Between society and solitude: the effects of labeling

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I. INTRODUCTION

Background

In Wisconsin a teacher must refer any student suspected of having exceptional educational needs. This begins a process by which many children become labelled as learning disabled. Doreen Kronick refers to it as the betrayal funnel.

However, at one point in his childhood parents, educators alter his status from one who would succeed to one who is a failure. The process of status change almost never is one to which the child contributes, he doesn't decide that he's learning disabled, they do. Psychological and neurological testing is imposed upon him in a progressive process of transition from normal to exceptional with concomitant devaluation of status and reduction of rights. Each process is 'candy coated' as much as possible to minimise anxiety and disguise the implications of each procedure for the child.

Detrimental implications of labelling have been summarized by Kirk as permanent stigmatization, peer rejection, exclusion from educational and career opportunities, assignment to an inferior educational program, unnecessary institutionalisation and the mislabelling of minority groups.

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In addition Jones; Reynolds and Balow; Bradfield; Padover; Foster, Schmidt and Sabatino; and Arnold have suggested that a label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Educational programs, personal or group interactions, and observations of a student labelled as learning disabled may then be contingent upon the label and not the actual needs and abilities of the student.

The way in which people perceive and interact with a student can change that student's behavior and self-perception.

The way we imagine ourselves to appear to another person is an essential element in our conception of ourselves. Thus I am not what I think I am, and I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am.10

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"One lives," as Ernest Van de Haage has poetically expressed it, "in the tension between society and solitude." 11

...We organize a symbolic concept of ourselves, a concept of society, and of our relationship to it. If the resultant concept tallies with others' idea who we should be in relationship to the culture, we are considered sound. 12

The self is the product of a struggle between one's inner instincts and the demands of society. 13 Therefore, a student labelled as learning disabled might change his or her behavior to fit the label or what he or she believes other people's perceptions of appropriate behavior for that label to be. Thus labelling could have a detrimental impact upon the student.

However, there are other aspects to the labelling issue. Kirk14 has summarized the advantages of using labels as expediting communication, aiding in obtaining legislation, aiding in designing appropriate services, and helping in organizing categorical volunteer services. The label may also have a protective nature. "It forces people to look at children as organisms rather than just saying -- try harder." 15 Perhaps when it is known that there is a reason a student may have difficulty in learning

or adapting a specific behavior peers responding derogatorily may be more tolerant thus more accepting and encouraging.\textsuperscript{16}

In theory, the effects of labelling appear to be conflicting. Whether the student by being labelled is provided with additional resources or is handicapped further appears to depend upon people's perceptions and reactions to that label. "A stigma [label] is not inherently value-laden; the stigmatizing attribute is neither creditable nor disgraceful per se. It's value lies in how people perceive it -- that is, it's socially accepted meaning."\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, it seems crucial to understand how people perceive and react to the label "learning disabled." One way to judge this is the degree to which students labelled as learning disabled are accepted or rejected by their peers and teachers.

The Dimensions of the Review

Scope

In order to determine the effects of the label "learning disabled" on the acceptance of a student, the review of the literature covered research studies in two basic areas: (1) the acceptance of educationally handicapped students by their teachers and peers, (2) the effect of labelling on teacher and peer attitudes toward the educationally handicapped.


Limitations

The research studies reviewed were limited to three categories of exceptionality. The studies were on the effects of the labels -- learning disabled, educationally mentally retarded, and emotionally disturbed. A further limitation was that only research published since January 1, 1970, was included.

The Importance of the Review

In American schools a high priority is placed upon sociability and peer relations.

"Probably facts are the least important thing children get from school. They learn to live with others, to think, to explore, to investigate, to help others, and to accept help from others." (Italics mine)

Parents, particularly those from the upper- and middle-class place a great emphasis on popularity and success.

The importance of peer acceptance seems to be widely accepted. "Peer influences on personality development and behavior are probably second in importance only to those of the parents." This need for peer acceptance seems to increase as the student matures reaching a peak in adolescence.

As time goes on, of course, the peer group surpasses the parental and family group in importance, and by the time the children are in high school, in our culture, they have begun to openly and


20. Ibid., 392.
candidly reject the parental influence in favor of the obvious superiority of the information and guidance they receive from their contemporaries. 21

However, one should not minimize the need for peer acceptance in the pre-adolescent years. Piaget 22 has observed and recorded the importance of peer interaction in even the pre-school child. For most children, though, it will be at school, starting with kindergarten where they first begin to react and respond to their peer group. 23

For the handicapped student sociability and acceptance appear to be very important. "The success of mainstreaming may be dependent upon the degree to which the teachers and students accept the educationally handicapped child." 24 In the Visalia school district Blum 25 reported that the main difficulty of mainstreaming educationally handicapped children was the social acceptability of the students, not their academic skills. Sociability will be important for the handicapped individual throughout life.

It has been shown that, the majority of handicapped persons who are unable to maintain jobs, or to function adequately in a variety of occupations seem unable to do so, not because of their presenting handicap, but because of their inability to function within the social framework of their occupation. 26

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21 Bierstadt, op. cit., 200.
26 Bradfield, op. cit., 86.
There is a need to consider social acceptance as part of the student's educational program. Even in the early school grades, furthering the sociability of the learning disabled appears to be important. By ascertaining the effect of a label on acceptance one may attempt, at least, to deal with it when creating programs for educationally handicapped students.

Definition of Terms

1. Categories of Exceptionality
   a. Emotionally Disturbed: These are students with emotional problems severe enough to prevent them from making the necessary adjustments for effective functioning in the culture. They have acquired habits of behavior sufficiently different from other children reared in similar circumstances so that their behavior is considered to be personally and socially deviant.27
   b. Learning Disabilities refers to traits which significantly inhibit a pupil's ability to learn efficiently in keeping with his potential by the instructional approaches presented in the usual curriculum and requires special education programs and services for educational progress.

   These traits hinder the acquisition of learning language skills (what is learned) and processes (how it is learned). These include but are not limited to the ability to read, write, spell, or arithmetically reason and calculate. These traits

may also be manifested in an inability to receive, organize, or express information relevant to school functioning.

The traits displayed by pupils with learning disabilities are not primarily due to sensory impairment or deprivation, mental disabilities, severe emotional disabilities, or special education needs (SEN) resulting primarily from poverty, neglect, delinquency or cultural or linguistic isolation from the community at large.28

c. Educationally Mentally Retarded: This includes those students with an intelligence quotient between 55 and 75 who are significantly sub-average in intellectual functioning, characterized by inadequacy in adaptive behavior.29

2. Label: A categorical name or title.
3. Stigma: Any personal characteristic or fault which designates one as outside the norms of society.

Summary

Acceptance by one's peers and the ability to be accepted by one's peers seems to be an important requisite and function of education in American Culture. Labelling or stigmatizing a student through identification for special education may lead to social rejection, thereby further handicapping the student.

The three categories of exceptionality which were included in the review of the research on labelling in Chapter Two were defined. Also,

29Telford and Sawrey, op. cit., pp. 156 and 220.
the difference between stigma and label was clarified.

Following a critique of past research Chapter Two reviews research articles published since January 1, 1970 dealing with the attitudes of teachers and peers toward educationally handicapped students and their labels.
II. A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Criticism of Past Research

A lack of empirical data is just one of several problems with research on the effects of labelling. "Most of the available data fail to separate the effects of receiving a label from other factors." A label does not exist in a vacuum, labelling implies consequences. One of the consequences of labelling is that services and/or programs are generated for the student. MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia listed several of the 'other factors' (independent variables) as including segregation to another school, room, or area; a different curriculum and/or teacher; peer group reaction; and the teacher/pupil ratio. They found, in conclusion of their research, "Any differences in the dependent measures (usually some aspect of achievement or adjustment) could be due to any one of these differences, some interaction of them, or even some which effect the dependent measures in opposite ways."
MacMillan;6 and Gottleib7 have indicated that another factor affecting the research on labelling is prelabelling.

Before a child is labelled mentally retarded, he invariably exhibited certain behavior that called attention to him as being in need of additional help. This unacceptable behavior preceded the child's labelled status and most probably resulted in his being the victim of less favorable attitudes by his peers, even before he was sent to a special class.8

The instruments and scales used in the research have also come under criticism. MacMillan et al.9 state that many of the instruments have not been standardized on retarded subjects with whom much of the research has been done. Hobbs10 and MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia11 point out that some scales, either in parts or as a whole, may lack reliability and/or validity. It was also found that authors rarely used the same or even comparable instruments.

In one of the most comprehensive reviews on the effects of labelling Hobbs was far from complimentary of the past research.

In short, the evidence of the effect of labelling is confounded with variables other than labelling, replete with sampling biases and confounded because of the use of questionable instruments and the findings show little damage to self resulting from label or disability.12

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7Gottleib, op. cit., 272. 8Ibid.
9MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia, op. cit., 245-246.
Since this criticism, there seems to have been little progress made toward clarifying the effect of labels.

Current Research

Few research studies have been published on the acceptance of learning disabled students. Most of the work seems to have been done by one person. In a series of two studies Tanis Bryan found that the learning disabled student was more often rejected than normal peers.

Whatever the factors which lead to rejection it is clear that learning disabled students are more rejected and less accepted than comparison peers. The rejection occurs across time, at least as measured across a one-year span, and the rejection occurs when the majority of classmates change.[13]

The sample in the initial study involved eighty-four learning disabled students in 62 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms. The replication utilized twenty-five of the original sample spread out over twenty classrooms. A paper and pencil sociometric scale was given to the students in the various classrooms for both studies.

A third study involved 10 third-grade boys identified as having learning disabilities. By matching them with ten normal peers it was observed that although they might initiate as many interactions as normal children they were more likely to be ignored by their peers.[14] Labelling was suggested as one of the possible explanations for peer rejection in each of the studies.


The preponderance of research on the social acceptability of children identified as having special educational needs deals with children labelled as educationally mentally retarded. In several investigations involving both primary and upper-elementary students Gottleib and Davis; Gottleib and Budhoff; and Goodman, Gottleib, and Harrison found that children labelled as educationally mentally retarded were more rejected throughout a variety of educational settings and building structures than their normal peers. Segregated and integrated retarded students were rejected more often than normal peers in both an open concept school and a walled 'traditional' school. Two studies used a paper and pencil sociometric rating scale. The other involved a more active participant choice as part of a bean bag tossing game.

The authors did not feel in any study that they were able to demonstrate conclusively that children identified as educationally mentally retarded were rejected on the basis of special class placement or label. In the bean bag tossing game Gottleib and Davis did not

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18 Gottleib and Budhoff, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

19 Gottleib and Davis, op. cit., pp. 142-143.
feel that they could distinguish between a competence judgement or a social acceptability judgement. Also, they listed physical appearance, motor coordination, height, weight, gait, etc., as other factors which might have effected choices. Of the study done by Goodman, Gottleib, and Harrison a possible explanation for the social rejection was that the educationally mentally retarded children were bussed into the school while the other students lived in close proximity. Gottleib and Budhoff actually found that the integrated educationally mentally retarded students were more rejected than their segregated counterparts in a more traditional walled school.

Other studies seemed to demonstrate that there was no difference between the social acceptability of students identified as educationally mentally retarded and their peers. Rens and Simeson interviewed seventh graders. In their descriptions these students gave of selected peers they found that there was equal rejection and acceptance of both normal and retarded subjects. Utilizing a peer acceptance scale to compare the attitudes of elementary children Bruinink, Rynders, and Gross found, "There were no appreciable differences in the acceptance of retarded and nonretarded samples attending schools in either urban

20Goodman, Gottleib, and Harrison, op. cit., 416.
21Gottleib and Budhoff, op. cit., 18-19.

* Even though this article was published prior to January 1, 1970, it was included because it is one of the few articles investigating 'older' children.
or suburban settings.\textsuperscript{23}

In two similar studies an attempt was made to isolate the effect of the label alone. In the first, Gottleib\textsuperscript{24} showed 88 fourth graders two videotapes of spelling performances by two unknown 'actors.' One was represented as a competent fifth grader while the other was shown as either mentally retarded or as a fifth grader. The subjects rated the latter on a social distance scale. The only significant variable for a school from an affluent neighborhood was spelling competence. In another school from a low socioeconomic area, there were no significant variables. The label of mentally retarded was not a significant factor at either school.

In the second study Gottleib\textsuperscript{25} found that a label did effect peer acceptance. Forty-eight third graders, split into two groups, were shown a videotape of a fifth grader. It was actually the same fifth grader. In one case they were told that he was retarded; in the other, only that he was a fifth grader. Although the attitudes were not consistent, the subjects had a more positive attitude toward the unlabelled behavior.

Labels of emotional disturbance also seem to effect peer acceptance.


Novak\textsuperscript{26} compared the reaction of 530 fourth, fifth and sixth graders to five labels (depressed, aggressive, phobic, schizoid, and immature). He found that the labelled behavior of an imaginary normal peer yielded a more negative evaluation, but not in all cases. In ratings by same sex subjects the labels did not seem to make any difference. However, in ratings by opposite sex subjects the label had a negative influence on all three scales (measures of attractiveness, social distance, and perceived similarity). Also, in the combined results the phobic peer actually benefitted on the social distance scale and the depressed peer benefited on the similarity scale. No effects were attributable to either the immature or aggressive labels even though aggressive behavior was least tolerated in both boys and girls. Novak interpreted the results as indicating that a label simply reinforces what a student may already know.

On balance, acknowledging a child's deviance by labelling him to his peers as having "special problems" seems to hurt, rather than help, the child in gaining greater acceptance. Children themselves are rather good diagnosticians and may have already established the fact that one of their classmates is weird or crazy or "different." However, hearing the label of mental illness used by a teacher or significant adult seems to bring in the negative stereotype of mental illness more strongly.\textsuperscript{27}

Both Novak\textsuperscript{28} and Gottleib\textsuperscript{29} found that peer reactions to labels were

\textsuperscript{26}David Novak, "Children's Responses to Imaginary Peers Labelled as Emotionally Disturbed," Psychology in the Schools, XII (January, 1975), pp. 103-106.

\textsuperscript{27}\textsuperscript{Ibid., 106.  \textsuperscript{28}\textsuperscript{Ibid., 105-106.}

\textsuperscript{29}Gottleib, "Attitudes Toward Retarded Children: Effects of Labelling and Behavior Aggressiveness," pp. 984-985.
inconsistent. In fact, in the first study Gottlieb\textsuperscript{30} did not find any effect of a label on peer acceptance. In Novak's\textsuperscript{31} study labels had no effect on same sex peers, and two labels even seemed to have a positive effect in the combined ratings. Also, in the same study, the effect of opposite sex rivalry, typical for students in those age/grade levels, was undetermined.

Labels alone may not be sufficient to significantly affect peer acceptance of educationally handicapped students. As a significant adult it may be the teacher's attitude toward the acceptance of such students that affects peer acceptance. Students often detect and imitate the attitudes of their teachers. Thus, teachers' attitudes may not only effect their own acceptance of educationally handicapped students but may be a significant factor influencing peer acceptance. Several studies have been done on how labels affect teacher attitudes.

Foster, Schmidt, and Sabatino\textsuperscript{32} conducted one of the few studies on the effects of the label "learning disabled." In their study they showed 44 teachers a videotape of either a normal fourth-grade male or a learning disabled student. Using a rating scale it was found that the label significantly altered the teachers' perceptions.

The data obtained on this study strongly suggest that the label of learning disabled generates a negative bias on the part of the classroom teacher and the bias is sufficient enough to alter teachers' observations of student behavior.\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{31}Novak, op. cit., 105-106.

\textsuperscript{32}Foster, Schmidt, and Sabatino, op. cit., 111-114. \textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 114.
In a previously reported study, Tanis Bryan found indications of teacher bias. While comparing 10 third-grade boys labelled as learning disabled to ten of their normal peers, it was observed that the classroom teacher responded three times more often to the normal students. Both the learning disabled and the regular students got equal amounts of positive reinforcement, but the learning disabled students received more negative reinforcement.

In 1973 Salvia, Clark, and Ysseldyke measured the attitudes of 165 undergraduate education and special-education students. The subjects viewed three normal children labelled as either mentally retarded, normal, or gifted in a test situation. On a rating scale the subjects predicted future success for the students. The results indicated that labels had a selective rather than a pervasive effect on their predictions. The effect of the label depended on what was most believable for that child.

In a study involving 194 teachers in sixteen states Smith and Greenberg analyzed teacher responses to nine hypothetical profiles. On all the profiles the intelligence quotient and school achievement were kept constant. Social class (upper middle, lower middle, and lower) and outside-school behavior (competent nondeviant, competent deviant, and incompetent nondeviant) were varied. Between 18 and 26 teachers saw each profile and responded to questions eliciting their feelings on subjects


such as student adaptiveness and appropriateness of the label mentally retarded. The results indicated that the label did not seem to affect the teachers' judgements of adaptive or nonadaptive behavior.

In a study though on mental health labels Herson\(^7\) found that labels had a biasing effect. The subjects were 175 teachers enrolled in summer school courses. They were given four descriptions -- that of a mentally retarded student, that of a depressed student, that of an emotionally disturbed student, and that of a paranoid schizophrenic. The descriptions were given in three ways -- with a label only, with a description of the behavior and a label, and with a description of the behavior only. Results showed no significant differences between the rating of the two descriptions utilizing labels. Both were ranked lower by the subjects than the unlabelled descriptions.

**Summary**

Studies done by Bryan\(^8\) seemed to demonstrate that learning disabled students were more rejected by their peers than their normal counterparts. However, studies of students identified as having other exceptional educational needs were inconclusive. Studies by Rens and Simenson\(^9\) and Bruininks, Rynders and Gross\(^\text{10}\) indicated no significant difference between

37Phyllis Herson, "Biasing Effects of Diagnostic Labels and Sex of Pupil on Teachers' View of Pupils' Mental Health," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, LXVI (February, 1974), pp. 117-122.
38Bryan, op. cit.
39Rens and Simenson, op. cit.
40Bruininks, Rynders, and Gross, op. cit.
the acceptance or rejection of nonretarded and retarded peers. Mitigating circumstances, such as being bussed into school, appear to compromise the results of the other three studies which did indicate a difference in the acceptance of retarded and nonretarded peers.

Three other studies attempted to isolate the effects of labels on peer attitudes. One showed that labels made no significant difference. In the other two studies, while some differences could be found, the results seemed marginal with student attitudes being inconsistent in both.

Five studies were reviewed on how labels affect teacher attitudes. The results indicated that the teachers seemed more likely to be affected by a label than their students. In a majority of the studies the labels were associated with a negative bias. However, the degree to which this would be transmitted and/or incorporated by the students was not clear.

Earlier in this chapter a critique of the research indicated the inadequacies of past research and several of the problems connected with the research on the effects of labelling. An inability to isolate the effects of the label was one of the major criticisms. Chapter Three further analyzes what the research has shown to date and presents some of the needs for future research.
III. CONCLUSION

In 1972 MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia reviewed an extensive body of literature on the effects of labeling. Their conclusion seems equally applicable to the present study.

To summarize, the evidence of the effect of labeling and or placement on peer acceptance is open to several conflicting interpretations. Clearly, the results of these studies are inconclusive. 1

The most significant problem is the lack of information available on the acceptance and the effects of labeling on the acceptance of learning disabled students. Information is limited to just a few articles. There is a definite need to extend the research on labeling in all of the areas covered in this review. Two key questions still need to be answered: (1) are learning disabled students accepted or rejected by their peers and teachers more than normal students, (2) is the label "learning disabled" a factor in the rejection or acceptance of learning disabled students? Studies are needed on all grade levels.

The majority of the research which is available concentrates on students labelled as educationally mentally retarded. The degree to which the results for those students is valid for students labelled as learning disabled is open to question. MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia 2

1MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia, op. cit., 244.
2Ibid., 244-245.
point out that results of research on students in the upper intelligence range for the retarded cannot be automatically extended to those students in the lower intelligence range. Would it be logical to attempt to extend those results and conclusions upward to students with supposedly higher intelligence quotients such as the learning disabled? Research on this question also seems conflicting.

A survey of parents of learning disabled, educationally mentally retarded, and normal students showed that there were significant differences in the behavior ratings on several different scales. However, another study showed that over twenty-five percent of the students labelled as learning disabled have an intelligence quotient in the retarded range. Since the research appears to be neither conclusive nor complete in any category, attempting to dispute the equality of the different categories may be merely an academic issue.

In the two most comprehensive reviews of the literature neither Hobbs nor MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia were able to find conclusive empirical evidence that labelling students was detrimental to acceptance by their peers. The results of the studies reviewed in Chapter Two with both the integrated and segregated students labelled as educationally


5Hobbs, The Futures of Children.

6MacMillan, Jones, and Aloia, op. cit.
mentally retarded were about evenly split. Some of the studies showed no more acceptance or rejection than that of normal students.

Complicating any research is the fact that a label does not exist in a vacuum. At any point before, during, or after the conferring of a formal label the student may have already been judged as deviant or stigmatized by peers and/or adults. The label then becomes nothing more than one factor in a continuum. Factors such as parent education, socio-economic status, the severity of the condition leading to labelling, the visibility of the condition, the salience of the label, the type of programming resulting from being labelled, and the possible protection afforded by the programming and/or label can effect the attitudes of both students and adults. Only studies by Gottlieb⁷ and Novak⁸ attempted to assess the effect of the label alone. Their results were inconclusive.

Teachers seemed to react more negatively toward labelled students than did the students' peers. A majority of the studies reviewed in Chapter Two showed how labels had a biasing effect on the teachers' attitudes. However, the research did not show that these attitudes were transmitted to the students or interfered with the instruction.

In a similar way, the fact that persons may anticipate incompetent behavior from persons labelled retarded does not mean that the observer will reward incompetent behavior.⁹

⁷Gottleib, "Attitudes Toward Retarded Children: Effects of Labelling and Behavior Aggressiveness."
⁸Novak, op. cit.
Also, until they get to know the student, teachers may initially rely more heavily on the label as a valid description of the student. A difficulty with several of the studies with teachers was that the teachers were either not exposed or exposed for only a short time to the students which they rated. It is possible too that the teacher may select a student as in need of special help long before a formal label was affixed.

The existence of labels because of tradition, precedence, categorical funding, etc., may be just another academic issue. Despite objections to labelling (including those other than the effects on teacher and peer acceptance) through continued formal and informal usage labels and the labelling process seems to have gained at least tacit acceptance.

Perhaps, what should have been anticipated all along remains as the only plausible conclusion. When a student is labelled as learning disabled there is no simple predictable consequence of labelling. "Rather there is a range of consequences for a given child -- and a range of possible reactions by the child."10 "Some children are born more sensitive to how people will react to them, or to how high they set their own standards of performance."11

Summary

In Chapter One many claims and counter claims were reviewed as to the effects of being labelled on peer and teacher acceptance. However,

10Hobbs, The Futures of Children, p.36.
11Silberberg and Silberberg, op. cit., 152.
the research as it was reviewed in Chapter Two did not seem to be able to clarify or conclusively substantiate any of the allegations. The results of different studies were often contradictory and there were problems with the research. It appeared to be very difficult to assess the effects of the label alone.

The only conclusion at this time seems to be the obvious one. There is a range of possible consequences for any student to being labelled. These consequences may range from greater acceptance to greater rejection or isolation. Further research is necessary before other conclusions can be reached, especially on the acceptance and the effects of labelling on the acceptance of students labelled as learning disabled.
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