

INCLUSION: RETHINKING ABILITY – MINDSET AND LANGUAGE

JOHN SKENE

John Skene provides some views and perspectives on the need for teachers to be the change-makers in language and culture to create more inclusive schools so everyone feels welcome...

“Inclusion is a mindset – not a specific location.”

(Poe, 2025, p.12)

Language is power. And there is power in language. This places a substantial weight on education settings to teach, develop and encourage individuals (student, colleague and community) to become literate in the language that builds inclusion rather than brings it down.

With over 7,000 languages spoken across the world today (GoFluent, 2020) it's important to reflect on how we ourselves use language, engage with language and foster development of ourselves and others.

Take a moment to reflect on your own word choices. How do you refer to disability?

THE LANGUAGE DEBATE IN THE DISABILITY SPACE

Language, both spoken and written, influences views, perceptions and interactions on so many levels. Within the disability space there are two variants of language structures used to refer to, or indicate, a need: the medical model and the social model.

The medical model of thinking defines disability as a deficit or sickness in need of fixing (Harkins Monaco, E., Stansbury Brushnahan, L., Fuller, M, and Odima Jr., M., 2024): building a language and discourse that can create negativity and position people to view those with disability as “less than”. Within this model, words are generally outdated or have interpretations of helplessness and limitation, painting a deficit view of the individual (Shams, 2025).

The social model of thinking promotes individuals with disability as part of the natural variations of being, and that it is personal bias, or reaction, that can impact interaction.

Society needs to reflect on language use. Shams (2025) summarises it nicely by saying “there is no expectation to

get it right all the time” but if those that are not disabled are trying, with compassion and respect, we can begin the journey of empowerment for those that are generally deemed lesser. It is not about perfection.

People with Disability Australia (2021) discuss that, within Australia, both person-first language (people with disability) and identity-first language (disabled people) are used. This notion opens the discussion around advocacy and simply asking: “what do you prefer?”

It is okay to ask someone when you don't know.

As we know, language is power, and many groups have strong preferences, one way or the other, when being spoken about. Many groups have started a process to reclaim terms, that historically were used to belittle or demean, in order to demonstrate strength, power and to destigmatise the historical use, such as: “crip”, “spaz” and “mad” (People with Disability Australia, 2021 p.6).

Word choice is important when speaking about a people, to which you yourself are not connected. Ensuring that word selection is uplifting rather than reductive (such as ‘the disabled’) supports the continued efforts of seeing individuals as human.

It is important to acknowledge a group's choice of language, or terms, when interacting with them. As an example, Deaf communities see themselves as a cultural group (rather than disabled) as they have a different first language (People with Disability Australia, 2021).

When in doubt always use person-first language to ensure you are humanising the individual you are speaking to, or about, not reducing them.

IMPLICATIONS IN SCHOOLS

According to Harkins Monaco, E., et.al., (2024, p.25) schools have an opportunity to be places that “remove barriers, increase access and innovate opportunities

for inclusion”. An outcome for which we should all be striving.

With a record 221,000 students diagnosed with disabilities in NSW public schools (Townsville Bulletin, 2025), equalling about one in four students - teachers have a responsibility to be mindful of the culture that they create. Schools have a role to play in empowering, supporting and uplifting a shift in mindset and language to promote inclusivity and positivity. This is not a one-person job or an overnight fix.

Like a slow dripping tap, to begin the shift and journey, change needs to start by having open discussions around language choice and use thus empowering honesty. If the leadership are on board, even better, to allow a top-down trickle in building inclusive, powerful and positive language and culture.

Something simple, but impactful, that can support positive views of individuals with disabilities in a support class is shifting the language from Special Education class to inclusive learning class or the class name. Moving away from the “special ed kids” to “students in xx class”.

SHIFTING MINDSET, CHANGING CULTURE

Building, instead, a community of learning, where the students with disability are not seen as the outliers in the school, in a different space away from everyone, but are included in the learning that is taking place across a school.

In getting the community on board, highlighting language use in communications such as newsletters, website etc. gives them the purpose behind the changes. Supporting conversations outside the school gates, to demonstrate consistency in language choice.

It is vital to shift the mindset to ‘everyone’s concern’ not just the special education teachers or other specialists. Supporting students with disabilities in schools is a collective responsibility. Too many times, a teacher from the support unit is having a much-needed break and is interrupted by a colleague stating: “your student xx needs you” or “xx is not following instructions, you need to go deal with it”.

While there are some circumstances where the expert will need to step in to support, most other times are simple situations where a consistent response, or support,

can be implemented by any staff member.

NSW public schools are to be inclusive spaces that support the learning, social and emotional engagement of ALL students with reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies regardless of “disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith” (NSW Education, 2025).

Reflect on your current school context and the collective perception of who holds responsibility for different groups of students. At your school, if there is an issue with a disabled student, do all staff support and manage the resolution, or is it referred to the special education teacher?

As a profession, the impetus is to shift from “not my student, not my problem” to a collective view that all students within a school community deserve the respect, care and support from all staff and peers. This takes effort and purposeful change-makers, to ensure that a philosophy aligned in inclusion, is embedded within a school.

Let’s work together to make this a system reality.

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

When a school seeks to empower, uplift and is truly inclusive – all students, with or without a disability, can be seen for who they are. They can be supported to achieve their fullest potential without biased barriers or road-blocks.

It can result in a student with a disability being elected to student leadership in Year 6, off his own accord and popularity, through the targeted language choice, mindset of the community and purposeful support that has been embedded into a changed school culture.

“...languages don’t limit our ability to perceive the world or to think about the world, rather, they focus our attention and thought on specific aspects of the world.”

(GoFluent, 2020)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Skene was elected as the NSW Teachers Federation Disability Officer in November 2024. As part of this role, he is responsible for supporting students, staff and schools in special education. He is working closely with Organisers, Professional Support, Trade Union Training and others to support Federation members.

With over fifteen years of experience as a teacher in special education, John has worked in schools for specific purposes (SSPs) and support units (SUs). He is an Assistant Principal Special Education and has held roles as Federation Representative and Workplace Committee at school level. John was a Councillor and Special Education Contact of Sutherland and Inner-City Teachers Association (across his time in school) and a Federation Executive Branch Representative in 2023 and 2024.

