

Who has special needs?

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What does it mean to be special? For some time now, as I have been more involved in the lives of persons with disabilities (PwD) in a social context, and not only from a healthcare perspective, I have been struggling with the euphemism “special needs”. The euphemism “special needs” appears to convey people who need different things from the rest of the population.

The term Special is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “Better, greater, or otherwise different from what is usual”. Do you believe PwD want to be named after that definition? The term “special” does not help in their inclusion, in fact, on the contrary, it generates segregation and exclusion.¹

So, what needs PwD have? The same needs as every human being, the need to eat, breathe, communicate, to feel loved. The only difference is that they may require different degrees of assistance according to the context or the need they want to meet. I was pleasantly surprised as I recently found a website which promotes a #notspecialneeds movement (Available at <http://www.notspecialneeds.com/>), where the use of the term disability over “special needs” is reinforced. Moreover, the euphemism “special needs” is not mentioned once throughout the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.²

Though the euphemism “special needs” was born as a non-offensive term, PwD do feel offended by it, they do not want to be special, they want to feel included. They want to have the same things as the rest of the population, to be respected, to have a social life, to be educated and to have the opportunity to have a job, not a “special job”.

The euphemism “special needs” only hampers the recognition of PwD as part of the human diversity,³ so it is time to discard this euphemism and to start using “disability”.

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