Representation within English literature is crucial for adolescent learners, particularly as they develop their identities and understand their place within broader social and cultural communities. This session focuses on the representation (or lack thereof) of people with disabilities in senior secondary English set-text lists across Australian Year 11 and 12 curricula. In this study we aim to explore whose voices and experiences are foregrounded—or marginalised—in the texts students encounter during these formative years.

Aligned with the conference theme *"Lighting the way for literacy: empowering voices, thinking critically, creating communities,"* this research interrogates the extent to which the voices and characters with disability are present (or absent) in the literary canon constructed through ATAR and General English and Literature text lists. While the canon has diversified in recent decades to include post-colonial, gender-diverse and sub-altern perspectives, the inclusion of disability representation remains comparatively underexplored in secondary school. Our study analysed 357 novels across senior secondary text lists to identify patterns, gaps, and dominant discourses shaping the portrayal of disability. Findings indicate that although characters with disabilities are present, their portrayals frequently align with deficit models that reinforce ableist assumptions about human value and capability. Such representations risk narrowing students' understandings of disability rather than fostering inclusive, critical literacy practices.

This session highlights the implications of these findings for secondary English teachers, pre-service teachers and the wider community. By critically examining the texts they teach—and the narratives those texts privilege—teachers can disrupt ableist norms, broaden the range of voices and experiences represented in their classrooms, and empower students to think critically about identity, diversity, and community. The presentation will offer discussion around practical strategies for selecting and framing texts to support more inclusive literacy practices, ensuring that all students encounter stories that reflect the complexity of human experience.

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