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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine if there is a difference in the self-concept of students who are labeled or nonlabeled as having a disabling condition. Subjects in the study were 50 general education Chicago (Illinois) students (ages 12-15) and 50 special education students labeled as having learning disabilities, educable mental handicap, or social/emotional disturbance. Administration of the IMAGE Survey to the subjects revealed that, overall, there were no significant differences in self-concept, though 11 of the 27 survey statements did reveal self-concept differences between the two groups. The study concluded that: (1) special education students have a lower opinion of themselves in terms of personal appearance; (2) special education students often get discouraged before a goal is accomplished; (3) special education students do not view their work as being the best they can do and therefore do not feel proud of it; and (4) special education students often feel that their success on tests is due to luck instead of ability. (Contains 10 references.) (JDD)

The Differences of Self-Concept of the Labeled and Non-Labeled Student

Anita F. Muse

Research has shown that in every facet of a person's life self-concept plays an important role. The more enriched a person's self-concept is, the greater the chance for success to occur. Likewise, when a person's self-concept is less enriched, the chance for success diminishes. If this is true, the relationship between a person's self-concept and their academic success is worthy of examination. Also, equally important and the focus of this study is the link between self-concept and the labeling of students. It has been noted by some researchers (Heal, 1989; Miller & Davis, 1982), educators, and parent's alike that labeling children can have negative effects on their self-concept, thus reducing the likelihood of academic success.

If the self-concept of a child diminishes as a result of labeling then the present educational process of labeling would have to be restructured. These changes would include every aspect, from identifying to placing children in the appropriate educational setting.

Classifying people has been an integral part of our society since the beginning of time. For example, classifications based on ethnicity, social or economic status, physical appearance, and sexual identification have always been made. If one were unfortunate and fell into the category that was not favorably looked upon, there was a resultant loss of identity and self-concept.

This same practice which classified and labeled people made its way into today's school system. Although time has shown that children have always been labeled, the practice became acceptable with the birth of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This Act also known as Public Law 94-142 (P.L. 94-142) required every state to provide a free appropriate education for all handicapped children between the ages of 3 and 18 (Kirk & Gallagher, 1986). In order for these services to be provided a child was identified, labeled and placed in a special class. These included labels such as: mental retardation, behavior disordered and learning disabled. Mental retardation refers to significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period. Children with behavior disabilities chronically and markedly respond to their environment in socially unacceptable and/or personally unsatisfying ways but also can be taught more socially acceptable and personally gratifying behavior. Learning disabilities, a "catchall" term refers to children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or

do mathematical calculations (Kirk & Gallagher, 1986). As Coleman (1983) stated children identified as handicapped by legal mandate (P.L. 94-142) had to receive special education assistance. This in turn made labeling and special-class placement concomitant events.

The debate of whether a child's self-concept is lowered as a result of labeling has been and continues to be one of importance in the educational field. According to Chapman (1988) a student's self-concept was seen as influencing achievement outcomes through its effect on motivation. People who held positive self-perceptions usually tried harder and persisted longer when faced with difficult or challenging tasks. On the other hand, student's who felt relatively worthless and ineffectual tended to reduce their effort or give up altogether when work was difficult.

Many researchers however, believed the self-concept of students who had been labeled remained intact. Twenty-one studies of general self-concept were studied by Chapman (1988). These studies used the Piers-Harris scale and the Student's Perception of Ability Scale. Only five showed an unequivocal difference between LD and Non-handicapped (NH) students. However, it is important to note, that while the findings are somewhat equivocal in terms of general self-concept, the findings in the other studies do not support the belief that LD students have low general self-concepts. In terms of normative data (at least for studies using the Piers-Harris scale), LD students' general self-concepts tend to be around or above average.

Vaughn et. al (1992) conducted a study which examined the peer relations and self-concepts of students prior to and following their identification by the school district as learning disabled (LD). Self-concept ratings (kindergarten through fourth grade) and peer acceptance ratings (kindergarten through third grade), as well as academic achievement scores, were compared across 3 groups: LD students who were placed in resource special education programs during second grade, low-achieving (LA) students, and average-achieving/high-achieving (AA/HA) students. For peer acceptance, AA/HA students' scores were higher than LA students' scores only. Findings suggest that LD students' self-perceptions are not negatively affected by academic and social difficulties in the early grades or by the identification and labeling process.

Not only have researchers shown that labeling students does not have a negative impact on their self-concept, but that labeling was effective. Kirk & Gallagher (1986) cited three reasons for the effectiveness of labeling. The first reason was differential treatments. One of the standard uses of labeling was to provide the basis for some type of differentiated treatment. A child who is unresponsive to

verbal communication and who seems chronically unhappy may be deaf or mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed. The label we place on the child creates a very different type of treatment program. The second reason is the search for etiology. Epidemiologists had to classify conditions as a preliminary step in identifying the factors that cause them. Without these distinctions, scientists lose one of their most powerful weapons in the prevention of various disorders. Finally, the third reason that labeling is effective is that it helped in obtaining needed resources for treatment. Many special educators believe that needed resources for training, research and services would disappear if we no longer identified conditions.

At the same time that special educators believed that labels were necessary, there was another group of special educators and researchers who became disenchanted with the use of labels (Miller & Davis, 1982). Instead of labels describing only one characteristic (like height or weight or personality), the label became the person. Another reason was labels could increase a subgroup of discrimination. Many studies showed a disproportionate number of minority group children in special education programs. This raised the question of whether schools were using these programs as a form of segregation. Lastly, labels affected self-image. If someone called you crazy or stupid, it bothered you. But if enough people did it, you began to believe it yourself.

Several studies have been done to show that labeling was damaging to a student's self-concept. When the term "gifted" is used generally positive thoughts arose. However, when Heal (1989) conducted a comparative case study analysis which described and analyzed patterns of gifted students' perceptions toward being labeled gifted, the results found that youngsters reacted negatively to the gifted label, to their loss of friends, to heightened teacher expectations, and to the rigorous workload. Females reported a greater number of negative reactions that did the males. As the program model became more segregated and as the use of the gifted label increased, the reactions toward the label intensified.

Another case study followed a child from birth to approximately age eight. At an early age the child had learned to construct words from magnetic letters. By age five he was a relatively independent reader. Kindergarten and first grade reinforced his self-concept as a capable learner. Nevertheless, during grade two, a substitute teacher criticized the monotone voice he used when reading aloud, and noted the number of worksheets he had not completed. The child was placed in a remedial class where his schoolwork declined. He had adopted the label given to him, "remedial student," and behaved as a slow learner. The child transferred to a new school for his third year. His teacher began to rebuild his self-concept. He began

to improve, receiving B's in all areas of language arts, yet his love for school was not fully recovered (Juliebo & Elliott, 1984).

Not only do labels affect students, but the attitudes of teachers towards students. One of the strongest statements claiming to show the effects of labels in creating behavior was published by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). In this study positive information was communicated to teachers regarding the intellectual development of elementary school-aged children. Rosenthal and Jacobson claimed that changes in teachers' beliefs produced by brief statements about children inserted in their educational records led to significant intellectual growth by children, presumably because of subtle changes in how those children were treated by their teachers (Reynolds, 1987). Although their work was severely criticized, it made those in the education system stop and look at the self-fulfilling prophecy theory. This theory as it relates to special education suggests that children and youths acquire deviant behavior or fail to develop positive behaviors because of the special education classification.

Another study that also dealt with labeling and teachers' expectation was conducted by Rolison and Medway (1985). In this study 180 teachers were administered booklets that provided varying information about a hypothetical student named Bob. The first page indicated the subject's age, sex, race, and length of elementary teaching experience. The second page gave general information regarding Bob. This information included items about his label and previous educational placement. The third page of the experimental booklet contained the pattern of manipulation. After the subjects read the information about Bob, their future expectations and causal attributions regarding his performance were assessed. The expectation measure consisted of one question that asked subjects to predict the number of times that Bob's test scores would exceed the school district average on the next 20 achievement tests he took. The attribution measure consisted of a series of 7-point Likert scales on which subjects were asked to indicate the importance of various causes in accounting for Bob's previous test result record. The results of this study indicated that actual classroom teachers raised or lowered their expectations according to a student's previous special education label and past performance.

To further illustrate that labeling can influence the attitudes of teacher and others a study was conducted by Severance and Gasstrom (1977). This study investigated the effects of the label "mentally retarded" on person perception and the utility of attribution analysis. Ninety-six female undergraduates enrolled in lower division psychology were randomly given a booklet which described a situation in which a 10-year-old boy or girl either succeeded or failed at assembling a 10-piece jigsaw puzzle. For half the subjects the label "mentally retarded" was included in the

description of the person, while the remaining subjects received the identical information with the exclusion of the words "mentally retarded." After the subjects read the description they rated the child's failure or success on a four point scale based on effort, luck, task difficulty, and ability. A scale was also included that ranged from 0 to 100 percent in ascending intervals of 10 percent that indicated their expectations of the target person's future success at the task. The data revealed striking differences in causal attributions made to persons labeled "mentally retarded" as compared to persons not bearing that label. In contrast to a nonlabeled person, a "mentally retarded" person's success at an identical task was credited much more to effort, with ability and task difficulty being seen to influence the outcome roughly the same as for the nonlabeled person. Under conditions of failure, ability and task difficulty were seen to account for the "mentally retarded" person's outcome, whereas these factors were regarded as much less important causes underlying identical behavior by a nonlabeled person. The overall impact of these attributional patterns was reflected in subjects' estimates of the probability of future success at the same task, where a successful "mentally retarded" person did not elicit as high an expectancy for future success from observers as a nonlabeled target person who achieved identical success. These biases implied that expectations were less for a labeled person and reduced the likelihood that a person labeled "mentally retarded" will be credited with success or given the benefit of the doubt for failure to the same extent as nonlabeled person.

The last study reviewed refers once again to the difference between the self-concept of nonlabeled and labeled students. Cooley and Ayres (1988) conducted a study in which 93 Caucasian children (37 nonhandicapped students and 46 students with learning disabled) were given the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Questionnaire and a subscale that compared ability and effort attributions for 10 failure situations. This study investigated differences in self-concept between students with learning disabilities and nonhandicapped students and differences between attributions made by students with learning disabilities and those made by nonhandicapped students when explaining success and failure. The data revealed that attributions that the students made about academic successes and failures did not indicate any more than directional differences between the groups. However, the results indicated that pre- and early adolescent students with learning disorders had poorer academic self-concepts than their normally achieving peers.

This review of literature is only a small sample of the studies that have been conducted on the subject of the self-concept of the non-labeled and labeled student. However, it is representative of the conflict in opinions regarding the topic. Despite the two opposing opinions one consistent theme was found throughout; self-concept is an important factor in a student's academic success.

There were three other factors worth noting as a result of the review of literature. It is imperative when researching this topic that the reader beware of the type of self-concept that the researcher was studying. In reading the studies three types of self-concepts were encountered; global self-concept, social self-concept and academic self-concept. The other area of concern is the type of instrument that the researcher used as well as the components of the instrument. For example, in the Cooley & Ayres (1988) study they discovered a difference in global self-concept between the two groups they studied. However, after doing their statistical analysis they found that the difference was due largely to the academic component within the Piers-Harris measure. When this academic component was removed, the self-concept differences disappeared. The last factor to be noted is that many of the studies conducted lacked an empirical foundation. Because there appears to be a link between self-concept and academic success and discrepancies between the self-concept of non-labeled and labeled students, further empirical research is needed.

Therefore the purpose of the study is to determine if there is a difference in the self-concept of labeled and non-labeled students.

Procedures

Population/Sample

The population in this study will include 178 general and special education students from two Chicago elementary schools. The students range in ages twelve through fifteen years old. The special education population includes three categories: Learning Disabilities (LD), Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH), and Social/Emotionally Disturbed (S/ED).

A total of 178 general and special education students were surveyed. Surveys were administered to existing classrooms. Fifty students from each group were randomly selected for this study.

The IMAGE Survey was distributed to students in their classroom. The statements were read aloud as each student read silently. This procedure was employed to ensure that the statements were understood. Any additional help was given individually at the student's request. After the collection of the survey the teachers coded the survey with the appropriate label of each student.

The instrument used was the IMAGE Survey which consisted of 27 true and false statements, divided into two categories, General Self (17) and School Academic

(10). The survey had no right or wrong answers. It merely asked the students to express their opinions for each statement.

The chi square test was applied to each separate question to determine whether there were significant differences between the responses of the labeled and non-labeled students.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine if there was a difference in the self-concept of labeled and non-labeled students at the elementary school level. In order to accomplish this goal the IMAGE Survey which consisted of 27 true and false statements, divided into two categories, General Self (17) and School Academic (10) was administered to 178 students. Of these, 100 surveys were randomly selected, 50 from the labeled and non-labeled population.

It is evident from this research survey that there are significant differences between the responses of labeled and non-labeled students. Data from the survey rejected the research hypothesis and accepted the null hypothesis based on the chi square treatment of the survey data.

In the General Self section of the survey 10 of the 17 statements accepted the null hypothesis while 7 of the statements rejected it. In the School Academic portion 6 of the statements accepted the null hypothesis, while 4 of the statements rejected it. Additional information on the data and treatment of data can be located in the Appendices.

The chi square data analysis resulted in the overall acceptance of the null hypothesis. Therefore, the research hypothesis that stated there would be a difference in the self-concept of labeled and non-labeled students was not true for this population.

It is important to note that in spite of the null hypothesis being accepted with greater frequency, that 11 of the survey statements did reject the null hypothesis and showed that in some areas there is a difference in the self-concept of labeled students as compared to the self-concept of non-labeled students. Those statements that rejected the null hypothesis are located in the Table 1 of the Appendices.

From the 11 questions for which significant differences were observed, I would make the following conclusion:

1. Special education students have a lower opinion of themselves in terms of

personal appearance.

2. Special education students often get discouraged before a goal is accomplished.

3. Special education students do not view their work as being the best they can do, therefore not feeling proud of it.

4. Special education students often feel that their success on tests is due to luck instead of ability.

It is because of those statements that further empirical research should be conducted regarding the issue of the self-concept of labeled students as it relates to special education labeling.

IMAGE SURVEY

DIRECTIONS: Answer every question even if some are hard to decide. Circle only one answer **TRUE or FALSE**. There are no right or wrong answers. Only you can tell how you feel about yourself.

General Self

1. I am a happy person.	True	False
2. It is hard for me to make friends.	True	False
3. I am often sad.	True	False
4. I am shy.	True	False
5. I have good looks.	True	False
6. I usually want my own way.	True	False
7. I give up easily.	True	False
8. I am lucky.	True	False
9. I worry a lot.	True	False
10. I like being the way I am.	True	False
11. I often feel left out of things.	True	False
12. I wish I were different.	True	False
13. I am dumb about most things.	True	False
14. I am good looking.	True	False
15. I forget what I learn.	True	False
16. I am easy to get along with.	True	False
17. I am different from other people.	True	False

School Academic

18. I find it very hard to talk in front of a class.	True	False
19. I'm proud of my school work.	True	False
20. I'm doing the best work I can.	True	False
21. I like to be called on in class.	True	False
22. I do well on test because I'm lucky.	True	False
23. I'm not doing as well in school as I'd like to.	True	False
24. I often feel upset in school.	True	False
25. I look forward to going to school most days	True	False
26. My teacher makes me feel I'm not good enough	True	False
27. I often get discouraged in school.	True	False

IMAGE SURVEY RESULTS
LABELED/NON-LABELED

	(L)		(NL)	
General Self	**True**	**False**	**True**	**False**
1.	40	8	43	7
2.	9	40	6	42
3.	18	30	10	38
4.	20	30	13	35
5.	35	14	45	3
6.	27	22	36	12
7.	18	29	5	43
8.	32	16	35	13
9.	32	16	23	24
10.	28	20	39	9
11.	26	23	16	32
12.	19	30	10	38
13.	19	29	10	37
14.	34	15	43	5
15.	31	17	14	33
16.	35	12	39	7
17.	28	20	34	14
School Academic				
18.	32	18	27	21
19.	37	13	25	22
20.	44	6	27	16
21.	27	21	29	20
22.	23	27	9	39
23.	31	19	35	13
24.	26	22	21	27
25.	30	19	25	23
26.	12	38	10	38
27.	32	16	15	33

* The numbers in the true and false columns represent the number of responses each statement received from the labeled and non-labeled students.

NULL HYPOTHESIS
ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION TABLE

QUESTION	CHI SQUARE VALUE
1.	.152
2.	.623
3.	3.223
4.	1.872
5.	8.320 *
6.	3.900 *
7.	9.997 *
8.	.445
9.	3.047
10.	5.978 *
11.	3.870 *
12.	3.628
13.	3.661
14.	6.050 *
15.	11.630 *
16.	1.524
17.	1.639
18.	.615
19.	4.474 *
20.	8.055 *
21.	.082
22.	39.245 *
23.	1.354
24.	1.042
25.	.813
26.	.151
27.	12.046 *

*Indicates rejection of the null hypothesis. The critical value of the chi square equals 3.841 at the .05 level with a degree of freedom of 1.

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