Emotional/Behavioral Disorder: Why and How do We Name It?

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Abstract

The controversy over the use labels for students who receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act has been raging for decades. Do labels really serve an educational purpose? Do they stigmatize students? Do disabilities really exist? Are they just part of the normal distribution of human characteristics, just diversities considered disabilities only because of social barriers? Postmodernists or relativists—those who are involved in what has been called disability studies (DS) or disability studies in education (DSE)—would answer those four questions No, Yes, No, and Yes. These answers and the attempt to "normalize" disabilities, eschew labels as worthless, and even say special education is not the answer but the problem for educating these diverse students are dangerous not only to students with various disabilities but also to the very existence of special education. We argue that labels are important and a necessary way for professionals to communicate. Consequently, this article focuses on the reality of behavior, the nature of language and use of words, and how labels can and should be used—particularly those when applied to students who display "challenging behaviors."

Keywords: *emotional and behavioral disorders; disabilities studies; multi-tiered levels of support; labeling; abnormal and normal behavior*

Introduction

Arguments about labels have been raging for decades, perhaps for more than a century. The catch phrase, "label jars, not people," has appeared on stickers, pins, and tee-shirts. Changes have been made in what we call students who are receiving special education services. For example, the word "handicap" was replaced with "disability" or "exceptionality," which gave way—for better or worse—to "person-first" language (e.g., "students with disabilities" rather than "disabled students").

Our purpose is to discuss not just the common debate points about labeling theory but to consider the role of labels in contemporary society and the importance of all labels in communicating clearly about disabilities of all manner—in fact, communication about *any* phenomenon. For example, matter and energy we do not completely understand exert forces in the universe. Physicists know these phenomena exist because of their detected effects but do not yet have a way to see them all. So, they need a label enabling physicists to communicate with each other as these

not fully understood forces are being researched. Physicists came up with the labels "dark energy" and "dark matter." These labels are considered "place holders" until more data are gathered. In this article, however, we give particular attention to the disability we now commonly call emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) or emotional or behavioral disorder (E/BD). The reason for our focus on this particular label is, at least partially, the way society views it.

From a sociological standpoint, labels can be classified as either "labels of forgiveness" or "labels of damnation" (Noblit et al., 1991). Labels of forgiveness convey conditions that an individual can not control, such as Down Syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Conversely, labels of damnation imply that someone purposely engages in the behaviors associated with the label and could choose to behave differently. Examples of such are the labels "delinquent," "emotionally disturbed," "behaviorally disordered," "paranoid," "socially maladjusted" "and "conduct disordered," to mention a few. It is easy to understand why these are called labels of damnation when we think about the stigma associated with a mental illness and misbehavior. Some people with major depressive disorders continue to view their labels as indicating personal weaknesses (or damnations) and refuse to take medications prescribed for them.

Attempts to Avoid All Labels, Including EBD

Debate of which labels to use in describing people and their behavior is different from a current and disturbing trend to eschew labels altogether. Two factors—knowingly or unknowingly—seem to fuel the position of advocates for the avoidance or abolition of labels.

Inclusion and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

First, the inclusion zeitgeist is partially responsible for the now popular approach to delivering educational services, supposedly without labels. Some propose to do this through multi-tiered systems of support (e.g., SWIFT Education Center, 2021), but there are other efforts to "transform" public education so that it serves *all* children in a single kind of place—the neighborhood school, ordinary classroom (e.g., Slee, 2018, 2020). When the focus is academics, tiers are typically called response to intervention (RtI), and when the focus is behavior it is commonly known as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS; Shogren et al., 2016). We note that some tiered systems do not claim to be fully inclusionary, simply to serve more children with disabilities in general education. For example, Lane et al. (2020) described a tiered system that integrates academic, behavioral, and social learning known by the acronym Ci3T. Furthermore, not all advocates of PBIS or RtI make the claim that special education is irrelevant or unneeded. Our point is that some do make such a claim, and that their claim is dangerous for both students with disabilities and special education teachers.

Tiered systems are based on a universal supports paradigm that addresses struggling students regardless of the presence or absence of a disability. With tiers, there is presumably no *necessity* to label students because the interventions apply to *all* students—they all get whatever they need, so only the intervention needs to be labeled. This approach, or philosophy, seems to be implied by SWIFT Education Center (2021) and by some proponents of fully inclusive schools (e.g., Slee, 2018). Nonetheless, people are always and necessarily labeled by the services they receive.

Ideas of Individuals Involved in Disability Studies

Second, the postmodern or relativist ideas espoused by individuals involved with disability studies (DS) and disability studies in education (DSE; e.g., Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, 2020; Ferri, 2008; Slee 2018) include arguments against the use of any labels. For example, Tomlinson (2018) wrote, "Are all of these contorted inclusive practices just elaborate ways of masking the exclusion of young people who are considered as disabled, disruptive, and have learning difficulties or any of the myriad other labels given to those 'not quite normal'?" (p. xi). Slee (2018) bemoans the categories and labels of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association by suggesting, "We should not have the ambition to label as mental disorder every inconvenient or distressing aspect of childhood" (Slee, 2018, p. 51, quoting Frances, 2013, p. 177). We wonder how a parent of a child with severe autism or schizophrenia or conduct disorder would respond to that!

The rise in these two areas are disconcerting and portends the dangerous direction special education seems to be taking (e.g., Kauffman et al., 2017, in press; Maag et al., 2019). The clear and present danger involves the defining down or denial of "child with a disability" and the role (or non-role) of special education in schooling such a child (e.g., Kauffman & Farkas, 2021; Wiley et al., 2019). Namely, some factions of the special education profession seem to be drifting in a frightening direction analogous to what is now known as the Trumpian "big lie" and the prevailing (2022) Republican response to it. To wit, neither failing to label a loss "a loss" nor insisting that something was stolen that was not stolen removes the realities of losing and stealing. Something akin to this phenomenon may be happening in special education. Specifically, there is an increasing resistance to calling things what they are and, instead, considering disability just another form of diversity or difference that has little to no implication for education. This is a grotesque abuse of language and concept that bodes ill for students with disabilities as well as those who teach them. Moreover, insistence that "normal" does not exist but "diversity" does (e.g., Baglieri et al., 2011; Slee, 2018) reveals a failure to grasp the essential nature and meanings of disability and diversity. Slee's (2018) appropriation of Frank Zappa's comment that "jazz isn't dead, it just smells funny" to describe inclusionary education is another example of missing the meaning of disability, something that Kauffman (2005) compared to waving to Ray Charles (a renowned, blind musician)—a cluelessness about the nature of disability that is not just funny but dangerous if taken seriously.

The postmodern or relativist idea that we should not use reality-based labels threatens the relevance of special education for all children with disabilities (see, for example, Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, 2013; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006; Sasso, 2001, 2007). The threat to special education is the denigration and rejection of the concept of differences in abilities and disabilities and the use of labels of any kind (perhaps with some exceptions made for "child," "student," "girl child," etc.) by those embracing DS and DSE. There is, of course, a logical discontinuity with these positions, as no one would be deny or dismiss the reality implied by calling someone who cannot hear "deaf" or someone who cannot see "blind." Knowingly or unknowingly, proponents of postmodern ideas seem to espouse a Trump-era view that "alternative facts" exist for some but not all phenomenon or to deny the reality of scientific facts altogether (cf. Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Kauffman, in press; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006; Rauch, 2021; Sasso, 2001, 2007).

An advocate of DS who has been lionized by others in the DS community wrote the following: "I was and remain implacably opposed to the very existence of special education" (Oliver, 2000, p. 6). Tellingly, the forthcoming (4th) edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Education,*

of which Slee is a coeditor, will have no volume on special and inclusive education, and instead one devoted to inclusive education alone (Slee, personal communication with author Kauffman, May 20, 2020). Linton (2006) stated that, "special education is not a solution to the 'problem' of disability, it *is* the problem…" (p. 161). Connor (2020) wrote, "How can we forge different ways of thinking about disability and education without defaulting to the limited—even dangerous ways—of special education?" (pp. 24-25). Baglieri et al. (2011) opined the following:

> If we are to interrogate equity issues among *all* schoolchildren and youth, it is useful to shift the focus away from students with disabilities to consider the normative student for whom public schools are designated—the mythical normal child…However, it is within special education that cognitive and biological ideologies of normalcy and abnormalcy are codified and exercised—even championed for relentless methods of identifying pathology within schoolchildren in order to deliver "appropriate services" (p. 2129).

Clearly, the very idea of special education is distasteful to many proponents of DS. Finally, the nonsense about diversity and disability is perhaps best illustrated by Slee's (2020) appeal to make education inclusive of all the following categories:

- Indigenous and First Nations children
- girl child
- children displaced by conflict or natural disasters
- children from minority ethnic, religious or tribal groups
- children living in poverty
- traveller children (p. 6)

Deep thinking is not required to recognize that any of these categories might include children in any of the others. Consequently, lack of logic and recognition of differences among diversities and the implications of various categories or labels for teaching students with disabilities is part of the twisted nature of some current approaches to language and meaning.

When it comes to disabilities, the attitude seems to be that we would rather not talk about them in understandable language, not name or label them or what we do about them—except to say they are like any other diversity and to avoid a discussion of what a given diversity requires of an effective teacher or how a teacher should understand that certain types of academic instruction may work for some students but that a different approach is required for others. A similar avoidance of diversity in education can be seen in how many educators view the concept of "evidence-based practices." Namely, some suggest that if an intervention is evidence-based, then it should be adopted for *all* students. This line of thinking is logically inchoate and is analogous to saying that because fluoxetine (i.e., Prozac) is an evidence-based pharmacologic treatment for depression it will work for *everyone* who is depressed.

The avoidance of specificity is particularly relevant when the difference, disorder, or disability involves behavior. The field of behavior disorders has been particularly leery of labels, supposing that stigma can be significantly reduced by not talking clearly about such disorders, intimating that we all have these disorders or that they are just fine, and then talking about them only in a new code (e.g., students "at-risk" or students with "challenging behaviors"), or otherwise hiding them behind a smoke screen of language (e.g., saying such children just need tier 3, intensive individual interventions).

Hence, the remainder of this article focuses on the reality of behavior, the nature of language and use of words, and specifically how labels are used (or not used) in the case of children who have traditionally been considered seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) or to have EBD. Further, a historical perspective of this debate is provided and a more sound approach to the labels used for these "types" of students is proposed. We end with reflections on current efforts to avoid labels altogether and the prospect of avoiding difficult realities.

The Special Case of Behavior

Behaviors are the observable actions performed by all living organisms. Some behaviors of humans are instinctive, such as blinking when someone suddenly claps their hands in front of your face. This instinctive behavior is self-protective. An infant's crying is another instinctive behavior, regardless of how an adult interprets its intent. Some behaviors are caused by a biochemical reaction in the brain, such as hearing voices due to neural discharges that may be associated with genetic variation(s) in brain tissue. However, the majority of behaviors are learned and explained by operant conditioning and social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Skinner, 1938). Measurable dimensions of behavior are frequency, duration, and intensity. Importantly, differences among individuals in these dimensions are used to judge what is normal or abnormal.

Abnormal and Normal

Behavior differs in different settings, locations, or contexts and can be considered *normal nor abnormal*. The word "abnormal" comes from the Latin *ab* as in "away from" and *normal* as in "falling in a range close to or at any given average." Neither word—normal or abnormal—carries *inherently* positive or negative connotations—and hence these are not labels that should be eschewed or biased in favor of "normal." For example, someone may say, "It's normal for deciduous trees' leaves to change color in autumn." Or another person might observe, "Wow, Everest is abnormally high compared to most other mountains." When the descriptors (i.e., labels) "normal" and "abnormal" are applied to natural events or objects, other than homo sapiens, then they are considered innocuous and serve a descriptive purpose. However, normal and abnormal can be applied to behavior of any species—but especially to humans. The behavior of a person may be judged either normal (i.e., around the norm or average) or abnormal (i.e., away from the norm or average). And although such observations regarding human behavior may be based on realities of direct observation and measurement, "abnormal" takes on negative connotations. Some people even object to the use of "normal" applied to humans, particularly their physiognomy or behavior. The word "abnormal" applied to human beings is considered so inappropriate by some that in 2022 the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* changed its name to the *Journal of Psycopathology and Clinical Science*.

When a measurable dimension of behavior is extreme compared to that of most people (i.e., is an outlier of frequency, duration, or intensity), then it is considered abnormal—to indicate psychopathology of some type. The larger the quantity of different types of behaviors a person displays on one or more of those dimensions (frequency, duration, and/or intensity), the more likely a person will receive a label—be it a diagnosis, classification, or qualification for something. Basically, language is used to "name" persons, places, or things. It is used to distinguish *this* from *that* (Dutton, 2020). Sadly, this is a reality that some individuals seem unwilling to recognize (e.g., Slee, 2018). When we abandon labels about something, we abandon communication about it. To

the extent that our labels are less specific, our communication becomes less precise (Kauffman, 2013). One thing badly needed in special education is more precise language and clearer communication (Kauffman & Badar, 2014).

The Arbitrary Nature of Language and why it Matters for Labeling Disabilities

In many ways language is arbitrary. For example, we use the words blue, red, green, and yellow to label colors. To human eyesight, a splotch of red would still look the same if it was instead labeled *glope*. Humans would then consider that what our eyes see as red is named *glope*, simply because it is universally agreed that *glope* is what that color was called. When humans name something, that name rarely is based on the location. For example, a timepiece that is worn on the wrist is named a "watch." You can position the watch with the straps vertically, then horizontally, then turn the watch over and it still remains a watch—spatial orientation has nothing to do with changing the label "watch" into another. Contrast that example with a vertical line and a semicircle attached at the bottom of the line to the right would be called the letter "b." You turn the semicircle to face the left and now its name is the letter "d." When you turn it back to the right and move it to the top of the vertical line you now have the letter "p." This explains why some students with learning disabilities have so much trouble identifying those letters. Names typically do not change when something changes its position, but when they do, as is the case of those three letters, it causes some humans great confusion and difficulty distinguishing one name from another.

Disabilities and the Fallacious Beliefs in Social Construction

The point is that human language requires that we name or label things so we can communicate consistently with commonly understood knowledge (Dutton, 2020). Human communication would not have advanced very far if every living and nonliving object were all called "things." Nevertheless, when it comes to children and adolescents with disabilities, there has been a growing movement to view disabilities and the labels that describe them only as a social construction (Baglieri et al., 2011). Recently, Kauffman et al. (in press) described the dangers of the anti-labeling movement based on the erroneous supposition that disabilities are simply a social construction and that only using the name "included students" or "students with differences" is more helpful and less stigmatizing. That approach would certainly be inclusive, because all humans have differences of some kind—whether as obvious as height or hair color, to more subtle genetic or neurobiochemical differences. However, those terms do not tell us anything specific about students' strengths and weaknesses related to learning. Another example would be the way some people, in the name of racial equality, use the phrase, "when it comes to humans, I'm color-blind." That is tantamount to saying that "when it comes to a rainbow, I'm color blind." Differences in people need to be acknowledged, and our understanding of the meaning of these differences needs to be improved. Removing, all "names" or labels for students with disabilities is preposterous. As any science or craft evolves or progresses, its labels become more, not less, specific, differentiated, and therefore voluminous (Kauffman, 2013; Kauffman et al., 2008). The evolving field of medicine provides an obvious example, but there are other fields, such as entomology, in which more specific names become more explanatory. For example, "bug" tells us little. "Beetle" is a bit more descriptive. "Japanese beetle" (Popillia japonica) describes even more. And as new species

of any animal are discovered, they must and will be named *if* they are to be talked about either among scientists or the general public.

Labeling has been especially problematic for students who display the most challenging behaviors or those at-risk—both of which are terms in and of themselves that are non-descriptive, but nevertheless are becoming the more common nomenclature. These children, when eligible for special education services, are commonly served under the labels (i.e., names, categories) of behavior disorders, emotional/behaviors disorders (E/BD), emotionally disturbed (ED), or seriously emotionally disturbed (SED)—the latter of which was the designated label under the EAHCA and now under IDEA as ED.

In fact, the debate among scholars as to what to name/label/call these students has been raging for over almost 40 years. Decades ago, Wood and Lakin (1982) edited a monograph entitled *Disturbing, Disordered or Disturbed?* Of course, a student *can* be all three—disturbed, disturbing, *and* disordered. The issue of labeling continues, and "labeling theory" is something for which a quick search of the Internet reveals much (see also Kauffman, 2013).

Current and Historical Perspectives

The debate about the usefulness and potential stigma of labeling *handicapped* students began (using the vernacular of the era of the *Education of All Handicapped Children Act*, also known as Public Law 94-142) almost immediately after, if not before, P. L. 94-142 was reluctantly signed into law by then president Gerald R. Ford in December of 1975. This law was subsequently renamed in its latest reauthorization in 2004 as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA).

Understanding the past discussions, debates, and conclusions reached regarding definitions related to *serious emotional disturbance* (historically, the first term used in P. L. 94-142)—requires examining current practices for addressing what it is those students are called. This explanation begins with MTSS and its universal supports paradigm that addresses struggling students regardless of the presence or absence of a disability (Shogren et al., 2016; SWIFT Education Center, 2021). The universality of issues regarding problem behavior obfuscates our understanding of what labels related to EBD mean for educating and treating these students. In short, we need greater precision in our use of language (labeling) about those issues (Kauffman & Badar, 2014).

Who are Students "At-Risk" and Display "Challenging Behaviors?"

The reasons for this obfuscation is that the majority of students served under tiered systems are either called students with "challenging behaviors" or students "at-risk." Neither of these terms tells us anything about students' behavior other than they have EBD—whether formally receiving services or not. The most obvious answer to the question, "Who are students with challenging behaviors?" is that they are simply students for whom traditional interventions have failed (Maag, 2018). If the interventions (i.e., taking corrective action) did not fail, then we would not perceive their behavior as a challenge. Therefore, students with challenging behaviors are not defined through their behaviors but rather through educators' behaviors and their inability to change what they do when something does not work (Maag, 2020). The term "student at-risk" is no more helpful than "student with challenging behavior" and is no improvement over "student with EBD" and for the same reasons: "EBD" might be compared to "bug" or, at best, "beetle" but more specific labels are necessary. For example, earlier editions of the DSM used the diagnostic term "attention deficit

disorder." The implication was that the only problems students with this label (i.e., diagnosis) have is paying attention. Later editions of this manual refined the term to "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder," which is more descriptive of the range of behaviors displayed by some children.

The term "at risk" can be defined as something that puts a person in danger or jeopardy of suffering some condition, and it means it places them at higher risk (for everyone is at some level of risk for everything). For example, having high blood pressure places someone at higher risk than the general population for having a stroke. Or someone who smokes is at higher than typical risk for developing lung cancer or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). A child who lives in poverty is at elevated risk for receiving poorer education than a child who comes from a high-income family. But what does it mean when a child engages in inappropriate behavior? They are at elevated risk for what? Continuing to engage in those behaviors? How could they be at higher-than-normal risk for engaging in inappropriate behavior when they already are engaging in those behaviors to be considered risky? In this regard, the term "at risk" is simply a tautology, but nevertheless one that is becoming increasingly popular. For example, Common et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis on functional behavioral assessment focusing on recently developed methods of single-case analysis. Their review contained 18 studies with a total of 27 participants—17 of them were labeled "at-risk" rather than the others who were labeled EBD, learning disabled, or ADHD. Creeping change from "disability" to "variation," even unconsciously, continues unabated.

Origin of Behavioral Definitions

Over 50 years ago, Bower and Lambert (1965; see also Bower, 1981) developed a definition of children with "emotional handicaps" for the state of California based on research that state conducted in the 1950s. In 1975, P.L. 94-142 adopted the Bower and Lambert definition, almost verbatim, for the SED category, but with the nonsensical exclusion of students who are "socially maladjusted" but not "emotionally disturbed" (see Bower, 1982; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). This exclusionary phrase caused much heated debate in the early 1990s (Maag & Howell, 1992). The anti-service position viewed children who were "socially maladjusted" as choosing to purposely misbehave, whereas students with SED "manifest" inappropriate behavior because of their condition and not willfully (Noblit et al., 1991). This group believed that "social maladjustment" can be accurately distinguished from SED (e.g., Clarizio, 1987; Kelly, 1991). In retrospect, it was a silly debate because almost all behavior is purposeful, and it always fulfills some function. Nevertheless, the language and definitions of words for labels associated with the P. L. 94-142 definition of serious emotional disturbance and the exclusion of social maladjustment are germane to the current discussion.

SED: Serious or Silly Emotional Disturbance?

Several years after P. L. 94-142 was signed into law using the same five criteria developed earlier by and Bower and Lambert (1965; see also Bower, 1981), Wood and Lakin (1982) edited the monograph *Disturbing, Disordered or Disturbed*? We juxtapose these two publications because they are relevant to the definition of EBD. The word "seriously" in the SED label apparently was meant to designate a dangerous student, subject particularly worthy of attention or intervention—something severe, not trivial. Without the word "seriously," emotionally disturbed could be interpreted to pertain to nearly all students at some time and to a plethora of situations—but does

the word "seriously" really serve that purpose? For example, saying "He was seriously emotionally disturbed when the twin towers were destroyed on 9/11" would include anyone's normal reaction. However, that is only one situation, and it could be argued that as a "condition," being seriously emotionally disturbed would require multiple and prolonged behavioral manifestations across a variety of situations, most of which do not induce serious emotional disturbance in "normal" individuals. However, that same person could say "I was seriously emotional disturbed about the shootings at Columbine" or "I was seriously emotionally disturbed for many years regarding the needless war in Vietnam," then serious emotional disturbance regarding these events might be expected of normal individuals. Consequently, a serious emotional disturbance can be normal in response to multiple events and across periods of time.

Could it be that an individual's serious emotional disturbance is merely a function of situations that are severely disturbing to them? The definition of the word "disturbed" means emotionally upset, troubled, or maladjusted. Note that the last word in that definition is "maladjusted," which was hotly debated as being distinguishable from "seriously emotional disturbed." No matter, disturbing means something tending to upset or agitate, troubling, or worrying. It is not a reach to conclude that any mixture of those words could be used and one would still have a silly tautology.

Socially Maladjusted or Lack of Social Competence?

Perhaps a different pattern emerges when defining the term "socially maladjusted." The key would be the definition of the word "maladjusted" which means to be poorly or inadequately adjusted. That definition is obviously problematic when the word "adjusted" is used to define "maladjusted," and perhaps a more encompassing definition would help (such as lacking harmony with one's environment from failure to adjust one's desires to the conduct of one's life). However, it is almost impossible to define "maladjusted" without using the word "adjustment" or "adjusted" as in "lacking adjustment" or "poorly adjusted." In a variety of situations, an individual can be socially maladjusted, such as not having the social skills needed to maintain a conversation with others at a party. Of course, because of the negative connotations of the term "socially maladjusted" we tend to temper that term by saying, "Oh, he's just socially awkward in certain situations." However, saying someone is socially maladjusted is no different from saying someone is socially incompetent. Social competence is the overriding performance that is derived from individual social skills and groups of such behaviors. Those behaviors can be taught, but not knowing only that someone is socially incompetent obfuscates the fact that the person would benefit from social skills training interventions.

Perhaps it would help to leave the educational realm and enter that of psychiatry and the DSM diagnosis of "conduct disorder" which refers to a set of ongoing emotional and behavioral problems that occur in children and teens. Problems may involve defiant or impulsive behavior, drug use, or criminal activity. Ironically, the part of the definition "ongoing emotional and behavioral problem" is close to the term Emotional or Behavioral Disorders which is the label advocated by the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD)—a division of the larger organization, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

Concluding Remarks: What's in a Name?

We have critiqued difficulties in coming up with a name and crisp definition of what constitutes what we now call EBD. Defining and naming it are fraught with uncertainty, resulting in

frustrating exercises in the use of language to communicate accurately and reliably what it is. Nevertheless, we must advocate for logic, reality, and the appropriate use of words to reflect those. The field of special education, in general, and the subarea of emotional and behavioral disorders, today is buffeted by ideologies that would not only undo logic, realities, and careful use of words that represent them in the education of students with EBD but the very foundations of all special education. In spite of the fulminations about labels of those who advocate some sort of label-free education and totally inclusionary education (e.g., Slee, 2018), we understand the absolute necessity of labels, the more specific the better, if we want to communicate effectively. Whatever it is named, what we call EBD constitutes for some the most serious impediment to inclusion or inclusive education, and not only in the United States (Ahrbeck et al., 2021).

Another main point we hope we made is that labels such as seriously emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted are used every day in numerous situations and under a variety of conditions to describe people or to describe ourselves. The examples of being seriously emotionally disturbed about 9/11 or the Columbine shootings that we used earlier demonstrate that people who would condemn labeling a child with a disability "seriously emotionally disturbed" have no problem with people who do not have a disability calling themselves by that label. Sometimes we lighten the label a bit when it is used for individuals without disabilities. We made the same point stating that instead of calling someone socially maladjusted we might say someone is "socially awkward"—as in the failure to use social skills, or use the wrong ones in certain situations. Sometimes people are okay with being a bit more direct and saying someone is socially incompetent, but the intent is the same: It is acceptable to use these terms to describe ourselves or others who do not have a disability, but they are inappropriate when someone does have a disability.

Philosophies, ideologies, and lies underlying suspicions of scientific evidence and logic are threatening to drag us past the crossroad about which we wrote (Kauffman et al., 2017), and many in our profession seem unwilling to unite—whether due to apathy or acceptance that change is impossible—to stem the tide threatening to sweep away our core values, including veracity (Kauffman & Farkas, 2021; Kauffman et al., 2021). Key among these forces is the use of language to misrepresent, obfuscate, deny, and denigrate what special education is and does and the nature of the realities we confront.

The temptation to dismiss our arguments as hysterical, tired, trivial, or ruminations of the past will be great, for the motives of those promoting alternative views are often pure and the views they promote may be seen as innocuous variations of ideas to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, we see disaster (maltreatment of students with disabilities, their sacrifice in the name of an ideology) ahead if we do not change the course of discussion, debate, and action. Heterodoxy—difference of opinion—is good, but only up to a point. The big lie of Donald Trump and Republican acquiescence to it is not productive. Neither are the scathing commentaries on special education and lies about the advantages for all of full inclusion and the ultimate savior—multi-tiered systems of support which espouse a universal, non-label approach.

Many well-meaning colleagues have noted the stigma that goes with labels, the fact that life can be very good for people with disabilities, that science is not everything and does not answer all questions, that logic has limitations, that language is limited, that disabilities are part of personal identity, that we must see the strengths and abilities of people with disabilities (not to be concerned only with deficits), and that our society can become obsessed with abilities and appearances. More such propositions could be named. These and many other intentions are all good, helpful things to remember. However, they all are also propositions that can be corrupted by extremism, absolutism,

and power. They can be twisted into perverted ideologies. We list some of the ideas that are, in our opinion, perversions that involve denial and warping of truths and realities.

- We can avoid stigma by renaming or removing a label.
- Behavioral disorders are merely differences, not disorders.
- Having a disability is not a deficit, just a difference, and may be good.
- Life can be so good with a disability that we need take no measures to prevent them or improve the abilities of people who have them.
- If we simply remove all social barriers to those with disabilities, their disabilities disappear and become just another form of diversity.
- Special education is, on balance, an unnecessary part of public education.
- General education can and should be made so supple, individualized for all, and differentiated that we do not need special education for anyone.
- Special education is like racial discrimination and segregation, neither of which is ever justifiable.
- Special education needs no separate, special identity because it is just something that should be the work of all teachers.
- Sorting and labeling are unnecessary and counterproductive aspects of education—general or special.

We have listed 10 beliefs held and promoted by some, but we could list more. Our identity as special educators and the work we do have been under attack for a long time. These attacks includes complaints about special education for doing what it simply must (Kauffman, 1989, 2000, in press; Kauffman et al., in press; Meyen, 1998). We must continue to struggle with how we describe any disability including EBD without succumbing to the seductive ideologies that would have us believe we can serve students with disabilities without using language that clearly, unambiguously indicates we see things that we hope to change for the better. So perhaps no better way to end than to provide answers to the title of this article.

What is disability, specifically EBD? It is what humans choose to name or label anything. Why do we name it? So we can use reality to communicate between individuals as accurately and reliably as possible. How do we name it? Based on some set of scientific rules and collected data, understanding that labels evolve and become more specific as data are accumulated. We may disagree about what something is best called. Nevertheless, we should agree that data and objective reality exist, and therefore accept the absolute necessity of using labels.

The late Senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was fond of saying that everyone was entitled to their opinion, but not their own facts. In point of fact, variations of this saying go back farther, at least to 1918 when the chairman of the War Industries Board said, “Every man has a right to his own opinion; but no man has a right to be wrong in his fact” (Baruch, 1941, p. 22). The fact is, that we must label (i.e., name) to communicate.

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