

## Navigating Social Work Field Placements: Barriers and Adaptive Strategies Among Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Inclusive higher education has become a central agenda in advancing social justice; however, its implementation in professional education-particularly in social work field placements-remains inconsistent. This study examines the barriers faced by students with disabilities undertaking Social Work Field Placement (Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial, PPS) within the Social Welfare Program at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Indonesia, as well as the adaptive strategies they employ. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving three students with disabilities and two field supervisors. Thematic analysis reveals that students encounter multiple barriers, including limited mobility, insufficient institutional support from placement agencies, social stigma, and psychosocial stressors. The findings further identify four predominant coping strategies: seeking social support, self-regulation, acceptance and adjustment, and task simplification facilitated through supervisory mediation. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability, this study demonstrates that students' challenges are primarily produced by non-inclusive field environments rather than individual impairments. Coping Strategy Theory is employed to explain the diversity of students' adaptive responses to field-based stress and uncertainty. The study highlights that successful field placements for students with disabilities depend on systemic support, responsive supervision, and inclusive field placement design. These findings contribute to international debates on inclusive professional education and offer practical insights for developing disability-responsive field education policies within social work programs, particularly in Global South contexts.

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### Abstrak

Pendidikan tinggi inklusif merupakan agenda penting dalam mendorong keadilan sosial, namun implementasinya dalam pendidikan profesional, khususnya praktikum pekerjaan sosial masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji hambatan serta strategi adaptasi mahasiswa disabilitas dalam menjalani Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial (PPS) di Program Studi Ilmu Kesejahteraan Sosial UIN Sunan Kalijaga. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan

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### Kata Kunci:

Mahasiswa disabilitas, praktikum pekerjaan sosial, strategi adaptasi, social model of disability, coping theory, pendidikan inklusif.

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desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan telaah dokumen terhadap tiga mahasiswa disabilitas dan dua supervisor praktikum. Hasil Analisis menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa disabilitas menghadapi hambatan berlapis yang bersifat struktural, sosial, dan psikososial, meliputi keterbatasan mobilitas, lemahnya dukungan lembaga mitra, stigma sosial, serta tekanan mental personal. Temuan juga mengidentifikasi empat strategi adaptasi utama, yaitu pencarian dukungan sosial, pengaturan diri, penerimaan dan penyesuaian, serta penyederhanaan tugas yang dimediasi oleh supervisor. Dengan menggunakan Social Model of Disability, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan mahasiswa lebih banyak diproduksi oleh lingkungan praktik yang belum inklusif daripada oleh disabilitas itu sendiri. Sementara itu, Coping Strategy Theory membantu menjelaskan variasi respons adaptif mahasiswa dalam menghadapi tekanan praktik. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan PPS mahasiswa disabilitas sangat ditentukan oleh dukungan sistemik, supervisi yang responsif, dan desain praktik lapangan yang inklusif. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kebijakan dan pedoman PPS berbasis keadilan sosial di pendidikan pekerjaan sosial.

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a fundamental pillar of equitable social development. It is based on the principle that every individual has the right to access quality education without discrimination, including persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). This paradigm serves as a central framework for ensuring equality, meaningful learning opportunities, and full participation for all students in higher education. According to the Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education issued by UNESCO (2020), inclusive education goes beyond providing physical accessibility; it requires a systemic transformation of teaching and learning processes to address the diverse abilities and needs of students.

In Indonesia, a strong commitment to educational inclusion is demonstrated through a series of national legal frameworks. Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, Law No.

19 of 2011 concerning the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 on Reasonable Accommodation for Students with Disabilities serve as the primary legal foundations guaranteeing educational rights for persons with disabilities. These policies build upon earlier legislation, such as Law No. 4 of 1997 on Persons with Disabilities, and signify a paradigmatic shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based framework. Through these regulations, the state aims to promote a higher education system that upholds equality while respecting diversity (Wati et al., 2024).

Despite regulatory advancements, the implementation of inclusive education in higher education institutions continues to face significant challenges, particularly within the context of Social Work Practicum (Praktikum

Pekerja Sosial/PPS). The practicum is a critical phase in social work education, allowing students to integrate theoretical knowledge with professional practice in real-world settings. However, existing research indicates that many field education guidelines prioritize minimal legal compliance and provide limited practical guidance for inclusive implementation (Gutierrez & Jacob, 2021; McGinley et al., 2024). Consequently, students with disabilities often experience exclusion during practicum, including feelings of alienation from the professional identity of social work, uncertainty about accommodation procedures, and the burden of independently navigating structural barriers within placement environments (Kiesel et al., 2018). These challenges are frequently compounded by limited disability awareness among field supervisors, which undermines the provision of adequate emotional and pedagogical support (Bogo et al., 2022).

Within the broader context of higher education, inclusive education holds particular significance due to the strategic role universities play in fostering equitable academic environments for all students, including those with disabilities (Andayani, 2018; Farid et al., 2024). This importance is especially pronounced in disciplines focused on social empowerment, such as social work. As both a service-oriented and advocacy-based profession, social work education is expected to cultivate a profound understanding of social inclusion, educational equity, and human rights

among its students (Bartolo et al., 2025; Moriña, 2017). Therefore, inclusive education in social work encompasses not only physical accessibility but also equitable access to curricula, adaptive pedagogical approaches, and fair assessment mechanisms (Moriña, 2017).

Moreover, social work students must develop professional competencies through direct engagement with social issues and the lived experiences of vulnerable populations to function effectively as agents of social change (Goulden, 2020; Healy, 2005; Hearn et al., 2014; Paz-Maldonado et al., 2024). Consequently, integrating inclusive principles into both the curriculum and field practice not only safeguards the rights of students with disabilities but also enhances the professional competence of future social workers (Li et al., 2024).

Social work is a professional helping discipline focused on addressing social problems and restoring social functioning among individuals, families, and communities. Its core functions include promoting social change, facilitating problem-solving in human relationships, empowering and liberating marginalized populations, and advancing social well-being. To fulfill these roles effectively, social work education systems must undergo fundamental reorganization. Social work is not synonymous with charity, relief, or ad hoc assistance; rather, it is a profession grounded in specialized education, structured training, and professional standards (Fajar & Darwis, 2017a).

In practice, social workers assume multiple roles, including motivator, initiator, mobilizer, and facilitator. As motivators, they foster critical awareness among persons with disabilities regarding the social challenges they face. As initiators, they catalyze collective action; as mobilizers, they encourage autonomy and participation; and as facilitators, they support individuals in recognizing and developing their life potentials (Fajar & Darwis, 2017a). These professional roles distinguish social work services from non-professional social assistance and underscore the necessity of formal education and competency-based certification—typically at the bachelor’s level (Bachelor of Social Work)—to ensure professional recognition and accountability (Darwis, 2016; Fajar & Darwis, 2017b; Muktiwibowo & Prayogi, 2022; Santoso et al., 2020).

Within social work education, professional skills are essential for preparing students to address complex and interconnected social challenges. Social problems rarely exist in isolation; they are shaped by multifaceted causal relationships that often become apparent only through comprehensive assessment and intervention processes. Accordingly, the careful application of theory in community-based services is imperative, making inclusive adaptation within curricula and field practice particularly critical. The practicum constitutes a pivotal learning phase in which students are required to translate classroom knowledge into direct

interactions with clients and communities (Abdussamad et al., 2023; Brakel et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, social work practice is often characterized by professional dilemmas related to values, skills, and institutional constraints. Common challenges include the emergence of cascading cases from unresolved issues, managing high caseloads amid limited human resources, and work fatigue resulting from insufficient supervision—particularly when intervention timelines do not align with field realities (Afni & Muslim, 2023). These dilemmas can be further exacerbated for students with disabilities during practicum placements.

Although an increasing number of studies address inclusive education within social work, much of the literature remains focused on classroom-based accommodations rather than the lived experiences of students with disabilities during professional field practice (McGinley et al., 2024; Traber et al., 2021). Field placements represent a critical context for professional identity formation; however, participation by students with disabilities is often limited by stigma and insufficient structural support. While some research highlights the importance of institutional support—such as in occupational therapy education (Dhillon et al., 2024)—it also reveals that students with disabilities frequently must navigate placement-related barriers independently due to inadequate institutional

preparedness and supervisory support (Kiesel et al., 2018).

Research on internships for youth with intellectual disabilities indicates that field-based experiences can positively impact independence and long-term employment outcomes (Romualdez et al., 2020). However, these studies seldom focus on the specific context of social work education, especially within higher education systems in the Global South, including Indonesia. This gap highlights the limited empirical understanding of how students with disabilities actively develop adaptive strategies during professional practice in social work environments that remain insufficiently inclusive.

This gap is further highlighted by studies showing that, despite increasing attention to inclusive social work education, field placements often fail to foster genuinely inclusive environments (Asamoah et al., 2023). Research in Canada, for instance, reveals that many social work schools lack adequate policies and supervisor training to support students with disabilities (Dunn et al., 2008). Similarly, Harrison and Ip (2013) emphasize that global field placements frequently neglect the needs of international students and students with disabilities due to limited cultural sensitivity, insufficient linguistic support, and inadequate professional preparation. Consequently, students with disabilities often face significant barriers during practicum, including insufficient physical and social accessibility, communication

challenges-particularly for those with sensory or neurodivergent disabilities-and psychological stress stemming from stigma and subtle discrimination (Boye, 2024; Solís-García et al., 2025). As Strnadova et al. (2021) observe, students commonly report feelings of isolation and lack of support when supervisors lack disability awareness.

In Indonesia, inclusive universities such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga have emerged as pioneers in providing equitable access to higher education for students with disabilities. Through various inclusive programs, the university aims to ensure that students with physical or sensory impairments can pursue academic pathways comparable to those of their peers (Andayani, 2018). Despite the development of inclusive policies and facilities, empirical studies systematically examining the challenges and adaptive strategies of students with disabilities during the Social Work Practicum (PPS) remain scarce. This gap is particularly significant, given that the PPS constitutes a core component of the Social Welfare curriculum, requiring advanced communication skills, professional relationships, and a high level of adaptability in field settings.

This study aims to contribute to the advancement of the Social Model of Disability by investigating how social and institutional barriers influence the professional education experiences of students with disabilities. Additionally, Coping Strategy Theory is utilized

to clarify the psychosocial adaptation processes through which these students respond to challenges encountered during practicum placements. From a practical standpoint, the findings are expected to inform the development of more inclusive practicum policies and guidelines, while enhancing the capacity of higher education institutions and field supervisors to provide accommodations tailored to students' needs.

Accordingly, this article aims to examine the challenges faced by students with disabilities and the adaptive strategies they employ while undertaking the Social Work Practicum (PPS) within the Social Welfare Study Program at UIN Sunan Kalijaga. The central research question guiding this study is: How do students with disabilities navigate structural, social, and professional barriers during the PPS, and what adaptive strategies do they develop within a social work education context that remains insufficiently inclusive?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Inclusive Education and Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Research on inclusive education in higher education consistently demonstrates that the participation of students with disabilities is shaped by intertwined structural, social, and institutional configurations that frame their learning experiences. Inclusion is no longer understood merely as access to university admission, but as sustained and meaningful participation throughout the academic

trajectory, culminating in degree completion and the development of professional competence. Within professional education contexts—such as social work—these challenges become more complex, as students are required to engage intensively in practice-based environments characterized by performance demands, professional relationships, and ethical accountability.

A growing body of literature documents that students with disabilities encounter multilayered barriers in higher education. A systematic review and bibliometric analysis by Gull et al. (2025) identifies at least fourteen major thematic challenges, ranging from physical inaccessibility and insufficient academic support to social exclusion and psychological distress. These findings underscore that the barriers experienced by students with disabilities are systemic and cross-contextual rather than individual or incidental. Moriña (2017) further argues that although inclusive policies have expanded significantly, institutional practices often remain administratively driven, resulting in a persistent mismatch between formal commitments to inclusion and students' lived experiences.

Recent studies also highlight the dilemmas students with disabilities face in accessing reasonable accommodations, particularly when disclosure of disability is required in competitive academic environments (Lindsay et al., 2018). Disability-related stigma has been shown to operate not only as a source

of social exclusion but also as a determinant of psychosocial well-being and academic outcomes. Higher levels of stigma consciousness are associated with lower academic achievement and heightened feelings of alienation (Haft et al., 2023), while self-stigma and internalized negative perceptions of disability restrict students' social participation in higher education settings (Smith & McVeigh, 2025). Importantly, coping strategies—such as avoidance or selective help-seeking—are shaped by these stigma perceptions and may exacerbate emotional strain and academic disengagement (Carballo & Cumming, 2025; Kumar et al., 2024). Consequently, the effectiveness of inclusive education cannot be assessed solely through the presence of policy frameworks but must be evaluated in terms of institutions' capacity to foster socially safe environments that recognize diverse learning needs and identities.

### **Structural, Social, and Institutional Barriers in Professional Education**

In professional education, barriers faced by students with disabilities become more pronounced as learning extends beyond classroom settings into applied and field-based environments. Numerous studies indicate that students with disabilities in professional programs encounter structural barriers, including physical inaccessibility, non-adaptive transportation systems, and ambiguous or inconsistently implemented accommodation policies. These challenges are compounded by

social barriers such as stigma, ableism, and implicit assumptions regarding the “ideal professional body,” which continues to be shaped by non-disabled norms (Langørgen et al., 2020; Neely-Barnes et al., 2014; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021; Wernick et al., 2024; William & Lowe, 2025).

Institutional barriers further manifest through limited preparedness among lecturers, field supervisors, and partner organizations to support students with disabilities. Sellmaier and Kim (2021) demonstrate that social work students with disabilities are frequently required to engage in extensive self-advocacy to articulate their needs, due to the absence of clear institutional support mechanisms. This dynamic reinforces power asymmetries within professional education, where access to and continuity of field practice are often contingent upon the discretionary attitudes of institutional actors and gatekeeping processes at both university and placement levels (Langørgen et al., 2020). Simultaneously, the burden of self-advocacy-initiating, negotiating, and managing accommodations—can be emotionally taxing and demotivating amid heightened professional performance expectations (Neely-Barnes et al., 2014). When stigma and unresponsive institutional cultures discourage disclosure and support-seeking, practicum experiences may become significant sources of stress, contributing to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal from learning processes (Grant & Kinman, 2012; Gull et al., 2025).

## Social Work Practicum and Field-Based Inclusion

Field placement constitutes a core component of social work education, serving as a critical site for professional identity formation and the internalization of social justice values (Baikady et al., 2022; Shree Chhetry et al., 2024). Paradoxically, however, field practice has been identified as one of the most fragile points in the implementation of inclusive education. William and Lowe (2025) argue that practicum placements frequently fail to accommodate students with disabilities due to disparities in organizational capacity and the institutional cultures of partner agencies. Field-based barriers include limited physical mobility, inadequate disability awareness among agency staff, and insufficient training for supervisors in inclusive mentoring practices.

Low levels of disability literacy among supervisors and frontline practitioners often result in students with disabilities being positioned as “adaptation burdens” rather than as legitimate learners entitled to reasonable accommodation. This reinforces earlier findings that students’ practicum experiences are heavily dependent on individual supervisors’ attitudes and organizational readiness, rather than on structured and systemic inclusion frameworks (Mogaji & Nguyen, 2022). Furthermore, research on work-integrated learning suggests that the absence of pre-placement planning, weak communication between universities and placement agencies,

and unclear accommodation procedures contribute significantly to exclusionary and inequitable practicum experiences (Hill & Roger, 2016; Maftuhin, 2018).

Social work literature also emphasizes the professional identity dilemmas encountered by students with disabilities during field placement. Several studies document tensions arising from the need to balance support requirements with expectations of professional competence (Jarus et al., 2023; Mayer et al., 2025; McCall et al., 2020). These identity negotiations shape students’ adaptive strategies, including efforts to legitimize their competence and manage the boundaries between personal and professional identities. Conversely, evidence suggests that responsive support from family members, peers, and supervisors can significantly enhance resilience and sustain participation in field practice (Hearn et al., 2014; Zuchowski, 2015).

Taken together, the literature indicates that challenges faced by students with disabilities in social work education emerge from the interaction between structural barriers and individual adaptive capacities. While existing studies have substantially advanced understanding of inclusive education and field placement, most empirical work remains concentrated in Global North contexts and offers limited insight into the experiences of students with disabilities in the Global South. Moreover, few studies explicitly link field-based barriers with the coping strategies employed by

students with disabilities during professional practice.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the experiences of students with disabilities undertaking Social Work Practicum in Indonesia. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability and Coping Strategy Theory, the research explores how adaptive strategies are shaped by social support and institutional readiness within professional education settings that remain only partially inclusive.

## METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the adaptive strategies employed by students with disabilities in navigating the dynamics of Social Work Practicum (Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial, PPS). The case study design was selected because it allows for an intensive exploration of the contextual and experiential complexity of individual cases within real-life settings (Yin, 2017). This design is particularly appropriate for addressing research questions that require a

nuanced interpretation of barriers and adaptive practices that are unique, situational, and strongly shaped by social and institutional environments.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that involves the deliberate selection of individuals based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The primary inclusion criteria were: (1) students with visual or intellectual disabilities who were actively enrolled in the Social Welfare Study Program, (2) students who were undertaking or had recently undertaken Social Work Practicum (PPS), and (3) field supervisors who provided direct supervision during the practicum process. This sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct, substantive experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

The study involved five informants, consisting of three students with disabilities and two practicum supervisors. Table 1 presents an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

No.	Informant	Age	Gender	Category	Interview Date
1	KH	21	Female	Low Vision	March 2024
2	RZ	21	Female	Low Vision	March 2024
3	SL	21	Female	Down Syndrome	March 2024
4	FZ	25	Male	Supervisor	March 2024
5	KS	25	Female	Supervisor	March 2024

The case study focused on seventh-semester students with disabilities who participated in social work field practicum at

partner institutions during the 2024 academic year. Three female students with disabilities were involved as primary participants. Two of

the students resided in Yogyakarta and lived with their families, while one student originated from Pekalongan, Central Java, and lived independently in rented accommodation. In their daily routines, two participants relied on online motorcycle transportation services to attend academic and practicum activities, whereas one participant was consistently accompanied by family members. These contextual characteristics were considered analytically significant, as they influenced participants' mobility, access to practicum sites, and adaptive strategies.

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, contextual observation, and the review of relevant supporting documents. In-depth interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, perceived barriers, and coping strategies during the practicum process. Observations were used to capture situational dynamics within practicum settings, while document analysis provided complementary institutional and procedural context.

All data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The analytical process involved systematic data reduction, category development, and thematic interpretation (Miles et al., 2013). Coding and categorization procedures were applied to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes related to students' adaptive strategies. Rather than imposing predetermined analytical categories,

themes were derived inductively, allowing adaptive practices to emerge organically from the lived experiences of the participants.

## RESULTS

### Barriers Experienced by Students with Disabilities in Social Work Practicum

The findings indicate that all three students with disabilities in the Social Welfare Study Program experienced substantial barriers during their Social Work Practicum (PPS). These barriers can be analytically categorized into internal barriers-related to psychological, communicative, and interpersonal capacities- and external barriers, which include limitations in support systems, mobility, and the inclusivity of practicum institutions and environments. The interaction between these internal and external factors significantly shaped students' practicum experiences and their ability to sustain engagement throughout the placement period.

#### *Difficulties in Building Effective Communication*

The role of companions and families in implementing assistance distribution policies for older adults directly shapes the service experience and psychological perceptions of beneficiaries. Findings indicate that older adults' impressions of the assistance program are strongly influenced by their interactions with street-level actors. Older adults reported that each meal delivery was typically accompanied by a greeting and a brief

conversation from the companion, providing an additional form of social interaction in their daily lives. For example, respondents R8 and R3 expressed:

Communication skills constitute a core competence in social work practice, spanning all stages of intervention—from engagement and assessment to intervention and termination. Communication functions as the primary medium through which social workers establish relationships with clients, obtain valid information, and facilitate change processes. At the undergraduate level, communication is generally regarded as an attainable skill; however, the findings reveal that for students with disabilities, communication may become a significant ethical and practical dilemma within practicum settings.

Both RZ and KH reported experiencing internal communication barriers, particularly when interacting with non-disabled individuals in practicum environments. These barriers were largely rooted in low self-confidence, uncertainty regarding professional values and ethics, and difficulties initiating and sustaining interpersonal interactions. As RZ explained:

“Communication should be the most important part of building relationships with clients, but I couldn’t do it well. I was confused about what to talk about, afraid of making mistakes, and unsure whether my actions were professionally appropriate.”(RZ)

Similarly, KH described the challenges of forming meaningful interpersonal connections, particularly in unfamiliar social contexts:

“When I interact with new people, it’s not easy for me to feel close to them. Even reaching a deep conversation takes a long time. Maybe if I had more opportunities to observe facial expressions closely, I could learn to understand them better.”(KH)

These communication difficulties were not merely technical but deeply intertwined with students’ sense of professional legitimacy. RZ and KH perceived their limited communication not as a temporary challenge, but as a barrier that ultimately prevented them from completing the practicum to its final stages. Limited interaction with peers and supervisors further exacerbated feelings of isolation and hindered the development of collaborative learning relationships. RZ, in particular, reported persistent intrapersonal communication difficulties throughout the practicum period, both with clients and fellow practicum students. She expressed feelings of inadequacy when comparing herself to peers and noted that the practicum environment did not sufficiently encourage openness or inclusion:

“Actually, the place was comfortable, but I didn’t feel comfortable with my group. They often discussed things without telling me. When I wanted to

share something, I didn't know who to talk to. I'm a shy person.”(RZ)

These findings demonstrate that communication barriers were reinforced by social exclusion within peer groups, limiting opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning—elements that are crucial in social work practicum.

### ***Challenges in Building Emotional Bonding with Clients***

Beyond communication with peers and supervisors, students also faced difficulties in establishing emotional bonds (bonding) with clients. RZ, for example, reported challenges when working with clients with intellectual disabilities, particularly those with Down syndrome. Limited prior exposure to this group generated anxiety and uncertainty during client interactions:

“I felt very hesitant with friends with Down syndrome. I didn't know how to interact with them. Even though I studied in a special school environment, I rarely communicated with people with Down syndrome.”(RZ)

Similarly, KH experienced difficulties in developing social networks within the practicum environment. Low self-confidence led to passive participation, limiting her engagement with children and community members. KH perceived herself as incapable of managing interactive field situations, which further reduced her role involvement during practicum activities. These findings suggest that

insufficient preparatory exposure and lack of guided support in client interaction significantly constrained students' ability to build therapeutic relationships.

### ***Difficulties in Managing Mental and Emotional Well-being***

Another critical internal barrier identified was the challenge of maintaining mental and emotional balance during practicum. Both KH and RZ reported experiencing personal stressors unrelated to practicum demands, including family economic difficulties and intimate relationship problems. These stressors interfered with their capacity to focus on practicum responsibilities and, in some cases, led to incomplete practicum participation. One participant reflected:

“The biggest challenge was myself. At that time, I had many emotional problems that were unresolved. The program and supervisor had provided guidance, but I wasn't active enough in consulting them. I lacked confidence in myself.” (SL)

Economic constraints further compounded emotional stress, particularly in relation to transportation costs and family responsibilities:

“My family's economic condition was unstable, so I had to reconsider transportation costs. My mother stayed at home alone, and my sibling had to work to support daily living.”

These conditions resulted in mental stagnation, as participants struggled to regulate emotional distress while managing practicum obligations. The findings suggest that proactive supervisory consultation could have mitigated these challenges; however, limited communication and support prevented effective coping.

### ***Mobility and Accessibility Challenges in Practicum Locations***

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### ***Insufficient Support Systems***

Support systems played a critical role in shaping students’ confidence and motivation during practicum. KH reported limited family support due to transportation and financial constraints. Institutional support was similarly lacking, particularly for RZ, who described minimal responsiveness from practicum supervisors:

“There was no space to share concerns with the institutional supervisor. When I asked about practicum needs, the response was minimal. They didn’t really greet me, so I felt reluctant to communicate.”(RZ)

KH echoed similar sentiments, stating that she often felt hesitant to ask for help for fear of being perceived as incapable. These responses indicate practicum environments that have not yet fostered inclusive communication and psychological safety.

In contrast, SL, a student with intellectual disability, demonstrated strong persistence and resilience, supported by a robust family support system. SL consistently attended practicum activities and was accompanied by family members to distant locations:

“I feel happy and comfortable there. The places are far because there are four

locations, but my father or mother always takes me, so I'm not too tired."(SL)

Despite this support, SL still experienced difficulties in independent communication and required ongoing assistance in managing practicum tasks. This underscores that while strong support systems enhance resilience, institutional and pedagogical adaptations remain essential for inclusive practicum participation.

### **Adaptive Strategies of Students with Disabilities**

The findings indicate that the adaptive strategies developed by students with disabilities in navigating Social Work Practicum (Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial, PPS) are shaped by a dynamic interplay between social support, institutional readiness, and individual self-regulation. Adaptation did not emerge as an isolated individual effort; rather, it was co-constructed through students' relationships with family members, peers, academic supervisors, and partner institutions. One participant explicitly noted that "support from my family and academic supervisor made me strong and not want to give up" (SL), illustrating how emotional connectedness and relational security functioned as protective resources during practicum. However, the availability and consistency of such support varied considerably across participants, producing divergent adaptive trajectories and outcomes.

Experiences of practicum discontinuation revealed how insufficient family support could undermine adaptive capacity even when partial accommodations were offered by institutions. KH, for instance, emphasized that limited family backing constrained her ability to sustain practicum engagement (KH). Supervisors described attempts to introduce flexible arrangements, including relocating practicum schedules closer to students' residences and encouraging peers to share transportation responsibilities. One supervisor explained that such measures were taken in the spirit of inclusion, stating that "we tried to adapt the practicum system to the student so that she could continue smoothly" (FZ). Nevertheless, these accommodations were not always accepted or feasible, particularly when students faced competing family responsibilities, economic pressures, or internal uncertainty. In several cases, limited family support intersected with emotional strain, reducing students' confidence to persist despite institutional flexibility.

In contrast, the participant who successfully completed practicum demonstrated how stable family support combined with responsive academic supervision could strengthen adaptive capacity. SL described how family members consistently provided transportation and emotional reassurance: "When I have practicum, my father or mother always takes me, so I'm not afraid of being late. If I'm confused, I ask my

supervisor or my friends” (SL). In this case, family support functioned not merely as logistical assistance but as a psychological anchor that buffered cognitive limitations and anxiety. Under these conditions, adaptation involved not withdrawal but progressive participation through modified tasks and supported learning.

Conversely, the experiences of RZ and KH illustrate how the absence of stable support systems deepened vulnerability. RZ reported limited responsiveness from the partner institution’s supervisor, stating that “sometimes I came, but I didn’t know where to start” (RZ). KH similarly explained that economic constraints and lack of transportation support disrupted attendance: “No one could take me because my parents work, so sometimes I asked permission not to come” (KH). These accounts indicate that when external support weakens, students’ self-confidence declines, help-seeking

decreases, and professional engagement becomes increasingly fragile.

Across the three cases, patterns of adaptation revealed a broad spectrum of strategies shaped by differing configurations of support. Family support emerged as the most decisive factor in sustaining participation, while peer support functioned primarily as technical assistance (e.g., reading documents, spatial orientation, or support during group activities). University-based supervision operated as a mediating and stabilizing mechanism through structured monitoring, academic feedback, and coordination with partner institutions. By contrast, support from practicum institutions remained inconsistent and highly dependent on individual initiative, reflecting the absence of formal guidelines for accommodating students with disabilities.

These recurring patterns allowed the identification of four dominant adaptation strategies, summarized below.

Table 2. Individual Adaptation Strategies of Students with Disabilities

Adaptation Strategy	Core Description	Illustrative Participant Pattern
Seeking Social Support	Mobilizing assistance from family, peers, and supervisors to manage academic and field-based challenges.	SL actively sought clarification and assistance; RZ and KH were more passive due to low self-confidence.
Self-Regulation	Managing daily routines, emotional states, and learning stamina during practicum.	SL maintained structured routines; RZ and KH experienced disrupted regulation due to emotional and economic stressors.
Acceptance and Adjustment	Acknowledging personal limitations while engaging in modified participation.	SL accepted simplified guidance; RZ and KH desired independence but resisted requesting help.
Task Simplification	Reducing task complexity through supervisor-facilitated modifications.	SL used simplified assessment tools and concise reports under supervisor guidance.

The first strategy, seeking social support, was most evident in SL, who actively mobilized family assistance and consistently consulted supervisors and peers when encountering difficulties. This collaborative orientation enabled sustained engagement and learning continuity. In contrast, RZ and KH tended toward withdrawal coping, shaped by fear of negative judgment and previous experiences of exclusion. KH stated, “I’m afraid of saying something wrong in front of my friends, so it’s better to stay silent,” illustrating how social environments that lack psychological safety can discourage adaptive help-seeking.

The second strategy, self-regulation, involved efforts to structure daily routines, manage emotional fatigue, and maintain learning momentum. SL demonstrated relatively strong self-regulation by maintaining consistent attendance, documenting interviews immediately, and seeking regular feedback. By contrast, RZ and KH reported difficulties sustaining engagement when emotional distress and family problems intensified, indicating that self-regulation was highly contingent on supportive social contexts.

The third strategy, acceptance and adjustment, was most pronounced in SL, who openly acknowledged cognitive limitations while remaining committed to completing practicum tasks. Acceptance in this context did

not signify resignation but rather reconciliation between personal capacity and structural constraints. In contrast, RZ and KH displayed what may be described as pseudo-independence: a desire to be perceived as autonomous coupled with reluctance to seek assistance, which ultimately narrowed access to practice-based learning opportunities.

The fourth strategy, task simplification, emerged as an institutional and pedagogical adaptation facilitated by academic supervisors. Simplifications included reducing report complexity, using structured assessment prompts, and shifting intervention goals toward more feasible micro-level targets. These adaptations enabled SL to complete core practicum requirements while maintaining ethical standards, illustrating that effective adaptation often results from co-construction between students, supervisors, and institutions rather than individual coping alone.

These adaptation strategies were reflected in participants’ overall practicum trajectories, as summarized below.

Table 3. Participation Trajectories and Practicum Outcomes

Participant	Dominant Support Source	Salient Adaptation Pattern	PPS Outcome
SL (Completed)	Family and academic supervisor	Seeking support, acceptance, task simplification	Practicum completed with modifications; final report completed; ethical standards maintained.
RZ (Discontinued)	Weak institutional and peer support	Disrupted self-regulation, limited communication	Practicum not completed; partial documentation.
KH (Discontinued)	Limited family support, low supervisory intensity	Withdrawal coping, emotional strain	Practicum discontinued prior to termination phase.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that adaptation in Social Work Practicum is not solely a matter of individual coping capacity but reflects broader structural and relational conditions. While inclusive policies and formal accommodations are important, meaningful inclusion depends on the readiness of social actors and institutions to translate these principles into everyday practice. SL's case illustrates that with consistent support and sensitive supervision, disability does not preclude academic or professional success. In contrast, the experiences of RZ and KH show that when support remains fragmented and informal, inclusive policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the experiences of students with disabilities in Social Work Practicum (Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial, PPS) cannot be understood reductively as a function of individual limitations. Rather, they emerge from a complex interaction between structural barriers, social relations, and

individuals' psychosocial adaptive capacities. Internal challenges such as communication difficulties, problems in building relational bonding, and unstable mental well-being—particularly experienced by KH and RZ—were embedded in practicum environments that lacked social safety. These environments were characterized by limited field supervisor support, exclusionary peer dynamics, and the absence of clear accommodation mechanisms. This pattern reinforces existing evidence that inclusive education in higher education often remains confined to formal access, while the quality of meaningful and sustainable learning experiences is not adequately ensured (Gull et al., 2025; Moriña, 2017; Wernick et al., 2024). In professional education, where performance expectations, competency evaluation, and intensive work relationships prevail, field practice becomes one of the most vulnerable spaces for inclusion—particularly when the notion of the “ideal student” continues to be shaped by non-disabled norms (Langørgen et

al., 2020; Neely-Barnes et al., 2014; William & Lowe, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strongly affirm the Social Model of Disability, which conceptualizes disability as a product of social and institutional barriers rather than as an inherent deficit of the individual. Barriers related to mobility, the absence of standardized accommodation procedures within partner institutions, limited disability literacy among field supervisors, and non-inclusive workplace cultures functioned as disabling barriers that constrained students' participation in PPS. Consequently, the experiences of "inability" reported by KH and RZ are more appropriately interpreted as systemic failures to provide equitable learning environments rather than as personal shortcomings (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2013; Moraña, 2017). This interpretation aligns with studies in social work field education showing that students with disabilities are frequently burdened with repeated self-advocacy due to the lack of structured institutional support mechanisms (Kiesel et al., 2018; McGinley et al., 2024; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). When inclusion relies primarily on individual goodwill rather than systemic design, exclusion tends to persist in subtle and normalized forms.

Complementing this structural analysis, Coping Strategy Theory, particularly the stress appraisal and coping framework proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), provides insight into how students with disabilities navigated

practicum challenges. The four adaptive patterns identified-seeking social support, self-regulation, acceptance and adjustment, and task simplification-reflect students' subjective appraisals of practicum environments and the availability of supportive resources. SL, who benefited from strong family support and responsive academic supervision, predominantly employed adaptive, problem-focused coping strategies, such as actively seeking clarification, accepting task modifications, and maintaining consistent practicum routines. In contrast, KH and RZ demonstrated tendencies toward withdrawal coping when practicum environments were perceived as unsafe, unresponsive, or potentially stigmatizing (Carballo & Cumming, 2025; Kumar et al., 2024). This pattern is consistent with the work-integrated learning literature, which emphasizes that organizational unpreparedness and weak social support amplify stress, isolation, and disengagement among students with disabilities in professional placements (Hill & Roger, 2016; Lawlis et al., 2024; Mogaji & Nguyen, 2022).

The dilemma of professional identity-situated between the need for support and the desire to be recognized as competent future professionals-represents a critical intersection between these two theoretical frameworks. From the Social Model of Disability perspective, the pressure to appear "independent" reflects able-bodied professional norms that frame accommodation needs as indicators of

weakness. From a coping perspective, this pressure shapes adaptive choices: some students mobilize support as a resource for resilience, while others conceal their needs or withdraw as a means of self-protection. These findings resonate with research on the professional identity formation of students with disabilities, which highlights ongoing negotiations between legitimacy, belonging, and competence in professional education settings (Jarus et al., 2023; Mayer et al., 2025; McCall et al., 2020). Accordingly, failure to complete PPS should not be interpreted as an individual deficit, but rather as an indicator of an inequitable practicum ecology that restricts opportunities for adaptive coping (Gull et al., 2025; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021).

The findings carry important implications for the design of inclusive social work practicum. First, they underscore the need to shift from administratively oriented inclusion toward systemic and operationally inclusive practicum design. Social work programs should develop explicit and actionable inclusive PPS standard operating procedures, including pre-placement assessments, access needs mapping, adaptive learning contracts, and structured triadic communication between universities, partner institutions, and students. Existing literature indicates that the absence of clear procedures often renders field-based accommodations ad hoc and inconsistent (McGinley et al., 2024; Neely-Barnes et al., 2014). Second, partner institutions and field

supervisors require structured training in disability literacy and reflective supervision to ensure that support is not contingent upon individual intuition or goodwill (Langørgen et al., 2020; William & Lowe, 2025). Third, the effectiveness of task simplification in SL's case suggests that thoughtfully designed task modifications-aligned with learning outcomes-can maintain professional standards while expanding access to meaningful learning experiences (Moriña, 2017). Fourth, from a coping perspective, integrating self-regulation skills and supported help-seeking into PPS curricula may strengthen adaptive coping strategies and mitigate withdrawal resulting from stigma or isolation (Grant & Kinman, 2012; Lawlis et al., 2023).

This study is limited by its case study design, small number of participants, and single institutional context, which preclude statistical generalization. However, its strength lies in the use of thick description, enabling analytic generalization to theory and practice in inclusive social work education (Yin, 2017). Future research should extend this inquiry across multiple higher education institutions and partner agencies, and include a broader range of disability types. Comparative studies across regions-particularly within the Global South-are needed to examine how structural conditions such as transportation infrastructure, family economic constraints, and organizational readiness shape coping strategies and the

sustainability of participation for students with disabilities in professional education.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the experiences of students with disabilities in the Social Work Practicum (Praktikum Pekerjaan Sosial, PPS) cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual limitations. Instead, these experiences arise from a complex interaction among structural barriers, social relations, and individuals' psychosocial adaptive capacities within a professional education ecosystem that remains only partially inclusive. The findings reveal that key challenges faced by students with disabilities—such as communication difficulties, mobility constraints, limited institutional support, and psychological pressure—are deeply embedded in the design of the PPS and in field practice cultures shaped predominantly by non-disabled norms. Consequently, students' success or failure in completing the PPS reflects the systemic readiness of educational institutions and partner agencies more than their personal capabilities.

Viewed through the lens of the Social Model of Disability, this study confirms that “disability” in the context of PPS is socially and institutionally constructed through disabling conditions. These include the absence of standardized accommodation procedures, limited disability literacy among field supervisors, and workplace relationships that fail to provide social and psychological safety.

Practicum environments that do not respond to the needs of students with disabilities create disabling experiences that restrict participation, erode self-confidence, and undermine practice-based learning. Conversely, when university supervision systems are responsive and partner institutions demonstrate openness to pedagogical and logistical adjustments, students with disabilities can perform professionally in meaningful ways, even when their learning pathways differ from normative expectations.

At the same time, the application of Coping Strategy Theory enhances our understanding of how students with disabilities respond psychosocially to practicum-related challenges. This study identifies a spectrum of adaptive strategies—ranging from seeking social support, self-regulation, and acceptance and adjustment to withdrawal coping—shaped primarily by students' appraisals of practicum environments and the availability of social support. Students who received consistent family support and responsive academic supervision were more likely to adopt adaptive, problem-focused coping strategies that sustained learning and engagement. In contrast, the absence of systemic and relational support tended to precipitate withdrawal coping, resulting in disrupted participation and discontinuity in the learning process. These findings underscore that coping among students with disabilities is not merely an expression of personal disposition but a

situational response constructed within specific structural and relational conditions.

This study contributes to strengthening the argument that inclusivity in social work education-particularly during the practicum stage-cannot be achieved through normative policy commitments or administrative accommodations alone. Genuine inclusion requires systemic transformation, encompassing pre-placement planning, disability-sensitive and reflective supervision, pedagogical adaptations aligned with learning outcomes, and the development of sustainable social support networks. By positioning the practicum placement stage (PPS) as a critical site for professional identity formation and the internalization of social justice values, this research highlights that institutional failure to accommodate students with disabilities not only disadvantages individuals but also undermines the ethical and professional mission of social work education itself.

This study affirms that adaptation among students with disabilities in PPS is a dialectical process involving both individual agency and institutional structure. When educational systems and practicum settings consistently integrate inclusive principles into relational, pedagogical, and organizational practices, students with disabilities are not merely able to practicum requirements but can develop into competent, reflective, and ethically grounded future social workers. These findings provide a robust empirical foundation for

advancing more just, inclusive, and sustainable practicum policies and practices, particularly within social work education in Global South contexts.

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