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Abstract

This brief article acknowledges the recognition that, when speaking of individuals with disabilities, it is important to acknowledge their personhood first and their disability second. This article seeks to take a closer look at linguistic bias towards people with disabilities especially in relation to students and the current emphasis on inclusion, for which we must stop separating them through our "special education" language. **Keyword: Attitudes**

Reader Response

A Rose by Any Other Name: Would It Smell as Sweet?

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Shakespeare noted that the word that one uses to name an object of concern does not necessarily influence the objective meaning of that "thing" (i.e., "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." [*Romeo and Juliet*]). Perhaps this is true for inanimate objects. However, in today's culture, the "way" in which we say things does influence the perceptions people form.

We have recognized that, when we speak of individuals with disabilities, it is important to value their personhood first and to acknowledge their disability second, as initially evidenced by the 1983 change in the name of the "Association for Severely and Profoundly Handicapped Persons" to "The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps." Most recently, the actions taken by the U.S. Congress to rename the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (in P.L. 101-476) demonstrate the growing recognition for the need to focus on the issue of appropriate naming. The sensitivity toward human beings represented in this name change relates to an issue that special educators must continually be aware of and concerned with: the subtle way in which our terminology and phraseology—the names and the prose we use—contribute to discrimination against, or advocacy for, persons with disabilities. Our efforts to speak of people with special needs as "individuals" first is an effort to limit the subtle discrimination created by the *way* in which we refer to individuals with disabilities.

It is time, however, to take a closer look at linguistic bias toward people with disabilities, expressed in other terms used to describe education services for students with whom we work. This is especially critical given the current focus on inclusion. If students are to participate successfully within regular education programs, we must stop separating them through our "special education language."

For example, a recent newsletter listed potential topics for articles that were being requested by readers for future issues. One of the items sought was an article on "Are there some mentally retarded people who should

not be *programmed* (too low level? too old? etc.)." Along similar lines, conference sessions and workshops often promise the development of skills for better "*programming*" of persons who are mentally retarded.

The way in which many educators speak of their work with individuals who are severely disabled is a serious problem. Discrimination is evident in the use of the term "programming" to describe the act of "teaching" an individual who is moderately, severely, or profoundly retarded.

Webster's 1988 entry under program/programming regarding behavior is "to direct or predetermine" (as thinking of behavior) completely as if by computer programming" (p. 940). The use of the term "programming" in reference to human beings who are mentally retarded subtly implies that these individuals, like computers, are inanimate, devoid of capabilities without the intervention of programmers, lacking nuance and will—"things" that can be manipulated to produce whatever outcome the programmer desires. The teacher as programmer conjures up an image denying the humanity involved in motivating and enabling someone to know more, to acquire a skill, to learn. Teaching and learning are not binary mechanical activities.

Our terminology indicates paradigms within which we think and out of which we act. The metaphors we use and live by tell of our underlying conceptualizations of situations and procedures. We have choices among many terms that describe teaching activities. "Teaching" implies a wider, richer, more promising activity than the high-tech, yet narrower "programming." Machines can *program* machines. Teachers *teach* real people with sensitivity, creativity, and promise. There is a need for precise systematic instruction; however, the human interaction between teacher and student is an essential part of "teaching" for all students.

The use of terms unfamiliar to regular educators may further separate children with special needs from children who are in the regular education program. We need to be sensitive about the use of technical terms such as "skill acquisition plans," "probes," and "baseline and intervention data." We can just as easily speak

of "instructional plans," "student assessments," and "pre- and posttesting" in everyday interactions with colleagues who are regular educators.

"Programming" for children with disabilities has different connotations from those implied by "teaching" these students. This difference in meaning has particular implications for individuals in the general public who are less aware of the capabilities of those with severe disabilities. The way in which we speak of our work gives messages to others about our students: who they

are, what they are capable of being, and how we interact with them. It is time for us to take another look at the way in which we speak of individuals with disabilities, and to review the ways in which special education professionals subtly, perhaps unknowingly, promote the unconscionable discrimination that exists in our culture against these individuals. Let us review our terminology so that we can promote, rather than detract from, acceptance of and respect for individuals with special needs in the high-tech world in which we live.