

# Labeling Phenomena in Elementary Schools: Its Impact on Students' Self-Concept, Learning Motivation, and Psychological Well-Being

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**Abstract.** Labeling within elementary school settings not only reflects teachers' or peers' perceptions of students' behavior but also functions as a social force that shapes children's self-concept and psychological well-being. While positive labels may foster confidence and motivation, negative labels can generate stress, lower self-esteem, and disrupt emotional development. This study aims to explore the impact of both positive and negative labels on the emotional condition, behavior, and self-identity of elementary school students. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis involving students, teachers, parents, and the school principal. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, reinforced with triangulation and member checking to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that negative labeling diminishes students' confidence, triggers withdrawal behaviors, and undermines learning motivation. Interestingly, the study also found that some students interpret negative labels as a source of motivation to disprove them, reflecting an attempt to restore personal autonomy when they feel unfairly categorized. Conversely, positive labels may enhance enthusiasm but can also induce psychological pressure, such as fear of failure or anxiety about maintaining high performance. These findings suggest that labeling practices in educational settings are part of a broader social dynamic that influences how children make meaning of their learning experiences. In this context, interaction patterns shaped by teachers and parents play a crucial role in fostering a communication climate that supports students' psychosocial well-being.

**Keywords:** Case Study; Elementary School; Labeling; Psychological Well-Being; Self-Concept

## 1. Introduction

The labeling phenomenon in elementary schools directly affects three key areas of children's development: self-concept, learning motivation, and psychological well-being. These aspects are interconnected, collectively shaping children's long-term development. Therefore, any form of labeling can simultaneously influence both psychological and academic outcomes, making it essential to analyze these three domains together when studying its impact.

UNICEF reports emphasize that children's mental health and psychosocial well-being are strongly influenced by social environmental factors, including interactions within the family and at school (Idele et al., 2022). The WHO also highlights that social stigma, discrimination, and negative labeling can be critical determinants that undermine the mental health of children and adolescents, even contributing to risks of depression, anxiety, and self-harming behaviors (Idele et al., 2022). Research on social stigma and negative labeling in the United States indicates a significant impact on children's psychological well-being, showing a notable increase in positive attitudes toward mental health compared to control groups, a reduction in discriminatory attitudes by an average of 18%, and a 22% increase in the willingness to befriend or assist peers with mental health challenges. These findings support the notion that social stigma and negative labeling in schools directly affect children's psychological well-being (Study, 2024).

Research in India shows that labeling shapes students' self-image, peer relationships, teacher

expectations, and academic performance, indicating that labels influence identity and emotional well-being (Choudhury, 2024). Findings from Ukraine reveal that labeling generates shame, withdrawal, fear of not fitting in, and internalized beliefs that undermine mental health (Gaschet et al., 2025). Cross cultural studies in six Asian countries similarly show that stigma and labeling toward children with psychological difficulties remain major barriers to well-being, lowering self-confidence, increasing social anxiety, and limiting participation in educational and social contexts (Z. Zhang et al., 2020).

### 1.1. Problem Statement

In educational settings, the phenomenon of labeling remains a serious issue that is often overlooked. Labeling is understood as a social process in which individuals or groups are assigned specific identities based on societal judgments or perceptions of their behavior (Jovanoski & Rustemi, 2021). Teachers, peers, and even parents often unconsciously assign children or students labels such as "naughty," "stupid," "lazy," "smart," or "top student." Such labeling can promote social criminalization and interventions that reinforce stigmatization, social problems, and marginalization (Matos et al., 2023a). Indeed, these labels may lead to social criminalization or interventions that strengthen stigma, create social issues, and marginalize children (Franz et al., 2023a). According to Lemert, labeling theory emphasizes how people define, categorize, and respond to behaviors deemed deviant or non-normative (Manago & Mize, 2024). In the educational context, labeling can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby children begin to behave in accordance with the negative labels assigned to them (Kashikar et al., 2023).

Labeling in education reinforces stereotypes, limits students' developmental opportunities, and strengthens social hierarchies, making it a mechanism of educational inequity. Labels whether intended as motivation or correction often become internalized and shape children's self-perceptions. Positive labels may enhance confidence, while negative ones reduce learning motivation and emotional stability. Over time, labeling also influences patterns of social interaction and the development of self-concept (Nurhavana, 2022).

A viral case at a public junior high school in Bekasi involved a teacher belittling a student, SL, with negative labels and disparaging language. The student's parent, Iwan, condemned the behavior, and the principal promised follow-up to maintain educator professionalism (Sinaga, 2024). In another incident in Sukabumi, two elementary students fought after mutual teasing at Lapang Raden, causing minor injuries to one student. The school, teachers, and parents are mediating the case (Fatimah, 2025).

Speech acts such as accusations, insults, or teasing can escalate conflict, harm morale, and disrupt learning, highlighting the need for better communication in schools (Dierendonck et al., 2024). Building on theory, this study argues that positive and negative labeling shapes students' self-concept, which in turn affects learning motivation and psychological well-being. These dynamics are moderated by factors like teacher and parent support and the school's social climate.

Based on the theoretical and empirical literature discussed above, this study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how positive and negative labeling influence students' self-concept, learning motivation, and psychological well-being. The framework also highlights the moderating role of teacher support, parental support, and school climate in shaping these relationships, as presented in Figure 1.

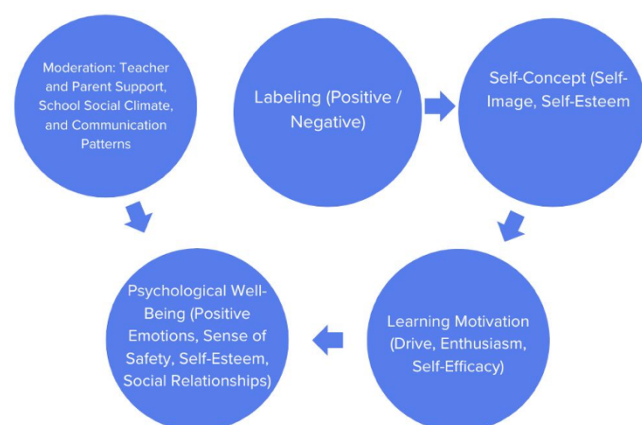


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

## 1.2. Related Research

Previous research on labeling mostly focuses on secondary or higher education, academic labels, or achievement gaps, often using quantitative or macro-level analyses. This study is novel by applying a qualitative case study with elementary students, capturing experiences from students, teachers, and parents. Recent research shows that negative labeling harms children's psychosocial well-being and reduces learning motivation. Evidence from China indicates that peer relationships support academic motivation, but this effect weakens when students have low academic self-efficacy (Rachmawati et al., 2024).

Students' social behavior, especially in classroom interactions and social status, can change due to peer rejection. A Swiss study of 36 elementary classes (grades 1–3; 709 students) found that rejected students were more likely to withdraw from class activities or avoid interactions, particularly when teachers gave negative feedback on their social behavior (Garrote et al., 2024).

Research also shows that labeling, stigma, and stereotypes shape students' social relations. Even when explicit attitudes improve through interventions, implicit biases toward peers with disabilities persist and continue affecting classroom interactions. (Wüthrich et al., 2024). Negative labels such as "lazy" or "naughty" often cause students to withdraw from class participation and group activities due to fear of mistakes or exclusion (Witt et al., 2024).

## 1.3. Research Objective

This study also fills gaps in existing research by examining how labeling operates across varied social and cultural settings and within student school interactions. By integrating perspectives from students, teachers, and parents, it offers a more holistic understanding of labeling in elementary schools and contributes to efforts to build supportive, stigma-free learning environments.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Labeling and Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to an individual's comprehensive perception of themselves, formed through interactions with and interpretations of their social environment, reflecting how individuals understand themselves based on experiences and others' responses to them (Matos et al., 2023b). It is also defined as the entire system of cognition, beliefs, and attitudes that a person holds toward themselves (Busch et al., 2021). An individual's self-concept develops through past and present interpersonal experiences (Maneka, 2023). Positive and constructive relationships are particularly meaningful for fostering healthy self-development (Carlén et al., 2023). Labels and self-concept are closely interconnected; both positive and negative labels ultimately contribute to shaping an individual's self-concept (Sawitri & Kusmawati, 2025).

Self-concept arises from one's interpretation of others' perceptions. Inaccurate or distorted views can affect emotional well-being (König et al., 2023 as evaluations by others significantly shape self-concept (Kariuki & Mwangi, 2022). This, in turn, can impact students' emotional well-being, as self-concept is closely linked to emotional conditions (König et al., 2023). This underscores the need to enhance students' well-being through accurate assessment of social interactions and self-concept using proper instruments (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). A positive self-concept fosters positive behavior, while a negative one tends to generate negative behavior (Ikbal et al., 2021).

### 2.2. Labeling and Learning Motivation

Labels from teachers, peers, or the school environment directly influence students' learning motivation, which drives energy and direction in their learning activities. Students with high intrinsic motivation tend to be more active, use effective learning strategies, and achieve better academic outcomes (Zhou & Ahmad, 2025).

Positive labels such as “intelligent,” “active,” or “promising” can boost students’ self-confidence and motivation to keep striving. A qualitative study shows that students receiving positive labels feel recognized by teachers, maintain peer relationships, and are encouraged to sustain consistent academic performance. (Milenia & Safitri, 2022).

Negative labels such as “lazy,” “stupid,” or “naughty” can cause students to internalize these identities, undermining their motivation. Many become reluctant to try, fearing failure or feeling constrained by the label, which reinforces the perception of being a “problematic student.” This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, reducing engagement and motivation. (Franz et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, meta-analyses indicate that when students are assigned diagnostic labels, such as learning disabilities or “problematic” characteristics, teachers’ and parents’ expectations for them are often lower compared to peers of similar ability who are not labeled. This, in turn, reinforces barriers to students’ motivation and academic achievement (Haft et al., 2023).

Since learning motivation drives participation, study habits, and self-regulation, negative labeling is a systemic concern in elementary education. Schools should avoid negative labels, give competence-focused feedback, and foster positive teacher–student relationships to sustain motivation. Labeling thus affects students’ motivation, achievement, and psychological and social development, not just ethics or interpersonal relations.

### **2.3. Labeling and Students’ Psychological Well-Being**

Labeling assigns positive or negative social markers that shape how individuals are perceived and evaluate themselves. In elementary schools, labels from teachers, peers, and parents influence students’ social identities and psychological well-being. The World Health Organization (2021) emphasizes that stigma and negative labeling harm mental health by fostering helplessness, low self-esteem, and social anxiety, while longitudinal studies show that persistently labeled students face higher risks of depression and social isolation.

Psychological well-being reflects children’s sense of safety, worth, and autonomy at school. Research by Konu and Rimpelä (2022) shows that well-being is shaped not only by family conditions but also by the school’s social climate, especially teachers’ treatment and evaluations. Negative labels can create high-pressure environments that hinder emotional development, whereas positive labels like “enthusiastic” or “high-potential” foster self-confidence, positive emotions, and stronger social bonds (Chen & Grossklags, 2022).

Labeling affects psychological well-being via self-fulfilling prophecies. When teachers have low expectations for “problematic” students, interaction quality and emotional support decline, leading students to internalize negative views. Positive expectations, however, foster a sense of value, agency, and stronger well-being. Thus, labeling can either enhance or undermine well-being depending on context.

Peer interactions also contribute to labeling, where terms like “weird” or “crybaby” can lead to exclusion and bullying that disrupt children’s psychological well-being. Liu et al. (2023) show that negatively labeled children report higher stress and depressive symptoms. UNICEF (2022) likewise highlights that discriminatory peer dynamics significantly undermine students’ mental well-being, affecting both relationships and overall psychological stability.

To foster healthy psychological well-being, schools should reject negative labeling and promote supportive, diversity-affirming practices. Evidence shows that stigma-reduction programs improve student well-being. Patalay and Fitzsimons (2023) highlight that mental health literacy and teacher empathy training reduce stress and enhance students’ sense of acceptance. Eliminating negative labeling is thus a key strategy to support children’s emotional development.

### **2.4. The Impact of Labeling**

Negative labels in the environment can immediately affect students’ academic performance (Bedyńska et al., 2021). Showing that labeling in schools is not mere

communication but an educational issue with psychological and social consequences (Dong et al., 2021). Parental expectations also matter; reduced attention can influence a child's emotional state (Garrote et al., 2021). Teachers, parents, and the community shape positive development, and adequate resources support effective support systems (Ayllón et al., 2019). Good interpersonal relationships promote cognitive well-being (Rathmann et al., 2018). Students, teachers, and parents face challenges from peers, school, and home, all affecting overall well-being (Ozturk et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to examine how school labeling impacts students' behavior and identity to foster a more equitable, supportive educational system.

Labeling can shape students' behavior and self-identity. Positive labels enhance learning motivation and self-confidence (Hollenstein et al., 2024). Whereas negative labels create psychological pressure, lower self-esteem, and reduce engagement (Haft et al., 2023). Negative labels often take the form of stigma based on perceived deficiencies (Meilanda, 2020), and affect peer relations, classroom dynamics, and school reputation. During preadolescence, environmental conditions strongly influence students' psychological and academic outcomes. (Wang et al., 2024).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative *instrumental single-case study* design. The case focused on one public elementary school, which was selected not to examine the characteristics of the school itself, but rather to serve as a contextual setting for gaining an in-depth understanding of labeling phenomena and their impact on students' self-concept, learning motivation, and psychological well-being. In this regard, the school functioned as an instrumental case through which the social dynamics and the meanings of students' lived experiences related to everyday labeling practices could be explored.

This study used semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, refined for clarity and context. Participants students, teachers, parents, and the principal were selected for their experiential relevance. Three students served as key subjects to provide diverse insights, supporting source triangulation to enhance credibility and validity (Korstjens, 2018). Recent studies also highlight that increasing data sources by integrating multiple types, methods, or perspectives strengthens trustworthiness and reduces bias (Chakma & Li, 2025).

This study focuses on the social phenomenon of labeling, both positive and negative, as it occurs within the elementary school environment. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: (1) How do labeling practices and their meanings, whether positive or negative, emerge in social interactions within elementary schools from the perspectives of teachers and parents? (2) How do students experience receiving particular labels in their social interactions and learning motivation?

Alignment between research questions, data sources, and analytic strategies was established to enhance methodological transparency in this study. Each research question was explicitly mapped to its corresponding data sources and analytic procedures. Because the research questions focus on meaning-making and lived experiences related to labeling, multiple qualitative data sources were integrated. Interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were used complementarily to ensure that each research question was addressed through appropriate empirical evidence and iterative thematic analysis. The alignment between the research questions, data sources, and analytic procedures is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Alignment between Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analytic Strategies

Research Question	Data Sources	Analytic Strategy
RQ1: How do labeling practices and their meanings, whether positive or negative, emerge in social interactions within elementary schools from the perspectives of teachers and parents?	Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents; classroom interaction observations; school documents (e.g., report cards, disciplinary notes, school policies)	Iterative thematic analysis involving verbatim transcription, open coding, thematic categorization, and cross-source comparison
RQ2: How do students experience receiving particular labels in their social interactions and learning motivation?	Semi-structured interviews with students; repeated classroom observations; reflective field notes	Interpretive thematic analysis focusing on students' lived experiences, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes

This mapping serves as the foundation for determining the subsequent data collection and data analysis strategies. Each data source was collected and analyzed iteratively to ensure that the findings genuinely address the research questions.

### 3.2. Respondents

Based on the data collection procedures, research informants were purposively selected to represent diverse perspectives within the context of labeling in elementary schools. The following table summarizes the informants' identities, roles, initials, ages, and the data collection methods used, facilitating readers' understanding of the data sources and the context of the participants involved in this study. The characteristics of the research participants are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Research Informants on the Impact of Labeling in Elementary Schools

ID	Role/Position	Initial	Age	Data Collection Method
I01	Student	S1	10	Semi-structured interview; classroom observation
I02	Student	S2	10	Semi-structured interview; classroom observation
I03	Student	S3	10	Semi-structured interview; classroom observation
I04	Teacher	G1	35	In-depth interview; classroom interaction observation; documentation
I05	Teacher	G2	49	In-depth interview; field notes; supporting students in competitions

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected via interviews, observations, and document analysis with two teachers, three students, and one parent selected for relevance. Semi-structured interviews lasted 20–40 minutes with students and 30–60 minutes with adults, repeated until all questions were answered, then transcribed verbatim with codes and time stamps. Observations captured verbal and nonverbal labeling and student reactions, while documents like report cards and disciplinary records were reviewed.

Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and parents explored labeling experiences. Repeated classroom observations captured verbal and nonverbal labeling and students' emotional responses, while document analysis of report cards, disciplinary notes, and school policies supported the findings. Data collection continued until saturation and was carefully archived to ensure credibility and validity.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Data reduction was conducted after all interviews, observations, and documents were collected. The researcher selected, focused, and simplified data relevant to labeling practices in elementary schools. The process involved verbatim transcription, repeated reading, and open coding to identify meaningful data on forms, impacts, and meanings of positive and negative labels. Codes were grouped into thematic categories and compared across sources to identify consistent patterns. Reduction was iterative, refining themes to ensure valid and meaningful interpretation.

Data presentation was carried out after reduction by organizing coded information into thematic descriptions and analytical narratives. These outlined the forms of labeling, their emotional and behavioral impacts, and responses from teachers and parents. Quotations were included to strengthen validity, supported by matrices and thematic charts that visualized patterns, enabling comprehensive interpretation of labeling dynamics within the school context.

This approach follows qualitative research principles, emphasizing data quality and depth over sample size. Although participants were few, they were sufficient for an instrumental qualitative case study aiming for an in-depth understanding of labeling in elementary schools. Participant selection prioritized informants' direct experience and relevance. Data collection and analysis were iterative until saturation, indicated by no new codes or themes. In case study logic, adequacy depends on data capacity to address research questions, so the combination of participant number, role diversity, and triangulation was sufficient to achieve the study's objectives.

The conclusion stage followed data reduction and presentation. The researcher interpreted patterns and themes to answer research questions on labeling in elementary schools. Conclusions were refined through reflective analysis and iterative verification using raw data, quotations, notes, and member checking, ensuring valid insights into how positive and negative labeling influence students' behavior, emotions, and self-identity.

### 3.5. Illustration of the Thematic Analysis Process

To enhance the transparency and auditability of the data analysis process, this section presents a concrete example of the analytic procedures employed in the study. This example illustrates how raw data in the form of interview excerpts were analyzed through stages of initial coding, code clustering, and iterative theme development.

As an illustration, one student stated: *"When the teacher calls me lazy, I actually become lazy. I think, well, maybe I really am lazy, so why should I try?"* (S2). At the initial stage of analysis, this excerpt was assigned several preliminary codes, including internalization of negative labeling, declining learning motivation, and acceptance of a negative identity. Subsequently, similar codes identified across other student interviews, classroom observations, and field notes were compared and grouped into the category emotional and motivational impacts of negative labeling.

Through an iterative thematic analysis, this category was further developed into the overarching theme "Negative labeling and the formation of a self-concept that undermines learning motivation." This analytic process reflects an interpretive approach, in which the researcher not only identified thematic patterns but also interpreted the meanings of students' experiences by considering the social context, classroom interaction dynamics, and labeling practices within the elementary school environment.

### 3.6. Validity and Reliability

Data trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was reinforced via member checking, discussing interview summaries and preliminary interpretations with selected students and teachers to confirm accurate representation. Peer debriefing with qualitative research and elementary education experts critically examined coding, theme development, and potential interpretive bias.

Transferability was ensured through detailed descriptions of the context, participants, and school setting, enabling readers to assess applicability. Dependability was maintained via systematic documentation of methods and analysis. Confirmability was supported by an audit trail of transcripts, notes, and documents, alongside ongoing researcher reflection to ensure findings were data-driven.

This study is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, which views reality as produced through meaning-making in social interactions. In this perspective, labeling in elementary schools is seen as a discursive process shaped by teacher student parent interactions. The researcher acts as the key instrument, interpreting data through field engagement, reflection, and dialogue with participants.

As a researcher trained in elementary education, the author recognizes that personal perspectives may shape interpretations of classroom interactions. Awareness of this positionality forms an essential part of the ongoing reflective process throughout the study. To minimize potential interpretive bias, the researcher employed several strategies: (1) maintaining analytical distance by refraining from directly evaluating participants' behavior based on personal experience; (2) engaging in regular reflexive journaling to document initial assumptions, shifts in perception, and emotional responses during data collection and analysis; and (3) conducting peer debriefing to test the consistency of interpretations.

This reflective approach ensures that interpretations respect participants' authentic voices and experiences. The findings represent a co construction between researcher and participants within the social and cultural context of elementary schools, reflecting meaning from intersubjective dialogue rather than mere empirical description.

#### 4. Findings

The reduced data, which underwent coding and categorization, were subsequently presented in the form of a coding frame to clarify the main research findings. The following table summarizes the central themes emerging from the field data, along with initial codes, subthemes, representative quotations, and phenomenological meanings that illustrate the impact of both positive and negative labeling on the behavior and self-identity of elementary school students. The coding framework resulting from the thematic analysis is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Coding Frame of the Study on the Impact of Labeling in Elementary Schools

ID	Code (Label)	Brief Definition	Indicators (What It Includes)	Example Quotation (Paraphrased from Findings)	Level (Manifest / Latent)
C1	Label as Social Regulation	Labels used by teachers as a tool to control and manage student behavior.	Teacher remarks that mark certain behaviors to guide classroom norms.	Teachers call students "naughty" or "diligent" as a way to correct or motivate them to follow class rules.	Manifest
C2	Resistance and Psychological Reactance to Negative Labeling	Students' active responses to reject and counter negative labels by increasing effort and restoring self-	Proving others wrong, increased motivation, oppositional effort, emotional resilience	"They said I was naughty, so I wanted to show I could be better" (S3)	Latent

C3	Active Effort to Reject Negative Labels	image Compensatory motivational mechanism triggered by perceived loss of autonomy.	Drive to prove oneself after being negatively labeled; defensive reaction turns into positive motivation.	Some students feel challenged when called "naughty" and actively try to improve their behavior.	Latent
C4	Positive Label as Emotional Pressure	Positive labels can create psychological burden to maintain an ideal image.	Fear of failure, anxiety about maintaining the "smart" or "exemplary" reputation.	Some students labeled "smart" feel anxious when grades drop, fearing they disappoint the teacher.	Latent
C5	Acceptance of Negative Labels	Negative labels lead students to conform to others' perceptions.	Decreased motivation, feelings of inadequacy, or resignation to the label.	Students frequently called "stupid" lose motivation and believe they cannot succeed.	Latent
C6	Role of Teacher/Parent Emotional Support	Affective support mediates the negative impact of labels.	Teachers/parents provide acceptance, empathy, or effort-based praise.	Students initially stressed become more motivated because teachers appreciate their effort, not only outcomes.	Manifest
C7	Labeling and Self-Identity Formation	Labels serve as social symbols shaping students' self-perception.	Internalization of labels in self-concept, behavioral changes aligning with the label.	Some students begin to believe they are "naughty" because teachers and peers repeatedly call them so.	Latent
C8	Impact of Positive Labels	Positive labels have dual effects: motivation and emotional pressure.	Drive for achievement accompanied by stress or fear of failure.	Students strive to maintain high grades due to fear of losing the "top student" title.	Latent
C9	Labeling as Classroom Language Practice	Labels function to reproduce social norms and hierarchies.	Teachers/parents reinforce social expectations through labeling language.	Labels such as "model student" or "naughty" mark students' social positions in the classroom.	Latent

C10	Reframing and Positive Discipline	Efforts to transform destructive labeling into positive framing.	Teachers correct behavior without negative labeling; focus on actions rather than identity.	Teachers replace “you are lazy” with “you can try to focus more.”	Manifest
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The coding frame shows that labeling in elementary schools impacts students' self-concept and behavior in varied ways. Many students experience declining motivation or social withdrawal, while others respond by striving to counter negative labels. Students reported different responses to labeling depending on how they experienced interactions with teachers, peers, and parents.

#### 4.1. Labeling and Self-Concept

The link between labeling and self-concept appears in how teachers, students, and parents interpret daily school labels. Teachers often see labels as behavioral guidance, while students perceive them as judgments of their identity. For instance, one student reported that being called “stupid” caused upset and reduced motivation, whereas being labeled “smart” increased happiness and eagerness to learn. One student explained how negative labeling affected their self-perception: *“When the teacher called me stupid, I felt sad and thought maybe I really was like that. After that, I didn’t want to try anymore”* (S1). In contrast, another student described a positive labeling experience: *“When I was called smart, I felt happy and wanted to study more because the teacher believed in me”* (S3). Such responses demonstrate that labels shape students' self-views and learning motivation.

Students described both supportive and distressing experiences related to labeling. Some felt encouraged by positive labels, while others reported sadness, embarrassment, or withdrawal following negative labeling. Students reported feeling “sad and inferior” when insulted or excluded, showing that negative labels affect social interactions and psychological well-being. These experiences indicate that children’s self-concept is shaped by interpersonal encounters at school and influenced by the social position and power dynamics between the label giver and recipient.

Teachers view labeling positive or negative as a subtle form of social regulation in classroom communication. Terms like “naughty,” “lazy,” or “diligent” aim to correct behavior or motivate students. However, repeated negative labeling can backfire: students labeled “naughty” may resist, act out, or feel helpless (“They stop caring and act out more”; “When constantly scolded, they feel helpless”). Teachers observed that some students who were repeatedly labeled as “naughty” became more defensive, less responsive, or showed oppositional behavior.

In Indonesian elementary classrooms, where teachers are moral authorities and disciplinarians, labels carry symbolic weight. Publicly expressed labels are often seen by students as judgments of character rather than temporary feedback, amplifying their emotional impact on self-concept.

#### 4.2. Resistance and Psychological Reactance to Negative Labeling

A salient finding of this study is that negative labeling did not uniformly result in withdrawal or reduced motivation. Several students actively resisted labels they perceived as unfair by increasing their learning efforts and attempting to prove the label wrong. One student explained, *“They said I was naughty, so I wanted to show that I could be better”* (S3). Another student described feeling challenged rather than discouraged after repeated criticism, stating that the label motivated them to improve their behavior and academic performance.

Teachers also observed this pattern, noting that some students previously labeled as “lazy” or “naughty” demonstrated noticeable improvement when given opportunities to participate in positive activities. A teacher remarked, *“Some children who were often labeled actually tried harder when they felt trusted”* (G2). These accounts indicate that resistance to negative

labeling emerged as an active coping response, particularly when students perceived emotional support from teachers or parents.

Interestingly, resistance to negative labeling emerged even within a school culture that strongly values respect for teachers and hierarchical authority. Although students are generally expected to accept teachers' judgments, several participants described actively attempting to counter negative labels by improving their behavior or academic effort, suggesting that agency and resistance can coexist with hierarchical classroom norms.

### 4.3. Labeling and Learning Motivation

Labeling affects students' learning motivation differently: it can either stimulate adaptive motivation or reduce engagement, depending on context. One student reported feeling sad and losing motivation when labeled "stupid" by teachers or peers ("When called stupid, I become lazy to study"). A student explained how negative labels reduced their motivation: *"When I'm called stupid by friends or teachers, I feel lazy to study. I think there's no point."* (S2) In contrast, another student described an oppositional response: *"They said I was naughty, so I wanted to show that I could be better and prove them wrong."* (S3). Conversely, labels like "smart" or "diligent" increased happiness and motivated greater effort, showing that labeling's impact depends on students' interpretations within social relationships.

Another finding shows that negative labels did not always lead to reduced motivation. Some students reported increasing their effort after being labeled negatively, describing a desire to show that the label did not represent them. Labels like "naughty" or "lazy" can trigger oppositional motivation, increasing learning effort when students receive supportive, non-punitive guidance from teachers or parents. This shows that labeling effects are context-dependent, shaped by individual interpretation and the social environment.

Teachers observed that students previously labeled negatively can still show strong potential and motivation. Oppositional behaviors, like those of students once called "lazy," often transform into adaptive effort when engaged in positive activities, such as competitions. Teachers' belief in students' potential helps redirect labeling effects toward constructive development.

Positive labels can also create complex motivational dynamics. Some students try to match the abilities implied by the label, pushing themselves to maintain the image of being "smart." Yet this pressure may lead to heightened expectations and reliance on praise, where children feel they must always be encouraged. In some cases, it also triggers boastful attitudes or unnecessary competition among peers.

Parental labels influence children's motivation, behavior, and self-concept. Negative labels like "stupid" reduce confidence and interest in learning, while positive labels can enhance achievement motivation. Supportive, empathetic communication between parents and teachers helps buffer these effects Yusuf's (2024) emphasis on affective family support.

In Indonesian elementary schools, classroom norms emphasize obedience, respect for authority, and conformity to collective expectations. Within this socio-cultural environment, labels such as "lazy" or "naughty" function not only as personal evaluations but also as signals of deviation from accepted classroom norms, which helps explain why some students experienced shame and disengagement following repeated labeling.

### 4.4. Labeling and Students' Psychological Well-Being

Negative labels such as "stupid," "naughty," or "lazy" harm psychological well-being, causing shame, social withdrawal, anxiety, and reduced classroom participation. Students report that labeling leads peers to avoid them, lowering motivation and discouraging group involvement. One student described the emotional impact of repeated labeling: *"When I was scolded and called lazy, my friends stayed away from me. I was afraid to talk in class."* (S2) A teacher also reflected on this pattern: *"When children are constantly labeled, they become quiet or defensive. They don't feel safe anymore."* (G1).

Some students given positive labels like “smart” or “exemplary” show heightened motivation, yet they also face pressure to meet others’ expectations. As one teacher noted, children try to prove they are smart, revealing how motivation and tension coexist. Teachers noted that students labeled as “smart” often showed strong motivation but also signs of anxiety when expectations increased.

Peer reactions to teacher labeling were also shaped by prevailing classroom norms. In this school context, labels expressed by teachers were often adopted by peers, reinforcing social hierarchies among students and contributing to experiences of exclusion and emotional distress.

#### **4.5. The Impact of Labeling**

Labeling in primary schools serves both as a classroom management tool and a source of emotional pressure that can shape self-identity. For students, labels signal self-worth; for parents, parenting; and for teachers, guidance. Effects depend on social context and relationships. Reflective strategies like positive discipline and reframing help transform labeling into support for healthy identity development.

#### **4.6. Cross-Theme Patterns in Dynamics**

Across the three major themes, the findings indicate that labeling operates as an interconnected process rather than as isolated effects. Changes in students’ self-concept were often accompanied by shifts in learning motivation, which in turn influenced their psychological well-being. Students who internalized negative labels tended to experience reduced self-confidence, followed by withdrawal from learning activities and feelings of emotional distress. Conversely, students who resisted negative labels often showed increased motivation as a way to restore their self-image, particularly when emotional support from teachers or parents was present. These patterns suggest that self-concept functions as a central mechanism linking labeling experiences with both motivational and emotional outcomes. Thus, labeling dynamics in elementary schools emerge as a relational process in which identity, motivation, and well-being continuously interact within students’ everyday school experiences.

### **5. Discussion**

#### **5.1. Labeling and Self-Concept**

Labeling and students’ self-concept are closely interconnected within the context of primary school life. The findings of this study underscore the relevance of labeling theory, which posits that language, symbols, and social interactions play a crucial role in shaping individual identity and behavior (Kashikar et al., 2025a). Interview data indicated that some students who received negative labels, such as “stupid,” “naughty,” or “lazy,” experienced decreased self-confidence and tended to withdraw from social interactions (Mueller, 2019). This reflects stigma internalization, where assigned labels become part of an individual’s identity. (Heilicher et al., 2025). In other words, labels are not merely words but social constructs that can constrain or shape children’s behavior over time (Kashikar et al., 2025a).

Negative labeling in schools strongly shapes children’s self-concept, with teacher and peer interactions playing a key role. (Vasalampi et al., 2020). Repeated criticism or negative labels from the school environment can reduce self-confidence and foster feelings of inferiority (Michaela Pugnerová, 2020). Biases in educational track recommendations show how teachers’ expectations, shaped by social labels, influence a child’s long-term academic identity (Kisfalusi & Hermann, 2025). Negative peer labels like “lazy” or “attention-seeking” harm students’ emotional and social well-being, indirectly reducing academic performance. (Abdullah, 2025). Persistent negative labels in unsupportive learning environments can pressure children’s academic and social identities, reinforcing a negative self-image. (Steinberg et al., 2024).

Negative labeling is a social construct that can shape children’s identity, self-concept, and

school participation over time. (Subtirica, 2024). The process involves environmental labeling, internalization into self-identity, changes in self-confidence and social engagement, and potential academic marginalization. These findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that reduce negative labeling and promote positive identity reframing, helping schools support children's psychosocial well-being and academic growth (Roslan, 2024).

### 5.1. Labeling and Learning Motivation

The relationship between labeling and self-concept also has implications for students' learning motivation (Brandmiller et al., 2024). Labeling and learning motivation interact reciprocally in elementary students, and positive labels do not always yield the constructive outcomes often assumed in prior research (Harber et al., 2025). Praising students with labels like "smart" or "class champion" can boost motivation but also creates pressure to maintain performance (Jansen et al., 2025). Social attribution theory explains this as children interpreting praise as expectations to fulfill (Royer & Ennis, 2024). The resulting pressure can provoke anxiety and fear of failure, ultimately undermining children's psychological well-being (Duru et al., 2024).

Within Lemert's (1951) labeling framework, students may internalize social labels, transitioning from primary to secondary deviation. Positive labels like "diligent" or "smart" can boost motivation but may pressure students to maintain an ideal image, acting as subtle social control. Jin and Oh (2025) highlight that the school's social environment mediates how labels shape emotions, norms, and self-perceptions.

Conceptually, not all negative labels produce harmful effects (Ye, 2021). In some cases, students demonstrate adaptive responses characterized by a strong desire to prove that the label does not accurately represent them (Franz et al., 2023b). This reflects psychological reactance, the drive to protect freedom and self-image when facing perceived unfair treatment or categorization. (Akolgo et al., 2025). Labels like "naughty" or "lazy" can sometimes boost motivation, increasing learning effort when students receive constructive support from teachers or parents (Heilicher et al., 2025). This underscores that the impact of labeling is highly context-dependent, shaped by how both individuals and their social environment interpret and respond to the label (Caballero et al., 2025).

Research shows labeling effects vary; some students respond to negative labels by striving to prove themselves. (Antonio et al., 2024). Experimental studies show diagnostic labels (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia) can trigger positive or negative teacher expectations depending on context and interpretation (Franz et al., 2023a). Negative effects of labels on learning difficulties are significant (Hedges'  $g \approx -0.42$ ) but can be mitigated if teachers have sufficient contextual information (Franz et al., 2023a). With emotional support and a facilitative classroom, students labeled negatively can channel psychological reactance into motivation to restore self-image and improve learning (Iotti et al., 2023). This impact is strongly determined by how the label is interpreted by students and is moderated by interactions with teachers and parents (Valcke et al., 2022).

Labeling is dynamic; positive labels can boost motivation temporarily but may also create psychological pressure from high social expectations (Royer & Ennis, 2024). Negative labels are not always harmful; in supportive settings, they can trigger self-affirmation via psychological reactance (Akolgo et al., 2025). Teachers and parents can reframe labels through empathetic communication, turning them into opportunities for children to realize potential and build a positive self-concept (Franz et al., 2023a).

### 5.2. Labeling and Students' Psychological Well-Being

Labeling closely influences students' psychological well-being, especially through academic expectations set by teachers and the school environment (Kashikar et al., 2025b). Research shows that labeling can lower long-term academic expectations, particularly when teachers view diagnostic labels as accurate (Schell et al., 2024). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that diagnostic labels generally lower student evaluations across domains (Franz et al., 2023b). Meta-analysis found diagnostic labels significantly worsen academic and behavioral evaluations across assessment types (Hedges'  $g \approx -0.42$ ). These results show that negative

labeling consistently produces observable effects across multiple experimental studies (Franz et al., 2023a).

These findings align with the present study, which highlights the complex dynamics between labeling and teachers' pedagogical responses. If labels affect student evaluations, they can also shape teachers' mindsets and instructional strategies (Kashikar et al., 2024). Labeling influences both student perceptions and how teachers adjust instruction and evaluate their teaching (Kashikar et al., 2025a). Australian research shows teachers feel more confident using differentiated instruction with students who have learning difficulties (Porta & Todd, 2024). However, they also tend to rely on stereotypes when selecting teaching strategies due to unclear label definitions and social pressures or expectations (Porta & Todd, 2024). Both positive and negative labels affect how teachers design learning activities and perceive their teaching competence. (Porta & Todd, 2024).

Labeling shapes teachers' perceptions of students and instructional strategies, directly affecting the classroom's emotional climate (Siems-muntoni et al., 2024). Praise, criticism, or high expectations can pressure students when labels tie them to specific standards (Rubie-davies & Hattie, 2025). Negative achievement emotions often emerge when praise, criticism, or high expectations feel burdensome to student (Sainio et al., 2023). Feedback from teachers and parents can create pressure, as how rewards are delivered affects children's emotional comfort (Wang et al., 2024). Effort-based praise ("you have worked hard") supports intrinsic motivation better than identity-based praise ("you are smart"), which can trigger fear of failure (Bolat, 2023).

Families are crucial for fostering children's positive self-concept, but support alone cannot counteract ongoing negative labeling at school (Elkadi & Sharaf, 2023). Students' emotional well-being is largely determined by the quality of social interactions with teachers and peers (Jin & Oh, 2025), while labeling practices in schools can significantly influence children's psychological experiences. Positive and negative labels elicit emotions like pride, shame, or fear of exclusion and may prompt self-protective strategies, such as withdrawing from class participation (Schwab et al., 2024). Formal labels for students with learning difficulties can boost teachers' confidence in differentiated instruction but may also reinforce stereotypes affecting expectations and social dynamics (Kashikar et al., 2025a). The impact of labeling is context-dependent, underscoring the need for pedagogical strategies to prevent labels from worsening students' emotional challenges.

This study is novel in three ways. First, it shows that positive labels can generate emotional pressure, often overlooked in studies focusing on motivational benefits. Second, it highlights the role of teachers, parents, and schools in minimizing harmful labeling. Third, it reveals that some students use negative labels as motivation to prove themselves. This response reflects a form of psychological reactance, defined as individuals' efforts to restore personal freedom when they feel unfairly categorized (Yan et al., 2024). Consequently, this study highlights labeling as both a psychological phenomenon and a structural-cultural issue within educational policy.

### **5.3. The Impact of Labeling**

The impact of labeling on students is not always negative; however, achievement-related labels can generate substantial psychological pressure (Hasan et al., 2025). Studies indicate that students labeled as "high achievers" often demonstrate initially superior performance, yet also experience increased academic stress and fear of failure (Jiang, 2025), although some details of these findings have not been fully confirmed in international publications (H. Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, excessive expectations from teachers and parents have been shown to reduce learning motivation and exacerbate academic pressure (Xia, 2023). Therefore, high-achievement labeling without accompanying emotional support may potentially produce long-term adverse effects on students.

The findings highlight practical implications for teachers and parents in fostering a communication climate that supports children's psychological development. Teachers should avoid negative labels like "naughty" or "lazy" and focus on behavior-based

feedback that preserves the child's identity (Brandmo & Gamlem, 2022), as well as implementing positive discipline approaches that have been shown to effectively support the development of a positive self-concept (Hasanov & Brandišauskienė, 2025). Similarly, parents should replace identity-based praise like "smart child" with effort-focused commendations that sustain motivation without causing emotional pressure (Platte et al., 2025). Theoretically, this study shows that labels are ambivalent, not inherently positive or negative, with effects shaped by social context and individual interpretation (Benson-goldberg & Erickson, 2021). Labeling functions as a social mechanism affecting self-identity, motivation, and well-being, underscoring the need for reflective communication among teachers, parents, and supportive educational institutions.

Findings from three students also indicate that negative labeling does not necessarily produce uniform effects (Kashikar et al., 2023). Students' responses from distress to motivation to prove themselves show that labels' effects depend on social context and individual interpretation (Franz et al., 2023a). This supports the social constructivist view that identity and behavior are shaped by individuals' interpretations of social interactions (Cheng et al., 2022).

#### **5.4. Socio-Cultural Context of Indonesian Elementary Schools**

The findings of this study should be understood within the socio-cultural context of Indonesian elementary education, where teacher authority, moral instruction, and classroom discipline are strongly emphasized. Teachers occupy central positions of power, and their language shapes classroom norms and student identities. Labels act not merely as descriptions but as symbolic markers of conformity or deviation. This context explains the strong emotional and behavioral consequences observed and highlights why resistance to negative labeling is particularly significant.

### **6. Conclusion**

This study reveals that labeling practices in primary schools function as a social mechanism that shapes students' behavior, self-concept, and psychological well-being. Labels given by teachers, peers, or parents not only reflect evaluations of behavior but also influence how children perceive themselves. Positive labels such as "smart" or "exemplary" can foster learning motivation, yet simultaneously create emotional pressure to maintain an ideal self-image. Conversely, negative labels such as "lazy" or "naughty" can lower self-confidence; however, in some cases, they may also trigger a drive to prove oneself as a form of resistance against stigma. These findings underscore that the impact of labeling is contextual and heavily influenced by the emotional support provided by a child's social environment. Communication patterns of teachers and parents play a crucial role in determining whether labels function constructively or destructively. Therefore, labeling practices should be managed through a pedagogical approach that is reflective, empathetic, and grounded in positive discipline. This study makes a theoretical contribution by broadening the understanding of the ambivalence of positive labels and offers practical recommendations for primary schools to create an inclusive, supportive, and child-friendly learning ecosystem.

#### **Limitation**

This study makes a significant contribution but has limitations. It involved few primary schools in one region, limiting generalizability, and relied mainly on interviews, which depend on participant subjectivity. Future research should expand the participant pool, use methodological triangulation (e.g., observations, documents), and incorporate quantitative approaches to systematically examine labeling frequency and children's psychological well-being.

## Recommendation

Based on the findings, teachers should use reflective and supportive communication to reduce the negative psychological effects of labeling. Schools need professional development on inclusive language practices, while policymakers should strengthen socio-emotional literacy in teacher education. Future studies are encouraged to apply mixed methods across diverse contexts to enhance generalizability and examine long-term impacts.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI ChatGPT to assist with language improvement, grammar checking, and refinement of academic writing. All conceptual development, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final manuscript preparation were conducted solely by the authors. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-generated suggestions and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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