**The work lives of disabled teachers: revisiting inclusive education in English schools**

Keywords: Disabled teachers; England; Inclusive Education; Mainstream schools

## Introduction

According to The Education Commission, a global initiative encouraging a greater progress on improving education in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4, an increasingly diverse student population needs a deeper engagement with a diversified teacher workforce (Education Commission, 2019). However, discussions on teacher diversity in countries around the world tend to focus on race, gender and ethnicity with very little attention being paid to other factors such as disability and sexual orientation. England is no exception. Since the 1990s, while considerable attention has been placed on developing inclusive schools (Ainscow 1999), very little attention has been placed on the inclusion of disabled teachers in the education workforce. The Department for Education (DfE) requires schools in England to record how many teachers identify themselves as disabled, however, in the 2016 census, only 50% of schools reported the status of disabled teachers (DfE, 217). The most recent report makes no mention of disability at all (DfE, 2018). No data is collected on disability status among people who work as Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), Teacher Assistants (TAs) or other support staff.

Available data from the 2016 census suggests that only 0.5% of the teaching workforce report having disabilities (DfE, 2017). There were 457,300 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) teachers in state-funded schools in England in 2016 (DfE, 2017), thus only some 2,287 teachers openly identifying as having disabilities were employed in England. This was also highlighted in an earlier survey of disabled teachers registered as part of an e-network under the National Union of Teachers (Rieser, 2008: 17), which observed that only a "small number of disabled students (were) entering teaching". This low figure could reflect underreporting among teachers, but it also highlights the significant underrepresentation of educators who may be coming into the teaching profession or remaining in it, should they acquire a disability.

The aim of this research is to explore in depth the working lives of disabled teachers in English schools. Keeping in mind that the inclusive education agenda is paramount in the English context, we are particularly interested in exploring how inclusive is this discourse of disabled teachers. We strongly believe that disabled teachers are central to the development of inclusive schools and that their experiences and reflections can enable us to identify challenges but also, importantly they can serve as enablers in the system which can bring about positive change. This paper, based on interviews with a small group of disabled teachers, is intended to foster greater dialogue with disabled teachers about their own experiences and recommendations for improvements in the mainstream education system.

## Overview of existing literature

Pritchard (2010:3) notes that "the plethora of research data and documentation around issues of equity in education has centered largely on the provision of opportunities for students to access all levels of education". He goes onto argue that the role and contribution of minority status teachers, especially disabled teachers, within the education sector remains grossly underestimated. Neca et al., (2020) further argue that disabled teachers remain the most invisible of all minority status teachers. Keane (2018) and Neca et al. (2020) reviewing literature in this area reach a similar conclusion. The few studies that have focused on trainee and qualified disabled teachers have mainly been small scale (Duquette 2000) and focus on

those with dyslexia (UK) or learning disabilities (USA) (Wertheim, Vogel, and Brulle 1998; Morgan and Burn 2000; Riddick 2003; Riddick and English 2006; Burns and Bell 2011; Griffiths 2012; Glazzard 2013). This resonates with our findings from this study where we found that most discussions about disabled teachers have taken place in newspaper articles or has been flagged by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) in their reports, with little attention being given in the academic literature.

In this section, we discuss key themes emerging from the little research that has been published on disabled teachers in England, but also examine work by other scholars in the internationally literature.  Existing research in this area can be broadly grouped  under three interrelated themes: (1) how disabled teachers construct their identities, their reasons for joining the profession and the tensions inherent in disclosing their disability status; (2) the impact on students learning; and (3) how students perceive disabled teachers.

Work by Ferri et al (2005) in the USA investigated the constructed identities of teachers with learning disabilities drawing on their personal histories. They found that when viewed through the lens of the capability approach, there was strong evidence that when disabled teachers are afforded freedoms to explore their capabilities, they regard themselves as competent teachers.  Disabled teachers, across the studies undertaken by Duquette (2000), Morgan and Burn (2000), and Riddick (2003) noted the struggles they faced to overcome difficulties in their own learning as children, had a positive impact on them as teachers.

Valle et al (2004) in in-depth research undertaken with four teachers who self-identified as having a learning disability, reported their significant struggle over the decision of whether to 'disclose' a disability. Some of the teachers felt the stigma around those with learning disabilities was so vast that disclosure was not an option, however, others felt that disclosing to their colleagues and students offered them an opportunity to bolster a positive opinion of learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004).

Within this selection of studies there are others which focused on how disabled teachers perceive their role.  For example; teachers with dyslexia attest to their added value to classrooms with diversity (Burns and Bell, 2011; Vogel and Sharoni, 2009). Glazzard and Dale (2015: 179) suggest that teachers identifying and owning the label of Dyslexia are regarded as "agents of change", supporting the progress of inclusive education. They also note that self-identification can have a positive impact on teachers' self-esteem. However, they highlight that the threat of 'standards' within the education system works as a deterrent, leading to many trainee teachers not disclosing their disability.

A few studies highlight how there are multiple positives for schools with disabled teachers  which contribute to strengthening inclusive school environments. For example, a range of studies with dyslexic teachers note how they can better differentiate learning activities and have empathy for children with learning disabilities (Burns and Bell, 2010; 2011; Griffiths, 2012; Morgan and Burns, 2000). While some findings focus on having dyslexic teachers, other studies highlight how student teachers with dyslexia can feel undervalued in the school environment and can be seen as a threat to standards by colleagues (Riddick, 2001).

Another group of studies have focused on students' perceptions of disabled teachers. An interesting example is a group of studies conducted by Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2008; 2009a; 2009b) in the USA where they considered the influence that a teacher's disability had on student perceptions of the teacher's competence in Physical Education (PE).  In three studies conducted with elementary, middle and high school students in the south-eastern United States, around one hundred participants were randomly assigned to view one of two virtually identical videotaped swimming lessons. In the first lesson, the teacher was able-bodied while in the second, she taught from a wheelchair. Pupils completed a questionnaire on the content of the lessons and a perception questionnaire regarding the teacher. Worryingly, they found that as students "progress through their schooling, their beliefs about PE teachers with disabilities

gradually change for the worse because they are socialised into believing that sport, physical activity, and physical education are for what appear to be whole and fit bodies" (Bryant and Curtner-Smith, 2009b: 319). The researchers conclude that these changes could be attributed to the limited opportunities offered in PE at the high school level due to a curriculum that focuses on athleticism and competitive, traditional sports.

In an earlier study, Roberson and Serwatka (2000) noted how students perceived Deaf teachers to be better at teaching and felt more positive towards these teachers. Similarly, a study on teachers with visual impairment working in mainstream schools in Nepal highlighted how students valued the positive attitudes and good communication skills, as well as providing strong social and moral lessons as strengths these teachers brought to the classroom (Lamichhane, 2016).

While these studies provide interesting reflections, there is a clear gap in the literature on how disabled teachers understand and perceive their working lives in many countries around the world. This is also true for England, especially in a context of a significant discourse on inclusive education for children with special educational needs and disabilities.


**Our participants and research approach**

In response to the significant lacuna of literature, we undertook an in-depth qualitative study with ten teachers based in mainstream schools. We consciously did not extend our sample to teachers working in special schools, as we were particularly interested in exploring what the inclusive education agenda meant for disabled teachers in mainstream schools.

In order to identify a range of teachers working in England, we undertook recruitment through social media, primarily twitter, asking teachers who identified themselves as having a disability to get in touch with us. We also mailed copies of the poster to other higher education institutions in England. We actively snow-balled, asking each interviewee if they could recommend another disabled teacher. We sought to reach 10 teachers for this project and when we reached our desired sample size we stopped. We acknowledge that our sample is not representative and there are inherent biases in relation to the sample being self-selecting - among other factors, all the participants are White British with only two men and eight women. Nonetheless this nascent research offers new findings on the experiences of those typically marginalised within research as well as in the mainstream education system. Of the ten participants, six were qualified teachers and two were trainee teachers with physical or mental health disabilities as well as one qualified Autistic teacher and one Autistic trainee teacher. Eight participants identified themselves as white British Females and two identified themselves as White British males. Seven of the teachers held Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) whilst 3 were currently studying. Eight teachers were teaching or training in government-maintained schools whilst two teachers had left the classroom – one to work with students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) in a university programme and the other to pursue a PhD in Education. The teachers had specialised in a range of areas including: Primary, Special Educational Needs, PE, History and Modern Foreign Languages. For a full overview of the participants see Table 1. All the participants' names are pseudonyms. <INSERT TABLE 1>.

It should be noted that whilst the participants freely disclosed their diagnosis, not all teachers participating in this study identified as disabled to their employers. With each of the participants we conducted in-depth interviews, which lasted approximately 45- 80 minutes. As our respondents were spread across England, we conducted interviews either in person, by telephone or online. This decision was made in consultation with the interviewees, prioritising their choice. Most of the interviewees found the flexibility of doing interviews from the comfort of their home (or other familiar places) more convenient.

The interviews were semi-structured and covered the following themes: self-identity, early years and decision to become a teacher; experiences of teacher training; career timeline; experiences in first school as a qualified teacher; most enabling school; other factors which enabled them as a teacher; challenges faced; perception of government and school policies in relation to inclusive schools for teachers. Each interview was completed with an open question asking the interviewee to add more information or ask further questions about the project. We designed the research to align with the Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and ethical clearance for the project was obtained through the Ethical Review Committee at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Each interviewee was clearly briefed about the scope of the research, and consent sought. Subsequently, all interviews were transcribed in full, through a professional transcription service and the transcript was sent for approval to the interviewees. All participants acknowledged receipt of the interviews, but none raised any objections to the content. The interviews were then analysed using Newman's (2014) three step analysis framework.

In this paper, we present the findings from these interviews under the following themes: reasons for becoming a teacher; experiences as a teacher, with emphasis being both on positive experiences and challenges; and changes needed in order to make schools more inclusive of disabled teachers.

## *Terminology*

At the start of each interview, we asked teachers about their preferences on how they would like to be identified and their view on terminology pertaining to disability Only two teachers who identified themselves as Autistic, took a strong stance on how they wanted to be addressed. Specifically, Melanie, an Autistic trainee teacher explained that "being Autistic is a defining character of a person…because it is literally how we're wired…so yes, I am perfectly happy being an Autistic person". In relation to other participants, there was no clear consensus on whether 'disabled teachers' or 'teachers with disabilities' was the preferred language. Most of the participants noted that it was the context in which the phrase was used that changed their preference, rather than the phrase itself. For example, Georgina a trainee PE teacher explained that she was "not too fussed on a label" and that it was only when terms were used in negative or derogatory ways that she would worry about the phrasing. Thus, in this article, we have chosen to use the phrases disabled teachers, as this the more preferred usage in the field, for example, the use of "disabled teachers" by the NASUWT. However, we also use the term Autistic teachers when referring specifically to the two participants who identified as such.

## **Becoming a Teacher**

In examining the reasons participants gave for becoming teachers, three general themes were identified: pragmatic, personal and social justice. Pragmatic reasons included: pay, incentive schemes and training bursaries; holidays and being able to spend time with their own children; and having a social and varied job. Personal reasons included following a childhood dream of being a teacher (n=4 Rachel, Paula, Frances, Nadine); enjoying learning themselves (n=2 Rachel, Jane); wanting to share a passion for a subject (n=2 Georgina, Frances); and being good with children and having skills to offer them (n=3 Rachel, Frances, Melanie). For two interviewees, teaching was a second career choice, in part chosen with one's disability taken into consideration. For example, Jim, who earlier in his working life had been an international sportsman and personal trainer, felt that after acquiring Incomplete Tetraplegia, a career in teaching was a more practical option. Similarly, Melanie an Autistic trainee teacher, had

previously worked in the film industry but had faced burn out, and felt that teaching would be a more manageable career path.

Having had inspirational teachers when growing up, especially disabled teachers, was an influential factor for four of the disabled teachers (Peter, Rachel, Frances, Jane). Specifically, Peter, reflecting on his "fantastic" math's teacher who was blind, said:

> He was just so on it, and he could hear everything, you know? He would tell people to take their coats off, and he didn't know…I don't know how he knew, just that he could hear the rustling of coats…So, he just noticed little things that we didn't.

A sense of social justice was also articulated by five teachers (Frances, Melanie, Jim, Jane, Marie). At one level, it was personal, for example having had poor educational experiences herself, Frances had a sense of wanting to prove detractors wrong.

> I started my career as an English teacher and when I was in secondary school, I had two English teachers, one who was really horrible and everyone else was crap and I was like, "I'm going to prove to you that you're wrong.

On a societal level, Melanie, Jim, Jane and Marie presented more ideological reasons that had little to do with their specific disability:

> This is going to sound a bit philosophical, but I see horrible things in the world and problems that need solving like climate change, things going on with governments, big, big problems that need solving and I see a generation that needs to be smart enough to solve them, so I'd rather be doing that [teaching] than anything else (Marie)

Significantly, for at least two interviewees, serving as a disabled role model was an important motivation. Melanie and Jim, a sixth form teacher noted the importance of role modelling: "when you're disabled you don't see many people doing things like I do and I think that's probably the biggest thing, to help people realise that they can do it" (Jim).

**Experiences as a Teacher**

*Relationship with students*
This notion of being role models extended to how the participants spoke about their relationship with students. In reflecting on their interactions with students, there was an overwhelming sense of positivity, as they reflected on how they were reaching out to young people and making a difference to their educational experiences. Paula, an Autistic primary teacher, who runs a resource space for Autistic children explained:

> I'm able to identify children that might be autistic very early on and put support in place. I have much more understanding of what might be affecting them. Because some of my children are pre-verbal as well, I'm very aware of the sensory impact and sensory processing difficulties…but I don't think neurotypical people get that.

Similarly, Nadine, who has now left teaching to work with students with Specific Learning Difficulties at University, reflected on how as a Dyslexic and Dyspraxic primary school teacher she had a deep understanding of how to effectively scaffold students' learning:

> I know I made a difference to children because I could see the smaller steps that they needed to take. I thought about things differently to other members of staff. … I was empathetic towards anybody who didn't fit that mould.…I could see where that person is, where they need to be and the bits that are missing, then scaffolding and modelling that until they became confident learners and could attach a new skill to that scaffold.

Some of the teachers, specifically those with Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, spoke about the ways in which they empowered students in the classroom to support them, for example, by writing on the board or helping with spellings. Nadine spoke about how these instances could be used as teachable moments*:* "I would quite often just use thinking out loud to engage the children, "Silly Miss has forgotten what letter comes next. Can anybody help me?" And turn it into a teaching opportunity."

In an interesting contrast, Frances who is blind, spoke about how her role as a teacher and a blind person changed as she moved between a mainstream school and Visual Impairment (VI) Unit within a larger school. In the mainstream school her primary identity was that of a blind person. When she moved to the VI unit her blind identity became secondary to her role as a teacher and this changed her relationship with the students.

> [Speaking about working in the mainstream school]…I know that the boy that was blind that was sent to us, was sent there because I worked there so they (parents) felt that it was an inclusive environment... Now [in the V.I. unit] it's weird because I'm trying to be a role model and now, I'm the teacher rather than the blind person. …I had a boy who was going into an interview and my boss said to him, "Why don't you ask Miss about that because she will have done hers and ask her what she said." And he was like, "No I won't do that." And it's because they see me as the teacher,…whereas if I was coming at them as a blind person they might listen… I never expected to experience this.

Only a few challenging instances in relation to teacher's interactions with students were disclosed in the entirety of the study and were mainly connected to students struggling when their teacher needed to take time off work for health-related reasons. For example, Jane a secondary teacher with physical disability and associated health conditions reflected on the challenges both for students and teachers when leave is taken.

> My relationship was good with students, but again, some of them would find it exasperating that their teacher was off school and there was a fair share of parental complaints if I was off near exam time, which is understandable, but can also make you feel really paranoid.

### Relationship with colleagues
In contrast to describing experiences with students, the teachers' relationships with colleagues were more complex. All seven teachers who were already qualified reported general friendliness with colleagues, nevertheless, six of them spoke about challenges in relation to

disability, with themes such as feelings of isolation, lack of awareness among colleagues, and feelings of being undervalued.

Teachers described situations where disability became an individual's issue to face alone, leading some of them to feel as though they were placing a burden on colleagues. Rachel reflecting on her experience, of being a teacher with a significant disabling neurological disability, described this in terms of her feeling guilty about "placing an additional burden on them (colleagues), that they would not have been experiencing if I had been normal". In another case, comparing herself to others led Nadine to isolate herself from in-school social networks:

> I got on really well with them in the sense of throughout the school day and I think they respected me as a practitioner, but I think I isolated myself quite a lot away from asking for support or advice or just being open about how long it was taking me to do things because everybody else seemed to just be able to manage it. Everybody moans about the workload, someone would say, "It took me ages to mark last night, I didn't finish until half past nine." And I'm thinking, I haven't even finished my literacy books by half past nine, I still have 120 to go and it makes you feel you can't be honest with people. If they're all managing it, why aren't you?"

Paula whilst conscious of the fact her colleagues failed to make accessibility adjustments, rationalised this by reasoning that everyone had so many other things to think about:

> I think people have got so many other things to consider that changing the background of their PowerPoint or whatever it is, it doesn't enter their mind.

In parallel, some of the teachers, predominantly those with Dyspraxia, noted a lack of awareness among colleagues. For example, Marie noted:

> My colleagues had never heard of it [Dyspraxia]. Usually when you say to adults that you're Dyspraxic, it's met with silence. And the thing with silence is often it's "I don't really understand what that is but I'm too embarrassed to ask".

Rachel and Jane who both had fluctuating health conditions spoke about the struggle some colleagues had with understanding the frequent changes in their health condition. Specifically, Jane who works in senior leadership spoke about stigma experienced in relation to needing periods of time off work:

> I don't think they were always understanding; I'd go from chronically ill to getting better. When I'm well, I'm like one hundred miles an hour and highly driven, highly focused on things and there's that, almost like, "Oh well, how comes you're off so much because you're obviously…" And you could feel their resentment or frustration when you were coming back into work. Again, it's touching on that thing around stigma, you can only feel stigma if you're experiencing it, you can't put your finger on what it is but it's there.

Frances and Nadine also spoke of being undermined by colleagues. For example, Frances often experienced interactions with other teachers who did not perceive her to be a teacher due to her V.I., thus undermining her authority often in front of students:

> I will meet other colleagues in the school who will just assume I'm not a teacher because I'm visually impaired. They will come into the department and they'll say, "I need to talk to a teacher!" And I'll say, "You're talking to one." And they'll go, "No, I need to talk to…" And they don't quite know what to say but they're basically trying to say they need to talk to somebody else and this happens a lot.

### *Interactions with senior management*

In discussing school leadership, nine of the 10 teachers recalled discriminatory experiences at some point during their career that left them feeling devalued and, in some cases, facing formal disciplinary action; forced out of their current positions; or, forced into part-time work. The only teacher who did not relate stories of discrimination or difficulty was Jim who took a very pragmatic approach wanting to, *"get on with it"* and be treated "like anyone else*."* Jim did have reasonable adjustments made for him and despite having incomplete tetraplegia, his classroom was the furthest away from his office. Rather than seeking a classroom closer to his office he explained that "I don't mind the walk really; it keeps me fit".

Rachel who left Primary teaching after her experience, spoke about a lack of understanding around her specific conditions (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis and Fibromyalgia) and how the Senior Leadership Team at her school attempted to get her to "grit her teeth and get on with it" until Occupational Health intervened.

> There's a lot of pain behind it all, because it was a horrific situation. I rang to call in to say, "Look, I'm not going to make it back at the start of the year" because I had basically a big flair up just before we went back, and…I was told basically to go in at any cost and I could just sit at the front of the class, and one of my TAs would do the teaching for me, but that I should be there…I distinctly remember this particular after-school meeting, where I was trying to address this issue, and my head said, "You just need to push through to half term Rachel. If you can get to half term, I'm sure you'll be much better after that, you like need to get through" and the deputy head said, "Grit your teeth, grit your teeth and get on with it."

Similarly, Nadine who also left Primary teaching, faced a lack of understanding about Dyslexia and Dyspraxia from the Senior Leadership Team that led to formal disciplinary action from the school. She had scotopic sensitivity which meant that she was unable to read green and red, however, these were the approved marking colours for the primary school. Despite finding a solution herself, where she used a computer rather than handwriting to give feedback, she was disciplined for not following school procedures.

Across all the participants, each provided an account when school policies had dismissed their needs or there was a general lack of accommodations. When asked to specifically reflect if the discourse of inclusive education in English schools, extended to disabled teachers working in these schools, the overwhelming response as like Melanie's was "no, absolutely not"! Only one respondent reacted positively. Jim, working in a Sixth Form college with 2,000 students and 200 teachers, felt that inclusive education did extend to teachers. He based this on the fact of his own employment and that of another colleague who was blind. Conversely, other teachers felt that disabled teachers were widely underrepresented in the profession and used this as an example to challenge whether inclusive education extended to teachers. In terms of representation, Paula felt that schools were more inclusive of teachers with different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds than of disability.

Our participants pointed out that the current agenda focusses overwhelmingly on students and positions teachers as enactors of inclusive education rather than recipients. Nadine reflecting on her experiences, vehemently pointed out:

> I think it's very prejudiced against teachers with disabilities. I think you're set up to fail. Because of all the courses and all the organisations, we go, "Oh, we're going to do this, and we're going to do this, and we do this with the kids." And we differentiate, we differentiate on all our bloody lesson plans every single day, for every single lesson. Where is my differentiation, do you know what I mean?

Both Autistic participants, Paula and Melanie, specifically point out the way in which the focus on inclusivity and adjustments for children is not continued into adulthood.

> I think the focus is just so strongly on the students that they forget that all these neuro-diverse kids grow up into neurodiverse adults. Again, there's this seemingly societal-wide idea that we 'get better' as we get older, when we've just learnt how to mask what is going on internally. So, they think they don't have to worry about it and, again, it's the way we navigate the world. It doesn't occur to them that there are other people that are struggling for completely different reasons (Paula)

> It is '*do as we say and not as we do*,' I've found that in every single school! If it's good enough for a child, why isn't it good enough for me? If it's going to improve my effectiveness, if it's going to make me a better teacher, if it's going to improve the quality of my teaching or the quality of my resources or the quality of the learning experience with the children- then why should it be an issue? … The children that we're teaching that we're investing in one day they're going to be employees somewhere and their difficulties and barriers are not going to go away... I find the spiel about inclusiveness in primary schools is very tokenistic; I'm yet to meet somewhere where it truly goes beyond (Melanie, emphasis added)

**Focusing on enablers**
Interestingly, despite many challenges, during the interviews, when encouraged to identify enablers in the system, teachers were able to highlight important levers for change. A significant lever identified by both trainee teachers and qualified teachers was the importance of mentors and having support from the senior leadership team.

Jane, one of only two teachers in the sample who held a Senior Leadership position, spoke of how she has a mentor and mentors others which supports her own self-image and pushes her forward.

> I think most of my friends now, are people who work in education and there have been key people. So, for example, the woman who I worked with who was very supportive around reasonable adjustments, she's now a head elsewhere and gives me that mentoring role and that self-belief.

The importance of mentors was also echoed by Melanie, an Autistic trainee teacher, who felt that if it hadn't been for the support from her mentor at her most recent placement she may not have got to the end of her Postgraduate Certificate in Education.

> If my mentor hadn't been as amazing as he is, I don't know that I would have finished the course, which is just…it makes me wonder about other students coming up behind me or ones that have come before me.

Marie, reflecting on why she felt she hadn't progressed in her career as much as she had initially wanted to, highlighted the importance of a mentor and felt that she lacked one herself.

> People who do well teaching can often identify a mentor, someone who's looked after them in their early years…Maybe because I've moved around quite a lot, I'm not really sure that I could identify someone that mentored me particularly.

Teachers also identified key character traits, such as empathy and feminism, that were present in effective senior colleagues who were agents for positive change. Nadine highlighted the fact that in one of her teaching jobs the Head Teacher had disabled children herself which meant that she had a deeper understanding of barriers and the effect, specifically of Dyslexia, on a person.

> The Head Teacher at that school had three children and two of them had disabilities, one had a physical disability and the other one was quite severely Dyslexic. I think she had empathy straight away for she had the knowledge of what it means to be Dyslexic.

Jane had a line manager, on the Senior Leadership Team, whose feminist perspective and drive for equity meant that she did not have to continually advocate for her own reasonable adjustments. Rather these were made for her by others.

> …she could see the impact of identity, and all those sorts of things on individuals, and was a trade unionist. So it was that real understanding about trying to make everybody's life equitable which make her ask questions that other people didn't necessarily ask, and she was able to find solutions. After she started working there, and line managing the person who did the timetables, I never had to move classrooms. I was always teaching in one classroom; my duties were very near to the classroom. I was able to do seated duties, as opposed to standing up duties and things like that, that just made it much easier for me.

**Making change possible**
Despite many challenges faced by the teachers participating in this research, eight of the ten participants remained actively teaching in the classroom. Of the two who left, both remained within the education sector. In reflecting on the ways in which the education system could be made accessible for disabled teachers, key reforms were identified at both system and school levels.

*Promoting inclusivity and not merely accountability*
Participants who were working in primary education advocated for systemic level changes, such as removal of national tests, and noted that accountability measures should be more focused on inclusivity rather than academic benchmarking. For example,

> If you could remove the ways schools are measured and the complete focus on attainment and statistics and just that drive always for raising the bar and achieving more, that kind of system that's imposed onto teachers. I think that would do a huge amount for the wellbeing of all students and all teachers, Neuro-diverse in particular, but for everybody….I know that you need some kind of accountability system, but it should be on how inclusive schools are, the wellbeing of the children, the progress that they're making, not whether they're hitting a ridiculous benchmark at eleven.

Moreover, Jane argued that on a system level there needed to be more robust data elucidating the experiences of disabled teachers.

> The government, I think it was 2007, they did a review of whose (who) got a disability in the profession but only half the schools sent the information back. So, I would make it absolutely statutory that you must send the return on the disabilities of your workforce when you send the census information.

The need for sharing experiences, knowing that one was not alone and the opportunity to learn from each other's' experiences, was articulated in different ways by all the participants. Georgina, a PGCE student with Cerebral Palsy, also promoted the need for teacher networks. She expressed feelings of loneliness as a teacher with a disability training to be a PE teacher, and felt she would benefit from a platform where she could reach out for support.

> I don't know if I am the first disabled PE teacher, but I feel like I am pretty much doing this by myself. It would be great for a platform, or for the school to branch out, and for you to potentially meet other disabled teachers. Or for there to be adequate training, like CPD courses on inclusive practice to cater for the needs of disabled teachers because I feel like then, I wouldn't feel like I was doing it myself.

Having a network was something that Paula felt would have been useful, when discussing her dilemmas about whether to disclose her identity to her employers. Even though she felt that disclosure would benefit her well-being, she feared being judged.

> I wish that people did know and that I could share things more openly. I'm just very scared of doing that because I don't know what the reaction will be of people, or how that will impact on how they look at

you and how they interpret or judge what you're doing or saying… if I could do that would help with my well-being.

### *School level reforms*

Reflecting on school level reforms, themes brought up included issues such as increased awareness of and training of senior management; making it easier for teachers to go part-time for reasons related to disability; increased accessibility; and more supportive environments where people were comfortable to disclose disability to employers.

As a starting point, all participants articulated the need for making workplaces more accessible. Melanie, an Autistic trainee teacher, advocated for quiet working zones or sensory rooms in schools for teachers that were sensory avoidant.

> Part of the reason why I find it difficult to work at the school, when I'm not teaching, is just noises and things like that, that other people are just not bothered by. Like chairs scraping loudly and door slams and sudden loud noises that seem unnecessary to me and do not bother anybody else. So, if there was quiet room, like a sensory room, that would help.

This was further extended to highlighting the need for better training and raising awareness of disability rights. For example, Rachel argued that there was inconsistency across schools in the way in which employment policies are enacted and disabled teachers are faced with having to continually fight to have their needs met. She suggested that better awareness among school leadership in terms of disability right and statutory requirements, would be a way to ensure more parity and equity for disabled teachers.

> I think there needs to be some statutory requirement on how disabled teachers are dealt with as well as specific training on this to senior leadership so that it is more consistent across the country. And then that would take out a lot of the stress that disabled teachers feel about asking for accommodations and adjustments. Knowing that their 'asks' are going to be met in a receptive way, rather than going into this hostile environment.

For example, Melissa argued that all staff working in schools should undergo *"unconscious bias training"* about disability to deepen their understanding. On the other hand, Frances who does disability awareness training specifically on V.I. argued that whilst colleagues have access to training, *"They don't take it in"* and rather equity in the system would be improved through the recruitment of more disabled teachers.

> …ultimately the only way is for them to get more disabled people into teaching and then to work and be around them, but that's reliant on people above employing them and not having those thoughts of "Oh, we'll have to put a lift in".

This also resonates with participants identifying disabled mentors and role models as important enablers in their own professional journeys.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Ironically, while there is a strong discourse around inclusive education in English schools and in education policy, our research findings suggest that this does not necessarily extend to disabled teachers. An overwhelming focus in the inclusive education debates has been focused on making schools inclusive for children, while teachers who are entrusted with developing an inclusive ethos, if they are disabled, find themselves side-lined in these efforts. We would strongly argue here that Inclusive Education cannot separate from other inclusive practices such as Access to Work and inclusive employment and so this must be modelled from the top down. We further argue that a more nuanced understanding of the processes of enacting inclusive education in schools is needed, broadening the focus to all who are in schools – not only children. Teachers in our research, who demonstrated a range of experiences and were at different points in their career from trainee teachers to teachers who had risen to senior management, all emphasised the importance of building a strong, equitable and caring ethos in schools which extended to the inclusion of disabled teachers.

Like the findings of Ferri et al. (2001) and Riddick (2003) a motivating factor for becoming a teacher among our participants were personal experiences, as well as belief in issues of social justice and being a role model. Our findings also highlight the positivity in teacher-student relationships. However, while existing literature, as noted above, emphasises disabled teachers as role models and we see evidence of the same in our findings, more pertinent and significant in our teachers' narratives was the idea of their bringing enhanced pedagogical sensitivities towards children into the classroom. So not only did benefits of a disabled teacher centre around their more 'caring and supportive values' (Glazzard 2013) in relation to non-disabled teachers, but, similar to the findings of Griffiths (2012) our respondents also identified greater understanding of the need to diversify teaching approaches, and their ability to model a variety of skills, strategies, and creative approaches that as effective learning approaches for all students. Our research did not capture enactment of teacher pedagogy through classroom observations etc., however teacher narratives were rich in how personal attitudinal and experiential factors enriched their pedagogical engagement. Teachers and student teachers in our study also frequently mentioned their enhanced understanding of those with educational difficulties and individual needs, and empathy with such children due to their own 'struggles' similar to the findings of Duquette (2000) and Griffiths (2012). Additionally, all our respondents reported that their disabilities made them more empathic and supportive teachers than many of their non-disabled colleagues' resonating with the findings reported by Burns and Bell (2011) and Griffiths (2012). Pritchard (2010) suggests that teachers with a disability are not only capable of delivering content for student learning but teach students about disability. This is further reinforced in the work by Hayashi and Maya (2011) who identified that having a person with a disability in a teaching role – recognised as experts in their field – contributed more to developing positive attitudes towards disabled people than exposure to disability in other scenarios. Our research echoed these findings.

Significantly, while the central role of disabled teachers cannot be disputed, all expect one teacher in our sample, noted facing difficulties and discrimination at work. Teachers spoke about how the responsibility for adjusting to a disability was placed on them as an individual rather than focusing on barriers in the workplace. Our teachers reported the need to continually reiterate their needs and advocate for their own reasonable adjustments. They clearly noted the lack of understanding surrounding what entails reasonable adjustments. Also evident was a clear lack of understanding among non-disabled colleagues, especially senior management, about their experiences and struggles.

Over the last few years one of the largest teaching unions, NASUWT has taken an active interest in focusing on disabled teachers in the workforce. In a survey undertaken with their disabled members in 2017 they reported that almost 70% of teachers believed that their

job has made the symptoms of their condition worse. In a similar survey continued in 2019 NASUWT found that 87% of disabled teachers stated that they had experienced difficulties when requesting disability-related reasonable adjustments in the workplace and 51% of believed their 'job' had impacted negatively on both their physical and mental health. (NASUWT, 2018).

Bargerhuff, Cole, and Teeters, (2012, 186) note that University staff and faculty often attempt inclusive practices, but may be reticent to "accept, accommodate, and mentor" disabled teacher candidates. Furthermore, teacher candidates may be reluctant to ask for accommodations because the process is onerous; for example, a request for special equipment may require completing countless forms. Disabled teachers may "try to be inconspicuous" (Hazen, 2012, 50), and handle accommodations themselves, reflecting a medical view that they are personally responsible for overcoming the disabling conditions within their environment. Moreover, there needs to be a greater appreciation of how standards discourse impacts disabled teachers disproportionately, as discussed by some teachers in our study. Reflecting on this issue Glazzard and Dale (2015) note how official 'standards' and accountability mechanisms work as a deterrent, resulting in many trainee teachers not disclosing their disability. In their research with disabled teachers in Israel, Alon and Lishchinsky (2019) concluded that "dealing with the school environment is often more difficult and demanding than is coping with the disability itself". Similar arguments are made by Saltes (2020:22), researching with disabled graduate students teaching in universities in North America, who suggests that the "normalising ideology" of a "capable teacher" is a significant barrier resulting in both physical and attitudinal barriers.

While teachers narrated accounts of discrimination or neglect from senior staff what was interesting is that one of the key levers identified for success was also the support offered at the senior level. When teachers discussed what had worked for them, they discussed the support offered by line managers. Some teachers were able to identify individual attributes that line managers had which made them particularly supportive. Here the issue of role models, particularly for senior disabled teachers, was significant. However, given the lack of disabled teachers in the profession it also means that this rarely happens, resulting in feelings of isolation and being on one's own.

The pathway for inclusion of disabled people into the teaching profession must begin with support for disabled students seeking qualifications to create a career path within the higher education sector. Valle et al. (2004, 15) argue that schools are "powerful social and political institutions in which discourses of disability circulate", and these discourses are contributed to by the teacher training programs mainly framing disability within a deficit model. They advocate for the importance of teaching different models of disability to student educators (Valle et al., 2004). Similarly, Parker and Draves (2016), doing research among music teachers with visual impairments, argue that a clear way to disrupt the disabling discourses is by increasing the presence of disabled teachers in school.

Given the global mandate in the Sustainable Development Goal 4, it is vital that further research is undertaken both in England and globally to ensure that disabled teachers lives do not remain on the margins. Having rich data on the experiences of disabled teachers has the potential to contribute to policy and practice that has both social and economic implications for the teachers interviewed and for bringing and keeping more disabled teachers in the profession (Chiong, Menzies & Parameshwaran, 2017). Additionally, listening to what disabled teachers have to say about their educational experiences contributes to determining how best to support students with special needs. Such knowledge can assist schools anywhere in the world in developing inclusive practices (such as the implementation of organisational changes and specialised curricula) and improving individual learning outcomes to enable young disabled people to fully participate in mainstream schools. The presence and voices of

disabled teachers in schools also disrupts notions of able-bodiedness in schools. As Anderson (2006, 368) explains, "Pedagogy is also shaped by our life experiences. Teachers with disabilites offer knowledge through their bodies and experiences that isn't usually part of the curriculum. Disabled teachers embody pedagogies of justice, interdependence, and respect for differences". All of which are crucial in developing towards a truly inclusive education system.

It is important to remind the reader that the current research draws on a small sample size, which is also very heterogenous in the type of disabilities that the participants reported. While this diversity of disability types provides a unique opportunity to see the commonality of the 'disability' experience in the teaching workforce in England, it also hides the many differences that may arise as a result of more 'visible' and 'invisible' disabilities. Furthermore, the findings are based on participants' self-reported data, and no triangulation took place from other sources such as observations of the teachers' practices, interviews with their colleagues etc. Also, the data captures one dimension of diversity- disability, but says nothing about intersecting variables such as ethnicity or religion. Although the findings of this small-scale qualitative study are not generalisable, they highlight crucial issues in relation to disabled teachers, which have a profound impact on their professional lives and well-being, within the wider discourse of inclusive education.

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