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Labeling: Student Self-Esteem and the Stigma of a Label

A Research Paper

Submitted to the Special Education Faculty of the  
Marshall University Graduate College  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

By  
Amanda Kay Sowards

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### Abstract

Labels help to provide educational support to students who struggle academically, physically, emotionally and socially. The decision to use a label should be carefully considered due to the possibility of negative connotations regarding social relationships, personal preferences and the effects on self-esteem. The author discusses a study that examines the effects of labeling in regard to the impact on the self-esteem of students with disabilities and will scrutinize if students with disabilities are negatively perceived by their peers. Current research of labeling, self-esteem and social disadvantage is discussed. Due to the overwhelming number of students being labeled and a lack of research concerning the self-efficacy of students with disabilities, reasons are given as to why further research should be conducted on the topic of labeling. Implications for students, parents, teachers and society are provided.

*Keywords:* labeling, self-esteem, special education

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## **Chapter I: Statement of the Problem**

The need to label people, things and events has been around since the beginning of time. History has proven that labeling has occupied the minds of many influential people. In a seminal sociology book, Erving Goffman (1959) demonstrated the ways in which others perceive an individual as being crucially important to how that individual outwardly presents him-or herself. Goffman (1959) believed that even the most basic connotations of labeling could influence the way a person interacts in any given situation and could lead to being stigmatized for life.

Sociologist Howard Becker is credited with the most influential design of labeling theory. According to labeling theory (Becker, 1963), deviance is not an intrinsic feature of behavior. Individuals are not naturally deviant in their actions and behaviors until a social group defines them that way. Essentially, labeling theory suggests that people define and construct their identities based upon society's perceptions of them.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) investigated the Pygmalion effect which demonstrated the potential of teachers in influencing the performance of students based on the teachers' perception of the students. In their experimental study, elementary students participated in intelligence pre-tests to identify the academically high achievers. Teachers were explicitly informed of which students were expected to have the greatest potential to be successful in the school setting. However, the identified students were chosen randomly and not according to test results. All students were retested at the end of the year. At the conclusion of the study, the students labeled as the potentially highest achievers were the most successful with the highest scores. This study proves that labeling students creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and reveals a direct correlation between teacher expectation and student performance. This can be detrimental to students who are labeled as a "slow learner" or having a disability.

Students who struggle academically in school face two potential labeling possibilities. The first possibility consists of being officially evaluated by a professional to determine if the student meets eligibility criteria in order to qualify for special education services through Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). If the student meets eligibility criteria, the student will be classified as belonging to one of the 13 specific disability categories outlined by federal education regulations. Assigning a student a categorical name implies the school will have more knowledge about the characteristics of the student's exceptionality and will be able to better educate the child.

The second labeling possibility is to be unofficially labeled with negative and artificial labels such as "lazy," "slow," or "unable to learn." Unfortunately, it does not matter if the student was labeled by a professional or unofficially because all labels are the carriers of assumptions. When people are identified by a label, society is often judgmental through the sharing of opinions and beliefs. Too often, people willingly accept statements without evidence of validity. Such assumptions could become stereotypes leading to stigmatization. "When we expect certain behaviors of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur" (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985, p. 36).

When it comes to labeling, society seems to put on blinders and recognizes only a narrow portion of a complicated human being. This leads to a society engaged in name-calling and verbal abuse. Regrettably, it is human nature to be emotionally affected by society's negative words and actions regarding labels.

### **Rationale**

This study is significant because along with the label comes the stigma of being considered deficient. For this reason, assigning a student to a category for special education purposes and

formally labeling them for life is a momentous step that should be heavily considered. Labeling should be the last resort after all other options to assist the child have been proven unsuccessful. It is the responsibility of educators and parents to be advocates for students. This responsibility surpasses more than just academic growth. Students must be given social guidance and emotional support so they can thrive in the ever-changing world.

Students with disabilities have made significant gains in public schools because of IDEA. Such advances were made possible due to the services provided when someone was designated as having a disability. Once a child is categorized with an intellectual disability, an emotional disturbance, or a learning disability, accommodation information will be forwarded to every new teacher through the child's cumulative folder (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2009).

Negative perceptions of a student can be damaging if a label influences the perceptions of other attributes the student possesses. This could inadvertently influence the way the student is treated at school and hinder the opportunities made available to the student (Gates, 2010). Research findings could be used to develop emotional and social support programs at school to help students cope with their label. Perhaps counselors or school psychologists could lead counseling sessions among students with disabilities and their peers that facilitate conversations about what it means to be labeled with a disability.

This study's findings may have implications for students, parents, teachers and the community in general. Together, society can overcome negative labeling by cultivating unconditional acceptance, compassion, and understanding. Students, parents and teachers who understand the power of labels and words can avoid using them to diminish others and instead use labels and words as a means to educate, encourage and inspire others.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine if labeling has an impact on the self-esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how the students with exceptionalities are perceived by their peers. The researcher will utilize a survey with multiple choice questions and rating scales to gather data from elementary students with and without disabilities in third through fifth grade.

## **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

The hypotheses and primary research questions guiding the study include the following:

- 1.) Students with exceptionalities will have a self-esteem rating similar to their peers without exceptionalities.
  - a. Do students with disabilities have lower self-esteem compared to their peers without disabilities?
  - b. Do students with labels perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers?
- 2.) Students in the general education setting will demonstrate negative perceptions of their peers with labels.
  - a. Do students with disabilities feel as if they have less friends than their peers without disabilities?
  - b. Are students in general education classes likely to be friends with students who attend special education classes?
  - c. Does labeling of children with special needs increase the risk of facing peer rejection?
  - d. How do general education students perceive their peers with exceptionalities?

## Chapter II: Review of Literature

Labeling in special education is not a new concept. It is necessary that a disability be identified and labeled in order for students to be eligible to receive special education services. Identification is usually sought after by various parties that may include the school, parent, or even by the proposed recipient him-or herself. The role of labeling in special education has two main purposes. Firstly, it is to provide reasonable access to extra support within the public school system for those whom are believed to require it. Secondly, labeling serves as a means to indicate the needs and learning styles that assist in structuring and strengthening teaching practice.

To be eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), children can fit into any of the 13 defined categories that identify disability: deafness and hearing impairments, dual sensory impairments, intellectual impairments, other health impairments, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, multiple handicaps, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments and blindness, autism, traumatic brain injury and speech (language) impairments. Although the area of giftedness is not included in the 13 categories mentioned above, the author would like to note that it is also a label that bears significance.

Labeling refers to a form of classification. Hobbs (1975) defined classification as “the act of assigning a child or condition to a general category or to a particular position in a class system” (p. 43), which also includes “the notion of public communication of the way a child is categorized; thus the connotation of a stigma is present” (p. 43). As noted by Thomson (2012), the use of categorical labels to define a disability has stimulated debate and concern throughout the history of special education.

## **Pros and Cons of Labeling**

Labels could potentially serve as a social benefit. Being labeled has potential to assist in informing peers of why and how a particular student is different and provide justification for their unique needs. Labels also assist teachers with instruction by helping communicate the individualized and specialized needs so the student can be properly educated. It is more efficient to refer to a label as a means of describing a disability than it is to list all of the symptoms and signs associated with that particular disability each time teachers need to communicate with other professionals. While labels help to provide educational support to students who struggle academically, physically, emotionally or socially; there are also negative connotations.

Reynolds and Fletcher-Janzen (2004) defined labeling as a term that refers to a series of negative effects, believed to result from some type of formal classification of students as handicapped. A study by Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) questioned whether the use of labels in special education was useful and made a critical assertion that the overall effectiveness of labeling individuals was very limited. One concern over disability labeling is the potential for such labels to cause children to be singled out amongst their peers. Some may argue that labels increase the likelihood of students being ridiculed because the labels themselves would become a way to tease the student. On the other hand, Boyle (2013) believes the perspective of a student with a label will vary according to personality and the type of label attributed. Therefore, some students may not be negatively affected by their label while others find being labeled disconcerting.

Kelly and Norwich (2004) examined the perspectives of children who receive special education provisions for their mild to moderate general learning difficulties in order to validate the assumption that pupils' perspectives will reflect a tension between positive aspects (wanting and appreciating help) and negative aspects (wanting to avoid stigmatizing associations) of being

labeled. Their findings show that the pupils in both mainstream and special schools are sensitive to the negative connotations associated with some of the labels applied to them.

### **Self-esteem**

According to Banks and Woolfson (2008), depression and low self-esteem have both been found to have higher incidence rates in students with learning difficulties compared to students without learning difficulties. While many common disabilities do not demonstrate any external physical attributes, the tools and educational modifications an individual uses clearly prove a need for assistance. The practice of inclusion places individuals with exceptionalities in the same environment as their peers where their vulnerability is visible. Recognition of a child being perceived as different sometimes makes peer acceptance difficult.

A lack of peer acceptance and feeling of rejection could contribute to the development of emotional problems (Georgiadi, Kalyva, Kourkoutas, & Tsakiris, 2012). Adding an emotional disorder along with being identified as having a learning difficulty only further burdens the individual and hinders their academic growth and social development.

Conley, Ghavami, VonOhlen and Foulkes (2007) conducted a study that examined the self-esteem of students who are emotionally disturbed, students who are learning disabled, and students who are in regular education classrooms. Conley et al. found that students who were emotionally disturbed or learning disabled had lower self-esteem than did students in regular education classes. In a similar study, Little and Kobak (2003) revealed results suggesting that students with exceptionalities perceive common interpersonal stressors as a greater emotional challenge than students with exceptionalities. With such findings, it is likely that increased stressful experiences of interpersonal events creates excessive demands on the coping abilities of students with

exceptionalities. Such stressful experiences and demands have the potential to hinder students with exceptionalities ability to make friends.

### **Social Disadvantage**

In 1959, Canadian Sociologist Erving Goffman demonstrated the viewpoint in which people perceive you is crucially important to how you outwardly present yourself. This viewpoint suggests that labeling has an influence on how one interacts in any given situation. For instance, Goffman (1959) believed that having the label of a mental illness meant that you were stigmatized for life, and this had a bearing on how you would be treated throughout your life.

According to Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000), a label can lead to social disadvantage and exclusion from society. Therefore, labeling defeats the purpose of special education progressing from a pull-out model to an inclusion model in an effort to ensure that students with disabilities are fully engaged with their peers without handicaps. Placing students in the general education setting may help them academically, but it does not always benefit them socially or emotionally.

DiGennaro Reed, McIntyre, Dusek, & Quintero (2011) found that the use of sociometric ratings suggests that students with disabilities were less likely to be nominated as a first choice for sitting with at lunch, playing with at recess, or working with in a small instructional group. While this may seem petty to an adult, it is important to note that such social interactions and feelings of acceptance are an essential component of children developing a sense of belonging. Students with exceptionalities are already at an academic disadvantage and to add social disadvantage further hinders their educational performance and attitude toward life.

Research on a sense of community and feelings of belonging conducted by Bramston, Bruggerman and Pretty (2002) found that individuals with disabilities reported a significantly lower feeling of social belonging and empowerment than their matched nondisabled peers.

A conflicting study examining attitudes towards peers with intellectual disabilities by Georgiadi et al. (2012) found that typically developing children express overall neutral attitudes towards their peers with intellectual disabilities, with children from inclusive settings being more accepting than children from non-inclusive settings.

## **Conclusion**

There is a scarcity of research regarding what children understand about being given a label and how they view themselves (Banks & Woolfson, 2008). Due to the overwhelming number of students being labeled and a lack of research concerning the self-efficacy of students with disabilities, further research is needed.

The purpose of this study is to determine if labeling has a negative impact on the self-esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how the students are perceived by their peers.

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been defined as follows:

- Labeling: a classifying phrase or name applied to a person, especially one that is inaccurate or restrictive.
- Self-esteem: confidence in one's own worth or abilities; self-respect.
- Social disadvantage: an unfavorable circumstance that reduces the chances of success or effectiveness of making and maintaining social relationships

If there truly is a negative correlation among labeled students' self-esteem, ability to make friends or an overall negative perception by their peers, future studies would need to address a

means for combating such problems. Teachers and students should be provided with various strategies and instructional techniques that support positive interactions and acceptance of individuals with exceptionalities. Knowing the negative aspects associated with labeling can help students with special needs as well as their parents and teachers to help combat the negative stigma. They can keep a watchful eye on their child or student's experiences with other children and stress that each child is an individual with unique needs, strengths, and qualities.

Frederickson (2010) reviewed a study in which social interaction between students with disabilities and students without disabilities participated in preplanned social activities. The outcome of the mentioned activities provided positive evidence of the effectiveness of increasing positive interactions and reciprocal levels of acceptance between students with special needs and their peers. DiGennaro Reed et al. (2011) argued that social skill instruction should be emphasized to focus on friendship making skills (e.g., joining in, asking someone to play, sharing, and offering help) and emotional regulation.

Labels may stay with an individual throughout their entire life (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). In conclusion, the decision to use a label should be carefully considered due to the possibility of negative connotations regarding social relationships, personal preferences and the effects on self-esteem.

### **Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology**

In an effort to determine if having a label affects self-esteem, the researcher conducted a survey to discover if students with exceptionalities have a self-esteem rating similar to their peers without exceptionalities and if students in the general education setting demonstrate negative perceptions of their peers with labels. The researcher will also ask questions related to socialization and the ability to make friends. From the survey, the hope is to increase awareness of various strategies and instructional techniques that support positive interactions and acceptance of individuals with exceptionalities in order to combat any negative stigma.

#### **Subjects**

Subjects selected for the study consisted of a candidate pool of 127 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students enrolled at Midway Elementary School in rural Lincoln County, West Virginia. Both male and female students with and without disabilities between the ages of nine and 13 could participate. A total of 93 students participated in the study.

Demographics of the 93 students in this research study include 30 third-graders, 32 fourth-graders and 31 fifth-graders. There were 43 male students and 50 female students who participated in the study. Students with exceptionalities and disabilities made up 27% of the participants—17 male and 8 female.

#### **Procedures**

First, the researcher reviewed journal articles on current research regarding labeling, self-esteem and social disadvantage. Permission was then obtained from the principal of Midway Elementary to conduct the research project and survey. Permission for the research study was obtained from Marshall University's International Review Board (IRB).

After gaining IRB approval, the co-investigator sent home parent consent forms to all third, fourth and fifth grade students with and without disabilities enrolled at Midway Elementary

School. A total of 127 subjects were the most that would be able to enter the study since that is the maximum number of subjects in the candidate pool of third, fourth and fifth grade students.

All students had one week to return the consent form. Students who returned the consent form with a parent or guardian signature then attended a brief informational meeting regarding the study. The meeting was led by the co-investigator and detailed the purpose and procedure for the study.

During the meeting, students were provided the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had about the survey and their involvement. Students who agreed to participate in the survey signed a child assent form and returned it to the co-investigator during the meeting. One week later, participating students used the school's computer lab to complete the survey.

The lab was utilized in groups of approximately 15-20 students per grade level in order to efficiently supervise and provide support to students. There were a total of six classrooms brought into the lab—two classes of each third-, fourth- and fifth-grade. Prior to initiating the survey, all computers were logged on to the internet and the kwiksurveys.com website. Participants were reminded that they may discontinue the survey at any time if they so choose. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Any participant needing or requesting to have the survey read aloud to them did so with the assistance of a teacher. After completion students were thanked for their participation, and they returned to their classroom. The next grade level group was then brought in to complete the survey.

### **Instrumentation**

The assessment tool for this study was an online survey created by the co-investigator using the kwiksurveys.com website. The complete survey consisted of 33 questions in a mixed format of multiple choice, Likert scale and drop-down menus. The first page of the survey contained 13

questions focused on student demographics. Questions specifically pertained to gender, age, grade and involvement in educational services such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, reading or math interventions and other aspects of special education. Survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

The second page contained 10 statements from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale—a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth through assessing positive and negative feelings about the self (Rosenberg, 1979). Students were asked to rate each statement as “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree”.

The final page and last nine questions of the survey focused on the concepts of socialization and labels. Students were to choose a statement from a drop down menu based on how easy or difficult it is to make friends. Five questions referred to students’ personal perspectives of their intelligence compared to their peers. Students were given the choice of “Much Smarter”, “Just as Smart”, and “Not as Smart” using a drop-down menu. One question required students to rate how likely they were to be friends with a peer in special education classes using “Very Likely”, “Likely” or “Not Likely”. The remaining questions pertained to bullying and being bullied. Students had to select “Yes” or “No” according to how the statement related to them personally. No personal identifying information was on the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing the survey, results were automatically saved to the kwiksurveys.com website where the co-investigator could access them. Data was then analyzed to establish relationships among labels and self-esteem as well as labels and socialization.

First, demographic information was cross referenced with the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale to determine if students with labels in special education classes have lower self-esteem compared to their peers without disabilities.

Next, demographic information was cross referenced with the 9 survey questions regarding socialization to determine the following:

1. Do students with disabilities feel as if they have less friends than their peers without disabilities?
2. Do students with labels perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers?
3. Are students in general education classes likely to be friends with students who attend special education classes?
4. How do general education students perceive their peers with exceptionalities?

Then the co-investigator looked for a predominant theme in order to determine if labeling has a negative impact on the self- esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how students with disabilities are perceived by their peers.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine if labeling has an impact on the self-esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how the students with exceptionalities are perceived by their peers.

The data analyses were guided by the research questions posed. This study used a survey to provide answers to the questions. Each research question will be answered in this chapter. A description of the data used and the analyses done will be given. The results of the analyses will then be presented and the researcher's conclusion of the hypotheses will be determined by the evidence. Hypothesis one is statistically driven and hypothesis two is inferentially-based on student responses to survey questions.

### **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

- 1.) Students with exceptionalities will have a self-esteem rating similar to their peers without exceptionalities.
  - a. Research Question 1: Do students with disabilities have lower self-esteem compared to their peers without disabilities?
  - b. Research Question 2: Do students with labels perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers?
- 2.) Students in the general education setting will demonstrate negative perceptions of their peers with labels.
  - a. Research Question 3: Do students with disabilities feel as if they have fewer friends than their peers without disabilities?
  - b. Research Question 4: Are students in general education classes likely to be friends with students who attend special education classes?

- c. Research Question 5: Does labeling of children with special needs increase the risk of facing peer rejection?
- d. Research Question 6: How do general education students perceive their peers with exceptionalities?

The researcher began data analyses by investigating demographics of all participants. Participants were categorized by grade level and gender. Then the researcher determined how many students for each grade, three through five, were in special education. Table 1 displays participant demographics.

**Table 1**

Participant Demographics of the Study: Labeling: Student Self-Esteem and the Stigma of a Label

<b>Participant Demographics</b>		
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male .....	43	46
Female .....	50	53
<b>Grade</b>		
Third .....	30	32
Fourth .....	32	34
Fifth .....	31	33
<b>Educational Placement</b>		
General Education.....	68	73
Special Education.....	25	27

In order to gain an accurate count of students in special education, the researcher noted responses to six survey questions denoting some type of placement in special education. Students were asked if they left their typical classroom to go with another teacher for assistance in speech, math, reading or enrichment (gifted).

After carefully examining each response, it was determined that only 13 of the 25 students in special education were aware that they were considered to be in special education classes. Table 2

displays all students' responses to questions pertaining to their involvement in special education classes.

**Table 2**

*Student Responses Regarding Involvement in Special Education Classes*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Special Education</b>	<b>Speech</b>	<b>Ms.White For Math (Special Ed.)</b>	<b>Ms. White For RLA (Special Ed.)</b>	<b>Mrs. Browning (Gifted)</b>
1	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
2	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
3	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
4	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
5	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
6	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
7	Female	Fourth	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
8	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
9	Male	Fourth	No	Yes	No	No	No
10	Male	Fourth	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
11	Male	Fourth	Yes	No	No	No	No
12	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
13	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
14	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
15	Male	Fourth	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
16	Female	Fourth	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
17	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
18	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
19	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
20	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
21	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
22	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
23	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
24	Female	Fourth	No	Yes	No	No	No
25	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
26	Male	Fourth	No	No	Yes	No	No
27	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
28	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
29	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
30	Male	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
31	Male	Fourth	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
32	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No

Student	Gender	Grade	Special Education	Speech	Ms.White For Math (Special Ed.)	Ms. White For RLA (Special Ed.)	Mrs. Browning (Gifted)
33	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
34	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
35	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
36	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
37	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
38	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
39	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
40	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
41	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
42	Female	Fifth	No	Yes	No	No	No
43	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
44	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
45	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
46	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
47	Male	Fourth	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
48	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
49	Female	Fifth	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
50	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
51	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
52	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
53	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
54	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
55	Female	Fourth	No	No	No	No	No
56	Male	Third	No	Yes	No	No	No
57	Female	Third	No	Yes	No	No	No
58	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
59	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
60	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
61	Male	Fifth	No	Yes	No	No	No
62	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
63	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
64	Male	Third	No	Yes	No	No	No
65	Male	Third	No	No	Yes	No	No
66	Female	Fifth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
67	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
68	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
69	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
70	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
71	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No

Student	Gender	Grade	Special Education	Speech	Ms.White For Math (Special Ed.)	Ms. White For RLA (Special Ed.)	Mrs. Browning (Gifted)
72	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
73	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
74	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
75	Male	Third	No	Yes	No	No	No
76	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
77	Male	Third	Yes	No	No	No	No
78	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
79	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	Yes
80	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
81	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
82	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
83	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
84	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
85	Male	Third	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
86	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No
87	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
88	Male	Third	No	No	No	No	No
89	Male	Fifth	No	No	No	No	Yes
90	Female	Fifth	No	No	No	No	No
91	Male	Third	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
92	Male	Third	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
93	Female	Third	No	No	No	No	No

*Note. The survey asked students if they left the room to attend class with another teacher for Special Education, Speech or the Gifted Program. The table lists their “Yes” and “No” responses.*

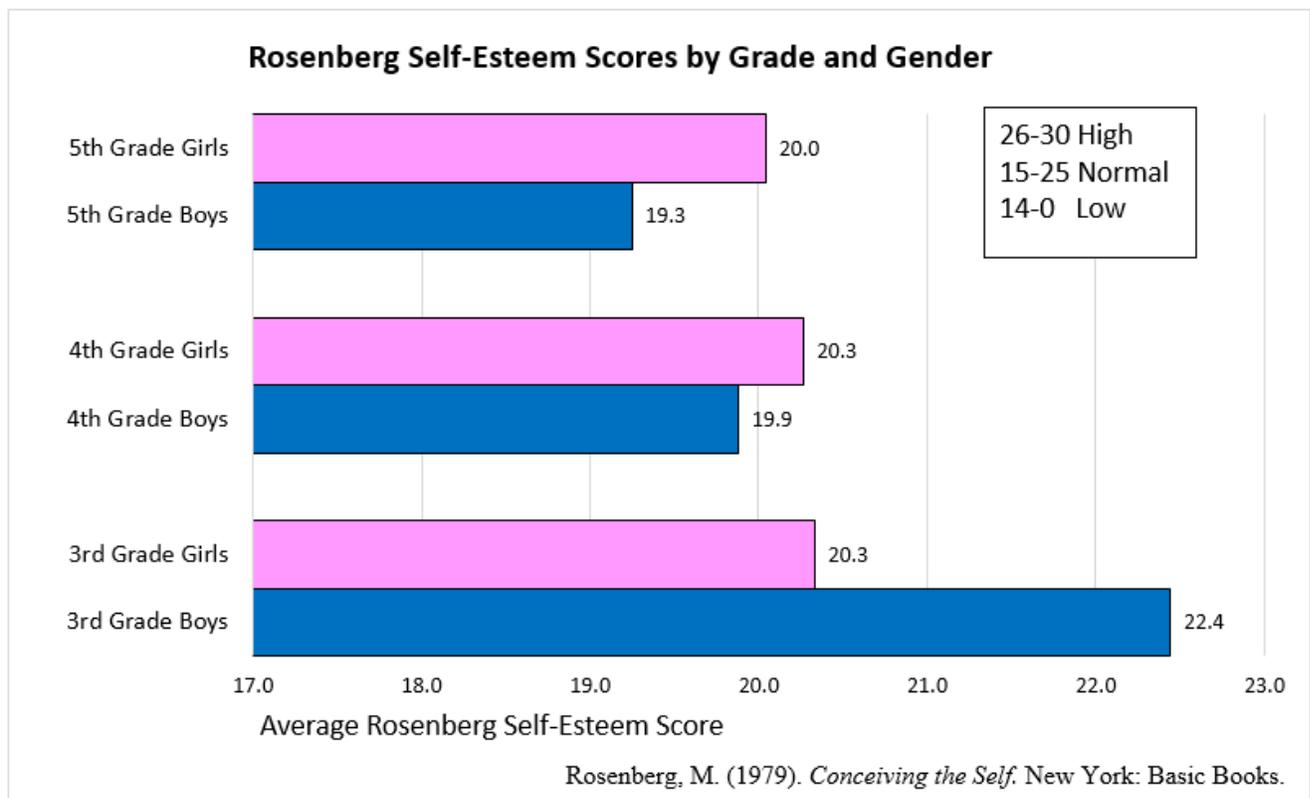
### **Research Question 1: Do students with disabilities have lower self-esteem compared to their peers without disabilities?**

Survey items 14-23 consisted of statements from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale was used to measure students’ self-worth using a Likert scale to rate positive and negative feelings. Students completed the survey by rating each item, and then the co-investigator scored each item. The scale ranged from zero to 30. Scores between 15 and 25 were within normal range; scores below 15 suggested low self-esteem.

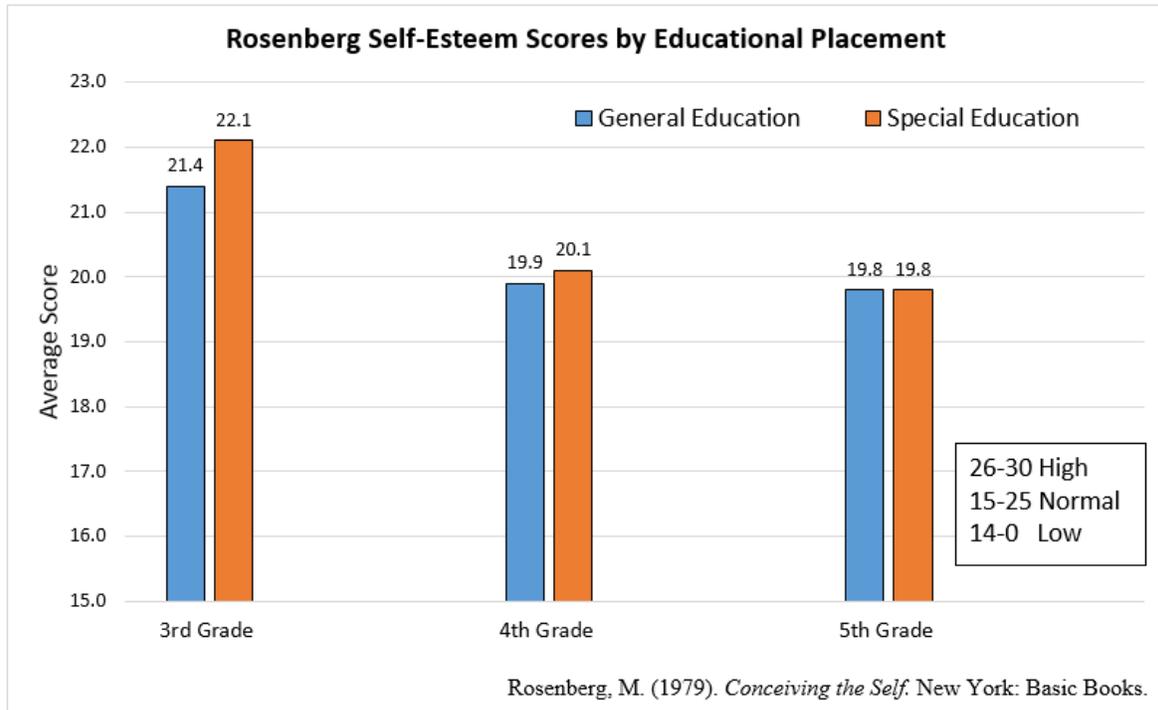
The researcher exported each of the 10 items to an excel spreadsheet and then scored items accordingly before establishing a total. Items 14, 15, 17, 19 and 20 were scored on a scale of three to zero with three being “Strongly Agree” and zero being “Strongly Disagree”. Items 16, 18, 21, 22, and 23 were scored reversed in valence with zero being “Strongly Agree” and three being “Strongly Disagree”.

Once all student scores were determined, the researcher created three graphs to represent the data. Figure 4.1 shows average results organized by grade and gender. Figure 4.2 depicts average results according to educational setting. Figure 4.3 displays the average scores according to grade, gender, and educational placement.

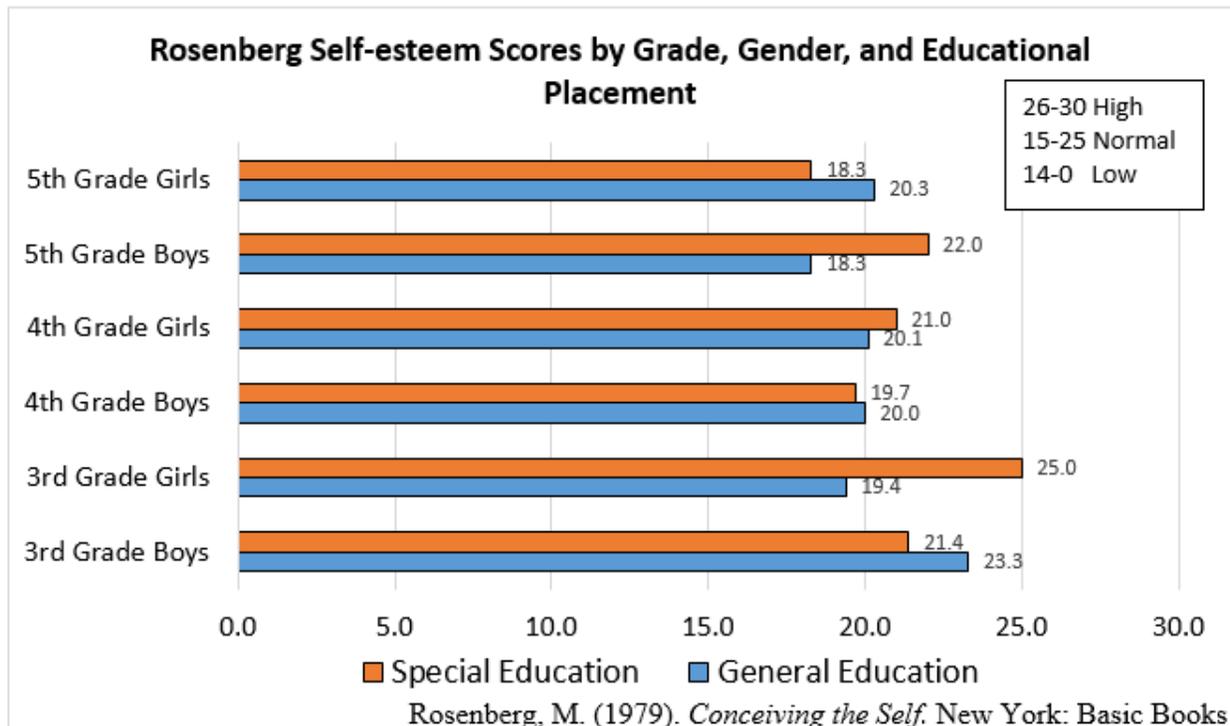
**Figure 4.1:** Average Results of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale Organized by Grade and Gender



**Figure 4.2:** Average Results of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale According to Educational Setting



**Figure 4.3:** Average Results of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale According to Grade, Gender, and Educational Placement



The results showed that participants in general education achieved a mean raw score of 20.35 on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale compared to a mean score of 20.84 for participants in special education (Rosenberg, 1979). To determine the probability that the difference between these means was significant (beyond chance), a t-test for independent samples was obtained. These results, shown in Table 2, indicate that participants in general education did not score significantly greater than did those in special education ( $t=0.72$ ,  $df=40$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Based upon the results of the data analysis, hypothesis one is accepted that there are not significant differences in self-esteem scores among general education students versus special education students.

**Table 2**

*t-Test Analysis of Self-Esteem Scores of General and Special Education Students*

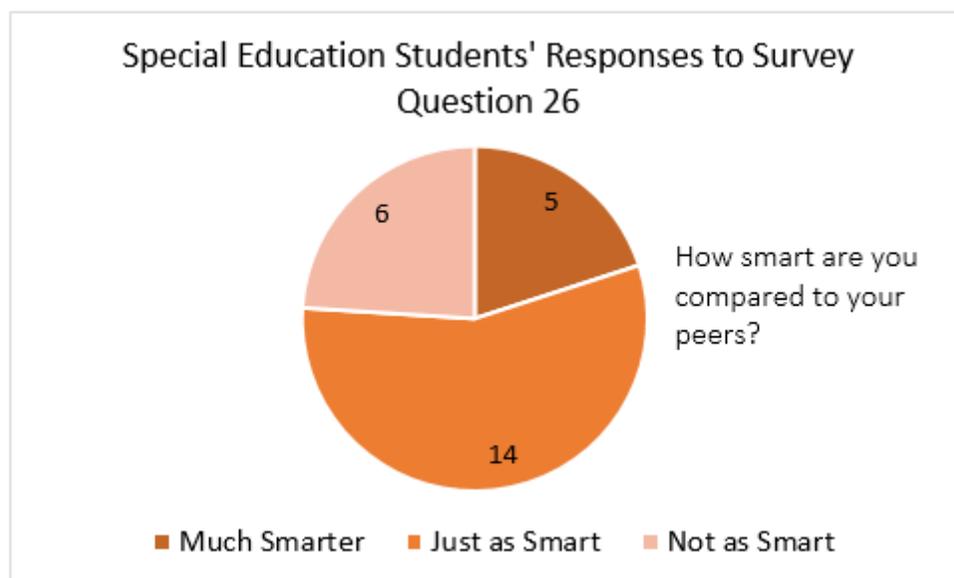
<b>t-Test: Two Sample Assuming Unequal Variances</b>		
	<i>General Ed.</i>	<i>Special Ed.</i>
Mean .....	20.35	20.84
Variance .....	30.83	35.39
Observations .....	68.00	25.00
Hypothesized Mean Difference.....	0.00	
df.....	40.00	
t Stat.....	-0.36	
P(T<=t) one-tail.....	0.36	
t Critical one-tail.....	1.68	
P(T<=t) two-tail .....	0.72	
t Critical two-tail .....	2.02	

**Research Question 2: Do students with labels perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers?**

Participants were asked, “How smart are you compared to your peers?” Figure 4.4 illustrates results in a pie chart. Results showed 24% of special education students believe they are “Not as Smart” as their peers. On the other hand, 56 % of special education students believe they

are “Just as Smart” as their peers, and 20% of special education students believe they are “Much Smarter” than their peers.

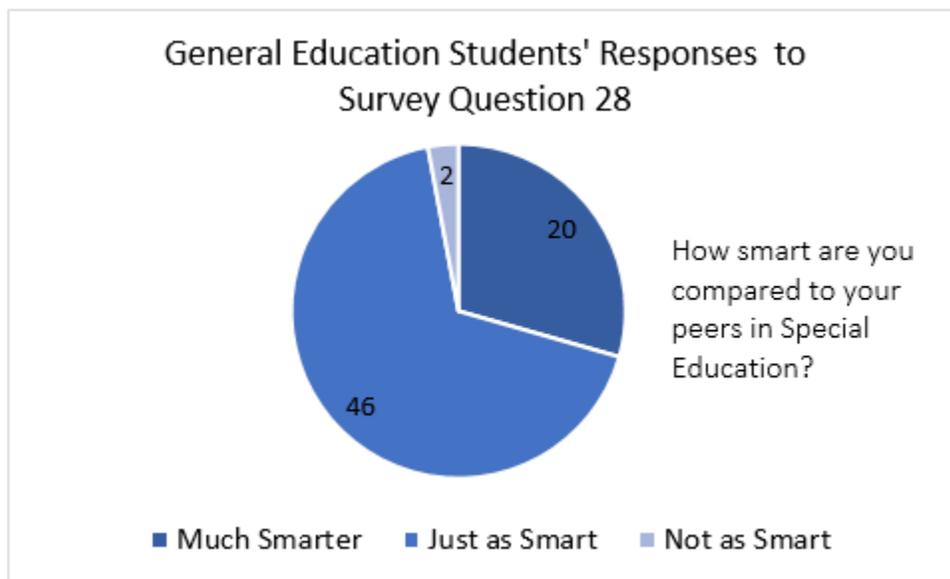
**Figure 4.4:** Special Education Students’ Responses about Intelligence as noted by Survey Question 26



After looking at special education students’ responses, the researcher investigated responses of students in general education. Findings depicted 24% of general education students believe they are “Much Smarter” than their peers in special education classes. The majority (67%) of general education students believe they are “Just as Smart” as their peers in special education classes and only 3% of general education students believe they are “Not as Smart” as their peers in special education classes.

In response to research question three, students with labels do not perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers. The majority of students in special education classes feel equally as intelligent as their general education peers. Figure 5 displays the responses of students in general education in regards to survey question 28.

**Figure 4.5:** General Education Students' Responses about Intelligence as noted by Survey Question 28

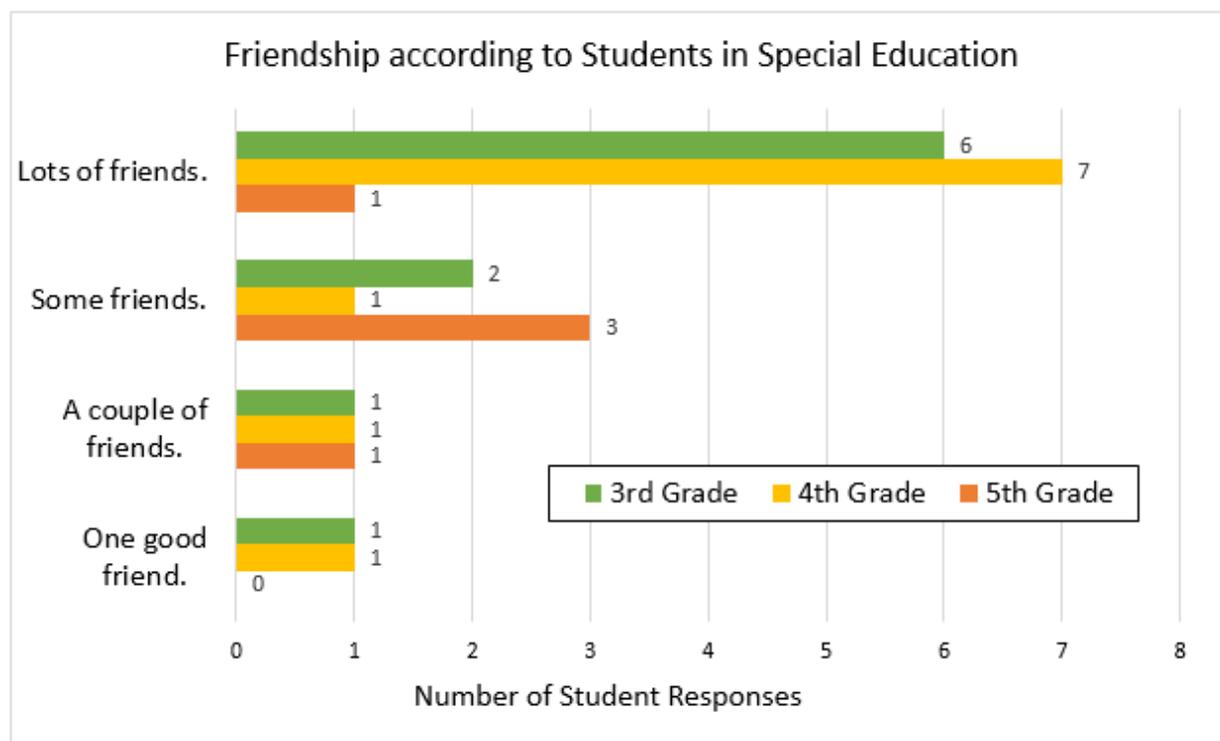


**Research Question 3: Do students with disabilities feel as if they have fewer friends than their peers without disabilities?**

The researcher used survey questions 23 and 24 to gain information about the participants' number of friends and ability to make friends. First, the co-investigator examined the responses of students in special education classes. It was determined that the majority of students in special education classes felt they have "Lots of friends" (56%). Precisely 24% of students in special education believe they have "Some friends". Comparatively, 12% of surveyed students in special education believe they have "A couple of friends" and 8% of surveyed students in special education believe they have "One good friend". Figure 4.6 displays results graphically.

**Figure 4.6:** Friendship according to Students in Special Education as noted by Survey Question

24

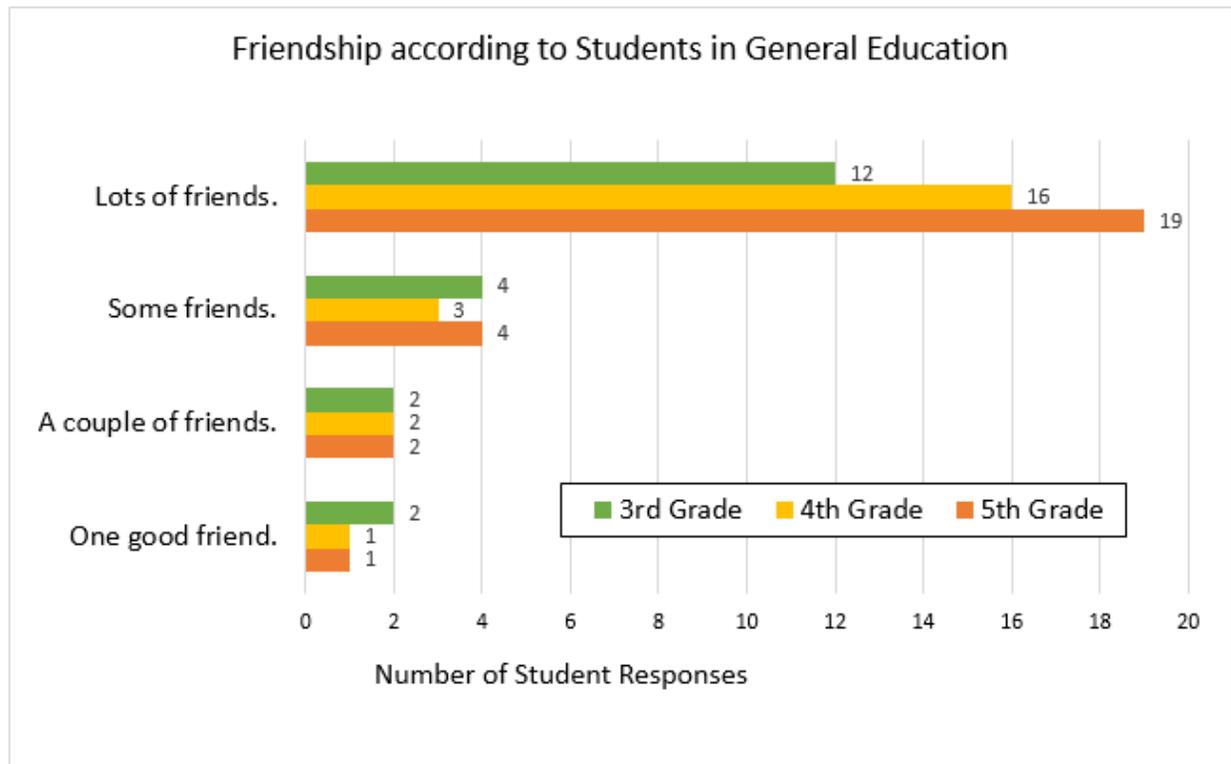


Next, the co-investigator reviewed the responses from students in the general education setting. Student responses showed 69% of students in general education believe they have “Lots of friends”. Survey results revealed that 16% of students in special education believe they have “Some friends”, 9% of students in general education believe they have “A couple of friends” and 6% of students in general education believe they have “One good friend”. See Figure 4.7.

The co-investigator’s findings yield a very similar relationship among special education students and general education students’ number of friends. This leads to the conjecture that students with disabilities do not feel as if they have less friends compared to their peers without disabilities.

**Figure 4.7:** Friendship according to Students in General Education as noted by Survey Question

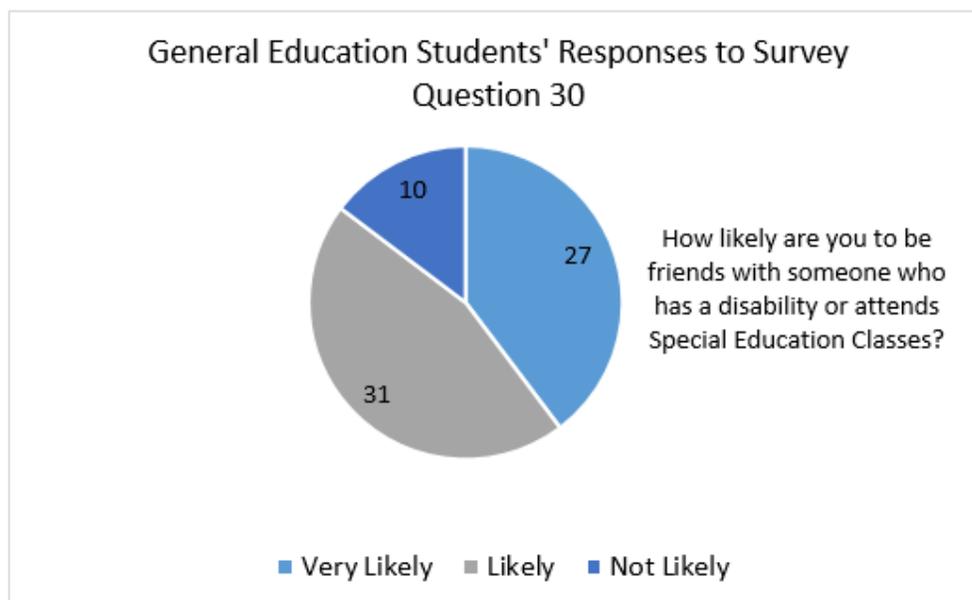
24



**Research Question 4: Are students in general education classes likely to be friends with students who attend special education classes?**

According to general education students' responses, 40% were "Very Likely" to be friends with someone who has a disability or attends special education classes. Comparatively, 46% of general education students were "Likely" to be friends with someone who has a disability or attends special education classes. In contrast, only 14 % of general education students were "Not Likely" to be friends with someone who has a disability or attends special education classes. Figure 4.8 displays general education students' responses to survey question 30.

**Figure 4.8:** General Education Students' Responses about the Likelihood of Friendship as noted by Survey Question 30



A large percentage (86%) of general education students chose “Very Likely” and “Likely” in regard to being friends with a student in special education classes. These findings provide evidence that positive relationships are being developed among all students regardless of being associated with a label. It seems as if general education students do not have a problem being friends with students in special education.

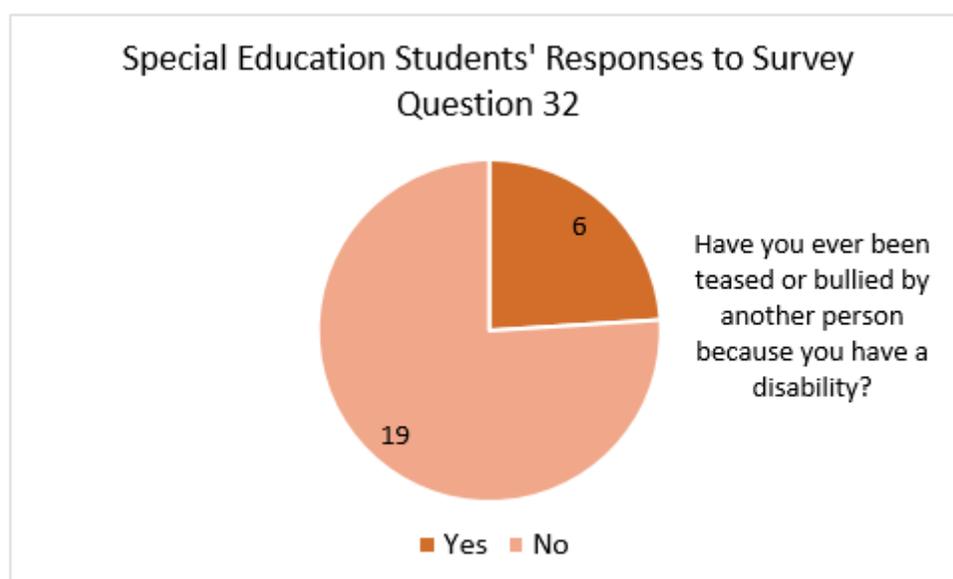
**Research Question 5: Does labeling of children with special needs increase the risk of facing peer rejection?**

In order to determine if students with special needs faced peer rejection, the researcher considered all nine socialization and labeling questions on the survey and gave particular attention to questions 32 and 24.

The researcher used survey question 32 to ask participants, “Have you ever been teased or bullied by another person because you have a disability?” The co-investigator focused on

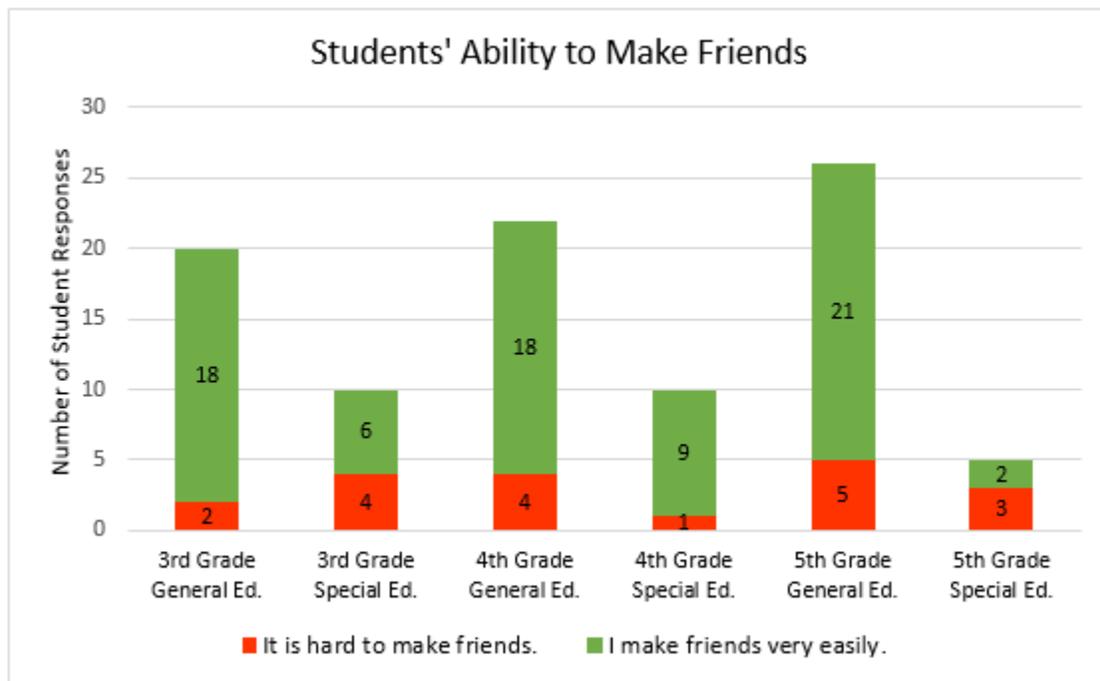
responses from students in special education classes in order to conclude if the majority of students in special education classes felt they had ever been teased or bullied. Results are displayed in Figure 4.9. Out of the 25 students in special education, six (24%) responded that they had been teased or bullied because of their disability and 19 (76%) responded that they had not been teased or bullied because of their disability.

**Figure 4.9:** Special Education Students' Responses About Bullying as Noted by Survey Question 32.



Then the researcher examined survey question 24 to compare the ability of making friends between students in special education and students in general education. Results are depicted in Figure 4.10. Results showed that 32% of students in special education classes find it hard to make friends and 68% of students in special education classes feel as if they make friends very easily. The results from general education students showed that 16% of students find it hard to make friends and 84% of general education students feel as if they make friends very easily.

**Figure 4.10:** Students Ability to Make Friends According to Educational Placement and Grade Level. This data is derived from Survey Question 24



This data from questions 24 and 32 suggest that it is slightly more difficult for students in special education classes to make friends. This may or may not pertain to the fact that students in special education have a label applied to their persona. However, it is disheartening to know that nearly one-fourth of the special education students surveyed have been teased or bullied due to their disability.

**Research Question 6: How do general education students perceive their peers with exceptionalities?**

Based upon the results of the study, hypothesis two was affirmed. Students in the general education setting demonstrated negative perceptions of their peers with labels. Students with disabilities feel as if they have fewer friends than their peers without disabilities. There are students with labels that perceive themselves as being less intelligent than their peers. While some students

in general education classes are likely to be friends with students who attend special education classes, there is a portion that is not likely. Students with special needs and labels are at risk of facing peer rejection through the use of teasing and bullying. The ideas that the students with exceptionalities feel it is difficult to make friends and the belief that they have been bullied due to having a disability, proves a negative stigma exists. While the results did not indicate an overwhelming difference, there appears to be areas that could be further investigated.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to determine if labeling has an impact on the self-esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how the students with exceptionalities are perceived by their peers. This chapter presents: (a) interpretation of results, (b) limitations of the study, (c) recommendations for future research and (d) conclusion and implications.

### **Interpretation of Results**

A study by Banks and Woolfson (2008) indicated that depression and low self-esteem have both been found to have higher incidence rates in students with learning difficulties compared to students without learning difficulties. A similar study by Conley, Ghavami, VonOhlen and Foulkes (2007) examined the self-esteem of students who are emotionally disturbed, students who are learning disabled, and students who are in regular education classrooms. Conley et al. found that students who were emotionally disturbed or learning disabled had lower self-esteem than did students in regular (general) education classes.

In contrast, this study's findings showed there was not significant differences in self-esteem scores among general education students and special education students in grades three through five. Scores for both groups of students averaged between 20 and 21 which is considered to be within normal range.

A study by Georgiadi et al. (2012), found that typically developing children express overall neutral attitudes towards their peers with intellectual disabilities. These findings are comparable to this study in that the co-investigator's findings yield a very similar relationship among special education students and general education students' number of friends, ability to make friends, and the likeliness of general and special education students being friends.

## **Limitations**

While this study had a positive participation rate (73%) and results suggest there is not a major difference in the self-esteem among general and special education students, there are several limitations that need be considered.

First of all, Midway Elementary School is in a rural area with very limited diversity and the participant pool was a small sample of students in only grades three through five. Out of a total of 93 participants, 25 were in special education and 68 were in general education. Surprisingly, a significant portion of participants in special education (52%) were not even aware that they participate in special education classes. For this study's purpose, it was necessary that students be aware of their involvement in special education as well as their perception of being labeled. According to Boyle (2013), the perspective of a student with a label will vary according to personality and the type of label attributed. Due to this, the perspective of students in special education may not have been adequately depicted considering over half of the students were unaware of their placement in special education.

A second possible limitation is that students participating in the study completed the survey in the school's computer lab, which was not a private setting. Participants were surrounded by their peers and may have been influenced to respond in a way that was inconsistent with how they would have responded if in a more private setting.

Finally, there was a slight time restraint. The survey was completed during the school day on the co-investigator's planning time. This resulted in students having a limited amount of time to complete the survey. Allowing students more time to think may have yielded different responses.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Based on the limitations noted above, the following recommendations are suggested for future studies:

- Utilize a more urban district with diverse participants.
- Include participants in middle and high school.
- The study should require a larger pool of participants in special education.
- Survey completion should be conducted in a more private setting.
- Participants should have an unlimited amount of time to complete the survey.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the results of the study, hypothesis one is accepted that there are not significant differences in the self-esteem scores among general education students versus special education students. Hypothesis two was affirmed that students in the general education setting demonstrated negative perceptions of their peers with labels.

DiGennaro Reed et al. (2011) argued that social skill instruction should be emphasized to focus on friendship making skills between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The co-investigator agrees that more instruction in the general curriculum should focus on friendship and how to prevent bullying. Students could also benefit from instruction on acceptance of disabilities. The author suggests screening students in general and special education for low self-esteem as well as providing counseling services for all students.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A. IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board  
401 11th St., Suite 1300  
Huntington, WV 25701

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

February 24, 2015

Jane Bogan, PhD  
Special Education Department, MUGC

RE: IRBNet ID# 718988-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Bogan:

**Protocol Title:** [718988-1] Amanda Sowards- Labeling: Student Self-Esteem and the Stigma of a Label

**Expiration Date:** February 24, 2016

**Site Location:** MUGC

**Submission Type:** New Project APPROVED

**Review Type:** Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Vice Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire February 24, 2016. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Amanda Sowards.

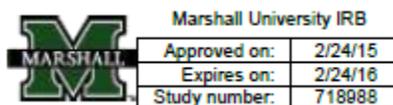
If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## Appendix B. Consent

### Parental Consent/Permission

*Labeling: Student Self-Esteem and the Stigma of a Label*

Amanda Sowards, B.A., Co-investigator  
Jane Bogan, PhD, Principal Investigator



### Introduction

Your child is invited (with your permission) to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. Your child may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. There may also be risks associated with being part of research studies. If there are any risks involved in this study then they will be described in this consent. Participation is voluntary so please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

### Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to determine if labeling has an impact on the self-esteem of students with exceptionalities in grades three through five and to determine how the students with exceptionalities are perceived by their peers. The researcher will utilize surveys and questionnaires with rating scales to gather data from elementary students with and without disabilities in third through fifth grade. If there truly is a negative correlation among labeled students' self-esteem, ability to make friends or an overall negative perception by their peers, future studies would need to address a means for combating such problems. Teachers and students could be provided with various strategies and instructional techniques that support positive interactions and acceptance of individuals with exceptionalities. Knowing the negative aspects associated with labeling can help students with special needs as well as their parents and teachers to help combat the negative stigma.

### How Many Will Take Part In The Study?

It is anticipated that 70 children will take part in this study. A total of 128 subjects are the most that would be able to enter the study since that is the maximum number of subjects in the candidate pool of third, fourth and fifth graders enrolled at Midway Elementary.

### What Is Involved In This Research Study?

In order to participate in the study, your child will complete an online survey in the computer lab during the school day. The survey consists of three parts: Demographic, Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and Socialization and Labels.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

How Long Will Your Child Be In The Study?

Your child will be in the study for the length of time it takes to complete the survey (about 15 minutes). You or your child can decide to stop participation at any time. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the study investigator or study staff as soon as possible.

The study investigator may stop your child from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your child's best interest; if your child does not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

What Are The Risks Of The Study?

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?

If you agree to allow your child to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to them. We hope the information learned from this study will benefit other people in the future. The benefits of participating in this study may be: an increase in social and self-awareness stemming from the self-reflective nature of the survey questions.

What About Confidentiality?

We will do our best to make sure that your child's personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your child's study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your child's records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, your child will not be identified by name or in any other way.

What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?

There are no costs to you for allowing your child to take part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

Will You Be Paid For Participation?

You will receive no payment or other compensation for your child's participation in this study.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

*What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?*

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to take part or you may withdraw them from the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child are entitled. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

*Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?*

For questions about the study, contact the study investigators:

Principal Investigator, Jane Bogan at (304) 746-1957

Co-investigator, Amanda Sowards at (304)756-3121.

You should also call the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Stephen Cooper at (304) 696-7320. You may also call this number if:

- You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- The research staff cannot be reached.
- You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

***SIGNATURES***

You grant permission for your child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this study. You have had a chance to ask questions about this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are stating that you are not giving up any legal rights to which you or your child are entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

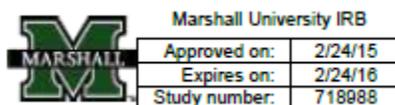
\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C. Assent



### Marshall University Child's Assent for Being in a Research Study

Title: Labeling: How Students Feel About Themselves and Others.

#### Why are you here?

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how students feel about being given a label for Special Education classes. I also want to know about what students in regular classrooms think about students who go to other classrooms for help.

I am inviting you to be in the study because you are easy to get in contact with and you are old enough to complete the survey.

#### Why am I doing this study?

I want to make sure all students feel good about themselves and understand that everyone is special in their own way. With your help, I might be able to encourage parents, teachers, students and people in the community to better accept people with disabilities.

#### What will happen to you?

You will go to the computer lab and take an online survey. The survey will only take about fifteen minutes. You will read 32 questions and answer them honestly by selecting a multiple choice answer.

#### Will the study help you?

Some of the questions in the survey will make you think about your feelings and the feelings of others. This will help you to reflect on how you think, feel and act as a person.

#### What if you have any questions?

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can come to my room and talk to me before or after school hours.

#### Do your parents know about this?

This study was explained to your parents and they said that you could be in it if you want. You can talk this over with them before you decide.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in the study. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell your parents and your teacher. It's up to you.

Putting a checkmark by the word YES and writing your name after that means you agree to be in the study, and know what will happen to you.

You have talked to your parents and Mrs. Sowards about the study. You have had all of your questions answered. You understand that you can stop being in this study at any time and no one will be angry or upset with you. Indicate your choice below:

---

*(Check One)*

\_\_\_ **YES**, I want to be in the study.      \_\_\_ **NO**, I do not want to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Witness *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D. Participant Survey

Questions in this document directly reflect the questions from the online survey. (kwiksurveys.com)

### Page 1: Demographics (1-13 are multiple choice)

Please answer the following as accurately as possible.

All information is confidential.

1. What is your gender?

Male (Boy)

Female (Girl)

2. What grade are you currently in?

Third

Fourth

Fifth

3. What is your age?

9

10

11

12

13

4. Are you in Special Education classes?

Yes

No

5. Do you go to Speech Class?

Yes

No

6. Does Ms. White come into your class to help you with Reading?

Yes

No

7. Does Ms. White come into your class to help you with Math?

Yes

No

8. Do you leave the classroom for extra help with Math? (Mrs. Gillenwater or Mrs. Bell)

Yes

No

9. Do you leave the classroom for extra help with Reading? (Mrs. Gillenwater or Mrs. Bell)

Yes

No

10. Do you go to Mrs. Fraley's room for Math?

Yes

No

11. Do you go to the Gifted Program? (Mrs. Browning)

Yes

No

12. Do you go to Mrs. Fraley's room for Reading?

Yes

No

13. Do you receive OT (Occupational Therapy) or PT (Physical Therapy) services?

Yes

No

**Page 2: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (14-23 use a Likert Scale)**

\*Questions 14-23 were taken from:

Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the adolescent self-image. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

14. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

15. At times I think I am no good at all.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

16. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

17. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

18. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

19. I certainly feel useless at times.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

20. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

21. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

22. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

23. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

**Page 3: Socialization and Labels** (24-32 use a drop-down menu, 31-33 are multiple choice.)

Please answer the following honestly.

24. How do you feel about your ability to make friends?

I make friends very easily.

It's hard to make friends.

25. How many friends do you have? (Friends meaning people you trust, care about and spend time with often because you choose to.)

Much Smarter

Just as Smart

Not as Smart

26. How smart are you compared to your peers?

Much Smarter

Just as Smart

Not as Smart

27. How smart are you compared to your peers who go to Speech class?

Much Smarter

Just as Smart

Not as Smart

28. How smart are you compared to your peers who go to Special Education classes?

Much Smarter

Just as Smart

Not as Smart

29. How smart are you compared to your peers who get extra help from another teacher? (Ms. White, Mrs. Bell or Mrs. Gillenwater)

Much Smarter

Just as Smart

Not as Smart

30. How likely are you to be friends with someone who has a disability or attends Special Education Classes?

Very Likely

Likely

Not Likely

31. Have you ever teased or bullied another person because they had a disability?

Yes

No

32. Have you ever been teased or bullied by another person because you have a disability?

Yes

No

## Appendix E. Thesis and Dissertation Permissions Page

### Marshall Digital Scholar Permissions Page

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Amanda Kay Sowards  
Name

*Amanda Kay Sowards*  
Signature

April 30, 2015  
Date

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