

Effects of Labeling Students “Learning Disabled”: Emergent Themes in the Research Literature 1970 Through 2000

Karen Osterholm, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Leadership and
Counseling
The Whitelowe R. Green College of Education
Prairie View A&M University
Member of the Texas A&M University System

William R. Nash, EdD

Professor

Department of Educational Psychology
Texas A&M University
Member of the Texas A&M University System

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD

Professor

PhD Program in Educational Leadership
The Whitelowe R. Green College of Education
Prairie View A&M University
Member of the Texas A&M University System

Visiting Lecturer (2005)

Oxford Round Table

University of Oxford, Oxford, England

Distinguished Alumnus (2004)

College of Education and Professional Studies
Central Washington University

ABSTRACT

Using an iterative process similar to the constant comparative method, 34 studies addressing the impact of the learning disabled label were synthesized. Four overlapping primary themes emerged: expectancies, stereotypes, and attitudes; stigmatization, rejection, and social distance; action versus attitude toward labeled individuals; and differential influence of the LD label when other salient information is provided.

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Introduction

The confusion and conflict surrounding definition, diagnosis, and treatment of learning disabilities is well documented. Debate over definition is common and surprisingly heated. Learning disabilities manifest in diverse ways, making diagnosis difficult. Lacking associated physical signs or symptoms, learning disabilities comprise an invisible disability. As a result, students so labeled are frequently considered simply lacking in motivation or commitment. Ong-Dean (2005) points out that society may view invisible disabilities as “illegitimate excuses for failure to conform” (p. 148) to achievement standards and other expectations. Alternately, the LD diagnosis is sometimes misconstrued by laypersons as a form of mental retardation, with myriad misconceptions deriving from this error. Labeled students, their co-learners, and teachers often experience considerable frustration in negotiating the legal, ethical, educational, and social mazes that learning disabilities present.

When ambiguity and the attendant professional disagreement regarding a disorder are ongoing, the question of whether the designation should be used at all inevitably arises. Does such a diagnosis hinder more than help those so labeled? Labeling theory, a sociological model, proposes that labeling of individuals as “different” in the negative connotation of the word creates a potentially distorted reality for those who bear the label, as well as for their teachers, parents, and peers (Hebding & Glick, 1987). Labeling theory further predicts that once an individual is labeled, “the social group seems to assign to that person a new identity and a new role, a new set of expectations. The social group then responds to the individual according to those expectations, thus reinforcing the label and affecting all future interactions” (p. 136).

The labeled individual’s self-perception is inextricably bound to others’ perceptions and reactions. As Poole, Regoli, and Pogrebin (1986) suggest, individuals “are not passive recipients of negative labels; rather, they are actively managing or coping with these labels” (p. 347). A self-fulfilling prophecy might result when a person accepts the label and incorporates it into her or his self-conceptualization, with reduced performance expectations and damaged self-esteem as unfortunate byproducts (McGrew & Evans, 2003; Rosenthal, 2002). Reduced effort and lower achievement might logically follow.

Others engaged in the debate believe that labels serve useful purposes with a net positive result. Keogh (1987) opines that the LD label serves “as a focus for advocacy and for ensuring attention to the problem, as a category or mechanism for providing services and as a condition or set of conditions that require scientific study” (pp. 4-5). Kuther (1994) adds that diagnostic labels facilitate research for practitioners, which hopefully results in tailored interventions and program improvement. Opposing those who support inclusion and elimination of the LD label, Hallahan and Kauffman (1994) go so far as to endorse development of a “culture of disability.” They suggest that reduced stigma and enhanced learning might be achieved by “developing *esprit de corps* among congregations of people with disabilities” (p. 505).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) speaks to the labeling issue repeatedly. Particularly germane to the concerns of this paper, the new statute prescribes “early intervening services to reduce the need to label children as disabled in order to address the learning and behavioral needs of such children.” The statement is first seen in the 2004 statute, bearing subtle testimony to the recognized dangers of label application.

Purpose of the Article

Divergent opinions on the ramifications of the “learning disabled” label abound. The purpose of this study is a synthesis of research related to the effects of the label. Herein, “label” will connote a designation assignment by qualified school personnel, psychologists, and other diagnostic professionals. The reader should be cognizant that informal labeling – as well as self-identification – might certainly impact the labeled individual as well.

Research Questions

Study selection, examination, and synthesis were guided by the following research questions:

1. How does being formally labeled as learning disabled affect labeled students?
2. Are teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors different for labeled and nonlabeled students?
3. How do nonlabeled co-learners perceive and react to peers identified as learning disabled?

Methodology

Using all professional databases available, conscientious efforts were made to identify, locate, and collect the entire population of relevant studies from 1970 through 2000. Several promising studies failed to delineate students’ diagnoses precisely, while others did not adequately distinguish the influence of the *label* from the cumulative impact of experiences germinated by the symptoms of the *disorder*. The term “learning disabilities” denotes very different phenomena in different countries (Hart, 1999). In response to these and other idiosyncrasies of this particular literature, the following selection criteria evolved:

1. Studies must report data specific to the LD label as a distinct phenomenon, rather than data based on aggregated diagnostic labels.
2. Studies must directly address the formal LD label as distinguished from the actual disorder.
3. Studies involving two or more diagnoses within a single individual described in case studies or presented in vignettes were excluded.
4. Due to differential use of relevant labels across national boundaries, only studies conducted in the United States were utilized in this synthesis.

Application of these selection criteria yielded 33 studies. Twenty-eight employed quantitative methodologies, and five were qualitative. One quantitative research effort involved two independent reports, yielding a total of 34 studies.

The decision to include both quantitative and qualitative studies was a carefully considered one. Despite the obvious philosophical and other distinctions between the two research types, synthesis of diverse approaches has become increasingly utilized and appreciated in recent years (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Sutton, 2006). Miles and Huberman (1994) offer strong support for this approach when they state, “The careful measurement, generalizable samples, experiment control, and statistical tools of good quantitative studies are precious assets. When they are combined with the up-close, real-world contexts that characterize good qualitative studies, we have a very powerful mix (p. 42).

Specific methods used to analyze and combine results from the 34 identified reports were necessarily driven by the characteristics of the data collected. An iterative approach similar to the constant comparative method was employed (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Descriptive synopses were developed for each study. The synthesist was alert to potential commonalities and patterns, analogous to the concept of emerging themes in the qualitative literature. She kept an informal record of such intuitions and insights, generating tentative labels for individual clusters. Methodological, theoretical, temporal, and subject-related patterns were of interest, though receptivity to other potential commonalities was a hallmark of the iterative process. Each new synopsis presented potential for addition to and reorganization of groupings previously considered. During this phase, data collection and data analysis proceeded simultaneously and interactively.

After completion of the 34 descriptive synopses, all were reviewed by one of the authors and another faculty member in psychology, and sorted with regard to the final iteration of clusters. Many studies fell into multiple clusters. Examination of clusters yielded four overlapping themes or patterns. Again, studies often contributed to more than one theme.

Results and Discussion

The four overlapping themes or patterns that eventually emerged follow.

1. Expectancies, stereotypes, and attitudes related to the LD label
2. Stigmatization, rejection, and social distance related to the LD label
3. Action versus attitude
4. Differential influence of the LD label given other salient information

Each of the four themes is addressed below. Selected studies from the synthesis are cited in support of the themes. Additional research affording further clarification is cited as well.

Expectancies, Stereotypes, and Attitudes Related to the LD Label

A review of the literature relevant to sociological labeling theory offers relatively strong support for the view that negative or deviant labels generate unfortunate expectancies. A number of studies addressed this particular theme – some more directly than others. Minner (1982) investigated the academic and behavioral expectations for students labeled with learning disabilities and students labeled with educable mental retardation. A “no-label” group served as the control. Vocational teachers read a vignette describing student attributes germane to academic performance, as well as typical behaviors exhibited. Some subjects received vignettes in which the student was described as learning disabled, while others were led to believe that their student had educable mental retardation. The research reports a significant negative effect for diagnostic labels. Additionally, *post hoc* tests revealed that nonlabeled students with negative descriptions and students labeled LD with positive descriptions were not differentiated. Even more surprisingly, teachers made no distinction between LD students with promising attributes and those described negatively.

Minner and Prater (1984) asked college teachers to judge the academic promise of a student portrayed as having learning disabilities, as well as their own ability to work successfully with such college students. According to the researchers, “the LD label significantly and negatively influenced faculty members’ initial expectations” (p. 228). They were less definitive with regard to the impact of the label on teachers’ perceived ability to work effectively with the LD student. In a subsequent study, Minner (1990) reports that teachers were significantly less likely to refer a child labeled LD to a gifted program, even though descriptive vignettes were otherwise identical to those describing other children who were referred. For teachers familiar with the discrepancy formula so often applied in diagnosing LD, Minner’s vignette may have been confusing since it described a student with congruent achievement and intelligence.

Though results are not entirely consistent, these and other quantitative studies suggest that the LD label has potentially negative implications for those who bear it. Relevant themes from qualitative studies were examined to determine whether context-specific information would inform the quantitative data. Albinger (1995) quotes one young man as saying, “Mrs. Albinger, if you make me keep coming to resource, I’ll just be a bum on the street [pointing out the window]. All the bums out there went to resource!” (p. 621) The painful impact of such an expectation on the boy’s self-esteem cannot be overstated. Several students reported repeated name-calling incidents involving pejorative terms such as “stupid” and “retard.” Labeled students reported insensitive teacher behavior as well. One instructor criticized a labeled child’s academic efforts publicly, chastising her for acting like a kindergartner. Barga (1996) quotes a math teacher who *fondly* called a favorite labeled student “D.D.” – an abbreviation for “Darling Dummy.”

In summary, analysis suggests that the learning disabilities label generates reduced or negative expectations, as well as negative stereotypes and attitudes. Lower expectations often translate into reduced effort and lower achievement. Studies characterized by design flaws and inadequate reporting may reduce confidence in such conclusions, however. Further and better research is essential in clarifying this issue. IDEIA 2004 indirectly supports this premise, stating: “Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by ... having high expectations for such children.”

Stigmatization, Rejection, and Social Distance Related to the LD Label

Several studies included in this synthesis suggest that children designated as learning disabled experience emotional and physical isolation as a result. Cartledge, Frew, and Zaharias (1985) report that fourth- and fifth-graders rated a child labeled LD significantly more negatively on 12 of 15 questions presented than they did a similar boy labeled “non-handicapped.” Though the labeled boy was rated as less likely to treat others children unkindly, students expressed lower levels of interest in establishing a friendship with him. Researchers did not assess level of student understanding of the term *learning disabled*. With very young subjects, such a determination might be especially important.

The concepts of expectancy and stereotypy have overlapping and cyclical relationships with stigmatization, rejection, and social distance. Studies purporting to address one of these phenomena often subtly inform our understanding of the others. For example, the previously cited study on academic expectations for college students with learning disabilities (Minner & Prater, 1984) is relevant to the second theme as well. College faculty members made a distinction between the labeled and nonlabeled students with regard to predictions of academic success, as well as the teachers’ perceived ability to work with the individual portrayed. Upon superficial consideration of these outcomes, one might deduce that faculty members feel underprepared for the challenge rather than averse to the student. Unsolicited comments written on the questionnaires suggest otherwise. One professor wrote, “We cannot allow everyone into college – the integrity of the B.A. degree cannot be challenged” (p. 228). “I am trained to teach bright students, not handicapped ones,” opined another. These remarks imply stigmatization, rejection, and desire for increased social distance from students with learning disabilities.

Research on stigmatization and rejection relative to the LD label is not entirely consistent. Cohen’s (1977) study cited previously used the Mann-Whitney U to compare numbers of positive adjectives attributed to various student groups. Teacher responses did suggest a significant bias against students labeled LD compared to those identified as “normal.” Though this might seem purely a study of attitudes or stereotypes, an additional manipulation of the variables informs acceptance versus rejection due to label. When the written vignette *described* a learning disabled individual but no actual label was provided, lower ratings were given than when the same description was *labeled* LD. Perhaps individuals displaying atypical behaviors are more likely to be stigmatized and rejected when there is no ready explanation for their “difference.”

Studies that fail to distinguish clearly the impact of the LD label from effects of the actual disorder (and thus are ineligible for actual inclusion in the synthesis) enhance understanding of stigmatization. When physical segregation from nonlabeled co-learners is part of labeled students’ experience, feelings of stigmatization are legitimized regardless of whether the label is appropriately applied. Albinger (1995) reports that labeled students’ efforts to avoid stigmatization usually included fabricated stories about their activities apart from time with nonlabeled students. Some children carried the lie for several years, as when one student told friends that she took piano lessons at a certain time each day. Another child told friends on several occasions that he arrived late due to problems with the family car.

In his qualitative study on African American and Hispanic American teenagers who bear the LD label in New York schools, Bryant (1989) offers even sadder commentary on the

embarrassment experienced by labeled students. One individual reported that students in the resource room would try to conceal their identities when regular education students walked by. “Regular ed. kids could come by and everyone would cover their faces. We’d cover our faces and we would all hide because we’d be embarrassed” (p. 91).

Many students reported that “pullout” programs were especially problematic, as nonlabeled students bore witness when labeled students were called to a *special* place for *special* students. The social distancing phenomenon inherent in such segregation is a concern as well. Even labeled students who consider the LD diagnosis a relief or welcome explanation for previously misunderstood “differences” suggest that physical separation from non-labeled peer is disheartening and potentially stigmatizing (Barga, 1996). IDEIA 2004 lends credence to the importance of minimizing social and physical difference, stating that “the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by ... ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.”

Action versus Attitude

The potential pain derived from the first two themes to emerge from this synthesis should certainly not be diminished. Some evidence suggests, however, that *attitudes* toward those labeled learning disabled are typically more negative than *actions* taken. In other words, disheartening responses to attitude and acceptability scales notwithstanding, nonlabeled others may behave more responsibly when action is required of them. Certainly, this is not new idea. Social psychologists have long wondered at the apparent disconnect sometimes observed between attitudes and behavior (Brehm & Kassir, 1996; Ajzen, 2000).

Cohen (1977) illustrates this phenomenon in her dissertation involving teachers’ stereotypes of three groups: learning disabled students, individuals whose reading requires remediation (RR), and their normal peers. Teachers consistently ascribed more negatively connotative adjectives to LD and RR label-bearers compared to nonlabeled students. Yet they did not translate these negative perceptions or attitudes into discriminatory action. Regardless of the label applied and the information provided, teachers in Cohen’s study were able to score all students’ essays fairly and accurately. Thus, their expectations did not dictate their behavior.

Several studies comparing diagnostic labels but lacking an unlabeled control group lend support to the suggestion that attitude and action are relatively independent phenomena. Boucher and Deno (1979) found that teachers who read a three-page case study with either the LD or ED label affixed were capable of objective programming decisions. The ED label was more consistently recalled than the LD label, which might suggest a stronger reaction to the former. Yet any differential reaction to the two labels was not translated into behavioral distinctions.

Fairbanks and Stinnett (1997) tapped a more diverse subject population. Teachers, school psychologists, and school workers were presented with a vignette describing a third-grader with a pattern of disruptive behavior. Different diagnostic labels were assigned to the hypothetical child for different subjects; LD, behaviorally disordered (BD), and ADD ascriptions were alternately made. When asked to judge the acceptability of one of two possible intervention strategies, no labeling effects were noted. However, no nonlabeled control group is in evidence.

Additionally, no attitude or expectancy measure was taken for comparison with the more action-oriented plan for intervention. This was not the stated purpose of the study, so the researchers cannot be faulted here. The report states, "an attempt was made to distribute each of the labels and interventions equally within each of the groups" (p. 330). This was perhaps a practical alternative to random distribution within groups or across groups, given the relatively small sample sizes and the large number of treatment combinations.

In summary, studies seem to suggest that prejudicial attitudes toward individuals labeled LD do not necessarily result in discriminatory behavior. The research on stigmatization and social distance might be interpreted as suggesting quite the opposite, however, at least among student populations.

Differential Influence of the LD Label Given Other Salient Information

A fourth theme emerging from the data involves whether the LD label loses potency when additional information is available to moderate it. Huebner (1990) asked school psychologists to make diagnostic and placement decisions for fictitious students, providing them with a student profile, identification as having learning disabilities or as "normal," and current diagnostic testing data. Results indicate that only current psychological test results influenced psychologists' decisions. In other words, even when a student was currently in a special placement for her or his disabilities, most psychologists were quite willing to declare that neither the special placement nor the label was necessary. Huebner considers this outcome evidence that confirmation bias may not be as strong as previously believed. Similarly, Dukes (1987) found that expectancies were mediated by exposure to additional salient information. Elementary teachers' pretest scores reflected the predicted expectancy effects for learning disabled students. However, following exposure to two videos in which teacher and students interacted in a classroom setting, posttest scores were not impacted by label.

Sichel (1984) designed a creative study to investigate interaction effects between the LD label and teacher personality, as well as several elements irrelevant to the current synthesis. Results on a dogmatism scale enabled him to separate subjects into two groups representing opposite ends of the dogmatic/open-minded continuum. Several dependent measures offered impressive triangulation. Teachers evaluated an essay reportedly written by a hypothetical student who was described to half the subjects as learning disabled. This study is unique among the quantitative selections because subjects actually interacted with the student rather than reading vignettes or viewing videotapes. Though the student was a confederate of the researcher, this design allowed a closer approximation to reality than most others found in the literature. Interpersonal impressions constituted one dependent variable, while objective observers' ratings of teachers' support and liking for the student were examined as well. The presence or absence of the LD label had no impact on outcomes. Teachers were similarly objective, supportive, and pleasant regardless of the student's ascribed status.

Graham and Dwyer (1987) studied the degree of objectivity that college students could muster when faced with grading an essay reportedly written by a student labeled learning disabled. Control group participants believed that nonlabeled students wrote the essays they read.

Though results indicated that the LD label did affect scores assigned, the quality of the essay wielded even greater influence. These and other studies offer relatively strong support for the view that salient information ameliorates label bias.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, despite design and conceptual flaws evident in several studies utilized in this synthesis, tentative conclusions may be drawn. Overall, assignment of the learning disabled label is associated with teachers' lowered expectations, as well as more negative stereotypes and attitudes toward the labeled individual. Most synthesized studies employed written vignettes or brief videotaped segments, both of which are rather artificial stimuli. Others failed to employ appropriate control groups. However, when children rather consistently rate hypothetical peers labeled LD as less acceptable, less socially attractive, and even less valuable, the potential social and emotional implications for *real* children so labeled are disheartening. Labeled individuals report stigmatization and both social and physical distancing from nonlabeled peers, factors that render the school experience even less appealing for those targeted.

These unfortunate conditions notwithstanding, evidence indicates that negative perceptions of the labeled student do not necessarily generate biased grading practices or inappropriate programming. Further, compelling evidence suggests that the negative impact of the label is diminished when other salient information is available. Sensitivity and diversity training, as well as educational efforts aimed at increasing all stakeholders' understanding of learning disabilities, might further reduce the negative impact of the label.

This synthesis included studies published from 1970 through 2000 that met selection criteria delineated earlier. However, 27 of the 34 studies were published before 1990, perhaps skewing results relative to all themes identified. With hope that progress has been made regarding attitudes toward diversity in general and learning differences in particular, future researchers might compare studies from different decades including those published most recently.

The debate regarding the potentially negative outcomes of being labeled learning disabled as opposed to possible benefits derived is ongoing. As Sack-Min (2007) notes, however, applying a diagnostic label to an individual "is a profound decision that affects the rest of his or her educational career and life" (p. 23). Continued exploration of the clarity and utility of the label itself is warranted.

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