



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH  
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

# THE ROLE OF LABELLING IN EDUCATION: A FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS.

**Dr. Wellington Samkange**

Senior Lecturer,  
Zimbabwe Open University, Faculty of Arts and Education,  
Department of Educational Studies: Box 8306 Harare,  
ZIMBABWE.

## Abstract

There are arguments surrounding the role of labelling in education. There are arguments for and against labelling. The paper examines the concept labelling and its role in education. In its attempt to explain the labelling theory, the paper identifies and discusses the different labelling approaches. The three approaches to labelling that are discussed in the paper are the developmental approach, the cultural approach and the individual approach. The paper further examines the advantages and limitations of labelling before discussing the role of the teacher and to some extent that of the school head in managing exceptional children. In explaining the role of the teacher, the paper proposes the use of the systems approach in classroom management. The promotion of play and active learning are also emphasized. The paper concludes by noting that labelling is a reality in education that has to be managed well for the benefit of the children with exceptionalities.

**Keywords:** Labelling; Exceptional children; Exceptional learners; Systems approach; disabilities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The education system and teachers in particular have to respond to the needs of all children. This includes children with special needs in education. One of the debates on special needs education has focused on the role of labelling as the education system attempts to provide for children who are exceptional and with various learning disabilities. Labelling can therefore be viewed within at least two contexts. These are the view that labels can contribute to improvements in education and that they may impact negatively on schooling. There have been arguments that labelling in education has the disadvantage of giving pupils name tags that present them as social misfits in society. It was been argued that this has resulted in society judging the performance and behaviour of the person so labelled basing on the label that they have attached to the person. The question that the paper intends to address is: What role has labelling played in education? In order to address this question the paper identifies different approaches to labelling. The paper discusses the concept of labelling in special needs education. It then focuses on the role of the teacher in handling children who are exceptional. The following key concepts are explained: labelling and exceptional learners.



## 2. LABELLING

Hardman, et al. (1999) define labelling as the process by which society comes up with descriptors to identify people who vary significantly from the norm. They give examples of labels used by professionals as disorder, disability and handicap among others. There are at least two elements in the definition by Hardman, et al (1999) that are worth noting. First, it is the role of society in coming up with “names” that denote certain behaviours within society. In that respect, society creates “names” and expects the individuals to behave as characterised by the name. In that regard, labels are a societal construction. Secondly, the definition brings in the importance of norms and the role they play in assessing behaviour. Norms demand conformity, and failure to conform to the expected norms contributes to labelling.

Ask.com refers to labelling as the attachment assumed qualities to particular people that are used to describe them. Labelling is therefore approximations of characteristics of the criteria that society sets to establish if individuals meet expectations of society. In that regard, the two definitions highlight the role of society in labelling.

## 3. EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

According to Mangal (2012) exceptional is being unique or different from others in possession of personal trait or quality. Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) define exceptional children as those who require special education and related services if they are to realize their full human potential. It should be noted that exceptionality is a relative attribute, as children are different and are born with exceptional attributes that distinguish them from one another. However, from the two definitions it can be noted that exceptional children are those whose behaviour is different from the average and therefore need interventions and support for them to develop to their potential. What makes the children exceptional is the way they differ from the norm in their behaviour. Such differences can be judged to be below the norm or above the norm. In that regard, the term exceptional becomes inclusive. It is inclusive in that it is used to refer to children with behaviour problems, physical disabilities and those who are highly talented intellectually. There is the misconception that exceptional children are those that operate below the norm. Heward (2014) notes that exceptional children have the following problems: learning problems; behaviour problems; physical disabilities; sensory impairments; and those who are intellectually gifted and talented. They are exceptional in that their development differs from other children. They differ in various areas of development. As noted by Decker (1990) exceptionality encompasses development that is “faster and beyond as well as development that is slower or below that of others”.

## 4. LABELLING: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Labelling is guided by the labelling theory. Labelling theory underpins the role of society in defining behaviour. As such, behaviours become deviant when those that are conforming to the norms attach labels to those that are not conforming. Labelling theory is a result of the work of Howard Becker. This is a theory that Becker created in 1963. There are a number of fundamental issues that the labelling theory attempts to explain. First, is the view that people tend to behave the way they are labelled. Secondly, that those that are so labelled tend to behave as characterised by the label. Thirdly, labelling can lead to stigmatisation. Furthermore, it focuses on the power that people in society have to make these labels stick. In that regard those who have power impose labels that can last for life. Such people include community leaders, school heads, parents, teachers, and caregivers among others. The nature and characterisation of the label has an effect on the behaviour of the labelled child. Crossman (2014) argues that negative labels contribute to low self-esteem, lack of confidence, rejection and denial and may cause more deviancies. The labelling theory is therefore concerned with the impact that the label would have on the individuals who are so labelled. On the other hand it has to be noted the theory argues that labels a social construct of how society defines behaviour. In that regard, any deviance behaviour is viewed as a reaction rather than the action itself.



On a similar note, Haralambos (1986) explains the labelling theory in terms of the self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Haralambos (1986) within the classroom the teacher defines a learner in a particular way and then makes predictions in relation to the label that he/she has assigned the learner and as such the teacher's interaction with the learner is influenced by the label. Within the same context, a learner who is viewed by the teacher as deviant is so labelled and his/her actions are interpreted in terms of the label given by the teacher. The label is most likely to affect the way the teacher interacts with the learner and in some cases the learner may feel discriminated against.

There are a number of models that have been used to explain labelling. These include the developmental approach, the cultural approach and the individualised approach. The developmental approach to labelling focuses on how the child develops and labels are attached to that lack of development. Development in the child is measured in terms of growth in all facets of the self. Such growth includes physical development, social development, emotional development and intellectual development among other forms of development. Development in these key areas is therefore measured in terms of the expected 'normal'. A child who has disabilities may be retarded in development in the referred areas, and as such he/she is so labelled. On a related note such labelling can result from disabilities due to sensory, physical, cognitive, emotional or communicative impairments. The developmental differences in growth contribute to labelling, which in some cases may impact negatively on the child.

Whilst the developmental approach to labelling focuses on social, personal, language, physical and other forms of growth, the cultural approach to labelling focuses on the culture of the people. The cultural approach explains behaviour in terms of the norms and values of the society. In that regard, expectations differ from community to community and society to society. This explains why different labels mean different things to different people. Grobler (2009) makes pertinent observations about culture and its characteristics. Grobler (2009) observes that culture varies from society to society and that it also varies across time and place. In that respect, labelling children as deviant is embedded in culture.

Another model or approach to labelling is the individual approach. Unlike the other models noted above in which society imposes labels on the individual, as for the individual approach, the individual engages in self-labelling. Within the context of the individual approach, children may label themselves in a manner that may undermine or overrate their self-concept. In that regard, such labels may create an identity crisis within the individual and how they react to society. The label that the individuals attach to themselves may not be recognised by others. The effects of self-labelling can be two-fold. Children who are labelled negatively may give themselves a new identity that motivates them and prove teachers otherwise. Secondly, such children may overrate their abilities which may lead to frustration due to failure to achieve.

## **5. THE ROLE OF LABELLING**

Labelling has a number of advantages in education. Identifying and labelling children as gifted enables the teacher to single out such children for special instruction. Their abilities are recognised and the teacher is able to plan for such abilities. This gives the children an opportunity to do challenging work that keeps them occupied at the same time developing their mental capabilities. It allows the teacher to manage different groups according to their abilities. Labelling enables children who are identified as having challenges in their education to be recommended for special education services. Labelling in a way classifies children. As noted by Henley, et al (2010) this classification process is based on the assumption that assigning a child a categorical name implies knowledge about the characteristics of the child's learning programme.

Other arguments for labelling are much to do with the state, teacher and the community at large. Henley, et al (2010) argue that labelling and classification of children is necessary for funding purposes, as the funding of special education programmes in most countries is based on categories of disability. They also note that labelling enables teachers and other professionals to communicate with one another as each categorical label conveys a general idea about the children's learning characteristics; at the same time the situation of the exceptional children is put on the spotlight. This



may contribute to the development of tolerance in the community. Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) also argue that labelling has led to the development of specialized teaching methods, assessment approaches, and behavioural interventions that have now been found useful for teachers of all children. In that regard, labelling if correctly done, children are able to receive specialised help from teachers.

According to Heward (2010) labelling recognizes meaningful differences in learning or behaviour and is a first and necessary step in responding responsibly to those differences. It is an intervention, as noted by Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) there are very limited interventions that are possible without labels. Labelling in a way acknowledges that there is a problem. That acknowledgment allows those involved to find a solution to the problem. In that sense, labelling assists as the first step in problem identification. Heward (2010) further notes that labelling may lead to a protective response and the allocation of resources and making the problem visible.

For labelling to take place, there should be assessment of the child's behaviour and disabilities. Assessment allows the assessor to get valuable information about the child. Brassard and Boehm (2007) note that the assessment of preschool children with special needs is based on the assumption that early identification will lead to the improvement of learning experiences for all young children. The assessment is then followed by classification. Classification assigns labels on children on the basis of their learning needs, which then enable the school system to come up with relevant special needs programmes. Assessment, classification and labelling contribute to placement of children according to their levels of exceptionality. Algozzine (2010) observes that classification enables us to categorise children as disabled, handicapped, gifted, deaf and disordered in speech and language among other labels. Such labelling helps in making the public aware of the children's needs which may attract sponsorship and funding as noted earlier.

## **6. THE LIMITATIONS OF LABELLING**

On the other hand, labelling may bring misunderstandings among children, as others may view the teacher as giving preference to the "gifted" children at the expense of others. At the same time, labelling children may have a stigma attached to it. Stigmatisation is detrimental to children's learning and development. In addition to that, the labels may shape the expectations of the teacher, as they may exaggerate the child's behaviour and thereby obscure the essence of teaching and learning (Henley, et al., 2010). Heward (2010) also notes that labelling may stigmatize the child, lead peers to reject or ridicule the child, thus contributing to the child developing a low self-esteem.

Labels tend to promote differences in children in the negative. As such, caregivers and teachers may confuse the child with the label. In that case the teacher or caregiver may try to make the label real and yet it is abstract. The chances of children being mislabelled are high in schools. The example that comes to mind is the streaming that was once prevalent in schools in Zimbabwe. The class that comprised of slow learners was in most of the cases neglected by the teachers. In some cases such placement and labelling have proved to be wrong, as such children through their efforts have gone on to excel. This therefore questions the criteria that are at times used in placement and therefore labelling of children. At times there are no reliable instruments to do the assessment and placement. There is a tendency to rely on past experience and children can be given wrong labels. Our failure to understand particular behaviours may contribute to us giving children wrong labels. Those who argue against placement and labelling advocate for inclusive education, as labelling opens the door for viewing children in a stereo-typical and prejudicial manner (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997).

## **7. THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND SCHOOL HEAD**

The teacher has a very important role to play in the handling of children with exceptionalities. This is so as in most of the cases the teacher is involved in the assessment and classification of children at school. As noted by Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) a teacher has to accommodate individual pupils' needs and be able to evaluate their academic abilities and disabilities. As a teacher, one has to screen and identify children with special needs and refer them to the relevant authorities. In Zimbabwe we now have a department that is responsible for needs assessment of children with disabilities.



Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) further note that a teacher has to participate in eligibility conferences, participate in programme writing, communicate with parents and guardian of the children, and other professionals. At the same time the teacher has to keep on advancing professionally so as to be in touch with new developments and trends in teaching and handling of children with exceptionalities.

Teachers and school heads as caregivers have to note that all children have to go through the same stages of development despite the labels we give them. They have to create a social world for the exceptional children by providing a learning environment that caters for self-understandings. This can be done by using teaching and learning activities that enable the children to share with others. Such activities can be best promoted through play. The role of play in managing exceptional children cannot be overemphasized. Decker (1990) observes that play contributes to the development of children's social world, as it contributes to physical development, mental development and social-emotional development. The emphasis on different forms of play may depend on the age of the child and level of development. Teaching through play may include playing with objects and playing with people. The teacher and school head have to plan and organise resource for these different forms of play. There is need for a well equipped play centre which is well managed.

In relation to management of children with special needs Shea and Bauer (1994) advocate for the systems theory in classroom management. They note that in the application of the systems theory in classroom management there is consideration of interpersonal relationships and recognition of the impact of neurological and physical factors on the children's functioning in the classroom (ibid). Such an approach to learning promotes the participation of the learner as advocated in active learning, as the balance of power is shifted to the learner and learning becomes an interpersonal transaction between the teacher and the learner. In that regard, effective teaching is characterised by the following: model teacher behaviour, planning and organisation and support from management. Support from management is key for effective instruction. It is the school management that determines the class size. The class size has to be manageable in order for the teacher to be able to give individual attention to children with special needs. Furthermore, the school management through supervision of teachers is able to identify staff needs and staff development requirements. Such support from the school management has to facilitate learning.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The paper has identified the main features of labelling. It has discussed the different roles that labelling plays in responding to learners with exceptionalities. The paper has observed that assessment, classification, placement and screening are key components of labelling. They all acknowledge the differences that exist among children. The paper discussed the arguments for labelling and arguments against labelling. Lastly, it discussed the role of the teacher and school head in handling children who are exceptional. The paper advocates for the systems theory for classroom management as it provides for full participation of the learner. In that regard, the role of the teacher becomes that of facilitating learning rather than that of providing one way communication. It can be observed that the arguments for labelling far outweigh those against, and that indeed labelling is a first and necessary step in responding responsibly to differences among children with exceptionalities, as it ensures that the needs of children with exceptionalities are met.

## 9. REFERENCE

- [1] Algozzine, R.F. (2010). *Labeling and Disadvantages of labelling*. Boston, Prentice Hall.
- [2] Brassard, M.R. and Boehm, A.E. (2007). *Preschool Assessment: Principles and Practices*. New York, Guilford Press.
- [3] Crossman, A. (2014). *Labelling Theory*: [http://sociology.about.com/od/L\\_Index/g/Labelling-Theory.htm](http://sociology.about.com/od/L_Index/g/Labelling-Theory.htm). Accessed 31 March 2015.



**GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH**  
*(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)*

- [4] Decker, C. A. (1990). Children: The Early Years. Illinois, The Goodheart-Willcox Company, Inc.
- [5] Grobler, R.C. (2009). BED Education 2B. Sociology of Education. Reading Package OPV 2B 20 UJHP Johannesburg.
- [6] Hallahan, D.P. and Kauffman, J.M. (1997). Exceptional Learners: Introduction to Special Education. London, Allyn & Bacon.
- [7] Haralambos, M. (1986). Sociology: Themes and Perspectives, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London, Bell & Hyman Limited.
- [8] Hardman, M.L., Drew, C.J. and Egan, M.W. (1999). Human Exceptionality: Society, School, and Family. London, Allyn and Bacon.
- [9] Henley, M., Ramsey, R.S. and Algozzine, R.F. (2010). Labelling and Disadvantages of Labelling. London, Prentice Hall.
- [10] Heward, W. L. (2014). Who are Exceptional Children? Pearson Allyn Bacon, Prentice Hall.
- [11] Mangal, S.K. (2012). Educating Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education. Delhi, PHI Learning Pvt Ltd.
- [12] [www.Ask.com](http://www.Ask.com) Retrieved 4 May 2014.
- [13] Shea, T.M. and Bauer, A. M. (1994). Learners with Disabilities: A Social Systems Perspective of Special Education. Madison, Brown & Benchmark.