

Disability Representation in Merdeka Curriculum English Textbooks: A Critical Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The representation of disability in educational materials, particularly textbooks, is an important yet often overlooked aspect of inclusive education. Although Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum promotes diversity, the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook remains underexplored. This study examines the visibility and social roles of characters with disabilities, focusing on whether they are portrayed as "agents" or "victims" based on the Social Model of Disability. Using Critical Content Analysis, this study analyzed three high school English textbooks (Grades 10–12). The findings indicate that disability is indeed depicted, but inconsistently, with more frequent appearances in Grade 10. All identified characters are portrayed as active, independent, and socially integrated individuals, categorized as "agents." Disability is portrayed positively as independent and capable, but its representation is limited and inconsistent across grade levels."

Keywords: *Disability Representation, English Textbooks, Kurikulum Merdeka, Inclusive Education, Social Model of Disability*

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in education is one of the important principles in ensuring equal participation for all students, including those with disabilities (Wirz & Donde, 2009). Inclusive education allows students with disabilities to learn and develop with their peers without structural barriers (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023). This perspective is in line with the social model of disability introduced by Michael Oliver, which challenges the medical model by positioning disability not as an individual limitation, but as a consequence of environmental barriers. Based on this framework, inclusive education emphasizes the removal of social and structural barriers that prevent the full participation of students (Chalise, 2024). In the Indonesian context, this mandate includes the representation of disability in learning materials, especially textbooks, which serve as powerful tools for shaping students' understanding of diversity and social inclusion, particularly in relation to disability.

In the context of Indonesian education, inclusivity is supported by curriculum policies and legislation. The Merdeka Curriculum (henceforth referred to as the Emancipated Curriculum) and the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* prioritize the development of students' character in terms of valuing diversity. This commitment is reinforced by Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which guarantees the right to inclusive education, as well as Article 31(1) of the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 20 of 2003, which guarantee equal access to education for all citizens (Lisyawati et al., 2022). Thus, textbooks are expected to serve as tools that demonstrate inclusive values and provide accurate representations of disability aligned with the social model of disability. However, despite this strong legal and curricular foundation, the integration of inclusive values, particularly disability representation, into educational materials remains limited.

Although existing policies are well established, the reality in schools still reflects discriminatory social attitudes towards students with disabilities. Such discrimination often arises due to environmental barriers and limited social awareness (Andana et al., 2025). Misleading, inadequate, or even completely absent representations will indirectly hinder the development of an inclusive school environment, making it difficult to achieve the goals of inclusive education. For students with disabilities, the absence of positive representation can trigger an identity crisis, making them feel like they are not part of society at large. Meanwhile, for students without disabilities, inaccurate representations such as portraying disability as something that always requires pity and dependence on others will fail to foster authentic empathy and will instead maintain limiting stereotypes. This phenomenon indicates that educational materials, particularly textbooks, have not yet fully optimized their role in guiding students toward inclusive values.

Previous research on textbooks in Indonesia has mostly focused on gender representation, while the crucial pillar of disability representation tends to be overlooked. For example, research conducted by (Tyarakanita et al., 2021) and (Dewi et al., 2022) found that textbooks tend to use more professional roles for men than women. However, in reality, gender and disability inclusion are two equally important aspects of education (Hussein et al., 2025). This shows that there is a gap in the literature on disability inclusivity that tends to be ignored. Disability representation is also an important aspect because it will determine how non-disabled people form their understanding of differences, which can be influenced by the books they read every day.

The current concern regarding the representation of disability in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook is that this element is often treated as an optional addition rather than an essential component of the curriculum. In the context of EFL, textbooks not only teach grammar but also serve as a window that introduces global social identities. If disability is not mentioned or ignored in English textbooks, this can lead to the interpretation that disability is not part of the global community or professional world. As a result, diversity, especially the representation of disability, is often only included in a limited number of language learning materials, and the life experiences of people with disabilities receive insufficient attention. This situation risks reinforcing a narrow understanding of social reality in the educational context. To address this issue, collaborative efforts are needed among textbook authors, publishers, educators, policymakers, and disability rights activists to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. A crucial first step toward this goal is to conduct a critical evaluation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook to assess how disability is represented as part of the Indonesian curriculum content.

Furthermore, representation in textbooks serves as a platform or tool for raising social awareness, not merely a reflection of everyday reality. From a critical discourse perspective, what is included or excluded from textbooks reflects the underlying ideology regarding which groups are considered significant or visible in society. Therefore, the absence or limited representation of disability can be interpreted as a form of symbolic exclusion. This highlights the importance of critically examining not only how disability is represented, but also how frequently and in what contexts it appears. Thus, this study positions textbooks as ideological texts that shape students' perceptions of diversity, normality, and social participation.

Recent studies have started to address disability issues, such as those by (Fitriani et al., 2025) and (Ulya et al., 2025a). However, these studies still focus on junior high school textbooks. Therefore, this study will focus on disability representation, which has rarely been researched, by analyzing senior high school textbooks from the emancipated curriculum that are most in line with current policies in the world of education to fill the existing gaps. Senior high school textbooks were chosen because their narratives and topics have moved into a more complex phase, thus providing wider data for critical analysis of the social role of disability. In addition, high school students are in a transitional phase towards higher education or the world of work, so it is very important for them to see representations of persons with disabilities as independent figures or 'Agents'. According to (Ulya et al., 2025b) The first step that can be taken to address issues and challenges related to inclusivity and disability content

in EFL textbooks is to evaluate the EFL textbooks themselves in relation to disability inclusivity as curriculum content in Indonesia. Therefore, this study was conducted to become a source that can fill the literature gap and contribute to writers, policymakers, and teachers by measuring the extent to which textbooks can fulfil the mandate of inclusivity based on the social model of disability concept.

The novelty of this study lies in the use of “Agent vs Victim” framework through critical analysis to analyse disability representation specifically in high school textbooks of the emancipated curriculum. This analysis aims to find out whether textbooks represent people with disabilities as independent and empowered individuals (Agents) or only as objects of pity and recipients of assistance (victims). In addition, this study aims to find out 1) How are characters with disabilities represented (in terms of visibility) in Senior High School English Textbooks for the emancipated curriculum? 2) How are the social roles, professions, and narratives attached to characters with disabilities represented in the text and visuals of the books? 3) To what extent is the representation of disability in the textbooks in line with the spirit of Inclusive Education and the Social Model of Disability perspective in Indonesia?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method using Critical Content Analysis (CCA) as the research design. Content analysis is a systematic and interpretive method for analyzing textual and visual data (Krippendorff, 2022) and (Neuendorf, 2017) The researcher used content analysis on texts and images to capture what the textbooks meant for people with disabilities, what they provided or hindered, and the impact of the messages they conveyed. The content analysis conducted in this study was based on the theoretical framework, which views disability as the result of social barriers rather than individual limitations (Oliver, 2004). In addition, this study applies the analytical categories of agent versus victim to identify whether characters with disabilities are portrayed as active participants or passive recipients in the discourse. Through this critical content analysis, researcher identifies and explores the extent to which these representations support or contradict the principles of inclusive education. This study employed several validation strategies to ensure data reliability, including in depth analysis of the data and careful re-examination of the coding results. Additionally, the coding process was reviewed to maintain consistency in classifying data into the “perpetrator” and “victim” categories. These steps were taken to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study’s findings.

Data Sources

The data sources in this study were senior high school English textbooks for grades X, XI, and XII under the emancipated curriculum published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. The three books were published in the same year, 2022. Each book has 4-6 chapters consisting of material explanations, exercises, and evaluations designed to improve the English language skills of high school students, ranging from listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and presenting. This study focused on analyzing the representation of disability in the texts and images of these books. This data was selected because the books were designed based on the Emancipated Curriculum and are widely used in almost all senior high schools in Indonesia. In addition, the material, which comprehensively discusses social themes, is more relevant to this study. Thus, researchers can find relevant and broad results.

Instruments

The main instrument in this study was a thematic coding sheet (a table used to organize and record data based on predefined categories) based on the social model of disability theory and the agent versus victim category. In this context, "Agent" refers to characters portrayed with autonomy and active social roles, while "Victim" refers to characters depicted as passive recipients of care or objects of pity. The coding sheet was used to find patterns of disability representation such as the visibility of characters, the social roles portrayed, and the narratives included. The categories used were type of data (text and visual), context of appearance, social

role (agent or victim), and environmental support. CCA allows researchers to explore and critique narrative texts and visualizations as a culture that represents positive or negative ideologies towards disability. The patterns found were then used to critique the ideology of whether the data found contradicted or supported the social model and to conclude its relevance to the goal of inclusive education in Indonesia or whether it actually regressed from the policy and placed more emphasis on the representation of disability with a medical concept

Procedures

This study has three main procedures. 1) Preparation of a thematic coding sheet by adapting previous research by (Khairunnisa, 2025). At this stage, the instrument was validated through expert judgment by English text analysis experts to ensure the objectivity of the indicators used. 2) The data were collected through a comprehensive scan of the entire contents of the textbooks, both visual and narrative. 3) The data were then recorded into a thematic coding sheet that includes the page number, text, and visual found, and context. Each unit found was classified into the "Agent" or "Victim" category based on the narrative or visual presented.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic coding sheet, categorizing them according to victim and agent classifications. The coding results were then analyzed to determine whether the textbooks represented disability in line with the social model of disability concept and promoted inclusive education in Indonesia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Disability Presence in Textbooks

Based on data collected from English textbooks for grades X, XI, and XII, it was found that disability is actively represented in both textual and visual forms across various contexts. This representation is shown in the context of international sporting events (Paralympic Games), school activities, learning activities at home, participation in public spaces, and social activities with peers.

In terms of representation distribution, representation is not evenly distributed among grades X, XI, and XII. Representation appears extensively in grade X textbooks, especially in chapters related to inspirational figures and global events. Meanwhile, grades XI and XII contain fewer explicit examples. This uneven distribution shows that disability representation is not vertically integrated into the high school curriculum. Instead, representation appears situationally in selected thematic units.

This distribution pattern suggests that inclusion may still function as a contextual theme rather than an ongoing curricular commitment. For inclusive values to be consistently internalized, representation should ideally appear progressively across all grade levels rather than being concentrated in specific units.

Table 1. Summary of Disability Representation in English Textbooks

Grade	Page/Unit	Data Type	Context	Social Role
X	p.27 Ch.1	Visual	Paralympic athlete	Agent
X	p.28 Ch.1	Text	Athlete biography	Agent
X	p.50-51 Ch.2	Text	Paralympic Games	Agent
X	p.51 Ch.2	Visual	Paralympic competition	Agent
XI	p.100 Unit 3	Visual	School discussion	Agent
XII	p.4 Unit 1	Visual	Learning at home	Agent
XII	p.31 Unit 1	Visual	Urban public space	Agent
XII	p.163 Unit 4	Visual	Social gathering	Agent

Based on Table 1, all eight data points show that disability has an integrated place in the general community. This indicates that the role of disability in these books is described as individuals who are not isolated or separated from their environment. The support from the environment shown in these books is categorized as moderate to high, as indicated by social

support from friends, family, and the community. Identification of eight data units across three grade levels shows that representations of disability do exist, but, numerically, they remain limited compared to the overall volume of textbook content. Given the total number of chapters and learning units in the analyzed textbooks, representations of disability occupy only a small proportion. This numerical limitation reinforces the argument that inclusion does exist, but has not yet been systematically integrated into the curriculum structure. However, structural support, such as physical facilities or infrastructure accessibility, is rarely explicitly shown in the books. This shows that textbooks emphasize social acceptance rather than structural change. From this perspective, this indicates that while social inclusion is recognized, the removal of structural barriers, one of the model's key principles, has not yet been fully realized. Although the representation of disability is visible across various contexts, its frequency is relatively limited, so its visibility remains selective and inconsistent. This selective visibility shows that disability is recognized in textbooks, but has not been fully normalized within social diversity. This finding contrasts with the social model of disability, which emphasizes the normalization of disability as part of human diversity, rather than limited or discriminatory portrayals.

This pattern suggests that disability is viewed as an additional theme rather than a structurally integrated component in the curriculum representation. The limited frequency of representation also shows that inclusion exists, but is not yet systematically and evenly reflected throughout the English textbooks under the Emancipated Curriculum. From a critical perspective, the low frequency of portrayals of disability may also indicate implicit marginalized treatment within the curriculum discourse. Although disability is depicted positively, its relatively rare appearance suggests that disability has not yet been positioned as a normal component of social diversity. Instead, disability appears as an occasional insertion tied to specific themes, rather than being systematically embedded throughout the curriculum.

This situation reflects a broader ideological trend in educational materials, where inclusion is acknowledged symbolically but not prioritized structurally. Consequently, students may view disability as an exception, rather than as an integral part of everyday social reality. These findings highlight the importance not only of the quality of representation but also of its consistency and frequency in shaping inclusive perspectives.

Disability Role in Textbooks

The results of thematic coding show that all data position persons with disabilities as agents. They are described as people who actively speak, learn, compete, participate in public spaces, and interact equally with other individuals.



Figure 1. Page 27 chapter 1 Textual data of disability representation



Figure 2. Page 51 chapter 2 Visual data of disability representation

Figures 1 and 2 show that in the field of sports, people with disabilities are represented as athletes who have achieved international success and are highly recognized socially. In daily life, they are portrayed as students who engage in discussions, children who actively learn at home, individuals who participate in urban spaces, and participants in social activities. The analysis shows that there are no representations that portray persons with disabilities as individuals who are dependent, weak, or victims. Therefore, this book consistently presents persons with disabilities as individuals with capacity who play an active role in the social environment. This is consistent with the social model of disability, which views persons with disabilities as active participants in society, rather than as passive individuals who are defined by their limitations.

Another important issue that emerged in this study is that representations of disability are often tied to specific contexts rather than being fully integrated. In the collected data, disability appeared in specific themes, such as inspirational figures and extraordinary achievements. This pattern suggests that disability is viewed as extraordinary rather than common. As a result, students may associate disability primarily with unusual contexts, rather than understanding it as part of everyday life. Although representations of disability in books already cover a broader range of topics, including daily routines, professional environments, and casual social interactions, these are not yet presented evenly.

However, portrayals of Paralympic athletes that emphasize extraordinary achievements risk positioning disability as something that is only acceptable when individuals achieve great things, rather than as a normal and diverse aspect of everyday life. Although this portrayal appears empowering, it can reflect elements of the “supercrip” narrative, in which people with disabilities are predominantly celebrated when they demonstrate extraordinary achievement. This framing can unknowingly reinforce high expectations of people with disabilities. This is somewhat contradictory to the social model of disability, as it shifts the focus from the removal of social barriers to individual achievement as a measure of a person’s acceptance.

From a broader perspective, this pattern may also reflect what is known as “inspiration based framing,” in which disability is used as a motivational narrative tool. While such an approach can bring about positive emotional responses, it risks reducing people with disabilities to symbolic figures rather than portraying them as complex individuals with diverse experiences. This highlights the importance of moving away from overly inspirational narratives toward more realistic portrayals.

Disability Interaction in Textbooks

The analysis of disability interactions focused on how characters with disabilities were represented when interacting with their social environment, whether they were represented

as integrated or isolated individuals. Based on the results of the thematic coding sheet, all persons with disabilities are represented as individuals who are integrated into social life.



Picture 3.2 Discussion at school

Figure 3. Page 100 unit 3: Visual data of disability representation



Picture 1.1 A family at home

Figure 4. Page 4 unit 1: Visual data of disability representation

As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, persons with disabilities are depicted interacting with peers, family members, and participating in public spaces. This shows that persons with disabilities in these books have a position inseparable from their environment and lead normal social lives. This portrayal aligns with the social model of disability, which emphasizes inclusion and full participation in social activities. By showing the integrated interactions of persons with disabilities, these books implicitly show that social participation should be open to all individuals regardless of their sensory or physical abilities.

The findings of this study also have important implications for the development of inclusive instructional materials, particularly English textbooks within the Emancipated Curriculum. First, the limited and inconsistent representation of disability highlights the need for a more systematic integration of inclusive values across all grade levels and learning units. Such representation should not be confined to specific themes but must be consistently embedded throughout the curriculum.

Second, textbook developers must consider not only social inclusion but also the structural aspects of accessibility. The absence of representation regarding physical accessibility, assistive technology, and institutional support suggests that inclusion is still primarily viewed as social acceptance rather than a systemic responsibility. Finally, educators and policymakers must critically evaluate textbooks to ensure that they reflect diverse and realistic portrayals of disability. In this way, textbooks can serve not only as tools for language learning but also as instruments for promoting social awareness, empathy, and equality among students.

Therefore, it is important to consider teachers as active facilitators in conveying textbook content. Although textbooks already provide representations, teachers can expand the scope of learning by introducing additional examples, facilitating critical discussions, and encouraging students to reflect on issues of diversity and inclusion, particularly regarding disabilities. This approach helps make the classroom a more inclusive environment. Furthermore, the representation of disability in various contexts, such as daily activities, professional roles, and social interactions, can help normalize disability as part of everyday life. This shift is crucial for moving away from viewing disability as something extraordinary toward an understanding that disability is a natural aspect of human diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the analysis is limited to three English textbooks from the Merdeka Curriculum, which may not fully represent all teaching materials used in schools across Indonesia. Second, it focuses only on textual and visual representations without examining how teachers and students interpret or respond to these materials in classroom practices. Third, as a qualitative study, it cannot measure the frequency of representations in detail. Despite these limitations, the findings show that persons with disabilities are present and represented in both text and visuals, often portrayed as active, independent, and socially integrated agents; however, their overall frequency remains limited and not yet consistently embedded across the textbooks. While interpersonal support is relatively visible, aspects of structural accessibility and institutional responsibility are still rarely addressed. This suggests that although the textbooks align with the principles of Inclusive Education and the Social Model of Disability, stronger consistency and greater attention to structural justice are needed to ensure inclusion is understood as a systemic commitment rather than merely social harmony. Therefore, future research is recommended to include more diverse instructional materials across subjects and educational levels, combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to better measure representation, and incorporate students' perspectives to understand the impact on their attitudes. Additionally, textbook authors and curriculum developers should integrate disability representation more consistently and inclusively, reflecting diverse and realistic life experiences, so that educational materials can move beyond symbolic inclusion and more effectively promote inclusive values and students' social awareness.

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