

# Labeling: To Tell or Not To Tell

BY PAUL PLOWMAN



**M**any parents are filled with great uneasiness upon learning that their children have been

identified as gifted. They wonder, and ask themselves:

- What is meant by the term?
- Should we rush down to the nearest community college and enroll in a gifted parenting course?
- Do we treat our children differently now? May we still expect them to do the dishes and cut the grass? Or should we, as supportive parents, take over chores so giftedness can flourish?
- Should we encourage only those friendships which might contribute to advanced intellectual and creative ability?
- Should we tell our children they are gifted, or will that just create problems?

Hold on parents! Your children are still the same children they were prior to being identified as gifted. They still need a parent's love and nurturing. This new label of "gifted" or "talented" should not become a stumbling block for you in your relationships with your children.

Gifted children already know—whether told directly or not—that they are different from most of their age peers. It is natural for them to feel out of sync with children who prefer picture books and comics while they enjoy adventure and enlightenment from the printed page. It is not necessary for you to focus on the label, but it is important that you help your children understand and cope with individuality—to appreciate the uniqueness

of each person. They need to understand that being "gifted" is not better—just different.

## PURPOSES FOR USING LABELS

So let us explore the purposes labels serve. The immediate purpose is to provide information. They give us ideas of what to expect whether it be garlic olives, patriotic poems, advanced math, or all A's on a report card. They are doors to understanding.

They also trigger emotion. Note two frequently observed bumper stickers:

"Proud parent of an honor student."

"My kid can beat up your honor student."

The "honor student" is the focus of both sayings; but one is very positive and the other negative. Let me share some experiences in which labels had negative and positive responses.

In the early 1960s I was employed by the California Department of Education, as the first consultant for the new Mentally Gifted Minors' Program. One day I noticed a very attractive brochure circulating among the professional staff, which highlighted high achievement in a California high school. It featured beaming faces of scholarship recipients who were described as outstanding in academic, leadership, athletic, and musical achievement. One of the state consultants had initialed the brochure and written words to the effect of:

Isn't it nice to be bright? Parents love you. Your teachers idolize you. And someday you'll lead us all down the path to socialism.

Clearly the identification of and focus on talented and gifted children had triggered negative emotions within this "professional" consultant.

During the first month of my employment, a high official in the Division of Instruction called me into his office and demanded to know why I had included my earned Stanford degree, Ed.D., after my name on a letter I had written. Here I was leading a new, state-wide charge to promote excellence through the Mentally Gifted Minors' Program, and was being chastised for displaying a label that signified excellence or high intellectual achievement—a major purpose of the MGM program.

On still another occasion, I was the Department of Education's representative on a Western Association of Schools and Colleges evaluation team reviewing a large high school in Los Angeles. In the opening session at the school, the chairman introduced team members to the high school faculty and to district personnel. He expressed pleasure in presenting each individual, naming their areas of expertise and their doctorate degrees. Unfortunately, the Department had not sent my credentials, and at the very end of the introductions, the chairman looked over at me and in what seemed a very condescending manner said, "Mr. Plowman, tell us something about yourself." I replied, "My doctorate is from Stanford in General School Administration." Suddenly I was a full fledged, not a peripheral, member of the team. Labels do indeed provide information and they provoke emotion.

As we all know, labels are both inclusive and exclusive in nature. And in some cases, they mean different things to different people. A can of peaches is exclusively a can of peaches. The labels, "Soroptimists," "Rotarians," and "Elks" identify groups of varying but like-minded individuals with shared interests and missions. The term, "skydiver," defi-

See LABELING, 40

## LABELING

Continued from 21

nately excludes me but not a friend who enjoys stepping off into space.

The terms "gifted" and "talented" have a number of meanings, resulting in confusion for parents and educators alike. There is a substantial body of research which validates identification of and programming for gifted children. Publishers, state departments of education, county offices, school districts, and institutions of higher education have spent decades perfecting advanced materials and strategies which engage gifted children at higher cognitive levels, in depth, with greater complexity, and at accelerated rates, preparing them for our fast moving information and technological age. Therefore, instead of abandoning the terms, we must be sure they are clearly defined and that we agree on their meaning in whatever context we are working. Let us look, therefore, at some instances in which the use of the label "gifted" is appropriate and when it is not.

### MISUSES OF THE LABEL

Labeling children as "gifted" may mean that we are:

1. Focusing on differences (setting people apart from one another) instead of promoting giftedness—focusing on separateness rather than wholeness.
2. Creating a class of children perceived as intrinsically better than other children.
3. Reducing incentives to work harder to achieve high goals.
4. Valuing children for what they can do rather than for what they are.
5. Assigning the best teachers to teach gifted children and other teachers to teach those who are not gifted.

We don't know a book by its cover. The world of appearances presents us with blinders that causes us to fail to recognize giftedness in a

large reservoir of untapped ability—including children from disadvantaged backgrounds and disabled children. We must be very careful to not misuse labels.

### APPROPRIATE USES OF THE LABEL

Labeling children "gifted" may mean:

1. Recognizing a category of children whose characteristics and needs entitle them to differentiated and more challenging learning.
2. Providing a focal point and a model for differentiating the curriculum and instruction.
3. Providing documented need for legislation assuring adequate funding.
4. Establishing the basis for more rigorous inservice education, curriculum development, individual instruction, and evaluation.
5. Highlighting academic excellence as an appropriate emphasis—along with excellence in athletics, business, technology, and artistic production.
6. Identifying and challenging children for whom we should have higher expectations.
7. Preparing more sophisticated teachers who are skilled in fostering higher intellectual inquiry, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and extended awareness.
8. Making school an interesting and worthwhile place for children whose lives are guided by a different drummer, who thrive on expanding their capabilities, playing with ideas, seeing new relationships, solving problems, guiding adults (e.g. in computer technology), and for some, participating in the adult world (e.g. managing their own stock portfolios).
9. Motivating excellence in all students and in all aspects of life.
10. Reducing school dropout rates resulting from boredom and little challenge.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

As mature adults, we recognize the need at times to down play our use of terms, so as not to raise red flags or antagonize others. In my judgment, it is perfectly all right—especially in the beginning—to refer to a gifted program as an enrichment or advanced learning program. The non-negotiable aspect is that student participants must be clearly identified by appropriate selection criteria and in educational programs uniquely suited for advanced learners. Hopefully those individuals who first saw red may come to recognize and accept, and appreciate the fact that gifted individuals have raised the standard of living for all of us. During times of trouble we seek the services of gifted individuals—a gifted plumber, a gifted auto mechanic, a gifted surgeon, or whatever gifted person will help to solve our problems.

Parents must be especially alert to not wittingly or unwittingly flout their children's giftedness with statements such as "Mary was identified as gifted. Was your daughter?" Program support and survival depends upon our being sensitive to the feelings and needs of others—in this case, parents whose children have not been identified as gifted.

The purpose of this article was to introduce the reader to a few common sense ideas about labeling. It might be wise for parents to sit down with teachers and administrators to brainstorm the pros and cons and best uses of labeling; reach a consensus; establish policy; and move forward with greater awareness, understanding, and effectiveness.

Good luck.

**DR. PAUL PLOWMAN** is the Advising Editor of the *CAG Communicator*. Past experiences include: 25 years as a California State Consultant in Gifted Education; conference speaker, federal projects director, and president of the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted. He can be reached at: [PaulPlow@aol.com](mailto:PaulPlow@aol.com).