



Watch Your Language

Closing or Opening the Special Education Curtain

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As a special education major going into her first field placement, Ms. Ryan expected to learn about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. What stood out the most at the end of her experience, however, were the following incidents:

The first incident occurred during an informal conversation with a teacher while the students were working on an assignment. During the conversation, the teacher nodded toward a student who was struggling with his work and said, "Can you believe he was supposed to be mainstreamed?" which was heard by all the students.

The second incident occurred later that same day. As the

teacher prepared materials for a math assessment, the paraeducator approached her and asked, "They get to use calculators?" In front of all of the students, the teacher responded, "Well, they are special education students."

During the third incident, Ms. Ryan observed another teacher who approached her students' differences in a very different way. One student asked the teacher why another student received extra free time for completing an assignment, by saying "That's not fair." The teacher responded, "Just like you, all students in this class work on learning new things in their own ways. In this class, we do not expect everyone to learn,

look, sound, and act the same." Later, the teacher told the students, "In your lives, you're going to meet a lot of people who are different from you, and it is these differences that make life special. Think about how boring it would be if we were all the same."

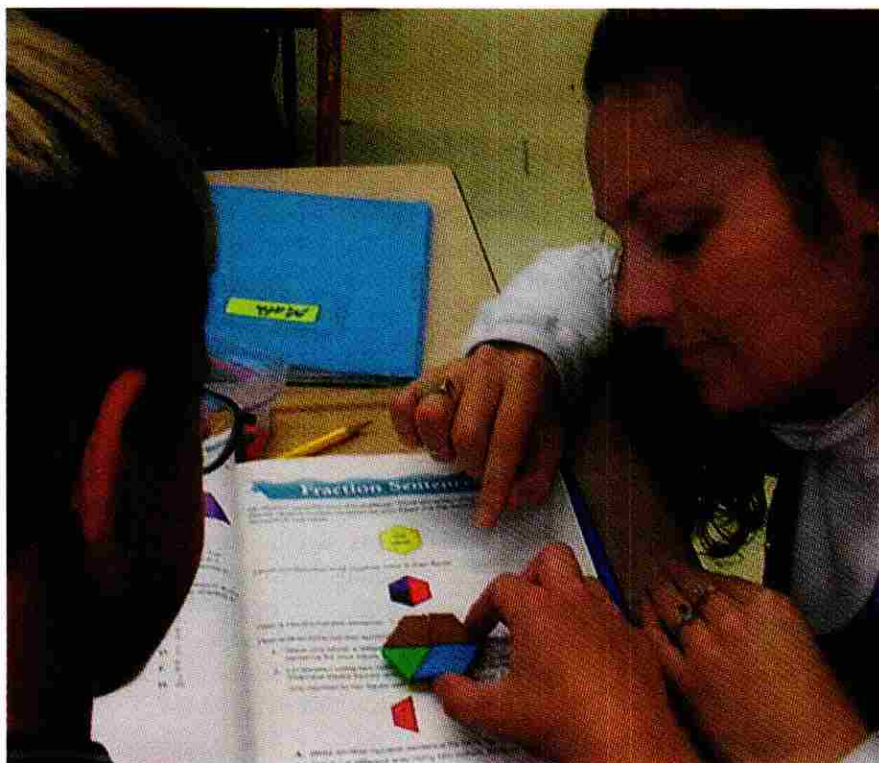
The final incident occurred when Ms. Ryan attended a planning-team meeting that included a student and his family. The team discussed the student's needs and strategies to enhance learning, rather than the student's disability category. Individual members and the student noted that he was good at some things and had difficulty with other things. The educators listened carefully to the com-

ments made by the student and the family and communicated that they believed that the student could succeed in their classroom. One team member told the student, "Trying is one of the stepping stones to learning."

How did the behavior and language of the teachers in the first two incidents differ from that of the teachers in the last two incidents? How did the language used in each incident affect the students, educators, and family members? How would you categorize your language and interactions with students, family members, and other professionals? This article helps answer these questions and provides guidelines and examples—and nonexamples—of effective use of inclusive language. Our hope is to assist educators in using language and engaging in other behaviors that empower students to succeed in inclusive educational settings and communicate acceptance of individual differences.

The differences in behavior and language of the teachers in these incidents reflect a difference in the way teachers view students' competencies and deficits (Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Smith, 2000). These differences are like a curtain, woven from the language of special education. This curtain can hide and hinder students' abilities, individual differences, and personalities—or, depending on how it is used, can complement and enhance the abilities of these same students. Do you employ the special education language to present certain students as deficient, different, and needy? Or do you use language to pull back the curtain by promoting an acceptance of individual differences and viewing students with disabilities as competent people who can make important decisions about their own lives?

These important differences in the way we use language can have a significant effect on students, educators, and family members (Salend, 2001). For students, these differences can influence their academic performance, self-esteem, and friendships with others (Rosenthal, 1997). When teachers talk in ways that present students as inca-



Use instructional feedback to support student learning and acknowledge effort: "You're really working hard," and "You have the skill to do this."

pable or invisible, students remain behind the special education curtain, often shutting down and holding back their talents, and sometimes learning "behind the teacher's back." For teachers, deficit-oriented language used in the classroom prevents them from seeing and providing a challenging educational program that addresses students' individual needs and strengths. It also hinders their ability to create an inclusive classroom environment that supports the learning and social performance of all students (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993). For family members, these differences can affect their perceptions of teachers and their willingness to become actively involved in their child's educational program or individualized education program (IEP) meetings.

Closing the Curtain: Deficit-Oriented Language and Interactions

In the first two incidents, the educators are acting in a "deficit oriented" manner. Their language presents the stu-

dents in terms of their disabilities, limitations, and what they cannot do (Smith, 1999). Though these educators may be well meaning and dedicated to their work, their language and interactions with students unknowingly limit and deny their students access to skills, curriculum content, and relationships with their peers (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & McFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). Here are some examples (the "nonexamples" mentioned earlier) of some unfortunate deficit-oriented

**LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL—IT CAN
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interactions between educators and students:

- **Defining student's performance in terms of deficits.** Educators sometimes describe students in terms of what they *cannot* do (e.g., limited English proficient) or who they are *not* (e.g., non-English speaking), rather than what they *can* do or who they *are* (e.g., second-language learner). For example, Jaron, a student with a severe disability, was described by his teacher as "low functioning. . . . He can't add 2 + 2 or say his ABCs. He's in here for the social benefits."
- **Describing student's difficulties in the presence of the student and others.** Educators may comment on a student's difficulties in the presence of the student or others. For example, Mary, a student with Down syndrome, was attempting to type with a visitor to her class. The teacher said to the visitor, "Is it O.K. with you that she's retarded? She can't spell her name." Mary had just typed her name with one mistake and wanted to show her teacher but stopped.
- **Commenting positively but within a deficit perspective on behaviors that are unique to the student's disability.** Educators sometimes describe students with respect to behaviors that have *limited relevance* and are specific to their disabilities. For example, at an IEP meeting attended by Luis, a student who uses a wheelchair, and his family, a teacher described Luis as smart. "He knows the curb comes whether I'm pushing or he is pushing himself." However, his teachers had little to say

WHEN TEACHERS TALK IN WAYS THAT PRESENT STUDENTS AS INCAPABLE OR INVISIBLE, STUDENTS REMAIN BEHIND THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CURTAIN, OFTEN SHUTTING DOWN AND HOLDING BACK THEIR TALENTS.

about his academic work and potential.

- **Referring to students with disability-related nouns or nicknames.** Educators may set students apart *and objectify them* by using disability-related nouns or nicknames to refer to them. For example, during a team-teaching activity, Ms. Parsons announced, "The inclusion kids will work with Mr. Stein, and everyone else will work with me."
- **Using terms that locate problems within students.** Sometimes, educators use terms such as *dropouts* or *disadvantaged*, which locate problems within students rather than within the educational system (Freire, 1970). For example, in discussing a student's difficulties in reading, a teacher attributed them to "his being an at-risk slow learner."

EDUCATORS SHOULD TALK ABOUT CHALLENGING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL GOALS FOR ALL STUDENTS.

- **Using language and talking about topics that are not age appropriate.** Educators sometimes speak down to students with disabilities or talk to them about age-inappropriate topics, which can communicate to students' peers that their classmate isn't like them. For example, an educator who usually greeted high school students with such comments as "Hey, Jo. How're you doing," greeted Patti, a 17-year-old student who could not speak, with "Do you have a smile for me today?" in a baby-talk tone. Later that week, Patti was working on a biology assignment with a substitute teaching assistant, who spoke to her in baby-talk tones even while asking her to choose among multiple-choice questions.
- **Completing the student's assignment or accepting student nonparticipation.** Educators may assume

EDUCATORS SOMETIMES DESCRIBE STUDENTS IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY CANNOT DO OR WHO THEY ARE NOT, RATHER THAN WHAT THEY CAN DO OR WHO THEY ARE.

that a student is not interested in the content of the class, does not understand the assignment, or lacks the skills to complete it. Instead of encouraging or assisting the student with the assignment, these educators may complete it for the student or accept the student's nonparticipation. For example, a paraeducator for Tom, a student with autism, often completed Tom's assignment because "I feel sorry for him." During another activity, Tom's teacher told him, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

- **Ignoring a student during instructional activities.** Educators sometimes fail to include a student in instructional activities. For example, a teacher about to demonstrate to her students how to assemble the pieces of a pillowcase that the class was making, invited the students to watch by saying, "Everybody gather around closer to watch this." However, the teacher did not encourage Nick, a student who could not talk, to move his wheelchair closer to the group. While other students were asked to respond to teacher-directed questions, Nick was consistently ignored during the activity whether or not he was paying attention.
- **Fostering the separation of students with disabilities from the rest of the class.** Educators may isolate students from their peers. For example, during reading instruction while students worked in reading groups, Henry, a student with a learning disability, worked with his special education teacher in the back of the classroom.
- **Creating a dependence on adults.** Some educators engage in behaviors

EDUCATORS MAY SET STUDENTS APART AND OBJECTIFY THEM BY USING DISABILITY-RELATED NOUNS OR NICKNAMES (LIKE “THE INCLUSION KIDS”) TO REFER TO THEM.

that prevent students from developing independence. For example, a teacher finds it uncomfortable to watch Jessie, a student who stutters, struggle to express his thoughts and avoids asking Jessie to respond. When Jessie does speak, the teacher interrupts him and completes his sentences.

- **Limiting social interactions with peers.** Educators sometimes engage in behaviors that limit students' social interactions. For example, an interpreter for Felicia, a student with a hearing impairment, spoke for her and hovered around her in the lunchroom and at recess, which served to limit her socialization with her peers.
- **Causing the loss of personal control or assuming that students need assistance.** Educators may take actions that limit students' control over their lives, or imply that students need assistance. For example, during a break in the activities of a high school classroom, Ben, a non-verbal student with cerebral palsy, was slowly pushing himself across the room in his wheelchair. A peer pushed him into a corner facing the wall and set the wheelchair's brakes. When asked about this, the student replied, “The teacher does it all the time.”
- **Placing students in embarrassing situations.** Some educators engage in behaviors that cause students to be embarrassed. For example, a female school nurse, announced that she was “taking William (a male student who uses a wheelchair) to the girls' bathroom.”
- **Speaking to students through others.** Educators may interact with stu-

dents by speaking to others who are then expected to interpret for students. For example, rather than directing her comments to Leon, a student with a severe disability, a teacher spoke to Leon's teaching aide.

Opening the Curtain: Competence-Oriented Language and Interactions

The last two incidents presented at the beginning of this article represent educators who accept students with disabilities and provide a classroom environment where they can flourish. Their language and interactions reflect an emphasis on competence and communicate their acceptance of individual differences. Such use of language opens

EDUCATORS CAN SHOW THAT THEY ARE COMFORTABLE WITH INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND ACT PROMPTLY AND DECISIVELY WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER STUDENT BEHAVIORS THAT ARE INAPPROPRIATE AND HURTFUL TO OTHERS.

the special education curtain—revealing students' skills, interests, and abilities. Rather than ranking and comparing students, educators with a competence-oriented focus on understanding students and providing them with an adapted-learning environment that supports their integration, participation, and growth and maximizes their abilities (Kliewer, 1998; Smith, 1999).

Whether your students have mild, moderate, or severe disabilities, your use of a competence-oriented approach, as the following examples show, can foster students' learning, acceptance, socialization, and independence:

- **Focusing on the individual rather than the disability.** In 1990, the U.S. Congress recognized the importance of language and changed the title of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reflecting “individuals first” language. In addition, all references to the term *handicapped* were replaced by the term *disabilities*. Educators who use individuals-first language demonstrate that they focus on the person rather than the disability. For example, a school district revised its forms to replace all references to *handicapped children* with the term *students with disabilities*.
- **Articulating high expectations for all students.** Educators talk about challenging academic and social goals for all students. For example, at a meeting for Ronald, a student with a learning disability, his teacher commented, “This assignment will be harder for him because it's longer; but he can do it, and it's better for him.”
- **Describing students in terms of their academic achievements.** Educators present students as making academic progress and benefiting from being in their classes. For example, at a meeting with Vanessa's family, a teacher noted that Vanessa “has improved her attention span and test performance and is now writing longer paragraphs.”
- **Referring to students in terms of their academic and social strengths.** Educators offer positive descriptions of students related to their academic and social abilities. For example, one teacher described

EDUCATORS CAN USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE THAT SHOWS ACCEPTANCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND PROVIDES A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT WHERE THEY CAN FLOURISH.

Billy, a student with mental retardation, as “a good student . . . conscientious about what he does, and always willing to try and work with others.”

- **Modeling acceptance of individual differences.** Educators show that they are comfortable with individual differences and act promptly and decisively when they encounter student behaviors that are inappropriate and hurtful to others. For example, when Ms. Fazio overheard several of her students making fun of the way Linh speaks, she quickly told the class that “put-downs are not allowed in this classroom, and we respect how everyone looks, sounds, learns, and acts.”
- **Offering students choices and soliciting their preferences.** Educators view students as active and competent learners and classroom participants by offering them choices and asking them about their preferences. For example, Ms. Washington asked her students to “select a book that they would like to read.” After completing their books, she asked the students “to choose a way to share your books with your classmates,” and provided them with a list of sharing activities that varied in both level of difficulty and learning style. She then worked with each of her students to select an appropriate activity.
- **Providing opportunities for all students to assume leadership positions.** Educators offer all students an opportunity to assume important class positions and jobs. For example, Mr. Garrick introduced a chart of class jobs and a system for rotating them among all students by telling the class, “These are important jobs, and everyone can do them and will have a chance to do them.”
- **Using instructional feedback to support student learning and acknowledge effort.** Educators use effort, ability, and informational feedback to facilitate student learning and acknowledge effort. For example, Ms. Velasquez used effort and ability feedback to respond to her students’ correct responses by telling them, “You’re really working hard,” and “You have the skill to do this.” She

responded to her students’ incorrect responses by encouraging them to “Try another way of doing this.”

Watch Your Language

Your language and interactions with students can affect your students’ learning, acceptance, socialization, and independence. Language and interactions that focus on students’ deficits can present a view of students that often is very different from how they view them-

selves. These conflicting views can disable students academically and socially and prevent the development of self-esteem. As educators, we must watch our language and reflect on how we talk to and about students. Figure 1 provides a checklist that can guide teachers in reflecting on our language and interactions and our skill at opening the special education curtain for our students.

Figure 1. Watch Your Language

Use the following questions to think about yourself in relationship to your students with disabilities.

1. Do you articulate high expectations for all students?
 - Do you expect all students to participate academically and socially?
 - Do you encourage and expect all students to complete assignments?
 - Do you avoid student nonparticipation and isolation?
2. Do you focus on the person, rather than the disability?
 - Do you describe student strengths in meaningful academic, social, and behavioral ways?
 - Do you refer to the student by name, rather than by label?
 - Do you locate problems in the environment or instruction, rather than within students?
 - Do you discourage talking about students as if they were not there?
3. Do you model acceptance of individual difference?
 - Do you respond promptly and firmly to put-downs?
 - Do you correct student misperceptions of unfairness regarding accommodations?
 - Do you speak directly to students, rather than to their interpreters or paraeducators?
 - Do you foster peer interaction with students with disabilities?
4. Do you promote students’ independence?
 - Do you take into account students’ gender and age when speaking to them?
 - Do you consider what personal assistance might be unnecessary and embarrassing to students?
 - Do you offer all students choices and solicit their preferences?
5. Do you provide leadership opportunities for all students?
 - Do all students have a classroom job?
 - Do all students have opportunities to show their strengths and assist others?
6. Do you use instructional feedback to support student learning?
 - Do you acknowledge the efforts and achievements of all students?
 - Do you ask students to try other solutions?

How would you rate your language and interactions with your students?
 Competency-oriented Somewhat Competency-oriented
 Somewhat Deficit-oriented Deficit-oriented

What are some goals and steps you could take to improve your language and interactions with your students?

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