

Words reflect and influence the way people think

Terms like “differently abled”, “my abilities are stronger than my disability”, “the only disability is a negative attitude”, “take the ‘dis’ from disability and focus on the ability” take the daily challenges of persons with disabilities (that are caused by society or the environment) and try to turn them into something they believe is “positive or empowering”.

Disability is imposed by society on persons with an impairment, and it is not necessary to redefine it. Just follow the principles of the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is why terms like “differently abled,” “special,” “inspirational,” and “super heroes” are problematic when we refer to persons with impairments or disabilities.

People may think that these terms are “positive” or more “acceptable”, but in essence, it are actually covering up the discrimination that we experience daily. These terms can therefore be detrimental to the process of reasonable accommodation and equality.

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Language reflects the social context in which it is developed and used. It therefore reflects the values and attitudes of that context and plays an important role in reinforcing values and attitudes that lead to discrimination and segregation of certain groups in society. Language can therefore be used as a powerful tool to facilitate change and bring about new values, attitudes, and social integration.

In recent years, people with disabilities have claimed individual and collective rights and tried to partially change their circumstances through the words used to describe them. Negative words and stereotypes are a barrier to understanding the reality of disability. Misleading language and prevailing attitudes promote out-of-date beliefs that persons with disabilities are suffering, sick, disadvantaged, needy, and generally not like “us”, and have juxtaposed persons with disabilities with those who are “inefficient”.

Article 8 of the UNCRPD obliges States to adopt immediate, effective, and appropriate measures that will promote respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities and that will combat stereotypes, prejudices, and harmful practices in relation to persons with disabilities. Please explain to those involved, especially parents, employers, and the wider community, the policy directives in dealing with the term impaired and the concept of disability.

Do not allow insecurities to become further obstacles in the way of those we would like to support. Legislation is clear: without the acceptance of long-term, proven functional limitations, the processes of reasonable accommodation and equal inclusion are impossible.

Sources:

SA White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

<https://youtu.be/aroH2dxJkJs>

PHYSICAL ADDRESS

82 Andries Pretorius Road
Edenvale, 1609

POSTAL ADDRESS

Private Bag x 10041
Edenvale, 1610



Rehabilitation International (RI)

000-923 NPO | 930020816 PBO

CONTACT THERINA WENTZEL
NCPD NATIONAL DIRECTOR

Tel: +27 (11) 452 2774

Cell: 083 255 6854

Email: therina@ncpd.org.za