



## Briefing Note: Understanding neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective

<b>To:</b>	Hon Jan Tinetti, Associate Minister of Education		
<b>Cc:</b>	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
<b>Cc:</b>	Hon Kelvin Davis, Associate Minister of Education		
<b>Date:</b>	8 July 2021	<b>Priority:</b>	Medium
<b>Security Level:</b>	In confidence	<b>METIS No:</b>	1263806
<b>Drafter:</b>	Michelle Dawe	<b>DDI:</b>	04 439 6406
<b>Key Contact:</b>	Susan Howan	<b>DDI:</b>	04 463 2839
<b>Messaging seen by Communications team:</b>	No	<b>Round Robin:</b>	No

### Purpose

The purpose of this Briefing Note is to inform you about the findings of a recent literature review, *Poipoia ngā ākonga kanorau ā-roro* prepared for the Ministry of Education by Dr Melanie Riwai-Couch (annex one). It includes next steps in response to the findings.

**Agree** that this Briefing will be proactively released.

☒ **Agree** ☐ **Disagree**

### Summary

- The Ministry is delivering Learning Support Action Plan priority four – *Flexible supports for neurodiverse children and young people*.
- An important part of this work is focussed on improving learning supports that respond to neurodiverse Māori ākonga and reflect te ao Māori perspectives.
- A literature review of research on neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective and a Māori advisory group has, and will continue to, inform our approach to supporting knowledge building and developing new supports for Māori ākonga.



Helen Hurst  
**Tumu Te Hāpai o Rāngai**  
**Deputy Secretary**  
**Sector Enablement and Support**

8/07/2021



Hon Jan Tinetti  
**Associate Minister of Education**

10/07/2021

## Background

---

1. The Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025 (LSAP) sets out commitments for improving learning support in six priority areas. Priority four commits to developing flexible supports for neurodiverse children and young people. Many ākonga with diverse needs do not qualify for the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, so they need educators with increased capability, as well as targeted or specialist support to progress their learning.
2. The term neurodiversity recognises the natural variability of how brains engage in learning, perceive information, and organise and communicate thinking. The focus of this priority is on building the understanding and confidence of early learning services and ngā kōhanga reo, schools and kura to teach and respond to neurodiversity in adaptive ways based on learners' strengths and needs.
3. We commissioned the Donald Beasley Institute to prepare an integrative literature review on responding to neurodiversity in the education context. We provided you a Briefing Note, *Beasley Institute research on neurodiversity*, 16 December 2020 (METIS 1247377).
4. The purpose of the Donald Beasley Institute report was to support the Ministry of Education (Ministry) to build a more comprehensive understanding of the available evidence base. However, the report did not include consideration of neurodiversity and effective supports from a te ao Māori perspective.
5. To further explore the supports needed for neurodiverse Māori students in July 2020 we established a Te Ao Māori Rōpū (Advisory Group) of Māori scholars, educators, practitioners and whānau with expertise or lived experience in neurodiversity and education. The skills and expertise of this group guided the commissioning of a report that gathered mātauranga, tikanga and te ao Māori frameworks that respond to neurodiversity. This briefing summarises this report and next steps.

## Report builds understanding of neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective

---

6. Dr Melanie Riwai-Couch was commissioned to conduct an analysis of literature and to prepare a report based on two broad questions:
  - a. 'What does research tell us about neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective?'
  - b. 'What does research tell us about the educational experiences, needs and aspirations of ākonga kanorau ā-roro (neurodiverse learners) and their whānau?'

### Main report findings

7. Dr Riwai-Couch's report *Poipoia ngā ākonga kanorau ā-roro* grouped the main findings under the outcome domains of Ka Hikitia, Ka Hāpaitia. The report discussed how neurodiversity is currently explained in te reo Māori. Two main expressions are commonly used - 'Kanorau ā-io' and 'Kanorau ā-roro'<sup>1</sup>. We are using the term kanorau ā-roro.
8. The report recommends redressing the power imbalance for Māori in the education system. The author also critiqued both the commissioned report methodology and the earlier literature review by the Donald Beasley Institute as unsatisfactory approaches to build a te ao Māori understanding of neurodiversity.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Kanorau' is an adjective that means to be diverse or varied. As a noun it can mean both diversity and variety. The word 'roro' is a noun that can be used to mean brain, marrow, or spongy matter. It is also the word used when describing the front end of a meeting house, verandah, or porch. (Riwai-Couch, 2021, p. 10)

9. Critique aside, the report findings gave insights into providing culturally responsive and effective education and care through forming effective partnerships with ākonga and whānau. Key considerations identified in the research were:
  - a. having practitioners and educators who are culturally competent working with Māori people
  - b. addressing power imbalances
  - c. tailoring for individual ākonga and their specific needs and aspirations; and
  - d. using the identity, language and culture of the ākonga as an asset that will support them to learn, grow, and excel.
10. Effective models and frameworks in the research are underpinned by uaratanga Māori (Māori values); being centred on Treaty of Waitangi principles; and providing deliberate space for whānau to engage in processes and decision making.
11. In contrast, the Beasley Institute literature review report summarised key themes of strategies, approaches and teaching practices, without identifying features that need to be addressed in the education system; raising equity for Māori ākonga, developing a culturally capable workforce, and using models that view identity, culture and language as a strength.

### **Critique of relying on a literature review as key research methodology**

12. Dr Riwai-Couch described the imbalance of power and inequitable position of gathering knowledge from te ao Māori, when published literature review is used as the research methodology.

*“Much knowledge from te ao Māori remains in the realm of tāngata Māori, not the print world. This creates an instant challenge when seeking to gain a full understanding of Māori perspectives on a topic through published sources.”<sup>2</sup>*
13. Examples were presented of recent writers who have attempted to develop better understandings of ākonga kanorau ā-roto (neurodiverse learners) by using methodologies aligned with te ao Māori; interviewing people with experience in neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective, reviewing traditional stories, customs and practices; and by examining whakapapa information and early ethnologies. These processes are recommended for the Ministry to grow and deepen the understanding of te ao Māori perspectives and evidence base.

### **Recommendations from the report are informing our direction**

---

14. Dr Riwai-Couch made three recommendations for future work to establish and improve supports for ākonga kanorau ā-roto:
  - a. Increase the depth of literature on understanding neurodiversity from a te ao Māori perspective.
  - b. Grow the current te ao Māori evidence base of models and frameworks.
  - c. Develop a culturally responsive education workforce able to work effectively with ākonga and their whānau.
15. The recommendations from Dr Riwai-Couch and advice from our Te Ao Māori Rōpū have challenged the Ministry to reflect on our work on LSAP priority four to date, and to prioritise improving understanding and knowledge of effective supports for ākonga kanorau ā-roto through engagement.
16. In response, the Ministry is partnering with the Te Ao Māori Rōpū on neurodiversity to guide our knowledge building and developing knowledge or supports in three areas:

---

<sup>2</sup> Riwai-Couch, M. (2021) Poipoia ngā ākonga kanorau ā-roto p. 5

- a. building understanding, knowledge, and research on neurodiversity from Māori perspectives
- b. building a strong evidence base of strategies, approaches and practices that work for Māori ākonga; and
- c. expanding on current supports for Māori ākonga by evaluating promising approaches and scaling up if appropriate.

## Next steps

---

- 17. We will distribute and promote the literature review *Poipoia ngā akonga kanorau ā-roro* completed by Dr Riwai-Couch to ensure the information is shared and used to improve understanding, practices and services for Māori ākonga and their whānau.
- 18. We will seek to collect and document a series of oral accounts and interviews of the lived experiences of Māori about kanorautanga ā-roro (neurodiversity) through ākonga voice, whānau voice, iwi voice; aiming for a range of accounts and interviews to reflect the diversity within Māori.
- 19. Within available resources, we will facilitate interviews and convene hui with early learning services, schools, kura, whānau and Māori communities to bring together experiences of what works for Māori ākonga and their whānau.
- 20. Over time, the understandings about neurodiversity from oral accounts and collected interviews of what works for Māori ākonga and their whānau will provide the evidence base for:
  - a. developing new supports,
  - b. strengthening culturally affirming approaches and strategies,
  - c. identifying and potentially scaling up teaching and learning practices that are already working.<sup>3</sup>
- 21. We will explore opportunities to evaluate and scale up promising approaches that are culturally sustaining for Māori ākonga and their whānau. Some examples are Te Mana Tikitiki and Huakina Mai Kaupapa Māori programmes within the Ministry's Positive Behaviour for Learning suite of resources and Ka Ata Mai, a Kaupapa Māori parenting programme that has been delivered with whānau, ngā kōhanga reo and early learning services in Hamilton.

## Proactive Release

---

- 22. We recommend that this Briefing is proactively released as per your expectation that information be released as soon as possible. Any information which may need to be withheld will be done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example the Tiriti based frameworks for learning support practitioners such as Te Pikinga ki Runga and the Journey to Tino Rangatiratanga developed by Dr Sonja Macfarlane.

Annex 1: Poipoia ngā ākonga kanorau ā-roto, A literature review prepared for the Ministry of Education

---

Annex is publicly available here: <https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz/assets/inclusive-education/resources/files/Akonga-Kanorau-a-roto-Final-Draft-of-Literature-Review-MRC-1.pdf>

Proactively Released