

# The impact of the language we use in education

Home / 2016 / April / Inclusive Education / The impact of the language we use in education



"If we do not change our language to match changes in thinking, we perpetuate what always was." Timoti Harris

In education, certain words and phrases have become the currency of our organisational systems and processes. We have ORS students, and "gifted and talented", and TAs, and SEG grants, priority learners, and target students. We use the terms, in good faith, to define roles and responsibilities, determine funding needs, and allocate resourcing.

However, our actions raise some questions:

- What is the hidden impact of those words on the wellbeing and learning of students and on the expectations and actions of teachers?
- Is there an alternative approach?

# A HIGH SCHOOL JOURNEY

[Inclusion: Cultural capital of diversity or deficit of disability? Language for change. A Journey Towards Inclusion](#) is the title of a sabbatical report by Timoti Harris. It tells the five year story of how a high school and its community journeyed towards creating a school “that lives inclusion”.

As part of a process of self review, the school looked closely for both enablers and barriers to inclusion. Language was quickly recognised as a barrier to inclusion, particularly the terminology that created the concept of “normal”, and, in turn, established an unspoken “not normal”, or, “less than normal.” To get some shared understandings, the school engaged in an analysis of words used in the school. Quickly, there was recognition that some words, “in their community’s view”, carried deficit thinking that led to lower expectations and reduced opportunities for students. Words that came under scrutiny included: special education, special ed kids, the kid with hearing aids, hostel kids, teacher aides, and disabled kids.

Following much discussion, the school and its community decided to take some action. Together they committed to:

- removing deficit language from everyday usage
- adopting new language such as “specialised educational provision” for “every educational intervention from extension to enrichment to assistive technology”
- renaming programmes and designations, for example, teachers aides were renamed “learning support teachers”
- rewriting all school documents to reflect the new language.



The leadership team also committed to providing ongoing prompts and discussion opportunities for staff to focus attention on “the hidden curriculum of the deficit language of disability” and its influence on expectations and practice.

The implementation of these changes didn’t happen overnight. However, Harris comments that the actions resulted in staff needing to differentiate students by who they were, not by deficit labels, or phrases, or their associated needs. He describes the effect as humanising, resulting in each person being acknowledged in a respectful way and contributing to a shift in culture in the school.

When I recently visited the school, it was evident that the focus on refining language is ongoing. The leadership team continues to provoke conversations about the choice of words and the intent behind their use, and staff work together to find ways of communicating learner needs that are honouring and respectful.

## KICKING OFF YOUR OWN JOURNEY

Taking these kinds of actions as a school has an impact at a fundamental level. Looking at language challenges everyone's beliefs and values, as the language we use reveals our thinking, which, in turn, underpins the way we do things.

To start your own journey:

- Ask the students and their parents and whānau about the words they would like you to use.
- Read [Inclusion: Cultural capital of diversity or deficit of disability? Language for change. A Journey Towards Inclusion.](#)
- Explore the [Leading schools that include all learners](#) guide on the Inclusive Education website
- Watch [Inclusive Society](#): a one-minute video outlining the value of experiencing difference by Marc Spooner Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Regina, Canada.
- Participate in an [Inclusive Education: what is it? CORE Breakfast in Christchurch or Auckland.](#)



### Chrissie Butler

Chrissie Butler works alongside schools and education facilitators supporting strategic planning and blended professional learning in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), e-learning, and inclusive practices. She is also the lead writer and content developer on the Ministry of Education's new Inclusive Education website. Chrissie supports the development of CORE's internal capability in inclusive learning design and provides consultancy to New Zealand and overseas schools and agencies. She brings her life-long arts practice to all aspects of her work. She has a particular interest in exploring the relationship between creative work, education, digital technologies, and social change.