Teaching with Oppressive Language: A Call to Implement the Human Rights Model in Inclusive Education with Autistic Students

Chloe Sisodiya, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Abstract: The language and practices we use with autistic students in Canadian schools perpetuates oppression, negatively impacts their well-being, and contributes to negative experiences at school and in society. Current practices in Canadian education systems are not complying with best practices as identified by autistic creators and researchers. Through the focus on how models of disability shape the language people use when discussing the needs of students who are autistic, this paper examines the impact of the human rights model on language and practices in education as they relate to teaching autistic students in Canada. Changing the language used from person-first and euphemisms to identity-first and acceptance will promote authentic connection, well-being, and lay foundations for lifelong skills for autistic students.

Keywords: autistic students, best practice, disability language, neurodiversity affirming

Introduction

T erms, definitions, knowledge, and personal experiences shape the language we use when we communicate with people (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Brown, n.d.; Clark, 2023; Monk et al., 2022). This influences the values and ideas we uphold as professionals and ultimately shapes our societal norms (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Brown, n.d.; Monk et al., 2022). Primary and secondary schools in Canada are not exempt from this phenomenon. The language, practices, and norms in the Canadian education system regarding students with disabilities has contributed to exclusion, oppression of identity, and negatively impacts their well-being (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Arqueros et al., 2025; Brown, n.d.; Carr, 2023; Clark, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Halmari, 2011; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Kapp et al., 2019; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). There are increasing calls from activists, caregivers, allies, and researchers within the disability community to examine the language used in education and how teachers are taught to support students with disabilities, including autistic students (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Carr, 2023; Clark, 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; United Nations, 2006; Wagland et at., 2025). This paper argues that the current language and practices used in Canadian education systems contributes to the oppression of autistic students and negatively impacts their well-being and sense of self. Relying on a review of literature and voices from autistic creators, this paper will define deficit-based language, oppressive practices, and advocates for educators in Canada to align with neurodiversity affirming practice.

Defining Frameworks and Language

Teachers, school administration, and government staff in ministries within the field of education have widely used a medical or deficit model to define and *treat* children with disabilities (Abernathy & Tylor, 2009; Bottema-Beutel, et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; Halmari, 2011). Researchers identify the medical model as prescribing to the idea that a person's needs and experiences can be "abnormal" (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Clark, 2023). Monk et al. (2022) states that the first records of the term *autism* came out in the 1940s. With children, this term was first used when observing "particular behavioural characteristics" (Monk et al., 2022, p. 791). Not only does the use of the medical model of disability by teachers, staff in administration, and government staff continue to perpetuate the idea that disability requires a cure, it continues to stigmatize society's perspectives, people's experiences, and has detrimental impacts on the mental health and well-being of autistic people (Arqueros et al., 2025; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Brown, n.d.; Carr, 2023; Clark, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Kapp et al., 2019; Monk et al., 2022). Mental health concerns can include an increased risk for suicidal thoughts and death by suicide, depression, anxiety, or a negative perception of their skills and capabilities (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Arqueros et al., 2025; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022). This approach often fails to include the interests and strengths of the person with the approach to treatment. Additionally, the terms used in a medical approach are aligned with person-first language (Brown, n.d.; Halmari, 2011). The use of *person with autism* places the noun first and the diagnosis after, acknowledging that the person is at the centre of the diagnosis (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). However, a shift in the language debate among autistic advocates and research from allies in the disability community are emphasizing that the use of person-first language is a form of ableism and extinguishes

autistic voices (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). The use of the medical model in education highlights a person's deficits, contributes to a culture and society that rejects their identity, and promotes the use of language that further isolates and poses harm to one's well-being (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Brown, n.d.; Cohen et al., 2022).

This shift, driven by the disability community among many autistic advocates and in research, has been amplified as advocates and allies have created space for personal narratives and voices of autistic people to be recognized and understood (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Brown, n.d.; Carr, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Cohn, 2023; den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; United Nations, 2022). Creating a space for autistic voices and experiences are actions that align with the human rights model. This model situates disability as a naturally occurring experience where barriers placed on the individual are from society (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). This model views the person as capable, full of potential for learning, and affirms the identity of the person (Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Sequenzia, 2012; Wagland et al., 2025). Although no sole author is credited for the establishment of the human rights model, momentum for this model of disability was amplified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). In this convention, the United Nations (2006) recognizes that rights of people with disabilities are human rights that need to be respected and adhered to in all areas of society, including in education. Although acceptance and celebration of this model have been on the rise, creators and allies in the disability community have been calling for authentic acceptance of their identities and equitable access to supports long before 2006 (Carr, 2023; de Houting, 2018; Halmari, 2011; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Monk et al., 2022).

An approach that is grounded in the human rights model is neurodiversity affirming (NDA) practice (den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Wagland et al., 2025). NDA amplifies the importance of a person's identity, as well as their skills, interests, and experiences (den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Wagland et al., 2025). Practices aligned with this approach affirm the needs and care of a person, while respecting their dignity, well-being, and capabilities (den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Keates, 2024; Wagland et al., 2025). A professional who is aligned with NDA practice will incorporate the student's interests or passions into activities, respect the student's autonomy, and acknowledge all forms of communication when interacting with the child or student (Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023). Additionally, autistic advocates supporting NDA are urging non-autistic professionals and allies to reflect on and change the language they are using (Carr, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; den Houting, 2018; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). Current language and terms such as person-first language mentioned above, euphemisms like *special needs*, *nonverbal*, and functioning labels including *high functioning* and *low functioning* have been identified by many autistic people as harmful, oppressive, and detrimental to their mental health and well-being (den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia, et al., 2023; Keates, 2024; Sequenzia, 2012). These terms are euphemisms that do not appropriately describe the needs of a person and create stigma among the peers of autistic children in school (Carr, 2023; den Houting, 2018; Gernsbacher, et al., 2016; Keates, 2024). Terms that are accepted are explored in the paragraph below. The United Nations (2022) has also disputed the use of euphemisms to describe a person or people with disabilities by declaring:

> We need to cease to use descriptive terms that have negative connotations or are hurtful. We also need to avoid euphemisms such as 'special needs' or 'differently abled', which attempt to hide or gloss over a person's identity. (United Nations, 2022, p. 16)

The language that is accepted within the framework of NDA and by the majority of autistic people is *identity-first language* (Car, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; den Houting, 2018; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012; United Nations, 2022). This includes describing the specific needs an autistic person or person with a disability may have, *non-speaking*, using the term *autistic* or *autistic person*, using the term disability or *disabled*, and always using the terms a person uses to describe themselves or their experience (Carr, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; den Houting, 2018; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Keates, 2024; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). It may be personal preference for a person to not identify as *autistic* (Keates, 2024; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). It is best practice to use identity-first language unless the person you are speaking with has informed you otherwise, or they have indicated their preference indirectly through the terms they use to reference themselves or on behalf of a person they are supporting (Carr, 2023; Keates, 2024; Monk et al., 2022).

Finally, there are limitations to this literature review that require consideration. The articles selected were primarily narratives from authors or participants who identified as autistic, as a person with autism, or as an ally of the disability community (Abernathy et al., 2009; Arqueros et al., 2025; Brown, n.d.; Cohen et al., 2022; Cohn, 2023; den Houting, 2018; Halmari, 2011; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Kapp et al., 2019; Sequenzia, 2012; Wagland et al., 2025). This was by design to explore the concepts of identity-first language, neurodiversity affirming practice, and concerns with the well-being of participants as it relates to autistic students or the experiences of autistic participants and creators.

Impact of the Human Rights Model on Autistic Students

As mentioned in the section above, there is growing acceptance and advocacy for the use of the human rights model of disability (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). The use of this model in education would benefit autistic students by build self-advocacy skills, a positive perception of one's skills and capabilities, as well as promote well-being and acceptance of autistic experiences and identities (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Wagland et al., 2025). This is enhanced by integrating students' interests, passions, and preferences into activities and the environment (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Wagland et al., 2025). By normalizing the needs of an autistic student, such as teaching their classmates why they stim, it provides natural opportunities to learn about compassion for peers, creates a more equitable learning environment, and promotes a culture of understanding why accommodations are in place for students in the class (Cohen et al., 2022; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023). This approach normalizes the needs an autistic student may have and in turn, normalizes the disabled experience in society (Cohen et al., 2022; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023). Additionally, the use of a human rights model or NDA approach builds autonomy and advocacy skills in autistic students (den Houting, 2018; Wagland et al., 2025).

Implication for Educators

The benefits of a human rights model and NDA approach outlined above can be paired with universal design to promote students' well-being and success in learning (United Nations, 2006; Wagland et al., 2025). This further aligns the education system with the principles outlined by the United Nations (2006, 2022) and the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021). Both organizations have produced documents calling for "inclusive and equitable" practices in education (United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2021). To apply these principles into practice we need to ensure teachers in primary and secondary schools are equipped with knowledge and understanding of how to support students with disabilities, and students' needs in diverse settings. Autistic advocates and researchers have repeatedly indicated that there are gaps in educators' knowledge and in the execution of best practices (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Cohen et al., 2022). For all students, including autistic students, to experience the benefits of the human rights model these actions cannot be seen as a checklist. There needs to be evidence of students' interests integrated into teaching, access to accommodations such as flexible seating available in all classrooms, reasonable accommodations in curriculum and learning outcomes, as well as authentic acceptance of neurodivergent students (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Clark, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; United Nations, 2006; Wagland et al., 2025).

Finally, the language and terms used in education documents, by teachers, and by adults in the school community needs to shift to align with identity-first language (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Clark 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Halmari, 2011; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Monk et al., 2022; Sequenzia, 2012). Currently, provincial and territorial ministries of education use a euphemism when referring to disabled students or to the needs students may have in the classroom. Euphemisms used in the policies include "special needs" (Alberta Education, 2022; Alberta Education, 2022; Government of Nunavut, 2020; Government of Prince Edward Island, 2024; Government of Yukon, 2025; Manitoba Education, 2022; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2014; Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2017; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019; Quebec Education, 2019), "additional needs" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2021), "diverse abilities" or "diverse needs" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2023; Government of Yukon, 2025; New Brunswick Education, 2019), "exceptionalities" or "exceptional needs" (Alberta Education, 2022; Government of Prince Edward Island, 2024; New Brunswick Education, 2019; Ontario Education, 2017), and "students with handicaps" (Quebec Education, 2019).

In bi- or multi-lingual provinces and territories, only the English policies and related documents were reviewed. This decision was made as this paper and literature review were conducted in English. The documents reviewed from education ministries across Canada were accessed online in July of 2025. These documents were the most recent policies and statements available to the public at that time. Changing the language used in policies and the terms people in education use are ways to model acceptance of autistic students for their peers and continue to uphold best practices as outlined by NDA and the human rights model (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Monk et al., 2022). Reflecting on the language we are using and shifting the standards of best practice to identity-first language will be a long-term commitment that will require ongoing efforts.

Conclusion

There is a movement in autistic creators, the disability community, and within current research that calls for the language and practices we are using in education to be examined (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Clark, 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Izuno-Garcia et al., 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). The language and terms often used by professionals do not adhere to best practices identified by these voices. Current language is more aligned with a medical model of disability, using person-first language or reporting deficits in skills and understanding of students (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Carr, 2023; Clark, 2023; Cohn et al., 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). These practices have detrimental impacts on autistic students' well-being, their sense of identity, their self-advocacy skills, and on their relationships with peers (Arqueros et al., 2025; Carr, 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Cohn et al., 2023; den Housting, 2018; Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Changes need to be made to the language in documents that govern Canadian schools, such as ministerial orders, curriculum documents, policies, and other resources created by education ministries and school boards to remove euphemisms identified in this paper. Teachers and school staff require access to professional development opportunities that allow them to build their knowledge on strategies that will promote connection, regulation, self-advocacy skills in students, and the commitment to using identity-first language. Universities and post-secondary institutions training pre-service teachers and other future members of school staff also need to consider the language and strategies they are teaching school staff to implement in their training programs. This is a call for teachers and staff in Canadian schools to lead by example, to invest in best practices, and to share knowledge about NDA with caregivers, students, and professionals supporting the school system to begin to change the language and practices accepted as the norm for inclusion in society.

REFERENCES

Abernathy, T. V., & Taylor, S. S. (2009). Teacher perceptions of students' understanding of their own disability. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *32*(2), 121-136. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406409334084

Alberta Education. (2022). *Inclusive education*. Government of Alberta. https://www.alberta.ca/inclusive-education

Alberta Education. (2022). *Inclusive education conversation guide for the video valuing all students*. Government of Alberta. https://www.alberta.ca/system/files/custom_downloaded_images/edc-video-discussion-guide-1-valuing-all-students.pdf

Arqueros, M., Jamett-Cuevas, V., Pulgar-Vera, V., Santander-Gonzalez, R., Pemau, A., & Alvarez-Cabrera, P. (2025). Camouflaging and suicide behaviour in adults with autism spectrum condition: A mixed methods systematic review. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. *121-122*, Article 202540. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reia.2025.202540

Bottema-Beutel, K., Kapp, S. K., Lester, J. N., Sasson, N. J., & Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2023*). Inclusive education policy*. Government of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/inclusive-education

Brown, L. (n.d.). Identity-first language. https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/

Carr, K. (2023). *The harmful reality of disability euphemisms: Why you shouldn't use phrases like "special needs"*. The Nora Project. https://thenoraproject.ngo/nora-notes-blog/the-harmful-reality-of-disability-euphemisms

Clark, H. (2023). Defining disability: Reviewing the construct of special education. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, *14*(2), 115 – 121. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/76457

Cohen, S. R., Joseph, K., Levinson, S., Blacher, J., & Eisenhower, E. (2022). "My autism is my own": Autistic identity and intersectionality in the school context. *Autism in Adulthood*, *4*(4), 315-327. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0087

Cohn, E. G., Harrison, M. J., & McVilly, K. R. (2023). Let me tell you, I see echolalia as being a part of my son's identity: Exploring echolalia as an expression of neurodiversity from a parental perspective. *Autism*, *28*(5), 1245–1257. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613231195795

den Houting, J. (2018). Neurodiversity: An insider's perspective. *Autism*, *23*(2), 271-273. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318820762

Gernsbacher, M., Raimond, A., Balinghasay, T., & Boston, J. (2016). 'Special needs' is an ineffective euphemism. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, *1*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-016-0025-4

Government of Nunavut. (2020). *Department of education inclusive education policy*. https://www.gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/policies-legislations/2023-12/inclusive_education_policy_06_20.pdf

Government of Prince Edward Island. (2024). *Inclusive education*. https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/education-and-early-years/inclusive-education

Government of Yukon. (2025). *Supports for students with diverse abilities*. https://yukon.ca/en/education-and-schools/plan-elementary-and-high-school/supports-students-diverse-abilities-or-special

Halmari, H. (2011). Political correctness, euphemism, and language change: The case of 'people first'. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *43*(3), 828-840. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.09.016

Izuno-Garcia, A. K., McNeel, M. M., & Fien, R. H. (2023). Neurodiversity in promoting the well-being of children on the autism spectrum. *Child Care in Practice*, *29*(1), 54-57. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2022.2126436

Kapp, S. K., Steward, R., Crane, L., Elliott, D., Elphick, C., Pellicano, E., & Russell, G. (2019). 'People should be allowed to do what they like': Autistic adults' views and experiences of stimming. *Autism*, *23*(7), 1782-1792. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319829628

Keates, N., Martin, F., & Waldock, K. E. (2024). Autistic people's perspectives on functioning labels and associated reasons, and community connectedness. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *55*, 1318-1328. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06316-3

Lawson, A., & Beckett, A. E. (2021). The social and human rights models of disability: Towards a complementarity thesis. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *25*(2), 348-379. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533

Manitoba Education (2022). *Standards for appropriate education programming in Manitoba*. Government of Manitoba. https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/aep/pdf/standards_for_student_services.pdf

Monk, R., Whitehouse, A. J. O., & Waddington, H. (2022). The use of language in autism research. *Science & Society*, *45*(11), 791 – 793. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2022.08.009

New Brunswick Education. (2019). *Guidelines and standards: Educational planning for students with diverse learning needs*. Government of New Brunswick. https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/K12/curric/Resource/GuidelinesStandardsEducationalPlanningStudentsWithExceptionalities.pdf

Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education. (2014). *Inclusive practices guidelines: School level*. https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/k12_inclusive_practices_guidlines.pdf

Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2017). *Inclusive schooling handbook*. https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/inclusive_schooling_handbook.pdf

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2019). *Inclusive education policy*. https://www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/inclusiveeducationpolicyen.pdf

Ontario Education. (2017). *Special education in Ontario*. Government of Ontario. https://files.ontario.ca/edu-special-education-policy-resource-guide-en-2022-05-30.pdf

Quebec Education. (2019). *CASP-I education program*. Government of Quebec. https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/education/soutien-eleves/Programme-educatif-caps-an.pdf

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2021). *Inclusive education policy*. Government of Saskatchewan. https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/85573

Sequenzia, A. (2012). Non-speaking, "low functioning". In J. Bascom (Ed.), *Loud hands: Autistic people, speaking* (pp. 159–161). The Autistic Press.

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf

United Nations. (2022). *Disability-inclusive communications guidelines*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf

Wagland, Z., Sterman, J., Scott-Cole, L., Spassiani, N., & Njelesani, J. (2025). Promoting neurodiversity-affirming care for autistic children: A scoping review. *Neurodiversity*, *3*. https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251357479

World Health Organization. (2021). *Social determinants of health*. https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB148/B148_R2-en.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe Sisodiya is a master's student at University of Prince Edward Island in the Faculty of Education. As a certified teacher in Alberta, Chloe works in an early intervention program providing support for families and their children with disabilities.