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STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN EMPOWERING A PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHER WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract
Promoting inclusivity in language teacher education is essential for advancing pedagogical justice and fostering a socially equitable education system. However, research and practice in this area, particularly on mentoring teachers with disabilities, remain scarce. Most existing scholarship has focused on students with disabilities rather than pre-service teachers with disabilities. Addressing this gap, this autoethnographic study examines the researcher's experiences mentoring a pre-service English teacher with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, who relied on a wheelchair, was unable to walk or write, yet aspired to pursue a career as an English teacher. Over one and a half years of mentorship, the researcher documented strategies and challenges through personal reflections and analysis of journals and interviews with stakeholders. Three strategies proved essential: adopting an inclusive mindset through differentiated instruction, actively listening to the student and his family, particularly in online learning and thesis supervision, and selecting a special school as the site for his teaching practicum. Three major challenges also emerged: addressing epistemic injustices and professional acceptance, coping with the absence of shadow lecturers and accessible infrastructure such as libraries and digital smartboards, and navigating restricted employment opportunities. These findings underscore the urgency of equitable accommodations for aspiring English teachers with physical disabilities.

Keywords: English teacher education, inclusive education, quality education, teachers with disabilities

Introduction
> *"I have a dream to be an English teacher," my student with a physical disability declared. "My son dreams of becoming a teacher, and I will accompany him and support him every step of the way," his mother added. His classmates echoed their encouragement: "He has the right to be a teacher, He can do it," "Let's give him a chance," "A dream is for everyone." It was my first time teaching a student with disabilities in my department's English teacher education program. Unsure of how to best support him, I decided to start by conducting interviews. I spoke with him, his mother, and*

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> *his classmates to gain insight into their aspirations and perspectives.*
> (Reflection note – February 25th, 2024: inclusive aspirations)

Looking back at my teaching journal, I still vividly recall those heartfelt responses. As I reflected on my role as his lecturer, I became aware of the magnitude of my responsibility. Questions flooded my mind: "How should I approach him?", "Can I be an effective teacher educator for him?", and "What should I do first?" While I was thrilled that my class was inclusive because I had a new student with physical disabilities, I quickly realized my lack of preparation. Booth and Ainscow (2002) have emphasized that genuine inclusivity requires educators to develop strategies that accommodate diverse needs. I questioned whether I was ready to meet this standard. As Shakespeare (2013) argued that bias and fear often limit opportunities for individuals with disabilities, I was determined not to let those barriers prevail. Instead, I reminded myself to remain professional, inclusive, and adaptable. With hope and determination, I committed to supporting my student in every way possible.

As more individuals with disabilities gain access to higher education, the number of pre-service teachers with disabilities has been increasing (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019). This is not limited to one context but is an international concern. For instance, the United States enforces inclusive practices through the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012), while Europe advances similar goals through the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019). In Asia, ASEAN has committed to disability priorities through the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 (Amnesti et al., 2023), and in Africa, South Africa's White Paper on Post-School Education and Training affirms the rights of students with disabilities in higher education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). This trend presents new challenges for teacher education institutions, which must balance the responsibility of providing reasonable accommodations with the obligation to meet standardized teacher training requirements (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023). This tension mirrored my own experience. I admit that I struggled to provide optimal accommodations for my student with physical disabilities, primarily because I was unprepared. I was pleased that my English education department had become inclusive, yet I worried that, as an institution, we could not fully uphold the rights of individuals to receive an ideal inclusive learning environment. As Peters et al. (2005) have argued, inclusivity must ensure equal opportunities for the personal and professional growth of all learners.

I have also observed that the increasing presence of individuals with disabilities is not confined to my department alone but is evident in other English education programs across Indonesia and abroad. Thus, my own lack of preparation may reflect a broader challenge faced by other English teacher educators. This collective unpreparedness risks undermining our ability to provide the best support for students with disabilities as they pursue their dreams of becoming qualified English teachers. Discussions of inclusive education must therefore move beyond a narrow focus on students with disabilities to also address teachers with disabilities. Unfortunately, existing efforts have largely overlooked this area. Keane et al. (2017) have confirmed that the issues surrounding teachers with disabilities remain underexplored. Previous studies have focused primarily on students with

disabilities rather than on in-service or pre-service teachers (Pritchard, 2010). Ware et al. (2022) have highlighted the scarcity of research on teachers with disabilities, while a literature review spanning 1990 to 2018 identified fewer than 55 relevant studies (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019; Neca et al, 2020). This underscores the urgent need for more qualitative and quantitative research on teachers with disabilities across diverse contexts (Neca et al., 2020).

Given the scarcity of existing scholarship, advancing research and practice in this area is both novel and urgent. Such efforts could contribute to a more socially inclusive education system, thereby fostering pedagogical justice within teacher education institutions (Pritchard, 2010). Moreover, they would support the career development of teachers with disabilities and move education closer to what Ware et al. (2022, p. 1417) called "truly inclusive", an approach that includes not only students with disabilities but also teachers. Importantly, this inclusivity empowers teachers with disabilities to challenge negative stereotypes, demonstrate their competence, and serve as role models and key contributors to inclusive schooling (Neca et al., 2020).

To advance inclusive educational environments that empower all learners, including those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020), and to contribute to the broader movement for justice within teacher education institutions, this study explores the personal journey of an English teacher educator mentoring a student with physical disabilities aspiring to become an English teacher. Research in this area is urgent for two reasons. First, it reveals the challenges and needs related to instructional strategies, assessment methods, and professional development for future teachers with disabilities (Şengül Erdem & Yakut, 2022). Such findings would better prepare English teacher educators to support students with physical disabilities who aspire to enter the teaching profession. Second, this research would guide English education departments in becoming more inclusive by encouraging the adoption of adaptive teaching tools, staff training (Şengül Erdem and Yakut, 2022), faculty workshops on accommodations, dedicated counseling services for pre-service teachers with disabilities, and competency benchmarks applicable to all candidates (Baldwin, 2007).

Without such research, English teacher educators and their institutions would lack critical insights into how to effectively support these students, especially those with physical disabilities, thereby creating systemic injustices by failing to provide appropriate accommodations. This study, therefore, seeks to reveal the key strategies and challenges experienced by an English teacher educator mentoring a student with physical disabilities who aspired to become an English teacher. The central research question guiding this study is: "What strategies were employed, and what challenges were encountered, by an English teacher educator in mentoring a student with physical disabilities?"

Method

Research design: Autoethnography

The overarching goals of this study are to address the limited research on teachers with disabilities, share personal experiences regarding key strategies and challenges in mentoring a pre-service teacher with physical disabilities, and advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities to pursue teaching careers. These objectives align with the principles of autoethnography, which include

addressing research gaps, offering insider perspectives on underexplored social and cultural issues, capturing personal and often private experiences, and making research accessible to broader audiences beyond academic circles (Adams et al., 2017).

The decision to use autoethnography is also grounded in its effectiveness in amplifying marginalized voices, particularly those of individuals with disabilities. Existing studies have demonstrated its value in revealing lived experiences. For instance, Doan and Darcy (2025) employed autoethnography to examine the experiences of individuals with disabilities working in hospitality and tourism, emphasizing its role in providing a platform for underrepresented voices to share their challenges and achievements. Similarly, Reuter (2017) conducted an autoethnographic study on his experiences as a future educator with a disability, further validating the approach in disability research.

This autoethnography study presents my experiences mentoring my student, a pre-service teacher with physical disabilities. He is 22 years old and has limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, a condition that weakens the heap and shoulder muscles, causing difficulties with both walking and writing. He uses a wheelchair for mobility and is always accompanied by his mother, especially during his studies in the department of English education. Although he speaks English well, his speech is somewhat slow. He is unable to write by hand, but he can type on his laptop, albeit at a slow pace. He has no cognitive impairments; he comprehends the courses and assignments well, and at times even outperforms his classmates. He also demonstrates emotional stability.

To explore key strategies and challenges in mentoring this student as he pursued a career in English teaching, I draw on my own experiences as primary data (Mead, 2024). Over a period of one and a half years, I mentored him in multiple capacities: as a lecturer in coursework, an undergraduate thesis supervisor, and a mentor during his teaching practicum at a special school. This sustained and multifaceted engagement allowed me to observe his professional development in diverse settings, within the classroom, during field teaching experiences, and throughout the research process for graduation. These experiences provide a holistic understanding of the professional trajectory of a pre-service teacher with physical disabilities, particularly one living with limb-griddle muscular dystrophy.

In addition to personal memory and subjective experiences (Tarisayi, 2023), I collected and analyzed my reflective journals, compiled notes from teaching, supervision, and mentoring sessions. I also interviewed the student and other stakeholders, including his parent, his practicum homeroom teacher, and classmates. These reflective notes and interviews captured reflections, challenges, and insights that emerged throughout the mentoring process. By integrating personal memory, subjective experiences in the reflective journal entries, and interviews, this study enhances methodological rigor and the validity of its autoethnographic approach. To further ensure accuracy and credibility, the data were presented using a coding system that specified the source (e.g., reflection notes or interviews), the date of collection, the category of participant (such as student, parent, or homeroom teacher), and the emerging themes. For example, an entry coded as "Reflection note – February 25, 2024: key strategy: inclusive mindset" indicates that the data were drawn from a reflection note written on February 25, 2024, describing strategies for mentoring a pre-service English teacher with a

physical disability through the practice of fostering an inclusive mindset. In addition, the data and interpretations were reviewed by my student with physical disabilities and his mother to confirm their accuracy.

The data from the journals and interviews were analyzed using content analysis with inductive coding strategies. To begin the analysis, I conducted a line-by-line reading of the journals and interview transcripts, identifying significant words, phrases, and incidents that highlighted both the challenges I faced and the strategies I employed while mentoring the student. This stage generated initial codes such as *"navigating communication barriers," "using multimodal scaffolding," "drawing on personal teaching philosophy,"* and *"seeking collegial support."* Each code was assigned whenever a particular passage expressed a discrete idea, experience, or pedagogical response.

Following this open coding stage, I reviewed the codes for overlap and conceptual similarity. Codes that reflected related experiences were clustered into broader categories. For example, *"using multimodal scaffolding"* and *"drawing on personal teaching philosophy"* were grouped under the category of *"key strategies."* The criteria for grouping were based on three key considerations: (1) semantic similarity, whether codes referred to related concepts or actions; (2) frequency, whether a code appeared across multiple parts of the data, indicating recurrence; and (3) analytic relevance, whether a code captured an idea central to the research question on mentoring practices and challenges. From these categories, overarching themes were developed to capture more abstract patterns. For instance, *"drawing on personal teaching philosophy"* and *"using multimodal scaffolding"* were integrated into the theme *"adopting an inclusive mindset and implementing a differentiated instruction approach."* This iterative process required constant movement between the data and emerging interpretations, ensuring data saturation and analytic rigor. The findings were ultimately organized into two major categories: (1) strategies for fostering inclusivity and (2) challenges encountered in supporting a pre-service English teacher with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. These categories were then elaborated through a discussion of the emerging themes.

Researcher positionality

As this study adopts an autoethnographic approach, I serve as both the sole participant and the researcher. My professional background in TESOL and inclusive education, along with my active engagement in promoting environmental and sosial justice in educational practices (e.g., Saiful & Shein, 2025; Saiful & Triyono, 2018), significantly informs my perspective. As a practitioner and advocate for inclusive English teacher education at my institution, my experiences, values, and professional journey inevitably shape the way I describe, interpret, and analyze the data in this study. I acknowledge that my positionality brings both strengths and biases to the research process, influencing the narratives shared and the critical reflections offered. Furthermore, the dual role of researcher and participant may create the risk of overemphasizing personal interpretations or overlooking alternative viewpoints. To address this, I engaged in systematic reflexivity through journaling, iterative self-questioning, and revisiting my narratives over time to critically assess my assumptions. In addition, I consulted relevant literature and aligned my interpretations with established relevant literatures. This approach ensures that while my voice remains central, the findings

are critically examined, contextualized, and meaningfully connected to the broader field of inclusive education.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

This study passed the ethical evaluation conducted by the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, a university in Surabaya, Indonesia. It also adhered to ethical research procedures, particularly those related to working with individuals from vulnerable groups, in this case, a pre-service teacher with physical disabilities. Consent was obtained from the pre-service teacher and his parents. They were fully informed about the study, including the narrative descriptions and analyses, potential risks and benefits, and their rights to request the deletion of any inaccurately portrayed storylines. Importantly, their personal identities were kept strictly confidential.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The following section outlines my key strategies and challenges in mentoring my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy during his professional journey in the English education department.

Key strategies

I found three essential strategies to prepare, train, and mentor my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. The first strategy was having inclusive mindset and implementing a differentiated instruction approach.

> *Ok, starting today, I must change my thinking to be more inclusive.* (Reflection note – February 25th, 2024: key strategies: inclusive mindset)

> *My son could not write but can type slowly….* (Interview with the parent of the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: differentiated instruction)

Although I had been working in teacher education for some time, I had no prior experience supporting aspiring teachers from underrepresented groups, such as individuals with disabilities. My initial understanding of a teacher was traditional and lacked inclusivity, focusing solely on individuals without intellectual, emotional, or physical disabilities. Therefore, when I first met my student with physical disabilities pursuing a teaching degree and aspiring to become an English teacher in my class, I was caught off guard and felt unprepared. My preconceived notions of what a teacher should be were challenged and, ultimately, dismantled. This transformative experience led me to realize that the teaching profession should be accessible to all. Everyone has the right to dream and the opportunity to become a teacher.

As reflected in my reflection note, I sought to better support my student by educating myself about inclusive education practices by attending workshops, participating in webinars, and reading research articles. Through this process, I gradually learn how to mentor student who has limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. I

employed a differentiated instruction approach. For instance, based on the result of the interview with parent, I adjusted classroom activities by allowing him to type rather than handwrite exams or responses, since handwriting was not possible for him. I also permitted the use of assistive technologies, such as speech-to-text software and laptops, for written English tasks. In addition, I extended assignment deadlines to give him more time to complete typing.

> *I always spent two hours a day to work on my thesis. My mom helps me writing, taking videos when I do research, learn research too.* (Interview with a student with physical disabilities – June 1st, 2025: key strategies: differentiated instruction)

Finally, during his undergraduate thesis project, I allowed him to work alongside his mother, who served as a shadow researcher by assisting with typing, conducting fieldwork at the school, and supporting him in learning how to carry out the research process.

The second strategy was to be an active listener for the student and his family. I wrote:

> *Ok now I have a student with physical disabilities in my class. I must get to know him well, I must interview him, his parent, his classmates. I need to also conduct surveys for my class. I must prepare to be more inclusive. I need to be more attentive to my sayings and behaviors. Ok, this is difficult, but let's try.* (Reflection note – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: active listening)

Based on my reflection notes, I recalled conducting interviews with all my students, including the parent of my student with physical disabilities. I did this to foster a supportive learning environment for everyone in my class. For all students, I asked about their coursework plans, assignments, and learning expectations. I also included questions about their personal feelings before and after lessons. For the mother of my student with physical disabilities, I focused on her expectations, concerns, and overall expectations about the course.

> *Maybe we can do online learning via zoom too Sir, because this class is difficult to move around.* (Interview with the students without disabilities (student number 3) – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: active listening)

> *I am sorry sir; I need more time to submit my assignment. I could not type fast.* (Interview with the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: active listening)

> *It is better to study online too. My son wants to be an English teacher. He can learn how teach online too when the lesson is in online.* (Interview with the parent of the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: active listening)

Based on the results of interviews with all my students and the parent of my student with physical disabilities, I found that they preferred online learning. My student with physical disabilities also emphasized the need for extended time to submit his assignments. From this, I realized that active listening is an effective strategy for understanding and responding to my students' aspirations for better learning in my class. Furthermore, before beginning the supervision process for the undergraduate thesis project, I also held discussions with my student, his parent, and myself to determine how the sessions should be conducted. Through this conversation, I learned that their preference was for online supervision via Zoom. His mother mentioned:

> *It took us two hours by motorcycle from our home to this university. So, could we do the supervision session for his thesis online?* (Interview with the parent of the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: active listening)

As his supervisor, I agreed with their suggestion and conducted all supervision sessions with my student with physical disabilities online via Google Meet. Through this process, I realized that active listening not only helped me better understand his progress but also enabled me to provide more frequent and targeted feedback on his work. Ultimately, he was able to complete his undergraduate thesis successfully and became the first in his cohort, including classmates without disabilities, to graduate with an excellent score.

The third strategy was selecting a special school rather than a general school as the site for my student's teaching practicum. When it came time for all third-year students in the faculty of education to begin their practicum, I consulted with my student and his parent about the school placement. They expressed a preference for a special senior high school, specifically the one from which my student had graduated. When I asked about their reasons, they explained that they were concerned students without disabilities in general schools might not accept an in-service teacher with physical disabilities, and my student himself felt unprepared for that environment. They also emphasized that choosing a special school would allow him to inspire other students with physical disabilities to pursue their dreams and continue their education. My student and his mother stated:

> *I want my juniors follow my journey. I want them to study more. I also feel comfortable in that school.* (Interview with the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: choosing special school over general school for teaching practicum)

> *I am afraid for my son, may be my son not ready for general school and students without disabilities might not accept him. So, better go back to his high school for teaching practicum.* (Interview with the parent of the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: choosing special school over general school for teaching practicum)

During his one-month English teaching practicum at the school, I supervised my student closely. I provided feedback on his lesson plans and teaching materials

prior to each teaching session. Before his practice lessons, I visited the classroom to check on his feelings and readiness. His parent was always present to support him in preparing for the practicum, and the homeroom teacher also supervised him in the field. When I later discussed his English teaching performance with the homeroom teacher, I found that her evaluation of his work was highly positive.

> *He is very on time, even before the lesson starts. He prepared everything with his mom. He taught English using various methods and used laptop and WhatsApp group when teaching. I can see he feels comfortable in this process.* (Interview with the homeroom teacher of the student with physical disabilities – March 2nd, 2024: key strategies: choosing special school over general school for teaching practicum)

My student arrived on time, taught English passionately, and incorporated technology into his lessons, such as using a laptop and a WhatsApp group for learning activities. The homeroom teacher noted that because he was already familiar with the school environment, he was able to perform effectively.

Key challenges

I identified three key challenges in mentoring my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy as he pursued his professional development in the English Education Department. The first challenge was related to perceptions and professional acceptance.

> *I was completely floored when I asked my non-disabled students. What is in their mind about the figure of teacher? Surprisingly none had a picture of disabled teacher because they think that a knowledgeable teacher is non-disabled teacher. I think I know because I also had the same conception.* (Reflection note – March 1st, 2024: key challenges: perceptions)

In terms of perceptions, my foremost challenge was addressing the epistemic injustices experienced both by myself and by my student with disabilities. I realized that my students without disabilities and I shared a narrow conception of what a teacher should be, particularly in relation to knowledge and competency. This perception likely stemmed from limited exposure to teachers with disabilities in both general and special education contexts. As a result, we had unconsciously internalized the notion that teachers must be both intellectually and physically able-bodied. Reflecting on my own experiences in teacher education, I recall never encountering an individual with physical disabilities preparing to become an English teacher, which reinforced the belief that the profession was inaccessible to them.

In terms of professional acceptance, my foremost challenge was selecting the most appropriate school for my student's teaching practicum. He has limb-girdle muscular dystrophy and therefore relies on a wheelchair, yet he speaks English well and had successfully completed a micro-teaching course, practicing classroom instruction for a semester. However, when it came time for the field practicum, I struggled to find a suitable school. I was concerned not only about whether the

school's physical infrastructure could accommodate his needs, but also about whether his prospective students would be willing to learn from him. I revisited my reflection notes from the interview sessions with all my students and his parent, where they likewise emphasized the importance of online teaching skills.

> *One important note to remember from my interviews with him, his parent, and classmates. They all mentioned a training on online teaching to give him wider chances to enter teaching profession as an online English tutor/teacher.* (Reflection note – March 3rd, 2024: key challenges: professional acceptance)

I recalled the significance of online teaching for my students. My student with physical disabilities and his mother noted that online teaching opens pathways to careers as English tutors or teachers without requiring a physically accessible school building. My students without disabilities also observed that they could benefit in similar ways. They added that online teaching helps eliminate mobility-related challenges for their classmate with physical disabilities, such as moving between classrooms, since he relies on a wheelchair.

The second major challenge I faced while mentoring my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy was the lack of preparedness in the teacher education system and inadequate infrastructure.

> *Today I feel so confused I no idea how to handle the needs of my student who ask for strategies to teaching English to visual impaired learners and ADHD. I have tried to seek information on the internet, asked my colleagues and friends, but no clue. I see there is a shadow teacher in secondary school, but why not in teacher education institution? So, I can ask appropriate methods to teach.* (Reflection note – April 10th, 2024: key challenges: lack of preparedness in the teacher education system)

Unlike special or inclusive schools, I found that teacher education programs often lack shadow teacher educators trained to assist students with disabilities. As a result, whenever I had questions about developing activities or providing mentorship to my student with physical disabilities, I always turned to his mother. I recognize that this was helpful for understanding his learning style and interests in various topics. However, I strongly felt the need for a shadow lecturer to assist with physical learning activities, allowing my student to focus on pedagogy, communication, and language teaching. Ideally, the shadow lecturer should also have expertise in special education, so they could provide constructive feedback on my teaching approach, behavior, and expressions, particularly in terms of whether they effectively accommodated the needs of my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy.

In terms of inadequate infrastructure, I found that the facilities were insufficient to support the learning process of my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy.

> *OMG, why is it difficult for my student to access library? Lucky my student did teach practicum in a special school, what if in general school? Are the facilities ready?* (Reflection note – November 10th, 2024: key challenges: inadequate infrastructure)

I found that the library was not accessible for students with physical disabilities like my student. He and his mother once told me that they wanted to read physical books there for learning and look for references for the thesis project, but the library provided no access for wheelchair users to enter. In addition, I observed that the classrooms in my institution and in K–12 schools were mostly designed with a "one-size-fits-all" layout, relying solely on traditional whiteboards without alternatives such as digital smartboards. Since my student uses a wheelchair, the availability of a smartboard would minimize physical strain, as he cannot stand, write at height, or perform handwriting tasks. With a smartboard, he could simply touch the screen to participate, making learning activities more engaging and accessible for everyone.

The third major challenge I face is helping secure employment opportunities for my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy.

> *Wow… there is a teacher with disability teaching at a special school. Why not at general school? I asked him when I did supervision at my student' teaching practicum school. I feel nervous as to asking personal question why this teacher with disability teach at a special school. Now I see that it is because just only this school accept him, it is difficult to get a job as a teacher too. I do not want this situation will be experienced by my student in the future. I searched for jobs for disability teachers but nothing. I asked my colleagues about this job, nothing. We all must do something.* (Reflection note – December 20th, 2024: key challenges: unprepared teaching profession)

Job prospects for teachers with disabilities in general education schools remain limited, as most opportunities are confined to special education settings. As my student with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy approaches graduation, I have actively searched for job vacancies but have found none. I recalled what my students without disabilities expressed in interviews: they believe the government should establish policies to ensure equal job opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the teaching profession. My students without disabilities have become vocal advocates for this issue, recognizing the systemic barriers that prevent their classmate with physical disabilities from securing a teaching position despite his qualifications and aspirations.

Discussion

Over one and a half years of mentoring my student with physical disabilities, specifically, limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, in the English education department, I identified three key strategies and key challenges that emerged in supporting him. The first strategy was cultivating an inclusive mindset and implementing a differentiated instruction approach. Embracing an inclusive mindset required me to reflect on my own beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes toward the rights of individuals

with disabilities. I came to realize that these elements profoundly influenced my actions as a teacher educator. This insight resonates with Borg's (2003) theory of teacher cognition, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of educators' thinking, knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Similarly, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) have demonstrated that teachers' inclusive pedagogical approaches are shaped by their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as their responses when students encounter learning barriers. Thus, envisioning the role of a teacher inclusively is crucial, as it drives initiatives to support students with disabilities in developing the skills and confidence needed to enter the teaching profession.

However, research also highlights that prejudices against teachers with disabilities remain prevalent. They are often perceived as less competent or incapable of fully participating in school activities, leading to discriminatory practices within school communities (Neca et al., 2022). Such biases undermine the human rights of persons with disabilities and perpetuate daily challenges for teachers. Therefore, adopting an inclusive conceptualization of the teacher's role is critical for promoting equity and countering homogeneity in the teaching profession (Santoro, 2015; Schleicher, 2014). Moreover, an inclusive mindset not only diversifies the teaching profession but also strengthens the philosophical foundation of inclusive education, which affirms the right of every individual to quality education, personal growth, and dignity (Peters et al., 2005).

Aligned with this inclusive vision, I also implemented a differentiated instruction approach to create flexible learning pathways tailored to my student's needs. For example, because handwriting was not possible for him, I allowed exams and assignments to be completed through typing and encouraged the use of assistive technologies such as laptops and speech-to-text software. Recognizing that typing required more time, I extended assignment deadlines to ensure he had sufficient opportunity to demonstrate his understanding. This strategy of providing extended time aligned with the findings of Şengül Erdem and Yakut (2022), who identified similar accommodation practices for students with visual impairments. As a result of this differentiated instruction, my student not only met all academic requirements but also excelled, becoming the first in his cohort to defend his thesis and earning the highest grade, an A. This outcome illustrates that differentiated instruction is not merely about accommodations but about fostering equity and enabling students with disabilities to thrive academically. This aligns with Florian and Linklater's (2010) argument that varied tasks, supports, and approaches form the cornerstone of inclusive education.

In addition, I discovered one particularly vital strategy within the differentiated instruction framework. During his undergraduate thesis, I allowed his mother to act as a shadow researcher, assisting with tasks such as typing, data collection, and navigating the research process. At first glance, this strategy might appear ethically questionable, since undergraduate qualifications typically require the student to conduct independent research. However, in the Indonesian context, where completion of an undergraduate thesis is a compulsory graduation requirement, this standard presented an insurmountable barrier for my student. Baldwin (2007) noted that teacher education directors often insist that when assessing teacher candidates with learning disabilities, accommodations in skill demonstration may be deemed unacceptable or even unethical. I contend, however, that in certain contexts of skill acquisition, such as conducting empirical research,

accommodations remain both necessary and valid. My student, who had limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, would have faced significant difficulties without assistance in physically collecting and processing data. Importantly, the shadow researcher did not generate the research ideas or conceptual framework; these remained solely the student's responsibility. As long as the intellectual ownership of the research rested with the student, the involvement of family members in helping to navigate the research processes should be considered both acceptable and ethical. This unique strategy of allowing a shadow researcher is therefore vital and may serve as a valuable option, particularly in English teacher education programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels where the completion of a research thesis is a mandatory graduation requirement.

The second strategy was being an active listener for both my student and his family. I carefully attended to their concerns, preferences, and aspirations, particularly regarding teaching and supervision methods that supported his learning. For instance, they emphasized the benefits of online teaching and supervision, which reduced mobility barriers while still enabling active participation. By valuing their voices, I adapted my teaching to respect their needs and honor their lived experiences. This process also allowed me to identify hidden challenges and co-create more inclusive learning opportunities. This practice reflects broader principles of inclusive education. UNESCO (2020) has underscored the importance of participatory education, where learners actively shape their experiences, while Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) have highlighted inclusive pedagogy as a means of ensuring meaningful engagement for all students, regardless of ability.

The third strategy involved selecting a special school for his teaching practicum rather than a general school, given his condition. After careful discussion, both my student and his parent strongly preferred a special senior high school, particularly his alma mater. Their decision was shaped by concerns about possible rejection in mainstream schools, his own hesitation to face such environments, and the belief that teaching in a special school would inspire other students with disabilities. This choice underscores the significance of creating supportive teaching environments that not only accommodate but also empower future teachers with disabilities. Barrett et al. (2019) have emphasized that such inclusive environments require active involvement from community stakeholders in designing schools and facilities responsive to diverse learner and teacher needs.

Despite these strategies, I also encountered three major challenges. The first was addressing perceptions and professional acceptance. I realized that both my students without disabilities and I initially held a narrow conception of what a teacher should be, particularly in terms of competence. This presented a serious risk of discrimination, rooted in societal stereotypes portraying individuals with disabilities as dependent or incompetent (Nario-Redmond, 2010). These biases reinforce the assumption that effective teaching requires freedom from impairment, leading to exclusionary practices such as assigning teachers with disabilities to less prestigious subjects or limiting their responsibilities (Singal et al., 2024). Within teacher education programs, such perceptions also raise institutional dilemmas about whether students with disabilities can meet professional standards (Baldwin, 2007).

Professional acceptance was also closely tied to securing a suitable teaching practicum school. Beyond issues of physical accessibility, concerns were shared by myself, my student, and his parent regarding whether students in mainstream schools would accept a teacher with disabilities. A recent study by Pov and Kawai (2024) reported similar concerns about including students with disabilities in regular schools, particularly in relation to resources and social acceptance. I found that these concerns extend not only to the inclusion of students with disabilities but also to the placement of teacher candidates with disabilities in mainstream school settings. To address this, I suggest the development of online teaching practicum opportunities for pre-service teachers with physical disabilities. Both my student and his mother emphasized that digital platforms provide alternative career pathways as English tutors or teachers by removing physical barriers and enabling greater demonstration of competence. This aligns with Raja's (2016) argument in the World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends, which highlights the transformative role of information and communication technology (ICT) in expanding educational and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, my institution does not currently offer online teaching practicums or online teaching licensure, and I was therefore unable to address this challenge. In the future, however, English teacher education institutions should establish online teaching practicum opportunities alongside corresponding licensure. Such initiatives would open pathways for individuals with disabilities to enter the teaching profession by providing the qualifications necessary for sustainable career development (Ware et al., 2022).

The second challenge concerned the lack of preparedness within the teacher education system and the inadequacy of supporting infrastructure. There were no shadow lecturers available to assist my student, leaving me solely responsible for accommodating his needs despite lacking specialized training. Ideally, a shadow lecturer with expertise in special education could have provided targeted support. Widodo and Umar (2020) have confirmed that the absence of shadow teachers undermines the quality of learning for students with special needs, as many educators lack inclusive competencies. Similarly, physical infrastructure in my institution was not designed with accessibility in mind. For example, the library was inaccessible, depriving my student of engagement with physical resources, while classrooms lacked alternatives to traditional whiteboards, such as digital smartboards, that could have reduced physical strain. Since my student uses a wheelchair, these limitations excluded him from fully participating in some learning activities. These issues reflect broader systemic barriers, as Amoah et al. (2023) also found that many universities still lack disability-friendly facilities across essential infrastructures, from libraries to transportation hubs.

The third challenge was securing employment opportunities after graduation. Teachers with disabilities remain a minority within the teaching workforce (Hu & Wang, 2024). Consequently, job prospects for teachers with disabilities in mainstream schools are scarce, often restricting them to special education settings. Neca et al. (2022) suggested that this limitation stems from prevailing perceptions of incompetence and incapability among teachers with disabilities in participating fully in school learning and activities. I have observed that this challenge arises not merely from epistemic injustice toward these teachers but, more critically, from systemic injustices embedded in recruitment policies. This exclusion is not the

result of a lack of competence but of institutional barriers. Recruitment processes often lack quotas for candidates with disabilities and fail to provide reasonable accommodations necessary for them to succeed. As a result, many qualified individuals with physical disabilities are denied opportunities to teach in general education settings, perpetuating inequality and reinforcing the perception that teaching is a profession reserved only for those without disabilities.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic study explores my experiences mentoring a pre-service English teacher with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. It highlights three key strategies: adopting an inclusive mindset through differentiated instruction, actively listening to the student and his family, and selecting a special school as the site for his teaching practicum. It also identifies three major challenges: addressing perceptions and professional acceptance, the limited preparedness of teacher education systems and infrastructure, and restricted employment opportunities. While these findings underscore the value of inclusive mentoring, the study is limited to a single case and my personal reflections. Future studies should adopt broader perspectives across English teacher education institutions and policy levels. They could explore how programs embed disability awareness and inclusive pedagogy in their curricula, as well as assess the accessibility of physical and digital learning environments for students with disabilities. Further inquiries might also examine the impact of institutional and national policies on fair employment opportunities and identify effective partnerships that promote inclusive hiring.

The study implies that English education programs must strengthen inclusive practices by embedding disability studies and inclusive pedagogy courses into the curriculum, training lecturers to adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and promoting peer-support initiatives. They should improve accessibility by ensuring classrooms and digital platforms are barrier-free, providing screen readers, captioning, and sign language interpretation, and redesigning campus facilities for physical mobility. To advocate for fair employment, programs should establish partnerships with schools and universities committed to inclusive hiring, create mentorship and career-preparation programs for teacher candidates with disabilities, and lobby policymakers for stronger employment protections. By implementing these measures, English education programs can empower future English teachers with physical disabilities and advance inclusive education.

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