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Political Correctness in the Educational Context: the Analysis of the Language Used towards Special Education Needs Learners

*"*Language is a tool available to us, of enormous power and potential beauty, but it is neither exclusive nor comprehensive. The job of education is to show children its strengths, certainly, but not to neglect its weaknesses"[1].

The idea of Good English and Political Correctness has been recognised by both teachers in the English-speaking countries and teachers of English as a second language. The concept of being 'socially acceptable' necessitated great changes in the presentation of usage in textbooks but also in the classroom. Educators are aware of the inevitability of speaking, addressing, describing and approaching all the learners in a polite and non-offensive way. Fontana[2] believes that the teacher's role is quite demanding as she or he has to not only teach how to use language but also help children to think critically about it. Additionally, as he claims, children "need help in identifying the misuse of language by people in responsible positions. They need help in sorting out the meaning – or the absence of meaning – in the utterances of others". Following this concept one can come to the conclusion that the teacher's role can also be understood as implementation of good manners, code of conduct and especially, using politically correct, appropriate and definite language. Pooley[3] defines this task in the following way:

"(…) this differentiation of language usage, a fundamental law of language, should be our first consideration in the study of 'correct' English and in the presentation of English usage in the classroom"; (…) in discarding an absolute right and wrong for a relative standard of appropriateness and social acceptability, we shall have to determine the areas or levels of language usage, to define and illustrate them, and to apply them as standards for the written and spoken English in the schools*".*

Doyle[4] thoroughly discusses the problem of politically incorrect (especially sexist) language and its influence on children's education. The author provides us with many examples of recent laws and guidelines aiming at combating this

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[1] Fontana, D. 1995, *Psychology for Teachers.* (Third Edition), (New York: Palgrave), p. 86.
[2] *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[3] Pooley, R. 1946, The Definition and Determination of 'Correct' English from Teaching English Usage. In Goshgarian, G. (ed.) *Exploring Language.* (Second Edition), (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company), pp. 12-15.
[4] Doyle, M. 1995 http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/01775128,00.html., pp. 98-99.

problem. The writer enumerates The National Union of Teachers (NUT), National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), and the Association of University Teachers (AUT) as the organisations that have produced guidelines specifically covering non-sexist language. *Towards Equality*, written by the NUT assistant secretary for equal opportunity and produced by ETUCE, a Europe-wide federation of teacher unions, urges every educational organisation to develop a policy of equal opportunity, beginning with a statement of intent covering all aspects of the curriculum, including "measures to combat sex stereotyping including the provision of non-sexist books and teaching materials, [and] the use of non-sexist language and images"[5]. Writing for the *Guardian*, Beadle[6] also stresses the importance of teaching children about political correctness – "Not teaching them that it is right or wrong – it's not a teacher's job to draw the conclusions – but that it exists". Hence, teachers should be prepared to introduce political correctness in the classroom. The author claims that the callous word causes more lasting damage as "words can hurt like hell". Moreover, Beadle states that it is possible to teach the existence of a more considerate version of expression in a disinterested manner, raising it as a possibility to consider, at the same time as satirising its extremities. This argument can be supported with the fact that:

"kids love being asked to define their own politically correct expressions, and respond with glee to describing a baldy as being follically challenged and a porker as calorifically enhanced. Study of this subject causes them to investigate the intrinsic morality of their own language, and to see how this may have changed over the years. It also politicises. A black girl who comes to the realisation that standard English is the language of a white male orthodoxy is a girl who may well be motivated to do something about this in her own life".

The American media have recently drawn their attention to a trend in education that has covered most of the issues. This trend is Political Correctness (PC) understood as a synonymous expression to multiculturalism. Closson[7] describes this process in the following way: "…Textbooks are being written and courses changed to promote multiculturalism at the expense of teaching about Western Civilization. Professors are unable to teach their courses or participate in the academic enterprise because their views fail to conform to the new guardians of culture. What is most appalling is the attempt to remove the freedom of speech from students who fail to conform to the correct position on a broad spectrum of topics…".

It seems that the situation has gone out of control, many universities (Berkeley, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Wisconsin) force their students to take part in the ethnic studies course whereas the one in Western Civilisation (e.g., American history) is not required. As D'Souza[8] writes, "any behaviour, verbal or physical, that stigmatises or victimises an individual on the basis of race, eth-

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[5] Doyle, M. 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

[6] Beadle, P. 2006, Mind your language and know what it means. In *The Guardian Unlimited,* 16 May, 2006; available from http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/01775128,00.html, on 22.08.2006.

[7] Closson, D. 2007, Politically Correct Education. The Power of Political Correctness; available from http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/pc-educ.html on 07.06.2007.

[8] D'Souza, D. 1991, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus,* (New York: Macmillan Inc./The Free Press), p. 142.

nicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, creed, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, handicap, or Vietnam-era veteran status" is defined as punishable. Ravitch[9] is also of the opinion that in the eyes of PC, "most classical literature is unacceptable when judged by the new rules governing references to gender, ethnicity, age, disability…it is a process that drains literature of its life and blood, converts it into dreary reading materials and grinds reading material into pabulum".

Unfortunately, it seems that Political Correctness (at least, in the USA) is nowadays interpreted only from the perspective of multiculturalism and thus does not focus much on the language itself. Apart from an article focusing on a problem of stereotyping exceptional people through the use of proverbs[10] to the best of my knowledge, not many analyses are devoted to the study of the language used while addressing or describing mentally or physically challenged people.

The category of Special Education Needs (SEN) can be described as a term corresponding to the learners who represent certain mental, emotional or physical impairment and consequently can not make use of the 'normal' (understood as traditional) schooling. Some of them attend individual tuition (this system of teaching is popular in Poland and the UK) others belong to, so called "integrative" or "mainstream" classes, where the education is provided to both – 'healthy' children and those with special needs), or special schools treating only slightly or severely mentally retarded students. These learners create a big Special Needs Minority that has to be tackled appropriately, both in terms of social behaviour and language used towards them. Unfortunately this particular minority has been experiencing lots of criticism, mock, ridicule, irony and maliciousness. The society despises everyone that is even slightly different and stands out from the average, and the yardstick, ironically, is defined by the 'normal' majority. This supercilious attitude is expressed not only in the behaviour (e.g., making faces while talking to them, showing offensive gestures) but also in the language.

According to Germain[11], the trend to use invectives towards SEN members has become a very significant problem in the UK. This type of bullying towards people who have a disability is known as 'disabilist bullying'. The Education and Skills Committee passed two recommendations about this type of bullying:

- all schools' anti-bullying policies must address disabilist bullying
- the Government must produce guidance on disabilist bullying.

Various organisations, such as Mencap or the United Nations Convention on Disability Rights have been fighting to promote and protect full human rights for the world's 650 million disabled people so that they can take part fully in society and prejudice against disabled people will not be so prevalent[12].

The intention of this article is also to display various expressions used towards

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[9] Ravitch, D. 2003, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn.* New York: Knopf. Cited in www.mackinac.org.

[10] Omotosho, J. *Stereotyping exceptional persons through the use of proverbs: implications for counseling.* www.ijeunilorin.net/dec1993/STEREOTYPING %20EXCEPTIONAL%20PERSONS.pdf; available on 18.07.2007.

[11] Germain, R. 2007, Politics Page UK, *British Journal of Special Education*, 34:3, pp. 180-181.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 181.

EXAMPLE	USED ABOUT	REFERENCE
their career have such a *meandering course*	ADD/ADHD	Flanagan and Strong, 2005, book cover
willful children	ADD/ADHD	Flanagan and Strong, 2005:17
big-picture people	ADD/ADHD	Flanagan and Strong, 2005:34
driven by a motor (being always on the go)	ADD/ADHD	Flanagan and Strong, 2005:36
misunderstood kids	ADD/ADHD	Waterhouse, 2003
the children who walk in the shadows	autism	Brown in Waterhouse, 2000:326
aurally challenged	deaf	Rees, 1995:3
buddy system	dyspraxia	Waterhouse, 2003
exceptional and special learners	mentally handicapped; SEN learners	Rees, 1995:93
mentally confused	mentally ill	Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2003
uniquely abled	mentally retarded	Rees, 1995:138
university challenged	mentally retarded	Rees, 1995:138
physiologically disenfranchised	physically handicapped	Rees, 1995:114-115
students who have diverse learning needs	SEN learners	Smyth, B., 2005
requiring education tailored for their needs	SEN learners	www.marvelwood.org.
under-performing pupils	SEN learners	www.tes.co.uk
exceptional families with exceptional kids	sensory processing disorder	www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Table 1: Least Frequent Examples of Terminology Used towards SEN Students

Special Education Needs learners. These phrases have either "caught my eye or ear"[13] and were collected during the period of 2003–2008. The table presents some of the examples used towards SEN learners.

The most polite and euphemistic expressions displayed in the table include *big-picture people, willful children, exceptional learners, uniquely abled* or *misunderstood kids*. Others may evoke confusion (*physiologically disfranchised, driven by a motor*) or even surprise (i.e., *have no useful hearing, university challenged, requiring education tailored for their needs*). But all of the above examples are politically correct and inoffensive and may have been coined by people who either experience the problem of being 'different' themselves (like Flanagan and Strong, both being the adults with ADHD) or are tolerant and careful as to

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[13] Sinclair, J. 1991, *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 25.

which language should be used while describing Special Education Needs students.

The examples of politically incorrect phrases can be divided into a few categories. The first group of expressions used to be employed in the past but nowadays should rather be avoided as their connotations are no longer positive. One should enumerate here such terminology as *disabled, (physically) handicapped* and *'cap in hand', mentally/physically retarded, deaf* and its diminutive form '*deafies', stone deaf, out and out blind, cripple* and *crips, physically different, invalid* and *(physically) abnormal.* Rees[14] questions the correctness of some currently appropriate terms (e.g., *learning difficulties[15]*) referring to the educational context and provides us with the opinion of Steven Billington's, Mencap's director of marketing and appeals, who claims that : "It is only a matter of time before even the most right-on expression becomes a term of abuse. It has been the same since people talked about village idiots, and "learning difficulties" is no exception. Children are already calling each other *LDs* as an insult". This opinion can partly account for the fact why certain (previously accepted) terms are no longer in usage, i.e., *backwards, mentally deficient, educationally/academically subnormal[16].* Surprisingly enough, the group concerned prefers still to be called in a (contemporary) inappropriate way. Lord Rix, Mencap's chairperson expresses this attitude as follows: "Learning difficulties" is a misnomer. It implies that men-

tal handicap is all a matter of education …My child [born mentally handicapped] is 40 and to describe her as having a learning difficulty is a travesty of the truth"[17].

The second group of constructions denotes certain problems that may be interpreted as deterring people from leading normal lives and having a detrimental effect on them. It encompasses such vocabulary as: *afflicted by, suffering from (e.g., mental alienation), confined to* e.g*., a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, touched by, crippled by, stricken by* or *a sufferer/victim of …[18].* These phrases are objected to by both – people who are disabled and those concerned with looking after them. Another category refers to inappropriate medical terms that used to be implemented while describing SEN students. One could distinguish here such terms as: *mongolism, mongol, imbecile, paralytic, cretin, LDs* (used as an insult), *defective, deformed, mad, crazy, insane, abnormal, spastic, mentally deranged/ disordered/disturbed/impaired, lunatic (asylum)* or *extreme behaviour disorders.* As has been already stated, the term *Down's syndrome* has been introduced into the usage at the expense of *mongolism* as it caused certain racial uneasiness and was hurtful to many parents[19]. The author traces the origin of this word and states that *mongolism* was first characterised before 1900 and defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition) as "*Congenital form of mental deficiency…marked by numerous signs, including short stature, short thick hands*

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[14] Rees, N. 1995, *The Politically Correct Phrasebook. What they say you can and cannot say in the 1990s,* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 94.

[15] The term *learning difficulties* was first introduced in 1976 at the time of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children of Young People (Rees, N. *op. cit.*, p. 233).

[16] Holder, R. 2003, *Oxford Dictionary of Euphemisms*, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 2.

[17] *The Independent*, 20 July 1992. This opinion is also shared by Australian teachers, the informants participating in my research. Some of these respondents notice that a vast group of differently-abled (usually physically disfranchised) students tend to joke about themselves and not treat their disability in a very serious way.

[18] Rees, N. 1995, *op. cit.,* pp. 36, 43.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

and feet, a large tongue, a flat face with features somewhat similar to those of Mongolians…". As this definition clearly indicates where offence might lie, the change of name was just a matter of time. It was inspired by a conscious campaign and since 1961 people with this condition have been referred to as *with Down's syndrome, Down's syndrome patients* or *Down's people*. This term is also an example of a phrase incorporating a word *syndrome* being used to avoid a taboo word. The stigma can be hence circumvented by naming the affliction after the English physician John Down. Holder[20] (quoting Winchester, 1998) is also of the opinion that in the same way one may prefer not to talk about other illnesses, e.g., schizophrenia: "(…) to rid the ailment of unpleasant associations, there are now moves to have it called Kraepelin's syndrome". Pyles and Algeo[21] provide another example of the above-mentioned strategy. *Leprosy*, because of repulsive connotations, has been changed into 'the colorless' *Hansen's disease.*

Another very vivid example of completely outrageous language used towards ADD is provided by Holder[22] who defines Attention Deficit Disorder as "idleness or stupidity". Moreover, the very same syndrome is widely described by Theroux[23], who claims that ADD is "a medical condition which can also be used to avoid condemning a child as being stupid, idle, or naughty"[24]. The above mentioned examples are to be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of Euphemisms*. This, in turn, can imply that ADD

is only a euphemistic, more polite form of something that 'less politically correct' people would call stupidity! The same dictionary defines *developmental classes* as associated with ignorance, idleness, or the lack of ability. "Educational jargon, as in the *developmental class* for the unruly or stupid, and the *developmental course*, which used to be called *cramming*". *Remedial classes* or *help* is understood here as " [the one] applicable to the dull, the lazy, and the badly taught". *Less academic* children are "stupid or unteachable" whereas *maladjusted* – naughty or ill-disciplined.

The biggest group of expressions unfortunately comprises foul and extremely coarse language. People who are not academically gifted, have low IQs or represent special needs are referred to as, e.g., *freak, vegetable, stupid, brain-dead* (used about Down's syndrome)*, funny (in the head), funny farm, wacky* or *wacko, bats, nuts, retard, moron, jerk, loon, luny, flawed, crack-brained, scatter-brained, shatter-brained, head-case, nutcase, bonkers, unhinged, nincompoop, certifiable, halfwit, nitwit, fuckwit* or *fuckhead, demented, flake, fruitcake, gaga, madman, madwoman, nutty, psycho, psychopath, schizo, troppo, unbalanced* and *wreck.* The overwhelming plethora of such expressions seems to be almost never ending as only one resource, namely the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*CALD*) provides eighty-four matches (the majority of which are impolite ones) to the term 'mentally ill' and one hundred and fifty four to the word 'stupid'. Manser[25] traces the origin of insults and states that some of them (*nitwit, freak*) were used in the 1910s, others such as *jerk, birdbrain, cretin, shithead* appeared in the 1930s and

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[20] Holder, 2003, *op. cit.*

[21] Pyles, T., & Algeo, J. 1964, [1982]. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), p. 248.

[22] Holder, R. 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[23] Theroux, P. 1993, *Millroy the Magician.* New York: Ballantine Books.

[24] Cited in Holder, R. 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[25] Manser, M. 2007, *Buttering Parsnips, Twocking Chavs. The Secret Life of the English Language*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson), p. 110.

EXAMPLES:	USED ABOUT
mADDening child	ADD
people who run into difficulties	ADD, ADHD,
another new bandwagon	ADD/ADHD
thrill-seeking people	ADHD
moral defectiveness	ADHD
little monsters	ADHD children
constant failure child	learning disabilities
less fortunate students	SEN learners
less favoured students	SEN learners
unfortunate children	SEN learners

Table 2: The Most Offensive Language Used towards SEN Students

1940s. Phrases of relatively modern origin comprise *nutcake* and *retard* (1960s), *goonhead* (1980s) or *twathead* (2000s).

The last two categories concentrate on the idiomatic expressions and similes and brand-new, newly-coined metaphors used to describe someone's intellectual potential. *CALD* provides us with many options, e.g., the synonyms of a term *mentally ill* and *unhinged*. One can distinguish here the examples that are used humorously (e.g., *unhinged, Dutchman*), others are informal or idiomatic (e.g., *certifiable, have a screw lose*). The majority though, are derogatory, offensive and vulgar, e.g., anything qualified as being *Dutch* is considered bogus or inferior[26]. Hence using the word *Dutchman*, may therefore be considered as doubly politically incorrect.

The last enumerated category is composed of newly-coined and relatively rare expressions that have appeared in print towards SEN learners. Some of the examples are very ironic and used offensively although their previous connotation was not as negative i.e., *a bandwagon* – is defined as "an activity, group, move-

ment, etc. that has become successful or fashionable and so attracts many new people"[27]. Referring to ADD or ADHD as *another new bandwagon* may imply that these syndromes have become attached to learners in a kind of fashion-like way, to make 'the bearers' more popular and attractive among their peers.

The term *mADDening child* makes use of an expression 'to go mad' (meaning to become crazy) and 'to drive somebody mad' and implies that an ADD child can have a devastating influence (or even maddening effect) on his or her caretaker. Strong & Flanagan[28] provide us with the example of *moral defectiveness* claiming that this term was created to place the blame on the child and the parents. The authors also postulate that "people with ADHD can have problems with empathy and with following rules, so they may act in ways that other people see as immoral or amoral". This concept,

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[26] Holder, R. 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

[27] Woodford, K., et al. (eds.). 2003, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Version 1.0 on CD-Rom based on the printed edition of *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Copenhagen: Cambridge University Press.

[28] Strong, J., & Flanagan, M. 2005, *AD/HD For Dummies*, (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc.), p. 18.

however, is still recognised as a kind of stereotype. The worst terminology and most churlish language used towards SEN learners are *unfortunate children, less favoured students* or *constant failure individuals*. The last expression suggests that people with learning disabilities do not stand a chance for a good future and are in a way, doomed to failure. Such a negative and pessimistic label can deprive them of any hope for a better life.

Some examples of politically incorrect terminology are slightly old-fashioned and obsolete and have already been replaced by something newer e.g. *village idiot, unsalted* (of unsound mind) or *devil's mark* are no longer attached towards less intelligent people. Other expressions describe different stages of a mental illness, its beginning or a very severe condition (*lose your mind, be losing it, be not (quite) right in the head, lose your marbles*) and exhibit different levels of formality ranging from *demented* and *gaga* (both of which are very informal) and *fruitcake* (a slang expression) to *to be of unsound mind*, being an example of a formal and legal terminology.

All in all, it has to be stated that some expressions are definitely more commonly used than others. **Table 3** illustrates the most frequently adopted examples.

One should draw attention to and advocate the usage of such expressions as *person/people with* … as they above all, highlight the person hidden behind the handicap.

Bugajski[29] is of the opinion that "prescriptivism basically rejects the idea of a 'norm', treating it as a dynamic, internally differentiated phenomenon that reflects

developmental mechanisms of a language and its evolutionary tendencies". This interpretation, and particularly the assumption that a language is always dynamic and does not require any norms, is very useful while presenting the collected material and examples of proper (or improper) terminology used towards SEN learners. Linguistics, being the showpiece of humanistic science, requires active and fastidious participation from con-

MOST POPULAR EXPRESSIONS
DIFFERENTLY **ABLED**
UNIQUELY **ABLED**/ OTHERLY **ABLED**
PHYSICALLY/MENTALLY **CHALLENGED**
INCONVENIENCED
DISFRANCHISED (E.G. PHYSICALLY, MENTALLY)
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES (LD)
REPRESENTING SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS (**SEN STUDENTS**)
SYNDROME
IMPAIRED (VISUALLY IMPAIRED)
HARD OF (SEEING)
HARD OF HEARING
HAVING PROBLEMS /DIFFICULTIES WITH
PERSON WITH
PEOPLE WITH DIFFERING ABILITIES
RETARDED IN ACHIEVEMENT
MIXED ABILITY CLASSES / REMEDIAL CLASSES/WORK/ SUPPORT CLASSES
STUDY CENTER /ACADEMIC WORKSHOP
DISABLED PEOPLE/ **PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**
GOOD/POOR/WEAK AT
RETARDED; PHYSICALLY IMPAIRED

Table 3: The Most Popular Phrases Used about SEN Learners

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[29] Bugajski, M. 2006, *Język w Komunikowaniu*. Warszawa, (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN), p. 24.

scious users and the protection of a language. Consequently, a person using vulgar, offensive and coarse expressions towards e.g., less gifted learners may 'contaminate' the language and introduce negative habits. Such behaviour is also contradictory to the idea of 'culture of language' and the popularisation of only positive and polite standards. Bugajski[30] expresses his opinion about the language of communication and states that one should be concerned with the kind of language one produces during any social interaction. Language users should interpret the facts from a socio-cultural angle as our output can influence and shape reality. One should transmit and popularise the knowledge that aims to raise the linguistic, cultural and moral standards of a society. This knowledge should, therefore, be applicable to the evaluation of social phenomena, and especially language.

Speakers of a language possess a great 'creative power' to shape it and consequently the way they speak (whether it is sufficiently polite and inoffensive) may contribute to the condition of the current form of the language. Hence one of the main goals of education should be to advocate the idea of Good English understood as SEN learners-friendly language.

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[30] *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.