

**Inclusive Education and the Politics of Difference: Considering the Effectiveness  
of Labelling in Special Education**

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**Abstract**

**Aim:** The contribution of this paper to this ongoing debate, is to interrogate the discourse of labelling by critically analysing its role in inclusive and special education.

**Rationale:** Labels have a strong tradition of orchestrating educational inequity. In response, recent debates about the concept of labelling have focused on whether the use of labelling in inclusive and/or special education has an equality potential or indeed threatens the quality of education provided to students with diverse needs.

**Findings:** The difficulty with labelling is that it is fraught with political, psychological and ideological ambiguities that permeate the well-intentioned efforts of providing education to students with disabilities. Labelling also carries considerable historical beliefs that saturates policy, professional, and institutional practices.

**Limitations:** This article is a position piece which has put forward an argument based on available evidence. However, as with all non-empirical articles it is limited to the quality of the articles which are cited by the authors and it may not reflect the breadth of available articles on this subject area.

**Conclusions:** Therefore, understanding how labels promote, or impede, the quality of special and inclusive education within international contexts is essential for developing realistic innovations in policy and practice to enhance educational outcomes for all.

**Key words:**

**Labels, inclusive education, inequity, equality, resource allocation, special  
education, special educational needs, educational psychology**

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### **Introduction**

Labels have a strong tradition of orchestrating educational inequity (Gold & Richards, 2012; Link & Phelan, 2001). In response, recent debates about the labelling have focused on whether, the use of labelling in inclusive and/or special education has an equity potential or threatens the quality of education provided to students with diverse needs. The contribution of this paper to this ongoing debate, is to interrogate the discourse of labelling by critically analysing its role in inclusive and special education.

The trouble with labelling is that it is fraught with political, psychological and ideological ambiguities that permeate the well-intentioned efforts of providing education to students with disabilities (Anderson et al., 2014; Artiles, 2015). It could be argued that a system has been created where it is essential to create classifications and thus labels especially with regards to that of health professionals (Davidson et al., 2008). Labelling also carries considerable historical beliefs that saturates policy, professional, and institutional practices (Becker, 1963). Therefore, understanding how labels promote, or impede, the quality of special or inclusive education within international contexts, is essential for developing realistic innovations in policy and practice to enhance educational outcomes for all (Anderson & Boyle, 2015).

The paper is organised in three parts. The first part explains and theories the concept of labelling. The second part analyses the implications of labelling by drawing out some of its advantages and disadvantages. The final part of the paper provides direction for moving forward beyond labelling to advance the quality of educational outcomes and support services for all children with diverse and multiple educational needs.

### **Interrogating the concept of labels and labelling**

The debate as to what constitutes labelling and its usefulness or discontents has persisted within the special and inclusive education environment for many years. Labels have frequently served (and still do, it might be argued) a limited purpose in inclusive education in terms of linking limited resources to the provision of additional support for children. A question then: do professionals accept (perhaps reluctantly) that we use labels only because the educational/health system in which we work demands it, or do we use them for other reasons, and if we do use them, are there any negative consequences of their use? This paper reflects on these issues surrounding the labelling discourse and uses Goffman's theory of stigma and Howard Becker's (1963) classic labelling theory as frameworks to examine and explain the concept of labels, labelling and implications in the field of inclusive and special education.

The question of how labels are implicated in special and/or inclusive education is not new (Boyle, 2007a; Boyle & Sharma, 2016). According to Artiles (2011), labelling "definitions are partly embedded in assumptions about identity purportedly framed by biological differences" (p. 436). Gold and Richards (2012) explained labelling as the assignment of a descriptor to an individual based on selected behavioral

and/or physical characteristics. In this way, labels serve as a special marker by which to identify and classify certain individuals either in institutions or society (Becker, 1963). An assigned label thus determines an individual's value and place in society in view of a specified group possessing similar characteristics. Other scholars defined labelling "as the recognition of differences and the assignment of social salience to those differences. In the context of disability, it is the recognition that a certain biological trait differs from the norm in ways that have social significance" (Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, & Straight, 2005 p. 197).

Labelling may produce stereotyping, which is the assignment of negative attributes to socially noticeable differences (Becker, 1963). Stereotypical differences refer to variances that people notice and emphasise, and which are considered by those engaging in the stereotyping as undesirable compared to an established norm (Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, & Straight, 2005). Stereotyping results when an individual or group separates themselves from others on the basis of a judgement regarding differences that are perceived as undesirable (Sowards, 2015). Thus, labelling as a discourse communicates an individual's apparent characteristics which can lead to stigmatising, isolation and stereotyping of that individual (Deutsch-Smith & Luckasson, 1992; Ormrod, 2008).

According to Thompson (2012), the term 'label' is derived from social labelling theory. Labels connote artificial classifications or categories for instructional purposes but no particular label can precisely define and categorise an individual (Becker, 1963). Thompson (2012) goes on to say that a particular student might have special needs for one or more of a labelled category (ies) and some students may have multiple or a combination of disabilities.

In Gove's (1980) view, two stages of labelling are worth considering: the process that results in labelling and the consequences of labelling. Concerning the process of labelling, abnormality is attached to the person that is labelled because the individual is judged from a social norm point of view (Gove, 1980), implying that the individual with disability is being analysed based on an established norm; his/her performance is explained in terms of how it markedly differs from others as to what a group of people in a particular society consider 'normal'. In this way, labelling becomes "the attachment of a deviant name to some action or attribute(s) of an individual" (Gove, 1980, p. 7).

When an individual does not fit into what most societies consider normal, he/she is perceived as deviant (McGrew & Evans, 2003). From this perspective, it can be argued that the term 'deviance' is historical, a largely socially constructed discourse by which social judgements are pronounced on others (Becker, 1963). If schools are concerned with who is normal and who is not, rigid normative labels can become a tool by which people will discriminate against others.

Becker (1963) reiterates that labelling can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, an individual that is labelled as 'learning disabled' may become disinterested in learning. In this way Becker's theory reminds us of the complex dynamics of labelling individuals in society because the ways labels are imposed do not only affect the individual that is labelled, they can also affect the people who are working with the 'labelled' child, in terms of lowered expectations.

In essence, labelling may result in stereotyping, separation, status loss, discrimination, powerlessness and oppression (Link & Phelan, 2001). Since power is implicated in labelling, conversations about disability and ability can either positively

or negatively affect teachers' classroom practice. This is reminiscent of Bourdieu's social theory which suggests that the production and utilisation of exclusionary discourses such as labelling in classrooms, emanates from the human habitus (Bourdieu, 1998). Habitus is explained as a set of internalised embodied social structures, internal habits which is structured by past and present institutional, social and cultural practices (Bourdieu 1998; Webb et al. 2002). This means that teachers' beliefs, feelings, perceptions, values and norms that generate labelling and discriminatory practices constitute the formation of their habitus (Manton 2008).

It is argued that labelling individuals with a disability label would allow for the development of individualised education programs to address educational needs (Gold & Richards, 2012). But seen from a social model perspective, "the very term *disability* suggests a deficit mode of thinking about the labelled students. Since the prefix *dis* is derived from Latin meaning *not* or *without*, the term disability can be literally defined as *not having ability*" (Gold & Richards, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, labels can serve as blindfolds, preventing us from knowing students well enough to provide the required support so they can succeed in education. The question here is whether there is sufficient consideration of the nature of the intervention programme after a label has been applied. In other words, how are these additional resources (if allocated) being targeted in order to meet an individual child's needs? Individuals and their families generally seek out a diagnosis in the perhaps mistaken belief that the label will lead to intervention and support that will improve the child's life experience and their educational provision. However, if the use of the label does not lead to

improved, or more appropriate and targeted educational intervention, then one may legitimately question its value (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

Labelling can either exaggerate or fail to capture the actual nature of people who differ from what society considers normal. Boyle (2014) argues that those who focus exclusively on labels to provide services sometimes unintentionally stereotype, construct, classify and exclude people as they fail to look beyond labels. Homogenously labelling individuals and placing them into a particular group of deviant people not only violates their rights, it also compromises professional ability to further explore the capabilities of the labelled individuals. If researchers and educators explore beyond what is apparent to them there is greater possibility that they would identify the hidden capabilities of individuals that are labelled. They will also identify how individuals with the same disability labels are different from one another (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2014).

### **Implications of labelling**

Labelling has both negative and positive implications for educational equity and quality (Boyle, 2007b). First, we will outline some of the positive implications as documented in the literature. As discussed earlier, some researchers have argued that labelling provides opportunity for educators to know which student should receive extra support and once the student is determined by his or her label, an individual education plan can be developed to target the student's specialised needs to succeed in school (Blum & Bakken, 2010; Kauffman, 1999). Labelling is seen in the ways that it qualifies students with special education needs to have an Individualised Education Plan (IEP), which allows them to receive pedagogy at their current level of functioning. In this way,

the educational programmes are modified to accommodate their differential learning styles (Kauffman, 1999).

A plethora of researchers also argue that labelling qualifies students to receive services that they may not have otherwise been able to receive without being assigned labels (Duhaney & Salend, 2010, Kauffman, 2015). In this way, we can explain labels as political tools that government uses to distribute resources to vulnerable students, such as instruction in a learning support room and the allocation of assistive technological resources (Blum & Bakken, 2010). This is to ensure that resources and instruction students with disability label receive meet their learning needs. In another sense, the labels may determine whether the individual student receives frequent repeated instruction or if the student may benefit more from the same ability or heterogeneous grouping (Duhaney & Salend, 2010).

Labelling is also found to be useful for determining the nature and level of support that a labelled student would receive (Kauffman, 2015). For example, if a student has been identified as having a speech difficulty, a speech therapists can be sourced to support teachers in designing and providing appropriate instruction for the student.

Instructions that target student's specific needs as well as meet their learning styles are found to increase student achievement irrespective of their ability levels (Boyle, 2014). Kaufman (2015), suggests that "it may be better to help the youngster understand what the label means than to shrink from using the label because of our fear that doing so may damage the youngster's self-concept" (p. 170).



In this way, it is argued that labels may increase awareness and understanding (Gus, 2000), provide a clear method of communicating with professionals (Kauffman, 1999), and provide comfort to children (and families) by explaining their difficulties (Duhaney & Salend, 2010; Riddick, 2000). The arguments put forward about how labels provide comfort to children and their families is an interesting one, and worthy of discussion. While one can accept that this may well be true for many, especially with regard to dyslexia for example. However, the question remains: did this relief lead to improved opportunities for the child? Did his/her literacy skills improve (in the case of dyslexia)? Did the child work harder with additional vigour upon receiving the diagnosis, or did it lead to feelings of helplessness and inevitability about their difficulties that made the child try less and less? In other words, research needs to be carried out looking at these questions, in our view, not whether the diagnostic label brought some relief to the child concerned and/or their parents (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2014).

### **Negative implications of labels**

In spite of the positive implications of labels explained above, labelling has deleterious effect on students who are labelled. Labelling students as lazy, emotional or behavioural impaired, learning disabled and so on, can limit a teacher's view of the students' capabilities before the teacher gets to know these students well (Bernberg, Krohn, Rivera, 2006). It might be the case that teachers and practitioners forget to call persons with disabilities by their names and instead use labels such as the 'autistic boy', the 'blind child' and so on. According to Perusin (1994), labels can change patterns of

social interaction, push people into imaginary similar subculture and compel labelled individuals to conform to the characteristics of the label. Labelling discourse has implications for social justice, equity and human rights (Blum & Bakken, 2010).

Research on teacher attitudes has found differing general results depending on sector and whether pre or inservice teachers (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Kraska & Boyle, 2014). Research has also found that teachers showed preconceived perspectives about disabilities as a result of their labels and grouped them for inferior classroom tasks. Similarly, the teachers excluded physically labelled individuals from participating in soccer sporting activities because they felt their bodies are not suitable for such activities (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014). Recent research by Gibbs and Elliott (2015) investigated the relationship between labels and teachers' beliefs about practice. They demonstrated that teachers make different judgements depending on whether the term "dyslexia" or "reading difficulties" is used. If "dyslexia" is used, teachers considered this to be a fixed, immutable phenomenon with a biological or genetic basis. This in turn can affect their feelings of efficacy about what they can do to help. If the term "reading difficulties" is used, there was more probability that teachers' believed that improvements could be made with the child's reading. This research has highlighted how powerful labels can be with regard to teacher expectations regarding 'labelled' children and resultant progress they might make.

Also, many teachers or practitioners may assume that labels mean the same thing to all people. Research identified that there is variability within the same type of disability and that two students with the same disability label are not the same (Kelly & Norwich, 2004). But in many cases, teachers tend to place students with the same

label in one category without differentiating their instructional methods to meet their diverse needs (Klibthong, & Agbenyega, 2013). And yet, we know that not all children are the same and diagnoses are not the same either. Some categories are ambiguous at best for example, ADHD refers to myriad behaviours that require different modifications, accommodations and teaching styles. Thus, the fact that a student is labelled with a particular disability does not provide all the needed information to the teacher (Kelly & Norwich, 2004). It has been argued that focusing exclusively on labels may not lead to quality education and achievement (Boyle, 2014) because labels can affect students' self-esteem and lower teachers' expectations of what these students can achieve in the classroom. Students with low self-esteem often demonstrate withdrawal problems and other mood behaviours that affect their participation in school activities.

It is argued here that the use of labels in special education has not proven to be very effective in driving educational equity and excellence. This is because disability labelling predisposes some students to be marked out amongst their peers and subjected to exclusionary educational practices. In some schools where labelling is used to classify students into ability groupings, the labels can serve as platforms for students in high-achiever groupings to ridicule and tease those labelled as underachievers. Boyle (2014) argues that the perspective of a student with a label will vary according to personality and the type of label attributed. This means, while some students with labels can cope with peers' ridicule and teasing, the majority of students who are labelled do experience problems with their self-esteem.

The concepts of 'self-esteem' and 'self' is very important in education as a belief in one's own ability and therefore successful attribution can enhance ability to complete task requirements (Bosnjak, Boyle, & Chodkiewicz, 2017; Chodkiewicz & Boyle,

2014, 2017; Koles & Boyle, 2013). Carl Rogers (1995) explains the self as one's experience or image of oneself. This self-image is developed when individuals interact with others in their socio-cultural settings. It is explained that a person's self-esteem is a congruency between a person's real and ideal selves (Hothersall, 1995). The ideal self refers to who a person would like to be. A high self-esteem is important to students as well as every other person because it drives goal achievement. In this way, self-esteem provides subjective feedback about the capability and acceptance of the self (Brooks, 2003; Gregory, 2007). Barkow (1980), suggests that self-esteem is an adaptation that evolves in the activity of sustaining dominance in a social relationship. In such situations, social relationship, respect and approval by people external to the individual who is labelled are important for a feeling of self-esteem. All these explanations point to self-esteem as essentially a psychological compass, by which an individual monitors the quality of their life course in relation with others (Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Individuals who have various labels continuously monitor the social-cultural environment in which they live for cues regarding the degree to which they are accepted or rejected by other people. Thus, the labels attached to an individual can potentially be a disrupting tool for self-esteem (Kelly & Norwich, 2004). When people behave in ways that protect or enhance their self-esteem they are typically acting in ways that they believe will increase their relational value in others' eyes and, thus, improve their chances of social acceptance.

The whole process of identifying, classifying and attaching labels for placing some students in special education in terms of their disability, can be likened to the ways we deal with labelled products in supermarkets (Agbenyega, 2003). Agbenyega

(2003) reiterated that people often select and buy products based on what the advertisement says on the labels without probing further into the contents of the product. The assumption is that the labels reflect what is in the content. In reality, this is not always the case as some finely or poorly advertised products have been found not to be consistent with their contents. Thus the practice of labelling may not represent the real person and invariably, diminish a student's self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995, 1998) because self-esteem is strongly associated with people's beliefs about how others within their socio-cultural or school environment perceive or value them. However, another factor worthy of consideration is that of how teachers perceive their ability to teach any student that they have been assigned. Jordan, Glenn, and McGhie-Richmond (2010) that a major consideration about whether inclusive education was successful came down to the relationship between teaching practice and the teacher's belief in his/her ability to effectively enhance the learning of the students.

A label may induce stigma, particularly when students with disabilities and those who support them begin to focus on the label rather than the student (Kelly & Norwich, 2004). The resultant stereotyping leads to neglect and separation of the individual with disability from others. It is argued by Green, et al. (2005) that the loss of status and discrimination are fruits of labelling because stigma compromises an individual's ability to participate fully in the social, educational and economic life of their community. Status, which Bourdieu (1996) refers to as 'symbolic capital', is important for social recognition and acceptance. Thus when individuals with a disability are labelled and discriminated against to the extent that they have little symbolic capital, they experience enacted stigma (Green, et al., 2005). Link and Phelan

(2001) emphasised that stigma can only be directly enacted upon individuals who are considered less powerful by those who wield more power in society (Foucault, 1986).

Inclusive and special education require that teachers enter into professional relationships by finding ways to connect with children irrespective of their unique differences (Boyle, Scriven, Durning, & Downes, 2011), but when teachers focus on labels, they can impose a hierarchical structuring of what, and who, is valued by teachers and what is worth paying attention to in schools (Grenfell & James 2004). For example, Agbenyega and Klibthong (2014) found that teachers who perceived children with disabilities as ‘problem children’ implemented pedagogical practices that were opposed to inclusive teaching, and students labelled as disabled received less encouragement and support than those students who were considered the ‘smart ones.’

In reflecting on the derogatory terms in which children with disabilities have been described in the name of advocacy and are still being described, the notion that labels are helpful for children to receive services can be questioned. The question is, what are our roles as teachers and/or educational psychologists in reaching out to every student through multiple means of engagement, representation and expression with theories of multiple intelligences? Labelling is confrontational construct whereby teachers, service providers and government entities that are in positions of power construct ways of classification of individuals with disability to provide exclusive services that should be available to all citizens (Foucault, 1986). Classifying students under one umbrella just because of the availability of finite resources without thinking of their self-esteem and emotional trauma, their families and what children go through, is counterproductive and contrary to the quality of education and equity principles (Macaulay, Deppeler, & Agbenyega, 2016).

Despite the fact that labels have been in use for decades, services to students who are labelled such as emotional disabilities, autism, dyslexia and learning disabilities to name but a few, have not yielded educational equity (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Therefore, how children with disability labels feel about themselves is something worthy of investigation on a large scale.

According to Goffman (1963), if professionals focus on bodily signs that depart from what society considers the ordinary, normal and natural, we may be deeply discrediting and reducing some students' diverse needs as deficient. Labelling is a powerful discourse that can situate students with disabilities as inferior to those that society considers 'normal' (Agbenyega, 2003). As labelling reduces some people in the eyes of others, such as stakeholders and their peers, before they qualify for special education services, it would be difficult to achieve educational equity and excellence for all students without transforming our disability discourses. Some researchers have argued that many of the labels used in special education label can often be detrimental to the child in terms of negative expectations and these labels can linger with them throughout their entire lives (Agbenyega, 2003; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

The use of disability labels can have an impact on the way students in special and inclusive education are perceived and how they perceive themselves (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigma arises when a person differs from dominant social norms on a particular dimension, and is negatively evaluated by others (Sowards, 2015). For example, a classroom of students seeing their peers being separated or withdrawn from class in order to receive additional support may result in a perception by peers that the withdrawn student is in some way inferior, or less able, than the norm. Consequently, a person's identity can be defined by labels and can diminish the degree to which the

person socialises with others, or diminish the degree to which the others will socialise and mix with the labelled person (Goffman, 1963).

### **Conclusion: Moving forward beyond labels**

As we grapple with the notion of labelling in special and inclusive education, and how to move beyond this point towards orchestrating educational equity, we need to revisit what Baynton (2001) said; “not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them” (p. 33, *emphasis in original*).

This statement calls into question the way we produce and use knowledge about labels. The new knowledge gained from inclusive and social research must be oriented toward a new sociology of disability and education. This new knowledge must bring dominant educational practices into question, and help us to transform discourses about disability (Artiles, 2015).

First, difference must be recognised as a beauty of life and we must change the focus from labelling to a need because everyone at one point in their life has needs that must be met with additional support. While Goffman called for a language of relationships rather than individual attributes in the study of stigma, traditional social scientific scholarship has often conceived of stigma as an attribute owned by the individual who is stigmatised rather than as an experience imposed on individuals by prevailing socio/cultural conditions (Fine & Asch, 1988). Thus the new direction for scholars and practitioners is to divert away from traditional scholarship that focuses on bodily impairments and their negative impact on individual identity to a critical social



model that draws attention to the disabling impact of structural, political and cultural factors.

The historical tendency for scholars of disability, teachers and practitioners is to become focused on children's labels and deficits rather than their potentials (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). If we aspire for the better provision of educational and social services then we must see every student or individual with disability as an "active meaning-maker, who uses their personal and social resources to make sense of the world as they experience their place in the world in which they live with others" (Nind, Flewit, & Theodorou, 2014, p. 342). We also have to investigate how labelling produces practice boundaries and to question how exclusion is generated from psychological or biological discourses.

Investigating labelling also puts us in a constant motion to interrogate and be mindful of psychological assessments or measurements as forms of judgements educators often use to validate some students as 'disabled', and as such may indicate that they do not qualify to belong to a particular form of education. As teachers, consideration of our own teaching methods and rethinking labels can greatly deepen our understanding of how labels that lead to stigma is still pervasive in special education, inclusive education, political and socio-cultural worlds which we all interact (Agbenyega & Tamakloe, 2014). By infusing reflexivity and ethics into our practice, educators and practitioners would come to understand how both the labelled and labellers grapple with schooling and how their social worlds frame educational uncertainties.

First, we need to continuously interrogate the traditional view of groupings and static notions of disability, especially those evidenced through psychological testing.

The fluidity of human nature and identity, and the various ways in which people respond to their natural world, have important implications for the study of disability, education and support services. Specifically, researchers and professionals who work with persons with disability must be concerned with the potential in everyone and to document collective as well as individual performances (Macaulay, Deppeler & Agbenyega, 2016). This draws on Rogoff's (1993) perspective on human development as largely social and cultural participation where individuals learn from one another through apprenticeship. The influence of Vygotsky's (1978) writings is also clear. By believing that every student is competent, educators and other professionals would be better positioned to modify their special education referrals and eligibility decisions and develop comprehensive strategies that work best for each individual's learning styles (Agbenyega, 2013). In this way, we will be honouring differences instead of continuing the controversial practice of labelling and thus continuing to hear about students' painful stories.

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