

The lingering effect of labels

Devashree Prabhu



Every class has a 'clown'. It also has a 'bully', a 'geek', a 'don', a 'scholar', a 'good for nothing', a 'fatso'. These labels are of course given in jest and we don't think twice about using them. Even when we meet up during reunions we refer to each other by these labels – "You remember that fatso from our class...", "What is that geek up to these days?" These labels appear harmless but truth to tell they create such deep impressions in our minds that they become our identities.

The famous psychologist Erickson has given eight psychosocial stages through which an individual develops. During the stage of Industry vs Inferiority (5-12 years), the school is a central part of the child and plays a very significant role in the child's development process. This is when the child is learning about life, relationships, and discovering himself/herself. Labels denote a way of stereotyping and are not reliable. Thus, if the teacher says, "Look student

'X' is very clever and intelligent, he completed his homework on time," what will the other students interpret from this? They possibly

will begin to believe that intelligence and cleverness is related to only completing your homework. Or they might get the idea that intelligence or cleverness is confined to the classroom.

Good girl/boy – bad girl/boy phenomenon

Imagine a classroom situation. There is a new boy in class – Ashok. The teacher introduces him as a 'very intelligent' boy to the class. From that day onwards Ashok becomes 'intelligent Ashok', or 'scholar Ashok'. Ashok always aces his tests getting anywhere between 93 and 95 percent. Everyone in the school blindly believes that

Ashok will be the star of the school in the board exams. When the exam results come everyone is surprised. Ashok not only missed the board ranking but he came 3rd in his class division. Ashok 'failed' to live up to expectations.

Labels such as 'you are so intelligent' or 'you are a hopeless case' are made very casually and sometimes in a fit of anger. What teachers sometimes fail to understand is that these remarks are like an indelible ink. The child comes to believe them and is either happy or feels guilty. It is important that we instead praise or chide the child's action and not the child himself/herself.

Decoding the labelling behaviour

In Ashok's case, the labels 'very clever', 'very intelligent' should actually have motivated him to do his best. But they did not. Some might argue that all the praise got to his head and led him to become overconfident. But Ashok was always an 'A' grade student. He scored well in all his exams. So what might have happened? Two things – the school teachers might have been victims of the 'halo effect'. Since Ashok was known to be 'intelligent' and 'very clever', this facet of his coloured their evaluation of his tests. This concept of the 'halo effect' can cause each of us to judge things differently. It happens to most of us and we do not even realize this when we make judgments (Nisbet & Wilson, 1977). The other thing is that Ashok was extremely stressed by everyone's expectations and the pressure finally got the better of him.

It is also observed that when the teacher rebukes a child as 'stupid' or 'idiot' in front of the whole class it turns out to be extremely harmful to the child and the child almost gives up trying or even investing any effort in school activities. This is especially true when the labels are negatively worded. There are also cases where students have come upon hating or disliking a particular subject because that subject teacher humiliated him/her in front of the whole class.

Pointers for teachers

Most of our lives we carry, evade, and fight the labels that come our way. What can teachers really do so that children do not go through this struggle? Here are some pointers which may be helpful.

- If you are unhappy with a student's behaviour, condemn the behaviour or the act and not the student.



Photo: Sakti Prasanna Mohanty
Courtesy: DAV Public School, Pokhariput

- Always check the vocabulary you use with your students. 'Useless', 'idiot', 'scholar', 'geek', 'loser', these are not just adjectives but powerful words to those little ones who are in a state of developing their identity. These words have the power to break or destroy them.
- Sometimes, children tend to start identifying with the labels given to them and behave accordingly. They engage in what is called 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.
- Try and be positive and consistent with the student. Allow him/her to make mistakes. Always leave the door open for improvement. It will help the student a lot – emotionally, psychologically, mentally, and physically.

Teachers also know that there is nothing in the world that can be perfect. We are all learners and 'work in progress'!

References

1. Nisbett, R.E., & Wilson, T.D. (1977). The halo effect: Evidence for unconscious alteration of judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35 (4), 250-256.
2. Smith, A., Jussim, L., & Eccles, J. (1999). Do self-fulfilling prophecies accumulate, dissipate, or remain stable over time? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77 (3), 548-565.

The author has a Masters in Psychology and is currently working as a Project Assistant at the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, Mumbai. She can be reached at < devashree.prabhu@gmail.com > .