

Uphill Both Ways: Helping Students Who Struggle in School:

When It Says Libby's...

Breathe. Push. Just a little more now! The anticipation builds until an infant's cry is heard. "It's a girl," the doctor exclaims as the excited new parents receive their daughter into their arms. Even before the umbilical cord is cut, she has been given her first label.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to write a book about children without including some labels. We live in a complex society that uses labels to separate, segregate, quantify, and justify. There are labels affiliated with gender, with culture, with religious belief and with socio-economic status. Some labels are factual while others are subjective.

Subjective labeling is a risky business. There is a fine line between an accurate adjective and an offensive characterization. Lawsuits asserting slander are prevalent in our litigious society. The old adage about performing to the level of expectation certainly merits care in labeling. A "gifted" musician certainly holds more promise than an average one. An "at-risk" child certainly poses more threat than a high achiever. Or do they? It is the task of all individuals to think beyond the label. At best, the adjectives that we assign one another tell us something about content. At worst, they tell us something about quality. *But only if we let them.*

I've started this book on students who struggle with a brief opinion on labels because I am challenged by the acronyms and jargon that we place upon

our students in our schools. When asked what I teach, I like to give the answer “children”...but I am nearly always given an eye roll and the answer, “Well, of course, but *what* do you teach?” This means the listener wants to hear about 8th grade social studies or 4th grade language arts. The answer “Special Education” invariably causes a pause and an exclamation of “You must have so much patience.” In recent years, when my students are now labeled “At-Risk” by their educational environment, I find myself with little answer beyond “children”. The students I teach struggle in school for a wide variety of reasons, most notably because it is the educational system and not the students that is “at-risk”. But the labels that the students bear open a forum for communication. They give us a starting point for discussion. And so, they are present through the book. Read them with an open mind an eye on some future time when teachers everywhere will find themselves answering “I teach children.”