

Improving Disability Representation through the School Library

By Alanna King

Background

I appreciate the opportunity to share why I'm deeply committed to disability advocacy and inclusion. My journey in this field is multifaceted, shaped by personal experiences and professional roles that have given me unique insights:

1. **Living with invisible disabilities:** I navigate episodic conditions and the onset of disability. Autoimmune issues, compounded by cancer surgery, have led to physical and cognitive challenges that impact my ability to work in education without accommodations.
2. **Teaching experience:** My career began in 1994 with the Japan Exchange and Teaching program, where I taught English at Tottori Yogo Gakko, a school for students with disabilities. This early exposure sparked a lifelong commitment to inclusive education.
3. **Parental perspective:** As a mother, I've experienced the challenges of securing proper accommodations for a child with suspected autism, a process that took several years to navigate.
4. **Advocacy in education:** As a teacher-librarian, I've worked to create accessible learning spaces. I continue to advocate for appropriate accommodations within the education system, both for myself and others.
5. **Union involvement:** I volunteer with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation's Advisory Group for Persons with Disabilit(ies) (Ontario Secondary

School Teachers Federation's Advisory Group for Persons with Disabilit(ies), 2025), working to advance the rights of educational staff with disabilities.

These experiences have deepened my understanding of disability issues from multiple angles. While my disabilities may not be immediately visible, they've profoundly shaped my perspective and drive my commitment to this important work.

Introduction

Disability is a culture that is deeper than the performative tropes and stereotypes typically used in media. As a former teacher-librarian and active educator, I am learning that when it comes to the disability aspects of 'Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity' endeavours, they are often an afterthought. I suspect this can be summarized as: 1) the complexity of disability contexts; and 2) the expense of creating disability programming, facilities and resources. The work of the school library to be inclusive is continuous and iterative. Presenting approaches to disability inclusion here is simply another crucial layer of this work.

In 2023, my secondment as an instructional liaison at TVO (Ontario's publicly funded media education network), was nearing its end. A journalist in the print journalism department, Sarah Trick, approached me about co-authoring a grant proposal to write a style guide on the representation of disability in the media through the Rideau Hall Foundation and Michener Foundation. Sarah and I were awarded the Michener L. Richard O'Hagan Fellowship (Fondation Rideau Hall Foundation, 2025), dedicated to the advancement and enrichment of the education of Canadian journalists and journalism students. We partnered with TVO and Carleton University and the project is currently being tested with students in the Carleton Faculty of Journalism.

My portion of the initial proposal for this work involved this optimistic description of our goals:

We plan to create a style guide, educational resources, and workshops for students and working journalists that would help them cover disability thoughtfully, accurately, and with nuance...

The resources will centre the lived experience of disabled people by including their narratives and voices wherever possible. Our resources will present a variety of historical and cultural examples for critical analysis to both highlight and reframe the common narratives versus narratives that are more inclusive. Using the “Anti-Bias Anti-Racism” (ABAR) Media Triangle” (Association for Media Literacy, 2020), students will analyze various media sources representing disability...when developmentally appropriate for the learner. As in Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1993), the educator will position the media examples of disability in relation to the ABAR triangle to elicit student wonderings, reactions, and curiosities about the media’s messaging.

Students will come to realize that the text, the medium’s production, and the audience all influence the message’s impact. The value of this work will be in dialogue and reflection through metacognitive prompts. The full impact of this ABAR work will be understood by learners and educators alike, as they engage in creation of new media representations of disability and gather feedback from authentic audiences on their work.”

When my portion of the project came to an end, the content I had made was transferred to a Carleton University Learning Management System for use by

faculty and students. I had already undertaken an enormous amount of additional research that remains incomplete. Thankfully, the ongoing iteration of Treasure Mountain Canada's action research mandate (Canadian School Libraries, 2025), has given me space to create a forum for this discussion in the context of school library work. I hope to outline the essential starting points for disability inclusivity with the most manageable effort using the loftiest of ideals. School library staff are uniquely positioned to focus on the representation of disability in programming and resources. This paper is just a snippet of suggestions based on my attempts so far both within the Michener project, and since in my role as an online English teacher.

In its fullest completion, my project will continue in each of these categories:

1. Introduction to Disability Representation in Literature and the Media
2. Disability Representation in School Library Collections
3. Improving Disability Representation in School Libraries

Although based on my previous work, in revising the curriculum for a school library staff audience, this approach aligns more closely with the needs and responsibilities of teacher-librarians and school library staff. By implementing these practices, school library staff can become ambassadors of inclusive information access, creating library spaces that welcome and empower all students, regardless of ability. Inclusion is an ongoing and iterative process that requires active education for staff and students about disability representation, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of disability.

Method

Key Influences

This section is accompanied by a slideshow that I made for the School of Journalism Faculty to introduce the rationale behind the curriculum design approach for our project. As you can imagine, many of these ideas were new. I present them here as resources for the advocacy work of school library staff as they present to various stakeholders to inform about the need for this work.

Slideshow link:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1p72w95qtt8B_blpc8bacYkceZnarmCaEmD5po_NmenE/edit?usp=sharing

1) ABAR Media Triangle

As an educator, I have relied on the foundational support of the Association for Media Literacy throughout my career for approaches to media literacy. Their ABAR Media Triangle (Association for Media Literacy, 2020) is pivotal to the work of disability representation and grounded the development of these educational resources at every turn. It not only acknowledges the three approaches to analysis (text, audience and production), but it also amplifies the context of history and culture in the context of the media producers and the inherent bias of the viewer.

2) Social constructivism

Much has been written about the impact of Lev Vygotsky's (Vygotsky, 1978), theory of social constructivism as it applies to societal change. In working with any age group, the individual learner progresses cognitively more fulsomely when combined with social interaction. This social interaction applied to issues relating to disability representation accelerates the understanding through the gathering and sharing of multiple perspectives and lived experiences relating to disability.

3) Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Likewise using Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1993), in which individuals interact with the structural and institutional contexts of oppression highlights the intersectional experiences of participants in learning. Through the direct analysis of disability barriers on a systemic level, each participant's lived experiences socially construct new meaning and often a collective desire for abolition of the oppressive system.

4) Deconstruction

The theory of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1993), informs much of the work I continue to do in media literacy. In this context, I use Derrida's premise to support the deconstructing of media representations of disabled individuals, communities, and cultures in various text forms created in Canada, including historical period, cultural background, and intersectional perspectives such as race and gender. Then to synthesize understanding there is a robust period of reconstructing media representations of disabled individuals and communities and efforts to challenge harmful narratives, views that are oppressive, incomplete, or inaccurate.

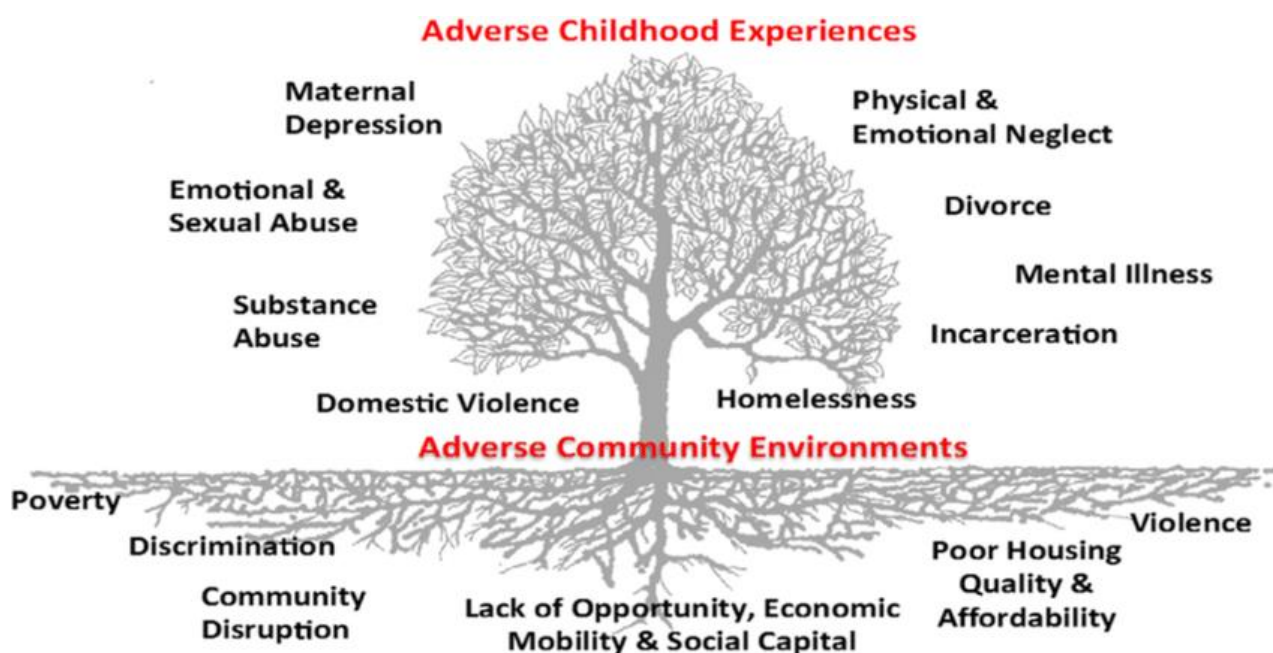
5) Culturally responsive and relevant framework

With faculty I presented the work of Zaretta Hammond (Hammond & Jackson, 2015), through the image on the slideshow to demonstrate how disability is a culture that is deeper than the performative tropes and stereotypes typically used in the media. In recognizing how the work of representation is emotionally charged, and acknowledging this with faculty and students before any discussion, it allowed us to move through the surface levels of representation into deeper levels of engagement.

6) Trauma-informed teaching

In the slideshow you will see a diagram called “Brain Parts”, which highlights the different areas of the brain. I used this diagram to help frame the need for creating a safe space for conversation before entering into the emotional work of disability representation.

In the 2023-24 school year I attended a voluntary workshop on the topic of trauma-informed teaching, a pilot collaboration between the Upper Grand District School Board and the Community Resilience Coalition of Guelph & Wellington. One of the key takeaways relating directly to disability was this foundational chart from research on Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adverse Community Environments (Ellis and Dietz, 2017). Paired with current statistics from the Statistics Canada Survey on Disability, this infographic immediately highlighted the need for trauma-informed models of teaching regarding the representation of disability.



7) Leading Learning

I first started to develop how this project could be rolled out under the guidelines of *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (Canadian School Libraries, 2020). Further exploration into the more current support document *Foundations for School Library Learning Commons in Canada: A Framework for Success* (2023) would be included in the greater scope of development. Figure 1 shows an adaptation of 4 standards to focus on disability representation rationale through school library programming.

Figure 1. Fostering Literacies in Disability representation based on [Leading Learning \(Canadian School Libraries\)](#)


Exploring	Emerging	Evolving	Established	Leading into the Future
Information literacy	Institution instructs students in skills to prepare them for inquiry in disability	Institution provides units and lessons to build student skills in disability	Institution infuses disability into learning experiences to ensure deep understanding of content	Institution leads the school community in the design of learning strategies and processes in order to empower learners.
Critical literacy	Students bring personal experiences and understanding to disability awareness by making text to text, text to self, and world connections.	Students are critical consumers of information and media by developing questions before, during and after reading and viewing examples of disability representation	Students use a variety of strategies to analyse, critique and synthesise misinformation and media.	Students construct and share new personal meaning using knowledge building technology tools.
Digital literacy and citizenship	Students learn how to be aware of disability representation online	Students learn how to use representations of disability ethically and responsibly	Students learn how disability representations affect rights and responsibilities of disabled individuals and communities.	In collaboration, the library learning commons staff empowers students to affect change through disability representation in the school community and beyond.
Literacy leadership	Institution offers resources in disability	Institution fosters critical and collaborative discussion on disability	Institution designs and applies learning experiences to nurture literacy about disability	Institution leads the school community in designing learning that is developed collaboratively by students and faculty about disability

8) Curriculum model of Federal Integration of provincial legislation

I was able to secure a brief interview and inside look at a current course developed by the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Program at The Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC) (Information and Communications

Technology Council (ICTC), 2024). The WIL Program is designed to help post-secondary students to acquire foundational business skills. They developed a curriculum specifically on “Accessibility in Technology” using some of the key mandates in the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) (Government of Canada, 2024). Being able to uncover the nuances of compliance with students and to raise the bar to include advocacy and allyship in workplace cultures through educational discussion, ensures that representation of disability will improve. Although currently a voluntary opportunity, it was foundational for me to see the vision of disability from this point of view.

This screenshot is used with permission of what the modules entail:




Accessibility in Technology

ICTC's WIL Digital Accessibility in Technology course is designed for students who are interested in developing fundamental skills on the Accessibility and Assistive Technology sector. This course serves as a source of knowledge of accessibility and their current impact for the workforce especially in Canada.

Modules		Lessons	Learning Objectives	
Module 1	Fundamentals of Accessibility needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to Disability and accessibility in a Canadian context Legislation at the federal and provincial levels Accessible terminology and vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning the history of accessibility in a Canadian context. Acknowledging appropriate terminologies and vocabulary 	Padlet Discussion
Module 2	Accessibility, Advocacy and Allyship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating inclusive workplaces Advocating for colleagues and self-allyship in the workplace Making work events accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring the workplace under an inclusive and accessible lens including meeting methods and event planning. 	Padlet Discussion
Module 3	Accessibility and Assistive Tools in Virtual Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistive and adaptive tools Accessible software applications Best practices in online workspaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring assistive hardware, software and systems and discovering future tools of a virtual workplace. Identifying the gaps of accessible and assistive technology in virtual workplace. 	Quiz
Module 4	Accessible Online Play and Social Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigating social media Navigating gaming spaces Accessible gaming tools Accessible job networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning accessibility within the scopes of social media and video gaming. Exploring options for job searching and accessible employment 	Padlet Discussion
Module 5	Career Opportunities in Accessibility and Assistive Tech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Careers in accessible hardware Careers in software applications Accessibility in policy making Human intervention and technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discovering employment, skills development, and career sectors within the four main subcategories of accessibility in technology. 	Padlet Discussion
Module 6	Emerging Technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in legislation Tools for the virtual workplace Innovative accessible and assistive technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning upcoming legislative changes. Understanding the next generation of accessibility in technology. Exploring emerging tech and predictive needs. 	Padlet Discussion

Funded by the Government of Canada's Student Work Placement Program (SWPP)



Curriculum Design

The goal of my portion for the Michener project was to develop a curriculum design that would be all encompassing of the scope of disability representation. Included in these three key modules is a link to 3 slidedecks that highlight resource and activity suggestions. Each module here has been developed with varying digital tools for teaching in a digital environment but include ideas for working in other educational contexts.

Module 1: Introduction to Disability Representation in Literature and the Media

Link to Google Slidedeck for Module 1 resources:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1VTeWEXGx8_OAeMN63A2G0C2jdmxLvtf2slSVYc6Vsi0/edit?usp=sharing

This module explores disability representation in literature and media, focusing on its significance in school libraries. By the end, participants will understand various models of disability and common stereotypes.

Learning objectives:

- Understand the historical and cultural contexts shaping disability representation in the Canadian education system
- Identify key concepts in disability studies including different models of disability
- Analyze literary and media examples to identify stereotypes, stigma and tropes
- Develop strategies for discussing disability representation with staff and students

Key concepts:

- Models of disability: Exploring eugenics, charity, medical, rights, social and trauma models
- Definitions of disability in government

- Common disability tropes and stereotypes in media
- Ableism and its manifestations in literature and media
- Intersectionality: Recognizing how disability intersects with other identities

Disability concepts:

- Social model of disability
- Person-first vs. Identity-first language
- Intersectionality in disability experiences

Literary examples:

- Books: Analyze global representations of disability in school-aged books
- Classic literature: Examine disability portrayals in canonical texts
- Contemporary fiction: Explore modern narratives featuring characters with disabilities

Interactive learning objects:

- Learning activities with historical representations of disability
- Case studies: Analyze literary representations of disability and discuss their implications

Module 2: Improving Disability Representation in School Library Collections

Link to Google Slidedeck for Module 2 resources:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1iH_GvncbzbNrEoFO9hk2Nn7HaMHregLeEQC16xxqfEs/edit?usp=sharing

This module focuses on the portrayal of disability in literature available in school libraries. Participants will learn to critically assess how disability is depicted across various literary forms and understand the impact on readers.

Learning Objectives:

- Analyze literary narratives to identify stereotypes and misrepresentations or incomplete representations of disability
- Understand the ethical considerations in selecting disability-related materials for school libraries
- Implement strategies for selecting and deselecting inclusive and authentic disability-related materials
- Develop programming to educate staff and students about disability representation

Key Concepts:

- Authentic vs. stereotypical portrayals of disability in literature
- Intersectionality in disability representation
- Impact of media portrayals on societal attitudes towards disability

Literary Examples:

- Analysis of literature by age group of library patrons
- Disability culture in literature
- Historical fiction
- Learning disability
- Onset disability
- Physical disability
- Mental Health
- Non-fiction

Programming Ideas and Educational Materials

- Book club focusing on disability-themed literature
- Student-led reviews of disability representation in library material
- Network list of inclusive of publishers and book series
- Case studies: Analyze literary and media representations of disability and discuss their impact on student perceptions
- Interactive examples of key concepts and literary and media examples
- Staff training on recognizing and challenging ableist language and stereotypes

Module 3: Improving Disability Representation in School Libraries

Link to Slidedeck for Module 3 resources:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1XB_lyc4WgFeXxuQQawOpBhR6jpfNoKby8gAcwcTZnZE/edit?usp=sharing

This module focuses on practical strategies and best practices for school librarians to enhance disability representation and accessibility in their libraries. By implementing these approaches, librarians can foster more inclusive spaces, collections and programming that better serve all students.

Learning objectives:

- Develop strategies to improve access for students with disabilities
- Develop strategies to improve disability representations in library collections
- Implement practices that enhance accessibility for students with disabilities
- Create or improve library policies and services to be more inclusive
- Collaborate with staff to better support students with disabilities

Key concepts:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Collection development for inclusivity
- Accessible library spaces and services
- Collaboration with special education consultants and staff

Strategies for improving representation:***Collection Development:***

- Audit existing collections for disability representation
- Seek out books featuring diverse disability experiences
- Include books with positive portrayals of characters with disabilities
- Ensure representation across various genres and reading levels

Accessibility Enhancements:

- Implement multimodal signage (e.g. large print, symbols, Braille)
- Provide assistive technologies and alternative format materials
- Create designated quiet spaces for sensory needs
- Arrange furniture and shelving for easy navigation
- Redevelop library digital spaces to improve accessibility features

Policy and Service Improvements:

- Develop flexible circulation policies (e.g., lending periods, classroom libraries, home use)
- Offer customized information literacy instruction
- Provide resources on various types of disabilities
- Train staff on the legal provisions regarding copyright for accessibility formats

Collaboration and Outreach:

- Partner with teachers and special education teachers and staff
- Consult with disability consultants and organizations for guidance
- Seek feedback from students with disabilities
- Promote disability awareness and inclusion through library programming

Interactive Learning Objects:

- Accessibility audit checklist for school libraries
- Case studies on successful disability inclusion initiatives
- Teaching materials on UDL Principles in library settings

Programming Ideas and Educational Materials

- Disability awareness events featuring speakers with lived experiences
- Workshops on assistive technologies available in the library
- Collaborative art projects promoting disability visibility and inclusion

Project challenges**Copyright access**

Copyright access to images and media for educational purposes of disability representation remains limited. I was able to secure some images of postage stamps and disability in history (Appendix 1). Some of the images I first located through Getty Images but later found out that they were in the public domain. Search terms for historical material on disability comes with its own challenges, as disability images weren't considered 'beautiful' and disability voices have traditionally been marginalized.

Open resource scope

Our initial mandate has always been to give away these resources on

disability representation as freely and openly as possible. We imagined that our project would cross international boundaries and help to create a community of like-minded individuals. At every turn we were met with firewalls, formatting issues and commercial limitations based on financial contracts. What I have provided in this project is the full extent to what we were able to accomplish. I will continue to provide links to great material, but I simply do not have the fortitude or influence to manage more. Even in conversations with CEOs and legal teams, there is very little precedent to rely on.

Conclusion

The curriculum I provide here is a dream essentially. There is no forum or plan for this work, but if I had enough time and power, I would launch this curriculum to educators across the globe to assist in elevating disability discussions. I am actively seeking partners in creating a home for these resources and would appreciate any assistance in the aforementioned challenges. Until then, I hope each reader will find something to provoke thinking about how to embed disability in current and future work in educational spaces.

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Appendix 1: Historical Images of Disability

These images must be used in reference to their source and are not licensed for commercial use.

A) International Postage Stamps











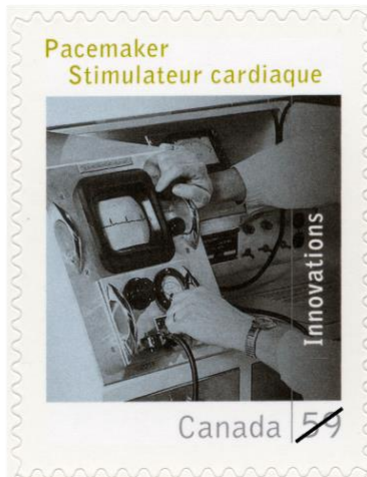


USA 15c

Seeing For Me

B) Archives Canada







7889 Harry Sparks with guests from Hospital for Incurables,
at Police Games, Manlan's Point. (Contn.) Aug. 6/30.





Saskatchewan Mental Hospital, Weyburn



Public Domain

