Case Study 12.1
Labels

In her 4th grade classroom, Mrs. Adams is being observed by her principal. She is telling her students that all of the statements she is about to make are true, but they might not think so at first. She asks them to think about how each statement could be true.

“I can see things that are invisible.”
“I can be underwater for an hour and still be alive.”
“I can hear people talking in China.”
“I can fly.”

Now Mrs. Adams asks the students to explain how all of these statements are true.

After a moment, one girl says, “You can fly if you take an airplane.” And a boy shouts, “Or a hot air balloon! I did that.” And another shouts “Or a hang glider.” Mrs. Adams smiles and tells them that they are catching on to this “game.”

A boy says, “You can see invisible things with a microscope.” Another boy says, “You could stay under water for a LONG time if you could breathe through a straw.” Voices call out, “Or scuba diving!” “Or in a submarine!” And others, “You could hear people talking in China if you called them on the telephone!” “You could hear them talking on television!” And the children shout out more comments.

Mrs. Adams says, “Okay now children, quiet down. You were very smart to think of all these things. People make tools so they can do things that they otherwise couldn’t do. One boy says, “My dad uses a forklift at work.” And Mrs. Adams responds, “Yes, that way he can lift heavy weights that he could never life on his own. Now I have a question for you. Isn’t this exactly what people with a disability have to do? Tell me some of the tools they use. Let’s say I couldn’t walk – what could help me get around?”

A girl says, “A wheelchair?” Mrs. Adams responds, “Exactly. What if I couldn’t hear very well?” As the conversation goes on the children mention hearing aids and Braille and special computers.

“Oh, Mrs. Adams holds up her hand for them to be quiet, “they use tools just like the rest of us, because that’s what human beings do. Should we give them a special name because they have a disability? Do we need to call them ‘hearing impaired’ or ‘visually impaired?’” Most of the children shout, “No.” Mrs. Adams asks, “All right, so what should we call people with a disability?” The children seem puzzled.

Mrs. Adams looks at a student and says, “Jerry Thompson, why do you wear glasses?” “I don’t see things so good far away,” he says. “Okay, the glasses help you do something you couldn’t do without them. So children, a label for that is “being near-sighted.” Is that what we should call him?” The children are very quiet.
A little girl says, “I just call him Jerry.” All the children laugh and several of them begin to chant, “Jer – ree! Jer – ree! Jer – ree!” And Jerry blushes and laughs, unused to getting all this attention.

“You’re right children. We should just call him Jerry and think of him as our classmate and our friend.” Then Mrs. Adams tells them to take out their notebooks and she gives them a writing assignment.

After the children leave for lunch, the principal says he wants to talk to Mrs. Adams about her lesson. The principal says he was not happy with the part of the lesson where she talked about tools. “I don’t see any point in avoiding labels. There are children in school who have cognitive disabilities and physical disabilities and multiple disabilities, and I believe we should teach all the children about how they are labeled, but make sure the information is accurate and make it a positive lesson about the meaning of labels so that the children don’t misuse the labels in a negative way.”

Mrs. Adams shakes her head, “Any label you teach to children can be and probably will be misused, because it teaches them to focus on the disability first. I want them to focus on the person first. I believe we need to forget about labels and emphasize that children and adults with disabilities are human beings just like anyone else. Teaching children about labels does not help them accept people with disabilities as human beings.”

“What’s the first thing you notice when someone is in a wheelchair?” asks the principal. That they are in a wheelchair, right? So people will always notice the disability first, but as long as you have explained disabilities to them and they have accurate information, they are more likely to be respectful and act appropriately.”

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. For what reasons might a person with a disability agree with Mrs. Adams position? For what reasons might a person with a disability agree with the principal’s position?

2. If you had a choice about how your children would be taught about disability, would you want their teacher to take the principal’s approach or Mrs. Adams’ approach? Explain.
Case Study 12.2

Determining Intelligence: Measuring Up or Down?

In Chapter Twelve you read about Sharisa Kochmeister who was born with cerebral palsy and had limited communication skills. As a child, she had taken an IQ test that had given her a measured intelligence quotient of 15; later she was taught how to type and continued learning until she no longer required a communication partner to assist her. As she approached her 15th birthday, Sharisa was retested and her intelligence quotient was measured at 142. Sharisa explained the barriers that she had to overcome:

“DISBELIEF IN MY INTELLECT AND INTEGRITY [and] MY OWN DOUBTS ABOUT BEING READY TO GIVE UP SUPPORT AND CONTACT.”

Like Sharisa, Lucy also had cerebral palsy with limited communication skills, and like Sharisa she had taken an IQ test as a child that had given her a measured intelligence quotient of 42. Another parallel with Sharisa was that Lucy was given a computer and learned to type on a keyboard. After learning to type she often discussed “intelligence,” describing it as a feeling of competence. Lucy had this to say about learning to type:

THIS HAS CHANGED MY WHOLE LIFE. I CAN NOW TELL PEOPLE HOW INTELLIGENT I AM INSIDE. I CAN TELL PEOPLE WHAT I LIKE AND DISLIKE. I AM ME AND EVERYONE CAN LOVE ME NOW BECAUSE I AM A GOOD AND VALUABLE PERSON.

Lucy described learning to type as a way of being reborn as a normal person, as someone who can do anything with her life because people understand that she is an intelligent person. But intelligent or not, Lucy says that everyone wants to be treated with respect. Asked what it was like before she learned to express herself on a keyboard and computer, Lucy wrote:

“I WAS A CLOWN IN A WORLD THAT WAS NOT A CIRCUS.”

From: Labeling: Who wants to be called retarded? By Chris Kliewer and Douglas Biklin (1996) in Controversial Issues Confronting Special Education

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. In your own words, describe what Lucy meant when she wrote that before she learned how to communicate with a keyboard she felt like she was “a clown in a world that was not a circus.” Do you think there may be other people who feel this way? Explain.

2. Write a brief short story where a person of high intelligence does not have the means of demonstrating that, and show other people making assumptions that she is not intelligent by how they behave towards her and talk to her.