

# TeachingEnglish

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## English language teachers with disabilities: an exploratory study across four countries

Nidhi Singal and Hannah Ware



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Nidhi Singal and Hannah Ware

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# Introduction

In 2019, a report published by the Education Commission; *Transforming the Education Workforce: Learning Teams for a Learning Generation* noted that an increasingly diverse student population needs a deeper engagement with a diversified teacher workforce. The report highlighted the need for new approaches to ensure routes into teaching are accessible for underrepresented groups, including those with disabilities. 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. Since the 1990s, while considerable attention has been placed on developing inclusive schools (for example Ainscow, 1999), very little attention has been given to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the education workforce. The overall objective of this exploratory project was to provide a snapshot of the experiences of English language teachers with disabilities in four purposively selected ODA countries where the British Council currently operates. This was done to better inform the British Councils' inclusion of teachers with disabilities within their work on English for Education Systems. The countries included in this small-scale exploration are Nepal, India, Rwanda, and South Africa.

## Structure of the report

The report begins with an international overview of existing research into teachers with disabilities working in mainstream education systems. Given the paucity of research, a specific focus on English subject teachers would have been very restrictive, hence a broader lens was adopted. The research in the area is primarily Northern based and hence reflections for Southern contexts remain limited. This overview is followed by a discussion of the four countries in relation to any policies, statistics and other information on their efforts towards the inclusion of teachers with disabilities in the workforce. The section on empirical insights gained from this project provides a detailed description of the research process, a discussion of the sample and a critical engagement with the findings. The report concludes with a reflection on the ways forward and recommendations for the British Council's work in this area.



A diverse student population needs a diversified teacher workforce.

# Insights from the existing literature

To gain insights from existing studies, a careful review of existing databases, specifically databases of the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and the British Education Index (BEI) were undertaken. In total, 59 studies published in English language journals were found across multiple countries including: United States of America (USA), Canada, United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Ethiopia, Israel, Finland, Malaysia, Australia and Nepal, with the most frequent research being undertaken in North America and the UK. A more recent desk-based review has also been published by Neca et al. (2020).

Of the 59 articles identified in our research, more than a third (n=21) focussed on the experience of teachers with learning difficulties, primarily those with dyslexia. Teachers with sensory impairments (hearing and/or visual impairments) were the second most frequent (n=12), followed by theoretical articles or articles not specifying type of disability (n=11). Studies focussed on teachers with physical disabilities (n=6), those who were Autistic (n=1) and studies looking across teachers with a range of impairments (n=8) were the least common. Of the articles that looked at a specific level of schooling, higher education emerged as the most frequent (n=25) level of focus, with 18 out of these 25 articles focussing on teacher training programmes. Few of the extant studies were subject specific, although three studies focussed on physical education (USA), two looked at music education (USA) and one science education (UK). Insights emerging from the literature can be broadly grouped into four interlinked areas: (1) how teachers with disabilities construct their identity and reasons for being a teacher, (2) barriers and tensions around disclosing disability at work as well as enablers for success, (3) the impact of teachers with disabilities on students' learning and (4) student perceptions of teachers with disabilities.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, the use of North(ern) and South(ern) are used to highlight the “fundamental economic inequality between the two blocs which results in inequalities in the standard of living, resources available and domination by the Northern bloc in international development” (Singal, 2010, p. 417). We aim to avoid the inherent bias situated within the terms ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries suggesting a “transmission of knowledge from so-called developed to developing nations” and a lack of recognition of the rich histories of many of the so called ‘developing countries’ (ibid).

<sup>2</sup> Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and the British Education Index (BEI) were searched using the key words ‘teacher(s)’ / ‘educators’ with ‘disability’, ‘disabled’, ‘handicapped’, ‘learning difficulty’, ‘learning disability’.



## Identities and reasons for becoming a teacher

Three main themes are identified in the literature as reasons for becoming teachers: pragmatic factors (such as pay, holidays), personal variables (for example passion for working with children, having relevant skills), and strong sense of social justice (Ware et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2005). Importantly, some teachers with disabilities argued that they brought additional qualities to the profession in relation to their non-disabled counterparts.

Examples included being particularly caring and having empathetic values (Glazzard and Dale, 2015) and being a positive role model as a person with disabilities (Ware, Singal and Groce, 2021). Studies undertaken by Duquette (2000), Morgan and Burn (2000) and Riddick (2003) highlight that while some teachers with disabilities had faced challenges in their own educational experiences as children, this had positively impacted on them as adult practitioners. Additionally, Ferri et al. (2005) undertaking personal history research in the USA reported strong evidence that, when viewed through the lens of the capability approach, focussing on people's capabilities and functioning, teachers with disabilities describe themselves as competent.

## Barriers and tensions around disability, and enablers

Tensions around whether to disclose identifications of disability, particularly hidden disabilities, are identified in the literature, with Saltes (2020, 22) suggesting that the 'normalising ideology' of a 'capable teacher' is a substantial barrier which causes both attitudinal and physical barriers. Valle et al. (2004), undertaking in-depth research in the USA with four teachers who identified as having a learning disability, reported significant struggles around disclosure. The stigma around learning disabilities was so strong for some teachers that they felt it was impossible to disclose their disability at work, while other teachers felt declaring their learning disability offered an opportunity to create positive perceptions of people with learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004).

In other research, teachers with disabilities highlight the importance of their role in the classroom. For example, teachers with dyslexia noted their value to classrooms with diverse student populations (Burns and Bell, 2011; Vogel and Arnoni, 2011). Glazzard and Dale (2015, 179) argue that teachers who identified and owned the label of dyslexia could be regarded as 'agents of change' actively supporting the process of inclusive education. However, while the authors note that self-identification at work can also have a positive impact on teachers' self-esteem, the threat of 'standards' within the education system meant that many trainee teachers choose not to disclose disability. Ware et al. (2021) researching in England, with ten teachers and trainee teachers with a range of disabilities, found that while there was a strong discourse of inclusive education in schools, this did not extend to teachers. Resultingly, nine out of ten teachers faced difficulties and discrimination at work with the responsibility for making adjustments put on the individual rather than barriers in the system being addressed. Similarly, Alon and Lishchinsky (2019: n.p.), working in Israel, note that 'dealing with the school environment is often more difficult and demanding than coping with the disability itself'.

In highlighting levers for success, teachers in Ware et al.'s (2021) study identified the importance of effective line manager support. Some of the teachers spoke of individual attributes which made their line manager effective, such as empathy, personal or familial experience of disability, being a feminist, and being a trade unionist. Notably, seeing other successful disabled teachers who were more advanced in their careers as role models was also cited as significant. However, due to the lack of disabled teachers in England, this is rare. The underrepresentation of teachers with disabilities is an international issue and ensuring more people with disabilities can access teacher training is vital to ensuring greater representation, diversity and inclusivity in the workforce. Valle et al. (2004, 15) argue schools to be 'powerful social and political institutions in which discourses of disability circulate' and these discourses are supported by teacher training programmes which often frame disability through a deficit lens. Actively disrupting these discourses (Valle et al., 2004) as well as ensuring greater representation in the classroom (Parker and Draves, 2018) is vital for ensuring the development of more inclusive schools and education systems.

<sup>3</sup> This review contains 53 research studies focusing on teachers with disabilities published in English language journals.



## Impact of teachers in classrooms

Findings from the literature highlight the central role of teachers with disabilities in the classroom both as positive role models and for improving teaching and learning practices.

Anderson (2006, 368) argues 'pedagogy is also shaped by our life experiences. Teachers with disabilities 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. Similarly, Hayashi and May (2011) argue that to have a person with a disability as a teacher, a respected expert in their field, contributes more to developing positive mindsets towards disabled people than exposure to disability in other contexts. In relation to teaching and learning, some studies highlight how teachers with disabilities are better able to differentiate learning activities for children, are more empathetic, and particularly empower students with disabilities (Burns and Bell, 2010; 2011; Griffiths, 2012; Morgan and Burn, 2000; Ware et al. 2021).

## Student perception of teachers

Research undertaken by Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2008, 2009a, 2009b) in the USA examined students' perceptions of the competence of a teacher with physical disabilities in teaching Physical Education (PE). In three studies, conducted across elementary, middle and high schools, 100 students were randomly assigned to watch one of two almost identical videoed swimming lessons. In the first video, the teacher was able-bodied and in the second video the teacher used a wheelchair. Students were then asked to complete a questionnaire on the lesson content and perceptions of the teacher. Concerningly, the researchers report that as students 'progress through their schooling, their beliefs about PE teaching 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). They suggest that this is likely due to the limitations of PE curriculums which focus on athleticism and competitive sport. In contrast, earlier research by Roberson and Serwatka (2000) found that secondary students perceived Deaf teachers to be better at teaching and were more positive towards these teachers. In Nepal, Lamichhane (2016) researching teachers with visual impairments working in mainstream schools reported students valued these teachers as having good communication skills and positive attitudes as well as being able to provide strong social and moral lessons.

In conclusion, the existing studies, though limited in number, highlight some important insights in relation to the significant value of teachers with disabilities which include embodied pedagogy and the reiteration of central values of inclusion. However, it also notes the many challenges that teachers with disabilities face in their workplace.

# Country Context Reviews

This section provides an overview of current legislation which makes specific references to teachers with disabilities. It is important to be mindful of the fact that this search was exclusively online.

In total ten official documents were identified for South Africa, nine for Rwanda, three for Nepal and seven for India. When examining these documents the focus was to specifically identify any explicit reference to teachers or educators with disabilities. Additionally, we searched for recent statistics on disability from official government websites to identify any information in relation to the participation of teachers with disabilities in the workforce.

## South Africa

The review of official documentation notes that in 1998 South Africa enacted the *Employment Equity Act* (EEA) in order to diversify the workforce following the repeal of Apartheid legislation in 1991, and the formation of a democratic government in 1994. The EEA set out to legislate that those in a designated group (including persons with disabilities) cannot be unfairly discriminated against in employment and declared that it was not unfair to take affirmative action by giving a person with a protected characteristic, such as race or disability, preference when employing.

However, recently, the 20th Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) (Department of Labour, 2020) showed that people with disabilities are still severely underrepresented in the South African labour market. In relation to teachers with disabilities, while no specific data is available, the CEE reports only about 1% of the professionally qualified and skilled workforce are persons with disabilities (1.1% and 1.2% respectively) (ibid).

It should be noted that these statistics only represent those who through employment have made a formal disability declaration using the EEA1 form. Nevertheless, underrepresentation exists, and the current rate of representation is significantly less than the 2% quota aimed for in public service employment (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

In addressing the status of teachers with disabilities within policies, there are few specific mentions. The 1997 *White Paper on the Integrated National Disability Strategy* (Office of the Deputy President, 1997) reflects on the need for capacity building within the education sector. In explicating on the education of Deaf learners, the White Paper notes not only the importance of having teachers fluent in Sign Language but also the importance of students accessing Deaf adult role models and Deaf culture in school. While this paper does not go so far as to call for the active recruitment of Deaf teachers, it does highlight the positive impact of having adults with disabilities as role models for children with disabilities in school. More recently, the *Draft White Paper on the Mainstreaming of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Equality and Dignity* (Department of Social Development, 2016, 112), echoes the United Nations 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

*In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.*

<sup>4</sup> Capitalisation of Deaf has been done to denote those who identify as culturally Deaf and for whom sign language is usually a first language.

<sup>5</sup> To begin with a wide search on Google was undertaken to identify country information regarding the specific recruitment of teachers we used the search terms: 'teacher recruitment' + 'policy' + 'name of country'. Following this we then searched respective government websites to identify official documents relating to teachers and/or disability using the following keywords: 'teacher', 'educator', 'disability'. To further expand our search, we trawled specific government departments to identify key legislation for each country including their Equality Act (or similarly equality legislation).

<sup>6</sup> In Nepal we faced particular difficulties in the acquisition of government documents in English resulting in fewer findings.

In looking at policy enablers, as well as affirmative action outlining quotas for the employment of people with disabilities in public service (see above), government bursaries are also available. The National Skills Fund and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme are available in South Africa for people with disabilities who are looking to study higher education, including training to become a teacher.

## Rwanda

In 2007, the equality legislation entitled *Law No1 Relating to Protection of Disabled Persons in General* outlined specific anti-discrimination policies for people with disabilities. In relation to employment, the law notes that people with disabilities should be protected from discrimination of any form in matters related to employment and noted affirmative action in recruitment stating, 'a disabled person shall be given greater access to employment opportunities than any other citizen in case of equal capacities or in case of equal marks in competition'. The 2019 Labour Force Survey reports that 16.1% of women with disabilities participated in the labour market in relation to 46.4% of women without disabilities (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2019a). Similarly, only 23% of men with disabilities are engaged in the labour market in contrast to 64.3% of men without disabilities (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2019a). However, due to the lack of disaggregated data it remains unclear in what capacity they are participating in the labour market, and no inferences can be made in relation to their participation in the teaching workforce.

There is little information available about the status of teachers with disabilities in Rwanda, however, the 2018 *Revised Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy* highlights the importance of accessibility for both students and educators underlining a commitment to 'developing conditions that are adequately conducive for all learners and educators to interact in a barrier-free and child-friendly educational environment' (p.1). In looking at access to training, the 2007 *Teacher Development Policy* set out to reorganise the funding for teacher training to strengthen the support given to primary and secondary training, as well as providing funding for in-service teacher development. Nevertheless, in looking at representation in higher education few students with disabilities access university-level education. The 2018 *Special Needs and Inclusive Education Strategic Plan* reports only 0.48% of all

students enrolled in tertiary education are disabled, with the 2019 *Rwandan Statistic Yearbook* (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2019b) reporting that for the academic year 2017/2018 only 173 students with disabilities were enrolled in tertiary education.

## Nepal

In Nepal, the Civil Service Act (1993, 2007 amendment) legislated that 45% of jobs should be filled by marginalised people in order to create an 'inclusive civil service' (Chapter 3, Article 7), which would include teachers working in government schools. Within the 45% of reserved jobs, 5 % were mandated to be filled by 'Disabled (differently able)' people. This is an interesting mandate given that the government estimated in the last census that only 2% of the population had disabilities (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). While the Civil Service Act remains in place not all the data is available in English. For instance, information obtained from the most recent Report on the Nepal Labour Force Survey does not provide information on the employment of persons with disabilities, rather it only notes disability or illness as a reason provided by 14% of the 3.7million people who reported working less than 40 hours per week at the time of the survey.

In addressing the status of teachers with disabilities specifically within policy there is scant reference, with the only explicit mention (in a document written in English) being within the *School Sector Development Plan 2016/17-2022/23* (Ministry of Education, 2016). In this plan the importance of ensuring accessible sanitation facilities in schools for 'children, boys and girls, and differently-abled students and teachers' is noted.

India's 2016 *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act* replaced the 1995 *Persons with Disabilities Act*, bringing it in line with the UNCRPD which India signed and ratified in 2008. In relation to training and employment, the Act sets out in Section IV that the government will provide loans at 'concessional rates' for persons with disabilities as well as providing schemes to ensure people with disabilities can access both formal mainstream training and specialised courses. The Act outlines non-discrimination in employment within government institutions (such as schools), but unlike Nepal, South Africa and Rwanda the Act does not outline any form of affirmative action for people with disabilities. In examining general disability statistics from the 2011 census, the government estimates that 2.21% of the population has a disability (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016). Of this, 36% of the total number of people with disabilities are working, with more men (46%) than female (23%) being engaged in the labour market (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016). However, the data is not disaggregated enough to estimate how many workers are working within the education sector.

For teachers with disabilities, the 2014 *School Planning and Architecture Act* explicitly notes that schools should be built for all, including people with disabilities. India's Education for All 2015 National Review (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015) positively reports on the active recruitment of local tribal teachers and female teachers under the programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) seeking to universalise primary education. Interestingly, while the review notes the importance of increasing the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce it there is no explicit mention of a drive to increase representation of teachers with disabilities as with female teachers or tribal teachers. The only obvious mention of teachers with disabilities is found within the 2016 *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act* which notes under specific measures to promote and facilitate inclusive education the aim to 'train and employ teachers, including teachers with disability who are qualified in sign language and Braille'. This brings the act in line with the wording present in the UNCRPD.

Thus, in all the country cases what emerges is a lack of data on the numbers of persons with disabilities involved in the education workforce and little explicit mention of increasing the participation of teachers with disabilities, particularly in the official documents focussing on Education.

# Research overview

To understand the lived experiences of teachers with disabilities in the four countries which were the focus of this review, a qualitative survey design was adopted comprised of two parts; firstly semi-structured interviews, followed by a focus group discussion. We were mindful of the fact that the research method adopted should enable teachers to express and reflect on their experiences, thus semi-structured interviews were used in the first instance. The semi-structured schedule, which was piloted and refined, covered the following areas:

- Motivation for becoming a teacher.
- Their identity as a teacher of English and as a disabled teacher.
- Experiences with colleagues; students; management; parents of children attending their school.
- Challenges and enablers.
- Experiences and reflections on advocacy.

As a first step, we received ethical approval from the British Council, after which we developed a participant consent and ethical protocol, which covered the following areas:

- Background and purpose of the project.
- What the participants were being asked to do, such as participate in two online interviews lasting no longer than 60 minutes each, with some details on the kind of questions that would be asked.

- How the data would be handled: assurances on recording; issues of anonymity and confidentiality (to the degree desired by the participants); processes of analysis and research dissemination.

In total nine participants took part in the research process (see section: *Sample selection*). The participants were required to e-sign a consent form to ensure that they had understood the process and the nature of engagement. The participants were not offered any compensation for their participation in the semi-structured interviews, however, for those that participated in the focus group a contribution towards the cost of mobile data was gifted to account for data used by participating in a video call.

After data from the interviews had been analysed, a focus group discussion was undertaken in order to facilitate reflections from the findings and to provide an opportunity for teachers to meet each other, something they had expressed a desire for during the interviews. The group discussion also offered an opportunity to explore anonymity within the research and discuss effective means of disseminating the findings. As all the interviewees were unable to attend the focus group, an online form with a summary of the questions was created, allowing teachers to reflect upon and add any additional comments. Five out of nine teachers (Joseph, Veliswa, Ashok, Mary and Gabriel) attended the focus group. Two teachers (Arjun and Sania), who didn't attend the focus group, provided information using the follow up questionnaire, the other two (Ankur and Jacob) did not revert back.



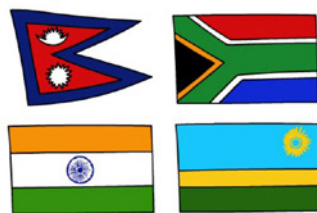
## Sample selection

The participants in this research were self-selected. In order to recruit participants, the research team developed a poster with key information (see *Appendix 1*) and adopted the following methods:

- Sought support from the British Council country offices in publicising the poster among their networks. This was very useful in the case of India where the British Council country team sent out a number of targeted WhatsApp messages.
- Social media networks were used, such as the Twitter account for the Cambridge Network for Disability and Education Research (CaNDER), and LinkedIn postings on the Inclusive Education Initiative CoP hosted by the World Bank.
- Personal and professional networks were used, for example in South Africa, colleagues based at UCT in Johannesburg sent the poster to all their teacher groups on WhatsApp, while in Nepal and Rwanda the poster was circulated through VSO country offices.

All those interested in the project, and who met the criteria – as stated on the poster – were asked to fill in an on-line form giving basic details about themselves; gender, country, type of disability, and a contact number. Each participant was followed up either via email and/or WhatsApp message.

The project generated a significant amount of interest, with 37 people filling in the Google form or making contact via email, however in many cases this did not lead to interviews, as many participants did not meet the basic selection criteria (for instance they did not have a disability, were not English language teachers, or did not reply to emails/arrive for the interview). Nonetheless, our total sample far exceeded the basic requirements of the initial project guidelines, which was one teacher per country. Table 1 provides an overview of the final list of participants and Figure 1 provides a more in-depth background on each of the participants. In writing this report a mix of real first names and pseudonyms have been used (see section on anonymity).



The teachers involved in the research were self-selected and made their own decisions about anonymity.

**Table 1. Participant overview**

First name	Country	Sex	Age	Disability	Highest level of education completed	Completed formal teacher training?	What level is the school?	Years as a teacher	Years as an English teacher
Joseph	South Africa	Male	56	Physical	Undergraduate degree	Yes	Secondary School	15	7
Veliswa	South Africa	Female	49	Physical	College	Yes	Secondary School	26	20
Jacob	Rwanda	Male	29	Physical	Secondary School	Yes	Primary School	3	3
Mary	Rwanda	Female	39	Physical	Undergraduate degree	Yes	Secondary School	Not yet recieved a job	Not yet recieved a job
Gabriel	Rwanda	Male	35	Physical	Undergraduate degree	Yes	Inclusive School	9	9
Arjun	Nepal	Male	33	Physical	Master's Degree	Yes	Secondary School	9	9
Ashok	India	Male	37	Visual impairment, physical	Master's Degree	Yes	Primary School	14	14
Sania	India	Female	37	Physical	Master's Degree	Yes	Secondary School	8	8
Ankur	India	Male	64	Physical	Master's Degree	Yes	Secondary School	32	32

In the following snapshots (Figure 1) we provide a more fleshed out overview of the teacher participants in this study. These pen portraits give a snapshot of the trajectories that these teachers followed and their current roles.



Figure 1. Snapshots of participants

### Joseph

Joseph is male and 56 years old. He was born in Zimbabwe and emigrated to South Africa in the early 1990s. He has been physically disabled since childhood and his mobility is affected by this. He trained to be a teacher at university during the Apartheid regime in South Africa where few career options were available to Black people. He describes teaching as a 'calling' due to his passion of working with young people. While at school in Zimbabwe, English was his best subject and during this time, he gained his passion for literature citing his admiration for works by Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare and Harper Lee. Joseph explains that he finds it 'exciting to teach English' at high school level. He has been a teacher for 15 years and has taught English for the last seven years. Joseph currently teaches at an inclusive government secondary school in an informal settlement in South Africa with between 70-85 students in his class, including children with disabilities.

### Gabriel

Gabriel is male, 35 years old and from Rwanda. He acquired his physical disability when he was 25 years old and this affected his mobility. Gabriel explains that he wanted to become a teacher because 'in my heart, I have a feeling that I can assist children well'. He explains that he has always liked languages and is interested in listening to the radio and reading novels in English and French. He had always wanted to live abroad and use his English but as that hasn't been possible, he decided to teach. Gabriel trained to be a teacher at university in Rwanda, completing a two-year diploma where he specialised in teaching both English and French. He hopes that in the future he will be able to return to university where he can study for another year to gain a Bachelors' degree. He has been an English teacher for the last nine years but during this time he has also taught French. He currently teaches at an inclusive government secondary school where he is also the Head of Discipline.

### Mary

Mary is female, 39 years old and from Rwanda. She was born with a visual impairment and was the only teacher in the sample currently not working as she has not yet received a teaching job from the government. Mary wished to become a teacher since childhood describing how she used to roleplay with her siblings. She chose to specialise in English because she really enjoyed it while at university. Mary finished her training two years ago having completed an undergraduate degree in English and Education which included a teacher training qualification. As part of her degree, she undertook a placement in a government secondary school for children with disabilities including those with visual impairments. It was this experience that she reflected on in order to participate in the research.

### Veliswa

Veliswa is female, 49 years old and from South Africa. Veliswa trained to be a teacher at teacher training college. She majored in English at college and due to her enjoyment of the language chose to specialise as an English language teacher. She grew up in a Xhosa speaking family and is passionate about ensuring that children from Xhosa speaking areas have access to good English teaching. Veliswa has been a teacher for 26 years having taught English for the last 20 years in government secondary schools. She recently became disabled, having her leg amputated in 2017. Since becoming disabled, Veliswa has faced difficulty at work due to being placed in schools which are inaccessible for a person with a physical disability, especially as she needed to use a wheelchair for a period of time after her amputation. She has recently got a new job and now works in a government special school teaching English. This school is accessible, she is able to move about more easily and she also has a teaching assistant.

### **Jacob**

Jacob is male, 29 years old and from Rwanda. He studied to become a teacher at one of the teacher training centres where he specialised in English and has been working as an English teacher for the last three years. He describes teaching as his 'vocation' and enjoys his job. Jacob has been disabled since childhood and has a physical disability which affects his mobility. While he was training to be a teacher at college, he had a lecturer with disabilities who inspired him and mentored him. He teaches in an inclusive government secondary school in a mountainous region of Rwanda. Jacob has no access to a vehicle, so has to walk long distances to get to and from school.

### **Arjun**

Arjun is male, 35 years and from Nepal. He identifies as having a disability given his mental health difficulties since teenage years. He chose to become a teacher as it is his 'passion' and he believes 'no job is greater than teaching' due to the importance of sharing knowledge with children. He chose to specialise in English because of his enjoyment when speaking it and he also believes it is an important global language. Arjun trained to be a teacher during his undergraduate degree and has since completed a Master's degree. Arjun has taught English for the last nine years and during his career he has worked at inclusive government community schools in areas of Nepal with high poverty. However, he now teaches English at a private secondary school.

### **Sania**

Sania is female, 37 years old and from India. She acquired a physical disability in childhood and this affects her mobility. She wanted to become an English teacher because she enjoys the subject and really liked her English lecturers at university, explaining they were 'so polite' and 'very softly spoken'. Sania completed her Diploma of Education at university where she also specialised in English. She has also since received a Master's degree. Sania has been an English teacher for the past eight years and she currently works at a government secondary school. While it is an inclusive school, Sania reports there are very few children with disabilities.

### **Ashok**

Ashok is male, 37 years old and from India. He has physical disabilities which affect his mobility as well as having poor eyesight. Ashok decided to become a teacher as he felt it would be a very suitable job given his disabilities and that he would not face 'tensions' in relation to his disability as a teacher. He did his teacher training at university where he completed a Diploma in Education and has since also received a Master's degree. Ashok has worked in government primary schools where he has taught English for fourteen years as well as other subjects including Marathi. He became a permanent salaried government teacher 11 years ago after having been on temporary contracts 16 initially. He currently teaches English at an inclusive government primary school, and there are children with disabilities in his class.

### **Ankur**

Ankur is male, 64 years old and from India. He has had a physical disability since he was a child, and this affects his mobility. Ankur explains that he became a teacher because of his mother's influence, and she strongly viewed teaching as a comfortable job for a person with disabilities. He initially trained to be a teacher at university but has since achieved a Master of Education as well as a Diploma in special education. As well as undertaking additional training courses, Ankur has been enabled by his school district to go abroad to see school systems in other countries. Ankur is currently the principal at an inclusive government secondary school. He has worked at his present school for the last year, however, he has been a principal for the last 12 years. Prior to this, he was an English teacher for 20 years. Ankur has received awards during his career for his commitment to the profession.

All the interviews and the focus group discussion were conducted on-line and consent was obtained for the meetings to be recorded. It is useful to note here that in all three interviews with the Indian participants, we had to undertake a bi-lingual approach, as the teachers were not comfortable speaking in English. The research team was diverse and multi-lingual with one of the researchers being able to speak multiple Indian languages including both Hindi and Marathi which were the primary languages spoken by the Indian participants. Being able to undertake the Indian interviews bi-lingually was important ethically to ease the communication difficulties for these respondents. All the interviews and the focus group discussion were then professionally transcribed, and cross checked for accuracy. The bi-lingual interviews were transcribed in both languages to improve accuracy and reliability of translation. The transcriptions were uploaded to qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. The data were thematically analysed drawing on the themes which framed the interviews. The main findings emerging from the interviews, across the sample, are discussed below.

## Anonymity and advocacy

Anonymity was discussed with participants, and they were given the option of using their real first name or a pseudonym within the report. In discussing the consequences of using real first names in the report it was made clear about potential repercussions of being easily identifiable within the research. Four teachers; Joseph, Veliswa, Ashok and Arjun wanted their real first names to be used in this report. The other five teachers either did not state a preference or asked for a pseudonym to be used.

The teachers who chose to use their real names advocated this strongly due to reasons linked with social justice. They felt it was important to identify themselves to activate change. Joseph explained, 'it is time for this small community [teachers with disabilities] to become bigger and hence I want to use this reality that is me to de-stigmatise the community'. Similarly, Veliswa felt it was important for her real name to be used to encourage people to pay attention to the research, she explained 'we are working on something that we need to improve, you know, disabled English teachers being recognised and accommodated and with the Covid-19 pandemic being accommodated there, and also for the research to be attended to'. The notion of having spoken their truth and having nothing to hide was central to the decision of those wanted to be identified.

In contrast, for some of the teachers who asked for pseudonyms to be used, they had more caution about the reception of the research within their country. While Mary explained that she thought the research 'will have a good impact for all teachers with disabilities who do English' she wanted to wait until the research had been published and see how the research was received before acknowledging her participation. Similarly, Gabriel, also spoke about waiting to remain anonymous until he was able to evaluate how people had responded.

In discussing anonymity and dissemination, the discourse of advocacy came across strongly within the focus group discussion. The teachers felt that the findings of the research were important and would help to raise awareness of the experiences of teachers with disabilities. When discussing advocacy, the experience of being a teacher with disabilities was more strongly focussed on by the teachers than that of subject specific experiences. Joseph explained that he thought the findings were 'eye opening' and needed to be shared with the general public, as he believed that hearing about the experiences of teachers with disabilities had the potential to 'change the status quo and the stigma that is besetting disabled teachers at different schools where we have been employed'. He argued:

*Disabled people have stigma attached and we have become objects of pity. Especially in this part of the world people say 'Ahh do you think he can do something worthwhile? Is he worth listening to?' That mindset has got to change, especially in our part of the world. I think we need to be out there, say whatever we have to say, not preaching but putting across what we believe in and making sure we are counted among the able bodied.*

As well as countering stigma some of the teachers felt it was important, going forward, to advocate for the rights of teachers with disabilities at governmental level. Notably, Gabriel spoke about the importance of advocating to the Minister of Education in Rwanda. Similarly, Veliswa spoke about how it was important to challenge the notion of inclusive education itself, explaining ‘there is something called White Paper C which is about inclusivity. This includes only learners but not teachers, so that needs to be looked at’.

## Research reflections

Undertaking research through mobile means raised both challenges and benefits. WhatsApp was used as a platform to conduct research through voice calls in seven cases with two being undertaken by Zoom. Finding a stable and quiet internet connection was challenging for some of the participants and particularly those in India and Rwanda. WhatsApp was the most reliable method of communication with participants for giving quick responses and easily enabling interviews to be rescheduled. The majority of participants who put email down as their primary method of communication never responded to follow up emails; it is possible that this was due to spam filters, but also longer messages via email may have been harder to digest than short messages as used on WhatsApp.

As well as WhatsApp and email, Google Forms were used during the research, both to collect key information from participants and to provide a facility through which to sign consent forms. Given that eight out of nine participants used mobile phones to participate in the research this was an inclusive way to ensure that participants could share, receive and review information in a simple format.

Given the frequent loss of internet signal in some cases, WhatsApp was useful in terms of sending voice notes. For example, for a teacher in Rwanda the interview was cut short mid-way, so the interviewee and interviewer communicated through recorded voice messages. This was more effective in facilitating the interview than during the voice call where real-time speech was harder to understand. The voice messages received from the participant were more detailed than the responses given during the voice call part of the interview. Where the method of communication was changed either through undertaking a bi-lingual interview or using alternative technological methods, the semi-structured interview schedule was still administered in the same way by the same researchers, reinforcing the notion of trustworthiness within the research.

Many of the participants spoke about the benefits of participating in the research, giving reasons such as the subject matter being important (Jacob) and feeling their voice had been heard which could lead to positive change (Mary). The dynamics between the interviewee and interviewer was important too. For example, having the opportunity to practice English by speaking to English speakers from other parts of the world was cited as an unexpected benefit by some of the participants (Veliswa, Jacob, Mary). Wanting to be part of good research and speaking to university-based researchers was perceived as important (Ashok, Arjun, Ankur). Finally, as the research was undertaken by a multi-national research team including an Indian woman, one of the participants noted how it was ‘a matter of pride’ for him to see an Indian woman in such a visible position of responsibility (Ashok). Each of these comments provided reflections on the composition of the research team, and the implicit benefits that teachers drew from participating in the discussions. In all cases teachers were keen to continue to engage in the research process, as noted in the findings section.

The methodological experiences within this research reaffirm that it is not only important how research is conceptualised and planned, but also how and by whom it is enacted, which affects the inclusivity of the research. Cross-cultural research offers both challenges and opportunities and this research reaffirms the benefits of having a diverse team of researchers. Research tools must be flexible and be responsive to the individual and the context and using innovative technology can be beneficial in order to capture participant voice, especially in low-resource contexts.

It is important to reassert that the current research draws on a small sample across four countries. The types of disabilities the participants reported were predominantly physical disabilities and therefore the reader should take in to account the heterogeneous nature of disability and be aware that this research does not show the differences that may arise from more ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ disabilities. Moreover, due to the scope of this research it does not offer commentary on intersectional identities such as socio-economic status or ethnicity and how this may change a person’s experience. Nevertheless, while not generalisable, this small-scale research highlights vital issues affecting the experiences of English teachers with disabilities working in India, Nepal, Rwanda and South Africa and highlights experiences at personal, school and system level as well global discussions on inclusive education.

# Findings

In presenting the findings, we discuss themes emerging from the analysis of the different interviews, highlighting any similarities and differences. Given the small size of the sample it is difficult to make any country specific statements, rather what the results highlight are the many shared experiences of being a teacher and indeed a teacher with disabilities in these contexts.

## Reasons for becoming an English teacher

All teachers had completed formal training whether through a university degree-level qualification or through a diploma at teacher training college. Few of the teachers spoke in detail about their training experiences, for example, Jacob from Rwanda highlighted the importance of having had a disabled teacher trainer while undertaking his training. He explained that seeing another disabled person like himself was inspiring and that the trainer 'encouraged' him to pursue teaching.

In examining the reasons teachers gave for becoming a teacher, three general sub-themes were identified: passion for teaching, belief that it was a good or suitable job and lack of access to other jobs. Seven teachers, Joseph, Mary, Ashok, Sani, Jacob, Gabriel and Arjun, across all four countries, spoke about teaching as their vocation, or passion. They noted their affinity for working with young people or being interested in teaching from a young age. Joseph from South Africa, underlined teaching as being a 'calling' due to it 'not having any incentives at all; it has very little pay at the end of the month', this was also noted by others including Jacob from Rwanda.

Teaching was described as a good job by many with Arjun, from Nepal, saying that 'no job is greater than teaching, as is about spreading and giving knowledge'. This was also highlighted by Sania who described how teaching was a 'huge responsibility' connected to the progress of a country with teachers being the 'creators of the future'.

Ankur, from India, and Jacob from Rwanda viewed teaching as a more suitable profession for a person with disabilities due to the lack of 'tensions' related to disability (Jacob). Ankur declared that at the time he became a teacher, 32 years ago, 'the job of a teacher was quite comfortable, no challenges, go to school, come back home at the right time' and so was a good job for him who has a physical disability. In addition, parental views about teaching being a respected job were also a factor in Ankur and Veliswa's decision to become a teacher.

Both South African participants, Veliswa and Joseph, had chosen to become teachers due to the lack of access of other jobs. Joseph, who had become a teacher during the Apartheid system noted that at the time only teaching, nursing or being a policeman were options and so he had decided to choose teaching due to his affinity with young people stemming from being an active church member. For Veliswa, she had originally wanted to become a social worker but due to not having success gaining a place at university her parents made an application on her behalf to a local teacher training college.



In explaining why they decided to specialise as an English subject teacher, the participants highlighted three main reasons: personal enjoyment and personal ability in the language, belief in the importance of the language, and job availability. Six of the teachers, Sania, Arjun, Jacob, Gabriel, Mary and Joseph, across all four countries, noted their enjoyment of the English language and their ease and ability in the subject while studying as an important factor in specialising as an English teacher. For example, Joseph, from South Africa, spoke about his own excitement for the language and how English literature had inspired him. During the interview he referred to books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and seminal authors such as Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare being his favourite. He also spoke about how these works had helped him develop 'self-confidence and that idea of being creative, being able to think very fast and adapt to every situation'.

Arjun, Joseph, Veliswa, and Ankur from Nepal, South Africa and India respectively highlighted English as being an important international language. Arjun explained that given English is a 'global language' it is especially important for young people to have a good grasp to enable them to learn effectively. This was also echoed by Ankur who noted that English is important for Higher Education and Joseph who said that a good command in English prepares young people for the workforce. Veliswa also noted that in the context of South Africa, teaching English is particularly important for Xhosa speaking children as they can struggle when they transition to high school and start learning in English as they have previously learned in their mother tongue. This was something she had experienced in her own schooling, so it was important for her to help young people learn English more easily.

While Mary, from Rwanda, continued to struggle to acquire a teaching job as a blind English teacher none of the other teachers noted any difficulty in acquiring a teaching position. Ankur, from India, noted that in his view, teaching English was a sensible specialisation due to the easy access to teaching work. He noted that there was always a need and demand for English teaching. None of the teachers spoke about facing attitudinal or systemic barriers preventing them from taking on more responsibility or accessing promotions during their career. In fact, Ankur from India had become a principal more than a decade previously. Gabriel from Rwanda had also received a promotion and was also in charge of discipline at his school. However, he noted how having a physical disability caused additional fatigue and how this had to be balanced with progressing his career.

Similarly, Sania noted how fatigue and the additional strain of having a physical disability was a reason she had decided not to take on the role of principal, which would be the next promotion from her current post. She was clear that it was her choice and not a barrier in the system:

*We [teachers with disabilities] get that many opportunities because after my post, the next promotion is for that of a school principal. As a handicap person, I cannot take up all the responsibilities that fall on the principal. I feel that if I was not handicapped then maybe I could have easily taken the post and done all the work. A teacher with disabilities can become a principal but personally, I do not want to because the principal has many responsibilities. There are no obstacles from the government, it is my choice not to take up that post.*

## Teacher identity

In examining the intersection of being both an English teacher and a teacher with disabilities, all teachers described themselves through a capability lens and did not highlight disability as a strong part of their teacher identity. Teachers focussed on highlighting their positive attributes. Fore fronting their subject knowledge was important for two teachers, Ankur and Joseph, from India and South Africa respectively who described themselves as 'well-read' (Joseph) and "having good subject knowledge" (Ankur). In commenting on their professionalism, positioning themselves as hard-workers or having a willingness to work and learn was identified by five teachers including Veliswa and Joseph from South Africa, Mary and Gabriel from Rwanda and Ankur from India. Arjun, Ashok, Sania, Gabriel and Jacob from Nepal, India and Rwanda, noted their role primarily in terms of helping students learn and facilitating knowledge development. The importance of being a teacher who has soft skills was also important for the teachers with Jacob and Joseph describing themselves as funny and fun loving, Mary describing herself as empathetic and Sania describing herself as positive.

## Disability

These teachers explained that they did not consider disability to be an important factor in their identity as an English teacher, or teacher in general. Jacob, from Rwanda noted, 'When I get there [to school], there is no impact [of my disability] because when I get there, I am doing my vocation and doing a good job that I like to do'. Similarly, Joseph noted that the reason he did not see himself as a disabled teacher is because of his complete acceptance by his colleagues: 'The reason is I do not take myself as that [a disabled teacher]. When I am between people or among people, my colleagues at school, I'm just like one of them and they don't take me as that [disabled], they take me like one of them, hence I've become one of them'.

In contrast, Sania offered a nuanced perspective on how her own self-development has changed in relation to not considering herself a disabled teacher:

*Before becoming a teacher, I was a student, and my thinking was very backwards and now it has developed as I have studied more. Even my thinking about my handicap has changed a lot. Earlier I used to consider myself the weakest but now I feel that things are a little okay, it does not matter.*

Like Sania, who highlighted the need for a positive mindset, Ankur, Gabriel and Joseph also noted the need for positive self-perceptions. Notably, Joseph, also spoke about going on a journey to develop self-confidence explaining:

*I believe one thing, first before I go into a public space, I should have what is called self-confidence and self-esteem. I worked on that because some people who have got physical disabilities or disabilities in general have got a lack of self-esteem. So what I did, I worked on that first. When I knew I was confident enough that I was able to stand in church to teach young people, to teach adults ... so, when I went into teaching it wasn't really a big problem.*

Teachers emphasised their strengths as teachers, and several saw themselves as role models for disabled students.



Similarly, Gabriel promoted the importance of self-confidence for people with disabilities in order to reach their goals, explaining that when giving advice to a young person with disabilities he would tell them to be confident rather than ashamed:

*I can advise them not to be ashamed, not to be shy, not to be timid. If they become shy, they cannot deliver what they have in their mind [their goals]. I can advise them not to be shy, and to be confident.*

Ankur was also focussed on self-confidence and rebutted the idea that a teacher faced discrimination due to disability, rather he explained that: 'respect depends on your personality, not your physical stature and it depends on what work you do, how do you work, your behaviour with others and it depends more on those factors than if you are disabled or not'. Linked to the discourse of self-development the notion of changing 'disability into ability' (Arjun), or compensating for disability, was also strongly present in the discussions with Ashok, Mary, and Arjun.

Five of the teachers Mary, Ashok, Ankur, Veliswa and Joseph explicitly spoke about how they were role models for students with disabilities. Joseph explained that he felt, '... I've got a role to play in society as far as people with disabilities are concerned' and he pointed out that students with disabilities were more likely to be sent to his school because he worked there. Additionally, some of the teachers noted that their presence projected a positive perception of persons with disabilities to others around them. Importantly Veliswa, Mary and Ashok also believed that they were more capable of teaching children with disabilities because they had increased understanding of what it means to be a person with disabilities. Mary explained that when she did her internship in a school for children with visual impairments there were no 'obstacles' between her and the students due to shared experiences of blindness.



## English language

The status of English is different in each country, due to colonial histories, contemporary practices and as well as whether English is an official language and/or how widely it is spoken in different parts. Hence, it was important for the teachers to reflect on how they perceived their role as an English teacher. In thinking about whether they were cultural actors in schools through their roles as English teachers some teachers (Ankur, Jacob, Joseph, Arjun, Veliswa) saw themselves as having a greater connection to other cultures or being able to function better in a more globalised world. However, none of the teachers commented on being a facilitator for inter-cultural engagement within the classroom, only that they were preparing the young people to have the language skills to function in a multi-lingual world. In contrast, Ashok and Veliswa from India and South Africa respectively voiced concerns about the importance of mother-tongue cultures not being lost in the drive for English language education.

In highlighting concerns about the degradation of primary culture, Veliswa explained that 'in some cases we tend to be more Westernised than being ourselves'. Nonetheless, many of the teachers spoke of their joy at being English teachers. Arjun, from Nepal, explained he was 'honour[ed]' and 'proud' to teach 'a global language', especially as English was a medium through which all other subjects could be learned. Sania, from India, spoke of the 'pleasure' she gets from teaching English as the subject 'makes a difference'. Similarly, Ashok, also from India, in explaining why teaching English was important for him, related a saying in his area of India which translates as 'if you have command over English, then there is demand for you in the whole world'. Moreover, the teachers from India, South Africa and Nepal spoke about how societal perceptions about English resulted in their elevated status as teachers of English. Specifically, in the Indian context, Ankur argued that if a person speaks English, then society thinks that 'he comes from a noble family, he is a very knowledgeable person, a very smart person, a very powerful person', a sentiment echoed by Joseph in the South African context. Therefore, Ankur, Arjun and Joseph argued that this gave them 'extra credit' in society (Ankur).

Not all teachers drew on direct reference to their identities as English teachers and their disabilities, though some did allude to how being English teachers made them more valued and respected in school among colleagues and the wider community. This was particularly highlighted in the case of Joseph, who elaborated how being good at English meant that he was very often approached by others to help with things like translation or negotiating with senior management.

## School-based experiences

An important focus in the interviews was to understand how things were experienced in the schools the teachers were working at. This led to a discussion on the impact of their disabilities on how they taught, the challenges faced, adjustments made by the school management and how others in the school perceived them. The themes emerging from the data are discussed below.

### Impact of disability on pedagogy, barriers and reasonable adjustments

The teachers reported few instances of their disability impacting their ability to carry out their duties as a teacher. However, Ankur, Veliswa, Joseph, Jacob, Gabriel, Veliswa and Ashok who all have physical disabilities spoke about having challenges in walking long distances, standing for long periods of time, or having difficulties with stairs. Some of these teachers received reasonable adjustments in order to support them to carry out their responsibilities.

Joseph, who had strongly advocated to his management team on behalf of both himself and the children with disabilities at the school, had been able to get changes made to the buildings including the installation of ramps and rails, and moving steps closer together. He also had some change in duties, for example, he was not required to undertake any sports related duties and instead had been able to set up extra-curricular debating classes which he could arrange 'comfortably' from his class.

Sania, Ashok and Ankur, all from India, had certificates of disability from the government. Sania noted that she had gained her position as a teacher as a result of a 'reservation' or positive discrimination policy. While the teachers did not report using the certificates much, Ashok noted that he kept his certificate 'in the file only, for the purpose that if some problem arises for teaching or transfer purposes then I shall avail of that certificate'. As well as this, the Indian teachers reported receiving an additional stipend as part of their salary to get transport to work as well as access to health camps for free medical check-ups. Ashok, who had a visual impairment as well as a physical impairment had his teaching schedule set so that he would not have to undertake teaching duties in the dark. He also spoke about receiving accessible teaching resources provided by the government such as large format textbooks. In contrast Mary (from Rwanda), who was blind, while she did not feel that her disability impacted on her teaching, was concerned about the lack of accessible materials and particularly a lack of translated resources in Braille.

Not all teachers received additional support or appropriate reasonable adjustment. Gabriel and Jacob, both from Rwanda and who both have a physical impairment received no support with transport, unlike the teachers in India, and so had to walk to school leaving them tired by the start of the school day. Veliswa, who had acquired her physical impairment less than five years ago, had experienced being placed in inaccessible schools. One such placement, where the school did not have a ramp, resulted in her falling from her wheelchair, rendering her unconscious and being hospitalised. It was only after this incident that she was transferred to a school with more appropriate accessibility. At the time of the interview Veliswa had changed schools again and was employed in a special school which was the most accessible school she had worked in, both in terms of the building and also support; for instance, she was supplied with a teachers' assistant to help her manage the class.

As well as discussing reasonable adjustments Ankur and Joseph spoke about the way in which they adjusted their teaching styles to accommodate challenges in standing at the blackboard. Before he became a principal Ankur used to deliver his lessons sitting in a chair and spoke his lessons rather than writing on the board. Joseph used the opportunity to focus more on group work using pre-prepared worksheets in lieu of writing on the board. Gabriel, who has a physical disability noted how this could reduce his energy and so to compensate he had to plan carefully to ensure he could do everything he wanted to. He prided himself on his excellent time management and commented on how this was an important quality for a teacher with disabilities to have in order to manage their life.

### **Subject specific challenges**

In relating some specific challenges which particularly affected English teachers, Joseph noted how English, due to its popularity and importance can result in larger class sizes than other subjects, such as geography. Lack of access to translated resources as well as a lack of access to internet and computers in schools were issues highlighted by Mary and Jacob, both in Rwanda. Veliswa noted a specific challenge in teaching English in multilingual classrooms. For example, some children in her class were from Afrikaans speaking homes, some from Xhosa speaking homes and some with English as a first language, causing tensions among children.

Related to this, she argued that English should be taught more effectively from foundation stage upwards to support all students to be able to have a better transition to English at high school level. Similarly, in India, Sania noted that at times she ends up teaching the English alphabet in upper secondary school, thus suggesting that English should be introduced earlier. She also described how it is important to teach English lessons both in Hindi and in English, as if lessons are conducted solely in English, students are unable understand and learn effectively.

## Colleagues and management

All teachers spoke highly of their colleagues and generally described having strong and supportive relationships. Sania, Veliswa and Gabriel, from India, South Africa and Rwanda, spoke about being friends with colleagues and offering and receiving emotional support. Ashok and Joseph, on the other hand, positioned themselves as being respected members of staff who were sought out by others for advice. Ashok noted that this was particularly in relation to supporting children with disabilities while for Joseph this was usually for support in speaking English. Colleagues would also ask him to translate or ask questions on their behalf during meetings conducted in English due to his strong command of the language. Jacob and Joseph also spoke about being accepted as a teacher first by colleagues rather than a person with a disability.

In discussing relationships with school management authorities, Veliswa raised her issue about the lack of accessibility of buildings. Jacob from Rwanda did not report any challenges with the management but noted that he worried that should he become sick due to his physical disability, he might be at risk of losing his job and that there was no protection against this.

Joseph, Arjun and Ankur spoke more positively about being given additional responsibilities. Joseph had strong relations with his management team and was often assigned to chair meetings or take minutes. Similarly, Ankur who was a headteacher noted how his seniors at administrative levels were very supportive of him, enabling him to undertake professional development including visiting schools abroad to familiarise himself with their education systems.

## Students

Most of the teachers related positive interactions with their students and spoke about receiving respect. Ankur noted that 'the students respect me more than I expected'. While Sania also reported being very well respected, she noted that the respect may have been increased due to her both teaching English and having had struggles as a person with a disability:

*I feel that I am the same for them, just like all the other teachers. They do not think of me as different, but they respect me. They respect me a lot because I have problems in life and yet I continue to struggle and it's not like I have given up. I continue struggling in life and because of that they [the students] might consider me their role model ... They respect me a little more than other teachers because I teach them English. Thus, that also facilitates their respect.*

While Veliswa and Joseph felt well respected in school they also spoke about some initial challenges they had experienced with students. These challenges had been overcome by directly engaging with students. Joseph spoke about how initially some students didn't do their homework 'because they thought, forget about that disabled teacher he's not going to do anything to us'. However, he explained that just like any other teacher when he first started at the school he 'la[id] down the law' and with time the students' mindsets changed and he is now well respected by students. Specifically, as a technique Joseph explained that he cultivates an atmosphere of respect in his classroom by promoting mutual respect as well as setting out clear behavioural rules for the students. For Veliswa, once she returned to work after her leg amputation, some of her students were 'scared' and would 'fold their hands, move a little bit to the back' while other students 'came closer to me trying to find out, "teacher how do you feel?"' She explained that she reassured the students that she was okay and after a couple of weeks the students adjusted. Veliswa also related an instance in which a student had an uncle who had also had a leg amputation and the student had shared the story of the uncle who was now walking on a prosthetic leg, and this had given her comfort that in time this was also something she would be able to do.

Gabriel and Jacob, from Rwanda, were the only teachers to speak about on-going challenges with students. Jacob who had been teaching for less time than both Veliswa and Joseph, spoke about how some students 'laugh and laugh' at him due to his physical disability and in some cases they also attempt to 'imitate how I am walking'. In these instances, Jacob explained that he would engage the students and attempt to change their mindsets:

*I try to make conversation with them, and I try to tell them that disabled people are people like them. I give them different examples of disabled people that are famous in the world and also in our country. What normal people can do also disabled people can do. They can't change my mind, but their minds are changed. I try to change it!*

Similarly, Gabriel also noted how some students 'laugh at me' and 'turn away'. However, Gabriel who was more senior than Jacob and was Head of Discipline at his school explained this only happened to him outside of school. In reflecting on why this kind of behaviour occurs Gabriel explained that 'normally they [students] don't experience people like me, teachers who are disabled, teachers who are not moving well'. As with Jacob, Gabriel also explained that it was his duty to teach the young people and promote acceptance:

*I normally call them. I normally say, 'you come' and I show them. There are some students who are disabled, we have to sit together. We tell them there is no need to put people aside because they are disabled; we have to teach them.*

### Parents and the community

The teachers generally reported having strong relationships with parents. Mary, from Rwanda, reflecting on her internship in a school for students with visual impairments spoke about how a parent had told her it was 'amazing' to see a blind teacher and that she was more suitable to teach his blind child because she was also blind and so had a better understanding of their needs. Joseph spoke about how when he first arrived at his schools some parents were slightly concerned 'you could see with the body language that they think "can this fellow actually pull it up?"' However, the matric results of the students he taught were very good and so this meant that he had the support of the parents, as he explained:

*My matric results in English were very good and then I got the confidence of the parents and hence the parents were comfortable with me, and even coming to me for personal issues outside of the school.*

Veliswa explained how the parents of her students have always been very supportive. At the time of the research, she was commencing a new job and explained that to avoid any parental concerns, connected to her disability or otherwise, she would set up a parents WhatsApp group on the first day to enable her to easily communicate.

While no teacher reported any concerns with discrimination from parents, some teachers experienced challenges with wider society. Sania, from India reported some concerns about her community. She explained that due to her disability she avoided attending any weddings and parties, she described feeling 'different to others' and feeling 'shame' as well as being 'shy'. Arjun, based in Nepal, spoke briefly about being discriminated against due to his mental health difficulties. He also commented that he knew of qualified teachers who 'due to their physical disabilities were confined inside their house'. In expanding on this he described Nepalese society as viewing a disabled person as having 'something lacking'.





## Covid-19

During the focus group discussion, teachers also reflected on the impact of working through the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the teachers had remained in their permanent teaching positions throughout the pandemic, however, Mary in Rwanda had lost work, having started a temporary contract at the beginning of the pandemic which was cut short. She explained that the pandemic had 'discouraged' her causing her to 'lose different opportunities of living or surviving like others'. Similarly, while Sania had remained in her teaching position during Covid-19, she raised concerns about other teachers with disabilities losing their jobs in India. Veliswa, from South Africa, also spoke about financial hardship during the pandemic, having left one teaching position during the pandemic and starting a new one only recently, leaving her without enough money to buy personal protective equipment (PPE).

While some of the teachers, including Ashok, said they did not feel more at risk from Covid-19 due to their disabilities, other teachers reported feeling more vulnerable. Sania from India was concerned about the pandemic and spoke about a lack of access to information regarding how Covid-19 is transmitted. For the teachers in South Africa, at the beginning of the pandemic there had been a drive to enable vulnerable people to shield and take leave from work. Joseph, who had an underlying health condition as well as having a physical disability, explained that he had been granted leave on full pay for three months in 2020. This had enabled him to work from home preparing resources while a substitute teacher took his place in the classroom. In contrast, Veliswa also from South Africa spoke about feeling at risk from continuing to work in person. She explained that initially, at the beginning of the pandemic, she had become 'paranoid' about the virus. However, as time progressed, she has learned to live with the risk, explaining 'as I learned about it all I adjusted and started acquainting myself with the protocols and how to cope and how to manage stress itself, because it was really scary'. Veliswa also spoke about the increased risk posed to teachers and particularly teachers with disabilities who continued to work in person. She recounted a recent experience where two children with bad coughs had been sent into school by their parents, and reiterated the importance of teachers being consistent with following Covid-19 protocols:

*The teacher has to make sure that the students wear masks, keep social distance and sanitise. The teacher must be consistent in class regarding that because children will be children and they may spread it. Yesterday, I discovered there were two learners who were coughing hysterically in my class and I had to speak to the head of the department and get the nurse to come in. It has been said that children who are sick they should stay at home, but parents will keep on sending them which is an exposure risk.*

An important theme, raised by teachers in all four countries, was the additional workload placed upon them. The teachers reported periods of school closures in all countries and the pressure to undertake additional work to help children catch up on schooling. In Rwanda and South Africa, the teachers explained how groups of children now attend school on different days meaning teachers need to fit more of the curriculum into shorter periods of time. Joseph, in South Africa, also explained how he has some classes which now run simultaneously meaning he moves between classes teaching the same concept repeatedly. Gabriel and Joseph explained how the additional workload was particularly challenging for teachers with physical disabilities as the increased movement between classes as well as the pressure to teach more content in shorter times caused increased fatigue. Importantly, Joseph also noted how the need for social distancing had also impacted teaching practices, he explained:

*Covid-19 has been a very difficult and challenging time for everyone, especially at our school. Our school is a government school set in an informal settlement. It is a non-fee-paying-school, and the numbers are quite huge, 70-80 kids [per class]. Those kids are crowded in moveable classrooms with hardly much furniture in there. Movement between the kids has been very minimal if any, and the use of teaching methods such as group work is now very, very minimal as well.*

## Supporting teachers with disabilities effectively

Towards the end of the interviews, we specifically asked participants to reflect on the changes which would be useful to help them perform more effectively and what they thought would be the value of establishing an international network of English language teachers with disabilities.

### Changes: system, school and individual level

Veliswa argued that change needed to happen first at system level, saying that the constitution of South Africa needed to better ‘consider disabled people’. She explained that the constitution needed to ‘retune to say what are disabled people’s rights’ and that this should be followed by increased efforts to ‘recruit more disabled teachers’. Importantly, Veliswa argued that there is ‘inclusivity with regards to children but not teachers’. Greater support for teachers with disabilities was also raised by Sania, Arjun, Mary and Ankur. Arjun expressed concerns about the lack of help available to gain employment, and the potential for discrimination, especially for those with mental health difficulties. Sania felt that more accommodations should be made for teachers with disabilities, including ensuring they had access to appropriate facilities, and that they should not be posted to rural areas with poor accessibility. Similarly, Ankur advocated for better employment conditions for teachers with disabilities to be enshrined in policy, including economic support and better facilities such as accessible transport services. Mary, from Rwanda, highlighted the need for better policies to support teachers with disabilities to get a job, while Jacob highlighted the importance of ensuring there is more English language training for English teachers with disabilities.

At school level, teachers (Jacob, Gabriel and Joseph) spoke about the need for access to technology, accessible materials such as materials in Braille (Mary), and accessible buildings (Joseph, Gabriel and Veliswa). Smaller class sizes were also suggested by Jacob, to help teachers with disabilities be better able to manage in the classroom. Another important point made by Jacob was the need for acknowledging the unique insights that teachers with disabilities bring when dealing with children with disabilities, especially in disciplinary committees. He noted:

*Teachers with physical disabilities have got to be allowed in those committees because they should have a say. Teachers who are able-bodied might not be able to understand where the child is coming from but the teacher who is disabled will be able to appreciate that child, because they are part of them [both disabled].*

Only two teachers, both from Rwanda, mentioned changes they would like at the individual level. Jacob mentioned he wanted better remuneration or transport support, which would enable him to get to work easily. Similarly, Gabriel was also concerned about ensuring people with disabilities get better access to facilities such as wheelchairs to help people with mobility related disabilities. He argued that it was important that people with disabilities were enabled to succeed and reach their potential, noting that these individuals should ‘get all facilities to assist them to deliver what they have in their mind comfortably’.

## Advocacy and support

At a more structural level, teachers stressed the need for better support through outreach programmes and specific workshops for teachers with disabilities (Joseph, Mary and Ashok). This ranged from a very pragmatic level, such as two of the teachers from Rwanda (Mary and Jacob) wanting to have more opportunities for practising their English, to wider objectives, such as enriching their pedagogy.

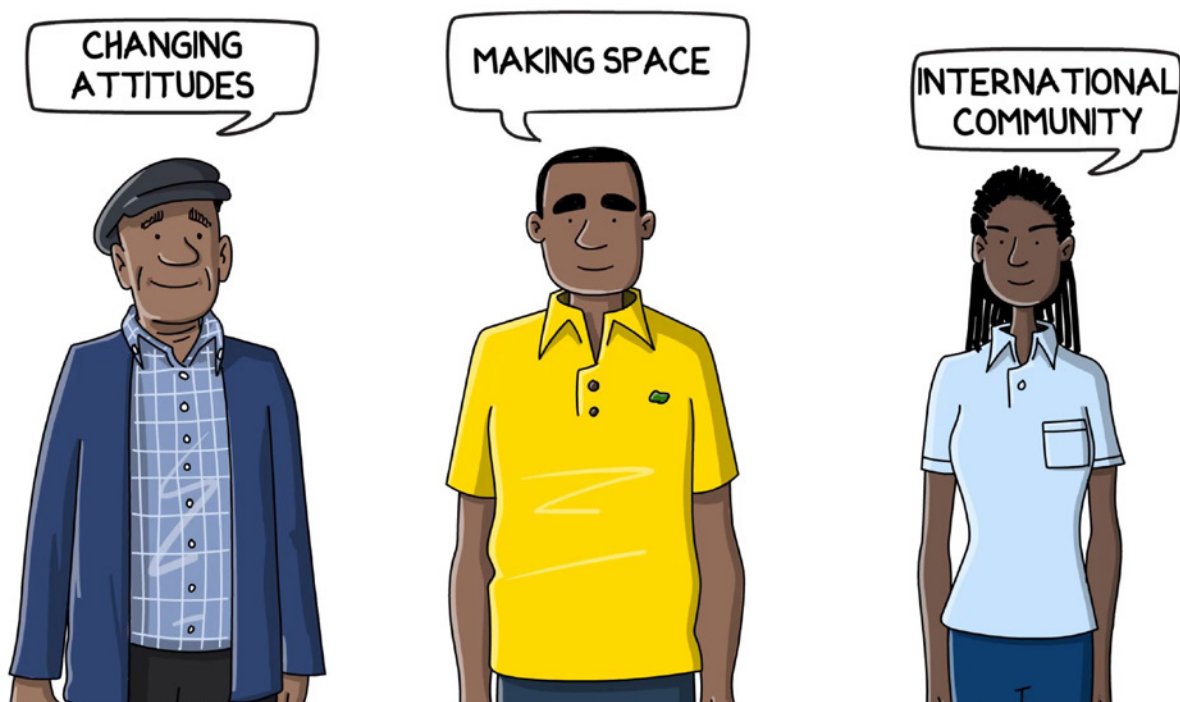
All participants were enthusiastic about the need for, and possibilities offered by, an international community of practice. As articulated by Joseph, 'This would be lovely ... [to be] able to network, share ideas, share information, share skills, share teaching methods and so on that could definitely help; networking would definitely help'. He went on to suggest key topics which would be useful to teachers with disabilities, including:

*How do we handle [non-disabled] colleagues in different schools? How are you treated by colleagues in your school? I would appreciate that. Then, how do disabled teachers handle discipline issues in different schools and in different set-ups?*

Gabriel from Rwanda also felt that a community would be valuable, particularly if it was able to provide a network to assist teachers with disabilities. He noted that the three main aims of such a community should be 'What is need is [one] assistance. Two, it is advice. Three it is sharing lives and other things'.

Being able to meet other teachers with disabilities, including those in other countries, and understand their lived experiences and challenges was an important factor for Veliswa, Mary, Jacob and Sania. Teachers from Rwanda and South Africa noted that such a network could help them develop new skills, information, and methods. The most frequent reason shared by almost all participants was the need for such a network for advocacy purposes; to overcome challenges together and make improvements through the belief that voices are louder together. A few teachers did query the reasons for the network being extended to only English teachers with disabilities, and how a wider approach to include all teachers with disabilities might be useful.

Two of the Indian teachers, Ashok and Sania, explained they were part of a WhatsApp group for English teachers in India which was effective at communicating relevant information easily, highlighting how a similar model could be used in the early stages for a teacher network. Using WhatsApp was seen as a way to be able to communicate with teachers from around the world, however, Joseph and Jacob also highlighted the importance of being able to be physically together, either with teachers from one's own country or through international exchange programmes.



Teachers provided their own recommendations for change at system, school and individual level.



# Recommendations

This section sets out some key recommendations in relation to this research.

## Recognising the strengths of, and need for, an inclusive teaching workforce.

Currently, teachers with disabilities are not actively included in discussions on inclusive education. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 as well as meeting the mandates set out in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, inclusive education practices should be broadened to include teachers with disabilities as central part of the education workforce. Teachers with disabilities embody the discourse of inclusion and as noted in this research should be viewed as important role models who bring unique and powerful experiences and skills to the classroom. These strengths need to be acknowledged and built upon to increase the visibility of teachers with disabilities within the profession. Teachers with disabilities are also powerful role models for students and the wider community.

## Positive policies to encourage recruitment, retention and progression.

Inequalities in the educational workforce in relation to disability remain unaddressed in both educational and employment policies. This leads to a teaching workforce which underrepresents people with disabilities in relation to the population it serves. Significantly, as has happened with gender, better representation within the teaching workforce has the potential to increase the enrolment of children with disabilities. Hence, explicit policy mandates in relation to teachers with disabilities are needed to ensure that these teachers are effectively included within the workforce and have opportunities for progression.

## Supporting teachers through creation of networks.

Large organisations, such as the British Council, have a key role to play in supporting teachers to gain representation through communities of practice.

In turn, these networks and communities have a role to play in supporting teachers with disabilities to gain representation at local, national and international level, providing opportunities for advocacy as well as teacher development. Subject specific networks can also be useful to provide teachers with disabilities with meaningful opportunities to engage in skill sharing and continuous professional development. Further research should be undertaken within the contexts of these networks or communities of practice, in order to better understand how teachers with disabilities can be best supported to engage in reflective teacher development.

## Gathering robust evidence for effective policy making.

Teachers with disabilities remain on the margins of research, resulting in little understanding of the lived experiences of teachers with disabilities in most countries around the world. Robust national datasets, as well as in-depth qualitative research elucidating the experiences of teachers with disabilities, has the potential to contribute to both policy and praxis. Subject specific research as well as intersectional research examining how ethnicity, religion, and sexuality intersects with disability is needed to understand how different dimensions of teachers' identities interact with disabilities and affects their experiences and inclusion within the workforce.

## Reciprocal and respectful research relationships.

Research must be respectful of individuals' culture and contexts. Diverse research teams should be encouraged when undertaking cross-cultural research as they are important in facilitating linguistic inclusion as well as cultural and contextual understandings within research. Research benefits from being reciprocal, ensuring the research process is not a one-way arrangement and that participants benefit from contributing to research. Specifically, participants should be facilitated to set research agendas that are meaningful to them as well as being offered opportunities to engage in processes of dissemination and advocacy.

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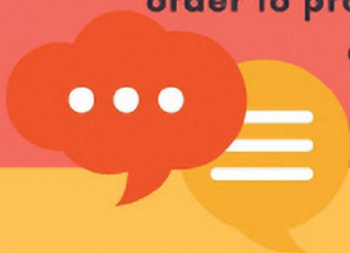
# Appendix 1



Cambridge Network  
for Disability and  
Education Research

## ARE YOU AN ENGLISH TEACHER WITH A DISABILITY IN RWANDA, NEPAL, INDIA OR SOUTH AFRICA?

This research, funded by the British Council, aims to explore the experience of English teachers with disabilities in order to promote their participation in the workforce and increase agency. For more info go to: [canderresearch.wordpress.com/etd/](https://canderresearch.wordpress.com/etd/)



### CRITERIA

### WHAT'S INVOLVED?

### CONTACT US

Do you identify as disabled and teach English in a school in Rwanda, Nepal, India or South Africa?

Two online/phone interviews lasting 60 minutes (maximum) each. Interviews will take place in January - February 2021

Email us at: [disabledteachersproject@gmail.com](mailto:disabledteachersproject@gmail.com)

Or fill in this form: <https://forms.gle/9ikaFBnnfeh4xNLgZ>

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