

# Disabled teachers being 'sidelined' in drive for more inclusive schools

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One of the first academic studies to examine the working lives of disabled teachers in England has called for 'urgent change' after finding evidence of significant workplace discrimination and barriers to their career progression.

The University of Cambridge research concludes that disabled teachers remain 'on the margins' of a drive for greater inclusivity in schools. It draws on in-depth interviews with several teachers to suggest ways this could improve. In particular, the study identifies the need to encourage more disabled people into teaching, highlighting the skills, knowledge and empathy they can bring to classrooms.

The authors suggest that disabled teachers continue to experience discrimination not because of the innate prejudice of colleagues, but because of the general pressure on schools created by various performance targets, which makes it difficult for them to accommodate staff with different needs. This may explain the fairly overt discrimination that some interviewees recounted: including a case where one [teacher](#) was told to 'grit her teeth and get on with it' when she requested time off work, and another in which a staff member was disciplined after devising workarounds for systems that she couldn't use.

The study itself is small, offering a snapshot of disabled teachers' working lives using pre-existing evidence and detailed interviews with 10 professionals. In part, this reflects the under-representation of disabled people in teaching: the last time the Government recorded their numbers

(in 2016), of the data returned, just 0.5% of teachers self-reported as disabled in stark contrast to the estimated 16% of working age disabled adults in the general population.

It is, however, also one of the only studies of its kind. The authors state that disabled teachers are 'typically marginalised within research, as well as [mainstream education](#)', and express the hope that their work will make the case for further evidence-gathering to inform policy and practice.

The study was carried out by Professor Nidhi Singal and Dr. Hannah Ware, from the Cambridge Network for Disability and Education Research (CaNDER), in the University's Faculty of Education.

Dr. Ware said: "There has been a significant focus on making mainstream schools more inclusive for disabled children and others. However, disabled teachers, who are entrusted with enacting that ethos, seem to have been side-lined in those efforts. These findings raise a serious question: How can we possibly promote inclusivity in schools if it only extends to children?"

Professor Singal added: "Much of the evidence we gathered suggests that stresses in the system are amplified for disabled teachers and that part of the solution is to recruit more disabled people into the profession. For schools, that would constitute a double-win: not only are disabled teachers excellent role models; they also often bring additional qualities and strengths into classrooms."

The participating teachers, whose details were anonymised for the study, had a wide range of disabilities. Interestingly, not all of them had felt sufficiently confident to disclose these to their schools.

The interviews revealed significant commonalities of experience.

Perhaps surprisingly, the teachers were overwhelmingly positive about their relationships with pupils. Many had developed coping mechanisms to handle their disability in the classroom: for example, one dyslexic teacher explained how she actively used her disability as a basis for ad-hoc spelling challenges in class.

The findings also suggest that disabled teachers can be highly empathetic and skilled at differentiating their teaching and learning methods to suit all students. By definition, they also help to make schools more inclusive and promote positive attitudes towards disabled people.

Most of those interviewed described a more problematic relationship with their fellow staff. Several said that they often felt lonely or undervalued at work, and were concerned that while colleagues were mindful of the challenges faced by disabled children, they displayed poor disability awareness with regard to adults. One participant described 'a hostile environment' every time she had to ask for adjustments to accommodate her disability; another, who has primary lymphodema in three limbs, said that whenever she took time off work, "you could feel their resentment when you came back".

Nine of the 10 participants said they had experienced discriminatory practices at work. One teacher, who has myalgic encephalomyelitis and fibromyalgia, had been told she had to come into [school](#) after a flare-up left her in severe pain. "The deputy head said: 'grit your teeth and get on with it'," she told the researchers.

Another teacher recounted being unable to use the approved colours for the school's marking system (green and red) because she has scotopic sensitivity. When she devised an alternative solution, which involved giving pupils feedback using a computer, she was formally disciplined for not following official procedures.

In line with some of the teachers' own comments, the authors argue that many of these problems emanate from systemic pressures. There is also some emerging, anecdotal evidence that the additional strain on schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred after the research was completed, may have worsened the extent to which colleagues feel unable to accommodate disabled teachers' needs. "These colleagues are typically well-meaning people who, outside school, would make every effort to accommodate a [disabled person](#)," Singal said. "Part of the problem is that in school their only option is to get on with the job."

The research identifies several 'levers for change' that would improve disabled teachers' experiences. Many participants highlighted the value of mentors, support networks, and of having senior leaders capable of empathising with the different demands that disabilities impose. "I don't know if I am the first disabled PE teacher, but I feel like I am pretty much doing this by myself," one participant told the authors. "It would be great to meet other disabled teachers."

The researchers therefore argue that there would be multiple benefits for disabled teachers and schools if more disabled people could be supported to enter the profession. Among other recommendations, they also highlight the need for more awareness training, particularly for school leaders.

Given the present study's limited scale and scope, the authors also call for more research and data-gathering about disabled teachers and their experiences in English schools. "This is not just an education issue: it's part of a wider disenfranchisement of disabled people in the workplace," Ware added. "But we stand more chance of resolving it in education by strengthening our understanding of disabled teachers' experiences."

The findings are reported in the journal, *Disability & Society*.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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