Disabled People Are

Black, Lesbians, White, Bisexuals, Brown, Employed, Parents, Trans, Children, Brothers, Gay, Sisters, Gender Fluid, Cousins, Unemployed, Blind, Romany, Queer, Tenants, Jewish, Gentile, Deaf, Musicians, Landlords, Women, Lesbians , Pregnant, Muslim, Carers Neuro Diverse, MPs, Wheel Chair Users, Christians, Scientists, Hindus, Men, Drivers, Sporty, Academics, Pilots, Influencers, Entertainers, Teachers, Mothers, Old, Fathers, Friends, Gay, etc

 and Proud

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

As educators we have an exciting job to affect the next generation and the culture of society. We do so at a challenging time. Since Brexit we have seen and heard vociferous voices challenging the human rights of many marginalized groups. We have seen this summer, the grass root challenge of those ideas in the ‘flash-mob’ type riots.

In our attempts to challenge the stereotypes that breed prejudice and discrimination, we have adopted the Labour Party concept of “protected characteristics”. This has been a useful device to highlight the wrongs done to people, and to put in place the duties on public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people. But while these named characteristics are a useful form of shorthand for practical purposes, we need to recognise and draw attention to more particular underlying concepts and language.

In my work as a trainer, I often see that this concept of inclusion leads people to think that the protected characteristics describe the ‘other’ people. In reality, we all have an ethnicity, ability, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief; some of us have been pregnant at some time and have responsibility for children. Our job as trainers and educators is to enable people to recognise the complexity of our identity and see that everyone is covered by the Public Sector Duty and so has a vested interest in its success.

In education, we see very little attempt to educate people or engender discussion on these vital issues. Too often we are taught that there are only two sexes, and we live thereafter with those glasses on. We also use language that obfuscates, (clouds the issue). We have two words – “sex” and “gender” – to describe what many think to be the same thing. We use the word “race”, when “ethnicity” would be more encompassing. “Religion and belief” is a useful phrase but it is rarely understood. Despite the persistence of many in seeing disability as limited to wheelchair use (and the signs on doors reinforcing this perception!), the term covers a huge range of impairments, both temporary and lifelong, physical and mental, directly and indirectly affecting a person’s ability to function in a few, many, most or all situations.

For many of us the legal definition is not understood or helpful. You’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities. You’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

Again, it is somewhat binary; whereas, in reality, those of us who are predominantly non-disabled can have periods of disability and those people who are considered disabled can have periods of less disability.

So the use of labels, can limit our recognition of the complexity of our species and reinforce differences, which in turn leads to fear and prejudice. For if we see the world in black and white – literally as well as figuratively – we are led down the path of “me” and “other”. We end up denying who we are, what we have been and who we will be. We therefore need to explore the language we use more thoroughly, take account of its emotive connotations and associations, and beware situations where simplification is convenient but dangerous

Language has power. How we frame things has a powerful unconscious effect on how we see the world. What we say and what we don’t say has power. Using the word ‘man’ exclusively to describe humanity renders women invisible.

History was indeed the story of men until feminists began to unearth all the hidden women.

And even then, the women cited were predominantly, white, non-disabled, cis, and heterosexual.

In the 21st century we need to move beyond the systemic binary concepts of identity.

Too often we write and talk as if our personal, internal ‘map’ is the actual ‘territory’ in which we all exist. We use language that excludes others. Inclusive language requires thought and knowledge. We often ‘don’t know’ what we ‘don’t’ know and maybe because we don’t want to offend, we are frightened of using the ‘wrong’ words in case we do offend.

We need to recognise that there are plenty of places, thanks to the internet, that can help us find the best words and frankly asking for advice is frequently welcomed by people like me.

Language that describes oppression is relatively new. When we are struggling for our human rights, it is very hard to convey what we are dealing with If we do not have words to describe the beliefs and behaviours of our oppressors. The terms: racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, disablism, homophobia and transphobia, only came into being in the middle of the last century and the concept of white supremacy has been popularised in this century.

Hard to imagine when the words we use now are so commonplace to describe personal and institutional prejudice.

The definitions of the ‘isms’ above have been developing as the people referenced by the terms have become involved in defining their meanings. We now have a shorthand that is largely acceptable to describe the attitudes and practises that render so many people as second class or non-citizens.

Over the years many minority groups have grabbed the words that have been used to attack them and reclaimed them. It is part of the process of challenging internalised prejudice. As a lesbian I am very happy to call myself a dyke. However, it would be unwise of me to use that word in certain places, like a classroom. It would certainly be unwise for a heterosexual person to use that word to describe me to another person as it would possibly cause offence and might lead them to be seen as prejudiced. Some disabled people have reclaimed the word ‘crip’ to the consternation of some; however, it is a powerful way to challenge the sentimental attitudes often portrayed about them and enable them to challenge internalised disablism

What we say, when we say it, where we say it, why we say it, how we say it and who says it is, ALL. For, as Albert Einstein might say, ‘context affects everything’

When describing people there is a discussion on whether we put people first or the characteristic; for example, ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘people who are seeking asylum’, ‘disabled people’ or ‘people with disabilities’. The latter form stresses the humanity of the person; it puts ‘people’ first. Some sections of each group prefer this, others prefer the former form.

The Social Model of Disability, the work of Mike Oliver, tells us that it is society, not their disabilities, that has disabled people. This places the responsibility on society to be inclusive.

He recognised that people were disabled by the attitudes and behaviours of our society that ignores the needs of disabled people and builds structures that put physical barriers to the accessibility of people with disabilities.

I have argued that social Model of Disability applies more broadly and is fact a “Social Model of Exclusion”.

Most societies put barriers in the way of women, people of colour, the working class and queer identified people, all who are considered able-bodied, from accessing their/our human rights. The Medical Model, de-humanising name calling and Criminalisation are some of the tools the powerful elite use to do this.

For example, the negative discrimination of LGBT+ people has been justified by the medical profession by deeming us as ‘pyschopathic’ until 1973 when the World Health Organisation changed their definition. Yet we are still challenging so-called ‘conversion therapy’. In parts of the world, we are still considered perverted or criminal.

 The label of ‘subnormal’ has been used to describe people by powerful men to justify enslaving people of colour, and our challenges s have been de-bunked by 'science'. The recognition of how society is impairing us and outlawing of such behaviour is a crucial step in taking responsibility to change to the situation.

There is also the problem of ‘victim blaming’ language. Commonly, the press and the media describe hate crimes in such a way. For example, a press report stating: “The victim was attacked because she was Asian”, describes the victim as a passive recipient of violence caused by her perceived ‘Asian’ characteristics.

 If the report had said, “The attacker, using racist slurs, violated a woman who he perceived to be Asian”, we would know that hate was the cause of this crime.

The woman may or may not have had Asian heritage and may or may not have fought back. But the description of the event would be accurate, if incomplete.

Defining the crime by the motive of the criminal makes it clear where the responsibility for the crime lies. The accurate description sounds clumsy. This is because we have become used to language that blames the victim and not the perpetrator; that describes the victim as a passive recipient of a crime and leaves out the actual criminal/perpetrator.

Is it any wonder therefore that our legal system so often ignores the rights of such victims?

It was not until the late 1900’s in the UK, that we began to pass laws that outlawed discrimination based on racism, sexism, ageism, disablism, homophobia, transphobia and religious beliefs.

If our language blames the victim, then it is hard to reframe our attitudes and beliefs. Even with the laws in place, victims often blame themselves when they are victims of discrimination or attack and they don’t report it to the authorities. When victims do report an incident or crime to the authorities, they often experience a response that either ignores the report or delays taking appropriate action or obfuscates the issues. The use of the word ‘bullying’ in schools rather than ‘hate crime’ to describe a vicious attack, often means that the issue is not taken as seriously as it needs to be.

Sometimes the authorities actually sabotage the correct proceedings.

The passive, victim blaming language therefore reflects the reality that society does blame the victim!

Society’s rules are enacted through language; our laws use this same language. So, if we want to change the reality of hate crimes and unlawful discrimination going unacknowledged and un- punished, we must change the language!

The perpetuation of stereotypes regarding ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and sexual orientation and gender identity limits children’s personal horizons and damages their self-esteem. Schools and society bear the responsibility of challenging prevailing stereotypes by ensuring that the experiences of all social groups are accurately represented in the curriculum, enabling individuals to find themselves reflected in official educational materials.

Another way language can undermine the appreciation of our diverse culture is by the use of terms like ‘normal’. It’s a simple word that carries a great deal of weight. It invites us into a false dichotomy of seeing a person or thing as either normal or abnormal. It invites us to approve of the normal as something healthy, unthreatening and correct. The word abnormal is used to describe the unhealthy when applied to psychology. It has been used to describe disabled people, people who identify themselves as LGBT+ and criminals.

To judge the ‘normality’ of a person is a very powerful tool in the hands of the elite. It is used to exclude those who are deemed an under-class. You can’t be in the ‘elite’ group, without an underclass.

Over the years I have promoted the use of the words “usual” and “usualise” to replace “normal and “normalise” in order to disseminate ideas in a way that does not imply a hierarchy. I see them as more neutral terms, without the history of promoting exclusion and oppression.

When we usualise something, we acclimatise people to its presence, and take away the threat of difference which creates fear and discrimination. Usualising in schools has more to do with familiarizing learners with a subject’s everyday occurrence or existence rather than an in-depth understanding of the subject. Learners should consistently be made aware of the presence of disabled people in all their diversity. Disabled people are integral to our learner’s lives. They exist in all times and all places. They exist in the here and now; essential to the UK society and culture. Their contributions to all societies have mostly been either ignored or gone unattributed. Teachers should use materials that illustrate and recognise such contributions. So, in the context of the classroom, “usualising” occurs when a teacher *references* the disability of the contributor without further comment.

The importance of the diversity of the human race is a powerful concept and one that so many young people round the world today, even with the internet, do not realise.

They struggle to feel good about themselves. Many believe they are all alone in the world.

The recent rise of hate crime engendered by Brexit, the press attacks on trans people, the last governments guidance on ‘gender questioning children’ all have an effect on disabled people regardless of whether they are black, migrants, or trans for of course, disabled people are members of all those groups. And the atmosphere that condones ‘othering’ is poisonous for us all.

Mastermind and Strictly Come Dancing have been including disabled people for many series now. Was this usualising or tokenism?

Chris McCausland (a stand-up comedian who is visually impaired), the 2024 winner of Strictlysaid “I think there are low expectations of people with disabilities. Sometimes you’ll come down a set of steps into a taxi and people say, “wow, how did you do that?”

There is an expectation of disabled people to be inspirational, when most of us are just normal people, doing ordinary things.

Disabled individuals are some of the most resourceful, innovative, and determined people you’ll ever meet.”

His message shines a much-needed spotlight on the barriers we face and the change we need to see in society.

The education system most not be blighted by the ‘low expectations’ Chris refers to.

Mainstream Schools should do whatever is required to ensure that disabled children can have access to the resources that are available to able-bodied children. Disabled children should be supported to be creative, productive and valuable members of society, rather than experience inhibitive barriers to fulfilling their potential.

It is up to us to ensure that they do.