

The Power of Language

By Patricia Dowse,
COO, NYSRA

There will be no more 'them and us', only us, sharing struggles and challenges as part of being human.

---Patricia E. Deegan, Recovery as a Journey of the Heart

What does “person-centered” really mean?

One would hope that in all we do -- whether with family, in our communities, at work or at play -- that we seek to bring the needs and interests of people to the center of our focus. In the work that NYSRA has undertaken in its advocacy supporting communities and systems that effectively foster opportunities for independence, inclusion, employment, and life-enrichment for people with disabilities it is essential that we purposely and consciously use the “right” words when we discuss, define, and implement resources.

We should start with the definition of the word “person,” but before we do that we should consider the meaning of the word “definition.” Did you know that a “**definition**” is a statement of the **meaning** of a term (a word, phrase, or other set of symbols). And that **Definitions** can be classified into two large categories, intentional **definitions** (which try to give the essence of a term) and extensional **definitions** (which proceed by listing the objects that a term describes). The word “person,” therefore, includes *multiple levels of definitions, intentional, extensional, and a few others as well.*

The Lexical definition of a “person” is *an individual, agency, association, branch, corporation, estate, group, partnership or other entity or organization having legal rights and responsibilities separate from those of other entities and/or of its owners or members. In Sociology the word has the meaning of an individual human being, especially with reference to his or her social relationships and behavior patterns as conditioned by the culture. And still in Philosophy the word person is a “self-conscious” or rational being.*

When writing, we also need to remember that the grammatical definition shares that “person” is a *category* used in the classification of pronouns, possessive determiners, and verb forms, according to whether they indicate the speaker (first person), the addressee (second person), or a third party (third person). How easy it will be to “classify or categorize” people *instead of seeing them for their individual contributions*, -- unless we pay attention to **this** particular definition!

Clearly, to be “person” centered is not as simple as the words spoken, nor is it in of itself simply defined. There will always be interpretations. Within the context of our work, a “person” is greater than the sum of the many definitions associated with the words, and the words we use when we talk about putting that person “in the center” must be chosen carefully. Remember-- words have the potential to define the narrative of that person’s experience and opportunities for equality.