NEWS | POSTED OCTOBER 19, 2026

National Disability Employment Awareness Month Spotlight: Oya Pakkal

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Bio: Oya Pakkal is a Ph.D. Candidate in Psychology at Brock University (Canada) whose research focuses on identity, belonging, stigma, inclusion, and the experiences of individuals with visible and invisible stigmatized identities. Her broader research interests include disability identity, peer relationships, victimization, accessibility, and educational equity.

Beyond her research, Oya is committed to advancing accessibility and inclusion within higher education and the developmental science community. Through her involvement with the SRCD Disability Caucus Steering Committee and her engagement in conference presentations, invited talks, workshops, and webinars, she works to promote dialogue around accessibility, belonging, and inclusion.

Oya also teaches as a sessional instructor, where she teaches a fourth-year honours research capstone course and mentors undergraduate students as they develop research, professional, and academic skills.

Her contributions have been recognized through several awards, including the Accessibility and Inclusion Recognition Award.

Through her research, teaching, mentorship, and service, Oya is committed to understanding and addressing barriers to belonging, inclusion, and success for individuals with visible and invisible stigmatized identities.

Q: Why did you decide to choose developmental science as a course of study or career?

A: I was drawn to developmental science because it asks some of the most meaningful questions about how people come to understand themselves and their place in the world. As I learned more about human development, I became especially interested in identity development, belonging, and the experiences of young people whose identities are often marginalized or misunderstood. Developmental science provided a framework for understanding how relationships, educational environments, institutions, and broader social systems shape development over time. Those interests ultimately led me to study disability identity and inclusion in higher education. What continues to inspire me is the opportunity to connect research with meaningful change. My goal is not only to better understand the experiences of marginalized students but also to generate knowledge that can help create more accessible, inclusive, and supportive educational environments.

Q: What are you most proud of in your career?

A: I am most proud of the impact I have been able to have through research, teaching, mentorship, and accessibility advocacy.

During my doctoral studies, I have had the opportunity to serve as a sessional instructor and teach a fourth-year honours research capstone course, where I got a chance to mentor undergraduate students as they develop their research interests and professional goals. One of the most rewarding aspects of my work is supporting students as they build confidence in their abilities and pursue opportunities beyond their undergraduate degree. Seeing students I have taught and mentored graduate, enter graduate and professional programs, and discover their own potential is incredibly meaningful to me.

I am also proud to have received highly competitive federal funding, including a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship-Doctoral award, which affirmed the importance of the research questions I am pursuing and supported my work on disability identity and inclusion in higher education.

Equally meaningful was receiving Brock University's Accessibility and Inclusion Recognition Award and being named a Champion of Inclusion. These recognitions reflect values that guide all aspects of my work and reinforce my commitment to creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Q: Do you have a mentor, or mentors, who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, who and how?

A: I have been incredibly fortunate to learn from several mentors who have shaped my development as a researcher, educator, and advocate. My doctoral supervisor, ***Dr. Elizabeth Shulman****, has provided invaluable guidance throughout my master's and Ph.D. training and encouraged me to pursue research that is deeply meaningful to me. I have also benefited greatly from the mentorship of* ***Dr. Naomi Andrews, Dr. Rajiv Jhangiani, Dr. Sandra Della Porta, and Dr. Karen Louise Smith****, each of whom has influenced my growth in different ways.*

One of the things I am most grateful for is the opportunity to be involved in several research labs, projects, and collaborative initiatives throughout my training. Working with different mentors and collaborators has exposed me to new ideas, methods, and perspectives while helping me discover the questions I am most passionate about pursuing. These experiences have played an important role in helping me find my place as a scholar and develop confidence in my own voice.

Beyond academic guidance, my mentors have opened doors to new opportunities, encouraged me to take on challenges I might not have otherwise pursued, and demonstrated the importance of supporting others along the way. Their generosity has inspired the kind of researcher, educator, and mentor I hope to become.

Q: What advice would you give to a student beginning their Ph.D. studies in developmental science or a related field?

A: Be curious, stay open to new opportunities, and remember that a Ph.D. is about more than developing expertise in a research area. It is also an opportunity to grow as a scholar, collaborator, and member of a broader academic community. One of the best decisions I made during graduate school was getting involved in professional communities, including the SRCD Disability Caucus. Through the caucus, I connected with researchers from other institutions, developed lasting friendships, found mentors and collaborators, and became involved in initiatives that promote accessibility and inclusion within developmental science.

I would also encourage students to volunteer, collaborate with others, and say yes to opportunities that align with their interests, even if they feel a little outside their comfort zone. Some of the most meaningful experiences in my career have come from taking chances on opportunities that were not part of my original plan. Finally, remember that your perspective matters. Developmental science is strengthened when diverse voices and experiences contribute to the questions we ask and the knowledge we create.