

Why Labeling Children 'Low Functioning' Creates a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy



Janet Farrell Leontiou • Follow

Last updated: May 14, 2020



2K



Save

Read in app



My school district agreed to hire a special education teacher to work with my son, Andreas. The district has always adapted to Andreas's academic needs as he grows and changes. I appreciate that they choose to meet him where he is instead of asking him to adjust to a plan that does not fit. I was looking for a special education professional who possessed a similar capacity to adapt.

As I try to respond to Andreas's needs. I have learned two things: one. watch how

Andreas responds and two, trust my own gut. One potential candidate for the job never got to meet Andreas because I heard, in her voice mail, a tone of annoyance after a few rounds of playing phone tag. Some may disagree with my decision to not give this woman the benefit of the doubt. My thought process was that if she was impatient because of a small inconvenience, she lacked the characteristics required to work with my multiply-disabled, nonverbal son. I reasoned that if I could hear her impatience in her voice, Andreas would be able to hear it too.

The next woman came highly recommended. She had many years of experience working as a special education teacher. During the interview, I asked that she tell me about her students. The first thing she said was that they were very “low functioning.” I tried to engage her about her choice of words. She was not so keen on having a conversation about how her profession may have provided her with a vocabulary that limits students instead of non-judgmentally describing the students’ abilities and challenges.

The label of “low functioning” can become a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby a person is seen as low functioning and thereby treated as such. The professional may treat the student in a way that demonstrates his or her low expectations for the student. There have been many studies that **reveal that the teacher’s expectation of the student** is one of the most powerful factors within the educational setting.

Beth was the next woman to come for an interview. She was a breath of fresh air. Beth has an art degree and currently works as a teaching assistant. Immediately, I saw a woman with a good heart who was keenly aware of how a teacher’s expectations may not always serve the best interests of the student.

We chose Beth. Andreas likes her and is always receptive to engage with her. Beth talks to Andreas as I imagine she would talk to any child. Andreas talks back — not with his voice but with his eyes, his body, and with his attention. I have watched the two of them get to know one another, establish a rapport, and form a relationship. Beth approaches Andreas with no judgment and in this space of acceptance, all things are possible.

The Mighty Asks

We want to hear your story. [Become a Mighty contributor.](#)