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Labelling: A Vehicle for Conveying and Fulfilling Self-Prophesy and Low Esteem amongst Post Primary Students in Metropolitan Benin, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the arguments for and against labelling of post-primary students in Benin metropolis. The study utilized the labelling theory in its explanation of the subject. The design was exploratory and involved the use of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. A total of six hundred and eighty eight (688) respondents were administered on respondents in public and private secondary schools in Benin metropolis while 32 in-depth interviews were purposively conducted amongst students. A descriptive analysis of the quantitative data collected was undertaken using frequency distribution while manual content analysis was used for qualitative data collected from the field work. Findings from this investigation showed that the inappropriate use of labelling is counter-productive in the achievement of students' educational goals. Based on the findings of the study, there is the need to re-educate teachers on the best way to use label to achieve specific goals.

Key Words: Labelling; self-esteem; low expectation; self-prophesy; individualized attention

Introduction

It is a truism that from time immemorial, people have been labelled and it would appear that God himself started the whole process of labelling as is evident in the fact that he labelled Cain by putting a mark on his forehead (Gen. 4:15). The Nigerian society as it appears, has taken a clue and labelling

others is now a common practice. Initially, the concept of labelling was used by criminologists to explain the fact that no behaviour is inherently deviant on its own, instead, it is the reaction to the behaviour that makes it deviant or not. In other words, labelling as conceived by criminologists and as now applied by educationists, see deviants as socially constructed through reaction rather than action (Kitsuse & Specter, 1977).

As a theory, labelling was initially used by Becker (1967) in the sociological studies of deviant behaviour. The theory has however undergone much research in the field of education in order to determine the relationship between students' academic performance and the labels they have been given in class. In the school environment, advertently or inadvertently, teachers and school authorities have been found to label students, using different concepts or words. This, according to labelling theorists, tends to make students respond either positively or negatively to the labels that have been attached to them. They do this by changing the perception they have on themselves, again in a positive or negative direction (Risti, 1977) notes that the use of negative or positive labels amounts to the construction of self-fulfilling prophesies whereby the labels themselves generate the behaviour and educational outcomes which are predicted or prophesied in the labels themselves.

Sociologists like Hargreaves (1967) note that teachers in schools constantly judge and classify students as being bright, lazy, trouble makers, dull, "mumu" and that this whole process of classifying students, often times is based on non-academic factors and unfortunately, once a student has been labelled as good or bad, it is almost impossible to shake off that label and this, as Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) note, affects good educational attainment.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, there has been an increasing debate and controversy among scholars like Sakange (2015) on the role of labelling in education. Interestingly, there are arguments for the increased use of labelling as well as a decrease in the use of labelling in schools. The concept labelling simply refers to the process by which people come up with a classification or a description to either mark or identify others who deviate in some significant ways from societal norms.

Some scholars have argued that labelling not only has a place in education but has a number of advantages closely associated with it and that when a student is identified as brilliant, it thus enables the teacher to single out such student for special instructions and plans for his abilities. This implies that the child is afforded the opportunity (as a result of his being labelled) to be occupied with challenging academic work that would prevent him from being bored since he is way above his contemporaries (Heward, 2010).

Similarly, labelling a child as struggling academically is in a way acknowledging that there is a problem and this acknowledgment enables the teacher find a solution to the problem. However good as this argument may sound, labelling has been criticized on the ground that a label can lead to social disadvantages and exclusion from society. In fact, labelling students can create a sense of learned helplessness which may make the student feel that since they are labelled, they cannot do well and this can result in low self-esteem. Besides, when a student is labelled, it can lead others to have low expectation from him. The truth is, if teachers and parents do not believe in the ability of the students, then the students will not believe in themselves and consequently, they are set up for failure (Tanneneaul, 1938).

It is glaring from the foregoing that labelling students could have positive social implications in their academic pursuits and similarly, could lead to low self-esteem and lower expectation which ultimately sets a student up for failure in school and in life generally. This study therefore sought to determine the role labelling plays in the life of the Nigerian student.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to find out the implication of labelling on the academic performance of students.

Research Question

To what extent does labelling affect the academic performance of students?

Brief Review of Related Literature

The word labelling refers to a sort of categorization, stigmatization and attaching of a name to a person or persons as the case may be. To gain admission to secondary schools in Nigeria, pupils have to take entrance examination which becomes a basis for distinguishing their capability and unfortunately sets in motion, the concept of labelling. The word labelling has been variously defined by scholars. Hardman et al (1999) argues that it is the process by which the society describes and identifies an individual who varies in some significant way from the accepted norm. Implicit in this definition of labelling is the idea that it is the society and in this instant case, the school teacher that creates a 'name' and expects the student to live out or act out the name given.

Labelling could also be referred to as the attachment of assumed qualities to a particular person that are used to describe or identifying him. In this sense, it is the approximation of characteristics of the criteria that the society sets to establish of a person meet societal expectations. On their part, Reynolds and Fletcher-Janzen (2004) believe that labelling is nothing but a concept that refers to a series of negative effects which result from some type of formal classification. This definition is further echoed by Hobbs (1975) when he argued that labelling is a form of classification, the act of assigning a child or condition to a general category or to a particular position in a class system.

Schools in Nigeria constantly engage in labelling and this occurs in various ways or forms. Some schools place students in different classes in strict reference to their academic position in promotional exams. Another form of labelling is placing all science students in one class while the arts students are in a different class. Other forms of labelling include the reference to a student as slow, bright, trouble maker, difficult or "mumu", a Nigerian word for foolish, high achiever, thief, "meat boy", 'pig' to mention but a few. Over the years, some parents have had to go to their children's school to complain about the names their children are called by teachers. In spite of these complaints, Igbinoba (2014) notes that labelling has not ceased. Interestingly, there are several arguments surrounding the function of labelling in the educational attachment of students. Labelling could potentially serve as a social benefit and at the same time a plague that ought to be avoided.

On the positive side of labelling, it has a number of advantages in education. Henley et al (2010) noted that when a child is identified and labelled as gifted, it enables the teacher to mark the child for special instructions. Once the ability of the gifted child is recognized, the teacher is thus able to plan for him. Furthermore, labelling entails classification of children. This implies that the teacher is thus able to manage different children according to their abilities. Another manifest merit of labelling has to do with the fact that labelled students are able to receive special and specific help in order to remedy their problem. Little wonder then that Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) noted that labelling has led to the development of specialized teaching methods and the likes, which teachers have found to be a ready tool to help children.

Some scholars have argued that the whole idea of labelling is to identify and categorize students according to their abilities. This without doubt is the first and most crucial in responding responsibly to these differences (Brassard and Boehm, 2007and Algozzine, 2010). Fine as this rendition on the positive goal and nature of labelling may appear, it has however been severely lashed at on several

grounds. One of the social consequences of labelling students is that, it leads to social stigmatization with the attendant effect of the child's peer not only rejecting him but at the same time ridiculing him. Students have been known to experience peer issues as some of them, due to labelling by teachers have become isolated and withdrawn in the school (Heward, 2010).

Labelling students tends to lead to a sense of helplessness as the labelled students may feel that since they are labelled, they just cannot do well. Implied in this, is that the student may lose his self-esteem or begin to experience low self-esteem. In addition, it also leads to low expectations from the labelled students. Most commonly, people, teachers inclusive may consider or see a particular student as incapable of achieving a specific task. Arguably, if the teachers and even parents do not have confidence in the ability of the students, it invariably means that the students will also not either. This leads to a cycle and the students are unintentionally set up for failure in the future.

Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000) note that labelling leads to social disadvantage and exclusion from society. This makes it defeat the very essence of labelling. Worst still is the fact that labels may stay or stick with a person throughout their entire life (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007).For instance, a child having the label of a mental illness means that the child will be stigmatized for life and this will have a bearing on how he will be treated throughout his life. In sum, teachers' labelling of students seems to have an effect on the students' self-concept which could be for good or for bad. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) observed in their study that once a student is given a positive label, he or she acts that label out and vice versa. They further stated that self-fulfilling prophecy comes into place when a student acts out a label that he or she has been given.

Theoretical Framework

The labelling theory was adopted by this study in the explanation of the subject under investigation. The main proponent of this theory is Becker (1963). The central thesis of this theory is that individuals come to identify and act in ways that reflect or show how others label them. Labelling theory assumes that although a deviant act can initially be caused by different conditions, but once the deviant behaviour has been labelled, there is the possibility of the deviant behaviour becoming more stable and becoming a means of defence, attack or adaptation (Lamarck, 1967). Although this theory was originally applied to sociological studies of deviance, it has however severe implication in the field of education, particularly as it has sought to determine students' academic performance on the basis of the labels they have been given in the classroom and consequently, the expectations that they have obtained by the teachers and school management.

In relation to education, labels have a deep implication and impact on how students feel about themselves, what they believe about themselves and the images they carry of themselves. In fact, labels have the power to define and shape who and what a student will become. In other words, labelling students leads to the self fulfilling prophesy whereby a student once labelled, continually lives out the label, whether the label is positive or not.

Methods and Materials

The study employed the concurrent triangular design in order to obtain different but complementary data on effect of labelling on the academic performance of students in post primary schools in Benin Metropolis. The design chosen brought together the differing strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses of quantitative methods with those of qualitative methods (Creswell, 2004). From the qualitative paradigm, the descriptive survey design was used. The descriptive survey design was used to collect information that described, explored and helped the study to investigate the population based on sampling (Kothari, 2011). For the qualitative paradigm, the in-depth interview (IDI) guide was used, since it is a purposeful undertaking by the study which interrogated subjects on a given situation to collect needed information.

The face and content validity of the research instrument was ascertained by three experts in the field of education and sociology in the University of Benin, Nigeria. The research instrument was divided into two sections. Section A dealt with the demographic characteristics of respondents while section B dealt primarily with the issues involved in the subject under inquiry. The split-half method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Reliability coefficient result obtained for the instrument was 0.95. The data gathered through qualitative technique was content analyzed while descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the quantitative data.

Benin metropolis has both public and private secondary schools from were six hundred and eighty eight (688) respondents were sampled, while 32 in-depth interviews were purposively conducted amongst students in the public and private secondary schools. The choice of these interviewees stemmed from the fact that they are the labelled, and are knowledgeable in the subject under investigation.

Out of the seven hundred (700) questionnaires that were administered, six hundred and eighty eight (688) respondents were returned, found useful and therefore used for analysis. This however represents a return rate of 98.4% and is considered significant. For the purpose of efficiency and thoroughness, two field assistants were recruited and trained. The field assistants were involved in the pre-test of the instruments and also the collection of the required data used for the study

Methodology
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Sex		
Male	480	70
Female	208	30
Total	**688**	**100**
Age		
21-30	120	17
31-40	405	59
41-50	121	18
51-60	42	6
Total	**688**	**100**
Religion		
Christianity	668	97
Islam	12	2
Others	8	1
Total	**688**	**100**
Educational level		
N.C.E	163	24
B.Sc	500	73
M.Sc	25	3
Ph.D	-	0
Total	**688**	**100**
Marital status		
Married	558	81
Single	130	19
Total	**688**	**100**

Source: field survey, 2017

Table 1 summarizes the results of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. It shows that among the 688 respondents who participated in the study, 70% of them were male while 30% were

female. 17% were in the 21-30 years age range, 59% were between 31-40 years while 18% were between 41-50 years and 6% were 51-60 years. On religion, 97% of the respondents were Christians, 2% were Muslims and only 1% practiced other religions. As for educational status, 24% of the respondents had were N.C.E holders, 73% were B.Sc holders while 3% were M.Sc holders and none had Ph.D. On marital status, 81% of the respondents were married while 19% were not married.

Table 2: Labelling and Students' Academic Performance

Does labelling affect students' academic performance?	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Yes	680	99
No	8	1
Total	**688**	**100**

Source: field survey, 2017

Table 2 shows that 99% of the surveyed population affirmed that labelling affects students' academic performance while 1% was in the negative.

Table 3: Relationship between Labelling and Academic Performance

In what way does labelling affect the academic performance of students?	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Positively	123	18
Negatively	565	82
Total	**688**	**100**

Source: field survey, 2017

Table 3 shows that 18% of the surveyed population held that labelling affects students' academic performance positively while 82% held that negative labelling affects students' academic performance negatively. The finding of this study validates the previous works of Heward, (2010), Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000) and Algozzine, (2010) that labelling leads to negative social consequences among students.

The result of this study is further collaborated by the view of one interviewee when he asserted that:

> My teacher is fond of calling me "mumu" (foolish) and good for nothing boy. She hardly sees anything good in me, to the extent that even when I answer a question correctly in class, she would not even realize it but still flog me. I not only hate her, I also hate the subject she teaches which is why I absent myself from her class at the slightest opportunity. She is so annoying and discouraging (IDI, Male student, Public Secondary School, Benin City)

Another respondent had this to say:

> I came to this school with high expectations and was determined to continue to do my best in my book work but Uncle James; the Further Mathematics teacher who sees nothing good in me has killed my dream. He says I am a yam head, always posing and talkative. I have decided not please him. Let him continue to hold his impression about me. Just that even fellow students have decided to join him to mock me thus making going to school a distasteful and

disgusting experience. God forbid that I would enroll Further Mathematics in school certificate exam. Have crossed my mind, I do not care what Uncle James and those lousy boys think (IDI, Female, Private School, Benin City).

Another respondent stated thus:

> Labelling is not good. Stigmatization or stereotyping somebody is evil. Teachers in my school commonly give people nicknames and before you know it, the students start to behave according to the names. I cannot explain it but it truly affects students (IDI, Male, Private Secondary School, Benin City)

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed that teachers in schools use different types of labels, some positive and others negative, on students who eventually act these labels out in school or later in future. In fact teachers in classrooms label students in a particular way and then make predictions in relation to the label he or she has given to the student. This label affects the way the teacher relates with the students as well as the way the students see themselves and relate with each other in the classroom. The study concludes that when positive labels are used on students, it has positive implication on the students' academic outcomes and vice versa when negative labels are used.

The study recommended that teachers in schools should assign positive labels on students whenever the need to label occurs, as this can motivate the student to act out the label both in the class and in the outside world. In the same vein, teachers should as much as possible, avoid the use of negative labels or words such as dull, foolish, good for nothing, thief, pig, and so on, on students as these tags affect the esteem and expectations of the students vis-à-vis their academic outcome.

It is further suggested that rather than labelling students, the teacher should where possible employ individualized attention for students identified as either bright or struggling. The student will appreciate this personalized or individualized attention more rather than stigmatizing them as dull to the knowledge of their peers.

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