

*Equal Access, Equal Treatment:  
Raising Awareness about people with disabilities and their struggle for  
equal rights*

**Lesson: History of Disability Rights**

**Rationale:** The purpose of this lesson is for students to examine how past prejudicial attitudes and social exclusion of people with disabilities led to the rise of a nation wide, grassroots movement for the recognition of equal rights, equal access and equal treatment of people with disabilities. Students will consider how ableist assumptions are rooted in past stereotypical portrayals of disability, and will be challenged to reflect on their own assumptions and attitudes towards people with disabilities. Students will also learn about current day issues concerning the disability community, and will work in concert with disability advocates to take action in their own community on a disability rights issue

**Objectives:**

- Students will be able to analyze stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities in the media from past to present
- Students will consider the influence of age-old stereotypes of people with disabilities on current attitudes today
- Students will examine their attitudes and assumptions towards people with disabilities
- Students will learn about the disability rights movement, and research the role of key leaders and organizations in the movement
- Students will assess the accessibility of their school for the full inclusion of people with disabilities
- Students will learn terminology and communication guidelines on disability
- Students will research current issues facing the disability community, and take action in their community on a disability rights issue.

**Age Range:** Grades 10 - 12

**Materials:** chart paper, LCD panel and overhead screen (to display images in a slide show format) or use overhead projector if LCD panel not available, markers, student journals

**Time:** 1½ hours or 1-2 class periods for Parts I and II. (Parts III – V are optional, and provide a more in-depth study of disability rights. If time allows, one or more of the activities in Parts III – V may be implemented as an extension to the first two parts of the lesson.)

**Techniques and Skills:** analyzing primary documents, collecting and analyzing data, connecting past to present, cooperative group work, critical thinking and reasoning, essay writing, examining historical photographs, forming opinions, historical understanding,

journal writing, large and small group discussion, media literacy, research skills, social action, using the internet

**Key Words:** accessibility, advocate, allocation, disability, discrimination, impoverishment, independent living, marginalization, mobilize, prejudice, reasonable accommodation, rehabilitation, segregation, self-determination, stereotype, sterilization, stigmatization, vocational training

**Procedures:**

Note: In order to appropriately define language and guide student discussion on disability issues, it is recommended that teachers carefully read ADL's resource sheets on disability prior to facilitating lessons with students. See the Resource section in the right-hand toolbar of this webpage for further reference.

**Part I: Perceptions of People with Disabilities** (*45 minutes*)

**-Journal Writing-**

Begin the lesson with a journal assignment. Distribute copies of the [Disability Culture Series: Disability Portrayal and the Media Today](#) and [Disability Glossary \(Student Version\)](#) handouts for each student to read as a homework assignment, and ask students to respond to the following questions in their journals:

- What kinds of stereotypes or assumptions have you heard about people with disabilities?
- What have been some of your personal experiences with people with disabilities?

**-Discussion-**

Discuss some preliminary ideas about disability with the students. Suggested questions:

- What is a disability?
- What types of disabilities could a person have?
- What is the difference between a "disability" and a "handicap"?

Explain to students that the word "handicap" was commonly used to refer to people with disabilities, but that it is an offensive term and should no longer be used. The origin of the word "handicap" is literally a person with "cap in hand", or beggar. Because of this negative association, it is disrespectful to call a person with a disability "handicapped". The more appropriate and respectful term is "person with a disability". Explain to students that a disability describes a person's mental or physical impairment, whereas a handicap describes a barrier in the environment that limits that person's opportunity to enjoy in everyday activities, such as not having ramps or elevators in a school for a student who uses a wheelchair.

**-Group Work-**

Divide students into groups of four. Pose the following question, and ask students to discuss their reactions to the [Disability Culture Series: Disability Portrayal and the Media Today](#) article:

- What are some common stereotypes or assumptions made about people with disabilities?
- In what ways has the stereotypical portrayal of people with disabilities in the media affected attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities?

In groups, or as a journal assignment, distribute copies of the handout [A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement](#) for each student to read and review. Ask students to respond to the following questions in their groups or in their journals:

- What are some of the attitudes towards people with disabilities in your school? in your community?
- How do people with disabilities participate in your school and community life?

## **Part II: History of Disability Rights** (45 minutes)

### **-Group Work-**

Distribute copies of the handout [History of the Treatment of Disability Portrayed in Pictures and Words, 1849 – 1939](#) to each student. In their groups, ask students to analyze the images in the handout, and discuss one or more of the following questions:

- What feelings or thoughts do these images evoke for you?
- What are the messages being portrayed through these images?
- Who is missing or not represented in these pictures?
- What do these messages indicate about the treatment and perceptions of people with disabilities prior to 1940?
- In what ways has the historical treatment of people with disabilities affected the attitudes and behaviors towards people with disabilities today?

### **-Discussion-**

Hold a class discussion to review group responses to the questions listed above. After reviewing responses to the questions, continue to have a guided discussion using the [Slide Show - History of Disability Rights & Self-Determination in Pictures and Words \(Post-1940\)](#). As students are viewing each image in the slide show, ask them to write down any words that come to mind to describe their thoughts and reactions to the images.

Note: If providing a slide show format is not possible, distribute copies of the handout [History of Disability Rights & Self-Determination in Pictures and Words \(Post-1940\)](#) to each student.

Following the slideshow, discuss the following questions with the class:

(If possible, allow the last photograph of the slide show to remain displayed as students respond.)

- What are the messages being portrayed through the words and images in these pictures, and how are they similar or different to those from 1849-1939?

- How do the images in this slide show differ from decade to decade?
- How do these images portray a shift in attitudes from exclusion and charity, to self-determination and independence of people with disabilities?
- In what ways do these images challenge stereotypes about people with disabilities?

### **-Group Work/Journal-**

As a group assignment, or as a journal assignment, distribute copies of the handout [Assessing Your School Environment for Access to People with Disabilities](#) for each student to read and review. Ask students to respond to the following question in their groups or in their journals:

*Are all buildings, classes, extracurricular activities and educational services accessible to people with disabilities in your school?*

**Part III Small Research Project** (2 – 3 weeks to complete assignments & 40 minutes for class debrief)

### **-Introduction-**

Explain to students that they are going to have an opportunity to study the evolution of the disability rights movement through the eyes of disability activists and the organizations that lobbied for key civil rights legislation for people with disabilities.

Distribute the following handouts to each student:

- [Group Research Project: History of the Disability Rights Movement](#)
- [Communication Guidelines on Disability](#)

Divide students into their original groups of four. Assign each group one of the following disability rights organizations to research (each group should research a different organization):

- a. Disabled in Action (1970)
- b. Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, California (1972)
- c. American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (1975-1983)
- d. Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (1979)
- e. American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (1983)
- f. World Institute on Disability (1983)

### **-Group Planning-**

In their groups, students should determine their timeline for conducting research and completing tasks as a group. Remind students to research any of the questions that remain unanswered from earlier in the lesson.

### **-Group Presentations-**

Once completed, have students prepare and present a 5 - 10 minute presentation of their individual group research projects. Groups should present in chronological order, following the development of the disability rights movement and the founding of the disability rights organizations listed above.

### **-Discussion-**

After each group has presented, pose the following discussion questions to the class:

- In what ways do we see the advancements and results of the disability rights movement being lived out today?
- Are there issues of inequitable treatment or lack of accessibility for people with disabilities in our school? in our community?
- How can people who are not disabled be allies to people with disabilities in gaining greater rights to access and equity?

### **Part IV: Research Paper** (*1 week to complete*)

In their groups, or as an individual homework assignment, have students research current issues of inequity facing people with disabilities. These could be issues facing students with disabilities in their own school, or could apply to the general population of people with disabilities nationwide. Students should write a brief, one-page paper describing one of the current issues of inequity facing people with disabilities, and at least two forms of action they could take as allies or student activists in gaining equal rights and treatment for people with disabilities. Students may conduct interviews, contact local disability organizations, and may use the following websites, to conduct their research (remind students to revisit the [Communication Guidelines on Disability](#) handout before reaching out to people in the disability community):

- a. ADA Watch, National Coalition for Disability Rights: <http://adawatch.org/index.asp>
- b. American Association of People with Disabilities: [www.aapd-dc.org](http://www.aapd-dc.org)
- c. Disabled & Proud: [www.disabledandproud.com](http://www.disabledandproud.com)
- d. Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund: [www.dredf.org](http://www.dredf.org)
- e. Disability Statistics Center: <http://dsc.ucsf.edu/main.php>
- f. Independent Living USA: <http://www.ilusa.com/>
- g. Institute on Independent Living: <http://www.independentliving.org/>
- h. International Commission on Technology and Accessibility: <http://www.ictaglobal.org/>
- i. National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: <http://www.nichcy.org/>
- j. National Organization on Disability: [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org)
- k. World Institute on Disability: <http://www.wid.org/>

### **-Discussion-**

Once students have submitted their papers, ask students to share the results of their research with the class. On chart paper, list the various issues of disability rights that students recorded in their individual research papers.

### **Part V Major Research Project** (*1 – 2 months to research and complete projects*)

#### **-Choosing Topics-**

Ask students to review the list of issues researched by the class, and to choose five (by consensus) that they are most interested in learning more about and taking action on.

-Post five pieces of chart paper around the room, and write at the top of each chart paper one of the five disability rights issues chosen by the students.

Have students choose which of the five issues they would like to work on by walking to the chart paper with the topic they are most interested in learning more about, and taking action on. (If groups are uneven, ask students if they would be willing to move to a different group to take action on another disability rights issue.)

#### **-Group Work-**

Once groups have been determined, have students spend five minutes writing down on their group chart paper various ways they could learn more about their selected disability rights issue, and different forms of action they could take as a group to create awareness about the issue in their school and/or community.

Once each group has brainstormed various forms of action they could take on their selected issue, inform each group to choose one form of action to implement in their school and/or community. Ask each group to come to a consensus on which form of action they will implement.

Inform students that once their group has chosen their project (such as helping to make their school more accessible, or writing letters to local politicians to ensure local voting stations are accessible to people with disabilities), they will build an action plan that reflects:

- the specific goal of their group project,
- specific ways they will outreach and include people with disabilities in their organizing and campaigning steps,
- specific action steps they will take to achieve their project goal, and
- a timeline that reflects when and where they will complete the action steps they have outlined.

Review the action plan of each group to ensure that each of the four questions listed above has been completed satisfactorily. Once each group's action plan has been approved, students may begin implementation of their action project or campaign.

### **-Group Presentations-**

After students have had time to successfully complete their action projects, ask each group to give a presentation to the class on the following:

- the successes of their group's project or campaign,
- how they went about working in coordination with the disability community,
- challenges that may have arisen, and
- their individual impression of the impact of their group project or campaign on their school and/or community.

Encourage students to continue taking action on disability rights issues by implementing an additional action project. For each additional project that students pursue, they should repeat Steps 4 - 8 to ensure students meet and reflect on their project goals.

### **Optional Extension Activities**

- Study race and gender issues within the disability community.
- Compare and contrast differences and similarities between the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and the disability rights movement.
- Research abuse and murder of people with disabilities by Nazi doctors and the Third Reich during the Holocaust.
- Study the real life story of Helen Keller as a suffragist and human rights activist.
- Research policies on disability access of potential college choices of high school juniors and seniors.