

Diagnostic vs. Social Labels: How Do They Influence the Perceptions of Peers?

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Overview

There are both advantages and disadvantages to labeling students. The phenomenon known as the *labeling effect* refers to perceivers' interpretation, evaluation, or judgment of different targets depending on the groups to which the individual targets belong (Jussim, Nelson, Manis, & Soffin, 1995). Past research has focused on how teachers' perceptions change when a hypothetical student is labeled (Bianco, 2005; Jussim et al., 1995; Tripp & Rizzo, 2006; Sutherland, Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Freeman, 1983). Labels that are derived through specific tests and meticulous criteria (i.e., diagnostic labels) are not the only labels that are present in schools. Social labels, or labels children give to one another, also exist in schools. Some of these labels have positive connotations (e.g., *smart*) and some of the labels have negative connotations (e.g., *nerd*). Although diagnostic and social labels are commonly used, little research has been conducted to investigate the relationship between labels and children's perceptions of their peers.

This current study was designed to the relationship between labels and students' perceptions. Each participant Participants were asked to answer questions about a hypothetical peer who had one of four labels. The results highlight the variations in students' perceptions depending on the particular label used.

Method

Participants included 146 3rd graders, 194 5th graders, and 86 8th graders from the Eau Claire School District. Participants received one of five descriptions of a hypothetical peer with a gender neutral name (Pat or Dakota). The hypothetical student was described as funny, nice, can keep a secret, and has a lot of friends in each condition. Four of the five conditions also described the student with one of the following labels: has a learning disability, has a really hard time learning, is in the gifted and talented program, or is smart. One condition did not include a label to act as the control. Participants were asked to answer questions while keeping the hypothetical peer in mind. The list of questions presented to participants can be found in the top box in the middle section of this poster. Participants selected their answers for each of the first six questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from "hate it" to "love it."

- ❖ How much would you like to work with Dakota on a school project?
- ❖ How much would you like to have Dakota come over and hang out at your house?
- ❖ How much would you like it if Dakota decided to sit at your lunch table?
- ❖ How much would you like it if Dakota helped you with your homework if you had a question about it?
- ❖ How much do you think other kids in your class would like to hang out with Dakota?
- ❖ How much would your teacher like it if Dakota was in your class?
- ❖ What grade do you think Dakota gets most of the time?

How much would you like it if Dakota helped you with your homework if you had a question about it?

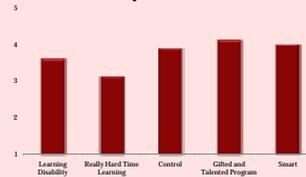


Figure 1.
Students were less likely to want to ask for homework help from a student who has a hard time learning than any other label, $F(4, 421) = 10.25, p = .000$

How much would your teacher like it if Dakota was in your class?

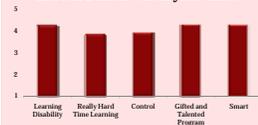


Figure 2.
Students believed their teachers would be less likely to enjoy having a student who has a hard time learning in class than students with any other label, $F(4, 418) = 3.75, p = .005$

What grade do you think Dakota gets most of the time?

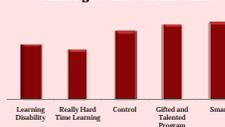


Figure 3.
Students believed a peer who is labeled either as having a really hard time learning or having a learning disability will earn lower grades than other students, $F(4, 413) = 26.07, p = .000$

Preliminary Results and Discussion

On the basis of past research, it was predicted that students would have less favorable perceptions of hypothetical peers who had labels with negative connotations such as *learning disability* and *hard time learning*. Students did seem to have more negative feelings toward a hypothetical peer with the label of *hard time learning* as displayed in Figures 1 – 3. Surprisingly, this was not typically the case for the hypothetical peer labeled as having a *learning disability*. Perhaps students who are labeled as having a learning disability have a protective factor in that peers are more likely to be taught tolerance for diagnostic labels than social labels.

Further, participants believed hypothetical peers who have a really *hard time learning* would not be liked as much by teachers as would hypothetical peers without a label or with the other labels utilized in this study.

It was also predicted that students would have more favorable perceptions of hypothetical peers who had labels with positive connotations such as *gifted and talented* and *smart*. This hypothesis was not supported.

It appears as though social labels with negative connotations produce more negative reactions in students than do diagnostic labels that have negative connotations.

References

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****This research was supported by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.****

