The Effects of Labeling on Special Education Students

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of special education labels on students understanding, academic expectations, and parent and teachers expectations. Research revealed a correlation between being labeled and how students view themselves. Related literature demonstrated that a Learning Disability (LD) label can significantly lower teacher and parent expectations of students. Lowered expectations have a direct impact on student academic achievement. In this study, 75 students from John W. North High School were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the special education label. Survey results revealed student’s understood what a label was, and it did not affect the positive view of themselves. Students felt supported by both teachers and parents and demonstrated having a bright outlook for their academic future. Changing how students with disabilities are viewed requires a collaboration of efforts, ongoing education and an emphasis on student learning. In order to improve the attitudes, expectations and perceptions of teachers, parents, and students, all students need to be provided with instruction that addresses standards and meets their unique needs.

**INTRODUCTION**

**General Statement of the Problem**

The use of disability labels can have an impact on the way students in special education are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Research on this topic generally held mixed conclusions. When looking at the different aspects of education it is important to include the expectations of academia, teachers, parents, and students. In this research we will consider the previous literature on all four of these categories as well as collect current data by issuing a survey to approximately 75 special education high school students. This report will also conclude how recent changes contrast previous research and the direction in which this research can be continued through looking at shifts in the structure of special education.

**Review of Related Literature**

Academic Expectations

Shifrer (2013) mentioned that after analysis the results indicate that adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) designation are more socially disadvantaged and have poorer academic histories than adolescents without school disability designations (p. 463). Adolescents with school LD designations exhibit poorer academic behaviors and fewer positive attitudes toward learning teachers’ and parents’ more negative perceptions of and expectations for adolescents with school LD designations may be entirely attributable to these adolescents’ more disadvantaged social, academic, attitudinal, and behavioral qualities.

Shardon (2008) explores the concept of a disability narrative and how it is developed to explain how expert disability labels shape the experience of academic performance and failure (p. 9). In the research it was suggest that the circulation of disability labels is a collective enterprise in which the lay person learns to make use of disability expertise. The purpose of the study is partial because it concerns with labels and the stigma that labels bring. The research stated that teachers have the most negative impact within students academics.

The results of the study concluded that teachers do have a great impact within their students’ academic learning. For example, one of the questions that was asked was “Do you feel supported by your teachers ?”, 83.33% of the students who were asked this questioned agreed that they feel supported by their teachers. This means that in order for students academics to rise teachers must be involved within their students’ lives.

Teacher Expectations

Certain student attributes have been linked to greater risk of students receiving negative

teacher expectancy (Rabinowitz, 2012, p. 3). According to research conducted by Rabinowitz

(2012), learning-disabled students were considered to be higher in terms of expected future

failures, regardless of effort displayed or their implied ability (Rabinowitz, 2012, p.24). It is

clear that the attitudes of teachers play a crucial role in the overall achievement of students with

disabilities.

Teacher attitudes, perceptions, expectations, and behaviors have an influence on the self-image and academic performance of students with disabilities (as cited in Marsh, 1998, p.15). Because of the exceptionality labels, students with special needs often experience negativity, however, the purpose of the special label is to aid in the delivery of appropriate services and ensure a pathway to a successful education (Marsh, 1998, p.2). A variety of special education labels have been found to yield negative expectancy outcomes in teachers, thus perpetuating problems, considering students in special education are typically experiencing academic difficulties (Rabinowitz, 2012, p.20). Adding more negative influence onto an already struggling student, even on a relatively small scale can be the difference between a passing and a failing student (Rabinowitz, 2012, p. 20).

Research demonstrates the special education label often radically influences the

teacher’s expectations for the student (Marsh, 1998, p. 4). “Labeling is frequently associated

with stigmatizing, isolating and stereotyping individuals with learning, behavioral or physical

differences” (as cited in Marsh, 1998, p. 45). The attitudes of teachers are thought to be the

culprit for the failure of the implementation of the inclusion process. Teacher attitudes have a

significant role in the success of student achievement (as cited in Marsh, 1998, p. 2). Research demonstrates that students with severe disabilities and those labeled with an emotional disturbance, impacted teachers’ positive attitudes towards students (as cited in Marsh, 1998, p.17).

The results of the study conducted by Rabinowitz (2012) suggested, “that negative

potentially inaccurate expectations of students formed by their teacher may be diminished

through greater knowledge and training” (p. 86). Teachers who harbor negative expectations of their students tend to treat those students in a manner associated with lower achievement. Rabinowitz (2012) suggested, if it is possible to limit some of these negative expectations through teacher education, it follows that there may be improvement in student performance (p. 86).

Parent Expectations

Labeling can also have an effect on the academic expectations placed by parents on students who are labeled with a Learning Disability (LD). Research suggests that parents will be more likely to perceive disability in adolescents as negative, regardless of the student’s academic record, attitudes, and behaviors. In fact, both teachers and parents might hold lower educational expectations for youth labeled with a Learning Disability (LD) solely because of their social and academic disadvantage (Shifrer, 2013, p. 464). It is here where we can see how labeling may produce negative stereotypes which can affect the perceptions and expectations of parents.

A study published in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior examined how the school LD label may produce stigma and reproduce a disadvantage for students (Shifrer, 2013, p. 466). In this study, it was revealed that if the school LD label produced negative stereotypes, parents were more likely to hold lower educational expectations of students. These negative expectations were partly attributable to their perceptions about the student’s specific disability.

Shifrer’s (2013) study found the following:

“Teachers and parents hold significantly lower educational expectations for adolescents labeled with LDs than they do for similarly achieving and behaving adolescents not labeled with disability, and these lower expectations contribute to labeled adolescents’ lower educational expectations for themselves.” (p. 475)

These results demonstrate the adverse effects that labeling has not only on the parent’s perception, but also on the student’s own perception. Shifrer also discovered that parents are more likely to hold significantly lower expectations of adolescents who are perceived as disabled by their teachers. He then concluded that it is the teacher expectations, not the parent’s, who hold a greater influence on the stigmatization of LD labels. To limit this problem, Shifrer suggested increasing the understanding of these labels and further educating teachers to diminish the stigmatization of such labels (Shifrer, 2013, p. 475). Doing so, may also limit the parent’s lowered expectations of these disabled students.

Student Understanding

 Special education students with disability labels have ranging understandings of how they are categorized. Some research concludes that students don't know what labels are in the first place or that they have one. One the other hand, other research states that students do understand their labels and have mixed reactions to them. Their reactions can range from simply accepting their label as nothing unique to completely rejecting it. Throughout the research gathered for this project, it has been more common to find articles that regard to the stigmas of labels and how students’ self-esteem is affected.

 To understand the effect that a label can have on a student, it is important to understand the stigma of a label. Margareta Maria Thomson states that labelling is used “when the individuals do not fit into what most societies consider normal, they are perceived as deviant” (Thomson, 2012, p. 159). This can cause society to have altering perspectives on said individuals, in other words, place a stigma upon them. Such perspectives can cause those holding labels to feel different from others or negative about themselves. As a result, W.M.L. concluded that “a significant proportion of people who have been labeled...do not use the label spontaneously to describe themselves” ( Finlay & Lyons, 2005, p. 120). Finlay and Lyons (2005) suggest that the “negative social assumptions associated with the label[s]” (p. 122) and focus on disability rather than the understanding of the individuals and their abilities is a leading factor in why it is important to minimize the use of labelling. Schiffer (2013) stated that negative stereotypes associated with labelling can also be considered the “second element of [the] stigma” (p. 464). As a result a student’s self-esteem can be negatively affected.

Self-esteem is essentially the way in which an individual perceives themselves. Thomson (2012), stated that the relationship between disability labels and self-esteem can be analyzed (p.161). In this article Thomson also states that “self-esteem is lowered by failure, criticism, rejection and other effects that have negative implications” (Thomson, 2012, p. 161), According to the research on this topic, this far, the use of disability labels on special education students creates a separation from other students that can host a negative effect of the self-esteem, However, with the continuous changes in special education, the use of labelling can be useful in helping discover the needs of students and their understanding of limitations, as well as how to strive regardless.

**Research Question**

Do disability labels have a negative effect on special education students?

**Significance of the Proposed Study**

The general purpose of this study is to consider the effects of learning disability labels and the perceived expectations of teachers, parents, and students. This study is useful to determine if a child in special education is perceived with less favor when compared to their non-disabled peer. Further research on this subject could include how expectations of parents and teachers have impact on the students reported academic efficacy (Rabinowitz, 2012, p. 19).

**DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

**Subjects**

The student population utilized in our study included designated special education students from John W.North High School in Riverside, California. Seventy five students were surveyed using a 10 question survey that included a variety of questions about the perceived effect of labels on special education students and their perceptions of themselves. Thirty four male students and 41 female students participated in the survey. Of these seventy five 56 students are eligible for special education services as students with a Specific Learning Disability, 8 students are eligible for services under Other Health Impairment (this can include, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Asthma, diabetes etc), 7 students are eligible for special education with a Speech and Language Impairment and lastly 4 students are eligible for services as a student with Autism. These students included grades 9-12.

**Instrumentation/Data Collection**

By thinking of questions that could be easily understood by our subjects, we developed a ten item survey/ questionnaire using Survey Monkey to assess student’s own perceptions and understanding of their educational label. The students utilized an online survey service (surveymonkey.com) to answer the survey.

Our team administered the survey to a select number of students to determine if the questions on our survey could be easily understood by the special education students ranging in intellectual abilities. The students that participated in the “pilot survey” included students from a special education special day class for students with mild to moderate disabilities which included students with specific learning disabilities, other health impairments and students that are eligible for services as students with autism. Once our team was able to determine our population was able to answer the survey questions that survey was distributed to a wide range of students in 9-12th grade special education classes in a hard copy format. This allowed for a quicker turnaround time and addressed the lack of technology. The hardcopy answers to the anonymous surveys were then inputted into the Survey Monkey data base and were made available for our team to review the findings.

**Presentation of Findings**

Below are figures that show the questions asked in the survey and the participants answers.

**Q1 Do you know what "labeling" is?**

* **Answered: 73**
* **Skipped: 1**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **83.56%**61 |
| **No** | **16.44%**12 |
| **Total** | **73** |

**Q2 Do Labels make you different?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **29.17%**21 |
| **No** | **70.83%**51 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q3 Do you think you are smart?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses |
| **Yes** | **70.83%**51 |
| **No** | **29.17%**21 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q4 Do others think you are smart?**

* **Answered: 71**
* **Skipped: 3**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **77.46%**55 |
| **No** | **22.54%**16 |
| **Total** | **71** |

**Q5 Do you have a Label ?**

* **Answered: 70**
* **Skipped: 4**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **37.14%**26 |
| **No** | **62.86%**44 |
| **Total** | **70** |

**Q6 Can learning make you happy ?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **77.78%**56 |
| **No** | **22.22%**16 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q7 Do you feel supported by your teachers ?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **83.33%**60 |
| **No** | **16.67%**12 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q8 Do your parents care about your education ?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **97.22%**70 |
| **No** | **2.78%**2 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q9 Do you care about your education ?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **95.83%**69 |
| **No** | **4.17%**3 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Q10 Do you think learning is important for your future ?**

* **Answered: 72**
* **Skipped: 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Answer Choices**–** | Responses**–** |
| **Yes** | **97.22%**70 |
| **No** | **2.78%**2 |
| **Total** | **72** |

**Limitations of the Design**

As is the case with any study, our research had its limitations. It is important for readers to consider the results provided within the context of its limitations. One primary limitation of our study is found in the small sample size. Our research was only representative of a small portion of one school population. The sample size in our study may have been expanded by including other schools in different regions. The inclusion of different school populations would have aided our results by providing a greater understanding of the student’s perceptions of their special education label. Another limitation of our study was the narrowness of the questionnaire. Having only true and false questions limited our understanding of the participant’s answers. The study could have benefited from using a different questionnaire design. Administering a face-to-face interview with closed-ended questions rated on a Likert scale could have yielded more accurate results. Lastly, results may have been biased due to the school’s implementation of RISE (Reaching Individual Success through Education), which is a program that has been developed to eliminate the stigma of the Special Education label. Because of this recent development, participant’s responses in this study may not have been an accurate representation of the topic at hand. Future research should focus on addressing some of these limitations in order to gain a greater understanding of our present study.

**CONCLUSION**

Review of the relevant literature has revealed that labeling not only affects a student’s own perceptions, but that of their teachers and parents. The perceptions of the special education label has been found to have a great impact on student academic success. In addition, labeling may perpetuate stereotypes which may pose a disadvantage on the student. However, the reactions to such labels are depended on the understanding of both the holder of the label. Although stigmatizing labels have the potential to be damaging to teacher/parent expectations and their perceptions of the special education learners, our research demonstrated that it is the public understanding and education of the meaning of these labels that supports the academic success of special education students. More specifically, Some research also points out that the commonality of the learning disabilities have led to an increased exposure and awareness of the disabilities characteristics and related training which in turn may serve to limit negative stereotyping. It was suggested that limiting these negative stereotypes may be accomplished through furthering teacher education.

 The research results of our study were congruent with the ideas presented in the reviewed literature. Surprisingly, these results did not reveal the negative aspects of labeling, but rather demonstrated the positive effects that teacher and parental support can have on the student’s self-perception. Most of the participants in this study felt supported by their teachers and parents, thus indicating an overall positive view of themselves and of their academic achievement. It is important to note, however, that although these participants were part of a special education program (thus being placed with a label), about 63% of the respondents indicated not having a label. This is consistent with previous research which indicates the potential unawareness of the labels being placed upon these students. Despite this possibility, our results show that despite labels, students can thrive with the proper support and encouragement from those around them. Further efforts in teacher and parent education must be implemented in order to look past the student’s disability labels and encourage them to be successful individuals.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In order to expand our current research, our survey would be modified to include open-ended questions that would allow for students to provide feedback beyond yes and no answers. A wider student population would be a valuable asset to this research to better determine if students from different school sites, socio economic environments would produce different or similar outcomes. A parent and teacher survey would also be a valuable addition to future research in order to obtain information about expectations of students with disabilities. The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education encourages the further research on parents’ and professionals’ perspectives of special education students, to determine if “dialogue between parents and professionals might result in greater understanding … and a clarification of the meaning of terms like ‘respect,’ ‘trust,’ and ‘commitment’ in the context of a given community” (as cited in Carter, 2002, p. 7).

Current legislation of IDEA-Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 was brought into legislation to ensure that every child receives access to a free public education that fits their needs. This allows students to receive life skills courses and employment training. In an effort to change the view of students with disabilities, there must be collaboration between the school, teacher, parent and student, which emphasizes increasing student learning (Marsh, 1998, p. 74). Every child’s education takes place within a relationship of families and professionals. As parents and schools learn the value and methods of collaboration, they can create together an educational environment that supports the abilities of all children to succeed (Carter, 2002, p. 8).

 Our research was conducted at John W. North High School in Riverside, California. North High School has implemented, RISE-Reaching Individual Success through Education. A teacher developed collaborative with the purpose of changing the face of special education at the school site and promoting student motivation through progress monitoring. Further research is needed to determine if the implementation of RISE has had a positive impact on the outcomes of student, teacher and parent expectations.

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