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What's In A Name?

Arlene L. Barry

I knew she considered me stupid, and whenever something had to be read out loud, she always called on me first, just to embarrass me. If I'd screw up on a word, she wouldn't let it go or tell it to me. Oh, no, that'd be too quick. She'd make me stand there in front of everybody and tell me to keep trying, pointing out how wrong I was. Over and over. I used to try to hide for the spelling games because I knew I couldn't spell. But she'd wait 'til all the teams were set, and then she'd find the best team with the smartest kids, and she'd say to the whole class, 'We'd better put Tony on this team to balance it out.' I didn't talk back, but I think I should have. I should have hit her as hard as I could, but I always backed away from things (Ungerleider, 1985, pp. 12-13).

This story was told by 14-year-old Tony to Dorothy Ungerleider, a reading consultant. Ungerleider described Tony as "neither a minority nor disadvantaged. He did not misbehave or act out." His "IQ scores had ranged from 119 at age eight to an unexplained 74 at age 14" (p. 13). What especially alarmed Ungerleider about Tony's case was that he had received help from 23 different specialists in a ten year period; specialists who tested, retested and neglected to read each other's reports. By the time Tony got to 9th grade, Ungerleider believed he developed what she called "controlled rage." She thought the rage was caused by "remediation failure" and that it would continue to build and eventually cause Tony to explode.

When there is a lack of communication among specialists, as in Tony's case, mislabeling is bound to occur. Algozzine and Ysseldyke (1983) identify numerous cases of

mislabeled. More specifically, they have found few psychometric differences between groups of students that have been labeled learning disabled and those students labeled low achievers. "Many of the learning disabled children did not meet federal definition guidelines as we operationalized them and many low-achieving children were 'learning disabled' by these same discussion rules" (p. 242). Gaskins (1982), along with others (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Graden, Wesson, Algozzine and Deno, 1983), expresses frustration over the labeling issue:

The question of who should teach a poor reader is often determined by a label. Yet the experts who do the labeling do not agree on a clearly definitive way to decide whether a poor reader should be labeled reading disabled or learning disabled (p. 81).

Has this disagreement among experts regarding labels always existed (e.g., is it a historical pattern), or are current labeling issues the result of some recent phenomenon? The history of assigning labels to children who could not read originates with medical doctors. As in the case of Percy F., a bright and intelligent 14-year-old who was unable to read, those with significant reading difficulties were brought to a physician for a physical examination. Dr. W. Pringle Morgan (1896), Percy's physician, concluded that since Percy was "bright and of average intelligence in conversation...and his eyesight is good" (p. 1378), the adolescent must be "word blind."

The label *remedial* first appeared in the literature two decades later in an article by Willis Uhl (1916) titled "The use of the results of reading tests as a basis for planning remedial work." In his article Uhl did not specifically define his use of the term *remedial*, but described the students with whom he worked as retarded in their schoolwork and "in the retarded group" (p. 275). The term *remedial reading* did "come into

quite general usage during 1923 and 1924" (Smith, 1934, p. 191). A distinction was made during these years of general usage between a remedial case and a corrective case. Henry Morrison (1926), a professor of education at the University of Chicago, published a text which he wrote for high school teachers titled *The Practice of Teaching in the Secondary School*. In his text, Morrison defined a corrective case as one in which "the difficulty is not such as to make necessary segregation from the group" (p. 85). A corrective case turned into a remedial case, according to Morrison, "when the difficulty does not respond to corrective measures within the class group" (p. 86). Morrison then advised that "the school must set up an organization for special study and special remedial treatment" (p. 86). A similar distinction, one of degree, was used by Gray when he defined the two terms in 1931. Definitions by both Morrison (1926) and Gray (1931) were also sufficiently imprecise as to cover any number of reading difficulties. Gray explained that "corrective teaching includes steps that correct or eliminate errors or difficulties before they become serious" and that "remedial teaching implies that pupils have acquired bad habits which are difficult to correct" (p. 164). A decade later, however, Gray (1940) seemed to combine both concepts: "The term remedial reading has been used increasingly during recent years to refer to the corrective work undertaken by schools with groups or individuals who are retarded in reading" (p. 502).

In general, differentiations in the literature between remedial and corrective were infrequent. In a 1988 personal communication, Roy Kress explained that "in the literature you will find little distinction between the terms *remedial* and *corrective* prior to 1950" (p. 2). Kress himself published an article in 1960 to dispel confusion over these two terms. Kress' clarification was thus:

The child with a corrective problem may be retarded in reading anywhere from a few months to several years below his expected grade level of achievement, as estimated by an intelligence test... However, the child with a remedial problem... is handicapped by a basic neurological or psychological difficulty... Such reading difficulties more appropriately are classed as visual aphasia, or dyslexia and properly are labeled remedial problems (p. 540-542).

Based on his explanation then, Kress equated *remedial* with *dyslexic*. One's difficulty with reading took on another meaning during the 1960s, when the United States moved into the Great Society era. Many students who experienced reading failure during that time were thought to be culturally disadvantaged. To address the needs of the culturally disadvantaged, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. This act was implemented via five Titles. Title 1 authorized one billion dollars to improve school programs in low income areas (Hawes and Hawes, 1982). The thinking behind the Title 1 financed programs was that the information and experiences gained in those programs would compensate for background knowledge not received in impoverished homes. McGill-Franzen (1987) elaborates: "Compensatory education particularly in reading was seen as crucial to upgrading the school achievement of disadvantaged students and ultimately upgrading their status in American society" (p. 17). *Remedial* therefore meant *compensatory*.

Being *remedial* took on yet another meaning during the 1970s. Through Public Law 94-142, the Education of all Handicapped Children Act (1975), federal funding was provided to assist states in meeting the needs of handicapped students. The handicapping condition experienced by students with reading problems was called a *learning disability*.

A *learning disability* was defined by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare as:

...a disorder to one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which... may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps... dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include... learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disturbance, or of environmental disadvantage (HEW Standard Terminology [1975] as described in Hawes and Hawes, 1982).

By virtue of this definition a student who was learning disabled could never receive compensatory education because that student could not be environmentally disadvantaged. The reverse was true also, then, because the stated purpose of Title 1 programs was to provide federal aid to "educationally disadvantaged children from low income areas" (Vazquez-Nutall, 1982). McGill-Franzen saw another polarization between compensatory and special education due to funding policies. It is her contention that because of funding policies the definition of reading failure was reconceptualized. Students who had previously been called disadvantaged and serviced in Title 1 programs started to be called learning disabled and were serviced in special education programs. To support her statements McGill-Franzen cites U.S. Department of Education statistics and a paper prepared for the Working Seminar on the Family and American Welfare Policy (Hartle and Bilson, 1986):

Nationally the number of students classified as learning disabled has increased by 119 percent during

the past decade whereas the number of disabled students served in Chapter 1 [a descendant of Title 1] compensatory programs declined from 8.3 million in 1966 to 4.8 million in 1985, a decrease of 42 percent (p. 8).

Information from other sources substantiates McGill-Franzen's theory. For example, an article on careers in the September 17, 1990 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* lists special education as among the top 20 "Hot Track" careers for 1991. The hottest area in special education noted by the article's authors was learning disabilities. According to Mannix, Friedman, Golden, Schrof and Nightingale (1990):

The shortage of teachers for children with learning disabilities has been declared a national emergency. According to the most recent data, there was a shortfall of 30,000 teachers during the 1987-88 year. And the problem stands to get worse (p. 81).

Despite the increased numbers of learning disabled students and teachers, current Chapter 1 programs "account for 20 percent of the U.S. Department of Education's total budget, or almost four billion dollars a year. Approximately one of every nine school-age children is enrolled in the Chapter 1 program" (Anderson and Pellicer, 1990, p. 10). Along with remedial education, special education and compensatory education programs, a whole range of students with reading difficulties struggle between these categories. Getting help for noncategorized students can be a difficult process. For example, if a moderately disabled student does not live in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood, that student would have neither eligibility for federally funded Chapter 1 programs, nor any right to special education, until the student's moderate reading disability became severe. At that point the student could be considered learning disabled and enter a special education program. Other students who do not fit into

special categories may be eligible for one of an array of local, state and federally funded programs, e.g., Structured Teaching in the Areas of Reading and Language Arts (STAR), High Intensity Language Training (HILT), Preparation for Raising Educational Performance (PREP), Learning to Read through the Arts (LTRTA), reading labs, learning centers, basic skills, developmental English, reading academies, and a host of literacy options. The problem with all of these programs, according to Allington and Johnston (1986), is a lack of coordination.

Among those who discuss educational intervention programs for specially targeted student populations (e.g., Chapter 1 for economically disadvantaged, PL 94-142 for the handicapped...) there seems to be general agreement that little coordination exists among the various federal, state and local initiatives. While coordination has been variously defined in these discussions, regardless of definition, virtually no one reports locating coordinated efforts (p. 3).

The case of Tony, discussed earlier, is a classic example of the effects of a lack of coordination and communication. With categorical procedures currently in place, the mislabeling noted by Algozzine and Ysseldyke (1983), Ysseldyke, et al. (1983), and Gaskins (1982) seems inevitable. The labeling process truly becomes, as Otto (1986) notes, whimsical. According to Algozzine and Ysseldyke (1983) one solution is "spending less energy in finding answers to the who, why and how of learning disabilities, and more effort in determining what to do with students who fail" (p. 246). Perhaps if educators followed Algozzine and Ysseldyke's suggestion to teach instead of label, those students who did not fit into a category but needed assistance could receive it. I have served on numerous multidisciplinary team meetings over the years for students who desperately needed help, but did not qualify for

special services according to established guidelines. There was 14-year-old Jane Doe, for example, who had a Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test composite of 75. Her overall IQ was deemed too low to allow her to qualify for a learning disabilities program and yet because one of her specific area scores was a 91, it was decided that she exhibited mental capabilities too high for placement in a cognitive disabilities program. Therefore, armed with the apologies of the educational system and a PIAT-R (Peabody Individual Achievement Test-Revised) general information score at the kindergarten level, Jane marched forth unassisted to attend high school. To no one's surprise, Jane dropped out.

John Doe presents another labeling dilemma. Each year, for the past several years, John's mother referred him for testing, hoping he would qualify for an LD program. John was bright and articulate, yet he struggled with reading. Ms. Doe perceived a learning disabilities program as the help that John needed. Unfortunately, while several years below grade level in reading, John's reading scores were never quite low enough for him to meet district guidelines for program placement. Eventually, John will probably fall far enough behind to meet the LD criteria. Hopefully when he does he will not be like Tony (Ungerleider, 1985), ready to explode from remediation failure and controlled rage.

There has been a historical pattern of disagreement among experts about the way to label children who have reading difficulties. This lack of agreement has resulted in difficulties for students who end up being labeled, as well as for those such as Jane and John who cannot receive help because they do not fit a label. One logical solution to this problem might seem to be to work on a standardization of the labeling process. However, based on both historical (Barry, 1992) and current (Ysseldyke, et al., 1983) data, regardless of the criteria, the students who are referred, labeled and placed are the

students who "bother" teachers. According to Otto (1986) "the actual placement decision has little to do with the data gathered. Decisions are based on sex, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, reason for referral, availability of services, and parents' power in the school system" (p. 573). Also, once placed in special programs, students seldom move out of them and frequently exhibit "minimal gains in reading" (Gaskins, 1982, p. 82; Muehl and Forell, 1973-74; Koppitz, 1971). The students with whom I have worked who have been placed in self-contained LD classes frequently asked "When will I get into regular classes?" "I am tired" they said, "of being a skid." Perhaps it is time to begin a discussion of new approaches for meeting student needs that do not rely on labeling. Perhaps it is time, as Taylor (1991) indicates, to try to change the system instead of trying to change the child.

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