

BRIAN WAGNER-YEUNG

What's in a Label?

An Inclusive Person-First and Strength-Based Approach

When you think of a label, you might think of a little sticker that is attached to an item, a piece of food, or an article of clothing. When you are at your local supermarket, for example, you might be looking at the labels attached to groceries to see what ingredients are included. We use

the labels attached to our groceries to make decisions about what to purchase, which eventually leads to what we serve on our dinner menus.

A label can be thought of in a similar way to how we view our students. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a label as “something serving to provide information about a person or thing; esp. a classifying word or phrase applied to a person or thing

(sometimes with the implication that such classification is inaccurate, simplistic, or restrictive).” When we associate labels with our students before knowing their possibilities, we are making presumptions or judgments in how we view them or teach them.

For a student to receive special education services and programs in the United States, they must be identified with one of the disability



categories designated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA was most recently amended by Congress in 2015 in Public Law 114-95, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In New York State, for a school district to receive federal funding to support their students under IDEA, eligibility criteria for students with disabilities are specified in the New York State Students with Disabilities Regulations of the Commissioner of Education (NYSED, 2018).

While designating categories in the form of labels may be necessary for school programs to receive funding, in classroom practice, teachers should be aware of how language can be detrimental to the academic and personal well-being of a student, and how the label does not define the student. One of the 13 disabilities defined by the New York State Education Department includes *emotional disturbance*, defined by dictionaries as “a breach of public peace, a tumult, an uproar, an outbreak of disorder.” Imagine having terminology associated with yourself including the word *outbreak*, especially in our post-pandemic climate.

Sometimes we create our own labels to describe a student, or even an entire class. Imagine you are about to teach a new student, and a colleague describes the student as “that autistic child,” or “they’re autistic.” Even before you meet them, you might make a judgment that they are non-speaking or have limited abilities. Moreover, think of when you hear the words *high-functioning* or *low-functioning* to describe a student.

What about the words *good* or *bad*; does that refer to their cognitive ability or to their behavior that day? What about the words *can* or *can't*?

We have all heard these terms used to describe our students; we may have used them ourselves. When you hear students described with any of these labels, how do you view them? What comes to mind? Imagine being the labeled student, and think about how they must feel, or about what barriers are created when this language is used. Just like labels at the supermarket, these labels can determine future experiences for our students. Fortunately, we can replace these barriers with more positive and inclusive language and learning environments.

What Is Person-First Language (PFL)?

One way we can replace these barriers is by using Person-First Language (PFL). In her book *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally* (2021), Emily Ladau explains, “This type of language is all about acknowledging that human beings who have disabilities are, in fact, people first, and they’re seen not just for their disability.” At the end of the day we are all human beings, part of the same genus and species.

Think about all the different types of plants that might be found in a garden. Some of them might look, smell, be shaped, or feel differently from others. They require different types of care or habitats to grow properly. Nevertheless, they are all still plants. Human beings are no different.



While designating categories in the form of labels may be necessary for school programs to receive funding, in classroom practice, teachers should be aware of how language can be detrimental to the academic and personal well-being of a student.

POINT LOMA NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

CONCERT BAND & JAZZ BAND

Dr. Bruce Mansfield, director

For a list of our prestigious wind and percussion instructors, visit www.PLNU/music.

MUSIC SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

state opus



We can recognize that our students have their own set of strengths and traits that can bring something unique to the classroom environment.

First, PFL is associated with viewing each other as a whole person. Going back to our labels, instead of saying “they’re autistic,” we could easily say, “the student has an autism spectrum disorder.” Instead of saying that a person is “high/low functioning,” we can say, “this student is good at . . . or really likes to . . .” or “we are currently learning how to . . .” Even when it comes to behavior in our classrooms, instead of saying “they are so bad today,” we could rephrase it as “they are just having an off day today.”

Some people prefer to be known by their disability first, known as Identity-First Language (IFL). Many people who are part of the deaf community, for example, prefer IFL over PFL. Some of our students have preferred pronouns, which we should get into the habit of inquiring about. When it comes to IFL, we should never assume or make these choices for someone. It is okay to ask a person how they would prefer to be referred to. Imagine what will happen to those barriers when we start with PFL and view all our students as human beings with an amazing array of possible abilities.

What Is a Strength-Based Approach?

A second way to replace these barriers is by incorporating a strength-based approach. Thomas Armstrong explains this approach in his book *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based*

Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life (2012):

Perhaps the most important tool we can use to help build a positive niche for the neurodiverse brain is our own rich understanding of each student’s strengths. Educators practicing positive-niche construction should become well-versed in a range of strength-based models of learning, including Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets framework, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and Dunn and Dunn’s learning style approach. Educators ought to know what students in special education are passionate about—what their interests, goals, hopes, and aspirations are.

When we think of a strength-based approach, we may also think of the *Ability Model* or a whole-person approach, which Elise Sobol discusses in *An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners* (2017). When we recognize our students as whole individuals, we then create ways to “elevate the whole child.”

Just as plants in our gardens have their own unique traits, humans have their own identities, cultures, stories, interests, ideas, and intersectionalities. A fern is a plant that typically would be found on the dark floor of a forest. If we were to grow one at home, we would need to find a shaded corner away from direct sunlight. A sunflower requires direct sunlight, and we would need to find a location that has plenty of sunlight, such as outside or on a balcony.

In our classroom environments, our students require the same individualization. Not all students learn, process, engage, create, perform, respond, or connect in the same way. We can shape environments that have multiple entry points, or multiple ways to engage, so all our students have accessibility. We can recognize that our students have their own set of strengths and traits that can bring something unique to the classroom environment.

We can also think of the language we use as fertilizer to help them grow. While a fern grows in a moist environment and a sunflower grows in a dry, open space, they still have the same basic needs: water, soil, and sunlight. If we use language



that is positive, inclusive, and person-first, we provide our students with the same optimum environment to grow.

Putting It Together

So, what does this mean for us as music educators? Instead of viewing our students for what they are *not able* to do, let us challenge ourselves and think about what they can do. We should focus on the “preservation of the individual personhood of each student,” as Alice Hammel and Ryan Hourigan explain in *Teaching Music to Students with Special Needs: A Label-Free Approach* (2017). Let us use PFL to look at our students as whole individuals with their own unique sets of skills that can be brought into our classroom environments.

While some labels are necessary for a student who has been identified as having a disability to receive special services and programs, we need to be mindful that these labels do not determine our opinions, decision-making, generalizations, and judgments. We want all our students to have equal access, and, for us educators, this means reflecting on how we perceive and describe our students.

How do we refer to one another when talking to colleagues, students, parents, families, or communities? When we recognize that all people are human beings and we see each other as people, we begin to create truly inclusive environments. When barriers are removed, our students can flourish. We can begin teaching our students to view each other in the same way, making the world more inclusive.

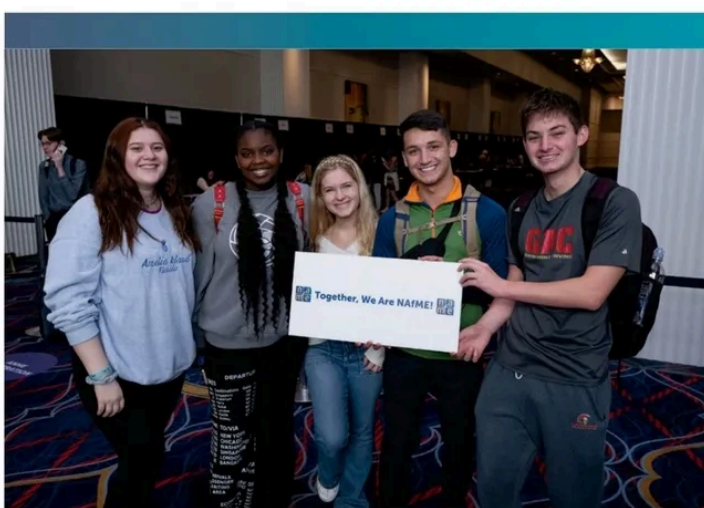
Let us continue being cognizant to use person-first language and a strength-based approach. We have the tools to do this.

One of many sources for further information and ideas is NYSSMA’s Belonging, Equity, Diversity, Representation (BEDR) initiative. Let us use music to help create a BEDR environment, or garden, for all our students. ☰

This article is reprinted (with editing) by permission from the NYSSMA *School Music News*, Vol. 86, No. 4.



BRIAN J. WAGNER-YEUNG is the Neurodiversity & Accessibility Chair for the New York State School Music Association (YSSMA). He is a music teacher for New York City Public Schools and an adjunct faculty member at City University of New York’s Brooklyn College. His book, *The Accessible Music Classroom for All*, will be published in the spring of 2025.



Majoring in Music Education? Join NAFME today!

- Engage in professional learning opportunities
- Network with music educators nationwide
- Showcase leadership skills on your resume
- Get a head start on your career
- Participate in the annual Collegiate Leadership Advocacy Summit
- Advocate for music education at the local and national levels

nafme.org/collegiate | collegiate@nafme.org | 800-336-3678

