

Addressing Ableism Virtual Workshop

Participants' handouts



Created July 2020



British Columbia Teachers' Federation
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Objectives

1. Understanding the term ableism offers us the language to frame the concept of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities/disabled people.
2. Understanding ableism affects the way we view disability and creates an opportunity to understand that disability is a normal part of the human experience.
3. Understanding ableism helps us to unify our communities to be more respectful and inclusive.
4. Understanding ableism helps us to guide our practice by centering the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities/disabled people.
5. Understanding ableism gives us the tools to identify and fight stigma.
6. Understanding and addressing ableism creates opportunities to cultivate disability pride, in ourselves, our students, and beyond.

What is Ableism?

“9 Things That Might Not Seem Ableist, But Actually Are”

Content reproduced from Wendy Lu’s article:

www.bustle.com/articles/187964-9-things-that-might-not-seem-ableist-but-actually-are?fbclid=IwAR0eSKsHDjvDevevaK1l1vlfhB8ha1WgY2cctBtQDXMb-jqGpmN0DsL_0XTQ

1. Announcing Someone Else's Disability in an Introduction

Unless there's a very specific reason for why someone introducing two people would refer to one of them as "disabled," it's awkward and out of place to say, "This is my friend John and he has cerebral palsy." Even if it's meant as a heads up, what this does is communicate, "This new person in front of you is disabled and that's the one thing you need to know upfront about them."

If people want to share their disability with a new acquaintance, they'll do it when they want to.

2. Saying You're Sorry

Imagine saying to someone, "Gosh, I'm so sorry you're black." That just sounds wrong, doesn't it? Now, replace the word "black" with "disabled." It's not all that uncommon for PWD to hear expressions of sorrow or regret over the origins of their disability, and yet it's just as disparaging as getting looks of pity.

In fact, a few days ago I met someone whose sister has a tracheostomy (trach) tube just like me. After learning why she needs a trach tube, I said, with genuine sympathy, "Oh no, I'm so sorry that happened." The young woman preceded to say, "Why? She's fine now." I felt so silly. I brush off unnecessary apologies all the time because I'm not sorry for having a trach tube, so why did I assume she would want to hear the same thing?

3. Forgetting That Disability is Also a Type of Identity

To be honest, it wasn't until a year or two ago that I realized being disabled is a characteristic of who I am — just like my Asian heritage — and not something to be ashamed of. I mean, I always told myself that; however, it didn't sink in until I realized how big the disability community is, and how proud many are of what makes them unique. When we talk about intersectionality, it's absolutely crucial to include disability alongside gender, race, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic background, and so forth. Disability is not an "accident," or "difficulty," or even a "special need." It is an identity.

4. Ignoring the Disability

This may vary from person to person. Some people are proud of their disability and want others to acknowledge that they have one, while others don't care whether it's overlooked or not. But there's a difference between saying "I think of you just like all of my other friends" and saying, "Well, really, I just pretend it's not there" — "it" being the disability. Indeed, if you're a PWD with an able-bodied significant other and they tell you, "I love you despite your disability," you might want to take that as a potential red flag. Most people I know want a partner who loves all of them, not parts of them.

5. Writing about Disabled Characters without Doing Research

The awesome thing about being a fiction writer is that you get to create characters and make things happen to them. But just as casting able-bodied actors as disabled characters is problematic because we need better representation of disabled people in Hollywood, writing about characters with disabilities can be dicey if you haven't actually gone through the lived experience of being disabled.

Let's say you're writing about a character with a prosthesis. Interview people who have a prosthesis instead of guessing or imagining what it's like. Need more explanation? Here's an article I wrote about how to write from the perspective of characters from marginalized populations.

6. Assuming That PWD want to Talk About it All the Time

Um, hi. Yes, we may be disabled, but we have other interests too, like what Netflix shows are coming out and what we should be for Halloween.

7. Insulting our Medical Equipment

I've lost count of how many times people have pointed to my trach tube and called it "that thing" or said "Ugh, that must be uncomfortable." Even my doctors say, "When are you going to take that thing out? You don't want it in forever, do you?" Well, actually, my trach lets me live and breathe every day, so it's been a pretty awesome device. (FYI, I much prefer when people ask me what my trach is or what to call it. It means they're open to learning about my disability, rather than dismissing it.)

Here's another example: There's also this idea that people in wheelchairs are "confined" or "stuck," but a lot of my friends who use wheelchairs tell me that their wheelchairs actually give them freedom and provide a means of transportation—even that their

wheelchairs are a part of their bodies. When our medical equipment gets insulted, our disabilities are being insulted as well.

8. Telling PWD Whether or Not They Should Have Kids

You might think you're being a thoughtful, caring person by telling friends with disabilities that it's probably not the best idea to pass on their "disability genes" to their kids, but the truth is, that's really hurtful. It's also not really anyone else's business at all what someone's plans are for the future.

9. Insisting on Helping Out

I understand that it's in our nature to ask whether someone's OK or to want to help out friends who may look like they're struggling, but if a PWD says he or she doesn't need help, listen. We're not helpless, and we're still capable in many ways. After all, people with disabilities know themselves the best.

Let's talk about language

Is disability a bad word?

By Leah Kelley, Chilliwack teacher and doctoral candidate, Faculty of Education, SFU

In my work as an educator and an activist, I have long wondered why it is so difficult for us to use the word “disability.” The word “special” and the notion of “special needs” are examples of the elaborate linguistic workarounds we have adopted to talk about disability. Historically speaking, the word special was intended to improve the language used to refer to “disability,” replacing more problematic words like “handicapped” and the “R” word, which in their time were designed as replacements for other problematic terms such as “stupid,” “idiot,” “moron,” and “imbecile.” Recently, other euphemistic terms like “differently abled” or “handicapable” have come into use. Although intended to push back against stigma, these terms are also problematic, since they remain connected to underlying biases. As many educators now realize, designating disabled people as special has done little to change these underlying biases of “ableism.”

SIMILAR TO THE DEFINITION of racism, ableism refers to discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. Such discrimination can be specific and overt toward a particular person or group. Ableism also exists hidden in structures and perceptions that are largely unexamined in our schools and communities resulting in more systemically widespread barriers, including our language. For instance, the way disability is discussed, or excluded from conversations, often reinforces negative stereotypes, shaping attitudes that can limit access and opportunity for students with disabilities, including nurturing a positive identity, developing self-understanding, and the cultivation of advocacy skills.

Language is shifting but the conversation remains the same

In British Columbia, we may be transitioning away from the language of special education toward that of diversity. Arguably, this shift is a well-intentioned attempt toward inclusivity and to avoid the language of stigma and discrimination. Framing disability as one aspect of diversity may appear to move in a positive direction. But we must ask the question: is it possible that this shift in language might actually make things more difficult for students with disabilities? And if so, how and why?

Suggesting that students with disability are simply a part of a wider diversity of learners may be true, but we must examine the implications of doing so, ensuring that space and language to explicitly talk about disability happens. We must resist subsuming disability into the broader category of diversity, so that we do not inadvertently make it more difficult to discuss and address the specific issues faced by disabled people.

When I use the term disabled, I sometimes see people politely work to hide a raised eyebrow. I sense unspoken shock that I am insensitive enough to actually say “that word.” Perhaps this reaction is tied

to assumptions that equate disability with tragedy, that disabled people are less than, and that to use the word is an insult. I am curious about what might be possible if the term disability were uncoupled from pity and stigma, and the opportunities that might then be created to examine why discussing disability—even saying the word—makes people so uncomfortable.

Students with disabilities continue to experience exclusion and discrimination that is different from members of other marginalized groups. What might be possible if/when the shift to the language of diversity and diverse learners is accompanied with an attitude of inquiry to understand the lived experience of disability-related stigma? How do we ensure that the experiences of students with disabilities are not disregarded, disappeared, or erased, and that the same stigma and barriers are not perpetuated—simply rebranded with a new name? How might we create opportunities to better prepare our students for their futures by including disability history and the disability rights movement in social justice curriculum?

Discussing and answering these questions would be a move toward justice. When disability and the stories and perspectives of disabled people are included in the context of human rights and social justice discussions, our understanding deepens and creates space to consider accessibility, accommodations, fairness, and bias—making our school communities better and more inclusive for everyone.

#NotSpecialNeeds #SayTheWord

Many of the disabled adults I know actually prefer the word “disabled” over the euphemisms designed to avoid the term.

“When I use the term disabled, I sometimes see people politely work to hide a raised eyebrow.”

Below: the author's son



Photo submitted by author

“Disability is a part of an identity we claim with pride. Disability is a natural part of the full range of human experience.”

Some people are confused by this, because it is counter-intuitive to the discourse and master narrative. However, for me, my family members, and others in the disability community, we understand that we are a part of a broader group with a particular history. Disability is a part of an identity we claim with pride. Yes, we experience difficulties, but we acknowledge that disability is a natural part of the full range of human experience, and we have our own stories. As someone who identifies as neurodivergent, is the parent of an autistic son, and with many years experience as an

integration and inclusion teacher, I'm well aware of the significance of language.

A shift away from the notion of special also creates an opportunity to move the discussion toward the idea that the needs of all students are actually the same: the need to have access to education, to belong, to be safe, cared for, respected, honoured, heard and supported to be self-determining.

The Ministry of Education is considering categorization and the framing of disability—here lies an opportunity to move in a different direction. It is a profound act of solidarity to interrogate how systems and attitudes have been shaped by avoiding the word disability. What might be possible when there is space in our classrooms to talk about disability, as a normal part of human experience—an identity uncoupled from shame? Let's have the difficult conversations and examine our attitudes about disability, and re-imagine inclusion in our classrooms, schools, communities—and in our lives.

References

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- Trent, J. W. Jr., (2017). *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*. Oxford University Press.
- Leah Kelley is a teacher in Chilliwack, and a doctoral candidate at Simon Fraser University. Read Leah's blog, 30 Days of Autism, at <https://30daysofautism.blog>, which explores education, social justice, advocacy and self-determination, parenting an autistic son, and navigating the world as a neurodivergent person.* ■



From institution to inclusion A history of special education in BC schools

From *Teacher Magazine*, Volume 31, Number 1, Sept./Oct. 2018

Research compiled by Emily O'Neill, BCTF librarian

1800s: Following medical diagnosis, children considered “handicapped” are routinely institutionalized. [A]

1890: First recorded legislation provides for the education of “handicapped children” in British Columbia. Deaf children are sent to the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Winnipeg, Manitoba. [B]

1900-1970s

Segregated schooling is the norm. [A]

1915: Vancouver School Board establishes classes for deaf and blind children. Originally known as the Provincial Oral School, it later becomes Jericho Hill School. [D]

1925: The *Putnam-Weir Survey of the School System* recommends modifying of curriculum for the “mentally handicapped,” to establish “opportunity classes” and special schools and facilities. [B]

Early 1950s: Government takes no responsibility for the education of children with developmental disabilities. Medical and education experts advise families to send children with special needs to residential institutions. [C]

Circa 1955: Unwilling to institutionalize their children, parents begin organizing non-profit societies in their communities, providing classes in homes and church basements. They create local associations and form a provincial network that eventually grows into the BC Association for Community Living, now Inclusion BC. [C]

1955: The provincial government introduces funding for programs for “handicapped” children as part of the basic grant to school districts. [B]

Circa 1956: BC government legislates funding for local associations to run schools for students with special needs.

1956: UBC holds the first special education teacher training [C] and in 1959 becomes the first Canadian university to appoint a Professor of Special Education. [C]

Late 1950s: *Public Schools Act* is amended to permit school boards to operate classes for “moderately handicapped children.” Further changes to the *School Act* allow separate classes in regular schools. [C]

1950s and 1960s: Students categorized as low incidence still taught separately. Students categorized as high incidence taught in separate classes but not separate schools. [A]

1970s-1980s

Integration and mainstreaming emerge [A]

March 1970: Ministry of Education (MOE) creates Special Education Division to assist school districts to develop programs. [B]

1970s-1980s: The push to close large institutions gains momentum. Government focuses on providing supports to children, youth, and families in local communities, as well as developing supports in public schools for students with special needs. [C]

1980s: MOE develops policy and procedure for including children and youth with special needs in regular classrooms. [A]

March 1987: BC government establishes the Royal Commission on Education that recommends the rights of special needs learners and their parents be clarified in the *School Act*. [B]

1999–Now The move to inclusion

1989-1990: *School Act* revised in response to Royal Commission on Education, entitling all school-aged children to a full educational program, not separated from other students, and in their neighbourhood schools. [B]

1988-1994: Many BCTF locals negotiate class composition language and specialist ratios-which guarantee minimum service levels in classrooms and schools.

1995: The special educational manual outlining policies, procedures, and guidelines is published.

2002: The BC government strips teachers' collective agreements, resulting in larger class sizes, fewer specialist teachers, and the dramatic reduction of supports for students with special needs.

November 2012: Supreme Court of Canada rules in *Moore v. British Columbia*, declaring that students with disabilities are entitled to receive the accommodation measures they need for learning. The court also declared that adequate special education is not “a dispensable luxury.”

2016: MOE begins revising its *Special Education Services: Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines*.

November 2016: Supreme Court of Canada renders final decision in BCTF's 16-year court battle restoring class-size and composition language and consequently, more support for students.

The BCTF has consistently and unwaveringly advocated for improved services and supports for students with disabilities-through media campaigns, presentations to government and trustees, collective bargaining, court proceedings, and strikes.

Sources include:

[A] Inclusion in British Columbia's public schools: Always a journey, never a destination? <https://is.gd/suuG0g>.

[B] A review of special education in British Columbia. <https://is.gd/YTbe2L>.

[C] Inclusive education-how it started <https://is.gd/jToKVA>.

[D] The Homeroom (British Columbia's History of Education website) <https://is.gd/XqU2Su>.

Assumptions about Disability: Lesson by Lydia Brown

Partner Activity:

Ableism and Disability Representation in the Media

[Excerpt from *Disability Justice Lessons* PDF developed by Lydia Brown for the Bazelon Centre]

ABLEISM AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

(estimate time: 20-25 minutes)

Choose one of the following topics to search in Google News:



Mental illness



Autism



Spinal cord injury



Blindness



Deafness

Write down or copy the first 20 headlines you get in the results. Then discuss with a partner or group the following questions:



What themes do these headlines have in common?



What attitudes about disabilities do they reveal?



What stories do these articles seem to be telling about people with disabilities?



If these headlines were about you, how would you feel?



If you were the reporter or editor, how could you change the headline?



Bonus: If you've read any of the full articles, who was interviewed in the article? Were any of the people interviewed actually disabled themselves?

Models of Disability

<p><i>Medical Model</i></p> <p>Based on linking a disability diagnosis to an individual’s physical body. The model supposes that this disability may reduce the individual’s quality of life and the aim is, with medical intervention, this disability will be diminished or corrected. The medical model focuses on curing or managing illness or disability. The aim is to expand functionality and/or improve functioning, and to allow the disabled persons a more “normal” life.</p>	<p><i>Social Model</i></p> <p>Based on the understanding that systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) are social constructs. While physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological variations may cause individual functional limitation or impairments, these do not necessarily have to lead to disability unless society fails to take into account and include people regardless of their individual differences.</p>
<p><i>Identity or Pride Model</i></p> <p>Based on a conceptual framework that people with disabilities should be proud of their disabled identity. The disability is part of their identity and is a source of strength and pride.</p>	<p><i>Human Rights Model</i></p> <p>People with disabilities/disabled people have inalienable rights under legislation. Recognizing disability is a component of upholding these rights. In all facets of life, these rights are upheld, such as in education, employment, and community involvement. Addressing ableism is ensuring voices aren’t silenced, marginalized, or made invisible.</p>

Principles of Disability Justice

“The disability justice paradigm rejects hierarchy within the disability community and actively promotes solidarity among different groups and types of disability, as well as with other social justice movements (Mingus, 2011). Disability rights activist Mia Mingus stated, “We don’t want to simply join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them” (Mingus, 2011, para. 5).”

– Andrews, E. E., Forber-Pratt, A. J., Mona, L. R., Lund, E. M., Pilarski, C. R., & Balter, R. (2019).

#SaytheWord: A disability culture commentary on the erasure of ‘disability’. Rehabilitation Psychology.

Consider the following when evaluating whether resources or learning activities might be ableist:

- Be aware of whose voice is centered.
- Be a detective for marginalization – Who is being represented? Who is not?
- Identify use of ableist language or phrases (i.e., *This is crazy, it was a lame response, falling on deaf ears, they are blind to to it.*)
- Increase our awareness of access (microphone example).
- Work to understand the challenge of navigating competing access points.
- Identify potentially conflicting access needs and work to find mutually beneficial alternatives.
- Avoid infantilization of people with disabilities/disabled people.
- Avoid exploitative inspirational examples (see Stella Young’s video or Andrew Pulrang’s work).

