"Retarded?" Who Still Says That?
An Adapted Physical Education Perspective

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How we refer to others reflects how we view them.

I hate that word—mental retardation...I wish they would change that one, because it sounds so institutional, like you can’t do nothing for yourself and you’re depending on somebody else to do everything, from putting on all your clothes down to your shoes. And that’s not right. (Shapiro, 2007, para. 3)

Some people who are kind of nasty, they would make fun of you and play at, you know with you and make you look like if you are a stupid person...but a person who has a disability is not that. They are very wise on some things, and they can be very knowledgeable about some things. (Shapiro, 2007, para. 8)

Unfortunately, too many people still use the words “retard” or “retarded.” Attend any public event, walk through the halls of a high school between classes, or listen to lunchroom conversations, and you are bound to hear a variety of derogatory labels used to refer to people with intellectual disabilities. Other such labels might include “tard,” “idiot,” or “moron.” People might also use the phrase “that’s so retarded” as part of their everyday language, and such words and phrases are all too common in current television shows and movies.

Sadly, these labels have not only been used for years, they continue to be used, even by the U.S. President. In October 2009, President Obama made a joke about the Special Olympics while he was a guest on The Tonight Show with host Jay Leno. Obama referred to a bowling experience on a campaign stop and joked that bowling a 129 “was like Special Olympics or something” (St. Clair & McCormick, 2009, para. 8). Similarly, Rahm Emanuel (ironically, Obama’s former Chief of Staff) used the phrase “f---ing retard” in a closed-door meeting in August 2009 when referring to some liberal activists’ response to healthcare reform (Nagraj, 2010).

Although both men apologized for their comments, it is disappointing to hear such insulting phrases in a time when so much has been done to be socially accepting of all persons, disability or not. Do we, or did Obama and Emanuel, ever stop to think about how these comments hurt the people to whom they refer?

In our own schoolyards and physical education classes, teachers and students have not always treated or talked appropriately to students with disabilities. In order to understand the experiences of students with physical disabilities, Blinde and McCallister (1998) interviewed 20 students (10-17 years old) with physical disabilities about their experiences in physical education and sport. Two major themes emerged from the interviews related to limited participation in activities and negative emotional responses. These negative emotional responses often occurred because of being excluded from class activities as a result of “unpleasant social interactions with classmates” (Blinde & McCallister, p. 66). For example, most children reported feeling unwanted by their peers or like an outsider. Charlie, one of the interviewees, indicated “that sometimes they just don’t ask me to play” (p. 66). Additionally, students often felt embarrassed because of their inability to perform the task or
drill at the same speed or as successfully as others. A student named Warren noted, "I’m just no good. I just call myself a no good person...when I go in there in P.E. class" (p. 67). He felt his friends “think that I’m a pity, no good...and, they just don’t want me on their team” (p. 67).

In a related study, students with physical disabilities reported they had “bad days” and “good days” (Goodwin & Wilkinson, 2000). Interviews helped to identify three themes reflective of the students’ bad and good days. Bad days consisted of (1) social isolation resulting from behaviors such as yelling, name calling, and laughing; (2) having one’s competence questioned (e.g., a student with a disability being perceived as incapable of a successful performance); and (3) restricted participation resulting from a lack of support from teachers, lack of engagement from classmates, and/or constraints imposed by the instructional space. Good days were characterized by (1) a sense of belonging and encouraging interactions with classmates and teachers; (2) understanding the goals of physical education as a benefit to students with disabilities; and (3) skillful participation, in which the students enjoyed the opportunity to demonstrate skill proficiency to their classmates.

Legislation has been put in place to help students with disabilities enjoy more of these good days and reduce the number of bad days. Federal legislation passed in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), defined mental retardation as a handicap for which children could receive special education services. Ten other disabling conditions were also defined in this legislation. By assigning students a label from one of the 11 disability categories, schools receive money from the government to provide appropriate educational assistance to facilitate student learning (e.g., special equipment, para-professional support).

Educators often think of this labeling as a double-edged sword. Children must have the label to obtain services needed to help them learn, but the label often negatively affects them throughout life. Shapiro (2007) noted, however, “Sometimes it helps to have the label of mental retardation. It is a diagnosis that leads to services, such as special education, job support, and housing” (para. 6). However, how can we have both a label or diagnosis necessary for services and a lifetime of acceptance without insults and derogatory labels for persons with disabilities?

While the labels associated with PL 94-142 have been vital for students with disabilities, various disability organizations have attempted numerous times to change the language associated with disability. For example, The American Association on Mental Retardation changed its name to The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD). To most people, a name change is minor, but to others it is an affirming accomplishment. Specifically,

The applause from the community of people with disability was unanimous once the name change was announced. ‘In taking “MR” out of your name, you’ve set a precedent for it to be taken out of the classrooms, the doctors’ offices, personal case records, and eventually out of the vocabulary of people walking down the street,’ says Amy Walker of Illinois Voices, a group working on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities. (AAIDD, 2006, para. 4)

Name changes related to disability have also occurred at the state and federal level. In October 2010, President Obama signed Rosa's Law into effect (Special Olympics, n.d.a). This law was named after a young girl in Maryland with Down syndrome and was passed in her home state in 2009. Inspired by Rosa's family, who learned their daughter and sister had been labeled as “retarded” at school, the sole purpose of this legislation is to "change references in federal law from mental retardation to intellectual disability, and references to a mentally retarded individual to an individual with an intellectual disability" (Disability Blog, 2010, para. 1).

The words of Rosa's 15-year-old brother were particularly insightful during testimony in Maryland. He succinctly stated, “What you call people is how you treat them. What you call my sister is how you will treat her” (Special Olympics, n.d.a). Will simply changing these words really change the perceptions of people toward those with disabilities? It is a good start, but we must do more to help change the behaviors, attitudes, and language used by people regarding individuals with disabilities.

What Can You Do?

Educate. The use of labels or derogatory names to refer to people with disabilities can stem from a lack of knowledge or fear of people with disabilities. One of the easiest things people can do is to educate themselves and the students, clients, or colleagues they work with. Changing attitudes is never easy, but it is worth the effort. Educators can invite persons with disabilities to speak to students and teachers. Physical educators could invite an athlete with a disability to demonstrate her or his sport. Teachers at all grade levels could read (or have students read) books about persons with disabilities. If there are students in the school who have disabilities, they might be willing to talk to groups of students and teachers about their disability and share their story. Students could watch age-appropriate movies about people with disabilities (e.g., Temple Grandin), with disability issues and themes (e.g., Avatar), or that have actors with disabilities (e.g., The Station Agent). Teachers could create disability awareness activities for students to simulate various disabling conditions. For example, physical educators could have students participate in regular physical education activities while using a wheelchair. Students could wear a blindfold and play catch with a beeping ball, or they could play games and sports using only their nonpreferred hand. Although we can never fully comprehend or experience life as a disabled individual unless we become one, such disability simulations can give others a partial view of what a person with a disability may experience on a daily basis and force teachers to think about how to modify the class environment or instructional strategies to accommodate students with disabilities.

Debrief. After participating in any of the aforementioned
activities, it is important to take the time to talk about the participants’ experiences and discuss people’s values, attitudes, and behaviors. We cannot expect attitudes, values, and behaviors to change just by participating in activities. Instead, we must create opportunities for people to process these experiences. It is through this processing or debriefing that we hope people can start to change their attitudes and behaviors. By helping others to increase their knowledge and reduce their fears about persons with disabilities, we can enhance their sensitivity to the potential harm of derogatory labels or names for persons with disabilities and be less inclined to use those labels in everyday speech.

Participate. Participation in a Unified Sports team associated with Special Olympics is a perfect opportunity for students in physical education classes to increase their knowledge and reduce fears about disabilities. The Unified Sports program consists of mixed teams (intellectual disability and able-bodied) that practice, compete, and enjoy time together in a variety of sports:

By having fun together in a variety of sports ranging from basketball to golf to figure skating, Unified Sports athletes and partners improve their physical fitness, sharpen their skills, challenge the competition and help to overcome prejudices about intellectual disability. (Special Olympics, n.d.b, para. 3)

Listen. Physical education teachers and athletic coaches can monitor the social dynamics of the classroom or athletic field more closely (Blinde & McCallister, 1998). We should be listening to the students with disabilities, as they often know their own needs, wants, and desires better than we do. Students with disabilities, if provided the opportunity, can often offer suggestions for adaptations or modifications for activities, surfaces, or equipment that would enhance their successful inclusion and participation in physical education (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). We must also listen to the interactions among all students (able-bodied and disabled) so no student is subjected to “ridicule, exclusion, or discrimination” (Blinde & McCallister, p. 68).

Join the Movement. Finally, we can all join the movement to stamp out the R-word. This movement was started in 2004 at the request of Special Olympic athletes who were uncomfortable being called mentally retarded (R-word, n.d.). The focus of this movement is to “combat the inappropriate use of the R-word in common usage” (para. 3). In 2009, youths with and without disabilities started the “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign to assist in the elimination of R-word use. A number of resources (e.g., public service announcements, fact sheets, talking points, video clips) exist on their web site (www.r-word.org/Default.aspx). Words really do hurt. I encourage all of us to start here and spread the word to end the word. We all have the power to make a difference.

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References


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