Background and Conclusions

In these studies, we use national with a wealth of measures describing regular and special education students and their schools to explore the possibility that school processes may impact the educational outcomes of high school students who are labeled as learning disabled. We compare the experiences and outcomes of students labeled with a learning disability to those of students not labeled with a disability but who have similar social and academic backgrounds, similar levels of early high school coursework and performance, and even similar scores on a 10th grade standardized test. Although the poorer academic histories of students labeled with a learning disability do contribute to their poorer high school educational outcomes, labeled students are taught by teachers who have lower educational expectations for them and they complete much lower levels of college preparatory coursework. These findings suggest that the poorer educational outcomes of students labeled with a learning disability are also attributable to the stigma of the label.

Poorer Educational Outcomes of Students Labeled with Learning Disabilities

Why Do Labeled Students Have Poorer Outcomes?

Figure 1 – Predicted Probabilities Comparing Labeled and Unlabeled Students’ College Enrollment

On average, 8% of students labeled with a learning disability are likely to enroll in a 4-year college within two years of finishing high school. In contrast, 42% of students not labeled with disability will do so. Once background, level of 9th grade coursework, and achievement test score in 10th grade are taken into account, the probabilities are still significantly different: .29 versus .39.

Figure 2 – Course-Taking

Students labeled with an LD accumulate significantly fewer credits in math, science, social studies, and foreign languages; and progress significantly less far in math and science coursework. These disparities are not accounted for by labeled students’ more disadvantaged backgrounds and early high school experiences.

Figure 3 – Parents’ and Teachers’ Educational Expectations for Adolescents

- Parents and teachers hold significantly lower educational expectations for students labeled with an LD than they do for students not labeled with disability, even among students who have similar backgrounds, took similar coursework, and had similar levels of achievement (grades, failures, test scores).
- Teachers are especially unlikely to believe that their students who are labeled with a learning disability will graduate with a 4-year degree (.47 versus .75). Students, net of controls.
- Rather than being based solely on students’ academic performance (courses, grades, test scores), teachers’ and parents’ educational expectations appear to be lower for labeled students in part because they perceived the student as disabled. The LD label may alter others’ perceptions.

Data

- Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 – 11,250 10th graders in regular and special education in 540 high schools in 2002