

## NEW WRITING

### Opinion

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Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*, and every week on Radio 4's *Today* programme John Humphrys determinedly challenges government ministers and other worthies to explain what their clichés and gobbledegook actually *mean*. For without real meaning policies are unrealisable, and they and their perpetrators are just that little more unaccountable. That goes for all of us.

#### Policy and practice

They say 'a fish stinks from the head', but the tendency to blur meanings and distinctions has not just happened top-down but thrives at all levels, to the extent that one must question whether we have a technical vocabulary at all worthy of the title.

Here, in no particular order (except that my least favourite is at the beginning) are some frequently met word and phrases:

*support, cope, wrap-around, roll out, evaluation, needs, monitoring, assess, joined-up, choice, community, feedback, networking, consultation, inclusive, efficient, evidence-based, fast-track, targets, deliverables, standards, hands-on, come to terms, partnership, value (as in value-added), best practice, counselling, quality/quality-assurance, vision, benchmark, audit, leadership, access, challenge, closure, engage, assessment, stakeholders, diversity, celebrate, reflective, critique, key, synergy, team, toolkit, leverage, discourse, empower, green...*

There can be few who read this list who cannot add their own.

Many of these words once had real meaning but it can be hard now to convey that original sense – rendering the sense itself at risk of extinction. How, for example, can you now unambiguously refer to what used to be meant by a 'student', or what used to be understood to constitute 'leadership'?

Where do such new words and meanings come from? Some are 'warm fuzzies', that appear to mean something and in fact don't – but aim to attract a benign glow ('community' is used a lot like that, in different ways). Then there are words that once had real, even distinguished, meaning but have been so bandied around by politicians, academics and bureaucrats as to be now actively misleading (think of 'inclusive'). There is psycho-babble ('come to terms'), post-modernist discourse ('engage'), an avalanche of management-speak (pick your own examples, there are enough of them!) and any government coinage meant to signify a new idea ('joined-up').

Ministers and officials love such words. Read or listen to their utterances and cringe. But what is on offer instead in the way of a technical vocabulary through which to communicate and extend – yes and to challenge (original sense) and refute – concepts and practices central to the actual services that clients receive?

Of course there should be new words and concepts as the world and our understandings of it change (even perhaps in some instances advance). When language changes we *all* play our part. Do we know what we are really talking about half the time, do we speak in a truly technical language mutually understood?

What is a ‘special needs child’? Who attends a ‘special needs school’? What *exactly* does a ‘special needs teacher’ or a ‘special needs assistant’ bring to the party in the way of additional skills and understandings – and the special activities that these imply? What on earth does ‘inclusion’ mean in this country today? What does ‘autistic’ convey? What is ‘dyslexia’ when it’s at home? Does the word ‘play’ have any commonly understood meaning and is the newly fashionable word ‘pedagogy’ any more than hot air?

## Unsupportable

My own least favourite jargon word is ‘support’. In my ordinary real-world English dictionary the word ‘support’ already has 11 definitions. In the world of social policy and provision (somewhere that can sometimes seem not just another country but another planet) the range in its meanings seems infinite. Worse, such meanings are rarely if ever defined, one blurring unproblematically into the next, without apparent need for clear boundaries. You can support children and their families, support special educational needs, support inclusion, support pupils with disabilities, support the curriculum, support language, support emotional development, support behaviour (and even support ‘challenging behaviour’), support communities, support teachers, support support assistants... Perhaps most fundamentally, and most undefinedly you can support learning – what does *that* mean in concrete terms that everyone can sign up to? In every instance ‘support’ presumably represents one or more professional practices that may or may not be defined (but are rarely identified) by this single all-encompassing word.

Even within a single example, does the word ‘support’ have a single specified meaning that everybody – or *anybody* understands? What does it actually tell us that somebody will be actually *doing*, say, at 11.15 on a Tuesday morning, in the real world of practice? What specific skills will be exercised, what particular activities undertaken, what is really going to be happening? What can users from the service actually expect? A Statement of Special Educational Needs that declares that there should be ‘support’ is no more acceptable than a prescription that just says ‘medicine’.

Whoever you are – no-nonsense grass-roots practitioner, manager or decision-maker, academic or researcher – try a personal experiment. For a whole week, every time that you hear or read the word ‘support’, ask yourself *exactly* what this means in practice. As for yourself, every time that the word springs to your lips or your computer, or even enters your thoughts, jump on it and hold it back. Try instead to express *exactly* what you mean in practice. If you can think of a better word then communication and thinking – and maybe practice too – will be that little clearer. And if you *can’t*, well, maybe you didn’t really have anything practical to say or do in the first place.

Parents, clients, expect something rather better than this when they first enter the Orwellian realm of the ‘support services’. What is the matter with our children? What are you going to do about it? What is going to happen? How will this all turn out? What do you mean by ‘Support for their special needs?’ Real people want concrete answers, not flannel.

An ‘Orwellian realm’? In the novel *1984*, George Orwell foresaw a fictional language called Newspeak, the aim of which was to make any alternative speech or thinking impossible by removing words or constructs permitting independent thought. By 2050 all knowledge of the previous language would have disappeared and the whole literature of the past destroyed. The underlying theory was that if something can’t be said or read, then it can’t be thought.

Orwell was a bit out with his dates. I remember the year 1984: it was nothing like he predicted. Already in 2008, however, and not just in ‘special needs’, his 2050 seems well on its way! How many younger professionals, for example, can read and understand the technical literature of not so long ago?

We are not, however, helpless. If the solution of this problem is not in our own hands, then what is? The first issue of a freely available, open-access Internet journal seems a better place than most to advocate a fight-back.

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### **Editor's note**

Andrew has asked me to give a mention to *Conductive Education World*, [www.andrew-sutton.blogspot.com](http://www.andrew-sutton.blogspot.com), which 'wanders into fields seemingly far beyond Conductive Education, from Airfix to Vygotskii'