

# The Crippling Effects of Labeling on the Public School System

By JAMIE McLAUGHLIN WITH FRED ULRICH  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

The constituents of our nation seem to expect the school system to solve all the nation's problems concerning inequality; however, more often the policies of our school systems have perpetuated these inequalities. How to 'save America' using our schools has been a polarizing topic through the years. In current years, No Child Left Behind has continued this tradition of polarization, casting doubts in the minds of many citizens as to the future of our public education system. By analyzing the theories of Paul Violas, Mike Rose, and J.D. Anderson, one sees the negative repercussions of cultural and socio-economical prejudice present in our schools. One can also use their research to theorize a better way of incorporating all students into the curriculum. Furthermore, through the study of tracking; special education; and No Child Left Behind one can theorize the effects this kind of prejudice is having on our public schools.

Paul Violas, a researcher of the American education system, explains to his readers in "Manual Training," how the development of vocational education was co-opted by corporations to create a stronger work force. He theorizes that despite positive progressive intentions during the beginning of the curriculum development for manual training, the backers of these programs were commonly industrialists who felt the intellectual side of the curriculum was cumbersome. The original idea behind manual training was to add to the classic curriculum to create a better-rounded student explaining that, "education should do more than train the mind or the intellect."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, support turned against this form of training when industrialists did not see direct gain from the new curriculum. Instead, this new form of education began to take on a more strictly industrial track. In fact, students began being labeled based on what social expectations deemed suitable for them. If a student came from a lower income or working class family, that student was more likely to be placed in an industrial program devoid of classical education. Violas' use of history causes his readers to reflect on more modern tracking systems. Do we still expect certain students

will only reach a certain level? Do we still train our students to adhere to the wants of future employers? Violas explains that as the system developed, the concern about "higher learning" was that this form of education was leaving workers unhappy and bored. The school systems were not there to educate future factory workers to be unhappy with their jobs. Violas explains, "As industrial tasks continued to subdivide into increasingly minute and simple operations, worker boredom and alienation became more acute. Hence, the educational problem posed by most industrial laborers involved personality adjustment, habit formation, and value conditioning."<sup>3</sup> This reform in the schools undermined the earlier American ideal of universal education for all. Violas explains that "this justification was found in the Substitution of 'equal educational opportunity' for the older ideal of 'equal education.'"<sup>1</sup> With the continuation of arguments that the schools ought to ensure students' later success in life, the tradition of inequality in American schools was cemented.

Violas' critique of these early policies and his understanding of the development of an American mind-set towards class distinction, helps modern readers to analyze the current school system's policies. Although most "tracking" programs have been removed from the public school systems, there are distinct levels of programs that separate students. Although one can claim that the use of placement testing is fairer to students and evaluates their ability on an individual basis, it is hard to ignore the fact that different educational opportunities are still available to students based on their environment. Regionally, students enrolled in suburban schools are given more opportunities for club activities, mentorship programs, and advanced placement classes; whereas in other regions, behavioral problems have become a justification for placement into special education classrooms. As a nation, we have learned to better disguise the inequality in our schools; however, class inequality is still present.

The next researcher that brought inequality to the forefront of the debate on education in America is Mike Rose. Rose

used his personal experiences to highlight the problems with labeling students, whether it is direct or indirect. Rose explains the misfortune he experienced as a child when he was accidentally placed in a low track. The lower track he was placed in was referred to as the vocational track. The shocking realities he reveals are those of incompetent teachers, less than desirable lesson plans, and violence within the classroom. He also explains the myriad of students within the classroom and their disillusionment with their future. A heart-wrenching moment in Rose's tale comes when a student declares a desire to just be average. Rose does not relate more to the readers about his former classmate, the reader is left to infer that the student succeeded in remaining unnoticed. Rose explains the difficulty of being a student in a lower track, "If you're a working-class kid in the vocational track, the options you'll have to deal with this will be constrained in certain ways: you're defined by your school as 'slow'; you're placed in a curriculum that isn't designed to liberate you but to occupy you, or, if you're lucky, train you, though the training is for work the society does not esteem."<sup>2</sup> Rose was able to get out of the lower track but found it hard to move up after years of being behind. Luckily for him, he managed to find mentors that inspired him to rise out of the negative situation he had been placed in. Rose used these experiences to criticize the education system and recognized that too often the labels we are place on children cause them to fail.

In Rose's article "Our Schools Our Children," he analyzes the problems he encounters dealing with students at UCLA. Rose watches as students are labeled "at risk" and begin to subscribe to the social expectations placed on them. As he observes an English class filled with "at risk" students, Rose notes the wide array of knowledge these students possess, and a knowledge brought out by a teacher that refuses to toss these children aside; however, many students are not fortunate enough to have teachers with this kind of sentiment. These students walk into the classroom disengaged because they expect to be passed over. Rose explains that these students "know more than the tests reveal but haven't been taught

how to weave the knowledge into coherent patterns.”<sup>3</sup> Rose reveals a very poignant analysis of the problem in American schools. He explains that expectations of past success are inaccurate, and that the diversity in our schools is a challenge that ought to be embraced. Instead of looking to strict guidelines for success based on rigorous ideals of past academic standards, the nation ought to look at ways of channeling students’ knowledge into a more “coherent pattern.” Unfortunately, the kind of “-back-to-basics-” education Rose discusses as consistently flawed stems from the exact kind of logic used to justify the increasing amount of standardized testing used in NCLB. Rose’s analysis of the problems in the public schools is still relevant today as we continue to ignore the cry of the individual mind.

J.D Anderson gives his readers a thorough understanding of the inequalities present in the development of a “-free-” education system for emancipated slaves and their ancestors. In his chapter, “Common Schools for Black Children, A Second Crusade,” Anderson reflects on the hard work and dedication of the black community as they worked to create schools for their children. His work reveals how the members of the community put private funding and work into these schools. During the time period before the Great Depression, African American communities endured double taxation in order to guarantee the running of these new schools. At a certain point during the depression, “their financial resources had been drained thoroughly by the process of double taxation.”<sup>4</sup> Due to this, many of these schools were unable to keep up with proper maintenance, causing outsiders to view African American communities as neglectful. Anderson explains how these kinds of sentiments caused a negative stereotype to develop that claimed African Americans did not value education. Similar to the stereotyping of the classes that Violas and Rose note, Anderson reveals to readers how these stigmas cause poor outcomes, and how these stereotypes are repeatedly perpetuated by inequalities in the school system. For instance, during a lecture in 2004, Anderson discusses that in the times prior to World War 2, African American schools did not extend to high school. He explains how this neglected fact reveals the injustice behind statistics showing low enrollment in college for African Americans. With high school as a requirement for college, and high school not open to African Americans, how is a student expected to enroll in college? Although we have remedied some of the

more glaring inequalities between blacks and whites in American schools, it is impossible to ignore the effects of decades of injustice.

In another work, Anderson takes note of cultural differences in America alongside the difficulties these differences created in attempting to create a universal curriculum and history for America. Just as he exposed in his work on common schools, cultural history is a huge part of the American dynamic. Not every immigrant or student has come from a background with opportunities. As Anderson explains in his article, “Can Public Schools Save America?”, “The nation’s past is characterized by different and conflicting American Dreams, not by surveys of what we want in the present.”<sup>5</sup> In this article Anderson brings to light harsh realities about American views on racial superiority in former decades. He explains how this affected the current educational system and led to many issues of inequality within the nation. He reminds his audiences that ignoring cultural differences is not healthy for the students themselves. Although using the differences to decide how the students will succeed is wrong, it is equally wrong to ignore the different cultures these students came from. Culture is a huge component of who we are and how we perceive the world around us, to pretend that every student is in fact created with a similar background would result in repression of the minority. In addition, Anderson brings up the economic inequality present in our current school system and how that undermines the success of many students: “Throughout American history professional educators and their political allies have looked to public schools to create a homogeneous people while maintaining schools that differed sharply along race, ethnic, and class lines”<sup>5</sup> (Anderson 8). How can we as a nation teach our children a universal set of values when our schools fail to reflect universal equality? Anderson highlights the extreme poverty gap in America. He explains that culture plays a huge part in the development of a people and those years of economic repression cannot simply be ignored in policy.

All three of these researchers concluded that the individual being labeled or lost is a large factor in children becoming disillusioned with schools. One can draw a conclusion from studying these three that a focus on the student’s culture and personal goals can help the student to succeed. Similar to how Rose sees the problem, we need to find a way, as a nation, of channeling the knowledge of students into applicable sources. Unfortunately, as shown through Anderson, a homogenized system does not

seem to be the key. Furthermore, as Violas reflected, vocational education cannot help students if it limits their opportunities. When the curriculum begins to label students American students are left with the classrooms of Rose’s past. When we focus on labels we place students in tracks towards failure; although we claim we are placing them on career tracks.

Tracking is a placement program in use in American public schools. *A Dictionary of Sociology* defines tracking as follows: “an organizational device used in some schools by which students are divided into separate tracks according to supposed ability,” the entry goes on to state, “Tracking is an extremely controversial practice and many believe that it promotes inequalities, with students in lower tracks suffering from a less challenging academic environment.”<sup>6</sup> Although modern educational practices have sought to do away with standard tracking programs, placement continues to be a factor in our children’s education. In most states some form of placement tests are administered in elementary school when a child is deemed worthy of advanced placement. In turn, students are also flagged in elementary school for special education. Once placed in one of these two programs the future of the student’s education is altered. For special education students, more opportunities are available for teacher assistance, extra time on tests, and various other program incentives geared towards ensuring the student is able to succeed in a general education classroom. However, the label of special education also carries with it a lower rate of graduation and a negative feeling of being “-at risk-”. With the label of “-gifted-” a student is given more challenging classroom activities and a label that promotes a positive self-image. As these students age and continue along the track the opportunities available begin to differ dramatically. It is as though the school system has taken two siblings and told one that he is destined to succeed and the other that he will always need help to make it. Although the school system uses different language to justify it, tracking is still apparent in today’s schools and is a clear example of the inequality in our nation. For instance, inner city schools tend towards a much higher rate of special education students and a lower rate of available AP classes; while suburban schools reveal a higher rate of gifted programs and a lower rate of special education students. Furthermore, in many of these suburban schools the students most frequently given a special education label are students with African American or Hispanic heritage.<sup>7</sup>

If special education is a new form of tracking, how do we as a nation support students with learning disabilities without undermining their success? An answer to some of the problems surrounding the special education programs comes from Joel McNally in his article, "A Ghetto Within A Ghetto." He brings to light the overrepresentation of black students in special education programs and the problems associated with it, "racial disparity makes it less likely that black students receive high school diplomas, less likely they will be employed after leaving school, and more likely they will end up in the criminal justice system."<sup>7</sup> McNally also reveals that an increase in African American student enrollment in special education is directly correlated with the additional categories of emotional/behavioral disturbance to the special education grouping. These categories allow teachers to place students who are disruptive in the classroom into special education. Frequently, clashes in cultural understanding play a part in a teacher's inability to control a student, not the student's tendency towards a disability. Although there are supposed to be checks to ensure students are not unjustly placed into special education, continually, the schools are too overwhelmed with referrals to properly follow these procedures and special education classrooms become overwhelmed by "'-trouble-' students. McNally does not blame the teachers for this problem but reflects on the fact that no other option is available for them. He quotes Daniel Losen as saying, "Teachers can be trained to think about it and actually change their practices. You know, bias doesn't necessarily make you an evil person. It just makes you a member of society"<sup>7</sup> McNally's analysis of the special education program problems reveals a similar conclusion to Violas, Rose, and Anderson: it is the failure to understand the needs of the individual student and the culture they come from that causes negative repercussions for the students in those neglected cultures.

The name No Child Left Behind insinuates a commitment toward equality in American public schools; however, in reality the policy has failed to create equality in the education system. In fact, in many cases NCLB has actually served to undermine poverty stricken schools and provide justification for further discrimination against the nation's poor. Anyon and Greene argue that, "for more education to lead to better jobs, there have to be jobs available."<sup>8</sup> They explain that NCLB has been used to justify the prevention of job creation programs in the country. That the

nation claims the promotion of education will help pull families out of poverty. Anyon and Green's article, "No Child Left Behind as an Anti-Poverty Measure," uses statistical evidence to back-up that the education system cannot operate on its own as a means of preventing poverty. They explain that the jobs available to graduating students are often within poverty-wage rates and that further education has failed to prove financially advantageous to many women and minorities. They explain that the increase in standardized testing has directly benefited corporate America, "Schools that fail to raise test scores, for example, give way ultimately to vouchers in the market model, but first to a variety of expensive, pre-packaged curricula, testing, and tutoring programs. As a result, companies have already accrued billions of dollars of profit."<sup>8</sup> Under NCLB, if a school is labeled as failing students are allowed to transfer to a passing school. In fact, funding is actually removed from the school in order to provide this opportunity to families. However, in many inner city and impoverished communities the constituents are unaware and unable to use these funds for opportunities for their students. Failing schools need financial support in order to move towards success, NCLB punishes these schools by removing funding, but ends up punishing the students.

If a person is looking to find examples of inequalities in schools, our current educational policy of NCLB is a perfect example. The reliance on standardized testing forces all students to prove their knowledge in the same way; and yet, there is no way to create the same learning environment for every child. The added pressure this program has placed on our already spread thin inner city schools sets many of these schools up for failure. The fact is, these schools no longer have the time to invest in programs of cultural education that could prevent teachers from misunderstanding their students and placing them in special education. The only way that NCLB is succeeding in equaling the education opportunities nation-wide is by lowering our schools chances for success.

Researchers Violas, Rose, and Anderson allow readers a look into American educational history as a window into understanding some of the current problems in our educational system. Inequality due to class and race has been a major proponent throughout our history and cannot be ignored. We cannot expect all students to learn in the same way and we cannot force students into specific career tracks based on our expectations of them. The key to success in American schools is opportunity.

As our history reminds us our universal education was a founding principle of our nation. Mann explains:

The Pilgrim Fathers amid all their privations and dangers conceived the magnificent idea, not only of a universal, but of a free education for the whole people. To find the time and the means to reduce this grand conception to practice, they stinted themselves, amid all their poverty, to a still scantier pittance; amid all their toils, they imposed upon themselves still more burdensome labors; and amid all their perils, they braved still greater dangers.<sup>9</sup>

Although this goal is a difficult one to maintain, by focusing on the individual and the cultures in America today we may be able to elevate all students to a higher level of success and reach some of the idealistic goals of our founders.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Violas, Paul C. (1978.) "Manual Training, The Training of the Urban Working Class." *The Training of the urban working class: a history of twentieth century American education.* Rand McNally. Pg 125-153.
- <sup>2</sup>Rose, M. (1990) "I Just Want to be Average." *Lives on the Boundary.* Penguin Press.
- <sup>3</sup>Rose, M. (1990) "Our Schools Our Children" *Lives on the Boundary.* Penguin Press.
- <sup>4</sup>Anderson, J.D. (2005.) "Can Public Schools Save America?" *Culture, Race, Academic Achievement, and the American Dream, State of the Discourse.* Du Bois Review.
- <sup>5</sup>Anderson J.D. (1988) "Common Schools for Black Children, The Second Crusade 1900-1935" *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935.* The University of North Carolina Press.
- <sup>6</sup>Lawson, Tony. (2001) *Dictionary of Sociology.* The Bath Press.
- <sup>7</sup>McNally, J. (2003) "A Ghetto Within a Ghetto: African-American students are over-represented in special education programs." *Rethinking Schools* 17.3
- <sup>8</sup>Anyon, J. and Green, K. (2007) "No Child Left Behind as an Anti-Poverty Measure." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 34.2. Pg 157-162.
- <sup>9</sup>Mann, H. (1846) "Tenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education." Massachusetts State Board of Education.