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Labels in Learning: An Exploration of the Effects of Cognitive, Intellectual, and Social Labels on Connections in the Classroom

Corinne Alexander
LABELS IN LEARNING:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTS OF COGNITIVE, INTELLECTUAL, AND SOCIAL LABELS ON CONNECTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Labels in Learning: An exploration of the effects of cognitive, intellectual, and social labels on connections in the classroom

Abstract

This paper is a testament to the negative impacts that cognitive, intellectual, and social labels have on connections in the classroom, both by way of students’ identities as learners and access to education. Labels pervade schools and exclude children from exploring, wondering, and making due to students’ identities and educators’ perceptions of their social interactions and academic performance. Whether intentional or not, giving students labels based on their cognitive, intellectual, and social abilities and performance creates separation and allows for maltreatment of students based on who does and does not have certain labels. As educators it is essential that we move away from these harmful labels and work towards seeing students as whole children so that we can support them in learning and obtaining tools for future successes.
Dedication

Dedicated with love to all my teachers and to all the students who have taught me. This work would not exist without you and I am eternally grateful for everything you have shown me.

Acknowledgements

I would like to recognize that none of this would have been possible without support from many people in my life, so I would like to give a special thanks to Kim Ferguson, the director of Graduate Studies here at Sarah Lawrence, Denisha Jones, director of the Art of Teaching Program, my amazing professors, Rue Beckerman and Patricia Virella, and the teachers and students who have hosted me for my field experience and student teaching placements- Cassandra Santos at the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center, Erin Jeanneret, Andrea Ruiz-Lopez, and Jardy Santana at Mott Haven Academy Charter School, and Geronimo Salazar and Tatiana Rosa at Castle Bridge School. All of you have shaped my journey to becoming a teacher and I’m so grateful for the opportunity to work with you. And of course, nothing at all would be possible without my family, the Amazing Alexanders, so thank you for reminding me that getting two degrees in 5 years wasn’t an insane decision.
Collaboration and connection are essential aspects of education, but many students are not given opportunities to do so because of social, cognitive, and intellectual labels that they are assigned by teachers and peers. Therefore, labeling students based on their social, cognitive, and intellectual abilities creates social and academic barriers that teachers should strive to eradicate so that all students can succeed.

I. What “labels” are we discussing?
   a. Social
      i. Loud, Troublemaker, Moody, Attention-Seeking
   b. Intellectual
      i. Lazy, Stupid, Gifted, Advanced
   c. Cognitive
      i. Sensitive, Lost, Low-Performing, High-Performing

II. How do we get labels?
   a. Assumptions
      i. Identity
         1. Tatum- “When we look at the experiences of Latinos, American Indians, [Black Americans], and Asian Pacific Americans in the United States, we can easily see that racial and cultural oppression has been a part of their past and present and that it plays a role in the identity development process for individuals in these groups as well.”
         2. “It is important to consider what messages children are receiving about [their] relative worth.” (123)
            a. “Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented
in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether?” (99)

3. Shalaby- “…school identity can seem to be [children’s] only identity if we fail to account for who they are in the many other parts of their lives… experts and natural learners.” (151)

4. Rose- “…isolation of neighborhoods, information poverty, the limited means of protecting children from family disaster, the predominance of such disaster, the resilience of imagination, the intellectual curiosity and literate enticements that remain hidden from the schools, the feelings of scholastic inadequacy, the dislocations that come from crossing educational boundaries.” (9)

ii. Social interactions

1. Shalaby- disruptive, combative, antisocial students are often called “troublemakers”

2. Shalaby- “Schools engender trouble by using systems of reward and punishment to create a certain kind of person- ‘a good student’… those who resist this narrow definition of what it means to be good are excluded from the community of goodness more broadly.” (152)

iii. Academic performance

1. Rose- “Through all [Rose’s] experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes [him] most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order” (205)

2. hooks- banking and obedience are the systems in place in schools, nonconformity is suspicious

3. Rose- “students will float to the mark you set”

III. Who is giving students these labels?

a. Teachers, admin, and peers

i. It is very easy to pass off these labels as “teacher language,” but this creates a reputation for each child and normalizes name-calling in schools.
When teachers and administrators refer to students by labels, students pick up on and start to use those labels as well.

ii. Mooney & Cole- “Her body language told [the kids in the higher reading group] that they were good, they were smart, and it told me that I was stupid”

IV. Over the past two years I have been student teaching in various classrooms- here are examples of how labels vs. seeing the whole child impact perspective:

a. Haven PKB & 3A- Z’akai, Esquire, Ariel

   i. Haven Academy: charter school founded on restorative justice and PBIS for children affected by welfare. Emphasis on SEL, staff of social workers, therapists, and other specialists to provide services as needed.

   1. Z’akai

      a. Deficit/labeled view: Online pre-k, wasn’t interested in formal instruction in whole or small groups, was “behind” on letter formation and spelling/writing her name.

      b. Whole-child view: Really interested in YouTube and aware of how the internet works and how to navigate it, external factors contributed to distraction during lessons.

   2. Esquire

      a. Deficit/labeled view: called out in class, didn’t complete worksheets, needed frequent redirection and one-on-one support.

      b. Whole-child view: Could tell you anything about anime, understood class material and made meaningful connections, had been out of school since K due to COVID-19

   3. Ariel:

      a. Deficit/labeled view: talkative, needed reminders to focus on her own work, redirected for talking to peers and teachers.
b. Whole-child view: Passionate about learning, wanted to help others succeed, often emulated love and care that she received from home and school.

b. Castle Bridge Oaks- Robert & Raahi
   i. Castle Bridge: progressive public school, small student body, psychologist, paraprofessionals, and other specialists available to support students. Evaluations based on Patricia Carini’s Descriptive Review Process.
      1. Robert
         a. Deficit/labeled view: emerging reader, disliked math and spelling, interrupts during group discussion, needs frequent reminders to do worksheets.
         b. Whole-child view: Knows everything about robots and space, amazing storyteller, bookmaker, block builder.
      2. Raahi
         a. Deficit/labeled view: Calls out often, asks the same question multiple times, tattles on peers.
         b. Whole-child view: Smart and inquisitive, liked to know what was happening and why.

V. How do labels affect learning?

a. Access to education
   i. “Troublemakers” are often removed from the classroom
   ii. Shalaby- troublemakers are canaries in a coal mine, alerting us to often-ignored harms caused by schools
   iii. Mooney & Cole- “I was given Ritalin as a kid so I would sit down at my desk…This was also the use of chemical restraint on a seven-year-old”

b. Internalizing
   i. Mooney & Cole- “Why am I stupid? I can’t read; all the other kids can read. What’s wrong with me?”

   c. Ability to connect and collaborate
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i. Rose- “…people always… make you feel stupid with their fancy talk.”
(161)

VI. Case Study
i. Present the child
1. Elementary-age child, doesn’t speak much in class, daydreams during group instruction, deep thinking but often disorganized, easily distracted. Excels in reading and writing but struggles significantly with math, slow worker

ii. Present child’s labels & 1st and 2nd grade teacher comments
1. Distracted
2. Daydreamer
3. Slow worker
4. Perfectionist

iii. Academic/social repercussions
1. Late diagnosis of ADHD (and lack of necessary supports due to lack of diagnosis)
2. Internalized being a slow worker/bad at math
3. Incomplete work due to time constraints
4. Often overlooked as a result of being quiet

iv. Fifth grade teacher comments

VII. Social Implications
a. Respect and trust in the classroom/building community
i. hooks- “When students see themselves as mutually responsible for the development of a learning community, they offer constructive input” (206)
ii. Rose- “[students need] to be let into the academic club.” (141)

b. Intentional language
i. Students hear the way we talk about them and to them- it is important to use thoughtful and intentional language to support students

VIII. Implications for Teaching
a. See the whole child
i. Strength-based views in learning
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1. Low floor, high ceiling
   a. Rose- “… students [need] to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they [need] to further develop their ability to think critically, and they [need] to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers.” (141)

ii. Descriptive Review Process
   1. Not doable for every student all the time, but teachers can and should consider what the descriptive review asks about a child so they can know the child more fully.
   2. Carini- “…given careful and caring attention, [children’s] works offer great insight into [their] persisting interests, choices, and preferences and a reliable guide to an education responsive to them.” (15)
   3. “…if we as educators and parents are attentive to works, we are able to witness the child, the maker, thinking aloud, using the space of a page or block construction or a story as a territory in which to make experiences, feelings, and ideas actual and renewable, while at the same time breaking boundaries into new fields of possibility.” (179)

iii. Mirrors & windows
   1. hooks- “To hear each other… to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition”

b. Re-evaluating expectations for student behavior and academic performance
   i. Shalaby- “High expectations for behavior are coupled with high levels of academic rigor.” (7)

c. Heal students who have internalized reputation/labels
   i. Trauma sensitivity
      1. SEL
         a. Castle Bridge- Bank Street Bears
            i. Each student has a bear which is not only a comfort object, but also allows students to share their
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feelings indirectly by describing their bears’ feelings

b. Haven- SELT
   i. Weekly lesson with a social worker
   ii. Anchor charts with feelings and daily check-ins about feelings

ii. Restorative justice
   1. Resilience/Empowerment
      a. Shalaby- “We rarely hear the words freedom and love in our private conversations and public discourses on schooling, in our aspirations and hopes for our children’s education, in our proposals and recommendations for school reform.” (xi)

IX. Conclusion
a. Now, with awareness of the harm labels can cause students, we can re-examine our approaches as educators and work toward creating respectful, responsive, flexible communities and getting to know our students fully as strong, curious, intelligent beings.
Social, cognitive, and intellectual labels are all over schools. They are murmured between teachers, thrown around between peers, and written in permanent records. As teachers who often only know students from August to June, who are we to describe a student as a “troublemaker” or “gifted and talented”? Our job, at its core, is to provide students with an education and give them the tools necessary for future success. When we label students, we actively prevent them from learning and using those tools, whether we intend to or not. We are responsible for the futures of our students as educators, and we must strive to show them that they belong in the classroom, that they deserve to feel comfortable at school, and that risk is part of the learning process.

I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) at 16, and never formally received support for my learning disability until I was 21 and had entered the Art of Teaching program. In many ways, this project has allowed me to begin the healing process of revaluing myself as a learner after hearing the labels I was given as a young student. Over my two years in the program, I have found myself, again and again, returning to the idea that labels inhibit access to education and are a disservice to students. Looking back, labels were present in every educational setting I had been part of, from the many years I spent as a summer camp counselor all the way back to the casual discussions I heard between teachers when I was a young student. Labels came up in many of the readings I did as well as in the schools I did my field experience and student teaching, so it was only fitting that the culmination of my experience in the Art of Teaching program was centered around labeling and its effect on students.

In my second year of Art of Teaching, I took a seminar on Children with Special Needs, where I was introduced to Carla Shalaby’s work. Her book Troublemakers (2017) put into words what I had seen in my own time as a young student, that “high expectations for behavior are coupled with high levels of academic rigor” (Shalaby, 2017, p. 7). After reading her work, I decided to expand my project to include labels based on social interactions and classroom expectations. Too often I had seen my peers sent into the hall for making trouble, and Shalaby’s work pinpointed exactly why removing students from the classroom is harmful. When we take students out of learning environments for failure to cooperate with teachers’ expectations, they
miss content and are not afforded opportunities for forgiveness, effectively barring them from accessing education.

Labels also implicitly allow teachers to get away with treating students differently based on their academic performance. *Learning Outside the Lines* by Jonathan Mooney and David Cole (2000), which I read for that same seminar, touched on differences in the way teachers approached students who were high-performing versus students who needed support. This tied in the final, and perhaps the most important impact that labels have on students. Their identities as learners and people are greatly influenced by how they are treated in the classroom, and students who are given harmful social, cognitive, and intellectual labels are often treated differently from their peers, which negatively impacts self-esteem and willingness to take risks, two key elements of growth and learning.

Although I internalized and was impacted by social, cognitive, and intellectual labels, this does not have to be the experience of every child, and in fact it should not be. There are many avenues for using intentional language and seeing children as whole people as opposed to a set of labels. Patricia Carini’s Descriptive Review Process does exactly this. The five headings allow teachers to think deeply about their students and get to know them more fully, which is essential to evaluating children’s work and cultivating respectful, joyful classroom environments. Carini says when we are attentive to children’s work, “we are able to witness the child, the maker, thinking aloud, using [space]… as a territory in which to make experiences, feelings, and ideas actual and renewable, while at the same time breaking boundaries into new… [possibilities]” (Carini, 2001, p. 179). My fieldwork at the Sarah Lawrence College Early Childhood Center and my student teaching at Castle Bridge School were concrete examples of the success of play-based, child-centered education, demonstrating that listening to and observing children as learners and explorers doing valuable work creates a strong community of children and teachers working towards the same goal- to include all in making sense of wonderings and learning how the world around them works.

Traditional schools can also implement practices that encourage educators to stop using harmful labels. At Mott Haven Academy Charter School, I saw teachers communicate regularly with parents and students to support children’s needs and desires and make an effort to, as bell hooks (1994) says, “see themselves as mutually responsible for the development of a learning community” (hooks, 1994, p. 206). All types of schools can implement positive and restorative
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practices to value students as whole children. If educators focus on children as whole beings, we can change schools to create respectful, responsive, and flexible communities that support curiosity and diversity.
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Bibliography


Hello and welcome to my thesis presentation on cognitive, intellectual, and social labels in learning. Before we begin I would like to recognize that none of this would have been possible without support from many people in my life, so I would like to give a special thanks to Kim Ferguson, the director of Graduate Studies, Denisha Jones, director of the Art of Teaching Program, my amazing professors, Rue Beckerman, Lorayne Carbon, Pam Tannenbaum, Emily Cullen-Dunn, and Patricia Virella, and the teachers and students who have hosted me for my field experience and student teaching placements- Cassandra Santos at the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center, Erin Jeanneret, Andrea Ruiz-Lopez, and Jardy Santana at Mott Haven Academy Charter School, and Geronimo Salazar and Tatiana Rosa at Castle Bridge School. All of you have shaped my journey to becoming a teacher and I’m so grateful for the opportunity to work with you. And of course, nothing at all would be possible without my family, the Amazing Alexanders, so thank you for reminding me that getting two degrees in 5 years wasn’t an insane decision.
“[Children] are born whole, perfect, and complete. It’s up to us to keep it like that, not them”

-Vivian Anderson in On These Grounds

My thesis explores labels given to students based on their social, cognitive, and intellectual abilities, and it is important that we acknowledge the way these labels pervade schools and negatively impact our students. Throughout this presentation I would like us all to keep this quote from Vivian Anderson in mind. “Children are born whole, perfect, and complete. It’s up to us to keep it like that, not them.” Children come to school as explorers, makers, and wonderers and as the adults that lead their educational journeys, it is our job to value and preserve that curiosity. Oftentimes, the social, cognitive, and intellectual labels I’ve chosen to focus on do exactly the opposite. They devalue children's wonderings by contextualizing them as disruptive or dismissible, they interfere with making and exploration by calling it distraction, and overall they take away from what students are in school for- to be in the classroom and actively participate in their own education.
This project is exploring specific labels—cognitive, intellectual, and social labels that teachers give to students that create a reputation and thereby impact students’ educational journeys. Imagine if someone only introduced you as a set of labels—this is what we unintentionally do to children when we call them these things. When we warn another teacher to “look out for this student, they’re a troublemaker” or we split students into “Gifted & Talented” and regular classes, we take part in deciding how others approach them as learners and people, and in turn what they think of themselves. This is not to say that labels have no place in schools—some find labels empowering, some labels are necessary for things like IEPs or services that schools provide. The labels you see on this slide harm students that are or aren’t given these labels. Imagine if a child introduced themselves with any of the labels you see on this slide— if a five-year-old said “Hi, I’m Troublemaker” or if an eight-year-old said “I’m Model Student”. I would be shocked to hear students refer to themselves by these labels, but the adults in the classroom do this when we talk about students. The author of Troublemakers, Carla Shalaby, says “school identity can seem to be [children’s] only identity if we fail to account for who they are in many other parts of their lives… experts and natural learners”. When we refer to children as “underachieving”, “struggling”, or even the so-called compliments “advanced” or “gifted”, we are shaping their identities as learners, and if this is all we focus on, we are shaping their identities as people.
Collaboration and connection are essential aspects of education, but many students are not given opportunities to do so because of social, cognitive, and intellectual labels that they are assigned by teachers and peers. Therefore, labelling students based on their social, cognitive, and intellectual abilities creates social and academic barriers that teachers should strive to eradicate so that all students can succeed.
How do we get labels?

- Assumptions based on
  - Identity
  - Social interactions
  - Academic performance

Before we discuss the effects of social, cognitive, and intellectual labels, it is important to recognize where these labels come from. They largely come from assumptions about identity, observed social interactions, and perceived academic performance. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of “Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” says, “when we look at the experiences of Latinos, [indigenous people], [Black Americans], and Asian Pacific Americans in the United States, we can easily see that racial and cultural oppression has been part of their past and present and that it plays a role in the identity development process for individuals in these groups as well”. We know that the educational system is still affected by systemic racism and racial bias, so it is important to recognize the influence that racial and cultural oppression have on students of color. Different approaches to identity are also based on the messages we receive. According to Tatum, who we are depends largely on what the world around us says we are. “Who do my parents say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether?” The way we are portrayed and perceived by the world affects not only how we view ourselves, but also how we view other groups of people.

Mike Rose, education scholar and author of “Lives on the Boundary” identified educational boundaries for his adult English Language Learner students based on identity, such as isolation of neighborhoods, information poverty, the predominance of family disaster and limited means of protecting children from it, feelings of scholastic inadequacy, and dislocations that come from crossing educational boundaries. The issues Rose identifies affect most racial minorities, effectively othering students from
these groups and creating labels like “struggling” or “underachieving”. Observed social interactions can be responsible for labels like “attention-seeking” or “out-of-control”. We know from Carla Shalaby’s work that disruptive, combative, or antisocial students are often called “troublemakers” and that schools can “engender trouble by using systems of reward and punishment to create ‘a good student’”. Any student who resists the narrow definitions of a “good student” is excluded from the community of goodness, and, if labeling persists, are not given opportunities to be ‘good students’.

Finally, perceived academic performance has a hand in the labels students are given. As Rose experienced with his own students, there is an “ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order”. As bell hooks said, success in traditional schools is often based on obedience and the ability to retain information given by teachers (a phenomenon Paolo Freire called banking), nonconformity is suspicious and contributes to students being labeled as “troublemakers” or, if they do conform, “teacher’s pet” or “model student”. As Mike Rose says, “students will float to the mark you set”, and when that mark includes strict, inequitable boundaries, students are bound to receive labels that impact their identity as learners and their access to education.
Now that we know how students get labels, it is equally important to look at who gives out these labels. Many of these labels can be passed off as “teacher language,” but this creates a reputation for each child and normalizes name-calling in schools. We may approach students differently based on the labels we have assigned them. When teachers and administrators refer to students by labels, students pick up on and start to use those labels as well. In “Learning Outside the Lines”, a co-authored memoir about two boys with learning disabilities who went to an Ivy League university, David Cole recounts a time in elementary school where his teacher’s approach and behavior indicated bias towards higher-performing students. “Her body language told [the kids in the higher reading group] that they were good, the were smart” he says, “and it told me that I was stupid”. The labels we assign affect our body language, the way we speak to students, and oftentimes they are far more aware than they are given credit for. Students know which students are being treated differently and why, and oftentimes it leads to students using these labels for each other, which is where we get harmful names like “try-hard” and “stupid”. 
Looking at labels vs. seeing the whole child

- Real students
- Each student is capable, emotionally and academically intelligent
- Children are already whole humans capable of progress

As people who work with children, one of the main things we can do to prevent labelling is focus on seeing the whole child. The following anecdotes are from my time as a student teacher over the past two years. These are real children, so before I introduce you to them, I want everyone to be aware that all of these students have their own strengths. They are emotionally and academically intelligent, and capable of so much. They are also still learning and growing, so it is imperative that we approach them with the same love and respect that we have for any other human-child or adult.
Mott Haven Academy

- Trauma-sensitive charter school aimed to serve children affected by the welfare system
- Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS)
  - Spirit Tickets, theme days
- Push-in & pull-out services
  - ELL teachers, psychologists, social workers, in-school nurse qualified to prescribe

At the beginning of 2021, I began my virtual fieldwork placement at Mott Haven Academy Charter School. Haven Academy is in the South Bronx and partners with the New York Foundling to be a trauma-sensitive school aimed to serve children affected by the welfare system. They use Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems, or PBIS, to establish expectations and consequences for behavior in school, including Spirit Tickets for students who demonstrate Haven’s values of Honesty, Achievement, Valuing community, Empathy, and Never giving up and theme days. Many classes follow the Integrated Co-Teaching model, and the school also has a team of ELL teachers, psychologists, and social workers who provide services for students, as well as an in-school nurse who can prescribe medication. Haven Academy emphasizes Social Emotional Learning and aims to support the success of all students in and out of school. In this student teaching placement, I met our first child, Z’akai.
Pre-K B: Z

Labels
Distracted
Unmotivated
Loud

Seeing the whole child

Z is one of three children participating in school virtually from an apartment during the COVID-19 pandemic. She enjoyed watching videos on YouTube, and often made connections between what she learned in class and what she watched after school.

I joined Erin’s Pre-K B class twice a week via Google Classroom from January of 2021 through April. Z logged into our virtual classroom from the living room of her apartment, typically with conversation or a television show in the background. She was often distracted, and some days she would log on and refuse to work. If we regard Z solely based on labels, we miss that Z was in Pre-K relatively early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, logging into class at the same time as two of her siblings. Her environment was full of distractions, so of course she would be distracted in class. Given that this was a virtual Pre-K class, many of the engaging, motivating activities one might want to do in preschool were hindered by our inability to be in the same space. Even though she was participating in school virtually, Z was a joyful member of our class community who liked to laugh loudly and often. Although this was occasionally disruptive, Z’s humor was instrumental in bringing our class community together despite the ongoing global pandemic. Describing Z as distracted, unmotivated, and loud discredits all the amazing work she did when she was focused and motivated, and limits the opportunities she should be afforded as a learner.
3A: William

Labels
Disruptive
Oppositional
Emotional

Seeing the whole child

William is a third grader who has not had consistent school attendance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although he was working on following classroom expectations, he was able to make meaningful connections to content.

I was lucky enough to return to Haven Academy in September of 2021 as a student teacher in Jardy and Andrea’s third-grade class. In my first few days I got to know William and we worked together often in the three months I was there. William’s desk was often in a state of disarray, with loose, crumpled, and ripped papers spilling out of it—most of which were incomplete classwork or homework. He frequently talked out of turn or made other noises that disrupted the flow of a lesson, and he often needed redirection to raise his hand or complete his work. When he encountered work he did not want to do, Esquire would retreat to the “take a break corner” behind his desk.

Eventually I began teaching Cognitively Guided Instruction, a math curriculum based on solving word problems and representing them with number sentences. When William participated, he would write an answer on his sheet and then put it away or claim he was “done” without showing his work or verbally explaining his thought process. The answer was almost always correct, demonstrating that he was aware and understood the material. Despite often speaking out of turn, many of William’s contributions were about meaningful connections he made, again showing how intelligent he is.

We were able to take a class field trip to the children’s center at the New York Public Library, and it was on this trip that I was able to see and know more about William from him directly. He was interested in the anime My Hero Academia and checked out three books from the series even though I had rarely seen him choose books from our classroom library. We sat together on the train back to Haven and he told me about every character in the show. This conversation was proof that despite any trouble I had with William as a student, he was exactly like every other student in the room and
wanted opportunities to be treated as such. He needed specific supports in order to meet expectations for behavior, but he was capable of meeting them regardless. If I had only interacted with William as a disruptive, oppositional, emotional student, I would have missed the small moments that showed he was invested in his learning. It is important to note that much of Esquire’s first and second grade classes were held online during the COVID-19 pandemic, so he did not have regular access to teachers’ support nor did he have time to experience and learn classroom expectations. Seeing William as a whole child was essential to our connection as student and teacher, and I ended up learning at least as much from him as he did from me.
Another student I was able to form a meaningful connection with was A, a very bubbly and enthusiastic member of 3A. She came into school early with one of her fathers, who is another Pre-K teacher at Haven, and would help take down chairs, pass out morning work, and socialize with her teachers. She was what one might call a “model student” or “teacher’s pet” because she met or surpassed all expectations and maintained a tidy desk. A occasionally needed reminders to worry about herself, as she was very involved in what her peers were doing and often engaged in side conversations while working. From a label point of view, A could be described as attention-seeking or distracted, but that would actively diminish Ariel’s contributions and personality.

What we miss from seeing A as her labels is that as the daughter of a Pre-K teacher and a student who had been at Haven for her entire educational career thus far, she developed a love of teaching and learning that she wanted to share with her peers. Most of her side conversations were focused on helping another student, which would have gone unnoticed if her teachers hadn’t stopped to listen and get to know her. Coming from a caring home and school environment, A wanted to embody what she learned and was a keystone of 3A as a leader and friend.
My final student teaching placement was in a progressive, dual-language public school called Castle Bridge School, or Escuela Puente del Castillo in Spanish. I joined the Oaks, a combined-age kindergarten and first grade ICT class that spent half the day in English and the other half in Spanish. There are 26 students in the Oaks, but the school itself only has about 180 students. The small student body allows for more specific push-in and pull-out services including a social worker, speech and occupational therapists, an IEP coordinator, and at least two teachers in each classroom. Castle Bridge also supports students' social emotional learning by using the bears curriculum from Bank Street School of Education to help students express feelings, desires, and opinions. Students also receive narrative biannual evaluations instead of report cards, based on Patricia Carini and Prospect School's Descriptive Review Process.
While I was at Castle Bridge I had the opportunity to work closely with each student in the Oaks, but throughout the three months I was there I spent quite a bit of time getting to know Rob. We first began working together during Daily 5, a series of station-based literacy activities the students did daily to learn reading and writing skills. Rob loved the drawing and color parts of these activities, but was reluctant to try the writing and reading exercises. He often told me he “can’t read” and despite my repeated attempts to explain he wasn’t expected to be perfect, he didn’t enjoy being made to try. Some days, however, writing would click for him and he could string together multiple sentences. If I had left Rob there as a struggling reader and on-and-off student, I would have missed what an amazing storyteller and mathematician he is. Rob loved to make books to share in Storytelling, coming up with hilarious characters and plots that left his classmates with big smiles and belly laughs. Rob takes immense pride in telling stories and often used his cleverness and humor to bring joy to our classroom. He also was much more open to reading and writing when he was allowed to incorporate his interests—specifically robots and space. I was also lucky enough to go on multiple outings with the Oaks and got to know Rob as an explorative learner outside the classroom. More importantly, Rob is a friend to all his classmates, and his gentleness was always appreciated in our room. In the beautiful memory book I received on my last day as an “Oakie”, Rob wrote “thank you for teaching me how to write”, and that is a connection I never would have had if I hadn’t taken the time to see Rob as a whole child.
R is a curious, smart student. Although he is working on raising his hand before speaking and thinking through his impulses, his contributions are often thought-provoking or otherwise relevant to what is happening in the classroom.

Getting to know R, another Oakie, was a difficult process that was worth every redirection and tangent. He stood out to me immediately as an astute, observant student who had a lot to say. He often called out during group lessons, would ask the same question multiple times, and I often had to ask if he was telling on someone to get them in trouble or out of trouble. For many grown-ups, this would be bothersome and make it difficult to know R. Fortunately, he was in a classroom that prioritized respect for all and seeing the whole child, so through conversations with him and with his teachers, I was able to learn more about R and start to understand him. R is very observant and intelligent. He likes to have as much information as possible at his disposal, which is why he asked so many questions and would ask the same question frequently. He wanted to know why things were happening, to check that things he expected were still going to happen, and overall wanted to feel safe by being informed. Although R spoke over classmates and teachers, it was usually to make a salient point about the topic at hand or to make a connection. Due to his quick thinking and ability to internalize and understand information, R benefited from extra challenges or tasks in the classroom like more difficult worksheets or class jobs. He is an enthusiastic learner and a bright child who currently needs support in following classroom expectations. This does not mean he will never be able to grow or improve. R’s labels do not begin to encompass who he is as a whole child.
Differences & Takeaways

Discussing, instructing, and interacting with children based solely on their labels:

- Diminutive
- Narrow
- Dismissive

Seeing the whole child:

- Promotes understanding
- Includes strengths and deficits
- Context

When we refer to students by social, cognitive, and intellectual labels, we miss a large part of who they are. Children are not just students, they have lives outside the classroom that influence who they are, how they behave, and how they see themselves. While a label is just one word, seeing the whole child is a narrative, capturing why and how students may receive these labels and also addressing their prevalence, which was often minimal when combined with everything else we come to know about a child.

Seeing the whole child gives teachers context to who they are and how they became that way, leaves room for growth and improvement, and includes students’ strengths and deficits. The difference between labeled views and seeing the whole child is not only obvious, but paramount to the success of every child.
How labels affect learning

- Can impede access to education
- Can lead students to internalize given labels
  - Damages self-esteem
  - Negatively impacts experience in school
- Ability to connect & collaborate with teachers and peers

Now that we’ve established how students get these particular labels, the question we are left with is “so what?” Aside from potentially being unkind, why does it matter that we talk about students in this way? We know from Carla Shalaby’s work that troublemakers are often removed from the classroom, meaning they are missing out on opportunities for progress and learning. Teacher’s pets may be tasked with the role of supporting teachers, which as children and learners is not their job at all. Children can also be put into difficult situations when we see them only by their labels, like David Cole was as a child. In Learning Between the Lines, he recalls being given Ritalin as a child so that he would sit at his desk during school. He described it as “the use of chemical restraint on a seven-year-old” that eventually led him to using psychedelic drugs and dropping out of school. While not all cases are as extreme as Mooney’s, as educators we must recognize the harm that we cause by using this limited view of children.

The most important reason to see the whole child goes back to the old saying “little pitchers have big ears”. Students hear the way we speak about them and to them, and they internalize it and incorporate it into their identities as learners and people. Jonathan Mooney, Cole’s co-author who has dyslexia, recalled the thoughts he had as an emergent reader in school. “Why am I stupid?” he asked himself. “I can’t read; all the other kids can read. What’s wrong with me?” This idea was supported by teachers’ feedback and the way he was treated in the classroom- as someone less capable and less intelligent than his peers.

One of Mike Rose’s students also brought up an important impact that labels have on access to education by means of being able to collaborate and connect with others. She says “people always make you feel stupid with their fancy talk”. This not only
means that we should be differentiating methods of instruction to be more inclusive, but that the way we speak to our students is a factor in making them feel comfortable in the classroom. How will a child feel safe taking risks if they fear being talked down to? How will a child know when to push boundaries and try new things when they are being dismissed? The answer is simple- they won’t- and this means they won’t have access to everything they can learn as students.
Case Study

● Elementary age student
● 2 traditional public schools in 2 years
  ○ Typically ~25 students in a class
● Teacher comments from 1st, 2nd, 5th grade

There was one student who inspired this entire thesis, and as I tell you all about her, I want to focus on what information is missing and how this affected her. She is an elementary-age student who went to traditional public school from first to fifth grade. In her first two years, she went to two different schools, and although her file travelled with her you will notice that her teachers said very similar things, demonstrating an obvious disconnect between the two schools and a lack of interest in seeing the whole child. I am going to show you teacher comments from this child’s first, second, and fifth grade teachers, and then discuss the labels this student was given and how they affected her.
These are from our student’s first grade teacher. According to the teacher, this student “has trouble staying focused…daydreams or becomes distracted by classmates”. Later in the year the teacher mentions one of the child’s strengths, writing, but mentions an inability to complete work due to aiming for perfection or distractions, and therefore not being able to display her knowledge. Suggestions for these issues were a conversation and a work contract to record finished work, framed by the student potentially not understanding the importance of completing work. The labeled view we can take away from these comments is that this student is distracted, a slow worker, and a perfectionist who daydreams during class. Although this teacher closes with wishes for an enjoyable summer and continued growth, these labels still come through and cast a shadow on the other kind descriptions in this report.
Our student switched schools after first grade after her brother was accepted into the Gifted & Talented program, which she would fail to meet the criteria for in third grade. These are comments from her second grade teacher, who echoes much of her first grade teacher’s observations and suggestions. While this teacher included being proud of this student’s progress and accomplishments throughout the year, she mentions an odd expectation- that the student needs to be able to complete a timed five-minute math test. This teacher had access to previous reports and may have known that the student had trouble completing work in the previous school year, but the teacher makes no mention of knowing this or suggesting ways to support the student. This teacher also says the student is “well above the benchmark level” in reading, signalling that this student’s main struggle is in math. Eventually this student would come to see herself as being bad at math, and internalized that information so deeply that it followed her beyond grade school.
Now that we have established some of the labels this child was given, you may be surprised to know that the child I have been talking about is myself. I was a quiet student who did not often participate, which led to being overlooked in many settings, especially given my proficiency in reading. Math was seen as an outlying struggle and I had to learn to advocate for myself and my needs in mathematics. The “daydreaming” and distraction that my first grade teacher mentioned was a symptom of Attention Deficit Disorder, also known as ADD, but I was not diagnosed or offered supports until I was 16. Again, this was an outlying struggle. Going to two different schools in two years also added stress in many ways- I had to leave the friends I had made and try to make new friends, and I had to learn different expectations because I was in a different school. I continued to receive similar comments from teachers in third grade, and over those three years I internalized being “slow” and being bad at math, which deterred me from trying to understand and progress. Even as an adult, I am actively trying to revalue myself as a learner and maintain a growth mindset instead of the fixed one I adopted as a child.
Finally in fourth and fifth grade, I had established enough connections in school that my teachers began to see me as a whole child, but even that fell short of being fully possible. Teacher comments remained focused on academic performance geared towards getting A's and passing quizzes consistently. My math teacher mentions being more consistent with the effort I put into Mad Minutes (timed math tests) and quizzes and that an A is not a far reach, meaning that if I worked harder I could be very successful. My homeroom teacher very kindly notes that I am a deep thinker and comprehender, but we can still see that I was struggling with participation and completing work. Having internalized being slow, distractible, and bad at math, I was reluctant to work harder for A’s and I still had no concrete advice for completing work or attaining an A. These labels followed me despite my progress in school, and even when I started at a new middle school in sixth grade, I continued to have issues with taking risks and collaborating.
Now that I’ve provided multiple examples of how labels affect learning, it is important to discuss what teachers can do to move away from labeled views of children and towards seeing the whole child. Not using labels altogether is not necessarily doable for all educators, and as I mentioned earlier some kinds of labels are useful in supporting children. What we can do as educators and leaders is cultivate classroom communities based on respect, and speaking to and about children in a respectful manner. Strength-based perspectives and getting to know our students will also allow us to filter out labels, as will strong connections and communications between teachers, parents, and students. For students who have already internalized their labels or who have been given labels over a long period of time, practices like restorative justice and trauma sensitivity can heal some of the damage that labels cause. The most important way that teachers can help filter out harmful labels is by using intentional language. We may not think “struggling” or “advanced” are labels that hold much weight, but deeper thought into how those labels may be received is essential, and may lead to more accurate, child-centered language.

I am going to share some practices that I have observed over the last two years that have made positive impacts on students as developing learners in the hope that teachers can incorporate them into their practices and foster resilient, curious thinking.
Preventative Practices

Strength-Based Views in Learning

- Differentiation
  - Low floor, high ceiling
- Valuing all kinds of learning and work
  - Play, self-led work, assigned work, etc.

One practice that can prevent the use of social, cognitive, and intellectual labels is taking a strength-based view of children. When we approach students by focusing on their strengths and supporting them when necessary, they not only receive valuable help but become confident students. This includes differentiating activities and lessons so that all students can feel successful, and also valuing multiple kinds of intelligences and work. Play is too often overlooked as being trivial or not part of the learning process when in fact children can learn so much by playing and experimenting. Self-led work and student choices also tell us what students are interested in, which can help teachers restructure ideas and lessons so that students can receive them more readily. Every classroom I worked in over the last two years has used these practices to support and encourage students, which has created joyful learning environments where students feel comfortable.

In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose says “students need to be immersed in talking, reading, adn writing, they need to further develop their ability to think critically, and they need to gain confidence in themselves and systematic inquirers”. Immersive education allows teachers to observe their students in many different ways and settings, which in turn helps them see the whole child.
Preventative Practices

Prospect’s Descriptive Review Process

- Physical presence
- Disposition & temperament
- Connections with others
- Interests & preferences
- Modes of thinking & learning

Emphasis on intentional language

A personal favorite practice of mine is Prospect’s Descriptive Review Process. Developed by Patricia Carini and the Prospect School, the Descriptive Review is comprised of five headings that create a holistic view of children. The Descriptive Review is objectively a large undertaking— the five headings each merit at least a paragraph including observations, conversations, and teacher comments. Doing this for every child in a class may not be possible for teachers, but students’ presence, disposition and temperament, connections with others, interests and preferences, and modes of thinking and learning are all relevant to how students react and interact in the classroom. Even if teachers write one sentence under each heading for their students, or focus on students they may have difficulty connecting with, it is possible to see the bigger picture of who a child is in the context of the world, not just the classroom. The Descriptive Review also emphasizes intentional language and is based on observation, meaning there is less room for harmful labels to find their way into comments. Carini says “given careful and caring attention, children’s works offer great insight into their persisting interests, choices, and preferences and a reliable guide to an education responsive to them”. Children will often show, if not tell, us what we need to know about them, so seeing and listening will help us create expectations and experiences that benefit children and encourage them to be active participants in their learning.”If we as educators and parents are attentive to works,” according to Carini, “we are able to witness the child, the maker, thinking aloud, using the space of a page or block construction or a story as a territory in which to make experiences, feelings, and ideas actual and renewable, while at the same time breaking boundaries into new fields of possibility.” When we pay attention to children, we learn how to support and lead them in a way that is responsive to their desires and needs.
Moving into things we can do to support students needs without relying on the information they give us, mirrors and windows are a positive practice that we should strive to incorporate into the classroom. bell hooks says that “to hear each other, to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition”. Cultivating a respectful and safe environment is contingent on understanding where each person is coming from and also seeing one’s own life reflected in learning. When children see themselves in the classroom, they see that there is a place for them in official knowledge. They see that they matter and that they are important. Windows, on the other hand, allow students to look into what others experience. Mirrors and windows are not just important for students, however. Teachers can use what they see and what is reflected in their teaching to actively get to know and see their students as whole children.
Another way we can prevent falling back to harmful labels is by managing and changing our expectations for students. If we expect all students to sit quietly, any student who is unable to meet that expectation would be redirected, and potentially removed from the classroom altogether if the problem persists. As Mike Rose says, “students will float to the mark you set”. If our expectations were modified to be more accommodating, we could increase the scope of students that remain in the classroom as active participants in their education. Carla Shalaby backs this up, saying that “high expectations for behavior are coupled with high levels of academic rigor”. I challenge you to think of an eight-year-old who is capable of sitting through a 45-minute ELA lesson without fidgeting or having a side conversation. We must make our expectations achievable and equitable so that we can do what we are meant to do- teach.
Another positive practice I have loved observing and participating in is Bank Street Bears, a social emotional curriculum based around sharing indirectly. Each child receives a bear that they then name and accessorize, which is not only a comforting object when students are troubled, but also an avenue for students to share indirectly with peers and teachers. When we ask students how they feel, they may struggle to name emotions, or they may become overwhelmed or reluctant to share such personal information. Passing that responsibility or weight onto a bear allows students to stand outside of their emotions and look in so that they hopefully can more easily identify and verbalize what they are trying to communicate.
A different way to support social emotional learning is through dedicated Social Emotional Learning Time (SELT) where, like in a math or ELA lesson, students have dedicated time to learn about expression and coping. Anchor charts and regular check-ins are also part of SELT and allow students to share in a healthy and positive way. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Systems (PBIS) is another way to support students positively. As you can see on this diagram, there are three tiers of supports. Tier one is universal prevention, which includes providing all students what they need to be successful and prevent problems. Tier two is more targeted, so in the event that the supports from tier one are not sufficient, more detailed and adult-supported interventions are used to help students resolve issues and build skills to prevent conflict. Tier three interventions are reserved for the few who need intensive support. If conflicts persist after tier one and two efforts are put in place, tier three acts as an emergency measure to ensure that students are able to handle emotions and behaviors in a safe and positive manner.
Along with PBIS, restorative practices can also be used to begin the healing process after someone has been harmed. As you can see, some actions and measures are partly or mostly restorative, but community conferencing, peace circles, and family group conferencing are at the center as fully restorative practices. As Carla Shalaby pointedly notes in the introduction of Troublemakers, “we rarely hear the words freedom and love in our private conversations and public discourses on schooling, in our aspirations and hopes for our children’s education, in our proposals and recommendations for school reform”. By centering healing and love, we can create those respectful classroom environments that are essential to seeing children as whole beings who belong in learning environments. Even after a student has internalized harm, conferencing, awareness, and representation can help students process their hurt and rethink how they see themselves. This is not a practice that has to start in pre-k in order to be successful- even one school year in a classroom that utilizes restorative justice can impact students long after they leave.
Now, with awareness of the harm labels can cause students, we can re-examine our approaches as educators and work toward creating respectful, responsive, flexible communities and getting to know our students fully as strong, curious, intelligent beings. Although the use of cognitive, intellectual, and social labels may persist, my hope is that we, through small acts of resistance, love, and respect, shift our view of students to whole humans deserving our love and support.
Thank you!