



Label Jars – Not People!

by JUDY BERANGER

Have you ever heard the expression “Label Jars - Not People”? Take a moment to reflect on the power of the spoken word and its role in influencing our perceptions. Did you have the experience of being labeled as a child or can you remember other classmates that were? In our staffrooms, classrooms, churches and community we witness how words influence the energy of those in the room. The words spoken may serve to be inspiring and promote positive energy, or draining and promote negative energy. The negative energy can contribute to the development of perceptions and interpretations that are judgmental and disrespectful. We frequently “label” fellow human beings who in some fashion do not fit the accepted or standard norms of the day. No one knows better than teachers how labels can become a permanent part of a person, affecting the development of his/her personal and social identity, becoming the filters through which others experience them. Unintentional though it may be, labels often restrict others from seeing the person in their entirety.

Real Life Examples

Examples from our school system illustrate just how powerful our words can be. How is your own perception influenced as you read the words used to describe Tom – a typical, sixteen-year-old high school student? Presently Mom says he is troubled, Dad tells him he is lazy, little brother describes him as “cool”, Grandpa brags he is “gutsy”, Grandma calls him a sweetheart, his girlfriend thinks he is caring and a neighbor describes him as thoughtful. At school Tom’s homeroom teacher tells him he is intelligent, one teacher has described him as stupid, another asserts he will never amount to anything, and yet another proclaims that he is going to make a real difference in the world.

Now let us consider Mr. Jones, an experienced teacher with more than twenty years in the system. One student finds Mr. Jones helpful while another laments, “he should be retired”. One fellow teacher finds him hyper, another finds him sad, and yet another finds him very sociable! One colleague asserts that Mr. Jones deserves to be department

head while another questions why he ever became a teacher! Mr. Jones’ wife describes him as caring, his neighbor finds him dependable, his parents find him lazy, and his hockey team boasts that he is awesome. Words are very powerful. They can give energy or they can take energy. Teachers use words as tools – and try to never use them as stumbling blocks. Medical science offers ample evidence that peaceful, affirming words can lower blood pressure, reduce stress levels, and in some cases even promote unexplainable physical healing. Teachers know that encouragement rather than criticism, both for students and for peers, goes a long way to making a daily difference in people’s lives.

Culturally we are sometimes quick to put labels on people without even realizing we are actually doing so. We use terminology in our homes and professions without conceiving the impact until years later when someone, because of a painful life experience, decides to speak out about how such labels hurt. I remember well a lesson I was taught by one of my own high school students a few years back. His parents had been divorced for many years but continued to argue over his request to spend more time with his mother, the “non-custodial” parent. This young man had been privy to several stormy exchanges between his parents concerning his “custody and visitation” arrangements. During his school years he had listened to his parents argue about who had “custody” of him and how much “visitation” he should have with the other parent. One day after classes he came into my homeroom to vent some of his frustrations. As he was leaving that day he said, “I wish everyone would realize that I didn’t do anything wrong. I am not a prisoner so I don’t need to be in custody and I don’t want to have visitation with my mother anymore, I just want to live with her sometimes.” On hearing such a story, and realizing the courage it took to share, it helped to sensitize my own perceptions around labeling and spurred the desire to promote language sensitivity. A jolt of reality like this should challenge us to take a hard look at the labels we are using that, although commonplace, are nevertheless hurtful and sometimes damaging. Something as common as a “single parent family” can be used in a negative context.

The Impact of Labels

Whoever would begin to define what “normal or intact family” means? With commitment, it is relatively easy to begin changing labels that are negative and judgmental. As in the above example, our legal system could attempt to get away from using the legal terms they use with prisoners in jail and with children of parents who have separated or divorced. “Living with” my mother or father for the weekend conveys a far more positive psychological message of “belonging” than does “visitation” with the “non-custodial” parent. Using terms like “broken”, “normal”, or “intact” become part of a greater problem. Why? Because the person using the label decides for that family what is normal, intact or broken. For some families the true “brokenness” was happening before the separation, when things seemed “intact” as far as the public was concerned. Most specialists in this field will agree that if children are left to focus on being children and left out of the adult situations and adult decisions they will generally do well regardless of the particular family structure.

Our history holds many examples of how labels were an integral part of negative and stereotypical judgments. Some of these were very blatant and abusive while others were more subtle and insidious, yet equally damaging. Commonly used terms such as retarded, on welfare, broken families, bastard, illegitimate, broken home, natural family, normal family, intact family, real parent, visitation, custody and access are but a few. Muller and Cox suggest that words come with “baggage” and possess universal as well as individual meanings. Goffman suggests that labels become a permanent part of a person and assist in the development of his/her personality and social identity. Labels can dehumanize and lead to withdrawal. Although we may have come a long way in some areas, unfortunately we have retained many negative labels and have added new ones as well! The difference with then and now is that now we are becoming more sensitized than any other generation to be aware of the affect negative labels can have on self-esteem. We also understand that reframing a symptom and finding the positive connotation of a particular behaviour or situation is often less stressful and more helpful for all involved.

“Kid’s Say the Darndest Things”

A Grade One class was trying very hard to listen to their teacher who was helping them work on using “big people” words – the teacher insisted on *no* baby talk! The teacher asked Chris what he had done over the weekend? He replied that he went to visit his “Nana”. The teacher reminded him to use big

people words in class and to say he went to visit his “Grandmother”. The teacher then asked Jack what he had done. He replied that he had taken a ride on a “choo-choo”. The teacher reminded him about big people words and told him to say he took a ride on a “train”.

The teacher gave Ronnie a turn. “I read a book” to which the teacher asked, “Which book”? Ronnie thought real hard, was about to say the title, stopped himself, and thought a little more, then puffed out his chest with great pride and said, “Winnie the Sh_t!” All language has meaning!

Teachers As Role Models

Teachers are in the vanguard of promoting a climate of tolerance and acceptance in our schools. Teachers enthusiastically embrace the responsibility of being respectful and inclusive in the words they choose, not only serving as role models for students, but for each other. We experience on a daily basis how language significantly impacts on the quality of connection between the teacher, the student and the learning environment.

A young man who was considered a “drop-out” decided to return to finish his high school. He was told by one of his teachers that he was “too old to learn!” He chose rather to listen to his principal and several other teachers who gave him continued encouragement. He says the memory of this encouragement and acceptance still supports him today – over ten years later. He remembers fondly, “I knew they were there to teach – it was all about personal-ity and humor and light heartedness. They were very supportive and did not judge me by past actions or by how I looked. It was so much more than the things they said.” We all deserve to have the gift of such memories that will serve to nurture us throughout our lives.

Have a wonderful, rest filled summer.

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