

Designing for Access: Learning From Disabled Educators in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion in education is often framed as a technical or compliance-driven process, emphasizing accommodations and policy requirements rather than everyday instructional practice. This article argues that centering disabled voices, particularly those of disabled educators, can support more relational, proactive approaches to inclusion in teaching and learning. Drawing on a narrative vignette of a disabled teacher educator, we illustrate how lived disability and/or neurodivergent experience informs instructional decision-making that normalizes access, reduces cognitive barriers, and benefits all learners. Shared examples demonstrate how disability-informed practices can interrupt deficit-biased assumptions and model inclusive pedagogy for future educators. These practices are situated within broader discussions of inclusion, othering, and belonging in higher education, with particular attention to teacher preparation contexts. Drawing on existing research, we highlight how disabled and/or neurodivergent educators contribute a unique perspective on inclusive learning environments and shape teacher candidates' understanding of disability, advocacy, and instructional responsibility. Practical, higher-education-specific recommendations at both institutional and individual levels are discussed, including reducing barriers to accommodations, supporting faculty learning, amplifying the voices of disabled people, and embedding inclusive instructional strategies within routine practice.

KEYWORDS

Disabled educators, higher education, inclusive teaching, relational access, teacher preparation

Barbara, an autistic¹ former special education teacher, is currently an instructor in a higher education teacher preparation program. In her current role, self-accommodations, such as using visual timers during activities, creating written and visual directions for each task, and building in quiet processing time during discussions, have become part of her everyday teaching practice. Additionally, she continues to script her class transitions before every lecture, a strategy she developed to manage masking through overstimulating meetings and unpredictable school days.

Barbara's case shows how lived disability² experience can shape everyday teaching practices to make learning more accessible for everyone. Rather than treating inclusion as a checklist or set of required accommodations, her instructional choices reflect how access can be built into the instructional design from the start. Barbara's use of scripting and other self-accommodations reveals an important and understudied issue in special education teacher preparation: how disabled instructors can uniquely model and inform inclusive teaching pedagogy.

Instead of beginning with the lived expertise of people with disabilities in teacher education, inclusion is often described in technical or compliance-driven terms, particularly in policy and professional guidance (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). For many educators, however, inclusion is best understood as actionable behaviors, such

as the daily decisions they make about instruction, classroom routines, and participation, within the contexts they teach (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). From this perspective, disabled educators bring valuable insights to inclusive practice (Price, 2024). Their teaching is often informed by years of navigating access barriers, problem-solving in complex systems, and adapting environments to support participation (Martin, 2026).

Emerging research also suggests that teacher candidates benefit from disabled educators. When teacher candidates engage with and learn from disabled instructors, they report greater empathy, stronger advocacy orientations, and a deeper understanding of disabled experiences, suggesting that these instructional contexts can meaningfully shape future educators' practices and their approaches to inclusion in their own classrooms (Snider et al., 2025). Together, these experiences highlight how disabled educators contribute not only to student access in higher education settings but also to future teachers' understanding and enactment of inclusion in their classrooms.

TRADITIONAL MODELS OF INCLUSION

Traditional models of inclusion can be explained as either a broad equity agenda for all students or access to the general education classroom for students with disabilities (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). In practice, however, inclusion is often reduced to the physical placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, where they receive minimal accommodations (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012) within typical, normative educational frameworks. Within these

frameworks, there is limited recognition of disabled and/or neurodivergent experiences and insights (Sarchet, 2024), despite evidence recognizing the benefits of diversity in academia (Anicha et al., 2017). This exclusion can be explained by the "othering" effect, in which a group of people is either explicitly or implicitly excluded from a larger group (Rakoska & Didrichsen, 2025). Oftentimes, this othering is a result of the majority's engagement in a deficit mindset of disability, assuming that disabled individuals are less capable simply because of their disability.

Othering has affected the practice of inclusion by omitting a key element of true inclusion in K-12 settings: social integration, which is characterized by a sense of belonging, community, and agency (Francisco et al., 2020). The same can be seen in higher education, where the lack of true inclusion has created an othering of both disabled students and instructors. In turn, any discussion of needs or accommodations can become taboo and discouraged, thereby preventing the disability community from being seen or heard (Sarchet, 2024; Toutain, 2019). This is especially detrimental in teacher preparation programs where future educators are trained to support all students in their care. To prepare educators to foster true inclusion, we must first address othering in higher education and destigmatize the experiences of disabled individuals.

During a micro-teaching practice session in one of her courses, Barbara notices a teacher candidate quickly verbalizing a series of instructions. A student in the back shifts uncomfortably, trying to keep up while scribbling notes in a notebook. Barbara recognizes the

familiar experience of cognitive overload from her K-12 school days, when directions came too fast, and she did not want to burden anyone by asking for help or repetition.

Barbara pauses the candidate's lesson and offers to model a redesign of how the instructions were presented to the students: breaking the task into steps, posting them visually, and slowing the pace. Drawing from her own experiences, she explains that clear structure and visual supports improve her ability to process and engage with information. Immediately, the energy in the room shifts, and the students re-engage. Barbara explains, "Attention isn't a character problem; it's a design mismatch. When directions are designed with people like me in mind, they tend to help almost everyone."

The class grows quiet as the students witness how a strategy rooted in disability-informed practice supports not only individuals with specific access needs but also enhances learning conditions for the group. What began as a routine activity became a concrete demonstration of how the lived experiences of disabled educators can interrupt deficit thinking and reshape teachers' instructional practices to create more authentic inclusion opportunities.

LESSONS TO LEARN FROM DISABLED EDUCATORS

Accurate portrayals of lived experiences can disrupt the othering of individuals with disabilities and dissuade false notions of disability by fostering belonging (Kirby, 2017). Disabled educators in higher education have the opportunity to shape the discussion surrounding disability, inclusion, and accommoda-

¹ Both identity-first and person-first language are used throughout this article. While person-first language has historically been promoted in professional settings, many disabled individuals and advocacy communities prefer identity-first language as an affirmation of disability as an integral aspect of their identity. Using both forms acknowledges these perspectives, respects the diversity of language preferences within disability communities, and aligns with Disability Studies in Education perspectives that center disabled voices and lived experience (Connor et al., 2008).

² Guided by the social model of disability, this article conceptualizes disability as produced through inequitable systems and societal barriers rather than inherent individual deficits. The term disability is used as an umbrella term that may include individuals who identify as disabled, neurodivergent, or both. The authors acknowledge that these identities are distinct and personally defined, and that terminology in this area continues to evolve.

tion by becoming a counter-narrative themselves and sharing their thoughts and experiences. This can be done by introducing teacher candidates to aspects of disability studies (Kofke & Morrison, 2021) and by being open with students as a disabled teacher educator.

One disabled educator explains how she incorporates her own lived experiences into her role modeling strategies and why she does so:

Student teachers in my classes are under my sphere of influence, and I have to mentor them to grow professionally. Thus, role modeling is a fundamental teaching strategy in my toolkit... I am a disability rights advocate committed to social justice, and I use my experiences to help student teachers understand how systemic biases suffocate disabled students... I structure my classes to support teacher candidates' self-reflection and self-awareness and help them acquire the skills they need to address school and societal issues. My goal is to have educators override their egos and negative thinking about disabled students to be allies who champion the inclusion of vulnerable people. (Ressa, 2023, p. 188)

By amplifying disabled educators' experiences and insights, researchers like Ressa (2023) illustrate the lived experiences of being on the receiving end of othering and offer possible solutions to combat the deficit perspective on disability in higher education settings. These insights prove that disabled people are not broken; rather, the systems around them are and must be transformed to foster true inclusion (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). True inclusion is more than providing physical accommodations. It is proactive and relational, involving deep understanding,

flexibility, and care that is not reduced to standardized support procedures or a checklist.

The experiences of disabled educators navigating access needs, defined here as the supports, accommodations, and environmental conditions required to ensure equitable participation and meaningful engagement, provide a unique and nuanced perspective on the interpersonal forms of inclusion (Brown, 2021; Snider et al., 2025). Collectively, this creative, embodied knowledge developed by disabled people as they navigate inaccessible environments is referred to as *crip wisdom* (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). The term *crip* is intentionally reclaimed within disability communities as an act of resistance against its historical use as a pejorative, instead signaling pride, solidarity, and critical insight derived from lived experience. Within higher education contexts, this knowledge emerges as *crip spacetime*, describing how disabled academics experience and navigate institutional expectations of time, productivity, and presence differently due to structural constraints (Price, 2024). Intentionally recognizing and learning from the *crip wisdom* of disabled educators is essential to improving the inclusionary practices in higher education and beyond.

Price's (2024) framing of *crip spacetime* encourages institutions to understand disability and access as more than providing individual accommodations, positioning accessibility as part of reimagining academic norms around productivity, pace, and participation. Nondisabled individuals may not always have accurate perceptions of accessibility or inclusion because they do not require the same supports as people with disabilities (Shigaki et al., 2012). Viewing inclusive education as a collective responsibility, constantly negotiated and responsive to shifting needs, aligns with Titchkosky's (2011) relational access,

rooted in human connection and mutual respect. Combining the perspectives and experiences of both disabled and non-disabled individuals in higher education settings can combat implicit and explicit bias and provide future educators with a more comprehensive understanding of true, dynamic inclusion before entering the classroom.

Throughout the semester, Barbara notices that the teacher candidates in her class are becoming more insightful and reflective practitioners. After an early class discussion in which she shared examples of how disability-informed instructional practices could improve student engagement and learning, she observes a shift in how candidates approach their own teaching. Questions about pacing, clarity, and access become increasingly common, and Barbara now intentionally sets aside time during each class meeting for open discussion and questions about inclusive teaching practices.

As these conversations unfold, Barbara reflects on her position in the classroom. She wonders whether and when she wants to disclose her identity as a disabled educator to her students, particularly given her continued hesitation to formally disclose this part of herself within the university. The decision to name that experience aloud is complex, shaped by questions of vulnerability, professional boundaries, and institutional context. Ultimately, Barbara decides to disclose her disability to her class, which opens a line of communication between her and her students about how she accommodates herself and how her lived experience has deeply informed her teaching. Encouraged by positive discussions with her students after disclosing her disability, Barbara also decides to formally disclose her status to the university and learns about ways the university can accommodate her in her role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These moments of reflection underscore that inclusion is not enacted through a single decision or strategy, but through ongoing, relational work embedded in everyday teaching and institutional practice. Reimagining disability within higher education requires more than the provision of accommodations. Instead, it calls for examining the norms of productivity, pace, and participation that structure academic life (Price, 2024). It is also important to distinguish between accessibility and accommodations. Accessibility involves proactive efforts to design environments and practices that anticipate diverse participation and reduce structural barriers. Alternatively, accommodations are individualized supports that respond to specific needs that cannot always be anticipated. While proactive accessibility can reduce reliance on reactive practices, individual accommodations remain essential. In higher education settings, there are many ways to disrupt the deficit mindset of disability, ranging from simple strategies for individuals to those that require consistent group effort and initiative. While not intended to be comprehensive, the recommendations that follow are organized into institution-level and individual-level considerations for advancing more authentic inclusion.

Institution-Level Recommendations

Improving inclusive practices in higher education settings at an institutional level requires initiative and consistent group effort. These efforts should be ongoing and regularly reassessed as the administrative culture evolves and needs change. For many individuals who identify as neurodivergent or disabled in their day-to-day lives, sharing that part of their identity on campus can be daunting (Accardo et al., 2025), likely due to the continued stigma of differences. As a

result, higher education institutions must focus on improving attitudes, policies, and campus environments (Accardo et al., 2025).

Beginning with the hiring and onboarding process, institutions should openly recognize the value of disabled identities rather than simply stating that employment is equal opportunity (Sarchet, 2024). Directly acknowledging and validating the added value that individuals with disabilities can provide to the organization by elevating their experiences and insights can increase campus-wide awareness and knowledge about neurodiversity and disability. This recognition may also reduce anxiety and negative feelings of self-worth among disabled individuals (Hull et al., 2017).

Beyond the onboarding process, working conditions for individuals with disabilities can be greatly improved by reducing the institutional barriers to requesting accommodations. Policies and procedures for seeking accommodations can be complex, discouraging, and intimidating to navigate (Dong et al., 2022; Price et al., 2017). As Price (2024) argues, these processes are embedded in broader academic norms that create expectations and conditions that often draw attention when individuals disrupt them to request support. Institutions can reduce these barriers by increasing transparency about who is eligible to request accommodations and by clearly communicating which supports are commonly available on campus. Relatedly, clarifying the use of terms such as *disabled* and *neurodivergent* can reduce confusion and support more affirming understandings of disability and neurodiversity as valued identities (Accardo et al., 2025).

In addition to structural changes, institutions should invest in ongoing faculty learning that supports inclusive instructional practice. Rather than focusing solely on disability categories or legal compliance, effective faculty training

emphasizes accessible course design, inclusive communication, and flexible teaching practices. Consistent with Price's (2024) call to reconsider academic norms, such training invites faculty to examine how expectations around efficiency, independence, and standardization shape classroom access. When faculty are supported in developing these skills, particularly through training that incorporates disabled educators' perspectives, inclusion becomes a shared instructional responsibility rather than a reactive accommodation.

To support meaningful change in faculty learning, institutions should embed these opportunities within instructors' everyday teaching contexts rather than delivering isolated or one-time workshops. Embedded approaches, such as department-based conversations, teaching communities, or guided reflection on real instructional scenarios, create sustained connections between faculty learning and actual classroom practice. Through these connections, instructors are better positioned to examine how routine decisions about pacing, communication, and assessment shape access and participation. Over time, this reflective engagement can also contribute to shifts in faculty attitudes and perspectives about disability, moving away from deficit-based understandings toward viewing disability as an integral aspect of learner variability and instructional design.

While these shifts often begin at the level of instructional practice, broader institutional structures also shape how inclusion is supported across campus. In response to these systemic considerations, several institutional models outline concrete strategies to better support disabled individuals, including improved access to accommodations, neurodiversity-affirming counseling services, and other campus-based resources (Locke et al., 2024). Some institutions

within the United States have begun revamping their practices to better serve neurodivergent individuals in their communities. For example, three universities in New York have taken the lead with actions that align with the institutional support framework described by Locke et al. (2024). The Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) hosts a program that fosters collaboration, coaching, and programming to better serve the needs of neurodivergent members, including a neurodiverse hiring initiative that connects graduates with supportive employers and prepares them for self-advocacy in their careers (Rochester Institute of Technology, n.d.). Adelphi University on Long Island partners with reputable autism organizations to support its community's needs, has a sensory room, and offers employment supports similar to RIT's (Adelphi University, n.d.). In 2022, Empire State University, New York's only fully online public higher education institution, was designated an "Autism Supportive College" by the Anderson Center for Autism for its culture of supporting neurodivergent individuals in its culture, infrastructure, and planning (Empire State University, 2022). Empire has created a multi-tiered system of supports for neurodivergent community members by holding listening sessions, incorporating their voices, and conducting assessments to promote a more inclusive environment for all (SUNY Empire State College, n.d.). Following in the footsteps of these universities and aligning with the framework described by Locke et al. (2024) is a strong step toward changing the higher education system.

Individual-Level Recommendations

Faculty and staff who do not yet have comprehensive institutional support but still want to improve their own inclusive practices can take a variety of actions.

Looking internally, educators can shift their attitude toward disability from a deficit to an asset-based perspective by adopting an assumption of competency in which all students are perceived as wanting to learn and engage. This shift in perspective alone can change how instructional decisions are made. It is also important to interrogate the language used when talking about individuals with disabilities or neurodivergence. While some individuals prefer person-first language and others prefer identity-first language, the most respectful approach is to ask the person(s) themselves and honor their preferences.

We provide the following examples to illustrate how individual educators might translate principles of access and inclusion into everyday instructional decisions. These practices are not intended to be a comprehensive list or universally applicable. Rather, they offer ways for instructors to intentionally design learning environments that anticipate variability and normalize access across diverse contexts. Determining which instructional practices will be most effective requires professional judgment informed by context, course goals, and student needs. Examples of disability-informed instructional practices include:

- Sharing the rationale for instructional design choices (e.g., "I'm posting the directions for next week's activity so everyone has time to review them in advance")
- Building in intentional wait time during discussions and explicitly naming it as part of thoughtful engagement
- Offering flexible options for participation and demonstration of learning
- Making lecture slides or instructional materials available in advance to support planning and organization
- Providing feedback in clear,

supportive, and timely ways that emphasize growth and understanding

- Inviting ongoing feedback from students about pacing, clarity, and access throughout the term

For instructors who do not identify as disabled or neurodivergent, intentionally seeking and amplifying disabled voices is a critical component of inclusive practice. This can include incorporating first-person narratives, scholarship authored by disabled researchers, guest speakers, podcasts, or other media that center on lived experience. Engaging with these perspectives helps counter deficit-based narratives and ensures that disability is represented as a source of knowledge rather than solely a category of need (Connor et al., 2008). When doing so, instructors should be mindful to present these perspectives as diverse and multifaceted, rather than as singular or representative of all disabled experiences.

Within class meetings, certain communication styles and formats can intentionally support engagement among all students. During class discussions, educators should set the expectation that only one person speaks at a time. Doing so might slightly slow the pace of conversation, which allows for interpretation and wait time before a student is expected to respond (Smith & Andrews, 2015). Allowing for wait time benefits all students, since high-level cognitive discussions and questions require more time to formulate an answer (Shiau et al., 2024). Some additional low-effort inclusive instructional practices include providing both visual and auditory instructions, adding captioning to live or recorded lectures (Smith & Andrews, 2015), offering time management guidance to support self-regulation, and providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge (e.g., video, audio, or infographic formats;

Didrichsen & Smigielski, 2025). These strategies, aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), require little to no additional time or energy but can significantly improve accessibility for all students.

CONCLUSION

Barbara's teaching practices illustrate how inclusion can move beyond compliance and accommodation toward an intentional, relational design. Her choices, such as slowing instructional pace, externalizing directions, and modeling accessibility in real time, were not framed as special supports for a few students but instead as thoughtful instructional decisions informed by lived experience. She demonstrated how disability-informed practices can benefit entire learning communities while simultaneously disrupting deficit-based assumptions about disability.

Throughout this article, we argue that disabled educators offer uniquely valuable perspectives on inclusion because their professional practice is shaped by sustained engagement with access negotiation, problem-solving, and adaptation. When these perspectives are centered, rather than marginalized, inclusion becomes less about retrofitting existing systems and more about reimagining teaching and learning from the outset. This shift is especially important in teacher preparation programs, where future educators develop and shape their beliefs about learners, differences, and responsibility.

Advancing inclusion requires both institutional commitment and individual action. Institutions must reduce structural barriers, destigmatize accommodation processes, and intentionally create environments where disabled and neurodivergent identities are recognized as assets. At the same time, individual educators can enact meaningful change through everyday instructional deci-

sions by modeling their assumption of competence, interrogating language, and designing learning environments that anticipate variability rather than react to it.

Ultimately, centering disabled voices in higher education teaching practice is not an added initiative or specialized intervention, but a shift in orientation toward access as a shared, collective responsibility. As Barbara's story demonstrates, when disability is understood as a source of knowledge, rather than limitation, inclusion becomes not only more authentic but more achievable for everyone.

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