



## TEACHING THROUGH BOOKS

# ABLEISM

BY KELLY JOHNSON, RABIA KHOKHAR, AND REBECA RUBIO

### LEARNING FOCUS

Ableism refers to the attitude and underlying social prejudice of assuming that all individuals can, or should, be able to do things in the same way. Ableism undermines and harms people living with diverse abilities and disabilities, and impacts society as a whole by continuing harmful stereotypes and overgeneralizations that devalue and perpetuate discrimination.

**Identity:** How can learning about the ways that people are differently abled from each other help us to understand ourselves and our own unique ways of being?

**Skills:** What are some specific skills and actions we can develop that are helpful to and respectful of those who have visible and invisible differences?

**Intellectualism:** How can reading the stories of others and their lived experiences help us develop our understanding and make space for all?

**Criticality:** What are some ways we can demonstrate our commitment to being inclusive of people with all abilities?

**Joy:** Belonging is grounded in compassion and empathy. How can the understanding of everyone's different abilities help us create joy?

**THEME:** Diversity  
**SUB-THEME:** Ableism  
**GRADE LEVELS:**  
Elementary (K-3)  
Middle School (4-8)  
High School (9-12)



# ABLEISM | ELEMENTARY LEVEL

BY KELLY JOHNSON

## FEATURED BOOK



## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

### MINDS ON PROVOCATION

#### Background:

Jordan Scott's *I Talk Like a River* provides a thoughtful entry into conversations about diverse abilities and disabilities. Jordan lives with a stutter. His own-voice story shares with us that although he has a different way of talking, which caused feelings of fear and isolation as a child, he has been able to find courage and inspiration in recognizing that his differences also give him a unique perspective. Jordan Scott's metaphor of the river is the central imagery of this story.

#### Before Reading:

Display the 4-page spread of *I Talk Like a River* that contains the phrase "My dad says I talk like a river." Discuss: What sounds can a river make?

#### Connecting to the River:

Warm up student's hearts and minds and activate prior knowledge by giving them time to share their own river stories—rivers where they have visited, fished, swam, played, or enjoyed an outdoor lunch.

#### Connecting to Empathy:

Invite students to think of a time when they wanted to do something, but were not able to. Perhaps they were too short, or too tall; maybe too young, or too old, or maybe there





was a different reason. Often, we assume that all people are able to do the same kinds of things in the same kinds of ways. Explain to students that when we assume everyone should be able to do things in the same way, and when we assume that everyone should be able to do things the way we do them, then that kind of thinking is called “ableism.”

## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

Read *I Talk Like a River*. If possible, project the images with a document camera. Observe the detail in the illustrations carefully. Notice the connection between the drawings and the words that Jordan Scott, who is a poet, uses to describe the river: “...bubbling, whirling, churning, and crashing.”

Share that the author lives with a stutter. This may be a new word; discuss the meaning. At the end of the book, Jordan Scott has written a personal letter to readers about his feelings. Consider:

- What does it mean to have diverse abilities and disabilities? What kinds of diverse abilities and disabilities might we be able to see? What kinds might be invisible to us?
- What sorts of places do we have in our classroom and at school that might be difficult to use if you were differently-abled? What kinds of activities might be hard if you lived with diverse abilities or disabilities?
- What are some of the things you already do in your classroom and at your school to make sure that everyone feels included? Thinking about diverse abilities and disabilities, invisible and visible, brainstorm more ideas for ways to include all differently-abled people (e.g. on the playground, in the hallways, in the library, at the sink, etc.).

## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

### Draw and write the sound of your voice:

Have students consider the sound of their voice and the way they talk. Can they think of something that sounds similar (e.g. a storm, the wind, the buzzing of bees, or the song of crickets)? Students can draw a picture and write some words, a poem, or finish the sentence: I talk like a \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

This activity can extend to including more of each student’s own unique characteristics: My brain thinks like a \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_; My hands are like \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_; I move like \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

### Practice empathy:

In large or small groups, explore empathy by practicing the skill of “stepping into someone else’s experience,” where students will imagine and consider how to make space for everyone.





- What if you could not communicate with your voice? What other ways would you share your thoughts and feelings?
- What if you used a wheelchair? How would you travel around your classroom and school? Where would you play outside?
- What if you could not hear sounds? How would you know what your teacher, your friends, or a show on TV was saying?

### Co-create an Inclusion Agreement:

Together, make a class collaborative poster that celebrates inclusion and demonstrates that your classroom is a safe and welcoming space for all children.

## REFLECT AND CONNECT

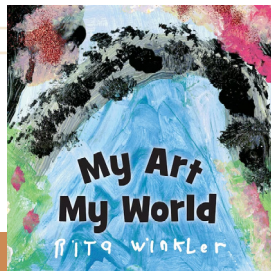
Have students consider the following: We have looked at ways to make room for people who have a different “normal” than us. What is one thing that you can do today to show kindness and be inclusive?

Students can complete a reflection using an “I can” statement (e.g. I can hold a door for a friend who travels in a wheelchair). Document learning by posting students’ statements around the classroom Inclusion Agreement poster.

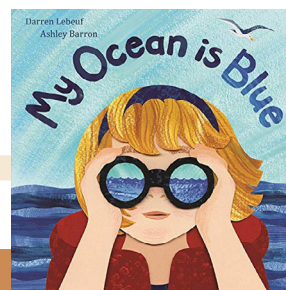
## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME



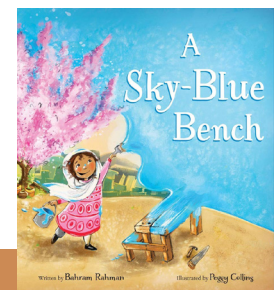
*We Move Together* by Kelly Fritsch and Anne McGuire, illustrated by Eduardo Trejos (AK Press, 2021)



*My Art, My World* by Rita Winkler (Second Story Press, 2021)



*My Ocean is Blue* by Darren Lebeuf, illustrated by Ashley Barron (Kids Can Press, 2020)



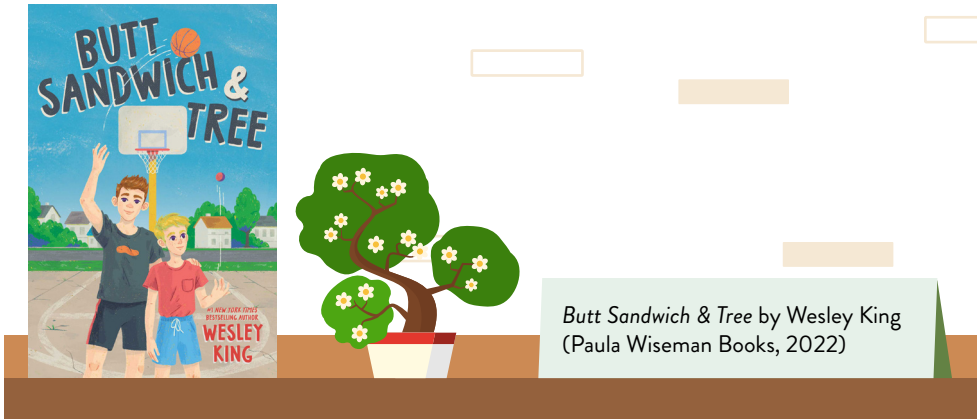
*A Sky-Blue Bench* by Bahram Rahman, illustrated by Peggy Collins (Pajama Press, 2021)



# ABLEISM | MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

BY RABIA KHOKHAR

## FEATURED BOOK



## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

### MINDS ON PROVOCATION

#### First I Thought, Now I Think:

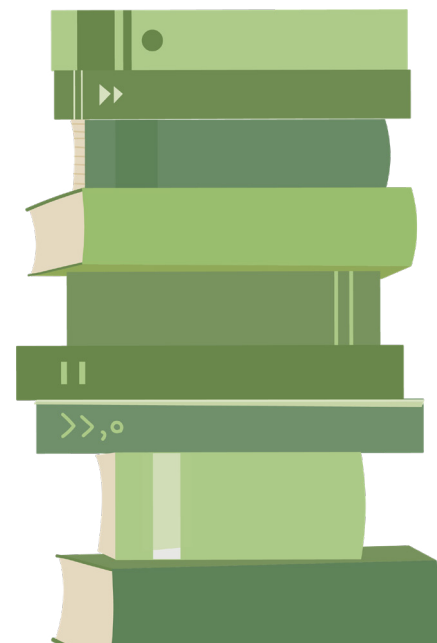
Ask students to write down or orally discuss the meaning of “neurodiversity.” Ask them to record their ideas on a piece of paper or in a journal. Give them the starting sentence, “First I thought...”

Have students share their ideas, then provide them with the following definition from the [Child Mind Institute](#):

**Neurodiversity** is a popular term that’s used to describe differences in the way people’s brains work. The idea is that there’s no “correct” way for the brain to function. Instead, there is a wide range of ways that people perceive and respond to the world, and these differences are to be embraced and encouraged. We are all neurodiverse.

After sharing the definition, unpack it with students. Ask them to finish the sentence, “Now I think...”

Let students know that one of the ways to be neurodivergent is called Asperger’s syndrome, which is part of the autism spectrum. Show this video to help them learn more: [Asperger’s syndrome explained for children](#).





Share the following definition with students and ask them to discuss their thinking, ideas, connections, and new learning:

**Asperger's syndrome** is part of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is one of the ways to be neurodivergent. People who have Asperger's syndrome may show some differences in interests, patterns of behaviour, social communication, and interacting with people in different environments.

Let students know that the class will be reading a book called *Butt Sandwich & Tree*, written by Wesley King, and that Green, the main character in the story, has Asperger's syndrome.

## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

The chapter book can be read aloud to students by the teacher. The activities listed below can be completed during and after the read-aloud, and can be done together as a whole group, in small groups, pairs, or individually.

### Creating Inclusion:

Green often experiences unfair treatment because of his neurodiversity. This is called "ableism." Share the following definition with students:

**Ableism** refers to the attitude and underlying social prejudice of assuming that all individuals can, or should, be able to do things in the same way. Ableism undermines and harms people living with diverse abilities and disabilities, and impacts society as a whole by continuing harmful stereotypes and overgeneralizations that devalue and perpetuate discrimination.

There are many places in the book where ableist ideas, words, and actions show up. Have students find 2-3 examples and consider how they would change the situation to be more inclusive.

EXAMPLE FROM THE BOOK	ACTIONS THAT CAN BE TAKEN
"Why can't Green try to be more normal?" (44)	Consider discussing with Mo what he means by normal. Tell him about neurodiversity or show him some videos about it to teach him more.
"Everyone is finally going to see the same Green as I do." (19)	Cedar has good intentions to protect and support his brother. But he can also model authentic acceptance of his brother and that will be a good example for others.





## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

### Character Identity Map:

Students will choose one character from the story (Cedar, Green, Mo, Coach, etc.) and make a character identity map of them. Have them choose words, phrases, colours, and symbols that describe:

- The character's identity, journey, traits, and interests;
- Things they do well;
- Things they are working on;
- The problems they experience and how they solve them;
- How the character grew and changed over time.

Encourage students to be as creative as they can in order to tell and show others about this character. Students will then write 2-3 paragraphs describing their character identity map, and their reasoning and choices. Links to examples of identity maps:

- [Self-Portrait Ideas for ESL Students](#)
- [Identity Portraits](#)
- [Prioritizing Student's Cultural Identity](#)

Potential learning goals for identity map:

- I will choose one character to make a character identity map.
- I will use different creative ways to tell and show this character's identity (words, phrases, symbols, colours, etc.).
- I will write 2-3 paragraphs describing my character identity map and choices.
- I will take part in the class exhibit.

### Detective Agency:

Have students write a response to the prompt below.

Cedar and Green do a great job in the story looking for clues and solving the mystery. They make a great team of detectives. If Cedar and Green started their own detective agency, what 2-3 skills would they individually bring to the team? How would those skills help them in their role?

## REFLECT AND CONNECT

### Character Exhibit:

One way to consolidate the learning from this book can be to make a class exhibit of the character identity maps students have created. Students can present their designs, post the paragraphs they have written, or simply display them in a specific area.







## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME



*Slug Days* by Sara Leach,  
illustrated by Rebecca Bender  
(Pajama Press, 2017)

*The Disability Experience: Working Toward  
Belonging* by Hannalora Leavitt, illustrated  
by Belle Wuthrich (Orca Book Publishers,  
2021)





# ABLEISM | HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

BY REBECA RUBIO

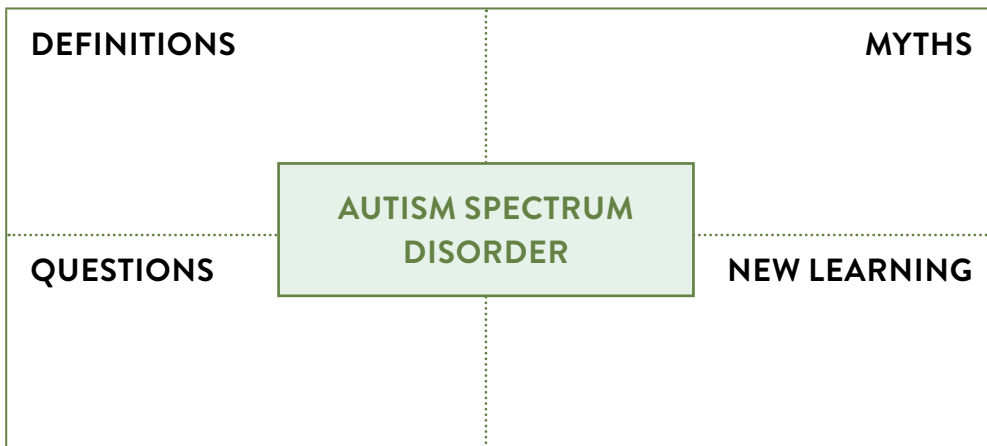
## FEATURED BOOK



*Boy in the Blue Hammock* by Darren Groth (Nightwood Editions, 2022)

## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

MINDS ON PROVOCATION



- Have students work in pairs to activate prior knowledge by recreating the organizer above and completing 3 of the 4 sections: Definition, Questions, and Myths.
- In their pairs, students will read stories found on the CDC's [Autism Spectrum Disorder page](#), or [this personal story](#) from CBC reporter Justin McElroy for Autism Awareness Day. Students will fill in the last section of their graphic organizer (New Learning) and make edits to the other sections.
- As a class, students will debrief the findings.





## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

Have students read the novel and consider the following guiding questions:

- The dog, Tao, is all of us: he is well-intentioned and does his duty, but he underestimates Kasper throughout the story and sees him as an impediment. How does this reflect society's ableist views of people with diverse abilities and disabilities? How does this realization ask us to rethink our own expectations, prejudices, saviour-mentality, or deficit mindsets?
- Kasper, and those like him with severe autism spectrum disorder (ASD), literally have no voice. They will never be on social media advocating for their rights; they will never tell their story; they will never be able to demand equity and inclusion. How do we give voice to the voiceless, authentically and empathically? Is it possible to speak for others without co-opting their identities?
- Myths of people with ASD often paint them as savants, emotionless robots, or awkward—even disturbing—creeps. But Kasper is not a trope: he is intensely vulnerable and capable of growth as a character. How does Kasper grow throughout the novel?
- *“See how he doesn’t just barge through others to go first? He watches and he waits. If there’s a smaller kid waiting a turn—he lets them go first... He notices. He understands. We get that he’s different in the way he feels and thinks. But maybe he knows differently too.”* Is it ableist to think that it would be best to try to “cure” Kasper of his autism or wish him to be neurotypical? What can be celebrated about the way Kasper moves through the world?

## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

What are some ways we can demonstrate our commitment to being inclusive of people with all abilities?

Have students refer to the [Stanford Design Thinking Process](#) to guide them as they design and prototype a way to support a person with ASD. They may design a physical or digital object, tool, device, or program.

- The Stanford Design Thinking Process begins with empathy. It asks students to interview, seek stories, uncover emotions, and determine need in order to design with purpose. A community member with ASD can be invited to share lived experiences with the students and help them to start brainstorming.
- Students can define their project, ideate, then prototype and test it. They may use the technology and tools available to them, both plugged and unplugged: 3D printers, digital tools, and hands-on building materials.





- Students can share their designs with members of the ASD community in order to seek genuine feedback.

## REFLECT AND CONNECT

Have students reflect on their learning throughout this unit of study:

- By completing “I used to think...” and “Now I think...” statements. How has their understanding of ASD evolved and shifted?
- By writing personal responses connecting how Kasper’s story helps them understand themselves and their own unique ways of being.
- By continuing to brainstorm ways they can demonstrate their commitment to being inclusive of people with all abilities.

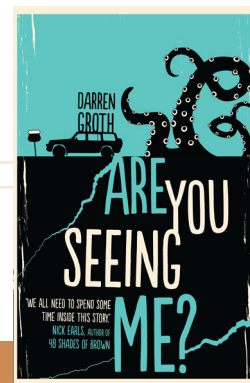
## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME



*Funny, You Don't Look Autistic: A Comedian's Guide to Life on the Spectrum* by Michael McCreary (Annick Press, 2019)



*On the Spectrum* by Jennifer Gold (Second Story Press, 2017)



*Are You Seeing Me?* by Darren Groth (Orca Book Publishers, 2015)

## MORE RESOURCES FOR ALL GRADE LEVELS

- [Autism Canada](#) and [Autism Alliance of Canada](#): Learn more about autism through these organizations.
- [Boy in the Blue Hammock: Teacher's Guide](#): Find lessons and teaching ideas for Darren Groth's book.
- [I Am a Kid with Asperger's](#): In this TED Talk-style video, a young person in America shares his lived experience as an individual with Asperger's syndrome.



- [Hamilton author had his children's book translated into a sign language](#): This CBC article introduces a teacher from Hamilton, ON, who made his first picture book accessible to all styles of reading. Braille copies of *Paislee and the Talking Tree* will be donated to the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), and an ASL translation is available for free on [YouTube](#).
- [Myperbole: The Darren Groth Blog](#): Learn more about the author and his experiences as the parent of a child with ASD.
- [Roots of Empathy](#): This long-running organization connects classrooms with infants and their caregivers as a way to build empathy and compassion.
- [#ThisIsAbleism](#): This social media campaign by Inclusion Canada unpacks bias and stigma faced by many Canadians who have ability differences.

