LABELING

Children With Gifts and Talents: Looking Beyond Traditional Labels

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This article explored the effects of the labeling that has become commonplace in schools. Theories such as labeling theory, control theory, the Pygmalion effect, and stigma theory provide evidence of the power labeling has to negatively and positively affect children's beliefs about themselves as well as the perceptions others have of them. Renzulli (1977) suggested changing the way we label gifted students, but this has yet to be implemented effectively in the field of gifted education. Here a renewed call for change is advocated, based on similar changes made in special education. Practical strategies are suggested to help children deal with the label of giftedness and to mitigate potential negative effects labeling may have.

Keywords: affective, control, gifted, halo, labeling, Pygmalion, self-concept, stigma

MISUSE OF LABELS IN GIFTED EDUCATION

Children are often categorized and labeled according to their intelligence quotient, standardized test score, or some other indicator such as a score in an off-level test. This seems to be most prevalent in the fields of gifted and special education. Labeling tends to influence the way adults view the student and the student views herself or himself. Inferences are made about how the child should behave and perform without consulting her or him. These expectations often are not conveyed to the child and result in a disparity between expectations and performance. This can be very confusing and even painful for the child. Perceptions and expectations of a child’s performance may change overnight due to a score on a test, when in reality the child remains the same. This article reviews the literature regarding the prevalence of labels placed on children and some of the positive and negative consequences of doing this. It is hoped that this will encourage practitioners in the field of gifted education to continue to look at the child, not the label, when making educational decisions.

By labeling a child, educators hope to be able to explain that child’s needs or strengths. It is this hope, coupled with a product-driven educational system, that perpetuates this emphasis on labels. If a behavior or personality trait can be defined then it can be more easily addressed. However, this completely ignores who the child is as a person, her or his thoughts, needs, feelings, and her inner self as described by Annemarie Roeper (1996a). Roeper noted that behaviors associated with giftedness are often associated with other disorders if they cannot be understood within the educational context. Daydreaming is seen as a failure to focus or a symptom of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) rather than “otherwise directed attention” (Roeper, 1996a, p. 224). This further muddies the water and makes it even more difficult to understand who the child is. Labels become the primary focus and the child seems to be forgotten.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Several questions have been raised regarding the social consequences of the label of gifted. There is also concern...
regarding the perceptions of those who are labeled as well as the perceptions of those with whom they interact. In order to understand the effect that labeling has on children who exhibit gifted behaviors it is useful to borrow from the field of sociology. Labeling theory (Becker, 1963) suggests that a label of deviant ascribed to a person increases the deviance exhibited by the individual. This theory also suggests that the exhibition of deviant behavior can result in the label of deviant, indicating a symbiotic relationship between the label itself and the environment associated with the person receiving the label. Furthermore, control theory (Hirschi, 1969) can be associated with labeling, suggesting that the more deviant the labeled person becomes, the further he detaches himself from the population, resulting in social isolation.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), in their investigation of the Pygmalion effect, showed the potential that teachers have to influence the performance of students based on what they perceive about them. These perceptions are manifest in the invisible curriculum and the interactions that students and teachers engage in. If a teacher perceives that a child is academically capable, he is more likely to expect high achievement. The converse is also true. Although this theory and its methodological components have been contentious, subsequent research has validated Rosenthal and Jacobson’s findings despite the weaknesses that have been noted in the initial research (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982; Cooper, 1979; Feldman & Theiss, 1982; Jamieson, Lydon, Stewart, & Zanna, 1987).

This discussion of labeling and control theories and the Pygmalion effect is not intended to indicate that giftedness is deviance but to show the power a label can have on the behaviors and socialization of a person. It can be argued that if the label of gifted results in negative perceptions by self and others, then increasingly negative behaviors may be exhibited causing social isolation and possibly negative emotional consequences.

Goffman’s (1963) initial definition of stigma suggested that application of a stigma to a person resulted in the belief that this person had undesirable characteristics. However, further work with and refinement of the theory has led to the understanding that a stigma also can be a label associated with a stereotype that is socially constructed (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Stereotypes are characterized by the fact that their basis is unquestioned, yet a large emphasis is placed on them in social contexts. Stereotypes are also characterized by generalizing specific characteristics or expectations to a group that may in reality be as heterogeneous as the general population. Therefore, if a group has a set of beliefs about what constitutes giftedness, then this stereotype is attached to the label of giftedness and thus to the person labeled. These stereotypes may be positive or negative and serve to indicate that the individual deviates from the normal group. This perception of deviation can result in honored status or pressure to conform to the norm and an attempt to hide the attributes. The stereotype also can result in inaccurate expectations of the individual, which can lead to social anxiety or pressure to perform in a certain manner (Crocker, Major, & Steele; Sternberg, 1985).

When applied to gifted education, labeling, control, and stigma theories may be as important as the label itself. People may react differently to the labeled person. People with labels may view themselves differently, and different options such as special programs may become available to them. The label of gifted has the potential to change the life course of a child through choices made and opportunities offered (Guskin Okolo, Zimmerman, & Peng, 1986). Together, these theories can be used to explain how and why individuals may feel the way they do about labels.

PERCEPTION OF SELF AND PERCEPTION BY OTHERS

Students labeled as gifted do not always perceive their label accurately. Although students may be positive or ambivalent about their designation as gifted, they seem to believe that their parents, siblings, teachers, and peers see them in a negative light (Colangelo & Brower, 1987a, 1987b; Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988)—a perception that is not necessarily accurate. The initial familial perception may be negative due to envy from siblings and potential fear of inferiority from parents. However, the long-term effects are positive overall within the family setting (Colangelo & Brower). Perceptions of peers and teachers are generally neutral or positive (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983). Some teachers, however, do see gifted students as annoying in class because they may disturb the class or ask hard questions (Reid & McGuire, 1995). Students feel more intense wariness of the label than may be warranted. However, the accuracy of the label may be less important than the belief regarding the label (Colangelo & Kelly).

Sternberg (1985) noted that the implicit theories held by people regarding intelligence are well used in a systematic fashion. They have great power without necessarily being accurate with explicit theories, similar to that of stereotypes. Care should be taken when labeling a person, because the label may affect his or her self-perceptions, perceptions by others, and major events and choices in life.

SHifting TERMINOLOGY

In recent years, the field of special education has determined that children should be called by name and not by disability. Instead of referring to children as learning
disabled, special educators now refer to these same children as children who exhibit learning disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2006). This shift in the terminology has brought the child back into focus and allowed educators to move away from a deficit model. However, the field of gifted education has not followed suit. In this age of high-stakes testing, students continue to be labeled in order to categorize them into groups for easy handling. Schools now have the gifted group who scored above a particular threshold and those who scored below designated as regular education students. Students know whether or not they made it into the gifted group. Those who do not receive the gifted designation can experience a drop in self-esteem and wonder whether they are just weird and not gifted as they, their parents, or teacher had thought (Peterson, 1998). These children may question their identities because they did not fit into a category of gifted, but they do not feel any different from their formally identified gifted peers.

Interestingly, the CEC-NAGC Initial Knowledge and Skill Standards for Gifted and Talented Education (Council on Exceptional Children and the National Association of Gifted Children, 2006) used the terminology individuals with gifts and talents throughout the document and yet practitioners in the field do not. Such terminology is not new. Renzulli (1977) suggested that rather than using the term gifted students, practitioners and researchers should describe these children as those “who exhibit gifted behavior” (p. 75). To date, however, terminology in the field remains largely unchanged.

I recently spoke to a child who knew (thanks to the tester who announced to the group what the students were being tested for) that she had been tested for a self-contained, gifted education classroom. She was not selected for the class due to a limited number of seats and a timed math computation score on which she was not fast enough. No one took the time to talk with her and explain that just because she was still in the regular-education classroom this did not mean she was not gifted. I happened to mention in a conversation that giftedness was one of her many characteristics. The child stared at me and asked, “I’m gifted?” “Yes you are!” I replied. The look of intense relief on this child’s face was painful to see. She had spent months thinking that somehow she was not as smart as she thought and as everyone told her she was. This child had begun to question her identity as a learner because she had not been identified as gifted. The gifted part of her identity became the only focus to describe her, rather than merely being a single facet among many that defined her as a person. Our conversation continued as we talked about how the knowledge that she exhibits gifted behaviors does not change anything in terms of who she is. We talked about how her brain and abilities had not changed just because she now had a label. Then came the difficulty of explaining to a second grader why she was not in the self-contained, gifted education classroom, because that was where many of the other gifted students were placed. The label was a hindrance to her own self-concept but also brought some sense of identity to her. Key to these issues is the manner in which the labels are used or explained.

**AFFECTIVE ISSUES OF LABELING**

Educators have ignored the affective issues of labeling students as gifted and talented. Educators, administrators, and parents refer to these children as gifted students instead of children who exhibit high ability or giftedness. The way children are labeled begins to define who they are and influences how they feel about themselves (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993; Kerr et al., 1988; Manaster, Chan, Watt, & Wiehe, 1994). However, a child is a person of many facets, one of which may be giftedness. Each facet, whether a strength or challenge, contributes to the whole self. Students who exhibit giftedness too often are expected to act and/or perform differently from their peers based on this one facet alone. Researchers have shown that although children who exhibit gifted behaviors may have superior ability to reason and think at a greater depth, this does not mean that their physical and emotional development is any different from their age peers (Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1993). This asynchrony must be dealt with appropriately because it can yield anxiety in a child who exhibits giftedness. Anxiety and negative emotions can affect the performance of a child who exhibits giftedness (Lam & Kirby, 2002). Although all children experience emotions whether they are identified as gifted or not, it is the manner in which they deal with them that affects performance. These emotions can be influenced by many things, such as appropriate educational fit, positive self-concept, and emotional self-regulation (Niehart, 1998; Peterson, 2006; Silverman). It is therefore important for educators to help ensure that children who exhibit giftedness see themselves in a way that includes their giftedness as a part of their more holistic selves, rather than a defining characteristic.

Tate and Copas (2003) outlined the issue of adultism in the American education system. This concept of adultism is characterized as the manner in which adults perceive the world from their own perspectives and not from the perspective of those who they serve. This viewpoint is underscored by the belief that adults are better equipped to understand issues and make decisions by virtue of age and size. This perspective does not account for children’s intelligence and their potential, especially among those children who have the ability to think deeply and analyze issues in a manner beyond what would be expected for someone of a particular age. Educators of students who exhibit gifted behaviors must be sensitive when enabling students to interact with the world in this precocious manner. These children will need help in dealing with these issues emotionally. It is important not to expect children who exhibit gifted
behaviors to be miniadults but to be cognizant of their asynchronous development. In this way, students can interact with the world’s issues in deep ways and also have the support to deal with this in an age-appropriate manner.

Children who exhibit gifted behaviors are often socially and emotionally sensitive (Peterson, 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Educators often have a preconceived idea of what giftedness means and how these students should act and perform. This perception influences the way adults and children interact and may ignore the individual needs of the child.

Peterson (1998) noted when reflecting on her work with children who exhibited giftedness that:

I also knew that educators, coaches, and even parents sometimes forgot that these bright and complex students were more than just potential fulfillsers of adults’ dreams, more than award winners, more than “stars.” They were certainly more than their intellect, their talents, or their stardom. They were kids, working through the same developmental stages as their same-age peers. Some of them, of course, did not manage their development smoothly, did not compete and achieve well, did not meet expectations. (p. 194)

These children, who are designated as gifted, have many of the same needs and motivations as their same-age peers, but the expectations are often too high due to the wonderful work they can produce or the precocious vocabulary they exhibit or developing a set of expectations for their behavior and performance (Peterson).

The definition of this population should not be narrowed either. A student in a graduate gifted education course recently noted that he felt relieved after having read Terman’s (1925) definition of giftedness, which is firmly rooted in the hereditability of superior traits rather than environment or a combination of both. He has taught in a self-contained middle-school class for students who exhibit gifted behaviors for the last 12 years. The demographics of his school are 80% Caucasian and 20% minority. This teacher felt vindicated in his beliefs that gifted children come from stable, two-parent, professional homes. He noted that most gifted children come from financially gifted homes and did not seem to experience many of the upheavals of other students. When questioned as to the demographic makeup of his class he noted that out of 64 students there was 1 student of Asian descent and 1 Latino child. No African American students were found in this population. Indeed, this same teacher noted that students from minority groups received services from the English as a second language and the special education teams in his school. He did not consider that children who experience trauma, low-socioeconomic status, or English-language deficits might be part of this elite group. His expectation was that all gifted kids would pass the state tests each year. He also noted that a colleague of his could pick gifted students out of the crowd just by appearance. It is this misunderstanding of the definitions of giftedness and talent that continues to fuel the mislabeling and misunderstanding of those children who do indeed exhibit gifted behaviors or may have the potential to if given the chance.

The idea of the halo effect, or as Thorndike (1920) put it, “the constant error of the halo” (p. 29) also comes into play with regard to labeling. The halo effect is the overall perception of a person based on sometimes a single attribute (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike). This definition is nebulous with respect to the strength that it might have concerning how people perceive one another. The halo effect is often used in the positive perception of someone such as the perception that a child is gifted rules out all possible negative connotations that this label might bring. However, the halo effect also can have the opposite connotation. If a child is seen as disruptive or as asking too many questions in the classroom, then the global perception may be that a problem exists with the child. However, the truth may be that a particular attribute of the child is being ignored (Nisbett & Wilson)—that of giftedness. This idea of the “constant error of the halo” indicates that there is a deep-seated inability to rise above the global perception in order to make an impartial assessment of individual traits of a person (Nisbett & Wilson; Pike, 1999). This inability is unconscious as well. Assessors tend not to be aware of their own biases in perceptions of others and therefore perpetuate incorrect assumptions about people. This can be damaging to a child if the label he is given influences all perceptions of other attributes he may exhibit and may influence his treatment and opportunities in school.

Annemarie Roeper’s gift is her understanding of the emotional and social experiences and development of children who exhibit giftedness (Roeper, 1990, 1991). Her work stresses the differences in their development, their thought patterns, and the way in which they learn (Roeper, 1995). Roeper perceives giftedness as a process rather than a product and has focused on educating children for life rather than for success. This focus stems from the belief that personal growth and mastery of one’s environment are the most important things in life. Her view encompasses the whole person, not merely the products of that person’s activity. This is the focus educators need to return to in order to meet the needs of the child who exhibits giftedness in today’s classroom.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN WHO EXHIBIT GIFTEDNESS

Educators need to interact with students directly about their labels and provide opportunities for these children to
explore themselves beyond their label of giftedness. Educators and parents do a disservice to children who exhibit giftedness if only their strengths are considered. Each one of these children also faces challenges. They may be precocious in their understanding of the world and academic concepts but behave emotionally in an age-appropriate manner, resulting in an asynchronous profile. These children may be gifted in a specific area but struggle in others. However, the expectation is that if performance is high in one area it should be high in all areas. Unless teachers teach students who exhibit giftedness how to deal with their challenges, these students may become unable to accept them and deal with them later in life (Baum & Owen, 2004; Peterson, 1998). Children need to understand that they are multifaceted individuals with many different skills, abilities, and challenges. When we deal with this head-on we can relieve some of the emotional stress that children who exhibit gifted behaviors feel about themselves and their performance at school (Peterson, 2006).

The idea of teaching the whole child is not new; however, it seems to have been disregarded at the expense of children. Rogers (1969) stated a set of conditions for education, which paralleled those for psychotherapy. He said that teachers must warmly accept and provide unconditional positive regard in order to set the conditions in which productive learning can take place. Too often educators assume that the child who exhibits giftedness can learn in any environment, and therefore they conform the environment and teaching to those students most in need of help (Gentry, Rizza, & Gable, 2001). This can result in a deficit model for all students. Those students who need the most assistance are relegated to a remedial education, whereas those who have the highest potential either work alone or in an environment that does not stimulate them and meet their needs (Gallagher, Harradine, & Coleman, 1997). This programming is based entirely on the child’s label and not on an assessment of their educational, social, or emotional needs. Recently, scholars have asserted where once a child’s educational needs were the first priority they have now become the last in the process of meeting academic standards and producing annual yearly progress in state-mandated tests (Gentry, 2006; No Child Left Behind, 2002). Teachers are required to show that the majority of the class has acquired proficiency in required state and national standards, not meet the needs of all learners based on needs (No Child Left Behind).

There are many ways that educators can help students deal with their giftedness (Silverman, 1993). Community circle time is a good place for these discussions to happen. Teachers can take students’ emotional temperature and discuss some of the reasons children feel the way they do. This can be done in a group or individual manner. These interactions can often segue into a discussion about how these children feel about themselves and their strengths and challenges. When these issues are brought out into the open, children often feel a great sense of relief and are more apt to talk about their emotional needs in the future (Peterson, 1998, 2006). This allows the teacher insight into the behaviors of his or her students and provides a way for the teacher to address children’s needs.

Journaling provides another more private way to have this dialogue (Silverman, 1993). Teachers can have one side of the discussion about strengths and challenges facing students who exhibit giftedness, and then students can respond privately in a journal. This allows the teacher to read and respond to each child individually about issues that may be difficult to discuss. A personal note back in a journal is powerful and shows children you care for them as a person and not just a student in the school setting. In this way teachers can also plan discussion topics for the whole class as they notice particular topics or trends.

A teacher in a local school has students write in a journal that they can share with the teacher. A little girl had a brother recently diagnosed with Type I diabetes, and she shared her story with the teacher. The child was worried about her brother but did not want the whole class to know about it. She wrote about it to her teacher and asked that it remain a secret. The teacher and student corresponded about the issue privately, through the journal, until the student was ready to share it with the class. Eventually, the child gave a presentation to the class about life with Type I diabetes. In this way, the child was able to work through the issues in a manner that met her needs. She understood all the causes and issues associated with Type I diabetes, but emotionally she was not ready to deal with the realities of it. This ability to talk with her teacher in a private manner enabled her to learn how to deal with her emotions and the teacher was able to build her up to the point where she felt positive about sharing it with her friends.

Some students who exhibit giftedness may need counseling to deal with the issues that giftedness brings with it. School counselors are a wonderful resource and can help students work through issues such as friendship, underachievement, social-emotional development, and many other challenges that these children face (Mendaglio, 2003, 2007; Peterson, 2006, 2007; Silverman, 1993). Often the asynchrony in the development of children who exhibit giftedness is painful, and they need help understanding and dealing with associated issues surrounding their giftedness and development (P. L. Vail & P. Vail, 1989).

Bibliotherapy and video therapy have become increasingly popular as school psychologists have become involved with students who exhibit giftedness (Flack & Lamb, 1984; Frasier & McCannon, 1981; Hébert & Neumeister, 2002; Silverman, 1993). These therapy methods consist of choosing literature or movies wherein the protagonist exhibits similar characteristics to the reader or viewer. These methods provide a unique way for students to relate their own feelings to the stories of others. Often children who exhibit giftedness feel that they are unique in the way they feel about themselves. Bibliotherapy together with
counseling can be a powerful vehicle to facilitate conversations with peers who are alike and individually about those issues that affect this population deeply (Fraser & McCannon; Lenkowsky, 1987). Teachers should be encouraged to use this method.

Small group counseling sessions are also a wonderful way to meet the needs of students who exhibit giftedness. School psychologists can be the moderator of conversations or just a listening ear for students as they interact with one another about their experiences (Colangelo & Peterson, 1993; Moon, 2007; Peterson, 2006, 2007). Similar support also can come from the gifted-education teacher. A gifted-education teacher in a local middle school recently related an opportunity she had to sit and chat with a group of her past students. Each of these students was experiencing significant emotional issues associated with their giftedness. She invited them to her classroom after school, made hot chocolate, and listened. The students ranted, played their band instruments, and talked with an adult who understood them. The catharsis this provided was profound for these students. They were given the opportunity to speak in a safe environment without fear of judgment or reprisal.

The field of gifted education needs to re-examine its use of labeling of students who exhibit gifted behaviors. Many misconceptions or stereotypes come with them. A label of giftedness can be helpful to a child in opening up new learning opportunities. However, this same label can be perceived in a negative light if educators determine that the questioning nature of a child is annoying or disruptive in class and therefore is a problem that needs fixing. Educators need to be the agents of change and stop defining children by their abilities, high or low, and begin to see them in terms of their whole identity. When educators see the whole child, they help the child understand himself or herself. They help ensure that the child experiences all facets of himself or herself and does not become defined by a single trait.

REFERENCES


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