What’s in a Name?  
The Labels and Language of Special Education

Some years ago at the annual convention of the Council for Exceptional Children, hundreds of attendees were wearing big yellow and black buttons that proclaimed “Label jars, not children!” Wearers of the buttons were presumably making a statement about one or more of the criticisms leveled at categorizing and labeling exceptional children, such as labeling is negative because it focuses only on the child’s deficits, labeling makes it more likely that others will expect poor performance or bad behavior from the child, and labels may hurt the child’s self-esteem.

Labels, in and of themselves, are not the problem. The dictionary defines label as “a descriptive word or phrase applied to a person, group, theory, etc., as a convenient generalized classification” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1986, p. 785). Most special educators agree that a common language for referring to children who share instructional and related service needs is necessary. The words that we use as labels, and even the order in which they are spoken or written, do, however, influence the degree to which those words effectively and appropriately communicate variables relevant to the design and delivery of educational and other human services. For example, although they may convey a general set of common educational needs, terms such as the handicapped or the retarded imply negative connotations that are unwarranted and inappropriate. Such blanket labels imply that all persons in the group being labeled are alike; individuality has been lost (Gelb, 1997). At the personal level, when we describe a child as a “physically handicapped boy,” we place too much emphasis on the disability, perhaps suggesting that the deficits caused by the disability are the most important thing to know about him.

How, then, should we refer to exceptional children? At the personal level, we should follow Tom Lovitt’s advice and call them by their names: Linda, Shawon, and Jackie. Referring to a child as “Molly, a fifth-grade student with learning disabilities,” helps us focus on the individual child and her primary role as a student. Such a description does not ignore or gloss over Molly’s learning problems but acknowledges that there are other things we should know about her.

It is important for everyone, not just special educators, to speak, write, and think about exceptional children and adults in ways that respect each person’s individuality and recognize strengths and abilities instead of focusing only on disabilities. Simply changing the way we talk about an individual with a disability, however, will not make the problems posed by her disability go away. Some disabled people have begun to speak out against the efforts of those without disabilities to assuage their feelings with language that may be politically correct but that ignores the reality of a disability. Judy Heumann, former director of the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services and a person who has used a wheelchair since she was 18 months old, explains her position:

As our movement has evolved, we have been plagued by people, almost always not themselves disabled, attempting to change what we call ourselves. If we are “victims” of anything, it is of such terms as physically challenged, able-disabled, differently-abled, handi-capables, and people with differing abilities, to name just a few. Nondisabled people’s discomfort with reality-based terms such as disabled led them to these euphemisms. I believe these euphemisms have the effect of depoliticizing our own terminology and devaluing our own view of ourselves as disabled people. . . .

I have a physical disability that results in my inability to walk and perform a number of other significant tasks without the assistance of another person. This cannot be labeled away and I am not ashamed of it. I feel no need to change the word “disabled.” For me, there is no stigma. I am not driven to call myself a “person with a disability.” I know I am a person; I do not need to tell myself that I am. I also do not believe that being called a “person with a disability” results in my being treated any more like a human being. Maybe putting the word “disabled” first makes people stop and look at what, as a result of society’s historical indifference to and/or hatred of
people like me, is a critical part of my existence. . . .

Let the disabled people who are politically involved and personally affected determine our own language. . . . A suggestion to those of you who do not know what to call me: ask!

Donald Cook, an educational researcher, contributed these comments to an Internet discussion of how to speak to and about people with disabilities:

I am handicapped by post polio syndrome and must use a wheelchair and/or a walker. The other day I was referred to, for the first time, as “differently-abled.” The context was benign: the speaker had noticed a beach with special wheelchairs that went across sand and into the water, and thought I would like to know about it. Still the term “differently-abled” stunned me. I asked whose feelings were being spared here, mine or hers? This question angered her—a possible sign of a question with a point. It seems clear to me that my condition is not merely different in some abstract dimension but one of a loss of function. So I prefer “handicapped” or some term which acknowledges that. (CompuServe Education Forum, July 11, 1994)

Bernard Rimland (1993a), director of the Autism Research Institute in San Diego and the father of a son with autism, is a severe critic of those who are trying to change the language of special education under the arrogant assumption of the moral high ground . . . certain that their way is the only way. . . . They insist that words such as “autistic,” “retarded,” and “handicapped” not be used. They insist that the silly euphemism “challenging” be used to describe severely self-injurious or assaultive behavior. . . . It deprives the handicapped of their most valuable asset—the recognition of their disability by the rest of us. Yes, there are people on the borderline between normal and handicapped. Does that mean that no one is handicapped? Yes, there are shades of gray. Does that mean there is no black and white? Does twilight disprove the difference between day and night? (p. 1)

Michael Goldfarb, executive director of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, offers some provocative and insightful thoughts on the language of special education:

Consider the following lists of words:

crippled
disabled
handicapped
challenged

inmate
patient
client
program participant

feeble minded
retarded
person with mental retardation
person

institution
state school
developmental center

Consider the words on the top of each list, the old and un fashionable ones. The names at the bottom are new and more acceptable. Many professionals in this field have made it a matter of deep personal commitment to get you to use the most up-to-date expressions.

Every one of these changes has been presented as an essential act of consciousness raising. Every one of these changes has been proposed by numbers of enlightened,
progressive, and intelligent professionals with the genuine intent of changing the image and role of disabled people in this society. Every one of these linguistic reforms has been followed several years later by newer and “better” names. Every one of these changes has failed to make the world different.

Linguistic reform without systemic change conceals unhappy truths. Social problems may be reflected in the way we speak, but they are rarely, if ever, cured by changes in language. It is certainly true that liberals feel better when they use the most acceptable phrase, but this should not obscure the fact that the oppressed continue to be oppressed under any label. (Perhaps we should not call people “the oppressed”; perhaps it would be better to call them “people with oppression.”)

Our real problem in this and many other societies is that we respect only intelligence, stylish good looks, and earning potential. This society denigrates people who are not intelligent, who are deemed unattractive, or who are poor. Referring to retarded people as “people with mental retardation” will not make them brighter, prettier, richer. These names leave the old prejudices intact. Society’s attitudes and the values that underlie them must be changed. This will take far more than trivial linguistic changes. Can you imagine a Planning Board meeting at which a local resident says, “We don’t want any retarded people living in our neighborhood! But people with mental retardation? That’s different. They can move in anytime.” I can’t.

Changing attitudes and values is more difficult than changing language. Perhaps that is why we spend so much time changing language.