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Rethinking Students

Presuming Competence



THE MOST APPROPRIATE LABEL IS
USUALLY THE ONE PEOPLE'S PARENTS
HAVE GIVEN THEM.

I have been a paraprofessional for 23 years. The biggest surprise to me is that these students are really smart. When I began working . . . we would have them practice writing their name and address every day, they would work on matching colors to these plastic bears—and the kids hated doing the same things over and over.

Then we got a new teacher, and things changed! We were now expected to take these kids into classrooms like algebra and physics. I thought [the teacher] was crazy (laughing) . . . But, I will never forget the day I was supporting Daniel. I gave him the calculator to figure out the problem . . . and it was a hard problem too. He pushed the calculator away, refusing to use it, and he wrote the answer down. I checked it. He was right! It made me want to cry. Who knows what we have done to kids like Daniel in the past, and who knows just what kids like Daniel can do!?

—Chantel (paraprofessional)

When I approach a child, [s]he inspires in me two sentiments: tenderness for what [s]he is, and respect for what [s]he may become.

—Louis Pasteur (Institut Pasteur, n.d.)

This chapter introduces the concept of *rethinking students*. Rethinking a student entails getting to know about the student and then reflecting on how you see, treat, and work with him or her. First, I discuss how to describe students to others through student strengths and multiple intelligences. Then, I describe the concept of presumption of competence and using age-appropriate and person-first language. (Please see Table 5.3 for examples of person-first language.)

STUDENT DESCRIPTIONS

Shawntell Strully is a 22-year-old who lives in her own home with roommates, attends classes at Colorado State University, volunteers on campus, travels during spring break, gets around in her own car, has her own interests, likes and desires, has a boyfriend, and speaks out on issues of concern to her.

Shawntell Strully is 22 years old, is severely/profoundly mentally retarded, is hearing impaired, visually impaired, has cerebral palsy, has a seizure disorder, does not chew her food (and sometimes chokes), is not toilet trained, has no verbal communication, has no reliable communication system, and has a developmental age of 17–24 months. (Strully & Strully, 1996, pp. 144–145)

These two radically different descriptions of Shawntell come from two different groups of people. The first description comes from her parents. The second comes from her teachers and other school support personnel. Although not all teachers would describe Shawntell in these ways, this is how her team described her. It is surprising to compare these statements side-by-side. The stark contrast raises the question of how the same person can be described in such disparate ways.

The principal reason for these radically different descriptions is that each group of people looks for different things and approaches Shawntell from a different perspective. Shawntell's parents know her deeply. They have spent a great deal of time with her, know her intimately, and understand her as a person who has wide interests and capabilities. Their description of her cites her interests, gifts, and talents. Conversely, the description generated by Shawntell's teachers reflects a more distant understanding of her; it is a cold, clinical account that focuses exclusively on her impairments.

As a paraprofessional working with students with disabilities, you will hear impairment-driven descriptions of students, and, thus, you will need to work to understand these students through their strengths, gifts, and talents. You may read a student's individualized education program, and it might abound with phrases such as *mental age of 2*, *phobic*, or *aggressive*. Reading those descriptors, you will need to realize that you are getting only one perspective on the student. Get to know the student yourself, and work to learn about what he or she can do. Hopefully, your descriptions of a student would look much closer to the parents' perspective on Shawntell than that of the teachers.

BEGIN WITH STRENGTHS

I was talking with Beth, a paraprofessional, and I asked her to describe Iris, a student whom she was supporting. She described Iris as autistic, sensitive, loud, sometimes sweet, and nonverbal. These descriptions speak to Beth's own beliefs about the student. On a separate piece of paper, write down the first 10 descriptors that come to mind when *you* think of an individual student. Now, look over the list. Were your descriptors positive, negative, or a combination?

Your beliefs about a student will impact how you support and work with that student. For example, if you believe a student is lazy or defiant, you will approach him or her in a different way than you will if you believe that child is motivated or cooperative. You can alter your beliefs about students by spending some time rethinking them. Reframing your conceptions of students in more positive ways creates opportunities for growth.

Consider the work of educational researcher Thomas Armstrong (2000a, 2000b) on using Multiple Intelligence theory in the classroom. Armstrong recommended that education professionals purposefully rethink the ways they describe students. By changing their language, people will begin to change their impressions. Armstrong emphasized that all behavior is part of the human experience and that behavior is based on a multitude of influences (environment, sense of safety, personal well-being). Armstrong has proposed that instead of considering a child *learning disabled*, people see the child as *learning differently*. Table 5.1 lists further suggestions for describing students.

What would happen if all education professionals changed how they viewed and spoke about students? What if every student were viewed as a capable learner? One of the best ways to think about the students whom you support is to look at the child through the lens of his or her strengths. Ask yourself the following questions: "What

Table 5.1. Turning lead into gold

A child who is judged to be	Can also be considered
Learning disabled	Learning differently
Hyperactive	Kinesthetic
Impulsive	Spontaneous
ADD/ADHD	A bodily-kinesthetic learner
Dyslexic	A spatial learner
Aggressive	Assertive
Plodding	Thorough
Lazy	Relaxed
Immature	Late blooming
Phobic	Cautious
Scattered	Divergent
Daydreaming	Imaginative
Irritable	Sensitive
Perseverative	Persistent

Key: ADD, attention deficit disorder; ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

From Armstrong, T. (2000a). *In their own way: Discovering and encouraging your child's multiple intelligences*. New York: Penguin Putnam; reprinted by permission.

can this student do?” “What are this person’s strengths?” “How would a parent who deeply loves this student speak about him or her?” Now, return to your list and take a moment to develop a list of strengths, gifts, and interests.

During a workshop with a group of teachers and paraprofessionals, Kathy, a paraprofessional, did just that. First, she wrote a list of descriptors. Then, after spending some time rethinking the student, she came up with a completely different list. She had originally described the student, Brian, as “lazy, smart, sneaky, a liar, cute, cunning, and mean (at times).” After talking about viewing students differently, she got a new piece of paper. She wrote, “relaxed, intelligent, good in math, cute, needs some support with peer relationships, a great sense of humor, and a beautiful smile.” I asked Kathy whether this still accurately described Brian. She said that the second list was a much *more* accurate description of him.

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

There is a pervasive myth in education that some people are smart and that others are not. *Intelligence*, *academic potential*, and *competence* are words often used to describe “smartness.” In education, this belief can be seen best through the system of labeling

Table 5.2. A guide to supporting through multiple intelligences

Intelligence	Which means	So support using
Verbal/linguistic intelligence	Good with words and language, written and spoken	Jokes, speeches, readings, stories, essays, the Internet, books, biographies
Logical mathematical intelligence	Preference for reasoning, numbers, and patterns	Mazes, puzzles, timelines, analogies, formulas, calculations, codes, games, probabilities
Spatial intelligence	Ability to visualize an object or to create mental images or pictures	Mosaics, drawings, illustrations, models, maps, videos, posters
Bodily kinesthetic intelligence	Knowledge or wisdom of the body and movement	Role-playing, skits, facial expressions, experiments, field trips, sports, games
Musical intelligence	Ability to recognize tonal patterns including sensitivity to rhythms or beats	Performances, songs, instruments, rhythms, compositions, melodies, raps, jingles, choral readings
Interpersonal intelligence	Knowledge of an inner state of being; reflective and aware	Group projects, group tasks, observation dialogs, conversation, debate, games, interviews
Intrapersonal intelligence	Good with person-to-person interactions and relationships	Journals, meditation, self-assessment, recording, creative expression, goal setting, affirmation, poetry
Naturalistic intelligence	Knowledge of the outside world (e.g., plants, animals, weather patterns)	Field trips, observation, nature walks, forecasting, star gazing, fishing, exploring, categorizing, collecting, identifying

Sources: Gardner (1993); Armstrong (2000a, 2000b).

people with disabilities. A clear example is IQ testing. Students take IQ tests, and if a student's IQ score falls below 70 and he or she has other issues with functional skills, the student receives the label of mental retardation. Howard Gardner challenged the way psychologists and educators defined *intelligences* and offered a different way to look at intelligence. He used the term *multiple intelligences* (Gardner, 1993).

Gardner viewed each of the multiple intelligences as a capacity that is inherent in the human brain and that is developed and expressed in social and cultural contexts. Instead of viewing intelligence as a fixed number on an aptitude test, Gardner argued that every person, regardless of disability label, is smart in different ways. All of the eight intelligences are described in Table 5.2. I have also added a column entitled "So support using," which might help you think of the students you support. If

you work with a student who prefers to learn in a certain intelligence area or who is strong in a certain area, consider some of the suggested activities and teaching styles.

PRESUME COMPETENCE

In the school setting, assumptions about students can affect their education. Take Sue Rubin, for instance.

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Sue, a student with autism, had no formal way of communicating until she was 13 years old. Before that time, she had been treated and educated as if she had a mental age of 2 years old. Mental age is often based on a person's score on an IQ test. For example, if a 14-year-old girl's score on an IQ were the score of a "typical" or "normal" 3-year-old, she would be labeled as having the mental age of a 3-year-old. This is not a useful way to think about intelligence. When Sue acquired a form of communication called facilitated communication, those long-held assumptions were no longer valid. People began to realize that she was very smart. She subsequently took advanced placement classes all through her high school career, and she is now in college. (Biklen, 2005; Rubin, 2003)

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Because education professionals have no real way of determining what a student understands, they should presume that every student is competent or capable. Anne Donnellan uses the term *least dangerous assumption* to describe this idea: "Least dangerous assumption states that in the absence of absolute evidence, it is essential to make the assumption that, if proven to be false, would be least dangerous to the individual" (Donnellan, 1984, p. 24). In other words, it is better to presume that students are competent and that they can learn than to expect that they cannot learn.

Biklen and Burke (2006) have described this idea of presuming competence by explaining that outside observers (e.g., teachers, parents, paraprofessionals) have a choice: They can determine either that a person is competent or incompetent. The presumption of competence recognizes that no one can definitively know another person's thinking unless the other person can (accurately) reveal it. As Biklen and Burke put it, "Presuming competence refuses to limit opportunity . . . it casts the teachers, parents, and others in the role of finding ways to support the person to demonstrate his or her agency" (p. 167).

AGE-APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

There is a tendency for people to speak down to individuals with disabilities (as if they were younger than they actually are) because of assumptions that people with disabilities are at younger developmental levels. For example, I have heard a paraprofessional ask a high school student, "Do you have to use the potty?" You would not ask a high school student who did not have a disability that same question in that same way. I also have overheard someone describe a young man with Down syndrome who attends college as

“a real cutie.” Individuals with disabilities should be described in accordance with their actual chronological ages.

Paraprofessionals should treat and work with students in age-appropriate ways. I once witnessed a paraprofessional holding hands with a sixth-grade student in the hall. I doubt that the paraprofessional would have thought it appropriate to hold the hand of a sixth-grade student who did not have a disability. For that very reason, it is inappropriate to hold any student's hand. This same logic holds true for having students sit on your lap, play with age-inappropriate toys, sing age-inappropriate songs, and so forth. Ask yourself how you would talk to or work with the student if she or he did not have a disability, and proceed in that manner.

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

If thoughts corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought.

—George Orwell (1981)

When describing, speaking, or writing respectfully about people who have disabilities, many people use a common language. It is called *person-first language*. The concept of person-first language is simple.

The Same as Anyone Else

Think first about how you might introduce someone who does not have a disability. You might use the person's name, say how you know him or her, or describe what he or she does. The same is true for individuals with disabilities. Instead of saying, “Chelsea who has Down syndrome,” you might say, “Chelsea who is in my fourth-grade class.” No one should be identified by one aspect of who he or she is (especially if that aspect represents a difficulty or struggle for someone). For example, I would not want anyone to introduce me by saying, “This is Julie, who struggled with statistics.” The same is true when talking about a person with a disability. Ask yourself why you would need to mention that the person has a disability.

Words are powerful. The ways we talk about and describe people with disabilities do not just affect our beliefs and interactions with our students; they also provide models for others who hear these descriptions.

If your own child broke his arm, would you introduce him to someone new as “my broken-armed child”? If one of the students in the school had cancer, would you expect to hear a teacher state, “She is my cancerous student”? Of course not. No one should feel ashamed about having a broken arm or having cancer, but a broken bone or malfunctioning cells do not define a person. Would *you* like to be known for your medical history?

Avoid the Label

The same is true for people with disabilities. Yet, students with disabilities are invariably described with labels instead of person-first language. Have you ever heard

phrases such as *the learning-disabled student*, *the autistic boy*, *that Downs child*, *the resource room kids*, or *the inclusion kids*?

It is important to understand the preferences of people with disabilities regarding how they would like others to speak about them. The following guidelines listed in Table 5.3 come from several different self-advocacy groups (disabilityisnatural.com and TASH).

Table 5.3. Examples of person-first language

Say	Instead of	Because
People with disabilities	The disabled or handicapped	Place emphasis on the person.
People without disabilities	Normal/healthy/typical	These words (e.g., <i>abnormal</i> , <i>unhealthy</i> , <i>atypical</i>) assume the opposite for students with disabilities.
Ella, the fourth-grade student	Ella, the student with Down syndrome	Omit the label whenever possible; it is most often not relevant.
Communicates with her eyes/device, and so forth	Is nonverbal	Focus on strengths.
Uses a wheelchair	Is confined to a wheelchair	Use possessive language to refer to assistive technologies; the nonpreferred language implies the person is "stuck."
Accessible parking spot	Handicapped parking spot	Accurate representation
Beth has autism.	Beth is autistic.	Emphasize that disability is one attribute—not a defining characteristic.
Gail has a learning disability.	Gail is learning disabled.	Emphasize that disability is one attribute—not a defining characteristic.
Jeff has a cognitive disability.	Jeff is retarded.	Emphasize that disability is one attribute—not a defining characteristic. Also, <i>cognitive disability</i> is a preferred term.
Ben receives special education services.	Ben is in special education.	Special education is a service, not a place.
The student who is blind	The blind student	Place the person before the disability.
Denis writes using the computer.	Denis can't write with a pencil.	Focus on strengths.
Needs a magnifier, laptop, or cane	Problems with vision; can't write or walk	Focus on needs, not problems.

Source: Snow (2008).

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT STUDENTS

- Q. What if a student prefers an age-inappropriate toy or game?
- A. Often, people with disabilities have been treated as if they were younger than they are. As a result, they have been exposed to cartoons, dolls, or games to which their same-age peers have not been exposed; their peers are not likely to think these activities are cool. One option, then, is to expose the student to more age-appropriate music and activities.
- Q. Are there any exceptions to person-first language?
- A. Yes, people who are deaf often prefer the term *deaf* instead of *person with deafness*. A group called Deaf First suggests that deafness is a major component of identity, and this group prefers disability-first language. Some people with autism prefer to be called *autistic*, and some use insider language such as *autie* to describe themselves. It is not accurate to say that all people with disabilities prefer one way over another. Person-first language serves as a helpful guideline because many advocacy groups consider it a respectful way to refer to people.
- Q. I do not think the student I work with is smart. This student has a label of mental retardation. How can I presume competence?
- A. This person may not perform well on standardized tests of intelligence. However, your responsibility when working with this student is to identify the student's strengths. Keep those strengths in mind. Every person is intelligent in different ways.

CONCLUSION

Remember, these labels are not accurate descriptors of people. Children who have disabilities are unique individuals with unlimited potential, just like everyone else (Snow, 2008). This recognition is not only about having a good attitude or believing that all students are smart; it also will allow you to treat, support, and work with all students in ways that promote dignity and respect. In the next chapter, I discuss how the ideas of dignity and respect can help facilitate social relationships.

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