

Teaching Disability Politics: The Recognition–Implementation Gap in Global South Perspectives

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Abstract

Disability-related teaching remains organized around scholarship and frameworks developed in the Global North. Drawing on an original survey of instructors in political science and related fields, this article examines how instructors incorporate Global South perspectives. Among 65 respondents, 90.8 percent described assigned disability literature as mostly or entirely Global North-shaped, yet 60.7 percent reported that Global South contexts constituted no more than 10 percent of their syllabi. The gap persisted across course types: nearly half of respondents teaching courses with majority disability content still reported no more than 10 percent Global South content. Respondents emphasized the value of these perspectives for challenging Northern frameworks and connecting disability to colonialism and political economy. They attributed limited inclusion to publication inequalities, disciplinary canons, limited familiarity, and shortages of teaching materials. Closing the gap requires disciplinary training and infrastructures that make Global South knowledge accessible and usable in teaching.

Keywords: disability politics; Global South; political science pedagogy

Word count: 3490

Introduction

Dominant frameworks for studying disability remain largely Eurocentric. Disability studies developed primarily in Europe and North America, where concepts such as independent living, individual rights, and the distinction between impairment and disability reflect particular political and cultural histories (Grech 2015; Grech and Soldatic 2016). This orientation is consequential because an estimated 80 percent of disabled people live in the Global South. Treating Northern frameworks as universal can obscure how colonialism, development, informal economies, kinship, and collective responsibility shape the production and experience of disability elsewhere (Erevelles 2000; Nguyen 2018; Brocco 2024). Global South perspectives thus challenge prevailing assumptions, broaden how disability is conceptualized, and address inequalities in knowledge production (Hickey-Moody and Garg 2022; Garzón Díaz and Goodley 2021; Sarkar, Mueller, and Forber-Pratt 2022).

Scholars have called for greater engagement with Southern theory and Indigenous or locally grounded knowledge. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has documented diverse understandings of disability while positioning disabled people in the Global South as knowledge producers. Yet these perspectives remain peripheral to dominant theories and canons, particularly in Global North classrooms (Grech 2015; Nguyen 2018).

Assessing their incorporation requires examining both presence and role. Instructors may recognize the value of Global South perspectives while continuing to rely on Northern theories and cases. Material may organize a course or appear only in a separate week, optional reading, or isolated example. The term itself also carries different meanings. It may refer to geographic representation, scholarship by Southern authors, or engagement with theoretical and epistemic traditions developed there. Courses may therefore include Southern cases while treating Northern frameworks as universally applicable.

Little empirical research examines how instructors understand these distinctions or how they shape course design. Rather than impose a single definition, this article examines how instructors define and incorporate Global South perspectives, the value they attribute to

them, and the barriers to inclusion. The distinction is used to investigate whose knowledge is centered without treating either region as internally homogeneous. Colonial relationships, migration, and inequality cross geographic boundaries, making the Global South an analytic category rather than a rigid division of the world.

Drawing on an original survey of university and college instructors, the study identifies a recognition–implementation gap. Among 65 respondents, 90.8 percent described assigned disability literature as mostly or entirely shaped by Global North contexts, yet 60.7 percent reported that Global South contexts constituted no more than 10 percent of their syllabi. Course scope did not fully explain this pattern: nearly half of respondents teaching courses with majority disability content still reported no more than 10 percent Global South content. Definitions also varied across geography, authorship, and epistemic engagement. Respondents attributed limited inclusion primarily to publication inequalities, disciplinary conventions, limited familiarity, and shortages of classroom-ready materials.

These findings contribute to scholarship on disability pedagogy and inequalities in knowledge production. Inclusion involves more than adding geographically diverse cases: Global South perspectives can reshape how disability is taught. Their incorporation, however, depends on the systems that make knowledge visible, accessible, and usable in the classroom.

Data and Methods

The study uses an anonymous online survey of university and college instructors who teach disability-focused courses or incorporate disability into broader courses. Distributed through academic networks and professional listservs in July 2026, the survey examined how instructors understood Global South perspectives, incorporated them into teaching, and assessed their pedagogical value. Participation was voluntary, and the study received institutional review board approval.¹ The complete questionnaire appears in Appendix B of the supplementary materials.

1. IRB information to be included upon publication.

Of the 113 individuals who initiated the survey, 65 completed it, yielding a completion rate of 57.5 percent. The analysis uses completed responses and calculates percentages from the number answering each question. Closed-ended responses are summarized descriptively, while open-ended responses are analyzed thematically. Because recruitment was voluntary and network-based, the nonprobability sample likely overrepresents instructors interested in disability pedagogy. The measures capture instructors' reports, not independently verified syllabi or student learning.

Table 1: Characteristics of Completed Respondents

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	Percent
<i>Institutional region</i>		
North America	47	72.3
Europe	7	10.8
Oceania	7	10.8
Asia	2	3.1
Africa	1	1.5
Middle East and North Africa	1	1.5
<i>University-level teaching experience</i>		
1–5 years	19	29.2
6–10 years	16	24.6
11–20 years	15	23.1
More than 20 years	15	23.1
<i>Primary discipline (recoded)</i>		
Humanities, language, communication, or media	10	15.6
Political science	9	14.1
Anthropology	9	14.1
Education or special education	8	12.5
Psychology	7	10.9
Disability studies	6	9.4
Sociology	5	7.8
Social work	4	6.3
Law or legal studies	3	4.7
International, development, or public health	3	4.7
<i>Disability-related teaching</i>		
Primarily disability-focused course	23	35.4
Disability within a broader course	24	36.9
Both types of courses	14	21.5
No substantial disability content	4	6.2

Notes: $N = 65$, except for discipline ($N = 64$). Free-text responses were assigned to the closest field. The final category includes respondents reporting limited disability-related material.

Results

The findings reveal a recognition–implementation gap. Respondents generally valued Global South perspectives and recognized the Global North orientation of commonly assigned disability scholarship, yet reported limited inclusion in many courses. Denominators vary because respondents could skip questions. Percentages for multiple-response questions do not sum to 100.

Disability-Related Teaching and Course Scope

Courses varied in their emphasis on disability (Table 1). Disability-focused offerings included *Introduction to Disability Studies* and *The Politics of Disability*; broader offerings included American government and political theory. Among the 62 respondents answering the repetition question, 64.5 percent had taught the relevant course or material at least four times.

Respondents most often framed disability through social movements and advocacy (82.3 percent) and accessibility and the built environment (66.1 percent). Rights and legal protections appeared in 58.1 percent of responses, and 51.6 percent included citizenship and inclusion.

Course scope was associated with Global South coverage. Among respondents whose courses devoted no more than 25 percent of their content to disability, 94.1 percent reported no more than 10 percent Global South content. Coverage generally increased as disability became more central, yet nearly half of respondents teaching courses with majority disability content still reported no more than 10 percent Global South content. Figure 1 presents the complete distribution.

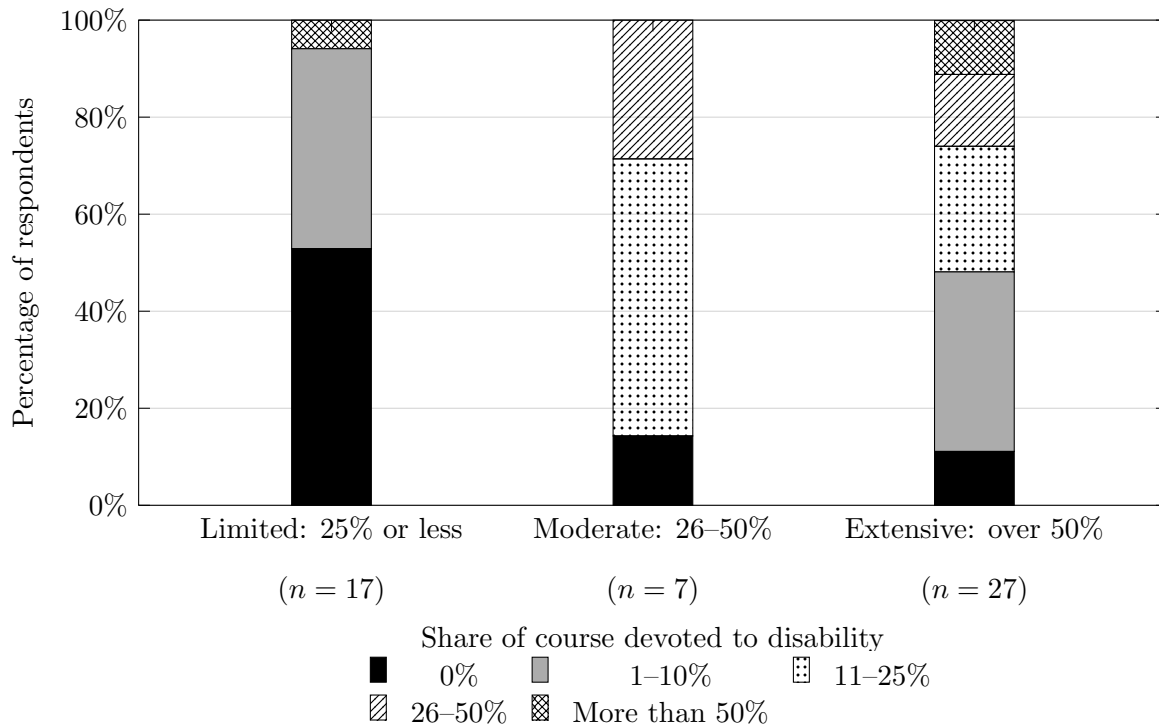


Figure 1: Reported Global South Content by Course Emphasis on Disability

Notes: The horizontal categories indicate the reported share of course content devoted to disability: limited (25 percent or less), moderate (26–50 percent), and extensive (more than 50 percent). Stacked segments show the reported share devoted to Global South perspectives. The figure includes respondents who selected one disability-content category and provided an applicable Global South-content estimate ($N = 51$).

Understanding Global South Perspectives in Disability Teaching

Respondents understood “Global South perspectives” as involving more than geographic representation. Their definitions also emphasized whose knowledge was assigned, engagement with locally grounded theories, and attention to colonial and material conditions. Table 2 summarizes these meanings.

The term remained contested: some respondents questioned its boundaries or preferred “Global Majority.” Understanding also varied by institutional location. All four respondents based in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East and North Africa offered substantive definitions, whereas all 15 who expressed uncertainty were based in North America, Europe, or Oceania. Most respondents in those regions nevertheless provided substantive definitions, and the

small number based in the Global South makes the difference descriptive.

Table 2: Meanings of Global South Perspectives

Dimension	Meaning
Geography	Cases from Global South contexts
Authorship and voice	Knowledge produced by Southern scholars or centered on disabled people
Epistemic engagement	Indigenous, decolonial, or locally grounded knowledge
Structural context	Colonialism, global inequality, resource constraints, and political institutions
Contestation	Disputed boundaries, alternative terminology, or unfamiliarity

Notes: Themes are based on open-ended responses and are not mutually exclusive.

Respondents also identified recurring contrasts between Northern and Southern approaches (Table 3). These involved the assumptions and conditions through which disability was understood, not simply geographic location.

Table 3: Perceived North–South Contrasts

Dimension	Global North emphasis	Global South emphasis
Political orientation	Individual rights and accommodation	Interdependence and community support
Institutional provision	Formal welfare and services	Uneven provision and informal care
Historical context	Limited attention to colonialism	Colonialism and global inequality
Material conditions	Barriers in affluent settings	Poverty, conflict, and resource constraints
Knowledge	Euro-American frameworks	Indigenous, decolonial, and local knowledge

Notes: These are respondents' perceptions, not universal regional differences.

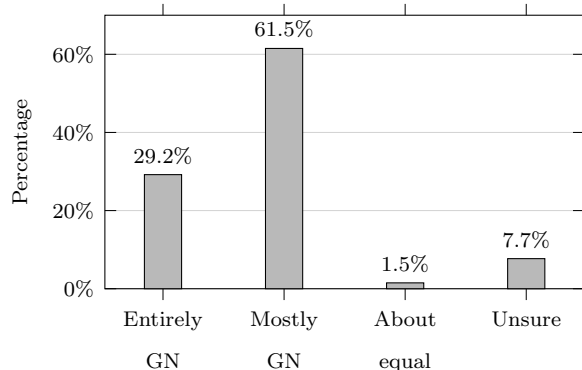
Respondents most often contrasted Northern emphases on individual rights and formal provision with Southern attention to interdependence and uneven state capacity. They also emphasized colonial histories and material constraints. Global South perspectives were thus understood as potentially different ways of conceptualizing disability, not simply as cases

from different places.

The Recognition–Implementation Gap

Respondents overwhelmingly recognized the Global North orientation of assigned disability literature: 90.8 percent described it as mostly or entirely shaped by Global North contexts. Yet three in five of the 61 respondents providing an applicable estimate reported that Global South contexts constituted no more than 10 percent of their disability-related syllabi; only one in five devoted more than one-quarter to such material. Figure 2 illustrates this contrast. These figures reflect instructors' reports, not independent syllabus analysis.

Panel A. Orientation of Assigned Literature



Panel B. Global South Share of Syllabus

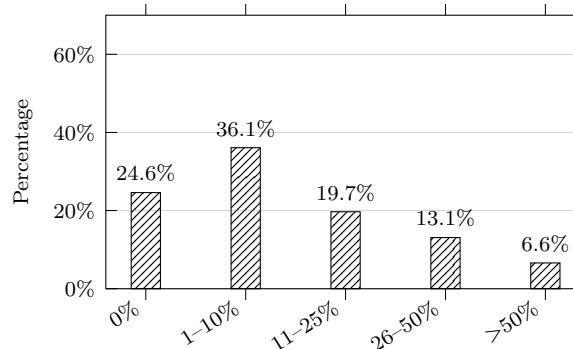


Figure 2: Recognition and Reported Inclusion of Global South Perspectives

Notes: Panel A reports the perceived orientation of assigned disability literature ($N = 65$). Panel B reports the estimated syllabus share devoted to Global South contexts, excluding “Not applicable” responses ($N = 61$).

Course scope explains only part of the pattern. Although limited international coverage may fit the goals of nationally or regionally bounded courses, nearly half of the 27 respondents whose courses devoted most of their content to disability still reported no more than 10 percent Global South content (Figure 1).

Frequency likewise did not ensure depth. Seven in ten respondents reported incorporating Global South perspectives regularly or occasionally, but the limited syllabus share suggests that this often involved brief or recurring examples. Among instructors who included

these perspectives, three-quarters placed them within broader themes and 42 percent used comparative cases throughout the course; only 14 percent devoted a separate module or week to them. Materials also remained geographically concentrated: nearly all respondents included the United States or Canada, compared with about one in five who included Africa or Asia (Appendix Figure A.1).

Domestic focus did not necessarily make these perspectives irrelevant. Some respondents defined the Global South relationally to include Indigenous or internally colonized communities within settler states. Courses centered on the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand could thus engage Southern or Indigenous knowledge without shifting their geographic focus abroad. Others defined the term through countries outside the Global North, making its relevance partly dependent on how instructors understood the category.

Reported inclusion also varied by institutional location, although the comparison is based on few cases. All four respondents in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East and North Africa reported regular incorporation and more than one-quarter syllabus coverage. Only eight of 57 respondents in North America, Europe, or Oceania reported comparable coverage. This difference is suggestive, not evidence of a systematic regional pattern.

Overall, Global South perspectives appeared more often as supplements than as organizing frameworks. The gap concerned both the amount assigned and its role within the course.

Pedagogical Implications

The survey asked instructors what becomes more visible when Global South cases are included and what students may learn from them that Global North cases alone do not convey. These responses reflect instructors' perceptions rather than direct measures of student learning. Among the 59 respondents answering the closed-ended question, 38 (64.4 percent) reported that Global South perspectives broadened students' understanding; the remaining 21 were unsure. No respondent reported that they had little or no effect.

Open-ended responses suggested that Global South perspectives changed the questions

through which disability was examined. Instructors associated Global North-centered teaching with legal rights, formal accommodation, and established disability models. Global South perspectives instead drew attention to how colonialism and political economy shape the production and experience of impairment. Disability consequently appeared not only as a condition to which governments respond, but also as an outcome of political arrangements.

These perspectives also broadened how students understood agency and inclusion. Respondents contrasted assumptions about individual autonomy with interdependence and community support. They also emphasized the gap between formal legal recognition and the practical enjoyment of rights. Their pedagogical value thus extended beyond adding geographically diverse cases to expanding the relationships through which students analyzed disability.

These findings align with Nguyen's argument that excluding Southern knowledge removes much of human experience from disability theory and reinforces the authority of Northern epistemologies (Nguyen 2018). When Euro-American theories are treated as universally applicable, the Global South can appear primarily as a site of deficiency, while Northern ideals such as independent living become the presumed standard. This orientation can also obscure how colonial violence and global capitalism produce impairment. Global South perspectives instead position disabled people in these contexts as producers of knowledge and political claims.

Respondents nevertheless cautioned against replacing one universal framework with another. Several questioned the boundaries of the Global South and emphasized variation within both regions. The pedagogical value of broader inclusion therefore lies in helping students examine how disability categories and political claims are shaped by particular histories and relations of power.

Barriers and Needed Resources

Respondents located the main barriers in academic knowledge production and disciplinary training. Publication inequalities were cited most often (66.2 percent), followed by limited instructor familiarity (58.5 percent). More than half identified disciplinary traditions or the canonical status of established texts, while roughly two-fifths cited language barriers or limited teaching materials. Figure 3 reports all responses.

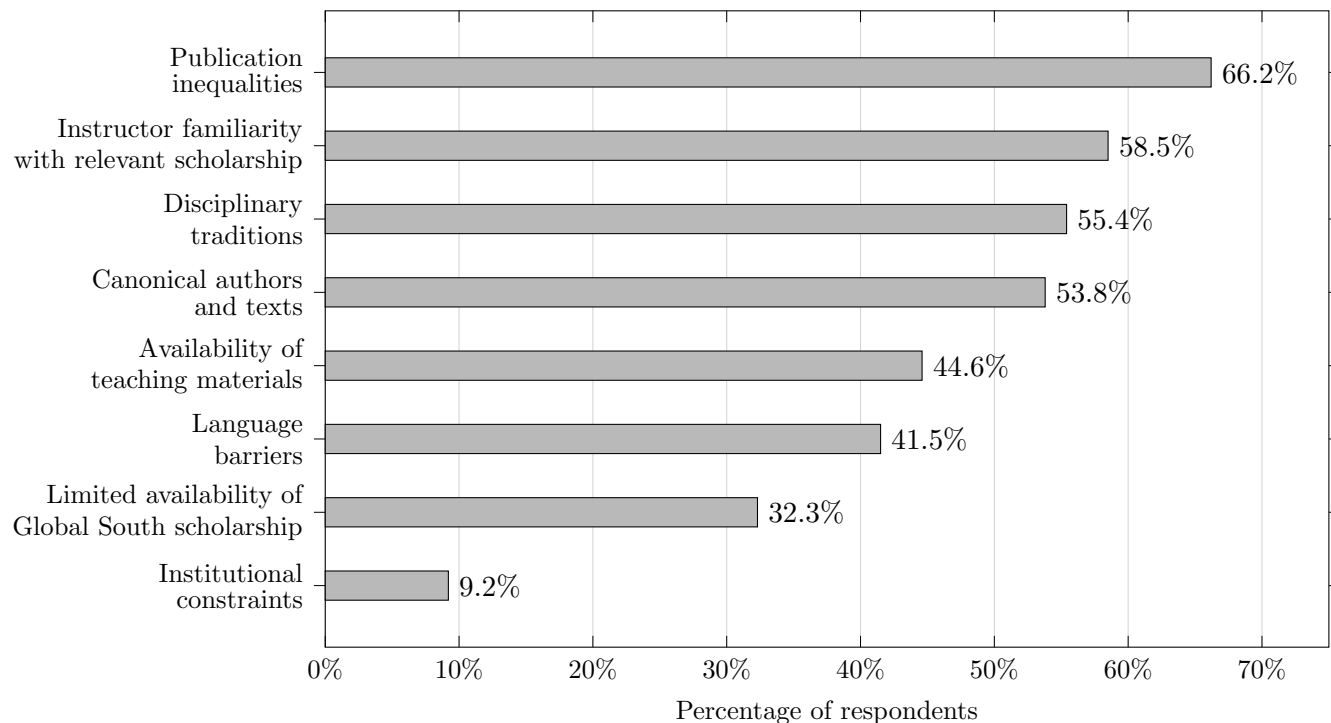


Figure 3: Reported Barriers to Incorporating Global South Perspectives

Notes: Bars report the percentage of completed respondents selecting each factor ($N = 65$).

Multiple responses were permitted.

Open-ended responses indicated that relevant scholarship was often difficult to locate, access, or adapt for teaching. Respondents cited paywalls, limited preparation time, translation needs, and accessibility concerns. The barriers thus involved both knowledge production and the infrastructure through which scholarship reaches the classroom.

Only four of the 58 respondents answering the materials question believed that sufficient resources were available; the remainder considered them insufficient or were unsure. Re-

spondents most often requested peer-reviewed scholarship and sample syllabi, followed by assignable books and first-person accounts. Appendix Figure A.2 provides the full comparison.

Respondents recommended curated bibliographies and searchable repositories to make existing scholarship easier to locate. They also called for translated and adaptable teaching materials, stronger partnerships with Global South scholars and disability organizations, and greater attention to this scholarship in graduate training.

In response, this project is developing a living teaching toolkit on an accompanying website.² The toolkit will compile scholarship and classroom resources on disability in the Global South, including sample syllabi, exercises, and accessible multimedia materials. Instructors and scholars will be invited to recommend additions so that the collection can grow over time. The toolkit offers a practical response to the recognition–implementation gap and a shared resource for instructors seeking to revise their courses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal a recognition–implementation gap: instructors valued Global South perspectives but reported limited and largely supplementary inclusion. Open-ended responses clarify why this matters. One respondent described these perspectives as exposing “the colonialism of knowledge” and different ways of “doing inclusion”; another emphasized “questioning dominant ideas about what disability is.” These accounts support arguments that Global South scholarship challenges the presumed universality of Euro-American disability frameworks (Grech 2015; Grech and Soldatic 2016; Nguyen 2018).

This contribution is especially relevant to political science pedagogy. Respondents commonly framed disability through rights, accessibility, and social welfare. Global South perspectives connect these concerns to colonial state formation, development, citizenship, political economy, and the uneven realization of rights, positioning disability as a lens for examining political power.

2. The project website and teaching toolkit link will be provided upon publication.

The gap also reflects inequalities in knowledge circulation. Publication hierarchies, disciplinary canons, and graduate training shape what instructors encounter, while language and limited classroom-ready materials constrain what they can assign. Relevant work may therefore remain outside the journals, citation networks, and seminars that influence course design.

Respondents proposed changes at both course and institutional levels. Disability-focused courses can place Global South scholarship alongside foundational theories, while broader courses can use selected readings or cases to illuminate their central questions. Graduate programs and professional associations can support these efforts through core training, accessible repositories, syllabus exchanges, translation assistance, and connections with Global South scholars and disability organizations.

Some respondents had already made progress. One invited students to select readings and found that this diversified the syllabus. Another promoted disability scholarship from Brazil through special issues, multilingual publication, and cross-regional collaboration. Others used colleagues' recommendations, guest speakers, student projects, or materials beyond conventional academic articles. The living teaching toolkit developed through this project provides one space for sharing such practices.

Broader inclusion should not substitute one generalized model for another. Respondents variously defined Global South perspectives through geography, authorship, positionality, or colonial relationships, and substantial variation exists within both regions. Their pedagogical value lies in showing how disability categories and political claims emerge from particular historical and institutional contexts. Future research can examine these processes through syllabus analysis, instructor interviews, and research on student learning.

Closing the recognition–implementation gap requires attention to course design and to the institutions that make knowledge visible and usable. Reconsidering whose scholarship organizes disability-related courses can strengthen disability politics pedagogy while making political science more globally representative and theoretically plural.

Acknowledgments

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Data Availability Statement

Replication materials will be made available in accordance with the journal's data policy and the study's human-subjects protections.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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