

Education is bedevilled by the use of largely subjective labelling. The following two descriptions, not untypical, illustrate my point.

Child 'A'

A bright, hardworking, enthusiastic academic girl of supportive middle class parents, who has had the benefit of a dedicated, committed, well qualified young staff in a modern, well equipped, traditional, academically orientated rural school.

Child 'B'

A disinterested, lazy, non-academic boy of unsupportive working class parents who has been taught by a group of lax, trendy, unkempt teachers in an old, poorly equipped, inner city school using 'progressive' methods.

With the possible exception of the age of the school, all the other judgements used in these assessments of these pupils, labels, are subjective and reflect the prejudices and personal opinions of the author of the comments. These labels can damage a child - and yet as teachers we are constantly being required to make such subjective judgements. Often subjectiveness of the overall judgement is masked by an apparent element of objectivity, a test of a particular attribute, possibly numeracy or literacy, but what indication can such tests give of inventiveness, practical skills, sympathy, artistic talent? Many young people may be pitch perfect yet show no talent at composition.

Why should we in education be so obsessed with sorting pupils? For many years we had the great divide at the age of eleven on the basis of some fairly crude measures. Youngsters were clearly sorted (labelled) into the sheep and the goats and sent to the apparently appropriate institution. When I taught in a boys' Grammar School in Yorkshire some twenty years ago, Art was not in the curriculum, woodwork/metalwork was available only as a minority subject. This was known locally as a "good school" yet it could offer little in the aesthetic field for the majority of its pupils. This school "produced" young men of high academic standards but with great gaps in their general education. There was little room for individual expression, in fact this attribute was positively discouraged for the sake of the "greater good" of the school. Rugby was the school game: it engendered team spirit. The individualist was thought a little odd.

In general, the educational system has moved towards an apparently more humane process of secondary education with the widespread introduction of Comprehensive Schools. The majority of our young people now move smoothly along an educational pathway from 5 to 16. Primary schools liaise with their Comprehensive neighbours and pupils are not formally assessed and labelled, whole futures do not hang in the balance of a single assessment at eleven. However, overt divisive segregated patterns of education have in many cases been replaced by covert insidious forms of pupil sorting and labelling.

I have visited schools where on the first morning that the secondary age pupils arrive at their new school they are put into a large hall and are given tests in basic numeracy and literacy. At the end of these tests the pupils are sorted into three groups: pupils who will take academic examinations, pupils who will take less academic examinations, and a third group it is deemed, at this first day of their secondary education, will not be suitable for examinations at the age of 16. In other comprehensive schools examinations take place at the end of the young person's first year in the school and a similar form of sorting takes place on the basis of their first year examinations. The great danger is the blanket implied statement that the child is all bright or all dull. I would be the first to agree that children have different levels of ability in different subject areas, and would not argue that there must come a time when these differences of ability must be individually catered for. I would hope that the sorting could be delayed as long as possible, preferably until a child can perceive the differing needs of himself and his peers, and then to provide tuition at the appropriate level on a subject by subject basis. This process of setting by ability and subject takes account of the individual in a way that the old sorting process, still found in some comprehensive schools, cannot do. Streaming or banding by "general ability" within a comprehensive school is a hidden form of selection that perpetuates the old bi-partite system of education.

Some years ago I was involved in research into the reasons for under achievement of pupils in the upper forms of secondary schools. The parameters of the project were pre-determined by my employers, the main factor of concern being the high percentage of pupils leaving school without any recognised paper qualifications. I visited a wide range of schools and there was a clear correlation between disenchantment/lack of qualification and the early labelling of pupils by overt or hidden forms of academic

sorting. Pupils told me they had been informed early in their school careers that they were non-academic, many then spent two, three or even four years in non-examination forms, a label in our qualification-conscious world equivalent to leper. Is it any wonder that these young people were responding by violence, truancy and apathy? Having spent a lot of time talking to these young people I would dearly have loved to have been able to talk to them five years after leaving school, as I am convinced that many would, once clear of the damning labelling at school, have carved out successful careers and be living happy and satisfying lives. For so many, the problem at school was that their personality and abilities did not match the school range of acceptable moulds.

The divisions within education have been perpetuated into the comprehensive era by the all-dominating examination system. For too long this system has been a dual system devised to match the needs of the bi-partite education system that existed before the comprehensive school came into operation: the G.C.E. 'O' level examination for the Grammar Schools and the C.S.E. examinations for the Secondary Modern Schools. The G.C.E. examination was designed for the top 20% of the ability range and the C.S.E. for the next 40%. Recent trends have allowed the C.S.E. examination to encompass a wider spectrum of ability but the duality of the system remains. The implication of this double system was to reinforce labelling within the emerging comprehensive school. At some point a child had to be entered for one or other of the examinations or at worst, neither examination, thus producing the damning labels of academic/average/non exam child. Recent moves to merge the examinations offered high hopes of a removal of these divisions but I fear that the arrangements of the new exam now emerging will in fact perpetuate in a somewhat modified form all the old divisions and labels.

The total abolition of labels within education is a practical impossibility. Life in a school is a microcosm of society but can we not move towards a more positive use of descriptive terms? Child 'B' could well have strong talents in a non-academic field, the apparent lack of support from parents could well be the result of domestic problems and no fault of the pupil. Is "trendy" a disparaging term for teachers using the most modern methods of education? The label "inner city" school is only used in a derogatory way in reference to Secondary Modern Schools and Comprehensive Schools. Many very highly thought of Grammar/Independent Schools are most definitely inner city but are rarely labelled as such.

If one uses the analogy of commercial labelling to illustrate a point, of five tins labelled "pork luncheon meat", the ingredients varied widely and only by looking carefully at the ingredients (declared in small print) could the actual proportion of the meat be established. The variation was from 70-90%. I would suggest that a similar situation exists today in many areas of British education: overt parity of opportunity, but a closer look at the ingredients would reveal cause for real concern. We must look beyond the label and study the ingredients.