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Amplifying Voices: Disability Justice and the Future of Sexuality Education in Ontario

Amplifier les voix : La justice pour les personnes handicapées et l’avenir de l’éducation sexuelle en Ontario

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Abstract

This article engages with disability justice principles (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016) as a framework for reconceptualizing school-based comprehensive sexuality education. Through the perspectives of disabled childhood studies and disability studies in education, this article advocates for inclusive and affirming practices and tenets that can guide professional pedagogies and curricular development within and beyond Ontario K-12 schools to cultivate school climates that honour and affirm the identities, experiences, and genders and sexualities of disabled learners. This article provides specific practice-based recommendations through the frame of disability justice principles for professionals and educators in schools.

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse aux principes de justice pour les personnes handicapées (Sins Invalid, 2015) comme cadre pour reconceptualiser l'éducation sexuelle complète en milieu scolaire. Reposant sur les perspectives des études sur l'enfance handicapée et des études sur le handicap en éducation, cet article plaide en faveur de pratiques et de principes inclusifs et affirmatifs qui peuvent guider les pédagogies professionnelles et le développement de programmes au sein et au-delà des écoles ontariennes de la maternelle à la 12^e année afin de cultiver des climats scolaires qui honorent et affirment les identités, expériences, genres et sexualités des élèves handicapé·es. Cet article fournit des recommandations spécifiques basées sur la pratique et fondées sur les principes de justice pour les personnes handicapées à l'intention des professionnel·les et des éducateur·trices des écoles.

Keywords

Disability; Disability Justice; Sexuality Education; Curriculum; Schooling

Introduction

Within Ontario schools, disabled students remain an afterthought—if thought of at all—when it comes to sexuality education, whereby the current updates to sexuality education curricula in the province, while important, still do not adequately address the experiences, realities, and identities of disabled students (Lunsky, 2018).¹ Santinele Martino et al. (2024) examine the popular perceptions of the sexuality of disabled people in Canada, noting that emerging adults in health fields often reinforce harmful stereotypes about disabled individuals' experiences of sexuality and sexual health. While these authors importantly emphasize the necessity of fostering inclusion² and dialogue to build the knowledge and capacity of professionals working with disabled people, further work is needed to promote social change in both society and schools through embedding disability justice principles within education. This paper contributes to disability justice in *action* and is crucial to forwarding a liberatory approach that reconceptualizes disability as political, relational, and communal.

Highlighting the importance of disability justice, Kafai (2021) notes how “our disabled, queer of color bodyminds confront erasure and alienation. We actively revise the

¹ Our focus extends to students with various disabilities, including physical, intellectual, mental/psychological, and/or sensory disabilities, exploring how educational practices can be adapted to better meet their diverse needs.

² While we use the term “inclusion” throughout, we align with a perspective of inclusion as an ongoing praxis and collective effort (Balter et al., 2023). Following Titchkosky (2003), “Whoever disabled people are, they are people whose inclusion in an environment can be addressed in a partial way, since addressing them also means addressing expense and ease” (p. 113). Given how inclusion is often deployed to justify exclusion (Titchkosky, 2008), we acknowledge that inclusion rhetoric frequently establishes boundaries around who is and is not deemed “includeable” (Titchkosky, 2003, 2008). Therefore, inclusion alone is insufficient. Our ultimate goal, inspired by Freire (1970), is to pursue societal transformation and collective consciousness.

reductive narrative that we are inherently too damaged or too broken, that we are undeserving of celebration, joy, and beauty" (p. 14). Disability justice, as an activist, aesthetic, and artistic movement, celebrates disabled embodiments, communities, and identities by restorying and challenging dominant ableist conceptions of disability that are steeped in pathology, deficit, and lack. Through the frame of Ontario's schooling system, centering disability justice offers pathways for rethinking and reshaping approaches to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Disability justice encourages a focus on anti-ableist, relational, and intersubjective forms of teaching, ensuring that all students engage with inclusive and accessible sexuality education (Kafer, 2013).

We argue that CSE should be reimagined through a disability justice framework to address the unique, context-specific needs of disabled students, fostering a more equitable and socially just educational environment and pedagogies. As a writing team of both disabled and non-disabled scholars, with diverse experiences living, studying, and working on the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the New Credit (now known as Guelph, Ontario), we are deeply committed to providing accessible, affirming, and inclusive sexuality education while centering analyses of white settler colonialism in our educational, scholarly, and activist efforts (Davies et al., 2024; Davies & Greensmith, 2024; Greensmith, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: *Disabled Childhood Studies*

In this article, we align our definition of disability with writing and scholarship within disabled childhood studies and disability studies in education. Here, disability is not only a description of physical or psychological impairments, but a multidimensional concept that

encompasses societal barriers, individual challenges, and collective political identity. As an emancipatory approach to lived experience, identity and politics, disability studies actively resists societal exclusions and prejudice while affirming disability as a fundamental aspect of personhood (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013). As Curran and Runswick-Cole (2014) and Parekh (2023) articulate, disability is both a social construct shaped by the barriers faced by disabled individuals and a political identity that advocates for disability rights and inclusion.

A crucial aspect of this discourse is the recognition of disabled children as valuable knowledge holders and active contributors to societal discussions, thereby challenging the ableist assumptions that often marginalize them. Mills and LeFrancois (2018) emphasize that critical childhood studies is transdisciplinary, pushing back against developmental logics that frame children's entry into personhood as contingent on adult perceptions of rationality and rational personhood. They note that such adultist notions often overlook children's potential contributions as equal members of society. Within this critical scholarship, childhood disability studies explores the lived experiences, perspectives, and intersectional inequalities that disabled children encounter. Rooted in the foundational work of Curran and Runswick-Cole (2013), this framework provides a comprehensive examination of the sociopolitical dimensions of disability, challenging dominant narratives of medicalization and pathologization.

Importantly, this framework posits that disabled children are not merely passive recipients of care or protection; they are active agents of change (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013). Disabled children's insights, experiences, and contributions are invaluable for

understanding disability as a sociopolitical category and for driving transformative societal change. A central theme of this paper is the necessity of recognizing disabled children as key contributors to knowledge production and discourse, emphasizing the importance of including their voices in shaping inclusive educational curricula and policies (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023, 2024).

Disabled childhood studies advocates for acknowledging disabled children as knowledge contributors, each possessing unique perspectives, experiences, and narratives that allow them to articulate their worldviews (Alper, 2017; Karmiris, 2023). A significant achievement of this field is its steadfast challenge to norm-based conceptions of disability (Karmiris & Davies, 2024). Such work critiques the exclusionary nature of the societal category of 'childhood' and interrogates terms like 'exceptionality' or 'special needs,' which further marginalize disabled children (Iannacci, 2020). For instance, adultist and ableist perceptions of children's cognition often frame their understanding of complex topics—such as genitalia, hormonal changes, sex, consent, and pleasure—through developmental milestones, erroneously suggesting they lack the capacity to engage with these subjects (Davies, Simone-Balter, & van Rhijn, 2023; Surtees, 2005). Moreover, within the context of sexuality education, the needs and experiences of disabled children are frequently sidelined or ignored entirely (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023, 2024).

Through its transdisciplinary approach and unwavering commitment to inclusivity, disabled childhood studies offer a transformative framework for understanding and advocating for the inclusion of disabled children's perspectives in CSE. By challenging entrenched biases, deconstructing normative narratives, and foregrounding the voices of

disabled children, this discipline paves the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and just educational landscape, highlighting the critical importance of disability justice in reshaping how we understand and support diverse learners.

Disability Justice Activism in an Ontario, Canada Context

Background on Disability Justice

Disability justice is a vital framework for addressing the complex, intersecting inequalities that disabled individuals face, especially as they navigate sexual health and sexuality education. Rooted in the activism of Black, Brown, Queer, and Trans disabled communities, disability justice moves beyond the liberal ideals of the disability rights movement, which focuses on state inclusion and assimilation (Kafai, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Instead, it centers disability as a critical frame to reimagine justice by valuing access, self-determination, and the acceptance of difference (Ortiz, 2012). Disability justice seeks to reimagine what disability is, whether “sensory, intellectual, mental health/psychiatric, neurodiversity, physical/mobility, [and] learning ... [by providing a] framework that values access, self-determination, and an expectation of difference” (Ortiz, 2012, para 1). As noted by Sins Invalid (2015, 2016), disability justice is about using disability as a locus of analysis to consider how work can occur and be embodied to create transformation toward a more equitable way to create a just world. In Ontario, this framework is especially useful for critically examining how sexual health education still fails to address the needs of disabled students and for identifying opportunities to make this education more inclusive.

Disability justice addresses the lived experiences and perspectives of many interlocking communities of disabled people to advocate for their liberation (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016; Peipzina-Samarasinha, 2018). Members of the *Disability Justice Collective* coined disability justice to emphasize the intersectional disabled cultural productions and artwork as forms of consciousness-raising and social activism (Kafai, 2021). The disability justice framework is organized by the ten guiding principles of Sins Invalid (2015, 2016). Disabled childhood studies emphasize disability justice by promoting a culture of interdependence, collaboration, and relationality, challenging entrenched ableist narratives, and fostering a more inclusive and holistic understanding of childhood.

The ten guiding principles of disability justice are:

1. Intersectionality;
2. Leadership of Those Most Impacted;
3. Anti-Capitalism;
4. Cross-Movement Solidarity;
5. Wholeness;
6. Sustainability;
7. Cross-Disability Solidarity;
8. Interdependence;
9. In Collective Access; and,
10. Collective Liberation (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016).

These guiding principles are central to the work of disability justice and ensure collective access, so that people from the margins are not left behind, and/or that everyone moves together (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021). Disability justice is not to be equated with human rights-based disability advocacy, which often focus on achieving inclusion within existing systems, such as basic legal rights protections for disabled people within broader societies. Instead, disability justice analytics seek to dismantle the underlying structures of oppression that constitute societal exclusions, such as ableism, racism,

heteropatriarchy, and colonialism—which systematically marginalized disabled people, particularly those who are also racialized, queer, and/or gender nonconforming instead of seeking inclusion within them (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016). Rather than simply advocating for inclusion within these systems, disability justice calls for a radical transformation of society, recognizing that these structures themselves uphold and perpetuate inequality.

Disability justice activism also builds from aesthetic elements of art, performance, and theater (Kafai, 2021; Siebers, 2010; Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016; White, 2017). Disability aesthetics are intertwined with questions regarding livelihood and ethics, which elicit reflections upon ideas of normalcy, embodiment, and exclusion (Gruson-Wood, 2009). Disability aesthetics emphasize disabled self-determination and autonomy through relationality, community, and disability collectivity (Chandler, et al., 2018). Ultimately, disability justice incorporates principles of disability art and aesthetics that challenge dominant ableist norms by emphasizing the cultural productions and artistic practices of disability communities. CSE can benefit from disability justice by integrating principles of disability art and aesthetics, which challenge dominant ableist norms and highlight the cultural productions and artistic practices of disability communities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and representative educational framework. Disability justice principles help disrupt desexualized portrayals of disabled people, fostering more inclusive representations of bodies, desires, and relationships.

Disability Justice in Ontario

The concept of disability justice has gained significant traction in Ontario through the work of disability activists who foreground the unique barriers faced by disabled

individuals. A key organization in this movement is the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO), founded in 2018 by Eminent Dagnachew, Shanthiya Baheerathan, and Sara Jama. DJNO's work includes initiatives like the youth action council and efforts to improve access to the arts, including the Hamilton Festival Theatre's disability-inclusive performance projects (Disability Justice Network of Ontario, n.d.). This place-based activism is particularly powerful, as it recognizes the specific social, racial, and colonial dynamics in Ontario, providing insights into how disability justice can be applied to different facets of public life, including sexuality education. By acknowledging local histories and the lived experiences of marginalized communities, disability justice in Ontario moves beyond mere inclusion and seeks to dismantle systemic barriers in various sectors.

In Ontario, disability justice initiatives are unfolding on university campuses and through community-based activism. For example, the University of Toronto's Students for Barrier-Free Access advocates for socially, environmentally, and financially accessible education, challenging dominant understandings of disability (Students for Barrier-Free Access, n.d.). Important work also emerges from historical investigations like the "Into the Light: Eugenics and Education in Southern Ontario" project at the University of Guelph, which critically examines the intersections of disability, institutionalization, and eugenics, with a focus on how these historical realities shaped reproductive control and sexual autonomy (Kelly et al., 2021). Similarly, Dr. Jennifer Rinaldi's research through Ontario Tech University with survivors of Huronia Regional Centre amplifies the voices of those who were denied agency, including in areas related to bodily autonomy and sexual rights

(Ontario Tech University, n.d.). These examples underscore the relevance of disability justice in transforming not only higher education but also public policy and community engagement.

The principles of disability justice are highly relevant to our project on enriching CSE in Ontario’s public schools. By drawing on place-based disability justice initiatives, we can build a CSE framework that is responsive to the unique barriers disabled students face. Just as DJNO recognizes the specific context of Hamilton in its arts initiatives, CSE must also address the diverse, context-specific needs of disabled students across Ontario. Our work aims to integrate disability justice into CSE by emphasizing localized strategies that consider the intersections of race, disability, gender, and sexuality. By embedding these principles into school curricula, we can ensure that sexual health education is not only accessible but also affirming and tailored to the diverse experiences of disabled learners, thus advancing equity and social justice in Ontario’s education system.

Sexuality Education in Ontario

Recent Developments regarding Sexuality Education in Ontario

Sexuality education has been a highly politicized and polarized topic in Ontario, where the provincial Ministry of Education provides standardized sex education curricula for public schools framed through Grades 1-8, and Grades 9-12 (Bialystok et al., 2020). In 2015, the Ontario Liberal government released a new Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, motivated by concerns that schools were using outdated materials from 1998, which predated the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the province (Maitland, 2022). While attempts to update the curriculum in the 2010s were met with resistance

from parents and religious groups (Bialystok & Wright, 2019), the 2015 version included significant advancements. These updates incorporated 2-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) identities, anatomically correct terminology, and Indigenous perspectives on health and development (Davies & Kenneally, 2020). However, these progressive changes sparked controversy, leading to public protests, particularly from conservative groups, and shaped a key platform for Doug Ford’s 2018 election campaign (Bialystok et al., 2020).

The backlash against the 2015 curriculum culminated in Ford’s pledge to return to the 1998 version, which he enacted shortly after assuming office in 2018 (Bialystok et al., 2020). His administration also canceled efforts to update the curriculum with Indigenous content, contrary to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Crawley, 2019). These rollbacks disproportionately affected students who had been historically marginalized, including disabled, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQIA+ students, who were once again excluded from comprehensive and inclusive sex education. In response to the provincial government’s actions, massive protests erupted across Ontario, including student walkouts and human rights lawsuits. By 2019, the curriculum was reinstated with many of the 2015 updates intact, now aligned with the Ontario Human Rights Code on a grade-by-grade basis (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). Despite this, ongoing debates highlight the failure to fully incorporate disability justice principles into the sex education framework.

The 2015 HPE curriculum made significant strides by addressing gender identity, sexual orientation, and Indigenous perspectives, but it continued to overlook disabled

students. Disability was notably absent from discussions around sexual health, sidelining disabled learners in a curriculum intended to reflect diversity and inclusion (Davies & Kenneally, 2020). When the curriculum was revised in 2019, this exclusion persisted, with no substantial efforts made to integrate the needs and experiences of disabled students. This omission underscores the need for a transformative approach to sex education that goes beyond surface-level inclusion. A disability justice framework offers a path forward, ensuring that disabled students are fully included in discussions around sexual health, autonomy, and consent. Disability justice, as articulated by Sins Invalid (2016), offers a crucial lens for addressing the systemic erasure of disabled individuals from sexuality education by emphasizing the interconnectedness of disability, race, gender, and sexuality. This framework advocates for a transformative approach to sex education that prioritizes disabled voices in discussions of bodily autonomy, pleasure, and sexual agency, challenging ableist narratives that depict disabled people as asexual or incapable of meaningful relationships.

Scholars, such as, Davies and Kenneally (2020), have critiqued the failure of the Ontario curriculum to fully “crip” sex education, pointing out how disabled students are often excluded from conversations about bodies, relationships, and sexual health. Davies et al. (2023) advocate for a disability justice approach that goes beyond simply adding a few lessons on disability. They call for a structural overhaul of the curriculum to ensure that the experiences and needs of disabled students are central to sex education from the outset. Moreover, educators in Ontario often lack the training needed to effectively teach sex education to disabled students, leaving gaps that reinforce ableist barriers (Davies,

Brass, et al., 2023; Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Borawska-Charko et al., 2023). A disability justice approach offers a way to address these exclusions, ensuring that sex education is not just inclusive, but transformative, empowering all students to navigate their sexual health with confidence and autonomy.

Cultural Overview of Sexuality Education in Ontario

Sexuality education in Ontario has undergone significant transformations since its inception in the twentieth century. Rooted in the social hygiene and reformist movements, early iterations of sexuality education were primarily geared towards reinforcing societal norms, particularly those surrounding gender roles, marital expectations, and health practices (Lupa, 2012). As the century progressed, North American schools oscillated between endorsing a moralistic approach to sexuality education, emphasizing ideals of monogamous heterosexual unions, and a more pragmatic approach focused on preventing sexually transmitted diseases and imparting biological aspects of sexuality (Bialystok & Andersen, 2022).

The Progressive Education movement, which emerged concurrently, played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of sexuality education (Bialystok & Andersen, 2022). This movement, deeply invested in the normative development of children, championed the health and well-being of students through rigorous scientific inquiry (Bialystok & Andersen, 2022; Richardson, 1989). However, a glaring oversight of this era was the marginalization of disabled children because their needs remained absent from the broader discourse on sexuality education. Omitting disabled children from the broader discourse of sexuality education is emblematic of institutional apathy towards disabled

children, as evidenced by Ontario's segregated educational history. It was not until the enactment of Bill 82 and the subsequent amendment of the Education Act in 1980 that Ontario's school boards were mandated to provide special education services to disabled children (Underwood & Musleh, 2024). The limited instances when disability intersected with sexual health discussions during the early-to-mid twentieth century were informed by eugenic thinking (McLaren, 1990). Disabled individuals, alongside Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, were subjected to forced sterilizations, a grim testament to societal efforts to curtail their reproductive rights (Chin, 2021; De La Cour, 2017; Kelly et al., 2021)

In contemporary times, the landscape of sexuality education in Ontario is further complicated by the neoliberal ethos permeating public education (Bialystok et al., 2020). Conservative political factions have strategically leveraged opposition to school-based sexuality education, fostering a climate of apprehension among educators by promoting divisions between teachers and parents (Bialystok et al., 2020). As educators navigate these complex terrains, it is imperative to center the voices and experiences of disabled children, ensuring that their unique perspectives inform and enrich the future of sexuality education in Ontario and are not left behind.

Disability Justice and Sexuality Education

Disability justice principles in sexuality education aim to provide collective access to relevant information that promotes the health and well-being of disabled individuals while addressing sexualized violence, the intersections of racism, colonialism, and ableism, and advocating for the voices of disabled children, parents, and activists to

dismantle ableist norms and ensure inclusion in sexual networks and communities.

Disability justice acknowledges that issues about the inclusion of disabled students in school-based sexuality education are an intersectional issue that particularly impacts disabled Black, Indigenous, and students of color (SIECUS, 2021). Disability justice's critique of capitalist state formations and intersectional framework that focuses on lived experiences demands that school-based sexuality education move beyond rights-based understanding of disability towards one that emphasizes those within the margins (Xaymaca, 2022). Disability justice frameworks call attention to how medical ableism is entrenched within sexuality education curricula and pedagogies (Welsh, 2020) while also asking human services practitioners and educators to reflect on their own biases and ableist assumptions (Kattari, 2023).

While some work has been written regarding disability justice and sexuality education, there is still little academic writing that places the principles of disability justice within school-based CSE (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Wright & Manuel, 2024). Considering the overall lack of attention to disability in Canadian school-based sexuality education (Davies & Kenneally, 2020) and coupled with the high degree of importance and multi-dimensionality that young disabled people place on sexuality (Coulter, et al., 2023), there is important work to be done to integrate disability justice principles into school-based sexuality education curricula and pedagogies. Disability justice critiques and challenges dominant ideas of 'normal' bodies and minds and seeks to deconstruct ableism by addressing structures of exclusion that exclude disabled people societally, whether through physical barriers, stigma, inaccessibility, or attitudinal barriers (Experiential

Learning Hub, 2022). By addressing these systemic barriers, disability justice not only critiques the prevailing notions of 'normal' but also lays the groundwork for its application in educational settings, where inclusive practices can transform how schools support and empower disabled students.

Disability Justice in Practice

Bringing the Principles of Disability Justice to School-Based Sexuality Education in Ontario

The activists and organizers of the disability collective, Sins Invalid, highlight ten core principles of disability justice. Here, we describe the ways sexuality education can centre disabled students and inform school-based sexuality education in Ontario, Canada (as well as other spaces and places) by prioritizing disability justice. While we provide specific recommendations, we use the core premise and principles of disability justice as interwoven and interconnected to show how sexuality education can be holistic, disability-centered, and address multiple and conflicting systems of oppression impacting disabled students, their families, and communities.

Disability justice movements have shown in the examples above that collective access (Principle 9) does not happen without an intersectional approach (Principle 1), and leadership of the most impacted (Principle 2) is a feature of sustainability (Principle 6). Central to disability justice is a commitment to challenge societal hierarchies, particularly biomedical, diagnostic, and psychiatric definitions of disability that are anchored in impairment and deficit (Titchkosky, 2003). Disability justice promotes disability and experiences with disability as part of the human (and non-human) experience (Sins Invalid,

2015, 2016). For disabled students, this means working toward holistic representations and embodiments of disability that challenge cisheteronormativity and assumptions of inherent asexuality (while acknowledging many disabled people *do* identify as and with asexuality), noting that sexuality education is created *with* disabled students who experience various levels and degrees of pleasure and desire (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2024; Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013). While constructions of embodiment are produced through normative modes of belonging and worth, typically rooted in ableist European beauty standards, disability justice rejects such notions through the principles and recommendations below (Erickson, 2016). We write our recommendations as they are interconnected to the principles in question.

Figure 1

Recommended actions for Disability Justice in Ontario's sexuality curriculum

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3	Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5
Include anti-Racist and intersectional considerations to sexuality education for disabled children	Lead with disabled children's knowledge and experience	Present disabled children's sexuality as a cross-movement issue	Celebrate disabled students as producers of culture and art	Incorporate disability activism into sex education
<p>Actions to embed the tenets of disability justice:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Center personal experience and narrative in sexuality education 2) Include the lived experience of disabled people with intersectional identities in curriculum and instruction 3) Teach Disability Justice in Bachelor of Education Programs in Ontario 	<p>Actions to embed the tenets of disability justice:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Center disabled students within sexuality education 2) Instruct using dialogue to include diverse perspectives 3) Engage in reflection on personal bias as they relate to intersections of gender, sexuality, and disability 	<p>Actions to embed the tenets of disability justice:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Teach about bodily autonomy and self-determination in health care and other cross-movement principles 2) Listen to the perspectives of disabled children 3) Teach sex-ed teachers about intersectional considerations and the specific issues the disabled student population faces as it pertains to health, well-being, belonging, and identity 	<p>Actions to embed the tenets of disability justice:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Include disabled ways of existing within the curriculum 2) Affirm disabled identity and community as it relates to disability activism 3) Discuss disabled people as democratic contributors to community, knowledge production, and society 4) Expand students' imaginary of sex and sexuality 	<p>Actions to embed the tenets of disability justice:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Situate disability justice within the context of the broader disability community 2) Address a lack of access to sexuality education for disabled students as a human rights issue related to governing human rights legislation 3) Discuss sexuality education as a human rights issue 4) Emphasize and teach allyship with disabled students

Recommendation 1

Embed Anti-Racist and Intersectional Considerations to Sexuality Education for Disabled Children

Central to disability justice is the goal of working toward social justice. In an interview, Mia Mingus (2011) distinguishes disability justice from disability rights by emphasizing equity (acknowledging historical barriers marginalized communities face) over equality (treating everyone the same, regardless of context). Disability justice’s commitment to equity involves unearthing and destabilizing oppressive systems, recognizing that these systems—ableism, racism, white supremacy, settler colonialism—are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. As Mingus (2011) points out, disabled people are not just disabled; they may also be immigrants, racialized, queer, trans, mothers, or hold multiple intersecting identities.

An anti-racist and intersectional approach to disability justice in sexuality education challenges normatively white, able-bodied, and cisgender perceptions of disabled students by interrogating systems of oppression such as anti-Black racism, heteronormativity, and ableism. Sexuality and gender are inherently woven into this framework, as they intersect with race and disability in shaping students' experiences of sexual education. Understanding how eugenic ideologies have marginalized disabled people of color and queer and trans individuals is essential for creating a more inclusive and just sexuality education (Dunham et al., 2015). This approach highlights the need for a curriculum that addresses the interconnections of disability, race, gender, and sexuality,

ensuring that the experiences of disabled students of color and queer and trans students are centered.

Incorporating and embedding the tenets of disability justice through an anti-racist and intersectional perspective in sexuality education will guide all youth in exploring diverse ways of thinking of and considering embodied realities with sexuality. One way that disability justice can frame sexuality education is through the centering of personal experience and narrative, which would foster safer, braver³, and affirming spaces where disability and sexuality are perceived as compatible. Disabled students' various lived experiences, including their racial, ethnic, and national biographies should be built into curriculum and instruction and used in rapport building to foster the identity development, sexual efficacy, and community of disabled students in schools. Disability justice also has the potential to challenge the dominant narratives and practices that have historically marginalized disabled students and their communities. For example, Piepznar-Samarasinha (2018) describes how healing within disability communities, especially amongst BIPOC disabled folks, can be beneficial in terms of building solidarity and community.

Recommendation 2

Lead with Disabled Children's Knowledge and Experience

³ To create classrooms as brave spaces, educators must first establish an environment that encourages open dialogue and vulnerability, allowing students to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. This involves actively challenging dominant narratives and fostering critical conversations about diversity and social justice, ensuring that all voices, particularly those of marginalized students, are heard and valued. Additionally, educators should provide ongoing support and resources to empower students in navigating difficult discussions, ultimately promoting resilience and a commitment to social change within the classroom community (Arao & Clemens, 2023).

To embody the core tenets of disability justice and disabled childhood studies, disabled students should be centralized within sexuality education—as consumers, as knowledge holders, and as members of a community whose voice and experience have been left out of the existing sexuality curriculum. For example, Johnson and Singh (2022) suggest that engaging in continuous dialogue and co-creating educational content can benefit disabled students. Within the context of school-based sexuality education, this can be modeled through teachers approaching sexuality topics through dialogue; that is, having conversations with students that are built on back-and-forths and allowing free-flowing discussions that centralize the specific perspectives, voices, and identities of disabled people. For educators, this might even involve them questioning or reconsidering their own biases as they approach discussing the intersections of gender, sexuality, and disability with their students.

Texts and conversations that disrupt ingrained societal assumptions can be productive and dialogical and even create moments where teachers and students can leave conversations changed in their perceptions and assumptions about gender, sexuality, and disability (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023). As such, these conversations, which are perceived as ‘difficult’ by some, might be disorienting at first, or require self-reflection; however, it is by having conversations with students about the intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality, and doing so in a fashion that prioritizes the first-person lived experiences of disabled people, that biases and societal structures can be challenged. Far too often, discussions of sexuality, pleasure, and sexual health of disabled students do not occur. Often, this is due to teachers’ own ableist and sanist perceptions. The inclusion of

disabled students’ voices would aid in power-sharing (Freire, 1970) and disrupt the banking model that produces students as passive receptors of knowledge. Disability justice principles call for holistic approaches to understanding disability as an embedded component of intersectional personhood (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016).

Recommendation 3

Present Disabled Children’s Sexuality as a Cross-Movement Issue

Disabled children’s experiences intersect and overlap with those of other young people. Consider, for example, that disabled young people are at the forefront of climate activism and testifying to the precariousness of their lives under the climate crisis (Schmidt, 2023). The same cross-movement thinking is a useful intervention in sexuality education. Disability justice advocates have also aligned themselves with reproductive justice activism in their joint efforts to promote bodily autonomy, self-determination in health care, and to address the historic ableism that has been entrenched in reproductive justice activism that has either left the reproductive needs of disabled people behind, or refused to engage in critiques of ongoing coercive sterilizations of disabled women (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2021). For example, providing disabled youth with information regarding parenting, healthy sexuality, access to abortion and family planning, and accessing contraception bridges the tenets of reproductive justice activism, which advocates for bodily autonomy and access to reproductive healthcare for all, and disability justice, which seeks the dignity and respect of all disabled people and their advocacy and cultural productions (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2021). It is necessary to listen to the

perspectives and experiences of disabled children and youth to ensure that sexuality education is socially just and provides relevant information.

Recommendation 4

Affirm Disabled Students as Producers of Culture and Art

In addition to emphasizing equity, voice, and facilitating change across various sectors and movements, disability justice recognizes the vital role of disability communities and actively includes disabled individuals as producers and participants in culture. This perspective values the contributions of disabled people and acknowledges their agency in shaping cultural narratives, rather than viewing them solely as subjects of care or intervention. By centering disabled voices and experiences, disability justice promotes a more inclusive understanding of culture that reflects the diverse realities of all individuals. Disabled children and youth are both within culture and communities and produce their own cultural identities and sense of belonging within and amongst other disabled people. For example, autistic high schoolers turn to YouTube, Reddit, and TikTok to discuss their experiences with pleasure and sex, noting that their bodies, experiences, and ways of being are left out of existing curriculum standards and ways of practicing sexuality education (Rauchberg, 2022). As such, the realities of living with disabilities involve finding ways to engage with sexuality that are inventive, community-led, and oriented towards mutual pleasure (Goulden & Kattari, 2023). As well, Andrew Gurza (2023), a queer disabled activist from Toronto, writes and produces commentaries regarding disability culture and activism as it pertains to the intersections of disability and queerness. Gurza’s work seeks to disrupt ableism within and outside of the 2SLGBTQIA+

communities (Jones et al., 2022). These writings, videos, and forms of online and written activism are examples of disability activism and disabled people advocating for transformational approaches to understanding gender and sexuality through community care and knowledge.

Disabled children and youth use technology and social media to engage with their disabled and non-disabled peers and advocate for social issues related to identity, community, and access (Bitman, 2023). This form of activism could be incorporated into classroom activities that involve mindfulness, art, performance, and discussions on disability identity and community. It also helps students understand the aesthetic and cultural productions that emerge from disabled activism and disability justice work. Many children and youth are already activists online, using social media and technology to disseminate and engage with information related to gender, sexuality, and disability. These media productions serve as valuable learning spaces for non-disabled educators and students, allowing them to listen to the perspectives and experiences of disability communities.

Sexuality education presents a crucial opportunity for students to engage with questions about sexuality and reimagine what sexuality entails, especially through the lens of disability justice. Engaging with narratives from disabled activists asks critical questions about how sexuality—especially desire and pleasure—can be reimagined outside of ableist and normative frameworks. For instance, which bodies are imagined as desirable and desiring? How do access needs intersect with conversations about sexual consent? These are essential questions for fostering meaningful dialogue with students.

Moreover, how might disabled content creators, who are active on social media and other platforms, contribute to this reimagining of sexuality education? These creators often challenge ableist norms and provide expansive representations of disability, gender, and sexuality, offering new ways of thinking about desire, consent, and sexual agency. Incorporating the work of disabled content creators into sexuality education could provide students with more inclusive, diverse perspectives, helping to break down traditional barriers and create a more effective and expansive curriculum. Wright and Manuel (2024) theorize the concept of 'sexual access needs' in relation to consent and disability, arguing that trauma can be understood as a form of disability. They advocate for trauma-informed consent education that explicitly addresses the needs of disabled youth, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity in discussions around consent and sexual health. By bridging disability justice and queer joy, their work highlights the necessity of creating educational frameworks that support the diverse experiences and perspectives of all individuals in the context of consent.

Recommendation 5

Incorporate Disability Activism into Sex Education

We recommend centering disability justice as the guiding framework for transforming sexuality education, rather than relying solely on disability rights approaches. While both disability rights and disability justice are crucial movements, disability justice goes beyond inclusion by fundamentally reimagining systems of exclusion and oppression (Sins Invalid, 2015, 2016). Unlike disability rights, which often focus on securing legal protections and access within existing structures, disability justice calls for an

intersectional, context-specific, and abolitionist approach that seeks to dismantle and rebuild societal frameworks to ensure equity for all marginalized communities (Soldatic & Grech, 2014; Bennett & Hannah, 2022). This transformation extends beyond legal recognition and involves activism, cultural production, and collective liberation. By taking a “both/and” approach, we acknowledge the importance of human rights protections while advocating for a deeper, more radical shift in how we think about disability, education, and equity (Tastrom, 2024).

The available resources regarding sexuality education for disabled individuals are significantly limited, consisting primarily of online resources for young adults (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023, 2024). Through a disability justice lens, the initiative led by a group of interdisciplinary professionals in Alberta, Canada, reflects a commitment to inclusivity and empowerment by developing a comprehensive series of sexuality resources for individuals across their lifespan, including disabled youth. The collective, known as Talking About Sexuality in Canadian Communities (TASCC), not only provides valuable information and educational materials through print and online sources but also incorporates interactive elements such as an online question box and a FAQ section. By addressing crucial topics like consent, puberty, birth control, sexual and gender diversity, sexually transmitted infections, and sexting, TASCC emphasizes the importance of informed and affirmative approaches to sexuality education. It specifically tackles issues relevant to youth with disabilities, such as personal boundaries, self-care, relationships and dating, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and the influence of social media.

Similarly, RespectAbility.org (n.d.) serves as a vital online resource, offering tailored sexuality education for disabled individuals that encompasses hygiene, masturbation, reproductive health, and prevention strategies against sexual abuse and exploitation. Additionally, the field of disabled childhood studies is enriched by resources like a recent special edition of the journal, *Studies in Social Justice* (Jones, Atwal, & Weber, 2024), and a symposium hosted by Brock University focusing on "cripping sexuality education" (Jones et al., 2022), both of which contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersectional needs and rights of disabled youth in the realm of sexuality education.

The ostracization of disabled children from receiving sexuality education with their peers not only hinders commitments to equitable and inclusive education touted by the Ontario government but also puts children at significant risk (Collie, 2019). An Ontario-based study carried out by Dr. Amy McPherson of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital suggested that many children with disabilities are not being taught sexuality education by educators and healthcare providers alike (Kinross, 2023). This phenomenon is rooted in epistemic injustice, as disabled children are viewed as having non-existent or abnormal sexual desires, rendering them perceived to be voiceless and/or ignored in the perspectives shared (Davies et al., 2024). The categorical silencing and barring of disabled children from sexuality education means they are not taught the language of consent, the proper terminology necessary for reporting abuse, or general information about safety (Kinross, 2023; Michielsen & Brockshmidt, 2021). These omissions are particularly concerning given the overrepresentation of people with disabilities experiencing violence—Statistics Canada (2018) reports that seven out of ten individuals with mental health

disabilities have experienced physical or sexual assault at least once by the age of 15, compared to a reported 33% of non-disabled individuals who have faced similar assaults. This disparity underscores the urgent need for comprehensive sexuality education. The sexuality of people with disabilities is often characterized by two binary assumptions: first, that disabled individuals lack or do not experience the same desires, attractions, and identities as able-bodied people; and second, that disabled people possess perverse or deviant sexual identities and behaviors that must be curtailed (Lam et al., 2021).

Some of the barriers that continue to impede the centering, inclusion, and privileging of disabled children and childhoods include teacher attitudes, limited support and resources, and the current political backlash against sexual education in Ontario, which is centered around societal fears of the sexualization of children and education (Davies, Bryan, et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2024). Classroom teachers tend to defer the responsibility of providing sexuality education to other adult figures in children’s lives, such as special education teachers, educational assistants, healthcare providers, and parents (Michielsen & Brockshmidt, 2021). This speaks to the limited clarity and understanding of educators’ roles and responsibilities—essentially, what is within teachers’ professional practices and obligations. Fundamentally, as Giami (2016) asserts, the sexual rights and autonomy of disabled children have not been fully recognized, despite policy documents that claim inclusivity in terms of accessing education. The lack of support, training, and resources designated for teachers teaching sexuality education highlights the discursive narratives emphasized throughout this article on the dangers of desexualizing children.

Conclusion

Love (2019), in *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, challenges us to radically transform schooling systems and structures in the pursuit of educational freedom. Building on Love's abolitionist teaching, we can incorporate a disability justice framework to reimagine comprehensive sexuality education that serves all students, particularly disabled students who navigate bodies, pleasure, and desire in ways often marginalized by existing curricula. This framework calls for more than mere survival in educational spaces; it demands the creation of environments where disabled students can engage with sexuality education as a vital aspect of their identity and lived experience. By centering their needs and voices, we develop inclusive curricula that celebrate diverse bodies and identities, enabling students to explore sexuality in safe, affirming, and empowering ways. This transformative approach aligns with abolitionist teaching's goals of dismantling oppressive structures and promoting liberation for all students.

Furthermore, engaging with the concept of 'disability' requires a critical perspective that conceptualizes disability as a dynamic set of practices and associations, as Kafer (2013) emphasizes in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. This perspective invites us to challenge and transform dominant narratives surrounding disability, underscoring the necessity of grounding sexuality education in disability justice. Critical questions emerge: how is sexuality education conceptualized, and for whom? This inquiry reveals the limitations and biases that often exclude disabled students. By asking these questions, educators and

policymakers are urged to rethink their approaches to ensure that the complexities of disability are understood and addressed in meaningful ways within education.

The commitment to disability justice also necessitates research that amplifies the stories and experiences of disabled students. Within school-based sexuality education, this means engaging with disability justice principles and disabled childhood studies to shape curricula that affirms disabled students’ identities. Such an approach honors disability as a space of community, cultural production, and identity. As Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) points out, disabled narratives are forms of resistance and empowerment. Writing from a sickbed, Piepzna-Samarasinha notes, is not an act of weakness but a “time-honored crip creative practice” (p. 17). By centering disability justice in sexuality education, we create a framework that acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of experiences, ensuring all students feel empowered, valued, and represented.

Embracing a disability justice framework in comprehensive sexuality education not only addresses the unique needs of disabled students but also enriches the educational experience for all learners. By centering the principles of abolitionist teaching as outlined by Love (2019), we advocate for a transformative approach that dismantles oppressive structures and fosters an inclusive environment where every student can engage with their identity, bodies, and desires. This shift recognizes that sexuality education is not solely about survival but rather about empowering all students to explore and celebrate their diverse identities in safe and affirming ways. By prioritizing the voices and experiences of disabled students, we contribute to a more equitable and holistic educational framework

that benefits everyone, fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding that prepares all learners for healthy relationships and informed choices in their lives.

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