

The Speech-Language Pathologist's Handbook for Inclusive School Practices

by

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BROOKES
PUBLISHING C^o®

Baltimore • London • Sydney

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Rethinking Students

Presuming Competence



"I think the field of rehabilitation is to people with disabilities what the diet industry is to women. We live in a society that idolizes a full and completely artificial conception of bodily perfection. This view of the 'normal' body tyrannizes most, if not all, women so that far too many women in our culture grow up believing that their bodies are inadequate in some way. The issue here is that I want professionals to think about the whole parallel between dieting and rehabilitation. That's why I always tell people with disabilities, 'Never do physical therapy with a therapist who is on a diet!' If she hates her own body, she'll inevitably do harm to yours!"

—Norman Kunc (*Giangreco, 1996/2004, p. 36*)

"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, provide services to, and work with him or her. First, we discuss how to describe students to others through student strengths and multiple intelligences. Then, we describe the concept of presumption of competence and using age-appropriate and person-first language. Please see Table 5.1 for examples of person-first language (Snow, 2008).

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 educational professionals 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

**Table 5.1.** 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	The nonpreferred terms assume the opposite for students with disabilities (e.g., abnormal, unhealthy, atypical).
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 cannot write with a pencil.	Focus on strengths.
Needs a magnifier, laptop, or cane	Problems with vision; cannot write or walk	Focus on needs, not problems.

Source: Snow (2008).

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 educational team reflects a more distant understanding of her; it is a cold, clinical account that focuses exclusively on her impairments.

As an SLP 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 IEP, and it might abound with terms 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, develop an authentic relationship, and work to learn about what he or she can do. Ideally, your descriptions of a student would look much closer to the parents’ perspective on Shawntell than that of the teachers.



BEGIN WITH STRENGTHS

We were talking to Joe and asked him to describe Mary, a student who receives related services. He described Mary as autistic, loud, sensitive, a runner, sometimes sweet, a mover, and nonverbal. These descriptions speak to Joe's own beliefs about the student. On a 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 affect 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 (e.g., environment, sense of safety, and personal well-being). Armstrong has proposed that instead of considering a child learning disabled, people should see the child as *learning differently*. Table 5.2 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 was viewed as a capable learner? One of the best ways to think about the students you support is to look at the child through the lens of his or her strengths. Ask yourself the following questions: "What 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 professional development day with general educators, special educators, therapists, and paraprofessionals, Suzie 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." Julie asked Suzie 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 others are not. *Intelligence, functioning level, communication level, academic potential, pragmatic*

**Table 5.2.** 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	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

From Armstrong, T. (2000a). "Table 10-1: Turning lead into gold", from *IN THEIR OWN WAY* by Thomas Armstrong, copyright © 1987, 2000 by Thomas Armstrong. Used by permission of Jeremy P. Tarcher, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) LLC.

^aADD, attention deficit disorder; ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

skill, and *competence* are words often used to describe "smartness." In education, this belief can best be seen through the system of labeling 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 ID. Howard Gardner (1993) challenged the way psychologists and educators defined intelligences and offered a different way to look at intelligence. He used the term *multiple intelligences*.

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 5.3. We have also added a column entitled "So support using," which might help you think of the students to whom you provide speech and language services. 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.

Table 5.3. 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, time lines, 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	Good with person-to-person interactions and relationships	Group projects, group tasks, observation dialogues, conversation, debate, games, interviews
Intrapersonal intelligence	Knowledge of an inner state of being; reflective and aware	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: Armstrong (2000a, 2000b); Gardner (1993).

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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, provided therapy services, 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 test was 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 typed augmentative 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 educational professionals have no real way of determining what a student understands, they should presume that every student is competent or capable. Anne Donnellan used 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.