

Brian J. Wagner-Yeung – NYSSMA® Chair: Neurodiversity and Accessibility Committee

## What's in a Label? An Inclusive Person-First & Strength-Based Approach

What is a label? When you think of a label, you might think of a little sticker that is attached to an item, food, or a piece of clothing. For example, when you are at your local supermarket, you might be looking at the labels attached to groceries to see what ingredients are included. If you are on a low-salt diet, you might be purchasing items that have limited sodium. We use the labels attached to our groceries to make decisions about what to purchase, which eventually leads to what we serve on our dinner menus.

A label can be thought of in a similar way to how we view our students. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a label is defined as "something serving to provide information about a person or thing; esp. a classifying word or phrase applied to a person or thing (sometimes with the implication that such classification is inaccurate, simplistic, or restrictive)," (OED, 2022). When we associate a label with one of our students before knowing their possibilities, we are making presumptions or judgments on how we view them or teach them.

For students to receive special education services and programs in the United States, they must be identified with one of the disability categories designated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA, 2004). IDEA was most recently amended by Congress in 2015 in Public Law 114-95, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In New York State, for a school district to receive federal funding to support their students under IDEA, eligibility criteria for students with disabilities are specified in the New York State Students with Disabilities Regulations of the Commissioner of Education (NYSED, 2018).

### Labels should not define

While designating categories in the form of labels may be necessary for school programs to receive funding, in classroom practice teachers should be aware of how language can be detrimental to the academic and personal well-being of a student and how the label does not define the student.

For example, one of the 13 categories listed in New York is "emotional disturbance." According to the Oxford English Dictionary again, a disturbance is defined as "a breach of public peace, a tumult, an uproar, an outbreak of disorder," (OED, 2022). Imagine having terminology associated with yourself including the word "outbreak" - especially in our current pandemic climate. Fortunately, this category may be changed in the New York State Legislature soon (Amin, 2022).

Sometimes we create our own labels to describe a student or even a class. Imagine you are about to teach a new student, and a colleague describes the student as "that autistic child," or "they're autistic." Even before you meet them, you might make a judgment that they are non-speaking, have limited abilities, or cannot do anything. Moreover, think of when you hear the words "high functioning" or "low functioning" to describe a student. What about the words "good" or "bad," whether that refers to student's cognitive ability or behavior that day? What about the words "can" or "can't"?

We have all heard these terms used to describe our students; we may have used them ourselves. Think about when you hear a student described as one of these. How do you view them? What comes to mind? How would other people think when we use these labels to describe a

student? Imagine being the student labeled as one of these and think how they must feel, or what barriers are created when this language is used. Just like when we are at the supermarket, these labels can determine future experiences for our students. Fortunately, there are ways we can replace these barriers with more positive and inclusive language and learning environments.

### What is Person-First Language?

One way that we can replace these barriers is by using Person-First Language (PFL). "This type of language is all about acknowledging that human beings who have disabilities are, in fact, people first, and they're seen not just for their disability," (Ladau, 2021). At the end of the day, we are all human beings, part of the same genus and species.

Another way to think of this is with plants and gardens. Think about all the different types of plants that might be found in a garden. Some of them might look, smell, be shaped, or feel differently from others. Some of them require different types of care or habitats to grow properly. Nevertheless, they are all still plants. Human beings are no different.

PFL is associated with viewing each other as a whole person first. Going back to our labels mentioned earlier, instead of saying, "They're autistic," we could easily say "the student has an Autism Spectrum Disorder." Instead of saying that a person is "high/low functioning," we can say, "This child is good at, or really likes to, or we are currently learning how to ..." Instead of labeling a student as one who "can't do anything," we can replace those words with "this student

really likes, or enjoys ..." Even when it comes to behavior in our classrooms, instead of saying, "They are so bad today," we could rephrase it as, "They are just having an off-day today."

There are some people who prefer to be known by their disability first. This is called Identity First Language (IFL). For example, many people who are part of the deaf community prefer IFL over PFL. In a similar sense, many of our students have identified pronouns, which we should get into the habit of inquiring about. Nevertheless, when it comes to IFL, we should never assume or make these choices for someone. It is okay to ask a person how they would prefer to be referred to. However, we should start with PFL first. Imagine what starts to happen to those barriers when we start viewing all our students as human beings with an amazing array of possible abilities.

## What is a Strength-Based Approach?

A second way to replace these barriers is by incorporating a strength-based approach.

Armstrong (2012) mentions: Perhaps the most important tool we can use to help build a positive niche for the neurodiverse brain is our own rich understanding of each student's strengths. Educators practicing positive-niche construction should become well-versed in a range of strength-based models of learning, including Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and Dunn and Dunn's learning style approach. Educators ought to know what students in special education are passionate about - what their interests, goals, hopes, and aspirations are (14-15).

When we think of a strength-based approach, this connects to the Ability Model and a whole-person approach. When we are recognizing our students as whole individuals, we are creating ways to "elevate the whole child despite any disorders,

impairments, or disabling conditions," (Sobol, 2017).

Just as plants in our gardens have their own unique traits, we as human beings function in the same way. We all have our own identities, culture, stories, interests, ideas, intersectionalities, etc. For example, a fern is a plant that typically would be found on the dark floor of a forest. If we were to grow one at home, we would need to find a shaded corner away from direct sunlight. Nevertheless, a sunflower requires direct sunlight. We would need to find a location that has plenty of sunlight, such as outside or on a balcony.

In our classroom environments, our students require the same individualization. Not all students learn, process, engage, create, perform, respond, or connect in the same way. We can shape environments that have multiple entry points or multiple ways to engage so all our students have accessibility. We can recognize that our students have their own set of strengths and traits that can bring something unique to the classroom environment.

We can also think of the language we use as the fertilizer to help them grow. While a fern grows in a moist environment and a sunflower grows in a dry open space, they still require the same basic necessities: water, soil, and sunlight. Similarly, if we use language that is positive, inclusive, and person-first, we are providing our students the same optimum environment to grow.

## Putting it together

So, what does this mean for us as music educators? Instead of viewing our students for what they are not able to do, let us challenge ourselves to think about what they can do. We should focus on the "preservation of the individual personhood of each student," (Hammel & Hourigan, 2017). Let us use PFL to look at our students as whole individuals with their own unique set of skills that can be brought into our classroom environments.

While some labels are necessary

for a student who has been identified as having a disability in order to receive special services and programs, we need to be mindful that these labels do not determine our opinions, decision making, generalizations, and judgments. We want all our students to have equal access, and, for us educators, this means reflecting on how we perceive and describe our students.

Think about when we are talking to colleagues, students, parents, families, or even in your communities. How do we refer to one another? When we recognize that all people are human beings and we see each other as people, we begin to create truly inclusive environments. When these barriers are removed, it is our students who will flourish. And, most important, we can begin teaching our students to view each other in the same way, making the world more inclusive.

Let us continue doing this by being cognizant to use PFL and a strength-based approach. We have the tools to do this. Let us use music to help create a BEDR environment (which is NYSSMA's Belonging, Equity, Diversity, Representation initiative) or garden, for all our students. ||

---

*Brian J. Wagner-Yeung is NYSSMA® Chair, Neurodiversity and Accessibility Committee. He is a music educator for the NYC Department of Education and is an adjunct faculty member at CUNY Brooklyn College. Please reach out to him at [brianwagneryeung@gmail.com](mailto:brianwagneryeung@gmail.com) if you need any resources or support or would like to suggest topics for future NYSSMA® Winter Conferences.*

*continued on next page*

## References

- label, n. 1. (n. d.). Oxford English Dictionary. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www-oed-com.brooklyn.ezproxy.cuny.edu/view/Entry/104691?rskey=U9bjM9&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>
- Regulations of the Commissioner of Education - Parts 200 and 201. (2018, January 12). New York State Education Department. Retrieved March 27, 2022, from <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/lawsregs/part200.htm>
- Section 1400. (2019, November 7). Individuals With Disabilities Act. Retrieved March 27, 2022, from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-i/1400>
- disturbance, n. (n. d.). Oxford English Dictionary. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www-oed-com.brooklyn.ezproxy.cuny.edu/view/Entry/55821?redirectedFrom=disturbance#eid>
- General Directions to Use the State's Model Individualized Education Program (IEP) Form. (2011, May 23). Special Education. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/formsnotices/IEP/directions.htm>
- Amin, R. (2022, March 14). To reduce stigma, New York moves to change 'emotional disturbance' label to 'emotional disability.' Chalkbeat New York. <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2022/3/14/22978080/ny-emotional-disturbance-regents-state-students-with-disabilities>
- Ladau, E. (2021). *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally* (p. 11). Ten Speed Press.
- Armstrong, T. (2012.) *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life* (pp. 14-15). ACSD.
- Sobol, E. S. (2017). *An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners* (3rd ed., p. 72). Rowman & Littlefield in partnership with National Association for Music Education (NAFME).
- Hammel, A. M. & Hourigan, R. M. (2017). *Teaching Music to Students with Special Needs, A Label-Free Approach* (2nd ed., p. xvii). Oxford University Press.