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NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING APPROACHES: DISCOVERING
INSPIRATION AND INTERSECTIONS WITHIN '10 HABITS
FOR PHENOMENAL EDUCATORS'

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INTRODUCTION

Inspired by a webinar and a conversation with colleagues, this article explores the Kato Toolkit and its *10 Habits of Phenomenal Educators for Pacific Learners* (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b) through a neurodivergent lens. Utilising a strengths-based philosophy and a Pacific research methodology, the ten habits intersect with neurodiversity-affirming approaches. The ten habits' descriptions encourage reflexivity and reflection, which could challenge and inspire educators who are supporting and teaching neurodivergent learners. Relationality, belonging, story-telling, kindness, clarity, trust, and creativity encourage positive engagement for both Pacific and neurodivergent learners and educators. Knowing ourselves and our learners supports diversity in our organisations and provides inspiration for our communities.

Attending the *Phenomenal Educators PLD Framework Research – Initial Findings* webinar in 2023 (Ako Aotearoa, 2023), I could see the intersections between supporting Pacific learners and supporting neurodivergent learners. The webinar inspired me as an educator and as a neurodivergent person. A later conversation with two colleagues sparked an idea for this article. We spoke about neurodivergence and what the reality of living with neurodivergence was like for our communities: rural, migrant, Pacific, and Māori. Afterwards, I reflected on our conversation and the significance of how we understand the different contexts people inhabit, across the spectrum of neurodiversity and neurodivergence. This reflection reminded me of the webinar and how communities can engage and inspire.

Supportive and inclusive communities utilise the strengths of each person for the benefit of the collective. Each member of a community has a role to play at different times – some will be needed in the present, but others will come to the fore at times of emergency or urgency. Communities are intertwined, like a rope, and the strength of that rope depends on the fibres. There is potential for everyone to play their part: the creators, the initiators, the reflectors, the listeners, the practical, the thoughtful, the negative, and the positive; those who rush forward, those who are patient and those who are reticent. These are the people who pace each other, provoke discussion, create space for thinking before doing, and provide a balance in the community.

Communities can enable belonging and promote inclusion. Communities can encourage people to be themselves; to feel seen and heard; to be engaged; to be celebrated, and to be supported during hard times. Educators are part of these communities and can strengthen learners' outcomes by creating inclusive environments which engage and stimulate learning (Fletcher et al., 2023). This article explores how two communities, neurodivergent and Pacific, could come together and support learner success through scaffolding with kindness, awareness, and trust, grown from a foundation of high expectations and belief.

NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING APPROACHES

Neurodiversity refers to the differences in how people's brains function and process information across our whole human society (Dyslexia Scotland, 2022c; Singer, 2017). Neurodiversity-affirming approaches are ones where different ways of thinking are accepted and framed in a positive or strengths-based way. This includes neurodivergences, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyspraxia, which process information differently (Dyslexia Scotland, 2022c; Lange, 2022). Neurodivergency is often framed negatively, with stereotypes, stigma and intergenerational challenges resulting in deficit-outlooks and impacts on wellbeing (D'Arcy et al., 2023; Nalavany et al., 2023). Neurodiversity-affirming approaches change a deficit paradigm into an inclusive and compassionate one, where differences are accepted and seen as strengths rather than a problem (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Understanding, acknowledgment, and the capacity to embrace neurodivergence are often luxuries, in conflict with the basic human needs of food, shelter, and safety. The daily reality for many neurodivergent households consists of challenges including inaccessible or limited pathways to services, friction with education, tension within employment, exhaustion, and a feeling of being lost or alone (Buckley et al., 2022; D'Arcy et al., 2023; Nalavany et al., 2023; van Gorp, 2022). However, these challenges are tempered by wins, small to some but huge to neurodivergent families. These wins can include children trying new things or staying in school, an educator or medical practitioner actively listening and responding respectfully, or an employer seeing the skills you bring to their business (Fletcher et al., 2023; van Gorp, 2022).

In reality, not every neurodivergent family is aware of their neurodivergence (van Gorp, 2022). Intergenerational issues persist without appropriate support or resources, and neurodivergent people might have negative or traumatic experiences in school or family contexts (Nalavany et al., 2023). Through activating neurodiversity-affirming approaches in education and the workplace, some of the challenges associated with neurodivergence could be reduced, and awareness and understanding could increase (Welton & Dettmer, 2023).

The generosity of the Kato Toolkit has enabled me to reflect on its gift of the 10 Habits (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b) through a neurodivergent and neurodiversity-affirming lens. The synergy and intersections of this gift will be explored in the next sections.

The 10 habits of phenomenal educators for Pacific learners

1. Fenua: The pedagogy of reflection.
2. Moana: Know your Pacific learner and context.
3. Vaka: Educate with phenomenal Pacific-centric methods.
4. Le Teu le Va: Build teaching and learning relationships with Pacific learners.
5. Ola: Develop phenomenal practices.
6. Teatea: Instil motivation and good work habits.
7. Aupuru: Cultivate creativity and enthusiasm.
8. Putuputu: Construct a Pacific learning community.
9. Arofa: Enable mentoring to be a natural part of your teaching and manage the 'wobbles' that arise.
10. Ti'ama: Deconstruct and emancipate your Pacific learners' experiences.

(Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021a, p. 102)

SYNERGY AND INTERSECTIONS

There is synergy between the 10 Habits of phenomenal educators for Pacific learners and a neurodiversity-affirming approach. Drawing on these 10 Habits will support not only Pacific learners but also neurodivergent learners and their families. Educators will be able to reinforce their existing good practices through engagement with the Phenomenal Educators PLD Framework (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021a) and apply their reflections positively when supporting their learner communities. The synergy provides inspiration for a more diverse and inclusive education environment where learners and educators engage with learning, collaborate, and evolve together.

Intersections between the Phenomenal Educators PLD Framework and a neurodiversity-affirming approach are explored by looking at each Habit separately. Some Habits also contain challenges for neurodivergent people and alternative suggestions from a neurodivergent viewpoint have been included. The discussion has been written with respect for Pacific spaces and the principles that shape the Kato Toolkit.

Habit 1. Fenua: The pedagogy of reflection

Habit 1, Fenua, highlights the importance of self-awareness, self-analysis, and reflection. Awareness of your positionality as an educator grounds you and it is an important nexus for reflexivity and reflection. Identifying your subjectivity and bias offers an opportunity to explore your own attitudes and bring objective approaches to your work (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Habit 1 also encourages educators to look beyond and identify opportunities for professional development.

A point of difference for a neurodiversity-affirming approach can be gleaned from the example given of a Pacific learner sitting in the back row of a class. An educator may assume that the learner is disengaged. Habit 1 highlights the “cultural principle of respect” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 6) as a reason for the learner’s position. However, neurodivergent learners may be seated at the back to enable a quick exit from the classroom; to stim without disturbing others; to have a holistic view of the room and the people in it; to avoid sitting close to others or in front of others, or because they are frightened, lack confidence, have low self-esteem, or are situated in a complex history of prior experiences as a neurodivergent person (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Educators could consider these reflective questions:

- What lens do you view your learners through?
- What awareness of their way of being do you have?
- What assumptions are you making?

From my experience in neurodivergent classrooms, I have seen relationships and belonging develop when a neurodiversity-affirming approach is employed. A neurodiversity-affirming approach incorporates mutual respect, honesty, and reliability gained through an understanding of positionality and reflexivity. “Being sincere will enable you to guide your learners and gain their trust” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 6).

Habit 2. Moana: Know your Pacific learner and context

Many questions and reflections in Habit 2 could be considered within a neurodiversity-affirming approach, shifting the focus towards neurodivergence. There is often relief and excitement when you talk with a person who shares your way of thinking, especially as “neurodivergent individuals have no problem communicating with other neurodivergents” (Lange, 2022, p. 115). Connection and context are important for developing these communities.

Each nation or territory will have its own interpretation of neurodiversity and their own stories. Cultural understanding of neurodiversity and its history of recognition within policies and education would support continued reflection, knowledge, and awareness. As described in Habit 2, being aware of your organisation's policies, strategic plans, and support services enhances your capability for signposting appropriate resources.

The section "Preparation for your teaching" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 10) could be used successfully for educators supporting and working with neurodivergent learners.

For a neurodiversity-affirming approach, further consideration should be given to intergenerational neurodivergence, prior experiences, and the potential for trauma-related responses (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Educators could also reflect on the experiences and education of learners who discovered their neurodivergence at different life stages, learners who hide their neurodivergence, and learners who are unaware of their own neurodivergence.

Habit 3. Vaka: Educate with phenomenal Pacific-centric methods

Neurodivergent learners work best when there is clarity, and when intentions and planning are purposeful, unambiguous, and clear (Fletcher et al., 2023; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Habit 3 talks about these ideas and offers discussion points to encourage successful planning. Responsibility and respect are valued by both Pacific and neurodivergent communities and are important aspects in a neurodiversity-affirming approach. Habit 3 also includes practical advice which could equally apply to neurodivergent learners and support their development. Story-telling, connection, community, innovative assessment measures, and inviting guest speakers are also areas where the values of a Pacific-centric approach overlap with a neurodiversity-affirming approach.

As with Habits 1 and 2, reflection around respect may be different when considering neurodivergent learners. As discussed previously, prior experiences and intergenerational challenges may exist. Additionally, respect could be impacted by a perceived or real lack of safety, experience of deficit mindsets, exclusion, or living on the outside fringe of families, peers, or school. For some neurodivergent learners, an educator's voice may be the only thing in their life that shows respect for them as a person.

Habit 4. Le Teu le Va: Build teaching and learning relationships with Pacific learners

Habit 4 is particularly important for a neurodiversity-affirming approach. Education can be challenging for many neurodivergent people. Academic discrimination can be experienced through bullying (from peers and teachers) and interacting with indifferent teachers who lack awareness, have low expectations or lack belief in their neurodivergent learners' capabilities and potential (Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Nalavany et al., 2023).

Important Pacific and neurodiversity-affirming intersections include relationship-building, trust, honesty, respect, empathy, and belief (van Gorp, 2022). Maintaining clear boundaries, keeping the focus on learning, actively listening, and being practical and professional educators are also key for successfully supporting neurodivergent learners (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Ideas for Pacific spaces for Pacific learners could be used to develop neurodivergent spaces for neurodivergent learners. A shared space for learners, staff, and families to talk about and engage with neurodiversity and neurodivergence could alleviate stigma and stereotypes by building supportive and collaborative communities (Dyslexia Scotland, 2022a; Fletcher et al., 2023; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). "As an educator, expect the best from your students and provide the best teaching for your students. Demonstrate your 'heart' for educating through your behaviour and language" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 13).

Habit 5. Ola: Develop phenomenal practices

A neurodiversity-affirming approach would greatly benefit from the ideas shared in Habit 5. Communicating enthusiasm, visual imagery, interaction, connection, discussions, comfort, music, flexibility, and respect are all key aspects of working with neurodivergent learners and are included in Habit 5 (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; van Gorp, 2022).

From a neurodivergent perspective, the 'fun icebreaker' suggestion could create challenges for neurodivergent learners. There are two parts to this. Firstly, a suggestion of 'fun' may cause concern and anxiety over expectations, behaviour, interpretation of the word 'fun' and an escalation of internal questioning around what 'fun' means and looks like in the classroom. Secondly, before an icebreaker, anxiety may develop from anticipating the activity which could lead to avoidance through absence, cause physical illness, or affect mental well-being. 'Fun icebreakers' are usually used at the start of an education programme which is also where the learners engage with peers and educators. If neurodivergent learners experience anxiety or avoidance because of the icebreaker activity, this can intensify feelings of exclusion, isolation, and disconnection. Neurodivergent learners may also find the focus on them as an individual too challenging in a new group or may have had previous negative experiences (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; Lange, 2022). Consideration for intergenerational issues, family challenges, prior experiences, self-esteem, and self-confidence could be included when planning introductory activities. "Your objective is to make the students glad they came to your class, that they learned something, and that the content of the lesson was relevant for them" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 17).

Habit 6. Teatea: Instil motivation and good work habits

As Habit 6 describes, navigating a tertiary education landscape can be challenging. Navigation of different spaces plays an important part in engagement and retention for neurodivergent people. Neurodivergent learners and staff are more effective and connected when the parameters and expectations are clear (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Habit 6 also contains practical ideas for developing skills and good work practices which underpin and scaffold self-regulation and executive function, supporting a neurodiversity-affirming approach (Benians, 2022).

One area that would need a different lens is reading aloud. It is important to be able to read aloud, as Habit 6 highlights. However, reading aloud can be problematic and anxiety-inducing for neurodivergent people. One practical alternative I have suggested to learners and educators involves developing self-confidence in reading the words, speaking aloud, and hearing your own voice. This alternative awareness arose from my own lived experience and the difference I have seen across more than a decade of reading aloud.

Prior to discovering I was dyslexic in my 30s, I did not read aloud unless I had to. When my child was born, I read books aloud every night. Over the years, the books evolved from one or two words per page to a few sentences then on to chapter books. This experience of reading aloud enabled me to develop confidence in speaking written words because it began with the basics. My audience in the early years was also supportive as they did not correct my pronunciation or mind how I jumbled up sentences or forgot where I was on the page. In later years, I was corrected, as most parents are when reading favourite or familiar stories! However, I could also develop my child's reading ability and literacy skills, alongside my own, by asking them to help me read new or difficult words or discuss details found within the stories.

My suggestions for developing reading aloud skills involve reading to children, pets, or plants, and using funny voices for different characters in books. Building up confidence in reading texts aloud and hearing your voice speaking the words on a page will support reading aloud in the classroom or workplace. It may be a long process, but it is something that can be completed every day using a variety of texts from our homes, schools, and workplaces.

Habit 6 also discusses the importance of taking cultural differences into account. For a neurodiversity-affirming approach, educators should also take neurodivergent differences into account, including consideration for learners' ages, prior learning experiences, intergenerational issues, and how neurodivergence is situated in their culture.

This habit supports group work, discussions; focussing on strengths; belief in learners' abilities and capabilities; identification of how skills and experiences outside the classroom are transferable skills, and how to feed-forward to encourage success. These are beneficial to neurodivergent learners. Goals and milestones, combined with reviews and reminders, support the management of neurodivergent success and mitigate anxiety (Buckley et al., 2022). Encouragement and praise are important to provide, and educators should be aware of their neurodivergent learner's ability to receive these (Dettmer & Welton, 2023). Knowing your learner will support the level of praise offered, and the way praise is delivered, in a respectful and empathetic manner. "Educators need to reach beyond the student's self-doubt" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 26).

Habit 7. Apuru: Cultivate creativity and enthusiasm

"The meaning of the Tahitian word, Apuru, is to 'treat with kindness'" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 27). Apuru can also be transformational in a neurodiversity-affirming approach (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). It includes kindness to learners, educators, families, and communities; kindness in recognising people's skills, capabilities, aspirations, and inspirations, and kindness in acceptance, tolerance, and support. Kindness can bring belonging and encourage inclusion which in turn can develop confidence.

Creative teaching increases the mosaic of experiences that learners can reference and use to expand their thinking and connections. For neurodivergent learners, providing creative and multi-sensory ways to learn brings additional dimensions and touchpoints for them to focus on or build into holistic pictures (Dyslexia Scotland, 2022b; Fletcher et al., 2023). Additionally, the educators' experiences and outside interests enable them to be flexible in the classroom when supporting neurodivergent learners. This could be evidenced by answering learners' questions on a diverse range of subjects, transferring ideas to different contexts to enable learners to make connections and visualise the learning, or having the knowledge to signpost for further information and guidance (Lange, 2022).

Enthusiasm for your subject and for education has a place in a neurodiversity-affirming approach but should also be seen through a neurodivergent lens. Reflecting on what enthusiasm might look like in a classroom will create a space where educators could pause and ascertain how they are communicating their enthusiasm and how it could be received by their learners (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). For example, neurodivergent learners may respond unexpectedly or may not understand the concept of enthusiasm. It may also not be appropriate to enforce making and maintaining eye contact as this could cause anxiety or a reduction in focus (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; Lange, 2022).

The statement "[learners] appreciate teachers whose classes have surprises and elements of fun" (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 27) is usually the opposite of what a neurodivergent classroom prefers. However, surprises and fun can be managed respectfully and appropriately when a psychologically safe environment has been grown through honesty, professionalism, and appropriate support.

Incorporating guest speakers into a programme should be managed in the same way. Some learners may be uncomfortable with visitors to the classroom depending on prior experiences or how their neurodivergence responds to new people or changes in routine (Fletcher et al., 2023). When you know your learners, you are able to prepare for these events appropriately. Maintaining awareness during fun activities or guest speaker visits could include checking in on learners who may need reassurance, or offering break-out spaces, and remaining calm and pragmatic. Clear explanations and expectations combined with time to answer questions can build

positive professional relationships with learners (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Mutual trust that can develop from these relationships encourages questioning and honest discussions, where educators are able to learn more about their learners and the lens learners bring to the classroom. A consistency of approach, where educators are open, honest, objective, practical, and creative, enriches a neurodiversity-affirming environment.

Habit 8. Putuputu: Construct a Pacific learning community

“Foster connectedness and belonging ... as a cornerstone of your course” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 30). Habit 8 describes building connections that ripple outwards from the learner, which are equally important for neurodivergent learners. The educational community includes learning designers and educational software developers who could support co-design and collaboration with neurodivergent learners (Benians, 2022; Dettmer & Welton, 2023) and has supportive Communities of Practice to engage with (van Gorp, 2022; Welton & Dettmer, 2023). The suggestions highlighted in Habit 8 include a diverse range of opportunities for connection in a classroom, at home, in the community, and in the workplace.

Engaging and retaining neurodivergent learners involves an intricate maze of awareness, knowledge, and confidence. Reflexivity is important for supporting an educator in understanding this multi-layered maze. Educators need to have an awareness of, and confidence in, their ability to work within the following layers:

- **Practical**
 - Resources
 - Accessibility
 - Teaching capabilities
 - Policies and procedures

- **Pastoral**
 - Support and wellbeing services
 - Context
 - Community

- **Neurodiversity**
 - Neurodivergent experiences
 - Masking
 - Learning differences
 - Confirmed, unconfirmed, unknown, or undisclosed neurodivergencies
 - Intergenerational challenges

- **Professional development**
 - Currency in education
 - Currency in understanding neurodiversity
 - Widening professional networks
 - Collaboration
 - Communities of Practice.

As a dyslexic and visual educator and learner, I picture a delicate, but strong, piece of refined and skilled lacework representing the outcome of a phenomenal educator who is walking through the maze with their successful and confident learners. Alternatively, when awareness, knowledge, and confidence are out of kilter, the ball of thread is just a ball of thread, often knotted or squashed, with its potential lying dormant until recognised by an artisan.

Habit 9. Arofa: Enable mentoring to be a natural part of your teaching and manage the ‘wobbles’ that arise

Mentoring has been used to support neurodivergent people in different contexts and is a useful educational skill for working within neurodiversity-affirming approaches (Buckley et al., 2022; van Gorp, 2022). Habit 9 builds upon Habit 8, demonstrating how an educator’s awareness and knowledge can be utilised and enhanced through mentoring. “Make students’ challenges into learning opportunities” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 33).

The theme of ‘know your learner’ runs through Habit 9, reminding us to engage fully with our learners. For neurodivergent learners, an educator who knows their learners will be able to encourage them in the most appropriate and respectful way for the individual and the context. Habit 9 highlights the importance of this when learners may be “lacking self-confidence or have become disoriented in their educational journey” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 34) or may over-analyse. Managing expectations is also a consideration when working with neurodivergent learners (Buckley et al., 2022).

Habit 10. Ti’ama: Deconstruct and emancipate your Pacific learners’ experiences

“By focusing on the learner’s strengths, you can help them to fully believe in what they have rather than what they do not” (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021b, p. 35). Habit 10 is inspirational and demands high expectations from educators and learners alike. It clearly identifies what an educator’s role is, and what their responsibilities are. The questions that Habit 10 challenges us with could be used as a foundation for a neurodiversity-affirming exploration of equity and inequity, policy, practice, and programmes.

DISCUSSION

Through my multiple lens of neurodivergent person, educator, and learner, the Phenomenal Educators’ Framework appealed to my teaching and learning approaches. The ideas and values within each habit would be beneficial for all learners, including neurodivergent learners supported by educators with appropriate understanding of the neurodivergent community. The imagery, associated with how the habits are named and described, offers creative and visual focal points. These focal points encourage sense-making, meaning-making, and schema development for neurodivergent learners. Imagery can be used to stimulate mind-maps, discussion, and connections, which are practical ways to engage neurodivergent learners and encourage cognitive learning.

CONCLUSION

The Phenomenal Educators’ Framework challenges educators to be better, to become Phenomenal Educators, and accept the passion and responsibility which that transformation entails. The importance of ‘know your learner’ is apparent across the 10 Habits and is essential in supporting neurodivergent learners. Awareness and knowledge create a sound foundation for educators and learners to develop their skills and move into the future successfully. Highlighting caring, clarity, and creativity, the Phenomenal Educators’ Framework could significantly inspire a neurodiversity-affirming approach.

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