

MOTOR BEHAVIOR

Using Effective Language Regarding Disability: The Role of Physical Educators and Coaches

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the importance of using socially appropriate language regarding disability and to discuss the role of physical educators and coaches regarding its use. Examples are provided of how to foster socially appropriate language within a school context relative to students and school personnel, as well as parents and community members.

Communication provides individuals with opportunities to convey their needs and desires to one another (Smith & Kirby, 2008) using a variety of mediums. These mediums are verbal, written, gestural, or facial expression. The way in which a thought or idea is communicated is important as to how it is interpreted by others. When one thinks of how thoughts or ideas are communicated, the topic of diversity comes to mind. Topics relevant to diversity include race, culture, sexual identity, and disability. Although all are important topics, the focus of this paper is on disability regarding issues of modeling appropriate verbal or written language.

According to Smith and Kirby (2008), spoken and written language is a result of cultural evolution and is “socially learned and culturally transmitted” (p. 3594). Changes in language are a direct

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result of social and cultural shifts from one generation to the next (Garner, 2008). Therefore, the words or terms individuals choose to use when they speak or write today are likely a reflection of those used in past times, especially as they relate to disability.

According to Devlieger (1999), *disability ideology* emerged about 50 years ago as a result of social inequality (i.e., civil rights movement). Social inequality relative to disability led to a number of changes within the political arena as well as within professional organizations. Within the political arena, initial landmark federal legislation, such as the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Education of the Handicapped Act in 1975, were enacted. These pieces of legislation have been revised over the past four decades to reflect the United States' resolve in reducing and hopefully eliminating social inequality relative to disability. The two pieces of reenacted legislation are the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). Their titles reflect a greater sensitivity to the individuality of disability. That is, the person is now acknowledged first and the disability second (i.e., individuals with disabilities). Since then, IDEA 1990 was again reauthorized as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004).

Similar changes have occurred within professional organizations. For example, in 1992 the name of the National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for the Handicapped (NCPERH) was changed to the National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for Individuals With Disabilities (NCPERID), again to reflect sensitivity to individuality. In 2006, the American Association on Mental Retardation changed its name to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, and soon after the Association for Retarded Citizens changed its name to The Arc: For People With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to reflect greater sensitivity for and more accurately identify its constituents. This movement away from the demeaning term *mental retardation* was further supported at the federal level when the United States Congress passed Rosa's Law in 2010, which changed the term *mental retardation* to *intellectual disability* and also officially changed the term *mentally retarded* to *individual with an intellectual disability* in all other federal laws, such as IDEIA. In 2008, the Associated Press struck the term *mental retardation* from its stylebook. The stylebook is an indispensable reference and considered "the journalist's bible" for all writers, editors, and public relations specialists (Christian,

Jacobsen, & Minthorn, 2010). The activities of these organizations signal the importance of effective language related to disability across the United States.

Education's Role

According to Sherrill (2010), language matters. In an educational environment, teachers play a significant and important role in establishing positive cultural norms that affect student self-worth (Stanulis & Manning, 2002). More specifically, the language used in school can affect self-perceptions of children and youths with disabilities (Blinde & McCallister, 1998; Goodwin & Wilkinson, 2000). Children learn how to use language to communicate appropriately in home, school, and community environments. In school environments, teachers have the responsibility to educate students to become contributing members of society who are sensitive to diversity. Today, educators teach diverse groups of students how to live, work, and play in a variety of cultural and global environments. Therefore, it is increasingly important to address the use of socially appropriate language with regard to disability. Using appropriate language can positively impact attitudes and behaviors and shape one's perceptions of people with disabilities as well (Norwich, 1999). According to Cardinal (2001), educators, as role models, can significantly influence the attitudes and behaviors of students.

Role of Physical Educators and Coaches

Physical educators and coaches can have unique roles to play in fostering effective language. Because physical education continues to be included in the IDEIA (2004) definition of special education, all children with disabilities must receive physical education as part of their free and appropriate public education. Today, 95% of all children with disabilities are included in regular school programs (IDEIA, 2004) and 85% of all children with disabilities are educated in general physical education classes ("Editorial: Legislative Update," 2006). In addition, with the implementation of ADA (1990) and the recent passage of Maryland's Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students With Disabilities Act in 2008, more students with disabilities are now participating in intramurals and interscholastic sports than ever before. The ADA requires individuals with disabilities not be discriminated against based solely on their disabling conditions, and the Maryland Act requires schools to

ensure students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to try out for and, if selected, participate on regular interscholastic sport teams. Schools also must ensure reasonable accommodations are provided for the student to participate.

According to Murphy (2007), it is important for physical education teacher education (PETE) faculty to teach *disability etiquette* to PETE students. In doing so, PETE students can effectively interact with students with disabilities in their preservice teaching experiences. Murphy provided a number of disability etiquette teaching strategies for PETE faculty, one of which is demonstrating proper conversational etiquette. Murphy focused on the education of PETE students regarding disability etiquette, but this paper focuses on providing strategies for practicing physical education teachers and coaches to effectively model appropriate language within a school context. Examples focus on interacting with students and school personnel, as well as parents and community members.

Recommendations

Educators who appropriately model key values and/or encourage student learning of those values have seen positive changes in the culture of schools (Lumpkin, 2008). There are a number of ways for physical education teachers and coaches to foster values through the use of appropriate language pertaining to individuals with disabilities. One significant way is through modeling (Cardinal, 2001). Modeling through writing and speaking as well as the use of body language can be used to convey one's feelings and values to others. For example, when a child with a disability enters the gymnasium, the teacher can smile, make eye contact with the child, and welcome him/her with a clap of the hands or a pat on the back, along with a verbal gesture of "great to see to today."

When speaking or writing, one should use person first language. Person first language fosters the notion that a disability may be part of the person but by no means defines the person. For example, using the phrase *cerebral palsied boy* highlights the disability first and then recognizes the person is a boy. Using person first language such as *the boy with cerebral palsy* suggests the person is a boy who happens to have cerebral palsy. Person first language provides an opportunity to recognize a person's abilities and positive attributes before defining him or her as disabled (Ellmer, 2010). With this being said, one should use the person's name, especially when describing him or her to others. Using a student's name will personalize one's

description of that individual. Also, one should verbally model use of appropriate language when referring to or describing a person with an intellectual disability.

In addition to modeling, one should provide helpful feedback to others as needed. These are opportunities to directly educate others who continue to use inappropriate and/or outdated terms such as *retarded* or *moron*. According to Tarr (2011), students without disabilities still use those terms in schools (e.g., in hallways, in lunchrooms, during recess, on athletic fields). It is our opinion, based on our observations in schools over the years, educators in general and physical education teachers and coaches in particular can be slow to correct inappropriate language as it directly relates to disability. There are a number of ways to address inappropriate language related to disability. For example, if students use less than appropriate language in class or on the athletic field, one could ask why the language is being used, what it means, and how it makes one feel. Verbal communication allows physical educators to model appropriate language with regard to disability, with the hope of having it positively transfer its use to others. Should others use less than appropriate terms, physical education teachers and coaches can seek clarification. For example, a colleague refers to a student as “the mentally retarded kid in the class down the hall.” As a matter of clarification and feedback one can say, “Oh, you mean Angela who has an intellectual disability, right?” One’s professional behavior, whether one is a physical education teacher or a coach, does not end when one leaves school grounds. Modeling also extends to parents of students as well as other community members. More often than not other educational professionals, parents of students without disabilities, and community members do not realize they are using less than appropriate terminology and would appreciate appropriate clarification.

Another example of fostering the use of appropriate language is to alert others to the discrepancies in how today’s society refers to persons with disabilities. For example, it is important to rely cautiously on the media to guide the use of appropriate language. Although the media provide interesting and informative information regarding topics related to disability, the terminology that is used may not always be appropriate. The media (e.g., news reporters and published newspaper articles) often use economy of expression (fewest words possible). As a result, current and appropriate terms are not always used. For example, it is common for a newspaper

article to use the term *disabled girl* rather than the person first form *girl with a disability*. Consequently, when reading a newspaper article or watching the news, one should not assume the language used to describe individuals with disabilities is correct. Instead, one should refer to the language used in validated sources to guide what is correct. These sources allow one to stay up to date regarding language related to disability.

Appropriate language should also be promoted and modeled through written communication. Physical education teachers and coaches commonly communicate through e-mail. When promoting programs, clinics, and workshops, teachers and coaches often rely on flyers or newsletters to publicize them. When written communication opportunities arise, one can use those occasions to use appropriate terminology. Once people hear and see examples of appropriate terminology on a regular basis, they may then be able to accept it and use it as their own.

Thus, physical education teachers and coaches can serve as models to help change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of others (Cardinal, 2001). In a similar way, physical education teachers and coaches can, according to Sherrill (2004), serve as advocates for persons with disabilities. To do so, however, advocates will need to know and use appropriate terminology.

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