

Mind your language



Talking about children with disabilities

There is a strong link between language and thinking. The language we use reflects the way we think about things and, in turn, ways of thinking are made possible by the language we use.

A report released after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which gave survivors of apartheid the chance to share their stories and perpetrators the opportunity to testify and request amnesty, said:

Language ... does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality.

What this means is that how people talk about others is very important, not least when they are people with disabilities, difficulties and disorders. This was acknowledged in the US, for instance, when President Barack Obama passed Rosa's Law in 2010. The law removes the term "mental retardation" from legislation and replaces it with "intellectual disability". Obama quoted Rosa's brother, saying:

What you call people is how you treat them. If we change the words, maybe it will be the start of a new attitude towards people with disabilities.

The words we use to disable

We easily recognise offensive terms such as "retard/retard", "spaz", "crip" or "midget". But we don't always recognise the more subtle work language does in constructing categories of others.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is an example. ADHD has become something of a household term as many parents and teachers have become familiar with this condition. The language used to describe children with an ADHD diagnosis is a constellation of terms from medicine, behaviour management and education.

When children with an ADHD diagnosis are described in medical terms, the language is of disease with symptoms, diagnosis and treatment regimes. The child who struggles to pay attention becomes a patient. His – boys are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD – behaviours are scrutinised and compared with what is regarded as "normal".

"ADHD behaviours" are described as being highly problematic and disruptive to the smooth running of classrooms. Research into the way language is used for ADHD shows children with this diagnosis being called "boisterous" and "difficult to manage".

One textbook warns teachers that these children have a tendency to do unruly things like "throw tantrums" or "throw stones". Other sources for teachers and parents speak of children with ADHD as "monsters" or "brats". Perhaps it is little wonder that some teachers have a low tolerance for children who don't sit still and concentrate for extended periods.

But people don't just talk negatively *about* children with an ADHD diagnosis. Language is used to ensure that ADHD is more than a diagnosis: it is an identity. Sometimes it defines children, like when we say, "the ADHD child". In some cases, ADHD becomes a child's identity: parents and teachers say the child "is ADHD".

These observations are not meant to deny the very real experiences of children and their families who struggle to cope with the demands of schooling in its current form. Learning and social interaction can be severely affected by concentration difficulties, whatever their cause.

The problem I am highlighting is how we talk about others, or other people's children, particularly when they're not regarded as fitting into what's considered "normal". Judging "normal" usually involves deciding how "like us" others are.

Speaking of children with disabilities as foreigners

A report compiled in 2015 by Human Rights Watch accused South Africa of being complicit in the educational exclusion of children with disabilities.

Section27, a public interest law centre focusing on health and education rights, released a report about educational provisions for children with disabilities in special schools. It noted that understanding disability relies a lot on how it is spoken about in society.

The language used to speak about children with disabilities is not unlike the language South Africans use to talk about foreigners. During the xenophobic violence witnessed at the beginning of 2015, a journalist commented that South Africans are:

... accustomed to talking about the "other" ... the idea of something called "us" and something called "them".

In introducing White Paper Six, South Africa's policy on inclusive education, in 2001 the then-education minister said:

Let us work together to nurture our people with disabilities so that they also experience the full excitement and the joy of learning, and to provide them, and our nation, with a solid foundation for lifelong learning and development.

In this statement, people with disabilities are clearly "they" and "them" as opposed to "us".

Like visitors or foreigners, who do not belong by right of birth, children with disabilities must be "welcomed" into the education system. There they must be "accommodated" and their needs "catered for". In some cases the parents of children without disabilities resist this in a kind of educational xenophobia. It has been reported that some parents complain that children with disabilities take up too much of the teacher's time at their own children's expense.

Language matters

It matters when language is used to speak about others as problems, challenges or as the object of pity or charity.

Changing our language will not immediately change the conditions of children with disabilities in South Africa nor the country's attitudes towards disability. But the conditions and attitudes are unlikely to change if our language does not.

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