

# Labeling and Disadvantages of Labeling

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Students identified as having problems in school either will meet eligibility criteria for special education services or will be unofficially labeled with such negative adjectives as "lazy," "unmotivated," "slow learner," or "behavior problem." In the latter case, neither the teacher nor the student will get help. The student will remain in general education and most likely continue to fail in school. There is an increased probability that the student will eventually drop out of school.

In most states, a student is identified as requiring special education when school evaluation data match the student with a specific disability category that is outlined by state education regulations. This classification process assumes that assigning a student a categorical name implies knowledge about the characteristics of the student's learning problem. This categorical approach to providing help has been roundly criticized by many educators who claim that labeling a student does more harm than good. What students are called determines what services they receive and where they will receive them. Because this classification process alters the school experience of many students, professionals have researched and described the advantages and disadvantages of the labeling associated with it.

## Advantages of Labeling

The advantages of labeling were more obvious in the formative years of special education (mid-1940s to early 1970s), than they are now. For instance, without the category of learning disabilities, advocates for these children would have had no rallying point to promote educational programs. Imagine how ineffective scientists would be in raising money for cancer research if they had no name for it. The advantages of labeling can be summarized as follows:

1. Federal and local funding of special education programs are based on categories of disabilities.
2. Labeling enables professionals to communicate with one another because each categorical label conveys a general idea about learning characteristics.
3. The human mind requires "mental hooks" to think about problems. If present categorical labels were abolished, a new set of descriptors would evolve to take their place. There is ample evidence of this in the evolution of the term "mildly retarded."
4. Labeling the disability spotlights the problem for the public. Labeling can spark social concern and aid advocacy efforts.
5. Labeling may make the majority without disabilities more tolerant of the minority with disabilities. In other words, the actions of a child identified as having intellectual disability might be tolerated, whereas the behavior of a peer without intellectual disability would be criticized.
6. Labeling has led to the development of specialized teaching methods, assessment approaches, and behavioral interventions that are useful for teachers of all students. (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1982)

## Disadvantages of Labeling

Because of IDEA, students with disabilities have made significant gains in public schools. These advances have been accompanied by problems inherent in officially designating someone abnormal. Make no mistake about it; these labels stick. Once a child is categorized with intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, or learning disabilities, that information will be forwarded to every new teacher in the child's cumulative folder. Along with the label comes the stigma of being considered deficient. For this reason alone, assigning a student to a category for special education purposes is a fateful step that should not be taken unless all other options have proved unsuccessful. The disadvantages of labeling are summarized as follows:

1. Labels shape teacher expectations. Imagine what your reaction would be if the principal informed you that the new student in your class is mildly mentally retarded. Studies on teacher expectations have demonstrated that what teachers believe about student capability is directly related to student achievement.
2. All children have some troubling behaviors. Labels can exaggerate a student's actions in the eyes of a teacher. A teacher may overreact to behavior of a labeled child that would be tolerated in another.
3. Labels send a clear message: The learning problem is with the student. Labels tend to obscure the essence of teaching and learning as a two-way street. Some students placed in a mild disability category have nothing wrong with them. They are the unfortunate recipients of ineffective schooling.
4. Labels perpetuate the notion that students with mild disabilities are qualitatively different from other children. This is not true. Students with mild disabilities go through the same developmental stages as their peers, although sometimes at a slower rate.
5. Teachers may confuse the student with the label. Labels reflect categories of disabilities. Categories are abstract, not real, concepts that are general enough to incorporate many different individuals. More than two million students may be identified with specific learning disabilities, but as individuals, each is a unique human being. When a student is placed in a category, a teacher who knows some of the characteristics of a category may ascribe all known characteristics to each labeled child. This is stereotyping. Stereotypes harm students when teachers rationalize low achievement by citing characteristics of the label. An example is the teacher who explains away a teaching-learning problem by stating, "We can't really expect Mary to remember too much math because she is 'intellectually disabled.' "
6. Students cannot receive special education services until they are labeled. In many instances, the intervention comes too late. The need to label students before help arrives undermines a preventive approach to mild learning problems.
7. Diagnostic labels are unreliable. Educational evaluation is filled with quirks. States use different descriptive criteria for the same categories; many evaluation instruments have questionable validity and reliability; specific labels go through trends (for example, at one time learning disabilities was considered a white, middle class category and African American students were overrepresented with mild intellectual disability).
8. Labels often put the blame (and the guilt) for a student's learning problems squarely on the parents' shoulders. In many cases, this is unjustified because students may be mislabeled or teachers may not fully understand the many different causes of mild disabilities.