

# Language to Live and Learn By

by Lauren J. Lieberman and Katrina Arndt

A new student, Terrace, moved to Jackson Heights Elementary School in the middle of the school year. Terrace was born with spina bifida and uses crutches to ambulate. He had been involved in a tee-ball league and the local swim team. When he arrived at his new physical education class, his teacher introduced him to his new classmates. She asked if he wanted to be called handicapped, disabled, or crippled. His response was, "just call me Terrace."

Today, in the United States, students of all abilities are being included in general education classrooms and settings. Twenty-eight years after passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, over 93% of all students with disabilities are now included in public schools. The more current version of this law is Public Law 105-17, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The change from *handicapped children* to *individuals with disabilities* reflects a shift in how disabilities are thought of and written about. Reference to the *individual* is placed before the word *disabilities*. IDEA and similar legislation has resulted in students with disabilities being included in the mainstream of school life. A further result is that the inclusion of students with disabilities has challenged teachers to embrace all students in a *person-first* way. *Person-first* is a movement that advocates looking at individuals instead of differences (Beadles, 2001). Language specific to that movement is the focus of this article.

The way students with disabilities are talked and written about is in part a product of attitudes about such students. Verbal and written communications reflect attitudes toward disability and shape the attitudes of others, including students both with and without disabilities. In the school setting, it is essential that teachers model an environment that respects all individuals, in all their diversity. Diversity includes linguistic, racial, physical, emotional, and intellectual differences. If inclusive and respectful language is not modeled in the classroom, there are potentially far-reaching implications of diminished student response to difference and disability.

For example, a teacher who refers to a student as "the crippled girl in 5th period" paints a picture of disability, reducing the student to a label. However, a comment that "Amanda is in my 5th period class," uses *person-first* language, suggesting respect for Amanda as a person and, by using her name, communicating that respect to others. Too often, descriptive language, while intended to identify, is used in limiting and minimizing ways. No person is a label and no person should be reduced to a single characteristic.

Though not yet common, *person-first* language is an accepted and recommended practice. Using it is one key to erasing stigma and being descriptive without labeling people

in restrictive and outdated ways. *Person-first* language acknowledges shifts in education and culture in the United States toward inclusion. Writers and speakers who do not respect and use *person-first* language risk losing their audience as they persist in using outdated and offensive language. A further result is the loss of innovative and provocative discourse.

Excellent ideas couched in outdated language are likely to be dismissed or ignored, thus impoverishing fields such as special education and adapted physical education.

## A Blueprint

*Person-first* language is a blueprint for action, not a list of terms deemed acceptable for use. This article provides an introductory list of current terminology; yet the point is that there is no single way to refer to all people. The ideal is to include the people referred to by asking how they prefer their difference to be noted. For example, the National Association of the Deaf (n.d.) concurs that labels are powerful:

*What's in a name? Plenty! Words and labels can have a profound effect on people. Deaf and hard of hearing people are sensitive as to how they are referred, because they have experienced being put down and disparaged by other people. They have seen their intelligence, their abilities, and their skills questioned simply because they are deaf or hard of hearing.*

Words must reflect that individuals with disabilities are valuable and equal members of society. A person with a disability is first and foremost a person. Having established the importance of using *person-first* language, let's consider specific examples. The phrases *the disabled*, *the blind*, or *the retarded* are outdated. When people are lumped together into one category, it robs them of their individuality. People with disabilities do not, in general, consider themselves to be suffering from, stricken with, or afflicted by a disease.



**"Just call me Terrace."**

Use:	In place of:	Because:
Person without a disability, or person who is non-disabled	Normal	Use of normal categorizes others as abnormal. Acknowledging the range of experience among people is more inclusive.
Person with a disability	Disabled person	This is the basis of person-first terminology.
Person with mental retardation and intellectual disability; people with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities	Mentally disabled	Recommended by 2002 AAMR Position Statement to describe persons with intellectual disabilities.
Person who is visually impaired or blind	Blind person	Person first terminology
Person who uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair bound, or confined to a wheelchair	Person first terminology
Person who has cerebral palsy	Palsied, spastic	Recommended by 2003 UCP National to describe persons with CP
Deaf person, or person who is hard-of hearing	The deaf, deaf and dumb, deaf-mute	Deaf is often capitalized to reflect membership in a culture involving a unique language and communication. <sup>1</sup>
Person who has epilepsy	Epileptic	Describes a person who experiences seizures. Epileptic is inappropriate as it reduces a person to a single characteristic.
Person who is a dwarf or little person	Midget	"Such terms as dwarf, little person, LP, and person of short stature are all acceptable, but most people would rather be referred to by their name than by a label." ( <i>Little People of America</i> Frequently Asked Questions)

Referring to any group of children with a blanket label is inappropriate. For example, *special population children* and *special needs students* reduces individual children to a homogeneous group, while the reality is that all children are different and deserve to be seen as individuals. Equally outdated is use of the phrase *confined to a wheelchair*. The United Cerebral Palsy Association notes wryly, "On the contrary, a wheelchair is the key to mobility for some people. Indeed, they are only 'confined' when their wheelchairs break down. Better to say he or she uses a wheelchair" (UCP National, 2003).

The language standard endorsed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.) is now more common and widely accepted. Under "Guidelines to Reduce Bias in Language" disabilities are addressed specifically.

*The guiding principle for 'nonhandicapping' language is to maintain the integrity of individuals as human beings. . . . Avoid language that equates persons with their condition; that has superfluous, negative overtones. . . . Challenged and special are often considered euphemistic and should be used only if the people in your study or program prefer those terms.* (p. 69)

The following list is a guide to assist teachers, researchers, and writers in using appropriate terminology that reflects this principle. Other excellent lists of language and terminology can be found on websites for the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Little People of America, the AAMR, and the National Federation of the Blind. There are many others. These are included as examples of resources for writers and teachers. Though there is some disagreement about terminology and terms often shift, one constant is the need to write in a way that recognizes the individuality and dignity of every person with or without a disability.

In general: Use *first names* when identifying students with disabilities in class, meetings, or discussions.

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## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> The term *Deaf person* is acceptable, generally, just as the cultural description of an Italian person or a French person is accepted. Many people who are hard-of-hearing prefer that term as opposed to hearing impaired. The term *impaired* gives the impression that there is something wrong with the person, and many individuals who are hard-of-hearing do not think there is anything "wrong" or "impaired" about themselves (National Association of the Deaf, n.d.).

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