What's in a Name? Challenges Vocational Educators Face with Diagnostic Labels Associated with Neurodivergence

TIFFANY J. STENGER, DR STEPHANIE KELLY & DR RACHEL TALLON

Neurodivergent learners report a range of negative experiences in higher education both nationally and internationally. These experiences can impact their well-being and sense of identity, as well as their personal, social and academic life. All learners have the right to receive equitable and appropriate education. However, academic literature reveals educator uncertainty about how to effectively cater for all neurodivergent learners. This paper reports findings from a qualitative research project conducted as part of the thesis component of the Whitireia-WelTec Master of Professional Practice. Six educators teaching in vocational education across Aotearoa participated. Their experiences and perspectives of neurodiversity were explored via semi-structured in-depth interviews. Three themes were generated, and this paper focuses on one of these: tension exists between educators' desire to avoid labelling learners and the recognised value of knowing their learners' diagnoses. The educators revealed an aversion to using diagnostic labels that are associated with disability and neurodivergence. In contrast to this, educators found that knowing learners' diagnoses and the associated labels was useful when planning and teaching. This paper aims to add to the discussion about the role both diagnoses and diagnostic labels can have in vocational education.

KEYWORDS: disabled learners; educators; neurodivergence; neurodiversity; vocational education

CITE THIS ARTICLE: Stenger, T. J., Kelly, S., & Tallon, R. (2024). What's in a name? Challenges vocational educators face with diagnostic labels associated with neurodivergence. *Whitireia Journal of Nursing, Health and Social Services, 31*, 43–53. https://doi.org/10.34074/whit.3105

Following the identification of a gap within academic literature, qualitative research was conducted to explore understandings and perspectives of neurodiversity in a small sample of vocational educators in Aotearoa New Zealand. Thematic analysis of participants' responses identified tensions regarding the use of terms and labels associated with neurodivergent learners. The study observed uncertainty and hesitancy among educators surrounding the use of

diagnostic labels concerning neurodivergent learners. Yet, educators also found such labels to be helpful for understanding, planning for and teaching their learners. The educators demonstrated ambivalence toward the use of diagnostic labels.

This paper begins by briefly introducing background information and terminology. This is followed by a brief overview of relevant literature, a description of the research design and the findings from the research interviews. The discussion then explores educators' language preferences, their uncertainty about using diagnostic labels and the role of diagnostic labels in planning and teaching. This paper concludes by proposing recommendations that could contribute to enhancing educators' understanding of diagnostic labels, thus reducing their uncertainty and increasing their comfort in using these labels.

BACKGROUND

Neurodivergent and Disabled Learners in Vocational Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

The learner population in higher education is becoming increasingly diverse. The sector is seeing increased enrolments of disabled learners, both nationally (Cleland, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2023) and internationally (Clouder et al., 2020; Grimes et al., 2017; Lipka et al., 2020). Dwyer et al. (2022) credit 'advances in diagnosis, awareness, and accessibility' (p. 3) for these suggested increases in enrolments. Currently in Aotearoa, neurodivergent learners are grouped under the label 'disabled learners'. According to Cleland (2021), 'disabled learners' includes learners with permanent impairments, impairments resulting from long- or short-term injury or illness, a learning disability, neurological or cognitive difficulties, mental health conditions and other hidden impairments.

Cleland (2021) reports that disabled learners are the most educationally disadvantaged cohort in Aotearoa. These learners report a variety of negative experiences, some of which include: a lack of disability-confident educators, learners feeling overwhelmed and learners showing reluctance to associate with disability support services (Cleland, 2021). In a recent study by Smith (2024), disabled learners reported receiving inconsistent support, environmental barriers and ineffective or unsafe advocacy. These reports from learners in Aotearoa are not unusual. Internationally, disabled learners have also reported a range of negative experiences in higher education, including high levels of anxiety alongside the challenges that come with their neurodivergence (Clouder et al., 2020). These negative experiences have been found to impact the wellbeing; sense of identity; and personal, social and academic lives of neurodivergent learners (Clouder et al., 2020; Syharat et al., 2023).

Defining 'Disabled Learners'

How the term 'disabled learners' is interpreted is influenced by understandings about how disability is caused. There are a range of models that shape the term, such as the medical model, the social model, the biopsychosocial model and the emerging neurodiversity model. In the higher education sector in Aotearoa, two models are typically drawn on to define 'disabled learners': the medical model and the social model. According to the Office for Disability Issues (ODI, 2022), the medical model of disability claims that disability is caused by individuals' impairments, therefore disabled learners are those with impairments. Conversely, the social model of disability claims that disabled learners are those who have an impairment but are disabled by environmental and societal barriers rather than by the impairment itself (ODI, 2022). Cleland's (2021) definition of 'disabled learners' aligns with the medical model.

Disabled people identify with the term 'disabled person' in different ways based on their personal understandings of what causes disability. The ODI (2016) explained that some disabled people see the term 'disabled person' as 'a source of pride, identity and recognition that disabling barriers exist within society and not with us as individuals'. The ODI also say that others identify more closely with the term 'person

with a disability' as they prefer to be 'recognised as a person before their disability' (p. 13). It is important to note that individuals' language preferences are not fixed and may change over time (O'Connor et al., 2018).

From Disability to Differences

Neurodivergence has long been associated with disability in the education sector in Aotearoa (Cleland, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2023). Neurodivergent learners can be disabled due to their condition, and those who are may not be disabled all of the time. According to Singer (1998), people with different neurologically based conditions, but who had similar experiences of exclusion, banded together to construct a new identity, distinct from disability, that more positively and comfortably aligned with their experiences and how they saw themselves. The neurodivergent community wanted to be seen as neurologically different, not disabled. This perspective led to the emergence of discussion surrounding neurodiversity. Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, is credited for coining the term 'neurodiversity' in her 1998 honours thesis. In short, Singer (1998) saw 'neurodiversity' as an umbrella term for people who were neurologically different from the so-called neurotypical people, such as people with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia diagnoses. She also recommended that neurodiversity should be seen and respected in the same way as other identity markers, such as ethnicity and gender. Armstrong (2010) asserts that 'instead of regarding traditionally pathologized populations as disabled or disordered' (p. 5), neurodiversity emphasises differences. He says that this shift has the potential to liberate neurodivergent people from prejudice.

Defining 'Neurodiversity' and its Associated Terms

Defining 'neurodiversity' can be challenging because the concept is still evolving (Dwyer, 2022; Ellis et al., 2022). Put simply, at this point in time, 'neurodiversity' describes the naturally occurring variations in the ways all of the human brains on the planet think and process information (Doyle, 2020; Ellis et al., 2022; Singer, 2023; Walker, 2014). Within the neurodiverse population, 'neurotypical' and 'neurodivergent' are two terms that are generally used when categorising people based on their neurological characteristics. 'Neurotypical' refers to individuals who do not have a diagnosed neurologically based condition (Casanova & Widman, 2021), and whose brain function aligns with the 'dominant societal standards of "normal"' (Walker, 2021, p. 40). The term was developed within the autistic community in the 1990s as a way of rejecting the term 'normal' (Singer, 1998). On the other hand, 'neurodivergent' was introduced in 2014 by neurodivergent activist Kassiane Asasumasu. Asasumasu aimed to provide a neutral term that was the opposite of 'neurotypical', because one did not exist (Foundations of Divergent Minds, 2023). According to Doyle (2020), 15–20% of the population is neurodivergent, a term that refers to individuals whose brain function differs from that of neurotypical people (Singer, 2019). Neurodivergence is strongly associated with neurologically based conditions, such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia (Cassanova & Widman, 2021; Doyle, 2020). However, Birdwell and Bayley (2022) also consider individuals with mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical conditions, such as epilepsy, to be neurodivergent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators' Understandings of Neurodiversity

A literature review was completed as part of a Master's research project during 2022–2023 to explore educators' understandings and perspectives of neurodiversity. Five international studies were identified as relevant: Ashcroft and Lutfiyya, 2013; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Lipka et al., 2020; Márquez and Melero-Aguilar, 2022; Sowell and Sugisaki, 2020, along with one Aotearoa-based study: van Gorp, 2022b. Overall, five themes were identified in the international literature:

1. Limited knowledge relating to neurodivergence
2. Limited training and preparedness for accommodating neurodivergent learners' needs
3. Challenges regarding learners' non-disclosure of disabilities
4. Limited understanding of inclusive education
5. Positive attitudes toward neurodivergent learners in higher education

None of the international studies used the term 'neurodiversity'. Various other terms were used in reference to neurodivergent learners, including: 'students with disabilities' (Ashcroft & Lutfiyya, 2013; Lipka et al., 2020; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022), 'students with learning disabilities' (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020) and students with 'special educational needs' (Holmqvist et al., 2019). Ashcroft and Lutfiyya (2013) and Lipka et al. (2020) asked participants in their studies to define their respective terms, and both found that most participants had difficulty in doing so. Conversely, van Gorp (2022b) included the terms 'neurodiversity', 'neurodiverse', 'neurotypical' and 'neurodivergent'. Van Gorp's (2022b) Aotearoa-based study examined vocational educators' teaching practices for supporting the success of neurodivergent learners, within which she briefly explored participants' understandings of neurodiversity. Participants in her research explained that neurodiversity refers to the different ways the brain works and processes information, and it is associated with traits and diagnoses that can cause barriers in learning and interactions with others.

The 2022–2023 literature search strategy was replicated in 2024 to identify new, relevant literature since the original Master's research project. However, no new studies were identified that examined educators' understandings of neurodiversity. However, notably, the term 'neurodiversity' is becoming increasingly used in higher education-based literature. In the past few years, there has been a significant increase in academic educational research that uses the term 'neurodiversity'. Searching the phrase 'neurodiversity AND higher education' in the databases that Whitireia and WelTec subscribe to shows that the majority of results were published within the last five years. Approximately 75% of the total results were published in the last five years (April 2019–April 2024), with 21% of those being published in the last year (April 2023–April 2024). Comparatively, approximately 25% of the academic literature containing the term 'neurodiversity' was published before 2020.

The Effects of Diagnostic Labels

The original research project did not explore literature that examines educators' experiences with diagnostic labels associated with neurodivergent learners in higher education in Aotearoa and internationally. This was due to the original study not specifically seeking to examine labels used by the participants.

Literature highlights the overwhelming negative impact neurologically based diagnoses and associated labels can have on neurodivergent individuals. Carr-Fanning (2023) asserts that 'labels are not inherently negative' (p. 20). However, diagnostic labels undoubtedly carry the risk of stigma and discrimination, which can have a negative effect on neurodivergent learners' self-concept, mental health, and cognitive and emotional load (Carr-Fanning, 2023; O'Connor et al., 2018; Syharat et al., 2023; Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). On the other hand, the literature also identifies some beneficial impacts that diagnoses and associated labels can have on neurodivergent individuals. Diagnosis can assist neurodivergent individuals in understanding and accepting their self-image and social identity (O'Connor et al., 2018), and associated labels can provide a way for them to easily explain their difficulties (Carr-Fanning, 2023). Syharat et al. (2023) state that many neurodivergent learners discovered strengths related to their diagnoses and found these strengths beneficial for their learning. Additionally, there is some evidence that neurodivergent individuals are becoming

more comfortable with receiving a formal diagnosis, learning that they are neurodivergent and sharing their experiences. For example, van Gorp (2022a) explained that receiving diagnoses for Irlen Syndrome and dyslexia enabled her to better understand herself and her challenging experiences in high school. She stated that she feels proud to call herself neurodivergent.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research project was designed and conducted to meet the requirements of a Master of Professional Practice qualification. It received approval by the Whitireia and WelTec Ethics and Research Committee on 7 September 2022, reference number RP342-2022. The aim of the study was to examine vocational educators' understandings of neurodiversity and their teaching practices in relation to their neurodiverse learner cohorts. An interpretivist qualitative approach was employed to enable the examination of educators' shared perspectives and experiences. Six educators employed in vocational education across Aotearoa New Zealand were selected to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Open ended questions explored participants' understandings of neurodiversity, and its influence on their teaching practices in their own teaching contexts.

Participants

Participants represented five different polytechnics and institutes of technology from across Aotearoa. All participants had recently graduated with an adult teaching or adult education qualification at Level 5 or higher. For most participants, this was the New Zealand Certificate in Adult Tertiary Teaching (Level 5). One participant identified as neurodivergent, sharing diagnoses of Irlen Syndrome, dyslexia and ADHD. Another participant suspected he had undiagnosed ADHD and therefore may be neurodivergent. The remaining four participants identified as neurotypical.

FINDINGS

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) thematic analysis framework was used to develop, understand and interpret patterns identified across the interview transcripts. Analysis of the information was carried out in six phases:

1. Familiarisation of information
2. Coding
3. Generating initial themes
4. Developing and reviewing themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing the findings

Three themes were generated from participant responses and related to educators' understandings and teaching practices, tensions with diagnostic labels, and training and preparedness. This paper discusses one of those themes: Tension exists between educators' desire to avoid labelling learners and the recognised value of knowing their learners' diagnoses. Although this study did not specifically seek to examine labels used by the participants, this became a central finding. Before exploring this theme, it may be helpful to present how the educators in the study claimed to understand neurodiversity.

In the context of vocational education, the participants broadly understood neurodiversity to refer to the differences in the ways people think, process information and learn. They strongly associated neurodiversity with neurologically based conditions, such as autism and ADHD. Specific behaviours and characteristics that may cause challenges for learners, such as short attention span, were also associated with neurodiversity. Two educators recognised that neurotypical learners fit under the neurodiversity umbrella. However, the other educators were uncertain about how to describe learners with no neurologically based diagnoses. Not all educators were confident in their interpretations of neurodiversity, who it pertains to and how neurodivergence can manifest in different people or change over time and in different contexts.

Three participants acknowledged that the term 'neurodiversity' is new. Uncertainty was observed among the educators regarding their understanding of why 'neurodiversity' and its associated terms emerged. When asked what the purpose of the 'new' term is, several reasons were given. The most common reasons were that:

1. 'Neurodiversity' is a more friendly and engaging term that emerged to replace 'disability'.
2. Using 'neurodiversity' in place of 'disability' helps to reduce the stigma experienced by learners who have been labelled 'disabled'.
3. 'Neurodiversity', compared to 'disability', offers a more balanced view of learners' characteristics and experiences that includes both their challenges and strengths.

The emergence of 'neurodiversity' also elicited questions from these educators regarding the meaning and use of the term 'disability' and who it applies to.

DISCUSSION

These interviews found tensions regarding educators' comfort with labels corresponding to learners' neurologically based diagnoses. There was a sense that these educators were uncertain about what language to use when describing their neurodivergent learners. They revealed an aversion to labels such as 'disabled' and hesitancy regarding the use of diagnostic labels such as 'ADHD'. However, they also recognised how useful such labels can be for understanding their learners, as well as planning for, and teaching them. This paper discusses the various aspects of this tension: their language preferences, uncertainty about using diagnostic labels and the role diagnostic labels play in their teaching.

Language Preferences

The educators in the study described their neurodivergent learners in a variety of ways, including:

1. Listing characteristics, strengths and challenges they had either observed among their neurodivergent learners or that their neurodivergent learners disclosed
2. Using diagnostic labels, such as 'ADHD'
3. Using terms associated with neurodiversity, such as 'neurodiverse'

The educators indicated that they felt uncomfortable using the term 'disability' in relation to neurodivergent learners and shared their preference for language associated with neurodiversity. They claimed to be consciously shifting away from describing their learners as 'disabled' or 'having a disability', and towards terms they perceived to be more closely aligned with neurodiversity, such as 'neurodiverse' or 'neurodivergent'.

Two prominent reasons were identified that explain these educators' language preferences. Firstly, they had determined for themselves that terminology such as 'neurodiversity' has recently begun to replace 'disability' as it specifically relates to differences in brain wiring and function. In passing, they discussed the stigma that corresponds with being labelled as 'having a disability', a topic that has been well researched, including studies by Carr-Fanning (2023), O'Connor et al. (2018), Syharat et al. (2023), and Thompson-Hodgetts et al. (2020). They perceived terms such as 'neurodiverse' and 'neurodivergent' as more 'friendly', less stigmatised, and as better language options for describing neurodivergent learners than 'disabled' and 'disability'. Walker and Shaw (2018) indicate that educators' choice of language can provide insight into their underlying views towards a particular phenomenon. These educators shared their views that describing learners as 'neurodivergent' (or 'neurodiverse' which is the term they used in most cases) could help reduce the stigma experienced by neurodivergent learners who have traditionally been described as disabled.

Secondly, educators' language preferences appeared to be due to their belief that being neurodivergent does not automatically equate to being disabled. One participant stated,

'I don't think that people who are neurodiverse [neurodivergent] have a disability.' Another participant, who identifies as neurodivergent, stated, 'I never considered myself disabled.' Another participant explained that neurodivergent learners 'don't have a disability unless we make it a disability', suggesting that if educators provide the right environment and support for neurodivergent learners then they will not be disabled. The understandings shared by these educators about what causes disability aligns with the social model of disability. Additionally, most of the educators in this study acknowledged that their neurodivergent learners have strengths along with challenges. Therefore, they felt that 'neurodivergent' offers a more balanced view of neurodivergent learners' abilities compared to 'disabled', as 'disabled' is strongly associated with deficits. This opinion aligns with those of neurodivergent advocates and researchers, who assert that neurodiversity encourages consideration of both the strengths and challenges of neurodivergent people, rather than focusing only on their difficulties or deficits (Armstrong, 2010; Ellis et al., 2022). Interestingly, Monk et al. (2022) suggest that educators' language choices can positively influence change in both other educators and learners' attitudes towards the neurodivergent community. This claimed shift in educators' language usage when referencing neurodivergent learners could have a positive impact on the wellbeing of neurodivergent learners.

Uncertainty about What Language to Use in Association with Neurodivergent Learners

Educators were hesitant to use diagnostic labels to describe their neurodivergent learners. In the responses to the interview questions, educators often described specific learners' characteristics and challenges before they used diagnostic labels. The following excerpt from one of the educators in the study demonstrates hesitancy when asked who he had adapted the fonts on his PowerPoint presentation for: 'Probably people with [pause] who might struggle with reading and comprehension for whatever reason. So I guess if I were to choose an impairment, it would be someone who might have been diagnosed with dyslexia.' This visible hesitancy to use diagnostic labels may be explained with several reasons.

Firstly, diagnostic labels have traditionally been strongly associated with disability. As discussed, the educators in the current study did not equate neurodivergence with disability, and therefore may have avoided diagnostic labels in the same way they avoided 'disabled learner'. Secondly, their avoidance of diagnostic labels may stem from the stigma that they perceived relates to 'disability'. Additionally, the ODI (2016) implied that people who do not belong to a specific community, in this case, the neurodivergent community, may be unsure of which terms are appropriate and respectful when describing people who do belong to a specific community. This may provide an explanation for the hesitancy observed in how the educators in this study described their specific neurodivergent learners.

The Role of Diagnostic Labels for These Educators

The educators in this study demonstrated ambivalence towards the use of diagnostic labels. Most demonstrated an aversion to using diagnostic labels to describe their neurodivergent learners. Yet, they also acknowledged that knowing learners' formal diagnoses could be useful in certain contexts. Knowing their learners was deemed essential by these educators in order to enable effective teaching practices. The main methods they employed for obtaining information about their learners' specific learning needs and preferences included:

1. Informal observations of learners during class activities
2. Informal conversations with specific learners
3. Learners disclosing their own diagnoses and learning challenges.

These educators shared that they could not gain enough information about their learners' strengths and challenges to be useful for their planning and teaching. Therefore, they appreciated when their learners voluntarily

shared their diagnoses with them. Ashcroft and Lutfiyya (2013) found that some educators in their study showed discontent when their learners did not disclose a diagnosis as it hindered their ability to cater for those specific learners in their classes. Of course, learners disclosing their neurodivergence relies on them knowing they are neurodivergent, having a formal diagnosis, and being willing to share their diagnosis. Grimes et al. (2017) explains that learners can be reluctant to reveal their diagnoses for various reasons, including: refusal to be labelled, fear of stigma and discrimination, and not associating their condition with a disability. Knowing their learners' diagnoses was deemed beneficial for these educators in the following ways:

1. Discovering their learners' diagnoses filled gaps in their knowledge about their learners' challenges and learning preferences, which helped resolve queries they had about learners' characteristics and behaviours.
2. Diagnoses assisted the educators in classifying their learners.
3. Knowing learners' diagnoses supported them in planning for, and teaching, their specific neurodivergent learners.

The following excerpt from one participant demonstrates the advantage that learning about a specific learner's diagnosis gave her: '… actually being able to put it [her learner's challenges] in a box, it was almost like a light bulb moment for me.' After discovering the diagnosis, this educator was able to provide her learner with the right assistance to help her achieve success in her course. Carr-Fanning (2023) asserts that diagnostic labels can assist with identification of challenges experienced by individuals and can guide the support provided. It was clear that this participant benefited in these ways. Ashcroft and Lutfiyya (2013) and van Gorp (2022b) found that the educators that participated in their studies felt that knowing about the neurodivergence in the classroom made it easier to plan and teach.

While knowing their learners' diagnoses has advantages, it was also identified as a cause of some unease by the educators in the current study. Three educators acknowledged the unhelpful practice of categorising learners or 'putting learners into boxes'. Ellis et al. (2022) suggest that it is natural for humans to categorise and use labels to make sense of the world. In this case, the educators were trying to make sense of the learners in their classrooms for the purpose of professional planning and teaching. These educators were cautious about categorising learners using their diagnoses. They shared that they saw value in classifying them, but they also acknowledged the negative implications that can result from labelling, thus demonstrating their ambivalence.

An important consideration is that knowing a learner's diagnosis is only helpful to a certain extent. While discovering a learner's formal diagnosis can provide insight into how they may learn, there are variations within each neurologically based condition (Ellis et al., 2022; O'Connor et al., 2018). For instance, ADHD can manifest in many different ways (Moriah, 2023), meaning that two learners with an ADHD diagnosis can present differently from one another. Knowing a learner's diagnosis may be a helpful starting point from which further exploration with individual learners should follow.

It was clear that the educators in the current study were ambivalent about the use of diagnostic labels. They experienced internal tensions between the usefulness of knowing a learner's formal diagnosis and the potential negative impacts of using diagnostic labels to describe them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This researcher is of the opinion that, as enrolments of neurodivergent learners in vocational education increase, it becomes more important for educators to understand how to effectively support them. Educators knowing what terminology to use in relation to neurodivergent learners, and how to use it,

is considered vital as language choice can have both positive and negative impacts on learners' well-being. This study found that although vocational educators felt that diagnostic labels were useful, they were hesitant and uncertain about using them. The changing landscape around terms associated with neurodiversity requires further investigation, contextualising and understanding. Therefore, critical analysis of the meanings, usages and implications of diagnostic labels on neurodivergent learners is recommended for educators. This has the potential to deepen educators' understandings, reduce their uncertainty and increase their confidence in using such terms and labels. It is recommended that vocational educators:

1. Explore labelling preferences of neurodivergent learners. Considering individuals' differing labelling preferences, it is important that educators pay attention to the terms specific neurodivergent learners use when referencing themselves and adopt such language. Additionally, as language preferences may change over time, learners would benefit from educators' conscious and continuous efforts to keep up to date with their individual language preferences, as well as efforts to critically engage with language developments at a societal level.
2. Examine the impacts that diagnoses and diagnostic labels can have on neurodivergent learners, including both the disadvantages and advantages.
3. Examine their own understandings of 'disabled learner' and other terms associated with neurodivergent learners. It could be beneficial for educators to investigate the academic and experiential terminology across all models and circumstances in this emerging field.
4. Practise normalising diagnostic labels, as well as terms such as 'neurodivergent learner'. Diagnostic labels can be functional. While they can come with negative connotations, when used in respectful ways that support and empower neurodivergent learners, there is the potential for learners to feel more comfortable in their learning environments.

While educators dedicating time to engage in critical analysis of the meanings, usages and implications of diagnostic labels is the primary recommendation here, it is only part of the solution. It is also recommended that educators apply their evolving understandings and knowledge about neurodiversity and neurodivergence in the teaching environment and continue to critically reflect on how it impacts their learners. Educators are responsible for developing and critically reflecting on their teaching practices. However, responsibility for professional development to address these actions also falls on tertiary education providers, the education sector and the wider disability sector, including the Ministry for Disabled People and the Office for Disability Issues.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights some of the difficulties identified among a sample of six vocational educators regarding their understandings and usage of labels associated with their neurodivergent learners. They shared that they were constantly balancing uncertainty about the appropriateness of labels associated with disability and neurodivergence with the usefulness of such labels in their teaching practices. Language will continue to evolve, and new labels will continue to emerge, bringing new challenges in teaching environments. With the emergence of new terminology, knowing what language is respectful and appropriate when referencing neurodivergent learners requires continuous and meaningful attention. Ensuring the wellbeing and educational outcomes of neurodivergent learners is the ultimate goal. Critical analysis of labels, associated meanings and the implications for neurodivergent learners has been recommended as a way of enhancing educators' understanding and related practice, an initiative that will need to be supported by the wider vocational education sector.

REFERENCES

Armstrong, T. (2010). *The power of neurodiversity: Unleashing the advantages of your differently wired brain*. Da Capo Press.

Ashcroft, T. J., & Lutfiyya, Z. M. (2013). Nursing educators' perspectives of students with disabilities: A grounded theory study. *Nurse Education Today*, 33(11), 1316–1321. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2013.02.018

Birdwell, M. L. N., & Bayley, K. (2022). When the syllabus is ableist: Understanding how class policies fail disabled students. *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, 49(3), 220–237.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Carr-Fanning, K. (2023). The right to dignity or disorder? The care for attention deficit hyperactivity diversity. *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, 6(1), 14–30. https://doi.org/10.18193/sah.v6i1.192

Casanova, E. L., & Widman, C. J. (2021). A sociological treatment exploring the medical model in relation to the neurodiversity movement with reference to policy and practice. *Evidence & Policy*, 17(2), 363–381. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16142770974065

Cleland, G. (2021, August). *Te Rito: Insights from learners and staff: Opportunities to enhance success for Te Pūkenga disabled learners*. Te Pūkenga. https://xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/assets/Our-Pathway/Learner-Journey/Te-Rito-Insights-from-Disabled-learners-Part-Three1.pdf

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rogo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis. *Higher Education*, 80(4), 757–778. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: A biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135(2), 108–125. https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021

Dwyer, P. (2022). The neurodiversity approach(es): What are they and what do they mean for researchers? *Human Development*, 66, 73–92. https://doi.org/10.1159/000523723

Education and Training Act 2020. https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html

Ellis, P., Kirby, A., & Osborne, A. (2022). *Neurodiversity and education*. SAGE Publications.

Foundations of Divergent Minds. (2023, July 28). *Kassiane Asasumasu on neurodivergent #shorts* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0BP5nbgdu4

Grimes, S., Scevak, J., Southgate, E., & Buchanan. (2017). Non-disclosing students with disabilities or learning challenges: Characteristics and size of a hidden population. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 44(4–5), 425–441. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-017-0242-y

Holmqvist, M., Anderson, L., & Hellstrom, L. (2019). Teacher educators' self-reported preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in higher education. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 77(5), 584–597.

Lipka, O., Khouri, M., & Shecter-Lerner, M. (2020). University faculty attitudes and knowledge about learning disabilities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(5), 982–996. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1695750

Márquez, C., & Melero-Aguilar, N. (2022). What are their thoughts about inclusion? Beliefs of faculty members about inclusive education. *Higher Education*, 83, 829–844. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00706-7

Ministry of Education. (2023, April). *Provider-based enrolments* 2023-2022. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiaryparticipation#:~:text=Total%20participation,trend%20of%20decreases%20since %20200

Monk, R., Whitehouse, A. J. O., & Waddington, H. (2022). The use of language in autism research. *Trends in Neurosciences*, 45(11), 791–793. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2022.08.009

Moriah, C. (2023). *This is ADHD: An interactive and informative guide*. Allen & Unwin.

O'Connor, C., Kadianaki, I., Maunder, K., & McNicholas, F. (2018). How does psychiatric

diagnosis affect young people's self-concept and social identity? A systematic review and synthesis of the qualitative literature. *Social Science & Medicine*, *212*, 91–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.07.011

Office for Disability Issues. (2016, November). *New Zealand Disability Strategy 20162026*. https://www.odi.govt.nz/nz-disability-strategy/about-the-strategy/new-zealand-disability-strategy-2016-2026/the-new-disability-strategy-download-in-a-range-of-accessible-formats/

Office for Disability Issues. (2022, March 28). *Things you should know: Definition, concepts and approaches*. https://www.odi.govt.nz/disability-toolkit/things-you-should-know-definitions-concepts-and-approaches/

Singer, J. (1998). *Odd people in: The birth of community amongst people on the autistic spectrum. A personal exploration based on neurological diversity* [Bachelor of Arts Social Science (Honours) thesis, University of Technology, Sydney]. Academia. https://www.academia.edu/27033194/Odd_People_In_The_Birth_of_Community_amongst_people_on_the_Autistic_Spectrum_A_personal_exploration_based_on_neurological_diversity

Singer, J. (2019, October 10). Neurodivergent from what, exactly? *Reflections on Neurodiversity.* https://neurodiversity2.blogspot.com/2019/09/question-neurodivergent-from-what.html

Singer, J. (2023, April 11). Neurodiversity: Definition and discussion. *Reflections on Neurodiversity.* https://neurodiversity2.blogspot.com/p/what.html

Smith, J. (2024, April). *Let's get accessible: Disabled students' experiences navigating the tertiary education system*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/244757/1-LGA-Final-Report.pdf

Sowell, J., & Sugisaki, L. (2020). An exploration of EFL teachers' experience with learning disability training. *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, *13*(1), 114-134. https://doi.org/10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.7

Syharat, C. M., Hain, A., Zaghi, A. E., Gabriel, R., & Berdanier, C. G. P. (2023). Experiences of neurodivergent students in graduate STEM programs. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, Article 1149068. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1149068

Thompson-Hodgetts, S., Labonte, C., Mazumder, R., & Phelan, S. (2020). Helpful or harmful? A scoring review of perceptions and outcomes of autistic diagnostic disclosure to others. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorder*, *77*, Article 101598. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2020.101598

van Gorp, R. (2022a). My journey and the value of a community where neurodiversity is celebrated. *Scope: Learning & Teaching*, *11*, 142–149. https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.4011002

van Gorp, R. (2022b). *Neurodiversity in vocational education: Facilitating success* [Master's thesis, Otago Polytechnic]. Research Bank. https://doi.org/10.34074/thes.5859

Walker, E. R., & Shaw, S. C. K. (2018). Specific learning difficulties in healthcare education: The meaning in the nomenclature. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *32*, 97–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2018.01.011

Walker, N. (2014). *Neurodiversity: Some basic terms & definitions*. Neuroqueer. https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/

Walker, N. (2021). *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic empowerment, and postnormal possibilities*. Autonomous Press.

TIFFANY J. STENGER MProfPrac (Education), GradDipTeach(ALN), GradCertTESOL, BA is an Academic Learning Advisor in Learner Support Services Whitireia and WelTec New Zealand.

DR STEPHANIE KELLY PhD, Lecturer, Faculty of Health, Charles Darwin University, Australia. Principal Supervisor.

DR RACHEL TALLON PhD, teaches on the Master of Professional Practice programme at WelTec New Zealand. Secondary Supervisor.