

Why “Special Needs” is Out

- 1) Special needs was not a term developed by the disability community. We chose “disability” whereas a majority of disability euphemisms, “special needs,” “differently abled,” “physically/mentally/emotionally challenged” “handicapable” were all developed by NONDISABLED people, educators, and family members. (<https://www.meriahnichols.com/3-reasons-say-disability-ins.../>)
- 2) It erases the expertise of disabled adults who find it infantilizing and inappropriate. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/.../my-daughter-doesnt-have-s.../>)
- 3) It is not a term defined in law. One reason the disability community uses “disability” is because the use of the word is connected to civil rights statutes. The Americans with Disabilities Act. The Individuals with Disabilities Act, the Developmental Disabilities Civil Rights Act.
- 4) “Disability” talks about us as a people, not a service, “special needs teacher” centers the “special needs” versus the community you are engaging with. If you want to call yourself a special education teacher, that is fine, as that is in the law, but special needs is not. And it offends us.
- 5) It does not cover the entirety of people with disabilities because not all disabled students are in special education classrooms or receive special education services. (<https://www.washington.edu/.../what-difference-between-iep-an...>)
- 6) Special needs, gives the impression that the rights of people with disabilities are special or extra. We have the same rights as everyone else. How we access those rights may differ, but disability rights are fundamentally the same civil rights as all people. When you imply that the act of accessing our rights is “special” it gives the rest of the public a pass to treat us as though our rights are a special privilege, and then we get harassed for it. (<https://www.damemagazine.com/.../i-prefer-that-you-say-im-di.../>)
- 7) It implies an out-of-date approach, given that the modern research shows us that 60% of students with disabilities spend 80% of their day in a general education, mainstream setting, alongside their peers. When you refer lovingly to “special needs students” or being a “special needs teacher” it also gives our community the impression that you think segregation is the appropriate setting for disabled Americans, which is not in line with your agenda. (<https://www.educationnext.org/edstat-60-percent-students-d.../>)
- 8) “Special needs teacher” also reinforces a sense that disabled students are saintlike or deserving of pity. Special education teacher focuses on our education, our academic and social engagement. It gives us agency.
- 9) Saying you don’t like the word “Disabled” or don’t see us as “disabled” is insulting, as it erases a part of who we are, and totally erases the oppression we face as a result of discrimination. (Look at #DisabledAndCute #DisabilityTooWhite) (<https://www.huffpost.com/.../what-to-call-disabled-perso.../amp...>)
- 10) Because we asked you to. 30 years after the ADA don’t you think we deserve the right to self-determination?