

What's in a Name?

Special education jargon is rife with disputes over labels — right down to what to call a child with a disability. The confusion over the terminology regarding special education students parallels the complexity of other issues in special education. There are a number of words to choose from, including: disabled, exceptional, special needs, and handicapped. The choice can be very important as some labels are very offensive to special education teachers, advocates, parents, or others in the field.

Indeed, some advocates object to use of the term “special” in special education. “[L]abeling the needs of disabled children as ‘special’ creates the emotional environment that infers ‘different,’ ‘other,’ and ‘less than’ — educational needs that people assume are foreign to those they have,” says Joy Weeber, a disability counselor educator in Raleigh. “This language of difference carries a negative connotation, as in ‘special interest groups’ and can contribute to the resistance to providing for the educational needs of disabled children.”

The term found in federal and state law is disabled. Parents and advocates prefer to make

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the terminology less hurtful and more child specific by rephrasing it as “children with disabilities.” Ann Brady, director of special education at the Rockingham County schools, points out that putting the word “children” first creates an important distinction between a child with a disability and a disabled child.

Not everyone accepts disabled as the preferred term, however, even if the child comes first. David Lillie, an education professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, prefers the term “special needs” for the simple reason that these children do indeed have special needs. Lillie believes terms like disabled are too vague to be used as a general definition. Other labels — like “handicapped” — have been replaced by more specific terms like educable mentally disabled or behaviorally-emotionally disabled.

In conclusion, the general trend in the terminology surrounding special education has been to put the child first, instead of the disability or need that qualifies the child for special education. This reflects the changes made in public education itself as the schools work to meet the diverse needs of children with special needs.

— Anna Levinsohn

shall be excluded from service or education for any reason whatsoever.”⁵ Then came the 1975 federal Education of the Handicapped Act,⁶ which required states to provide a “free and appropriate public education” to all children with disabilities with an “individualized education program” in the “least restrictive environment.” In 1977, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the “Creech bill (named after its sponsor, Sen. William Creech, D-Wake),” which brought the state into compliance with federal law.⁷ The state law was amended in 1996 to separate education for gifted children from education for children with disabilities.⁸

The federal law was overhauled most recently in 1997.⁹ Highlights of the overhaul included: a requirement that children with disabilities be included in state assessment testing or an alternative assessment; increased opportunity for parental participation in individualized education pro-

grams; greater access to the general curriculum for children with disabilities; and requirements for providing alternative education when students with disabilities are suspended from school.¹⁰

Harris says this and prior legislative action has made a huge difference in how children with special needs are educated in the public schools today. “There’s more money, personnel, know-how, and the parents are more involved,” says Harris.

Still, even officials in the N.C. Exceptional Children Division would check “needs to improve” on the public schools’ report card where educating children with special needs is concerned. “Quality of service is a big issue,” says Mills. “All children are being served, but not all are being served in terms of what everyone would consider quality.”

Given its policy of ensuring every child “a fair and full opportunity to reach his full potential,” what can the state do to assure that children