

Socially and Culturally Sensitive Communication: Using Person First Language

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Abstract

“Cultural sensitivity is important in order to avoid language that relies on unfounded assumptions, negative descriptions or stereotypes of a given group’s age, class, gender, or geographic, ethnic, racial, or religious characteristics.” – Professor D.Parthasarathy

In today’s global world it is becoming increasingly important to consciously consider the terminology we use when referring to others. The purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss the importance of using Person-First terminology in conversations with or about individuals with disabilities.

Using terminology that does not offend or demean anyone is an appropriate way to show respect. Using Person First language is respectful because in doing so we recognize the most important aspect of an individual with disabilities – he or she is a person first. It is important that we educate others, adults as well as school children, to the fact that disabilities are a natural part of the human condition.

Along with accepting the responsibility for using appropriate language personally, as educators it is recommended that our students be required to use person-first language in discussions and in their writing. While the benefits of using person-first language have not been challenged, there appears to be a shortage of research providing data on the impact of this practice. Research into the impact of the use of person-first language on persons with disabilities is recommended. Conducting research on the influence that the use of person-first language has on perceptions of neuro-typical individuals regarding persons with disabilities is another topic which warrants further investigation.

Introduction

Our world is constantly becoming more complex and diversified. Those in the business world have come to realize the importance of socially and culturally sensitive communication, which is sometimes also known as being “politically correct.” The concept is also a global one. In a presentation at the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, India, Professor Parthasarathy of the Department of Humanities and Social Services stated that “Spoken or written language should be culturally sensitive, unbiased, simple, concise, concrete and vivid. Cultural sensitivity is important in order to avoid language that relies on unfounded assumptions, negative descriptions or stereotypes of a given group’s age, class, gender, or geographic, ethnic, racial, or religious characteristics” (Parthasarathy, n.d.). Being sensitive when communicating with and about individuals with disabilities is important in demonstrating respect for all.

One of the important roles of an educator is to demonstrate respect for those her or she is entrusted with teaching. Using language that does not offend or demean individuals should be an ultimate goal. In an article in the journal *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Carol Russell explains that “Person first is a philosophy reflected through language and actions by putting the person first and the disability second” (Russell, 2008). This helps focus on the individual rather than the disability. She describes Person First as a philosophy reflected through language and actions and gives the following examples of this way of thinking and acting:

- *Referring to the person first and then the disability.
- *Emphasizing abilities and not disabilities or limitations.
- *Not patronizing or giving excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability (Russell, 2008).

In the field of Special Education, terms describing individuals with disabilities have long been stereotypical, demeaning and focused on what a person is not able to do. Conversely, the use of Person First language considers what a person is able to do and celebrates the fact that every individual is an important member of society.

Using Person First language is important because it considers the most important aspect of an individual with disabilities – he or she is a person first. It is important that we educate others, adults as well as school children, to the fact that disabilities are a natural part of the human condition.

Interest

As a special educator with thirty years of experience, I have a special interest in this topic. The privilege of getting to know hundreds of children and adults with disabilities has shown me that even those most affected have strengths. To focus on these gifts and talents rather than differences and deficiencies enables us to more fully embrace our fellow human beings.

Once someone is aware of and begins to use Person First language, other terminology seems to glaringly stand out. Hardly a week goes by that someone does not ask me “What is wrong with him/her?”. Rather than going through a lengthy explanation of Person First language, I usually say (with a smile) “Nothing is wrong”. Usually it only takes once for the questioner to understand the implications of my response.

My long-term goals include becoming an educator of special education teachers or working at the policy-making level of a department of education in the field of Special

Education. Advocating the use of Person First language will continue to be one of my passions in either forum.

History

Historically, persons with disabilities have been seen as cursed. In nomadic times, individuals with disabilities were killed because they were not able to physically keep up with the tribe. Trepanning, or the drilling of holes in the heads of individuals to release the supposed “demons” of the mind was first documented in prehistoric times and continued to be practiced as recently as the nineteenth century. Language which is now considered derogatory has roots in the Middle Ages, such as the term “handicapped” which is said to have come from the practice of having persons with disabilities stand on the street with their “cap in their hand” in order to beg for money. The term “cripple” is also a reminder of times when families were ashamed to have family members with disabilities and would lock them in rooms to “hide” them from society. Terminology has changed over the years, with individuals with mental retardation being labeled as idiots, imbeciles or morons. Currently the term mentally retarded is being replaced by “intellectually disabled” or “mentally challenged.”

Although some steps were taken to help individuals with disabilities during the early twentieth century, it is commonly accepted that the movements for social change in the 1960’s were the impetus for the disability rights and independent living movements. Specifically, the Civil rights movement and consumerism were momentum for society beginning to think of those with disabilities in new ways (Casey, 2004).

Research/Findings

The idea that all people have value is the backbone of Person First philosophy. Person First philosophy as demonstrated in terminology and actions is a matter of respect for a person with special needs (Russell, 2009). The Person First movement is increasingly being embraced in our country. In the 1990s, federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) incorporated person first language (Russell, 2008). Increasingly textbooks have become person-first and journals are requiring submissions to be written in person-first terms (Russell, 2008).

Research on the topics of the impact of the use of person first language on those with disabilities as well as on the perceptions of people who embrace the use of this form of communication has been difficult for me to find. The only references I found were articles that gave the opinions of the author on the impact of person first language. While there are references to people appreciating more thoughtful language, no formal studies could be found.

Conclusion

As scholars who are also educators, it is our responsibility to model the use of person first language. Snow (2005) states that “People First language” was created by individuals who said “We are not our disabilities, it is not about political correctness” but good manners and respect.” Taking the time to look behind the differences and embrace the strengths of each person will lessen the impact that language has on our perception of our

fellow human beings. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.”

Recommendations

Modeling the use of Person First language in speech and in our writing is the first thing that must be done to improve perceptions about individuals who have disabilities. As instructors, we can require our students to use person-first terminology in discussions and in written work. Instruction on the subject is needed to inform others of the benefits of using this socially and culturally sensitive form of communication.

Further research must be undertaken to insure that terminology is acceptable to individuals with disabilities while still giving those who are communicating a clear understanding of the topic being discussed. Because it was difficult for me to locate formal research on the perceptions people without disabilities have of individuals before and after being taught to use person-first language as well as the impact of the use of such language on individuals with disabilities, these topics present themselves as possibilities for further research.

Raising public awareness about benefits of using culturally sensitive language is another conduit to improving the lives of those with disabilities. Activism in changing terminology used by governmental agencies, publications and textbooks is also an important goal.

References

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