

Breaking Reading Barriers for Children with Disabilities: Recognizing Features in Books that Make Reading Easier and More Fun

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ABSTRACT

Library collections must be accessible and inclusive. Special collections, like the Linda Lucas Walling Collection for Disabled Children, a demonstration collection for creating accessibility and inclusion at the University of South Carolina, have set a standard for how to create these collections with rubrics and evaluation criteria that inform librarians, other educators, parents, guardians and families of children and young adults with disabilities about how to select materials that are accessible, not only for children and young adults with disabilities, but for all children and young adults, as all have varying needs pertaining to their learning and to their engagement with literature. In addition to offering selection and evaluation criteria, the Collection's instructional materials also offer information on how to modify materials or the presentation of them to make them accessible for populations with varying accessibility needs or learning variabilities.

Rubrics and collection development instruction around accessibility in children's and young adult (YA) literature have received little attention in the diverse collections movement. Google searches on books for children with disabilities, reveal nearly exclusive listings of books **about** the children with disabilities. Very few listings include books or resources **for** children with disabilities or children with accommodation needs. Rubrics and collection development instruction around books for disabled children are essential to library collections, as well as to library and information science instruction and education, as reading and literacy establish the foundation for much of the learning an individual will achieve in life. Collections that center accessibility and multi-format materials can absolutely benefit children and adults with disabilities, but they can also benefit other patrons who do not identify as disabled, as research

consistently demonstrates that principles of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) make changes that benefit all members of the population and all learners (CAST, 2024).

In the United States, falling literacy rates have proven to be a cause for concern. Children are less interested in books, and are performing poorly on standardized literacy tests, most recent data indicating that students experienced the single largest drop in reading scores since 1990. These achievement gaps are historically even more significant for students experiencing learning disabilities. For all students, the gaps are frequently long-term and persistent. Literacy skills have direct correlations with lifelong learning and a love for reading, which can be beneficial to emotional and social wellbeing, participation in society, informed citizenship, health outcomes, and employment (Mattison, et. al., 2023). It should be acknowledged that, conversely, illiteracy disables people and can impact nearly every aspect of one's life, including health and employment outcomes, participation in society, and informed citizenship (World Literacy Foundation, 2022). Because literacy and illiteracy play such deterministic roles, librarians and other educators are constantly looking for ways to engage reluctant and struggling readers, as well as readers who might not be included in traditional collections (Merga, 2019) (Subramaniam, 2013).

Dr. Linda Lucas Walling wrote the original selection and evaluation criteria in the 1980s and 1990s to provide her students at the University of South Carolina with tools to use in selecting books from general school and public library collections for children who are challenged by a disability. Beginning in 2003, the criteria were incorporated in a web page [https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/library_and_information_science/literacy/south_carolina_center_for_community_literacy/collections/walling_collection/]. She and Dr. Clayton A. Copeland have recently revised and expanded the criteria and have discussed them, with examples, in *Disabilities and the library: Fostering equity for patrons and staff with differing abilities* (Copeland, 2023). Caitlin Tobin has now joined the team, bringing with her an interest in disability representation in picture books, as well as experience in creating criteria for evaluating disability in public library board book collections.

By using the Walling Collection criteria, librarians will be able to create and use collections based on accessible materials with disabled children in mind that can also be beneficial and act as an inclusive tool for children who are experiencing difficulties with reading, whether that be due to a lack of interest or below-grade reading skills.

The creators of this panel believe that by including the Walling Collection criteria for accessible materials in LIS instruction and pedagogy, potentially in collection development courses, children's and young adult (YA) literature courses, diversity courses, and literacy courses, librarians will be more equipped and knowledgeable about selecting and evaluating materials that are inclusive for children with disabilities and reading difficulties.

This panel will discuss the importance of always designing for IDEAS (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Solutions), including universal design and Universal Design for Learning. The presenters will then offer an interactive session, during which participants will engage in whole group activities and be given opportunities to:

1. Actively apply criteria for evaluating and selecting materials for varying accessibility needs;
2. Actively apply strategic processes to modify the presentation of materials to meet varying accessibility needs (including those presented by blindness, visual impairments, or print disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism and other forms of neurodiversity, and motor disabilities, among others);
3. Discuss and apply principles of universal design that benefit all readers/learners;
4. Discuss how the criteria can most effectively be integrated across LIS curricula.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Reading and reading practices; Specific populations; Children's services; Young adult services; Collections development.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Disabilities; Accessibility; Equitable access; Collections development.

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