The Impact of Labels on Relationships and Identity for Students and Teachers in Our Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore and better understand the importance and impact of labels in our secondary schools and society for students and educators at a small Northeast high school and how they in turn view themselves and others as a result of their interactions and experiences with labeling. What made this study important and different from previous studies was that no one particular label was investigated and that multiple labels were examined simultaneously. The twelve individuals involved in the study were a mix of staff and students from a variety of backgrounds who had both overlapping and unique experiences with labels and labeling.

An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) served as the methodology to better understand the intricacies and entanglements that labels have caused for the participants during their time in high school; both personally and professionally. The firsthand narratives of the participants provided detailed accounts for inductive analysis at the school under investigation.

The study revealed that people’s experiences with labels, while individual and inimitable, shared some commonalities in terms of impact. The four themes of normalization, liminality of labels, identity confusion and feelings of conflict were present across all of the conducted interviews to varying extents. Specifically, although people were familiar with the use of labels and labeling in schools they were far from comfortable with it. This discomfiture, if not vexation, was further confounded by the fact that the meanings and appropriateness of labels are constantly changing and, as such, ultimately contribute to confusion during the development of identity during adolescence and conflict that shapes their perceptions well into adulthood as well.

Keywords: Labels, Implicit-Bias, Intersectionality, Meta-Perceptions, School-Reform, Stigma, Identity, Critical-Bifocality, Confirmation-Bias, Performance, Stereotypes, School-disassociation
Dedication

When considering this dedication it quickly became apparent to me that I am a very lucky man to have so many people who have supported me throughout this journey. I would first like to thank Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons for her caring and conscientious feedback and guidance throughout this process as both an advisor and professor. Without her help and calming influence it is hard for me to imagine having completed this tremendous undertaking in such a reasonable amount of time. Thank you so much for all that you have done.

I would also like to thank Dr. Lynda Beltz and Dr. Kathleen McLaughlin for serving on my dissertational committee and working with me to complete this long and (at times) inconceivably arduous journey of self-reflection. I truly appreciate your insight, patience and assistance over the past year.

I have also been inspired by my family. Both of my parents were career educators and lifelong learners. Growing up the child of teachers/coaches was truly a blessing and made me the man and teacher that I am today. I grew up hoping to emulate their kindness, charity, compassion and community outreach. My extended family is also full of teachers… aunts, uncles, cousins, and great aunts who, like me, chose teaching as their vocation. My Godmother, a Catholic nun, and my grandmother were both teachers and administrators as well. I spent my life learning how to help people and really couldn’t imagine doing anything else besides working with young adults and future educators in schools.

I would of course like to thank my wonderful wife Gina and our two wonderful kids Finn and Farren. Gina you are my motivation, my center and my purpose. You have inspired me to be more than I ever thought I could be. You have allowed me to be the kind of husband, father and
teacher that I never envisioned myself being. Gina, when we met everything became clear for me and life began to fall into place. These last few years have been trying for me but I know they have been trying for you as well and I want you to know that this degree is something that we earned together and wouldn’t have been possible without your love, understanding and unwavering commitment to our family.

Finally, I would like to thank my two wonderful children; Finn and Farren. I have obtained this degree for you as much as for myself and I know how much you have had to give up for me to attend Northeastern. Nights where Daddy was home but downstairs writing were hard on me but even harder on you. It would break my heart to decline invitations to a game of catch or a stuffed animal tea party when a deadline was fast approaching. When I occasionally missed sports games, family trips to Iowa or even a trip to the park or movies I felt it deeply and I am truly sorry. When I was on a conference call or doing my homework my thoughts and my heart were always with you all. I am inspired by your creativity, caring, curiousness and compassion for others. I love you both so much and am excited to redirect the bulk of my time, energy and enthusiasm back to where it belongs… with the two of you. You both inspire me daily and I am eternally blessed to have you in my life. While this paper has been a great undertaking and something that I am very proud of, you two are my greatest accomplishment and our journey together is just beginning.
Chapter 1 - Introduction

Problem Statement

Labels have defined human cultures for millennia and have existed since the inception of the spoken word. It is human nature to attempt to qualify others in relation to oneself; to establish just who is the most similar or dissimilar to us and who should or should not be a part of our in-group. However, as our society and schools have grown in size and scope we have seen that this overly simplistic approach to labels not only ignores the nuances of identity but may even serve to alienate or confuse both those doing the labeling and those being labeled. This is particularly true when these progressively specialized labels are explicitly and implicitly suggested at successively younger ages without adequate consideration to the psychosocial or developmental impact of these labels on individual’s interactions with others and themselves.

What are the immediate and long term impacts of labeling students, teachers and schools? How do students and teachers reconcile differences between how they are or were labeled by others in positions of authority and how they presently or previously have elected to label themselves? Somewhere in the quest for organization, categorization and quantification of what is and is not working in our schools we have lost sight of the complex socioeconomic factors at play and the real impact that being labeled, either positively or negatively, has on both individual development and school climate and culture. While this topic is considerably diffuse we will primarily focus on how labels impact the development of both shared and individual student identity in our secondary schools. The proliferation of labels in our schools and society has gone unchecked for decades and I fear that without proper investigation and exploration of this issue the seemingly insidious impact that these labels have will just continue to grow; not only unchallenged and unchecked, but un-interrogated and unacknowledged as well. If we do not
better understand the risks and rewards of these labels we simply serve to maintain and reinforce the culture of ignorance and inequity that has so long plagued our society and its schools.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological research study was to better understand the importance and impact of labels in our secondary schools and society for students and teachers at a small Northeast High School and, in turn, how they view themselves and others as a result of their interactions and experiences with these labels. The labeling under examination is generally defined as any labels that are implicitly or explicitly placed onto individuals by schools or society. These labels may be externally or internally constructed and result from interactions with authority figures, peers or family and caregivers. The knowledge generated from this investigation is expected to inform practices of identification, instruction and intervention in our public secondary schools.

**Evidence Justifying the Research Problem**

There has been a fair amount of research on the power of labels in both schools and society. One notable example was Rosenthal and Jacobsen’s (1968) seminal study on the Pygmalion effect and the positive influence it has on student performance when students are given positive labels. Similarly the Golem effect, as referenced by Reynolds (2007), has the inverse effect and results in lower performance, motivation and self-ranking. Coupling these studies with the principles of observer-expectancy and subject-expectancy effect serves to reinforce the incredibly important role of labels in our schools. Claude Steele’s work on Stereotype threat and how labels shape “both intellectual identity and performance” (p. 213) and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) take on ecological transitions and the way “roles have a magic-like
power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does and thereby even what she thinks and feels” (p. 6) also demonstrates the real and measurable impact labels have on perception and performance in our schools.

**Deficiencies in Evidence**

The current trend in both the literature and the field is to study the impact of labels on very specific groups who were often marginalized or improperly labeled in the past (Johnson & Papafragou, 2016; Lo, 2004). Examples of such groups under review would be particular minority groups (Malott et al., 2009; Thomson, 2015), special education (Bentley, 2008; Gibbs & Elliot, 2015) and disabled individuals (Cunnah, 2015; Rizzo, 2014), or those with mental health issues (Found & Duarte, 2011; Granello & Gibbs, 2016). While such studies are certainly warranted, more work needs to be done to examine the impact and role of labeling in our schools and society for the remaining majority of students. This is particularly true when considering how such labeling shapes school staff’s view of students and these students’ views of each other and themselves; particularly when multiple labels are considered concurrently.

**Significance and Context**

The importance of labels in our schools cannot be overstated as they help administrators, teachers and social workers identify which students are currently in need of services and which are not. This is particularly important in school settings with transient populations, large student enrollment or high faculty turnover as it is easy for students to slip through the cracks when they are not explicitly classified and categorized. Paradoxically though, as people are placed into these boxes, there will often be a tendency for internal conflict. Labeling both creates and conflates such conflict. As Dewey (1938) put it “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme
opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Or, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities” (p.17) which of course leads to such dissension with this plurality of roles and labels.

While the past decades have seen many significant improvements in terms of curriculum, attendance and graduation rates in the United States, this substantial broadening of people’s horizons has come at a cost. There was a time that the son of a farmer would more likely than not ultimately tend the fields as well. Ignoring the obvious disparities of the supposed meritocracy we live in, the sons and daughters of farmers may now become anything they want. In fact many of the “fields” they will ultimately cultivate are in their relative infancy or haven’t been invented yet. Operating under this illusion of infinite autonomy and ownership of ones future is alluring but also potentially problematic as this lack of certainty leads to many issues in both society and our schools as people genuinely don’t know how to define others or themselves.

As noted, this omnipresence of institutionally applied labels is a major issue that warrants further investigation, particularly since students continue to additionally apply their own labels during these years as well. Children are participating in more extracurricular activities at increasingly younger ages and are starting to identify themselves as deficient or excelling in particular areas before nature has a chance to run its course (Fredericks & Simpkins, 2013; Hyman, 2012). To further compound this issue, because students are involved in so many disparate activities, both in school and online, they often begin to have a hard time identifying their true self and begin to rely on others to do this for them (Shoemaker, 1963; Tajfel, 2010). Many even describe themselves as having multiple identities at home, at school and online (Larsen, 2007; Markham, 1998; Suler, 2004). In addition, while we certainly do apply a great many explicit labels to both individuals and groups, we also rely on a great many implicit labels
in our schools as well. By only having state and national exams for Mathematics, English and Science we have labeled them as more important than History, Foreign Language and the Arts. Was this our intent? Many similar examples and contradictions may be found in our schools and societies today.

To quote Freire (1968), “To deny the importance of subjectivity… is both naïve and simplistic” (p.50). We must better understand the ways that these labels shape the climate and culture of our society and schools and how they ultimately impact us all both individually and collectively. We must recognize that our actions and inactions today have real and lasting consequences on not only the individuals who are being labeled but on those doing the labeling as well. It may ultimately be that more labels are necessary, or that we should sharply curb the propagation of such epithets all together. Either way, we need to better understand the impact that they currently have and could continue to have in the future while helping students and teachers better understand the role such labels have on individuals development of identity.

**Positionality Statement**

Labels placed onto students by those in positions of power can create conflict and confusion during an individual’s development of identity. The purpose of my research was to better understand the impact that labels have in schools and how parents and teachers view students and how the students view both themselves and others as a result. While the population under investigation will primarily be high school age students and their educators; the impact of labels applied at earlier ages as well as the latency of these labels will also play a significant part in the investigation. Recent events such as the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter Movements and our increasingly divisive political climate weigh heavily on
my mind and serve to remind me of the implicit bias present in both our societies and ourselves (Greenwald & Benaji, 1995).

Although some may argue that the only constant in our society today is change, it is undeniable that the type of refinements that are taking place at home and abroad are particularly challenging and re-shaping longstanding social stratifications, power-norms and traditions. Properly examining these changes is difficult and requires critical bifocality (Weiss & Fine, 2012; p. 173) that looks at the complex intersectionality (McCall, 2005) of labels and roles for both individuals and groups. As we begin to unpack the culture and climate of both our society and its institutions during this great transition we must strive for transparency but also address the inevitable “seepage of injustice” (Weiss & Fine, 2012; p.175) that will relentlessly serve to undermine and erode all that we are trying to build. As such it was imperative that I explored how my previous knowledge and experiences shape my opinions and potentially serve to both inform, as well as undermine, my research on this complex topic.

Previous Knowledge

As a member of humanity and both a graduate of, and teacher for, the American public school system, I am no stranger both to being labeled and to participating in the labeling of others. As noted previously, labeling students can have both positive and negative impacts on how students are perceived by others as well as on how they perceive themselves. I have read a great deal of information on this topic; particularly relative to the Pygmalion and Golem effect. (Reynolds, 2007; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Coupling these two ideas with both observer-expectancy and subject-expectancy effect reinforce for me the incredibly important role of labels in our schools (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Silverman, 2013). I have also attended multiple lectures
by Claude Steele and read much of his work on Stereotype threat. This has had a major impact on how I think about labels; particularly how Steele (1997) notes how labels and the resulting stereotyping that follows shape “both intellectual identity and performance” (p. 213). I regularly see this in how students and teachers approach their classes and subsequently interact in them.

**Personal Experience**

Since a very young age I have worn a lot of hats, and have been subject to a great many seemingly disparate stereotypes. In high school I was one of the youngest in my graduating class but I was also the biggest and tallest with facial hair at age 13 so I was often labeled as older and both more mature or immature then I actually was. I was class President, taking multiple AP classes’ junior and senior year but I was also a three sport varsity athlete who worked 20 hours a week at a local grocery store emptying garbage, bagging groceries and retrieving carriages to help out with finances at home. I grew up in a neighborhood that, although I would not like to raise my own children in, was seen as both better and worse than other boroughs in the city. As a result, each day I would find myself labeled as a meathead and egghead, at-risk and advanced, privileged and deprived. I would be asked to represent the school at functions because of my poise and performance, be celebrated for fierce or aggressive play in athletics and then demeaned and spoken down to at work. What is interesting is that there were many fewer labels in place 20 years ago but I still felt their burden each day as I searched to find myself in my formative years.

I have been working as a teacher for the last 17 years and have taught Special-education classes, discipline based classes as well as Honors and AP classes. I’ve worked in Boston and the Suburbs in both vocational and Preparatory settings. I have coached Football, Basketball and Baseball in high school but also have run the Chess club, Robotics club, Science team, National
Honor Society and numerous programs for at risk students (Peer-mentoring, advisory and academic support programs). I have also spent over a decade teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate level and running professional development for teachers. I have served as Best-man in five wedding ceremonies and served as the Master of Ceremonies at numerous fundraisers and events yet I consistently test as an introvert on both Jung’s and Myers-Briggs personality tests. I’ve attended an Ivy League College, Northeastern and both small and large state schools and as a result have been labeled as both more and less smart than I actually am as a result. I have always resisted and tested the efficacy of labeling/grouping people based on personal attributes.

**Beliefs, Biases and Opinions**

While I understand the desire to label people and group them based on traits or characteristics, I think this tends to have a deleterious effect on a person’s development. A student who performs well on tests and has no social skills is labeled as smart or advanced while another student who is confident, gregarious and hard-working but struggles with standardized tests does not get that label. Similarly, labeling someone as having an IQ of 99, 100 or 101 is highly arbitrary on the one hand as potential issues with both sampling and/or non-sampling errors make it possible that one’s score is incorrect by a factor greater than the two points which separate the three scores. The problem is that the person with a score of 99 is implicitly identified as below average and the individual with a score of 101 as above average which can have far ranging consequences on the how the child is viewed by others and how they view themselves. This is of course just one example but children and adults grow and evolve over the course of their lives and, once pigeonholed, it can be hard to break free and embrace that change. Labeling limits growth and an individual’s perceived ability to grow (Dweck, 2012).
Predilections and Predispositions

Before reading Freire (1968) and completing my coursework here at NEU, I had initially phrased the problem with a more negative slant about the negative and limiting impacts of labels, as opposed to the importance of managing labels. The way that Freire spoke about the oppressors and the oppressed and the various ways in which the groups view each other and themselves as result of these groupings, made me rethink my position. It also reinforced for me the way that the people who apply labels act as the oppressors of those for whom the labels are applied to, even when those labels are positive. A student who is labeled as advanced may hesitate to follow their heart and pursue courses in woodworking or art because it would prevent their being scheduled in “more important” subject based classes. Students may even unconsciously act as their own oppressors when they associate themselves with certain labels (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

I do think it is true that the Edison’s and Ford’s of the early 20th century would have a tough time maximizing their potential in today’s world as they would most likely be tracked into an advanced college preparatory curriculum and most likely not be exposed to mechanics or the troubles and challenges of the assembly process. Similarly, when someone is labeled as a proficient teacher (which is the case for over 90% of teachers in Massachusetts (DOE, 2015)) without any means of delineation between those who are on the cusp of Exemplary status versus those who are forced to go on an improvement plan and risk termination; it serves to diminish both the morale and work-ethic of all involved.

On the surface, I am a bit of a walking contradiction. The white-Catholic son of two very well educated parents; one who left the seminary and the other a first generation American whose family fled Northern Ireland amidst the turbulence of the troubles there. With the
exception of a few trips to visit family in New Hampshire I never traveled more than 30 miles
away from my home until both academics and athletics provided that opportunity in high school.
With this said I was privy to many great ethical and social debates between my Democrat,
activist, reformist parents and their friends. I grew up monetarily poor, but very rich in terms of a
stable home life; full of books, extended conversations and love.

Mitigating the Impact of My Bias

To once again revisit Freire, “To deny the importance of subjectivity… is both naïve and
simplistic” (p.50). Similarly, before reading Roulston and Shelton (2015) and their anti-
foundational approach to bias where they argue that “bias is not necessarily equated with error”
(p.6) I would have been prone to think of myself as an automaton capable of eliminating bias,
rather than how I now allow for and address its presence within my work. By carefully exploring
my own feelings, disclosing all potential conflicts, discussing and rationalizing all assumptions
and finally by relying on the critical eye of others to review and shape my work I believe that I
have preserved my relatively neutral position as a researcher. I was careful not to make
presumptions about labels, but rather identified how they are/were used and empirically
identified the impact they have within the lives of those interviewed and within the community at
large. Because I tend to see labels as negative I recognized that I would be prone to focusing on
examples that reinforced this notion. As such, I actively tried to additionally find and expound on
examples where the application of labels had a positive outcome for all or most involved;
ultimately using this newfound insight to guide my future actions as a teacher and administrator
within the American Secondary School system.

Research Question(s)
The purpose of this research was to better understand the impact that labels have on students and teachers in schools. The way that teachers view students is shaped by the labels that they carry into the classroom with them. These labels also shape the ways that these students view both others and themselves. This is the result of a myriad of interconnected factors which have been previously mentioned such as implicit bias (Greenwald & Banji, 1995), the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) and the Golem effect (Reynolds, 2007). While it can certainly be argued or demonstrated that labels have many beneficial qualities as well, their impact on both individuals and groups is indubitably tangible and lasting. The labels placed onto students by those in positions of power create conflict and confusion during an individual’s development of identity.

Overarching Question

What are the ways that labels impact student’s experiences, encounters and interactions in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers?

Sub-Questions

How, when and why are labels applied to students in both our society and schools?

How do these labels relate to students motivation, performance and achievement?

In what ways are these labels enduring and how do these labels potentially benefit or inhibit an individual’s personal growth and development?

Theory

The theory or lens which I have primarily applied to the issue of labels and their importance and impact in our schools was critical bifocality (Weiss & Fine, 2004; Weiss & Fine, 2012). With this being said, both the theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and implicit
Bias (Greenwald & Banji, 1995; Staats & Patton, 2014) have also played significant roles in the instrument creation and coding of the interpretive phenomenological interviews as well as its subsequent discussion and elucidation. Fully recognizing that most studies rigidly commit to one conceptual framework throughout, the reason that I have not is due in part to the unique challenges of my POP, but also to try and make sure that the subtlety and nuance of the work “doesn’t get caught in the undertow of hegemonic representations” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016) and maintains the type of complexity and potential contradictions that are necessary to explore such a diffuse and capacious issue as label comorbidity and its liminal impacts on the development of self-identity. As such, although critical bifocality provides the theoretical underpinnings of this study, its relationship with intersectionality warrants some discussion as well.

Intersectionality was both coined and championed by Kimberle Crenshaw; a civil rights activist and one of the leading scholars on critical race theory. Intersectionality tends to be applied in woman’s studies, sociology, legal cases and, more recently, educational studies. Not entirely unlike the previously mentioned theories, the way that our society is constructed both results in and perpetuates the current systems of privilege and oppression that we encounter each day (Collins, 2000). What is interesting though is the way intersectionality focuses on a multitude of identities; recognizing that they are situationally fluid and not the constants that previous studies have often led us to believe. Categories and labels when placed onto people result in individuals who are “more than the sum of their parts” (Brunn, 2009; p. 21). Likewise, Landry (2016) discusses how when examining things through the lens of intersectionality one must consider both simultaneity and multiplicity. Simultaneity is the fact that one cannot separate out class, race and gender even though all may not be relevant in every particular
situation. Multiplicity meanwhile explains how these relationships are not additive, but rather cumulative or interactive. To reiterate, when we view individuals or groups *in toto* they are collectively quite different than they may first appear from their constituent parts.

Though intersectionality has grown in popularity, acceptance and use in recent years there are two main groups who question its merits and/or appropriateness for both research and social discourse. The first, perhaps not surprisingly, are positivists who see the interconnectedness of variables and groups within the theories and studies as confounding and undermining to the research as opposed to informing or expanding the information to be gleaned from data sets. As intersectionality tends to raise more questions than answers and complicate rather than simplify they do make a fair point (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). With this said however, the very fact that their findings elucidate potential shortcomings and contradictions in these seemingly deterministic data sets seem to prove the importance and viability of the theory. Interestingly enough this brings us to the second area of pushback which comes from some feminists who feel that the fractal nature of intersectionality serves to subvert the singular and substantial challenges that women face (Steinbugler, Press & Dias, 2006). The feeling of some like Julie Burchill is that by examining the struggles of black women, as opposed to women, is potentially dangerous as it causes competition between the two labels; ultimately making one more important or oppressive than the other (Clarke & McCall, 2013). With this said, other feminists see intersectionality as an important step in the evolution of feminist thought and intervention (Cho et al., 2013; Dill, 2012).

Temporarily switching the conversation to critical bifocality; Weis and Fine (2012) argue that the majority of educational and societal research, while well-intentioned, is largely ineffective and non-transferable to the “real world”. By looking at problems individually,
researchers perpetuate the illusion that problems exist in vacuums and can be continuously reduced and simplified to identify their root cause. The authors instead argue that we need to apply *critical bifocality* to our analysis of these problems so that we may begin to make visible the messy reality that is the myriad of complex and liminal interactions between individuals and the institutional context and constraints under which they take place. Weiss and Fine feel that only by applying this braided bifocal design to the research and by examining both “structures” and “lives” through empirical and theoretical lenses may we then potentially apply what is gleaned to the population or problem at large and begin to impact real and lasting change. Unlike the often neat and clean world of post-positivist analysis where confounding factors are eliminated or removed, the authors argue that it is only in the noise of these new connections that the voices of the institutionally oppressed may finally be heard at both a macro and micro level.

Though I couldn’t find it officially detailed or referenced anywhere, it seemed to me that a substantial portion of Weiss and Fine’s core construction of critical bifocality, albeit based on their own personal endeavors, was also substantially influenced by both intersectionality and critical race theory and a particular cultural anthropology paper on “space, identity and the politics of difference” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). I could not actually find any particular criticisms of the use of critical bifocality in any field although I suspect that the messy nature of its findings would not align with the ideals and expectations of post-positivist researchers. It is a relatively new theory and one that does not have the racial connotations associated with intersectionality or critical race theory which most likely explains its apparent buffering from criticism. Neither theory has been employed in quite the way that I plan to nor have I seen the two combined with either one another or with implicit bias for a research study.
When applied to my particular POP the essence of these theories and their shared focus on the overlap and/or space between identities and labels is what particularly interested me. When coupled with the presence of implicit bias and, to a lesser extent, stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), the potential for this study to engender critical change in schools is quite high. In fact the absence of research on this topic seems to imply that any and all light shone onto the issue will in fact be new light; particularly as it relates to being viewed through the lens of the aforementioned theories. The tenets of intersectionality are all applicable to my study as though it is most often applied to issues of race and gender at its core it is about the fact that labels are not “unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather…reciprocally constructing phenomena.” (Collins, 2015; p.3) and that when we suppress or under/over-prioritize certain aspects of ourselves we invariably impact our own and others understandings and interactions with us in the “real” world. Likewise, critical bifocality is about expanding our understanding of this chimera like creation of identity during adolescence and throughout our lives as we interact with the presuppositions and perspectives which continue to predominate our schools and society.

**Method**

After considerable deliberation about the potential strengths and weaknesses of employing a quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approach I ultimately concluded that a qualitative interpretive phenomenological study best aligned with my research question. As both this question and the aforementioned theory that simultaneously serves to shape and scaffold it encouraged the avoidance of traditional approaches that have tended to limit the scope and substance of previous studies on labels the actual implementation of this method; I involved both a two stage interview with teachers and focus groups with students.
Audience/Stakeholders

While schools have long been audited by national or regional accrediting associations like the Coalition for Essential Schools (CES) or the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC); the state and national rankings that have become so commonly cited by media, politicians and parents are a relatively recent phenomenon and are the result of recent policy changes as well as the proliferation of state, national and international assessments. The same is true of teacher evaluations which have likewise evolved quite a bit over the years (Leung, 2004; McCaffery et al., 2003). On the one hand the compiling of such data has helped shed light on key areas of need in these schools and the positive impact that an exemplary teacher can have in their classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Feldman, 1996; Rockoff, 2004). On the other hand it has also served to increase the divide by highlighting the disparities that exist within our society and aligning them with school performance.

Although the specifics of this study are localized to one particular environment, this work is meant to speak to the entire community of secondary schools. While the primary research audience is students and the impacts that labels have on them; the outcomes of this work will ostensibly provide insight and direction for teachers, parents, and administrators as well. Reciprocity of course involves individuals participating in relationships of recognition. As such this study not only provides space for reciprocity but embodies the very ethos of the concept. Through discussion, metacognitive reflection and analysis both participants and their peers will be more conscious and considerate of the labels that they use and that have been used on them. The ultimate hope is that we will see fewer labels in school and that those we do see are more thoughtfully applied and examined.
Conclusion/Looking Forward

As we have begun to see, labels are incredibly important in our schools and, by proxy, our society; which results in a substantial and deep-rooted impact on how students view themselves and others. The following chapter explores relevant literature on labels. While the cynosure of this research relates to the impact of labels in schools; the scope of what is reviewed is not limited to schools and includes research from a number of other fields as well. Chapter three examines the research methods employed in this study as well as both the specifics of data collection, coding and storage and potential limitations and issues with the study itself. Chapter four analyzes the results of the interviews and focus group discussion by organizing the findings into a series of themes while chapter five discusses and examines the implications of this work for advocacy and application in the field as well as for future research.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review both integrates and explores the manner in which labels have historically been applied in our schools and, by proxy, our society. In my opinion, to paraphrase James Strickland (1991), labels are more useful for clothes than they are for individuals. With this in mind the resulting investigation of the current literature investigated the current gaps in the literature about how labels apply to all students. The fact that so much of the literature discussed within this paper applies to a minority of the population in fact strengthens the need for not only this particular study but also further investigation of the majority.

The problem of practice under investigation examines the ways that labels impact student’s experiences and encounters in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers. It is hard to investigate one without the other since if you apply open systems theory as Burke (2013) does then human organizations are not self-contained. To summarize what Grant (1988) posited so many years ago, we must ask if it is our schools that shape society, or rather society that shapes our schools? Somewhere in the quest for organization, categorization and quantification of what is and is not working in our schools we have lost sight of the complex socioeconomic factors at play and the real impact that being labeled, either positively or negatively, has on both individual development and school climate and culture.

While there are certainly many layers to this problem, my focus will be on the omnipresence of these labels in schools and how they impact student encounters and interactions in a myriad of ways. The investigation will have three main elements: How, when and why labels are applied to students in both our society and schools? How do these labels relate to
students motivation, performance and achievement? And finally, in what ways do these labels potentially benefit or inhibit individual’s personal growth and development?

This literature review analyzes the ways that labels may be equally positive or negative for a person’s development and how by defining people we inevitably and fundamentally change the way that we view ourselves and others; as well as the way that these others in turn view themselves and those they interact with. As such, a fair amount of label comorbidity and resistance/fatigue to the use of these labels and the potential conflicts that might result is to be expected. As Dewey (1938) noted, as people are placed into boxes, there is often a tendency for internal conflict; which of course leads to such dissension with this plurality of roles and labels and the conflict that results.

The organization of this paper is primarily thematic in nature and acknowledges, but does not rely on, the chronology of the research. With this said, the methodologies, history and trends of the existing literature were considered within three primary themes. The first and primary theme is how and why labels are applied to individuals and groups by those in positions of authority and what impact does this have on their development of identity? The second theme is how these labeled individuals and groups are viewed by their family or peers and how this aligns with the way they have been labeled by those in authority? The third and final theme examined the impact these assigned labels have on how individuals will in turn label and/or view both themselves and others as a result. The ways that this external labeling is internalized by the individual as they build their own reality was also closely examined.

The following research does come from a myriad of different sources and methodologies and will take some patience and vision on the part of the reader as we navigate our way through the argument of discovery towards a conclusion. In addition to these past predilections, I have
also been heavily influenced by the ideas of critical-bifocality (Weiss & Fine, 2012), implicit bias (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and the impacts they have on the way labels are applied.

**Gauging the Why, When and Where of Labels**

Labels, as inflicted by those in authority, have caused more harm than good in both our society and schools. Labeling is not strictly a human condition and has been present in various ways across most species for time immemorial. Within humans our tendency to label each other has resulted in everything from the creation of cultures, countries and ideological conflict; to empathetic or philanthropic interventions the world over. Although labeling has existed for millennia; its study didn’t truly begin until the 1930’s when Benjamin Whorf began to research its presence and prevalence in society (Carroll, 1956). Further research was undertaken in the 40’s and 50’s by Arsch and Kelley and specifically examined labeling in schools (Kelley, 1950). Fifteen years later the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was passed into law (Whitehouse, 2016). While attention was rightfully brought to marginalized groups it also resulted in the explicit rather than implicit labeling in our schools that has proliferated almost exponentially over the past fifty years, culminating with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and continuing to the Every Student Succeeds Act of present day (Yell, Katsiyannas & Shiner, 2006; Huntsinger, 2013; Klein, 2015).

Not surprisingly, as many of these labels began to be applied in a different time, they have produced a number of unanticipated consequences; ultimately resulting in the perpetuation and stigmatization of a great many of these labels as, once applied, they tended to endure (Kaufmann, 2012; Foroni & Rothbart, 2013). Many organizations have recently noticed the negative or unexpected impact of these labels (Cordiner, Thomas & Green, 2016); leading to
changes or attempted rebranding of the diagnostic labels for everything from ADHD (Kaplan et al, 2006) or Down syndrome and Asperger’s (Ohan & Corrigan, 2015; Whitehouse, 2010) to the potentially detrimental impact of using the word smart with children on both their motivation and performance (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Other countries like Austria have looked at the impact of labels over the course of a generation of school children (Schwab, Hessels, Obendrauf, Polanig, & Wolflingseder, 2015). When considering the weight of the aforementioned research it is imperative that a closer examination of how labels are applied must be undertaken with a critically-bifocal lens in three key areas; how and when labels are applied by those in authority, why these labels have historically been used or misused, and the impact of these labels on those groups they are applied to.

**The impact of labels applied by those in positions of authority.** As noted previously; labels are omnipresent in our society and have been since its genesis. Prior to the past presidential election results, it seemed that we had been making great progress with regards to discrimination, sexism and racism but now our current ethos seems a bit less clear. What does seem certain though is that through recent efforts to achieve parity, those in power have classified, labeled and sorted nearly everything and everyone. Although these efforts to track and identify differences may or may not be admirable in origin (Gillman et al., 2000); they ultimately end up taking complicated and continuous sets of data and reducing them to relatively simplistic absolutes (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). While this type of box-checking becomes necessary for large scale analysis, it often undermines the very research it is trying to advance (Levin, 1987).

With this said the identification of specialty groups such as the “working poor” (Butler, 2015) that fall above nationally mandated and supplemented poverty levels but also well below the relative safe-haven of middle-class have allowed for interventions that would have not taken
Similarly, with all of its well documented flaws, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 applied so many specific labels that marginalized groups could no longer be lost in the noise of the general population (Yell & Shiner, 2006). The question of whether this public exposure is beneficial or not is still under considerable debate (Coffey, Webster & Heafner, 2016; Gold & Richards, 2012; Gorton, Williams & Wrigley, 2014).

Labels have primarily been used in relation to race, learning disabilities and mental-illness in educational settings. As noted previously, the Brown versus Board of Education ruling and the subsequent enacting Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 led to great changes in the presence of labels in our schools (Whitehouse, 2016). The same is true of the Individuals with Disability Act of 1975 and its accompanying legislation for the education of Handicapped children; which were ultimately modernized in 1990, 1997 and 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The presence of labels; as well as the specific diagnosis associated with them, have major impacts on the services that schools are mandated to provide (Bentley, 2008; Lyons & Roulstone; 2016). The reasons these labels have been used is the focus of the following section.

Why labels have historically been used. When viewed positively, labels have historically been used to try and bring some order and accountability to the very complex and dynamic system that is our society and its schools. When viewed negatively, labels are used to determine deviation from a supposed norm or desirable condition; at times resulting in exclusion from public education or even an individual’s institutionalization (Found & Duarte, 2011; Gillman et al, 2000; Granello & Gibbs, 2016). Bentley (2008) speaks of labels as a type of “Medical-othering” with individuals confined by their diagnosis as much as their symptoms; as if their differences make them somehow less than their supposedly “normal” counterparts (p.544).
Chang (2013) focuses his research on critical race theory, ethnicity and sociocultural theory and views labels as complex, but ultimately as a method to add a “voice to the voiceless” (p. 348) yet he also warns of the “dehumanizing systems in education” as well (p. 349). This speaks to the tremendous amount of data and research related to schools, and indirectly to specific ethnic groups, that are increasingly labeled as consistently underperforming on national and state exams (Coffey, Webster & Haefner, 2016; Duncan, 2012; Gorton, Williams & Wrigley, 2014). How much of the disassociation and resignation we are seeing in these schools is a result of label confirmation bias or negative reactions to such constant oppressive and negative labels isn’t currently well documented at the system level in the literature and certainly demands further exploration.

Epithets have surely been used to diminish and demean both individuals and groups (Bachke, 2013; Goldsmith, 2016) or to highlight who deviates from some institutionally created norm (Cunha, 2016; Gillman et al., 2016), there have also been a great many attempts to use these labels to improve the condition of the other in society or schools as well (Gottfried, Estrada & Sublet, 2015). Examples of this include Burt & Stapleton’s (2010) research into the impact of performance testing labels on teachers, schools and individuals; with researchers ultimately finding a statistically significant difference in the favorability ratings of some commonly used testing words such as limited knowledge vs. basic and satisfactory versus proficient (p. 33). This shows that labels are more than simple semantics and that the words we use truly do matter; particularly when they are negative or oppressive. Gottfried, Estrada and Sublett (2015) have tried to use labels to identify and provide targeted interventions for “Sexual Minority” youth who face multiple stigmas when trying to pursue careers in the sciences (p.67). Others have even attempted to turn a negative into a positive by using the power of commonalities amongst labels
to minimize differences and to “combat intergroup bias by making a shared group membership salient, thus conferring the benefits of in-group membership on former out-group members (Scroggins et al., 2016, p.220). While such creative interventions are admirable, they only serve to highlight the impact of labels have on group dynamics as we will examine in the next section.

**The impact of labels by authority figures on groups.** While the use of labels has resulted in both positive and negative outcomes for those who have been labeled; the effects of these labels are further ranging then were intended. Such actions may seem to help individuals but they do not solve the larger problem as they ultimately “interfere with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more human” (Freire, 1968, p. 55). When children are younger and crystalizing the tenets of their personality and worldview the impact of authority is tremendous. Jaswal (2010) shows how quickly children will abandon “what they know to be true” when faced with conflicting testimony from a trusted source who speaks ‘authoritatively” (p. 249). Lapan and Bosevoski (2016) discovered similar findings where a statistically significant number of 3-6 year olds would literally change their opinion on what they were seeing so that it agreed with an authority figure. Both of these studies as well as McDonald & Ma’s (2015) study on how formally an individual dresses relate to the Halo effect and how we tend to judge individuals and their resulting words and actions as inherently good or bad. While “one of the most central processes in human cognition is categorization, that is, the grouping of discriminable properties, objects or events into classes” (Johanson & Papafragou, 2016, p.131). It is imperative that we recognize our predilections and frailties and no longer apply labels so easily stigmatized as being deviant from the norm.

Recognizing that the views of teachers, caregivers and other authority figures hold particular sway, we will give each group individual attention in the following section. Speaking
more generally however, the fact that organizations are studying the evolution (Schwab et al., 2015), efficacy (Cordiner, Thomas & Green, 2016; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007) and omnipresence (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, & Paek, 2013) of labels in schools and the impact they have on all involved clearly shows the saliency of the topic, if not the severity of the issue at hand.

**Progression.** So now to revisit Ho’s (2004) question: To label or not to label? There is a clear and direct evidence within the literature of the negative impacts of labeling (Biklen, 2010; Cooper, 2003; Gold & Richards, 2012), as well as its recent proliferation (Galinskey & Moskowitz, 2000; Schwab, 2015) with little to no discussion or research lauding its benefits or positive impacts. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Foroni and Rothbart (2013) labels persist long after they have fallen out of favor with the collective establishment and their impacts may be far reaching. Others have shown relationships between labeling and depression (McPherson & Armstrong, 2006) or that the specific words used have great power on the groups to which they are applied, either in terms of how others view them or how they view themselves (Burt, 2010; Carnaghi et al., 2008).

What changes can we make as educators and caregivers to mitigate the effects of labeling? How might we use the power of labeling for good rather than ill? How would we possibly meet individual students and school wide needs without labels? To begin to answer this we must consider our role and responsibility as educators and the need to take the investigation from the macro to the intermediate level and examine a different type of authority in the individual’s lives. So far we have talked about authority in a general and external sense as it applies to groups; but groups are composed of individuals who are blessed or burdened with the absence or presence of family, friends and teachers who directly influence their understanding and/or misunderstanding of society’s labels.
The Impact of Labels: Family, Teachers and Other Support Structures.

Labels change everything. They imply identity (Cordiner, Thomas & Green, 2016) and shape both our own and others perceptions of both identity and self-worth (Hoge, 2016; Lyons & Roulstone, 2016). The labels used by family, friends, teachers and others in our inner circles play a major role on how individuals understand and internalize the meaning of these labels (Carnaghi, 2008; Yeung & McIerney, 1999). Conversely, the same is true of the labels themselves which ultimately change the ways that those same family, friends and teachers view and understand the individual (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2016; Darley & Gross, 1983; Eberhart, Dasgupta, & Banaszynski, 2003; Johnson & Papafragou, 2016; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1992). This is particularly true when viewed in relation to marginalized groups (Addy, 2015; Bentley, 2008). While we are all products of our environment at large, there are always certain people who influence us more than others; pulling us to safety or pushing us towards self-loathing or regret. We must consider carefully our own role in this process.

Although support structures should serve as powerful buffers against societies labels they can also often as catalysts for bigotry and ambiguity as well (Evans & Murphy, 2015). As Bachke (2013) and Davenport (2016) noted, a family’s attitudes about labels directly impacts individual’s feelings about gender, class, and intellectual disabilities. Even on subjects as emotionally charged as dating family and friends play a major role on individual choice (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). As Anonymous (2016) and others note, individuals can receive mixed messages about labels and identity at home, through religious teachings and from society at large which preach both individuality and conformity (Hodges, 2014). This lack of coherence can also lead to a lack of “connectedness” (Maroulis & Gomes, 2008) and emotional or intellectual confusion (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). In response to this research it is essential that each of
these three roles is examined in more detail. The three areas examined below will focus on the role of labels on the relationships between family and labeled or unlabeled individuals, the use of labels within peer groups, and the tremendous impact of labels on the authenticity of relationships between teachers and students. Because of its intimate and heritable nature; the role of religion will be examined within the family strand.

Labels and family: Impacts on caregivers and individual family members. Labels impact both expectations and outcomes of interactions with individuals and their respective families. While the impact of the absence of family or support structures and its influence on personality is substantially documented (Allen, 2014; Biklen, 2010; Black, Thornicroft & Murray, 2013) well intentioned traditions and norms can cause chaos and confusion for individuals as well. Students of all backgrounds are struggling to find their place in the world but those who relocate or undergo religious education face particular contradictions. In the case of Anonymous (2016) the labels of immigrant, Muslim and Gay dominated their thinking and home relationships while they were trying to acclimate to a new educational and cultural system in New Zealand. Similar religious and ethical ambiguity played a role in several other studies as well (Benish-Weismann, Daniel, Schiefer, Möllering, & Knafo-Noam, 2015; Davenport, 2016).

Parents who had negative experiences with labels or the experience of obtaining these label’s for their children (Bachke, 2013; Graves & Ye, 2016) tended to either view all terms as uniformly restrictive or negative while others saw these as an opportunity to manage the situation and move forward (Butler, 2015; Mayes & Moore, 2016). In a study related to the use of medication versus placebos in ADHD; parent opinion and demeanor played a significant role in the child’s behaviors (Sandler, 2008). Some noted the differences in attitudes and appropriateness of labels such as special education (Graves & Ye, 2016) and how they may serve
as either an advantage or disadvantage during one’s schooling when teachers assess situations and interact with students (Spoto, 2016). When looking at studies as seemingly disparate as how children chose dating partners (Wright & Sinclair, 2012) and how they recognized pride (Garcia, Janis & Flom, 2015) the common factor was the influence of parents or caregivers on children’s recognition or choices. Additional influences on attitudes tended to originate with their teachers or, as we will examine below, from their peers.

**Labeling within peer groups.** As previously noted, with the possible exception of parents and in some cases teachers; peer groups have the most significant impact on students’ lives and their subsequent use of labels. The topic of peer pressure is so well documented that spending time discussing it seems both cumbersome and unnecessary. Instead it seems warranted to look at specific situations in which labels are applied within and across groups and the impact that they have on student’s relationships and lives. Students in a form of self-protective reactivity may begin to associate positively with negative peer labels. This applies to mal-adaptive responses to dating relationship labels (Howard, et al., 2015) or the pride and shame associated with adolescent sexual behaviors (Giordano, 2009). Some students even come to see the label of “bad” as being good and representative of their individuality as is the case with the “frequent-flyers” documented in Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy’s (2016) work with persistently disciplined students. Such stereotype-based expectancies were similarly explored in other studies as well (Hamilton, Sherman & Ruvolo, 1990).

There was also a tremendous amount of research on the impact of labels with relation to feelings of belonging or exclusion with relation to specific ethnic or athletic groups. As Addy (2015) noted, “the term "diverse" should not be used as a euphemism for immigrants, students of color and students who speak languages other than English.” (p. 205) Within such groups, labels
such as SES, parents level of education and other factors play significant roles in how students view and group themselves. Similarly, lower tracked students may disassociate with school all together (Anderson, 2015). Other times labels may be seen not as an explanation for but as an excuse for self-destructive behaviors (Black & Grahm-Murray, 2013; Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001). These homogeneous peer groupings may also lead to considerable difficulties for students who are heterogeneous by definition (Kaplan et al., 2016; Mayes & Moore, 2016); leading to conflict and uncertainty (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012; Wong, 2015). Ultimately these conflicts and cliques present themselves in the halls and classrooms of our schools and are further solidified or fragmented by student’s interactions with their teachers.

The impact of labels on relationship authenticity between teachers and students.

Labels directly influence relationships between teachers and students. Good teaching matters. Though this statement seems like a no-brainer, recent studies have sought to quantify the impact that a good teacher has on student performance (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2016; Hedlund & Hind, 1995; Sawchuk, 2016). What complicates the issue are the relationships that teachers and students do or do not have (Cooper, 2003; Yeung & McLerney, 1999) as well as how the labels placed on students impacts the level of bias that both teacher and student bring to the classroom (Beckett & Wrigley, 2014; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992; Spoto, 2016). While Maroulis and Gomez (2008) talk about the importance of “connectedness” within a school and how it leads to “social environments in which children and adults are more likely to know each other and care about one another’s progress” (p. 1902) it is also may reinforce stereotypes and stigmas about individual students or groups as well (Weisel & Tur-Kaspa, 2002). If the teacher sees the student as deficient then there are built in excuses for their failure. As demonstrated repeatedly over the past several decades, this Pygmalion effect results in both lower or higher expectations and
performance for both students and teacher (Reynolds, 2007; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1992). As Cunha (2016) so aptly notes “one of the inevitable consequences of being identified as disabled is that difference is accentuated.” (p. 214) Even if the differences being highlighted are positive in nature, their impact is significant (Cordiner, Thomas & Green, 2016; Wheeler, 2015).

The impact of teachers is particularly important in rural and urban settings where students may have limited exposure to role models outside of their own support groups. As Hedlund and Hind (1995) note in small rural communities the teacher plays a major role in expanding or limiting the student’s perspectives. Similarly, in urban settings, teachers perceived support or belief has a tremendous impact on self-esteem, attendance and achievement (Ritchey, 2003; Yeung & McLerney, 1999). Teachers use of stereotypes and labels are often more harsh than those of the students they serve; for example their response and classification of girls based on the way they dressed (Rahimi & Liston, 2009) or based on the sports or activities they participated in (Martiny et al., 2015). Similarly, students labeled as discipline concerns tend to put teachers on alert; resulting in more discipline and disassociation from the student, resulting in a sort of self-fulfilling pattern, ultimately resulting in the students failure (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, Murphy & Grosland, 2016). Similar results are seen for the teachers views on how students are labeled as learning disabled (Gibbs & Elliot, 2015; Ohan & Corrigan, 2015). The persistence of these labels sticks with the students not only for their academic careers but for the rest of their lives as well (Foroni & Rothbart, 2011; Hipes, Phelan & White, 2016) and we must acknowledge our roles as “gatekeepers, engaged in a careful if somewhat arbitrary sorting process of putting children in their place.” (Biklen, 2010; p. 15) As such we must be cautious and purposeful so that we may avoid the overuse and over-valuation of such tenacious and importunate categorizations as those under our care develop a sense of self.
Progression. As we begin to examine students as individuals rather than groups we begin to see that although from a distance they may appear to be homologous; the closer we get the more we reveal the peaks and valleys that collectively combat or create the prototypes and stereotypes we see in society. Building on this analogy that which may appear to be barren or bio-diverse may in fact be quite the opposite once we scratch the surface; revealing a trove of treasures or a shallow divot, devoid of substance. The same is true of labels but as we have seen it is when and how we use them that give them their power. This is particularly salient in the case of family and friends whose authority derives not from some external source but from the privilege born from their proximity and presence in all aspects of our lives. When you combine this implicit reinforcement of societal norms at home with the power and prestige that we tend to grant our teachers, particularly in our younger years, the table is set for both revolutionary and evolutionary changes in the way we view and use labels. As troubling as when students embrace or accept these labels is when they reject them or create alternative labels to describe themselves and others; tending to regress to the point of viewing things as black or white and ignoring both the shades of grey and the beautiful rainbow of possibilities that exist between.

How Individuals Identify Themselves and Others

The labels culturally transmitted and placed onto individuals by others ultimately serve as the framework by which individuals judge both others and themselves. As Ho (2004) posited as the title of her paper, “to be labeled or to not be labeled: that is the question” (p.86). While labels certainly have been used with great success to identify individuals in need of intervention (Powers et al., 2016; Sparks & Phillips, 1999) they have also been the cause of considerable alienation and discomfort as well (Carey, 2014; Cooper, 2003; Kennedy & Lewis, 2016). Children emulate the labels used by their caregivers and educators (DiYanni & Kelemen, 2008;
Jaswal, 2010). Labels serve as cognitive and cultural barriers that must be overcome (Beckett & Wrigley, 2014) and templates which influence the vantage point from which an individual views the world (Black & Graham, 2013; Crosnoe et al., 2007). While this is certainly true of negative label’s (Duncan, 2012; Hipes, Lucas, Phelan & White, 2016) it is true of supposedly positive labels as well (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Wheeler, 2015; Wong 2015).

To further confound this issue; labels do not exist in a vacuum and the presence of multiple roles of identities complicates the issue (Benish et al., 2015; Hannon, SooHoo, Reel & Ratliffe, 2009; Mayes & Moore, 2016). When you add to this search for identity the issues of students with mixed ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds things get even more complex (Fergus, 2016; Shao-Kobayashi, 2013; Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). As Hamilton (2015) noted there is as much schooling going on between classes as within them; this has major impacts on how individuals view themselves relative to others and is related to issues of self-esteem, pride and self-determination (Garcia, Janis & Flom, 2015; Handel & Fritzsche, 2015; Shogren et al., 2013). Such labeling and its resulting impact on identity have been linked to drug use and sexual promiscuity in teens (Giordino et al., 2009; Richard, Trevino, Baker & Valdez, 2010). In view of the previous research, there are three areas that warrant exploration below. The first is that the way children and adolescents label others is a product of their own environmental experience. The second is that the labeling they have experienced, as well as their own labeling of others, shapes the way they view themselves; ultimately resulting in its reinforcement through continued experience and confirmation of stereotypes. The third is that label comorbidity and identification with multiple roles results in both frustration and confusion with their own identity and the expectations of society at large.
**The way that individuals use labels is a product of their environment.** An individual’s experience with labels is used to qualify both others and themselves. As Galvin said, “How we see ourselves and how we feel we are judged by others is a very powerful point of influence and confluence.” (Cunnah, 2016, p.214) Individuals rely on interactions with both those they trust and those they do not to shape their value systems. The power of words is not to be underestimated, and has been shown both in the research and anecdotally throughout human history to be of paramount importance (Carnaghi, 2008; Czarniwska-Joerges, 1988). Information that is seen as self-relevant is prioritized (Stein, Siebold & van Zoest, 2016). However, information that is seen as challenging a student’s sense of self is often marginalized or ignored (DiYanni & Kelemen, 2008) while situations that confirm or reinforce an individual’s bias are enhanced (Darley & Gross, 1983). While such selective attention is normal to some extent it has both the potential and tendency to become mal-adaptive and negatively influence ones behavior and relationships (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2011).

One especially salient study that showed the way labels influenced how individuals view others showed people racially ambiguous images of faces and then used labels when asking them to draw or describe the individuals a short time later (Eberhardt, Dasgupta, & Banaszynski, 2003). Participants consistently used stereotypes or characteristics related to these racial groups when labels were given but did not when labels were withheld. This aligns with findings by Huntsinger (2013) on the difference between implicitly and explicitly measured attitudes and the results Rothbart, Davis-Stitt, & Hill, (1997) on their participants results on similarity experiments when arbitrary labels were applied or withheld. Finally, to revisit stereotypes participants in multiple studies applied stereotypes to others although they were critical of such generalizations being made about them (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Hamilton,Sherman,
Ruvolo, 1990). The existence of this ambiguity in attitudes between the use of labels on others and themselves warrants further analysis in the next section.

**Student’s self-perception is heavily influenced and reinforced by their environment.**

We are products of our environment and we define ourselves based on those experiences. As was the case with previous topics there are widely publicized and recognized relationships between negative experiences or trauma and conditions like depression or anxiety (Carnaghi et al., 2008; Foroni & Rothbart; 2011, Hipes et al., 2016; Martiny et al., 2015). What is interesting though is the way that individual’s restructure schemas based on experience; creating their own unique tapestry of perception and reality. Some individuals who are bullied take on the role of bully and perpetuate the persecution onto others; some see themselves as victims and retreat into solitude (Sharkey et al., 2015). What made the previous study particularly interesting though was that some choose a third option; opting instead to recognize that bullying occurred but rejecting the victim label altogether. Shogren (2013) researched “individual and ecological predictors of self-determined behaviors” that individuals employed in spite of disabilities or incongruities in their lives (p.148) while Szeto & Dorothy-Dobson (2013) researched the influence that others attitudes and perceptions had on their own internalization of mental disorders.

Similar research was performed that showed significant differences with how the individuals viewed themselves, and were subsequently viewed by others when labeled as being “people with mental illnesses” rather than as being “mentally-ill” (Granello & Gibbs, 2016). Additional research points out the internal and external challenges adolescents face when being diagnosed as “on the spectrum” or as “high functioning-autistic” instead of Asperger’s (Jones, Gallus, Viering & Oseland, 2015; Ohan & Corrigan, 2015). Such seemingly subtle differences
are anything but as a person searches for a sense of self and attempts to navigate their way through a harsh, judgmental and unforgiving world.

As these students attempt to overcome stereotypes and build confidence, they consistently encounter additional stereotypes based on gender ethnicity and cultural norms (Beckett & Wrigley, 2014; Handel & Fritsche, 2015). A great many studies have examined the impact of gender and sexuality on an individual’s search for self and all seem to demonstrate that association with these labels increases pressure and anxiety (Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb & Muller, 2007; Rahimi & Liston, 2009; Wong; 2015). Similar findings are present as minority use attempt to reconcile external labels with their blossoming sense of self-actualization (Fergus, 2016; Malott, Allessandria, Kirkpatrick & Carrandang, 2009). As Evans, Scourfield and Murphy (2015) investigate; far too often “the unintended consequences of targeting these adolescents with social and emotional learning interventions” do more harm than good (p.386). To further complicate the issue, as noted by Glass and Hopkins (1996) and Levin (1987) people do not neatly fit into the categories we so callously and continuously try to place them in as they often occupy multiple seemingly contradictory labels at the same time.

**Multiplicity of roles complicates identity; leading to frustration and confusion.**

Trying to label people as being or as not being “something” ultimately includes or excludes people from the equation; causing unnecessary confusion and frustration for all involved. “Adolescent’s lives are embedded in rich social contexts, as they are connected to multiple social groups and play many social roles.” (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015, p.767) This paper looked at 2337 students from multiple countries and found that the less boxed in to one label students were, the higher their self-esteem (p. 22-23). Similar findings from other studies applied to the way that biracial Americans chose to label, or not to label, themselves (Davenport, 2016). An
interesting aspect of Davenport’s study was how “ones expressed identity does not always correlate with one’s racial identity, or internal beliefs and perceptions” (p.59). This distinction may prove relevant as researchers investigate the dichotomy between peoples online and real-world identities.

Similar disassociation seemed to exist in sports; particularly amongst female and minority athletes and their athletic versus academic and social personas (Hannon et al., 2015; Martiny et al, 2015). When looking at the impact on minority students in academia Lopez (2016) eloquently voiced the internal conflict he still faces as a high school dropout turned high-school principal and doctoral candidate, narrowly escaping “the black-hole like force of our nation’s schools to prison pipeline- a conduit that unequally challenges the life trajectories of minority males in high poverty contexts” (p.13). Homologous comorbidity concerns exist in the literature for ELL students (Thompson, 2015) and for students with hearing and other physical impairments (Borders, Meinzen-Derr, Wiley, Bauer, & Embury, 2015).

**Progression.** The research made it abundantly clear that the labels culturally transmitted and applied onto individuals by others ultimately serve as the framework by which individuals judged both others and themselves. While so many of these studies talked about identity ambiguity most of the hard research investigating the phenomenon relative to labeling was based in the corporate world (Burke, 2013; Corley & Gioia, 2004). What was abundantly clear however was the labels adolescents were exposed to play a major role in the way that they labeled others and themselves. It was somewhat unexpected to see the contradictory evidence that occupying multiple roles may lead to either frustration or relief from the impact of labels. This seems to reinforce the work of Galinskey and Moskowitz (2000) that working with adolescents on perspective taking reduces their stereotyping of others and themselves; and also
the work of Scroggins (2016) who use the creation of “common in-group identities” categories to combat people’s natural tendency to focus on differences within subgroups (p. 220). Similar harmony tends to present itself in the wake of tragedies like 911 where all the petty labels of daily life are put aside and we unite under one common banner or cause. We must find a way to highlight our similarities and minimize our differences within schools and break the cycle of stereotyping, stigmatization and alienation that has not only existed but seems to be proliferating over the past half-century.

Argument of Advocacy

A clear and complex pattern of both the unexpected and improper consequences of label use has arisen as a result of this review and raises several issues which must be addressed. There were numerous studies that established the significant and varied impacts of these labels in school and at home; ultimately resulting in the implicit and explicit reinforcement and propagation of these labels for future generations (Biklen, 2016; Carnaghi et al., 2008; Foroni & Rothbart; 2011). Technically, outcomes were mixed, but the overwhelming majority of the studies demonstrated the negative results of labeling on both individuals and groups leading many to question their appropriateness and applicability to education at large (Gillman et al., 2000; Ho, 2004; Lauchlan, & Boyle, 2007). Unfortunately, as Kaufman (2012) noted labels are “pesky” and “persistent”; and as Rothbart and Foroni (2013) showed, simply “abandoning a label doesn’t make it disappear”, regardless of how much we might wish it would (p. 127).

Additional findings showed the complexities caused when students are qualified based on multiple, potentially contradictory labels and that there is a tendency to confirm one’s own biases as they pertain to labels on both others and oneself (Darley, & Gross, 1983; Kaplan et al., 2006; Mayes & Moore, 2016). Labels imply identity (Cordiner et al., 2016). To paraphrase what
Alter (2010) said regarding much of the psychological research on labeling, telling someone they are smart or stupid, essentially makes it so. This has repeatedly been shown to be true through the study of the aforementioned Pygmalion effect in the classrooms of our schools over the past fifty years (Reynolds, 2007; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1992).

One of the major criticisms of the literature is that a majority of the studies examined were not conducted with educational settings in mind and those that were tended to focus on special education populations or marginalized minority groups. Some of the studies were quite old and were included to both understand the history of labeling in America and our schools as well as to investigate the way that this labeling has either changed or remained over the year. Labels are in many ways very outdated in our schools. We break student populations down into so many subgroups that we sometimes can lose sight of both the forest and the trees. As noted earlier, individuals and the labels we apply to them don’t exist in a vacuum. The overwhelming majority of the studies examined treat them as though they do. Likewise, a majority of these studies don’t properly investigate why these labels are applied and how they might unintentionally impact these students’ current or future lives. There is currently not a consensus in the literature as to whether labels are good or bad as this question really hasn’t been properly investigated. At best, it seems that the results of labeling individuals are mixed and that the consequences of these labels are both poorly researched and understood.

Perhaps the best way to summarize not only the impact, but the omnipresence of labels is with the following quote. As Sizer (2004) noted:

We adults too easily talk of adolescents as an undifferentiated blob of people, as a Client Group or an Age Cohort. We are quick to generalize about them- unless of course they are our own children. Then we feel the intensity of specialness, these young people are
our own flesh and blood, each of unique promise. “That” Age Cohort we talk about professionally is full of other people’s youngsters, grist to become Products of the System, faceless agents of national defense, social orderliness and economic revival”.

(p.33)

As Sizer notes in this quote it is not until we humanize and individualize adolescent’s that we can truly understand them. Likewise, as Martin (2015) noted, labeling is in many ways akin to censorship as though it may appear to give individuals greater access to services or opportunities, it also welcomes stereotypes and complacency. This ultimately results in social stratification, the over-simplification of complex problems and the obstruction of self-actualization.

In light of the overwhelming magnitude of evidence detailed above, it can reasonably be concluded that labels are overused and that further consideration must be given to their impact on students, teachers and schools. Both School culture and climate would be significantly improved if the issues related to these labels were openly explored and addressed.

**Thesis, Summation and Future Exploration**

This analysis of the literature revealed that labels are of tremendous importance in our schools, and by association in our society at large; resulting in a real and lasting impact on how students are viewed by others as well as how the students view others and themselves, not only during their school years, but for the remainder of their lives as well.

The implications from this literature review are that the benefits of labeling for those working with the labeled have not been adequately compared with the potential harms of those who are, or are not, given these labels. While establishing a true control for such a post-positivist study is neither practical nor ethical, future research should explore the impact of labels on the general population; as well as both when and how these labels are applied. The best way to do
this would be to employ a qualitative-heavy, mixed-methods study that relies heavily on a mixture of surveys and interviews. Though certainly constructivist in its origins the research would also be critical-ideological as the ultimate goal of such research would be to eliminate or at least mitigate or minimize the impact of labels in our schools. It is imperative that all stakeholders (Students, Administrators, Teachers and Care-Givers) are involved. The inclusion of students is especially critical as they not only constitute the largest portion of the population at the school, but are ultimately the individuals that the institution of schooling exists to serve. Additional research should explore the impact of external labels on both student’s meta-perceptions and subsequent labeling of others as well as both the short and long-term impacts that labels have on student-teacher interactions, expectations and outcomes. Furthermore, the complicated intersection of these labels on student identity and performance must be explored.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter details the specific design and procedures employed to examine the ways that labels impact student’s experiences and encounters with their teachers and peers in a traditional high school setting. The conceptual framework chosen to underpin this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was critical bifocality. Interpretive phenomenology seeks to explore rather than eliminate inconsistencies and irregularities that are uncovered during interviews and analysis. This aligns well with critical bifocality which also attempts to make visible the myriad of complex and liminal interactions between individuals and the institutional context and constraints under which they take place. The ultimate goal of this study was not to find specific answers to the issue of labeling but rather to attempt a better understanding of the problem. This particular study will took place at a small suburban high school in the Northeast United States. The 12 person sample included a mix of administrators, counselors, teachers and upper-class students.

Research Paradigm

This qualitative study strove to better understand the lived experiences of the research participants as we work towards a more holistic understanding of label use in our secondary schools. While the idea of a critical ideological approach was entertained for this study, it was ultimately decided that a constructivist-interpretivist approach as defined by Ponterotto (2005) would present a sharp juxtaposition to the received or (post)-positivist paradigms “naïve realism” that seems to have dominated educational research for some time and seemed to be best suited. Ontologically, Butin (2010) describes reality for the constructivist as being “inter-subjective in that it is socially constructed, such that it can be described and represented through diverse perspectives.” (p.59) Constructivists like Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1972) also played
significant roles in my understanding of constructivist theory and will play major roles in the epistemology and methodology applied below. In terms of defining that methodology, the constructivist paradigm is highly qualitative and hermeneutic in nature; context is embraced and explored as central to the idiographic process of understanding the research participants. This shared, and social, epistemological approach results in methodology that looks to “replace the scientific notions of explanation, prediction and control with the interpretive notions of understanding meaning and action” (Merriam, 2005, p 48).

Within Ponteretto’s (2005) constructivist-interpretivism the axiology of Erlebnis or “lived experiences” is central to all research and although both bias and values are readily identified and discussed; they are not seen as avoidable or something to be minimized. Rather it is the rhetorical structure of these personalized and internalized interactions and investigations that the research focuses on; making them applicable, but not generalizable, to society at large. In fact though these emic surveys and ethnographic observations may be analyzed and compared, they are ultimately not in competition with one another and will not, as Butin (2010) points out, “attempt to adjudicate between competing truth claims to determine one best answer” (p.60) but rather work to completely and accurately record peoples shared and disparate perspectives on both labels and labeling.

When investigating the role of labels within schools, a constructivist-interpretivist approach was properly aligned with the problem of practice. Labels, whether applied to an individual or by an individual to others or themselves, are inherently social in construct and meaning. Furthermore, the interpretation or meaning of these labels may evolve over time within the individual, within subcultures or even across society at large. With this said, the axiology of a label is ultimately in the hands and heart of the individual. Phenomenologically speaking, the
results of the quantitative Likert scales that are so often used in educational research today generally mean little to the subjective reality of an individual; while the interactions and explanations gleaned from dialogue with that individual may ultimately reveal great insights into the motivations and personal meanings of both their personal and collectively constructed realities.

Using this paradigm and allowing for, as Roulston and Shelton (2015) put it, “reflexivity” coupled with metacognitive self-reflection on my part “to be aware of [my] values and predispositions and to acknowledge them as inseparable from the research process” (p.2) can not only enhance the sociocultural context of the process, but in fact prove crucial to capturing the “lived experience” of my participants. As with (post)-positivist strategies subjectivity and objectivity needed to be accounted for and I had to be careful about the dimensional construction of the discussions parameters; ensuring they did not become too broad or too narrow and that when appropriate and/or necessary, additional layers were added to either interview questions or observational studies of the presence and impact of labels within the school. As was previously noted, since labels are often a result of the hierarchical, ethnocentric, or even jingoistic nature of human society, the theoretical frameworks of this paradigm align with the problem of practice. As Vygotsky (1978) points out, development cannot be separated from its social context. Similarly, Bruner (1983) sees the two as interconnected in the way a child sees the world and him/herself. As labels are applied by or onto children their reality, which at a young age is generally relatively limited in scope, is permanently and continuously shaped as a result.

**Research Method**

The qualitative approach selected for this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). While more detail on the relatively recent origins of this approach will be
detailed in the following two sections; the basic purpose or premise of the approach is to attempt
to understand (or at least offer insight into) someone’s experiences and the way that they then
interpret, internalize and rationalize those experiences based on prior history and beliefs. It is
about perception (in terms of both the subject/participant and the researcher themselves) and
meaning making with a keen eye towards the role that bias plays on all aspects of this process.
As such, these beliefs or biases are addressed and incorporated into the discussion rather than
attempting to eliminate or minimize them as in other approaches and methodologies. Its focus is
more about participation and process (on the part of both the researcher and the participant(s))
more so than product as it attempts to understand (rather than explain) a given phenomenon or
event. It is in some ways a hybrid approach as it merges an idiographic focus with interpretation
and discussion of semi-structured interviews and artifacts (which are presented verbatim) that are
ultimately analyzed for key themes and concepts.

Its philosophical underpinnings include Phenomenology, Transcendentalism,
Hermeneutics/Semiotics, Ideography and Labeling Theory (a sub-theory of differential
association or symbolic–interactionism theory). Phenomenology is particularly difficult to define
as it involves circular (almost systematic) inquiry and reflection on peoples lived experiences
and the way that they in turn interpret these shared experiences. It is credited to Edmund Husserl
and came to prominence in Germany prior to World War I (Dowling, 2005) but was also largely
influenced by the work of Franz Brentano (Husserl, 1970; Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011).
Husserl relied heavily on Brentano’s idea of intentionality to scaffold and classify his beliefs on
the lived experience of being conscious of an experience or object (Moustakas, 1994). It was in
many ways a rejection of more traditional philosophy that was historically rooted in rationality
Transcendentalism is largely rooted in the belief that the experience of the individual is critically important (Valle, King & Halley, 1989) and that subjective perception is far more important than falsely objective empiricism (although transcendentalism itself is not seen as being at odds with scientific inquiry). Like phenomenology it has its roots in the work of Immanuel Kant but its origins are in Cambridge, Massachusetts and it is viewed as the first major intellectual movement in North America (Heron, 1996). Other major contributors to the field include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Hermeneutics is about how we define our world and the events that happen within it (interpretation of the world). It is related to semiotics as this meaning-making (Cahn, 2011) and positionality is at once liminal and fixed; collective and individualistic. Larkin et al. (2011) talk about it in terms of inter-subjectivity and as “the emergent property of our engagement in the world (p.324). It can be applied not only to texts/transcripts (verbal communication) but to non-verbal communication (body-language, symbols, drawings, etc.) as well. Martin Heidegger and John Locke are commonly associated with hermeneutics and semiotics respectively (Heidegger, 1996). Wilhelm Dilthey (1910) also made a major contribution when he clarified the difference between interpretation and empathy when dealing with another’s (and one’s own) experiences.

Ideography is an approach that focuses on the particular rather than the generalizable; ultimately attempting to describe rather than explain a particular phenomenon (Nightengale & Crombey, 2002). It is the opposite of nomothetic research which takes the opposite approach. This distinction will be discussed further when investigating the similarities between IPA and traditional phenomenological research. Max Weber’s analysis of this distinction was particularly responsible for bringing it to the forefront of discussion during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century (Smith, Harre and Van Langenhove, 1995).
Finally, there is Labeling Theory (a sub-theory of differential association or symbolic–interactionism theory). The basic premise of this theory is that people inhabit a world that is in large part socially constructed (Gertler, 2017). Under symbolic-interactionism theory, meaning is a social construct that is internalized (with different interpretations of objects/events varying across different groups). Particular emphasis is given to the words and phrases used to describe events, experiences or objects. These theories are widely attributed to George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley in the early part of the twentieth century, although labeling theory itself is attributed to Howard Becker in the 1960’s (Becker, 1973). As an aside, Lev Vygotsky’s work on Constructivism in Russia paralleled many of the findings of these men but most likely happened without their direct influence.

Most of the debate about phenomenological research is twofold. It first involves its marginalization by mainstream Psychology (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011) where it is often viewed as overly subjective, if not elitist (Van Hezewijk & Stam, 2008) or even less rigorous than traditional research where it has been described as a “simply descriptive methodology” that is one of the least demanding methods in qualitative Psychology (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The second major debate or divergence takes place between Phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Embodied Active Situated Cognition (Anderson, 2003). Phenomenology has significantly influenced the “new cognition” of IPA (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011) within the field of embodied active situated cognition (EASC). As was addressed previously, early phenomenology focused on uncovering the truth of things and attempted to do this via phenomenological reduction or bracketing. One common misconception was that bracketing was attempting to eliminate bias (rather than suspend it as is actually the case) (Larkin et al., 2003). This is not truly possible in IPA research (as there is more of an
accounting for and addressing of bias rather than eliminating of bias but there is still a commitment to Husserl’s open-minded approach. If and when bracketing is attempted in IPA research it is more about making clear ones partialities and examining the tangles and tussles that result from this interplay. Intentionality is front and center here.

Regarding Hermeneutics and Heidegger (and later Merleau-Ponty) and the belief that relatedness is a fundamental part of our identity results in the merger of subjective and objective inquiry (as a person, or their perspectives, does not exist without the cultural and social context in which their reality is constructed). There was a great quote from Gallagher and Zahavi (2007) in the Larkin et al. (2011) article that indirectly talked about the fact that IPA gives first person accounts from a third person perspective… saying that accounts and subsequent interpretations “emerge out of the encounter between at least two first person perspectives; that is it involves inter-subjectivity (p.40). Merleau-Ponty (1996) meanwhile emphasized the physical and/or perceptual world over both the logical and abstract worlds often highlighted in more traditional psychological work.

Ultimately, “IPA offers an established, systematic and phenomenologically focused approach, which is committed to understanding the first person perspective from the third person position, so far as possible, through intersubjective inquiry and analysis.” (Larkin et al., 2011) It does this as an eidetic method where the researcher tries to walk a mile in the subjects shoes (while of course recognizing that this is not in fact actually possible, but that perhaps one can translate or make more salient the lived experience of another). This process is often “described in terms of a double hermeneutic or dual-interpretation” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; p. 363) process where they critically examine intentionality (this is the interpretive part) but in the participants own words (this is the descriptive part) while also incorporating idiographic
practices so that individuals can be viewed separately (focusing on the particular rather than the transferable or universal).

**Alignment.** Although some consideration was given to using either a narrative or traditional phenomenological approach, interpretive phenomenological analysis was chosen in large part due to the somewhat hybrid nature of the method which incorporates some elements of both of the aforementioned approaches. This is particularly true in the case of my study where both semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used for analysis. Using IPA allowed for better understanding of what it is like to experience labels in our nation’s high schools and what impact(s) these labels have had on the individual’s development of identity. The fact that engagement with participants is not only allowed, but encouraged (albeit accounted for) at an idiographic level is quite encouraging and appealing. Furthermore, the interpretation’s that ultimately result from this detailed bracketing and analysis are able to incorporate a variety of different theoretical perspectives while still staying committed to the participant(s) phenomenological world(s). Such an approach will be particularly salient for examining the impact and importance of labels on the development of identity; particularly during ones formative teenage years.

**Population and Recruitment**

Permission to perform research in the school district was obtained from the school district superintendent. No incentives were offered to participants as part of this process although pizza was shared during one session due to timing. The sample included a mix of administrators, teachers, social-workers and students. Furthermore, no one who is professionally beholden to me in anyway was included. A mix of genders, ages, education levels and experience were intentionally included. All students who participated in the study were not students who had
previously taken classes from me or were currently taking classes from me during the year of the study. Additional attention was given to make sure that they did not have siblings who were or could later take classes from me as well. The students chosen for participation were upperclassmen who had attended this particular school for all four years of high school and have had the opportunity to experience a number of different labels during their school experience. All students involved were planning to continue on their education after high school. The anonymity of all participants was maintained throughout the study by assigning pseudonyms to all in paper discussion and analysis.

**Sampling Strategies and Criteria**

The sampling strategy was initially purposeful in nature but this had to be adjusted somewhat for convenience. While the idea was to include as wide of a variety of participants as possible there ended up being some redundancy with two department heads involved and two teachers who worked in the same department. In some ways the sampling resembled quota sampling in that a number of different demographical characteristics were considered in addition to the pre-selected criteria of intentionally choosing people who seemingly occupied multiple labels or boxes within the school. The plan to include 3-4 students and 6-8 educators with at least one serving in a leadership or administrational capacity in the school was met as the final sample included 12 participants (4 students, 6 teachers, 1 counselor and one administrator). Within the group attention was paid to include participants of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, etc. as well as individuals who both appeared or didn’t appear to be classified within one particular label or group. Due to the intense nature of both interpretive phenomenological analysis and the specific interview protocol applied here a smaller sample size seemed not only appropriate but expedient as well.
Data Collection

The interviews conducted consisted of two parts. First, the interviewees were asked to construct a list of labels that were particularly salient or memorable to them from high school. Next, a 30-45 minute interview was conducted. This all concluded with a brief 5-10 minute follow-up interview over the next several days to discuss the previous interview and to see if they had anything to add or change from the original encounter. Interviews were initially scheduled to take place in a conference room but in the case that such space was unavailable they were conducted in a similarly quiet, comfortable neutral space of the participants choosing. All interviews, and subsequent coding and analysis, were personally conducted and recorded by me. Recordings took place via iPhone using the Voice Recorder & Audio Editor App purchased from TapMedia Ltd. Lists of labels and any additional notes were written by hand, and when relevant, were included as an appendix.

The student focus group discussion that took place was approximately 45 minutes in length with the same basic interview format as the staff interviews being applied. A senior member of the school staff, Mr. Scott Gordon, was present for, but did not participate in, these discussions.

The interview protocol itself was designed to be semi-structured in nature. The constructed questions were all included but during some of the interviews and discussions additional follow-up questions were asked as a result of both particular answers that the interviewee gives and as a result of needed clarification or explanation to these questions. In addition, questions were asked as a result of the pre-interview list of labels that the interviewee constructs which ultimately led to some minor variation form the original script. This likewise applied to the small group discussion that took place with the students as well.
Data Coding and Analysis Procedure

Though the data analysis for this paper was meant to be inductive in nature it was difficult for me to completely eliminate deductive reasoning from the process. Whether this was a result of my original mixed-methodological ambitions or the actual research question under consideration is admittedly still unclear. Inductive reasoning moves from the trees to the forest by finding sequences, patterns and predilections that weave a more global understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In this particular case two books by Saldana (2016), and to a lesser extent Creswell (2013), were particularly influential to the how and why of this analysis. This ultimately resulted in the multi-modal approach that follows.

The first step in this process was to become familiar with the computer program MaxQDA. Several interviews were transcribed and imported into the program. The default setting for the program seemed to align itself with “lumper” coding (Saldana, 2016) and parsing the text into a series of excerpts based on questions and responses. There were also additional features where the researcher could establish different codes and sort them out, across multiple documents, in color for easy identification. This feature additionally allowed the user to search for the frequency of a particular word across multiple documents and would compile a list of all the sentences in which it was used which could allow for identification of common themes; particularly across different interviews. While I think that the attempted use of MaxQDA was helpful in the way that I ultimately approached my coding it did not seem to be a good fit. As such all data analysis was done manually on hard copies of the interview transcripts with highlighters and pens but there is little doubt that identifying which words and phrases were most prevalent shaped and guide further scrutiny and prioritization.
To borrow an additional phrasing from Saldana (2016) a number of paradigmatic, conceptual and methodological considerations needed to be examined to determine if thematic analysis sufficed or if more specific content analysis was warranted both with and across interview subjects. A pilot study was conducted in the Spring of 2017 and after transcribing and re-reading the data corpus the first inclination was to mix and match various coding styles for analysis as there was still considerable uncertainty about both the phenomena itself and what data would be most important. This was followed by considering whether coding a single participant’s responses would be appropriate and at all representative of understanding the impact of labeling.

My ultimate determination was that a mix of first cycle coding methods (In Vivo codes, Versus codes and Elaborative coding) should be used to analyze both the interviews and, to a lesser extent, the word lists generated by participants. While the analysis of the list(s) was at once more nuanced and simplistic then the actual interview and focus group discussions it did, in the aggregate, help identify some interesting trends that contradicted or reinforced what was said verbally. As Saldana (2016) notes: “the products we create embody who we are” (p.61) and this seems particularly apt when the interviewee uses words and lists to display ones identity. Based on the pilot study and the actual interviews/discussions that took place; value laden, first cycle coding may led to emergent and eclectic second cycle coding. Some of the data was actually viewed independently of coding altogether. This amalgam of techniques allowed me to examine the interview and focus group discussions in ways that were descriptive, emotionally expansive and dynamic. By looking at both individual words, trends, themes and statements and combining this with notes on the subjects mannerisms, inflection, and intonation and then examining the entire transcript *in toto*; I was able to “reduce the data to present more of it” (Chenail, 1995; p.4)
but still include some particularly salient quotes for discussion. The findings are presented in an informed but narratively logical style in chapter four and five of this study.

**Limitations**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a relatively new analytical approach to research. Grounded in psychology, the strengths of IPA are in many ways its weaknesses as well. The researcher plays a central role in the process; serving as not only interpreter but arbiter of the participants words and intentions as they try to make sense of their experience. As such all findings are not only the result of the participant’s biases and beliefs but those of the researcher as well. While the results of such a study are thick with detail, discussion and depth of understanding they are also, by definition, very specific and individual in their scope and thereby far less generalizable to the population at large. Due to the rigorous and intimate nature of the interview process the sample size stayed relatively small which further reinforces this lack of transferability. Likewise, the participants involved in this study were volunteers and may not be representative of others with seemingly similar labels. Finally, these interviews and focus group discussions represented a singular stage of the interviewee’s self-reported perceptions. Their emotional or developmental state may have inaccurately presented or portrayed not only their own opinions, but those of their demographic cohort as well and this was taken into consideration during any and all subsequent analysis or discussion of results.

**Reciprocity**

We all live in a world of labels and labeling. It has shaped, and continues to shape, the way we view our place in the world. As adept or inept… as imposters or authorities, we ultimately turn to the labels that others have given us and that we have given ourselves to help guide our moods and behaviors. Participating in a metacognitive, hermeneutic endeavor like this
can be powerful, or at least poignant, exercise for all involved. By helping the individual make their thoughts about labels (and to a lesser extent their thoughts about themselves) visible they may begin to scrutinize that which wasn’t obscure or unknown to them; ultimately finishing the process more aware of the convictions and contradictions that drive both their behaviors and emotions. All of this certainly applies to me personally as well.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research should not be evaluated according to the same standards for validity and reliability as quantitative research as this would tend to rob the study of its depth and result in a far more prescriptive and counterproductive product. Considering the trustworthiness of qualitative research, and in particular interpretive phenomenological research, involves a more sophisticated and subtle, if not pluralistic, approach. Bias is not something to be eliminated from the study but rather something to be embraced and addressed. Both the participants of the study and I rely on bias to view the world through a series of ever refocused and refined lenses.

When first examining the term scholar-practitioner at the start of my doctoral journey it brought to mind other seemingly disparate dichotomies such as warrior-poet, neo-traditionalist or industrialist-philanthropist. I must admit that I have traditionally tended to think of the two as being diametrically opposed; if not in theory, certainly in terms of real world application. To quote Freire, “To deny the importance of subjectivity… is both naïve and simplistic” (p.50) and while previously prone to thinking of myself as an automaton capable of eliminating bias I now see that “bias is not necessarily equated with error” (Roulston & Shelton, 2015; p. 6). As such I think my power is at times enhanced or limited by my post-positivist tendencies and an aggressive search for harmonious discord.
To paraphrase what Flores (2014) so aptly stated in her blog; it is easier to start an argument than it is to resolve one. The intent of this research was not to confuse or confound the participants. They should not have left questioning the authenticity of their priorities or purpose but rather have been more aware that some presumed absolutes are in fact ever-changing. As Franklin (2014) put it, “I believed in individual egalitarianism” (p. 69). I admittedly have been at times narcissistic, or at least egocentric, in my view of the world but after 17 years at the high school and another 11 at the college; as well as through the readings here and my last few degrees; I have begun to better understand how I am positioned in relation to others… “as dominant/subordinate, marginal/center, empowered/powerless” (Takacs, 2014; p. 169) and how as I, or the participants of the study, transition between roles, my positionality may subsequently shift as well. All of this is/was addressed within the analysis of the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

As has been discussed throughout this paper labels can have many real and unforeseen consequences on an individual’s successes, failures and sense of self-worth or purpose. When working with individuals to unpack such a complex and often unconsidered phenomenon it was incredibly important that I monitored peoples comfort level throughout and after the interview. This is part of why the interview itself was broken up into two parts so that after the interviewee had completed their initial interview they had a chance to expound on or clarify anything from the first day of interviews. Additionally, participants were shown copies of their interview transcripts for approval. This is also another reason why older students were selected for participation in the focus group discussions. As noted previously, pseudonyms have been used for both the location and all participants to ensure confidentiality. Participants were given forms to declare their informed consent and approval was obtained through the IRB process.
Data Storage

All data, transcripts and pseudonym information were and are stored in a password protected electronic device and/or locked in a fire-resistant steel filing-cabinet. Only I have access to the data and the key for the locking cabinet. All names and identifying information were be edited out of the audio recordings before granting a transcriptionist access to the files and were not written on the transcripts during my own analysis. At the conclusion of the data collection all transcripts were removed from the electronic device and stored on an external hard-drive in the locking filing cabinet. Once the degree of doctorate has been conferred and three years’ time has passed, all transcripts and recordings will be destroyed.
Chapter 4 – Analysis of Findings

The purpose of this research was to better understand the impact that labels have on students and teachers in our schools. The research question explored the ways that labels shape student’s experiences, encounters and interactions in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers. Additional sub-questions explored when and why these labels are applied in students and teachers lives and how this relates to motivation, performance, achievement and sense of self-worth; as well as how enduring the impacts of these labels are in terms of potentially inhibiting or benefiting an individual’s growth and development. The primary theory employed in this study was critical bifocality (Weiss & Fine, 2004; Weiss & Fine, 2012). However, the theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and implicit bias (Greenwald & Banji, 1995; Staats & Patton, 2014) also played significant roles in the way that the data was both examined and interpreted. The methodology of this qualitative study was that of interpretive phenomenological analysis.

The study had two distinct sets of participants. The first consisted of four high school seniors who met as a focus group to discuss the role that labels play and/or have played in their lives. All members of this group were at least 18 years old and included students of different gender, race, ethnicity and academic level. The second group was made up of 8 members of school staff: teachers, administrators and support staff of varying experience levels, disciplines, ethnicities, gender, sexual orientations and upbringings. One participant was born outside of the United States, two were raised in different states, and two actually grew up in and attended high school in the district under examination. Experience levels ranged from four to twenty-four years working in schools. Five of the 8 staff had previously worked at other schools. Of the six teachers involved, two additionally served in an administrative capacity as department chairs.
One served as music director, three had experience as coaches and three ran large clubs at the school. The remaining two adult participants were a school psychologist/adjustment-counselor and a vice-principal who had previously taught/coached at the high school level. All staff involved in the study worked in the district for at least two years prior to their involvement and have, at a minimum, a license and graduate degree in their field.

**Overview of Themes**

After completing the transcription of my semi-structured conversations with the 12 individuals involved in this study I was left with well over 100 pages of interview transcripts to sift through. In truth it was a bit overwhelming and I was unsure where to go with everything so I decided to employ a variety of techniques. My first step was to read the interviews in their entirety three times; recording any thoughts that I had about the interviews directly onto the transcripts. A variety of coding techniques were employed. The first approach was a mix of conceptual and taxonomic coding through which I attempted to ethnographically build a bigger picture of what was happening in the school at large with respect to labeling. This led to both **in vivo** coding and versus coding during later read-throughs of the transcripts. During the second stage of my analysis these codes, as well as my thoughts and observations, were examined thematically and a variety of themes began to emerge. Some of these themes were unique to individual interviews or group discussion while others were interwoven across multiple groups. The sum of all this eclectic coding was the integrative theming of the *data corpus* that follows.

Four themes were revealed by the analysis of the data. While the use of subthemes was initially explored it seemed that it was best to discuss each trend *in toto*. The experiences of the participants, individually and collectively, were quite mixed in their understanding. Participants
varied from fully conscious to completely incognizant of their experiences with labels. While some of these differences were undoubtedly the product of age and individual experience, the commonalities were as intriguing as the contrasts. The themes were as follows:

1. Convention. Labeling is normal and helps me know how I fit into the world.
2. Changing. That label doesn’t mean the same thing that it used to.
3. Confused. I am ___ and would describe myself as ___ but labels don’t define me.
4. Conflicted. Although I use labels I often don’t like them.

After examining each participant’s history and thoughts on labels and labeling within our schools in the profiles section that follows; we will more explicitly explore the presence of these themes across the group.

**Participant Profiles**

The following profiles are presented in the order that the interviews were conducted. This order signifies no importance as all involved were invited to participate at the same time and the scheduling of interviews was a matter of convenience on the part of those involved. All adult participants in the study were previously known to me but I intentionally did not include anyone that I socialized with outside of a professional setting or that I worked with directly. All actual names have been replaced with Pseudonyms.

**Haylee.** The first interviewee, Haylee, was a 37 year old art teacher who identified as married, female and white. While she grew up primarily in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, she also spent more than a decade living in other parts of the country as well. This included time as an undergraduate student on the west coast and several years as a river guide on the rapids of Yellowstone National Park, throughout Colorado and the Rocky Mountains. She ultimately
ended up recognizing her love of teaching through these outdoor endeavors which led to her moving back to Massachusetts to attend a prestigious college for a graduate degree in education. Although she initially was unsure if she wanted to teach Literature or Art, the elective nature of graphic design and Photography resulted in her choosing the latter. Prior to her current teaching job she also worked in two additional Massachusetts schools. Her first job was in a fairly economically and racially diverse city south of Boston for her student teaching and the second was a former factory town that has seen much better days. Both were demographically quite different from each other and from the district examined in this study.

Her own experiences with labels as a student were primarily positive. She felt that both she and others had a high opinion of her younger self. The primary labels she used to describe herself for the bulk of her middle and high school years were athlete, artist, student and scholar. She was quite reflective about the fact that both art and athletics resulted in her receiving attention, rewards or favor with teachers and classmates and that “part of [her] identification came from those recognitions” and that it “lent itself to [her] developing self-image.” (p. 3) She also candidly acknowledged times when labels were not so positive. When a teacher she respected placed Haylee in a lower level class then she expected she felt embarrassment, anger and self-doubt. Although she ultimately fought for a different placement she felt that her future would have been markedly different if she had not done so. “I do think that kids believe and take a certain sense of ownership of where they are, whether its arbitrary or intentional, I think that if I had been surrounded by a different group of kids who didn’t feel as “smart” as the honors or AP kids, or didn’t have that sort of motivation to try and push themselves, I think I would’ve easily adopted that and been perfectly, you know, satisfied with a certain level of achievement.”
Had Haylee accepted that label; she feels strongly that she would have been a fundamentally different person.

As a teacher she tries to not only be cognizant of labels but cautious about her use of them as well. She feels that she “see(s) [her] students in conflict all the time because [her] classes are 9-12th mixed classes of kids… it’s not a tracked subject by ability.” (p.5) Haylee feels that this is at once confounding and emancipating for the kids as they explore successes and failures that they are not accustomed to in their typical school days. She felt that many kids give up a piece of themselves to try and conform to labels with the stress and pressures of it taking a real toll on their self-esteem or through issues with anxiety. “I’ve had kids who are overwhelmed but they are desperate to have that kind of label” (p.6) and are “pretty set on maintaining their identity as a certain type of person” (p.8) When pressed if labels from peers or authority figures were more important to students she felt that it depended on the particular label and the individual student. She additionally had some interesting ideas about labels that at times aligned or sharply contrasted with other participants that will be addressed in depth in the themes sections.

Tim. The second interviewee was Tim, a recently engaged 38 year old Music teacher who identified as white and male. He grew up in a small, rural West Virginia town where the only industry to speak of was a large automotive plant that employed around twenty percent of the county. After attending a magnet high school for math and science he left his small blue-collar town to become the first in his family to attend college; doing so at a large private university in neighboring Virginia before ultimately moving up to Boston to obtain a graduate degree in Music education. The combination of a very positive graduate school and student teaching experience here in Massachusetts, along with some less than idyllic educational
experiences back home resulted in his staying here to establish roots. He has been teaching all 14 years of his career at this school. Early on in the interview process Tim made a point of defining himself as a non-religious white southerner and admitted that his atheist tendencies did not feel tenable in that “Friday Night Lights” (p.1) environment that he grew up in. Although admittedly a strong student who was initially well-liked by his teachers and classmates his physical disability and the journey that he underwent to realize that he was gay led to some very challenging years from middle school through college.

Though Tim is now very confident and secure in both his profession and sexuality; going so far as to say that “the biggest sources or hallmarks of my identity are that I’m a teacher and that I’m a gay man” (p.3) his own experiences with labels in school have been quite complicated. Tim described middle school:

From being called effeminate or faggot or homo in various forms in middle and high school to coming to terms with that in college and now I’d say that I’m… where I was very scared… resistant of being called or labeled as gay in school, now I am very proud to call myself a gay man. The struggles that I’ve had because of my relationship with that label, “gay” have created my tenacity and ultimately cemented that gay is not only who I am but who I want to be, if that makes sense… so even if [it was] hard, I’m grateful for that as part of my life. It’s emotional…

Throughout the interview he talked very little about his physical disability but often returned to how the labels he embraced or rejected shaped his educational experience. Whether it was the kindergarten teacher who labeled Tim as one of the smartest kids in class “and how I sort of got labeled with that early, and I always felt the need to live up to that” (p.4) or how he was always
labeled as not good at sports and how ‘that label stuck with me for my, like, thinking of myself as athletic in anyway is something that I have trouble doing’ (p.6) there did seem to be a common thread that he always would always turn to positive or negative labels to try and balance out his identity and relationship with his parents. Tim explains:

I also think that I’ve been ambitious and hard-working partially when I was a kid because I was afraid, dealing with the sexuality stuff, I wanted to be labeled as perfect in every other way. So I might disappoint my parents in this way, but I was perfect… I was good at everything else I did. So that became, like part of it was escaping the fear of the wrath for being a gay boy. (p. 3-4)

Tim used his academic, musical and social successes to offset his internalized/perceived “failings” with his sexuality and athletic prowess. He used labels to achieve a net positive self-image. He sees students having similar struggles in his classes and tries to use his personal experiences to make things easier for them as they search for their own multi-faceted identities. Tim sees labels as “generally problematic” (p.7) although he understands why they are used and feels that this application is in many ways “instinctual and tribal” (p.8). Through running the gay straight alliance (GSA) at the school, resisting the schools grade system or creating interdisciplinary assignments that help students grow he seems to simultaneously acknowledge the importance of labels in schools without conceding that there influence needs to be permanent. Many of his insights, contraventions and experiences will be revisited and further explored in the following sections.

**Matt.** The third participant was Matt, a single 27 year old History teacher and coach who identified as a single white male. Matt grew up in town and attended the school that he now
works at although he has since moved away due to the high cost of real estate in town. He shares an apartment with several roommates who he feels don’t value things the same ways that he does or understand the world that he sees. Their use of labels “makes me want to do more… stuff [labels] like that is closed minded and annoying” (p.2). This is also something he experienced in college with athletics and his first real interactions with people of other socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. Growing up in a “white picket fence, white suburb” (p.1) led to his teammates from “Lawrence or Boston that were Hispanic or black, they didn’t expect me to be as open-minded and hang out with them… even though I was a rich kid from the suburbs, rich in quotes” (p.4) they had really good relationships but that “at the end of the day I was still the suburb kid and I couldn’t escape that” (p.5). He noted that he even though his blue collar family was financially very successful they were not viewed with the same cache as other less affluent white collar families in town. He attributed this to never really feeling like he fit in where he grew up and felt that others in town had similar experiences and tried to compensate for their seemingly inferior blue collar label where “anything that has to do with appearances they’ll use to try to beef up their status” (p.5). Matt noted that at the end of the day their spot on the social pecking order ultimately doesn’t change. This seemed to drive his repeated mentioning of attending a state school and not a private university. He seemed to view this as some sort of personal failing as he would repeatedly compare himself to his high school classmates without recognizing that he was the first in his family to even attend college at all, let alone achieve multiple degrees in his field.

Matt’s experiences with labels were mixed during his time in school as both a student and teacher but he views them to have been positive overall. In addition to his teaching duties, the former college athlete who self-labels as a “‘Jeek’… a mix of a jock and geek” (p.2) also
coaches football and lacrosse at the school and works summers and weekends for his families landscaping business. This often results in his working for the parents/guardians of his current students and/or athletes and has given him some interesting perspectives on both himself and the town at large. “The way that people talk to me when I am wearing a tie or my coaching gear is entirely different than when I am covered in dirt digging a hole, or moving rocks” (p.9)…”I feel it, and it’s ridiculous because I am suddenly labeled as less than… as if what I am doing is somehow who I am” (p.9). He wondered why the questions people ask always come back to what people or their parents do… where they live, or what they drive. The focus on the external is something that he notices not only in the labels kids wear on their clothes around school or the cars that they drive, but also in terms of how “people hire me to put lights on every angle of their house so that it is lit up all night so everyone can see” (p.4). He sees this focus cross over into schools as well when kids worry too much about what class or team they are on and how this might impact their social standing with others. Matt also had some very interesting takes on both the label Millennial and what it means to be type A versus Type B that will be further explored in the themes section.

Ellen. The fourth interviewee was Ellen, a recently engaged 29 year old social worker and crisis counselor who identified as female and white. Ellen was born in Moscow, Russia and immigrated to America shortly before elementary school. Over the course of her elementary school years her family moved several times to progressively more affluent communities until they ultimately settled in a town just outside of Boston that has the highest percentage of residents with terminal degrees anywhere in the United States. She went to a large state school in western Massachusetts where she obtained a degree in psychology before continuing on to an Ivy League school in New York for her Master’s degree in social work. She has worked at the school
for 5 years and recently gave her notice that she would be leaving to take another job closer to her current home south of Boston.

Interestingly, Ellen was the only adult interviewee who defined her school experience as overwhelmingly negative and difficult. “I actually never, I mean, the only reason I’m working in school is that I never loved school. I did not have good experiences in primary or secondary school… I had a lot of resentment.” (p.2 – 3) She felt a lot of pressure to succeed both from her immigrant parents and from the environment that she grew up in. “They had parents who were doctors and professors. My family was immigrants so they couldn’t help me on my homework” (p. 7). She really internalized this and “had to fight and struggle to get into the lower classes” (p.3) so that she could get good grades. She railed against the status quo which led to issues with drinking, drugs and promiscuity that she now regrets but that also help her to be better at her job. Ellen explains:

I was just not confident so I made poor decisions. I look back on that now and I think that’s great because it actually helps me to better understand kids now; and that’s part of my non-judgmentally… I hear kids telling me wild stories, and unlike some of the other adults in their lives, I see them as humans who are dealing with their own troubles. No one really makes these decisions because they are living this happy, content, confident life. They often times use them [labels/drugs] to escape or to mask something…. So I would see myself very differently now. I could never work in the high school that I went to because I am such a different person now but the labels that I had in high school are still there. (p.7)
She repeatedly said how she never felt intelligent until after graduating college but reflected that “if I had been in a different place, I probably would have felt more intelligent” (p.8). She felt less than, “lower class” (p.10) and “impoverished” (p.11) as a product of comparison with her classmates but now recognizes that owning one of the least expensive houses in one of the most expensive places to live in America actually means she was “upper middle class or above” (p.11). She sees similar issues with labels and how kids internalize them at the high school. “I see kids who are just struggling to make it through the day and those kids get quickly labeled” (p. 9) and that kids get labeled very negatively, very quickly and these are the kids that I work with the most and relate to because of my own negative experiences with school and labels” (p.10). While she did acknowledge the potential for certain labels to be beneficial she ultimately views labels as confining, if not actually defining, students high school experiences.

**Raven.** The fifth interviewee was Raven, a 48 year old, divorced father of one who currently teaches environmental science. He discussed how he tends to “wear a lot of different hats in the building” (p.2) having previously coached tennis before switching to his current role of science department chair for the past 11 years. While he loves teaching it is obvious that he is less interested in the administrative component of his job but that the extra money and flexibility are what drive him to stay in his current position. Raven commutes well over an hour to work each way as he drives to the town form a neighboring state. While the drive itself is cumbersome it gives him both more financial freedom and better access to both his daughter and his true passion of hiking/mountaineering. In addition to his many commitments at the school he also serves on the New Hampshire Outdoor council and maintains several trails for hikers in the White Mountains. In his younger days he logged over 10,000 hours traversing the Appalachian Trail from Florida all the way up to New York and Vermont.
His love of the outdoors was something that he picked up in college and graduate school in Florida after leaving a doctoral program in Chemistry without finishing his dissertation. It was during these several years on the trail that he found not only himself but his true calling as a teacher and environmental activist. While he has a sister some twenty years his senior, Raven grew up just outside of Buffalo, New York as essentially the only child of a single mother as he lost his father to a heart attack while just starting primary school. This largely solitary lifestyle drove him not only to excel in competitive tennis where he ultimately earned a division 1 scholarship; but also leads him to keep an eye out for “kids that don’t have a lot of people advocating for them and don’t get that same kind of above and beyond/out of their way kind of treatment.” (p.4) Raven is particularly adept at building relationships with kids that tend not to associate with school and “tend to fall through the cracks”(p.4) and need to be “bumped back in the right direction (p.5)”

His own experiences with labels in schools were largely positive but he does feel that “there are more labels now then there have ever been and, in some ways, they’re an advantage almost (p.7).” He feels that this is a “reflection of society, that [people] are more accepting of students with differences” (p.6) and that many students will now talk openly about their deficits or impairments without fear of being ostracized which leads to both more self-confidence and perhaps an increase in student complacency, if not outright apathy. He does see marked changes in the ways that students apply themselves in his classes and how they interact with each other. One of the points he made was particularly salient and will be fleshed out further within one of the themes sections, but the essence of what he said was that the presence or absence of some labels actually took precedence over what the labels were supposed to mean.


John. The sixth participant John, now 45 years of age, attended the high school that he now teaches Physics at. Like many other participants he describes his own upbringing as typical, although he does admit that growing up he felt like he was missing out on the type of exposure to diversity that kids in other towns were exposed to. The first 12 years that he was teaching high school, John taught a mix of advanced and remedial math classes. As the result of both an unexpected job opening and some personality conflicts that he was having in his previous role, John added an additional certification and ultimately changed departments. While the overwhelming majority of his career was spent in this one school he did additionally teach for one year in Burlington Vermont and in a neighboring, slightly more urban town as well. While he admittedly acknowledges a tendency to get selected by the students as the most rigorous teacher at the school, he describes himself as an easy-going, affable family man who cares about the community and the kids as much as the content that he teaches.

When reflecting back on his time as a student John did not see himself in the same largely positive light that he does today. He says that as a child he was a non-athlete, who wasn’t very smart and that for some of his classmates would have labeled him as a “loser” or “unpopular” and that he “doesn’t know if [he] made that much of an impact on them for them to try to apply labels to [him].”(p.3) The pain he still feels is palpable as says “I didn’t have a lot of friends when I was younger” and had experience with being bullied by a senior when he was a freshman in high school (p.4). Interestingly, he did not describe school as negative though as he took a lot of the blame for his lack of fitting in saying that “any weaknesses I felt were my own and not the schools” (p.6). While he has since found happiness, friendship and success personally in professionally he does worry about his own children feeling the way he did, or being labeled a certain way. He talked about his daughter, who is on an IEP for both a learning
disability and anxiety, having a tough time fitting in at school and how upsetting that is for him personally after his own trials and tribulation in his primary and secondary years.

John sees labels as a major players in our schools that dramatically impact or frame expectations and interactions in both positive and negative ways. He sees “that people make assumptions and coming in treat the class a certain way” and that it’s a “self-feeding thing… Either the teachers or the students can drive the other party to act that way and feel that way” (p.8). When labels are perceived as positive like Honors or AP he feels that it makes both the teachers and students work harder for each other but that the opposite is true with remedial or general classes where leveling can sometimes be associated with certain personality traits like sloth or indifference. “When you put someone in that box where they’re making the conscious decision to do poorly it just puts everyone on the wrong path.” (p.9) He feels that when we group ability and effort it ignores a myriad of other factors that heavily influence performance and predisposition. Interestingly he also brought up the role that movies and television had in the 80’s where “stuff was all about cliques and jocks and every group had a social label” (p.8) he feels that, at least at the school in question, that is just not how things tend to be anymore as single labels don’t tend to fit as neatly onto individuals anymore.

**June.** The seventh interviewee was 38 year old foreign language teacher June who identified as female and white. She got into teaching primarily because her Mom was a teacher and because of the advice of her father who labeled teaching as a woman’s profession. “My mom was a teacher and my dad used to say it was a great job for women. It was mother’s hours and all that good stuff.” (p.2) June grew up in Massachusetts but had previously lived in northern California as well. She is currently working as the foreign language department head but had previously left the school when she first got married to reduce her commute and be able to spend
more time with family. Through the interview process it was revealed that when she was living in the neighboring state of New Hampshire she would actually carpool with fellow interviewee Raven who also participated in the study. Missing both Massachusetts and the school she ultimately moved her family back to an affluent coastal town about 30 minutes away.

June mentioned that her experiences teaching at the school and at both her current and previous homes have been very different than where she grew up relatively poor in a blue collar town. It was interesting that she described her childhood and school experiences as largely positive but would not even entertain moving back home and/or raising her family where she grew up. “There was a great sense of community there, typical middle school experience, wonderful high school experience but if you asked me if I would go back, I would say no. Raising my kids there? No way… no way.” (p.2). She frequently talked about the annoyances of the affluent towns where she works and lives; describing them as “closed-minded” (p.3), “snobby” (p.5) and “not her style” (p.6). It was interesting how strongly she resisted her children growing up the way that she did even though she enjoyed it and likewise how much she seems to detest, or at least strongly dislike, the communities where she was working/raising her family.

June has actively tried to bring positive energy to the school where she additionally works as a class advisor, mentor and runs free yoga sessions for the kids. In addition to a few challenges she is facing as a mom she currently has two half-siblings who are in the late stages of cancer. This is causing her considerable stress and sadness and has led to great introspection on her part about her own experiences and approach to life. Her relationship with her step siblings is/was complicated and played a significant role in shaping Junes educational experience. She explains:
“There were some situations where I was judged because my siblings were not the best people. I definitely remember some parents who did not want their kids hanging out with me, which was odd because I was different. I was national honor society… I was an athlete… I didn’t get in trouble… we weren’t as poor as they had been. It took me a long time to realize I was being judged or labeled because of who my family was or worse who they had been.” (p.4)

This experience ultimately led to her being “a little more, or a lot more, open-minded and sympathetic” (p.5) to the challenges her students face as they navigate their way through the school day and recognizes that “there are a lot of comparisons taking place” (p.7) each day between students and staff. She actively tries to address this: “I’m trying my best to teach that comparison is the thief of joy, because there is always someone with more or less, money or whatever… but you never think about the less, just who has more than you… it never ends in a positive way.” (p. 8) June actively tries to keep an eye out for the kids who are struggling or seem sad as she can empathize with how they are feeling. We will revisit some specific instances of labeling that June has dealt with lately as a result of her sisters illness in the themes section.

**Ben.** The eighth and final adult participant was 40 year old assistant principal Ben who identified as male and white. Before pursuing his current career in education, Ben spent five years working on television as a sports reporter. The perspectives that he brings to this study were particularly unique for two reasons. First is that he is the only adult participant in the study who had a diagnosed learning disability while in school, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a label which strongly shaped both his current perspective and previous experiences. The second really interesting thing about Ben is that before taking this job in this affluent,
predominantly white award winning, “blue-ribbon” district; his first decade in education was spent as a teacher, coach and administrator at (literally) the lowest performing school district, with the highest percentage of English Language Learners (ELL), in the state of Massachusetts. This sharp contrast of professional educational experiences is buffered by the fact that Ben grew up about an hour outside of Boston in a middle-class suburb. Furthermore, his wife’s current work as an inner city curriculum director and his parents’ previous experiences as a special education teacher and school superintendent further expand his sphere of experience.

Ben described his elementary and middle school experiences as idyllic but lost his way a bit at the start of high school. “I hated high school to be honest with you. I didn’t enjoy much.” (p.2) He talked further about how his ADHD diagnosis and SPED experience shaped his experience during that time. “I didn’t want to be in that special education room. I was very nervous self-conscious about what people would think of me.” (p.4) What was interesting was that although his mother was a special education teacher and administrator, he was not actually diagnosed until age 14 in part due to fear of being labeled. “I think that my parents tried to control it as educators, my Mom would work with me at home and they tried to make sure I had teachers that would work with me… that would allow me to… but I always knew, and they always knew I was different.” (p.6) Ben feels that although things have in some ways changed and that certain labels like SPED ‘are more accepted now” (p.3) that “there’s more opportunities now to be labeled probably than in the past.” (p.9) He expands further on this point:

“Everyday there’s a label. Just looking at the student body, students are labeled by their learning style, by their behavior; they’re labeled by what extra-curricular activities they do/do not do and what sports they play. They’re labeled by their family life, their relationship status, their labeled by community, by what their parents do. Faculty is
labeled by how they teach, by who they teach. Faculties backgrounds, where they went to school, what degrees they do or do not have, how they build or do not build relationships with students. There’s labels everywhere… it’s stifling.” (p.5)

Ben feels strongly that labels, particularly negative ones, follow students throughout their educational careers and that “there’s no chance for the label to leave. It’s stuck there. You’re stuck with it until you leave high school.” (p.7). He sees this as being really unfortunate as “we all go through transformations and change through our whole life” (p.11) but that those labels shape our own perspective as well as our interactions with others. We will revisit some of his specific insights on inner city schools and special education in the themes section.

**Student Focus Group (B, G1, G2, G3).** The student focus group was initially comprised of 2 boys and 3 girls but right before the interview one of the participants was suspended, and eventually expelled, from the school and was no longer eligible to participate. All students involved were 18 years old and had attended this particular school for the entirety of their high school experience. All four students identified differently. The male participant (B) identified as mixed race while girl one (G1) identified as Caucasian, Girl 2 (G2) identified as African-American and Girl 3 (G3) identified as Latina/Hispanic. G2 identified as poor while the other three participants self-identified as middle class which was interesting as there were considerable differences in their demographics. G1 is the child of a CEO and prominent Boston lawyer while B is the son of a teacher and construction worker. G3 moved to public housing that was added to town roughly five years ago as a condition of building a high end shopping area and some luxury condominiums. Prior to this move G3 had lived near Logan airport in Boston and attended multiple urban schools in the Boston area before moving to town shortly after her Quinceanera. The fact that all three identified the same in spite of considerable socioeconomic variance was in
line with previously discussed research on the label of middle class. B, G1 and G3 have all attended school in the district since Kindergarten but G2 actually lives in Boston and is part of the METCO program; a program which transports inner city minority students to affluent suburban schools. Students B and G2 are on IEP’s. All four students described their overall school experience as mixed but positive overall.

When G1 was asked to describe herself she was particularly proud of her growth throughout high school. “I am an only child. School is really important to me, and getting good grades. I struggled going into high school with my grades and I’ve learned to improve them. I do sports here but mainly I am a competitive dancer”(p.1). G1 had to switch down to lower level classes to achieve this success but has framed her improvement positively as the result of personal growth. With this being said she still harbors significant resentment towards the students in the honors classes that she left. “They act like they are so much higher than you, even though in reality…. I have all A’s, my grades are better than theirs, I could be in the AP class I just don’t choose to.” (p.4) She feels strongly that many of these students who fight to hold on the label of honors or AP lose their center. “You have to draw the line and make a balance between sports, school, family, [and] friends. All of that goes together and makes you who you are.” (p.5) Throughout the discussion she would switch from talking about how “you can’t really define me on what scores I get because that’s not really who I am as a person” (p.7) to repeatedly talking about being “high honors” (p.7) and “class rank” (p.11) being really important parts of who she sees herself as. Not surprisingly she is still developing herself of identity and using some of these labels in her attempts to do so.

B reflected on his successes and failures throughout high school and the challenges he faced due to his learning disability. Although B is an exceptional athlete, initially receiving
multiple D-1 scholarship offers for both football and track, he feels that he has made some mistakes and was very set on not letting athletics define who he is. After becoming academically ineligible for both the state championship football game and a winter track season where he was the defending state champion, he seems to have really taken stock of what is important to him and his future. “I think I know what is important now. Is [being] an athlete more important? Or [being] a student more important? Or [being] a friend more important? I understand that now more than I did before.” (p.3) He says he feels pressure to succeed athletically but also academically as people think “he is getting away with things” (p.4) when he gets a good grade on an assignment. He resents this judgement and tries not to do the same with others. He blames labels and the ways that certain ones are celebrated for the struggles he has faced. “You don’t see me working. You don’t see it… Nobody’s going to put a newspaper article about me studying. All people see of me is track and football but that’s not the only me. I am not as good at school as sports but I work harder to get what I get in class, even if it’s not as good” (p.4) He seems to have better reorganized his priorities; recognizing that the sport he plays or the grade he gets is not who he fundamentally is as a person.

G2 seemed to have a very good relationship with who she was and wanted to be while simultaneously having a very complicated relationship with her school experience. Not living in town but being a part of the district through the METCO program and living in Boston, resulting in 2-3 hours on the school bus each day was difficult. She talked about how she likes to “help her community” (p.1) or “friends she grew up with” (p.11) she was always referring to where she lived in Boston and not the community/kids she went to school with for 13 years. She said that she feels people in Lynnfield are constantly judging her. “People think I am mean or tough, but I mean I am, but not at first. I am a nice person.” (p.3) It is difficult though as she feels she is
being doubly judged by those in Boston and the district she attends and is constantly defending the one to the other.

G2 feels very strongly that labels are problematic in schools and society. “I don’t feel that labels define me” (p.6) she said before going on to discuss issues that arise when people focus on the external features of people and places to apply merit. She explains:

“I feel that a lot of people because of labels, when they are younger they want to change to be like that but they know inside that they’re not like that, so it kind of doesn’t really work out for them. And so they end up doing something that they don’t even like to do just because they were following people… following a label of who they are supposed to be.” (p.9)

G2 really seemed to have a hard time managing people’s expectations of others versus who that person really was/is on the inside. She describes a friend who has a hard time “and doesn’t really get a lot of chances in certain things because of how he looks and acts and mistakes he has made.” (p.8) She really felt that peoples actions, looks, behaviors should not necessarily define how others view them which was at times difficult for me to follow.

G3 was the least talkative participant in the study but although she ultimately said less than the other participants she in many ways had the most to say. She had only been going to school in town for five years and said that she did not do particularly well academically or participate in sports or other extracurricular activities with the town. She seemed to struggle at times with just who she was but did see a relationship between what you do and who you are. “I don’t do sports and I am who I am because of that.” (p.5) She initially did not like town when she moved here at the end of middle school and said that she noticed being different. “In middle
school I felt more different from others than I do now. I don’t know if this is because we were all grouped together or what but now I am more with people that I am friends with or who are like me where, like, before it was just me.” (p.3) G3 is perhaps unintentionally noticing that in the homogenously grouped classes there are high percentages of minority students in the classes she takes. She spoke more directly to this issue later in the discussion when G2 was talking about METCO:

People sometimes think I am not from here because I am not white… that has happened with teachers and a bunch of kids too… especially here at the high school. But it’s weird because I am not from Boston, but even though I live here I am not from here… other kids come in and they are suddenly from here right away but I’ve been here for 6 years but I still feel like I’m really from [previous city] where I used to live in elementary school even though I don’t even talk to anyone from there anymore… I never thought about that.” (p. 11-12)

Her point about other kids moving in and being from here right away seems to speak to class and race issues. Even though others thoughts and perceptions clearly bothered her she was always quick to shrug it off as non-important. “What other people think doesn’t matter to me and it’s not like they are doing it on purpose they are just ignorant sometimes.” (p.12) She also saw that labels about leveling were not only not helpful but harmful and divisive at times as well. “I have been in different levels and the teachers treat us totally different” (p. 4). This will be expanded on further in the upcoming themes section.

One final thought about identity and labeling that was addressed by all four younger participant’s that was not brought up by the faculty participants was their social media identity
and how it might differ from their offline persona. B talked about it as being a “side life” (p.5) and how some people “let it get to your head in a negative way and start being something that you’re really not and stop being true to yourself then that’s when it starts being negative.” (p.7) All students felt that social media shaped the way people define success and popularity. G3 said “it was all about the likes” (p.6) and G1 talked about how ”that’s not who you are in real life” (p.7). What was interesting was how several talked about online and social media being a way to escape ones real-self as well as a way to express the real-self “that they aren’t comfortable expressing in real life”. (p.10) G2 said she felt that they were one and the same. “They’re both the real me” (p.10) while G3 felt “I am always real but others are fake” (p.10). This was in many ways a microcosm of the issue with labels at large in that all the students applied and used labels but felt that they did not apply to them.

In the following section we will look at the trends that emerged from these interviews; focusing on common themes that were present in the groups.

**Theme 1: Convention. Labeling is normal and helps me know how I fit into the world.**

When reading all of the transcripts it became clear that people were very familiar with the use of labels in our society and schools; both in terms of using labels about others and having others use labels about them. While people’s thoughts and opinions about the appropriateness of labels in different situations certainly varied they all agreed that labels are so pervasive in our schools that it is hard to imagine them not being there as they fundamentally shape peoples interactions and experiences. Labels serve to simplify an increasingly complicated world for both students and teachers. This simplification comes at a significant cost as the resulting assumption is that average is normal and in some way representative of individuals at large. In truth this
oversimplification of the aggregate leads to narrowed perceptions, by both individuals and
groups of what is, and is not, right. By helping people figure out where they fit in the world
what ultimately seems to happen is an increased alienation from not only society but from the
self as well.

Although each participants experience was novel and unique they all described their
upbringing or school experience as typical, average and/or normal. Seven of the eight adult
participants and three of the four student participant’s self-identified as some form of middle-
class and half of those in the study referenced the term blue-collar to describe their childhood.
Haylee spoke of her “typical New England upbringing with public schools” (p. 1) and how she
felt that it was similar to the affluent town where she now worked which served to reinforce just
how representative of the norm it was for her. Interestingly, Tim also used the words average and
blue collar to describe his own school and childhood experiences in a small southern town.
Although he realized that his coming out experience was not typical he discussed average and
typical as ways to fit in and offset the differences he was dealing with relative to his sexuality.
“So I might disappoint my parents in this one way, but if I was perfect. I was a good student,
played sports, was good at everything else I did. So that became…. like part of it was escaping
the fear or wrath of being a gay boy” (p.4) and how just because he “was different [he] could still
be normal” (p.8). Matt talked about “having a normal amount of friends in high school” (p.3)
and getting “typical grades for an athlete” (p.5) while John talked about having “less friends than
a normal high school kid” (p.5). Raven spoke about his upper New York schooling as a “regular
old childhood” (p.5) and saw the high school he currently works at as normal and “structured in
the standard way” (p.1).
This focus on normalization continued with others in slightly different ways where they acknowledged feeling like outsiders as there were aspects of themselves that fell outside what they and their community viewed as the norm. Ellen described “not being the normal A+ student [her] teachers expected” (p.5) and June talked about the normal families at her school and how her siblings were “not the best people” (p.3) but how she was different than them and “a typical national honor society kid” (p.5). Both June and Ellen’s perspectives of what was or was not normal shaped whether they viewed their own situation in a positive or negative light. As with others they assumed that their own experiences were typical or atypical based on how they aligned with their preconceptions of what normal was and adjusted both their expectations and emotional responses accordingly. This further shaped the way that they and the other participants viewed the use of labels as well. When the labels used aligned with their accepted understanding of themselves or others, regardless of if those labels were positive or negative, people accepted and seemingly internalized these labels and condoned (or at least continued) their use to describe and define others.

While the students responses were certainly tempered by the fact that they took part in a group discussion and that both confirmation bias and observer expectancy effect undoubtedly shaped their answers, the majority of them also saw their experience as normal with B self-describing as an average student (p.1) and a “typical kid” (p.3), G1 being “OK at sports” (p.5) and a “strong student like everyone else” (p.11). Of the students only G3, who had moved and attended dramatically different schools, recognized the absence of normalcy between the schools. “Normal here is not the same as normal there because here it’s normal to be white and have money and there it’s totally not, it’s different.” (p 9). With this being said, even she seemed to be experiencing the sense of normalcy that familiarity brings. “In Middle school I felt more
different from others than I do now.” (G3, p.3) Likewise Ben, who had previously worked at a predominantly poor, minority district, saw the contrasts that others missed when it came to the school itself. “I feel like there are more labels here when it comes to race and socioeconomic than there were there, because everyone was one demographic there. Poor.” (p.5) In his opinion, the absence of diversity in socioeconomic status or parent level of education seemed to result in a sort of homogenization of the group while at the school in question differences were highlighted more than commonalities.

In conclusion, the common trend amongst the participants was that everyone was very familiar with using labels to make comparisons about others and themselves relative to others. It seemed very important to people that their experiences and lives were viewed as normal overall and that although they all focused on aspects of themselves that either resisted or defied labels and labeling; they still needed their own labels to fit into society as a whole. It seemed important that people saw themselves as unique but not atypical and part of something bigger than themselves. Their presumed shared experiences/norms somehow made them judge their opinions as more internally valid and salient in some way. This intriguing dichotomy was particularly noticeable when looking at the changing nature of normal over time and how/when labels are applied in schools and internalized by students. This next theme will be explored in the following section.

**Theme 2: Changing. The label doesn’t mean the same thing that it used to. It no longer fits.**

As is also the case with the vernacular of a given population; the meaning of labels are constantly changing in our schools and society. While there are certainly some benefits to this for both individuals and their communities it is also leads to some of the confusion that people have
with labels. This confusion will be addressed more in the next section of themes but the fact that the prevalence of labels used and the actual interpretation of these labels by those being labeled and those doing the labeling changes makes it somewhat difficult to track the impact of these labels on individuals and groups. Peoples own negative experiences with labels can shape the way they interpret their use or how they do/do not apply them to others in their personal and professional lives. The participants discussed this seemingly subtle difference between how labels can describe versus define a person’s expectations and experiences in school. The introduction of new subsets of labels further compounds this issue for the participants of the study. People also addressed the way that the labels others applied or them or to themselves both shaped and changed the way they and others saw themselves over time.

In terms of the meaning of labels changing one of the labels that the majority of the faculty involved in the study saw as evolving the most over time was the label of SPED. What was previously a point of concern, negative label or even source of embarrassment for some of the participant’s during their own childhood had morphed into a neutral or even positive label for students today. Ben spoke about his thoughts regarding being labeled as SPED when he was in school. “I was very protective of it [the SPED label]… I did not want to be in that Special education room. I was very nervous, self-conscious about what people would think of me, but now it’s just accepted more. I think it’s just part of society and where it’s gone.” (Ben, p. 4) He said that while he was never explicitly made fun of or bullied as a result of his learning disability diagnosis but that it was something he dealt with and felt every day “because of the way I saw it… I think it was more for me individually. It allowed me to get the help I needed but it also set back my confidence too.” (p.5) Other’s spoke negatively of the SPED label in the past tense as well. “I had issues with math but luckily they were never serious enough to land me in SPED or
anything.” (June, p.7) Another participant similarly reminisced that “I don’t think what level you were in [Honors or CP] impacted social standing at all. As long as you weren’t SPED you were viewed as OK.” (Haylee, p.6) Both of these participants casually insinuate just how negatively that label was viewed a few decades back in their communities.

What was interesting though was that Haylee, June and others spoke entirely differently about the way that a SPED label is viewed in schools today. June spoke about the SPED label being “helpful for the student and teachers success” (p.8) while Haylee mentioned how creative kids she had being labeled as SPED “removes some of the ridiculous hurdles other kids are forced to jump through and lets them follow their passions. It is freeing for them.” (p.7) One of the students B spoke very openly and casually about his learning disabilities and how his learning to overcome them actually made him a better person and athlete. “People are different. I know I learn a lot slower than a lot of the normal kids in my class but there’s like special help programs and everything. But just because I am in that doesn’t mean anything.” (B, p.9) Although he still frames his experience relative to some sort of preferred or paradisiacal normal state he ultimately continues on about how his struggles are actually a positive. “It takes me a bit longer, but I guess longer if I get it, even though it costs me a couple bad grades along the way, is better for life because I guess in the end if I understand it then it helps me grow more. (B, p.10)

Other student’s mirrored his thoughts on this point and how the academic struggles they faced made them better in the long run. One student discussed how "I struggled going into high school but learned how to improve” (G1, p.1) while another discussed the way people wrongfully assume that her academic challenges are the result of her indifference or not caring. She say they assume “she doesn’t really want to do this or anything so don’t give it to her, or
don’t give her those tasks because she is too slow or does it in her own way. So I would have to do something in my own way and show them that my way can work too. But truthfully I sometimes don’t bother.” (G2, p.6) In these particular cases it seems that although perhaps 20 years ago having a SPED label was detrimental in schools today the absence of a label is more damaging than the presence of one as the presence of a diagnosis shifts the blame of failure off of the individual and onto the condition itself. It in some ways frees those students from the self-doubt and deprecation that the others have to deal with alone. They know what is different about them instead of trying to discover what is wrong with them.

In addition to how labels shape personality and experiences they also change how teachers and students interact in our schools as well. A common theme across all participants was the way that class placement impacted student and teacher expectations; both during that class and for the student moving forward. G1 speaks to the issue: “They see the label first. In an AP class they’ll think automatically that this kids so smart, but in a CP class the teachers just think that automatically well, these kids are just going to be average students so it’s not me it’s them.” (p.7) G3 went on to elaborate “that it’s a fixed game and you just can’t win” (p.7) and that once you get a label it is really hard to change both your own and others thinking about who you are and what you are capable of achieving.

Raven, Matt and June all inadvertently admitted that they treat the kids in CP, Honors and AP differently and used the term good kids to describe kids in the higher level academic classes. “It is just easier for one of the good kids to be absent as they will make up their work while those absences really add up for CP kids” (Matt, p.6). June spoke about it “being hard to find good kids to be mentors because of all of the AP testing” (p.6) which of course implies that the CP kids both somehow aren’t good and/or up for this non-academic task. This in some ways
ties back to the previous theme about the normalization or averaging of certain trends or people into black and white categories based on seemingly unrelated or even incompatible traits. Ben touched on the benefits of differentiating kids but did not take it nearly as far as others did. “It helps to challenge our students. It helps to push them a little bit further. I don’t know if it helps them to become better people. It may… it definitely helps them to become better students.” (Ben, p.7) John further backed this up saying how “teachers are more understanding and forgiving of Honors students indiscretions which is sort of funny as they tend to have more of them.” (p.8) Ellen also noted how “most of the kids caught plagiarizing and cheating here are the honors and AP kids” (p.5) but that the kids who struggle with their emotions or drug abuse get labeled as “morally broken and not worth the time and effort” (p.8) that other kids get from the teacher or counselor.

Raven addressed “that there’s more labels now then there’s ever been and in some ways, they’re an advantage almost. Labels that used to be a disadvantage and negative have now, I think, shifted at least to the point where they’re not.” (p.5) Ben felt that labels follow students throughout their time in school:

Students who are either labeled by their classmates, or even labeled by their teacher or by any other school person here… They make one mistake and the label sticks with them for their entire time and often times, it’s almost like a false label. It’s not really who they really are, but because of one action or incident, they continue to be labeled.” (Ben, p. 7)

While Ben felt that this is true in other communities as well; the small size of the school exacerbated this issue. Raven noted how the kids and teachers really rely on labels in the school. “I say that the label to me has become more important than what the label meant.” (p.5) The
implication is that kids are getting funneled into honors or given A’s to appease social pressures rather than to actually differentiate ability or performance. It is the label of honors that matters more to the students than the grade itself.

In conclusion, it seems that as the number of students labeled as both Honors or Special Education has increased this has likewise shifted some of the participant’s beliefs about these labels. Having an IEP is viewed as a difference rather than a deficiency, and being an honors student seems less tied into academic ability and more into a student’s character and ambitions. Being labeled a geek is more of a point of pride in the school than the disparagement it once was and academics and athletics seems to exist in more of a symbiotic than parasitic relationship in today’s school community. This perhaps explains some of the confusion about labels that participants discussed in the next section.

**Theme 3: Confused. I am ___ and would describe myself as ___ but labels don’t define me.**

The changing nature of labeling and labels was addressed in the previous section but the issues it causes for people are two-fold. First it leads to differing views about the same label or labels and it also leads to issues with people struggling with how to define others without labels and how to accept the contradictions present in being complicit in the labeling of others while still so adamantly arguing that labels improperly describe their own experiences/personality. When a previously negative label is internalized or applied incorrectly to a person or group this causes a lot of problems for all involved. This is particularly true when people have multiple labels that are viewed as incongruent or in competition with one another. The result is the simultaneous embracing and rejection of labels that follows.
When asked to define themselves participants were fairly evenly split in how they used labels. Some people first went for very general labels that were equally specific and vague… White, mixed-race, Catholic, agnostic, single, married, gay, parent, athlete were examples used by B1, G1, G3, Tim, Matt, Haylee and Raven. Others tended to label people more about habits, actions and personality traits. Ellen, Ben, G2, June and John used labels like kind, flexible, committed, laid-back, friendly, open, and understanding to define their core selves. Though this may at first seem a matter of semantics or question confusion it was very interesting that the same question about labels was internalized and applied in such an overtly different way. While both types of labels could certainly be labels that were applied by others the second groups responses seemed far more nuanced and transferable to all aspects of their life then the largely demographic labels shared by the first group. This type of interpretation reminds us that not all individuals take a constructivist approach to understanding. For many students and faculty, both meaning and importance are internalized based on the assessments of others in positions of power and influence.

Seven of the participants of the study directly referenced that labels did not adequately define them. Examples were “I wouldn’t say I am a typical art teacher” (Haylee, p.9) and “I am a Jeek, part jock part geek” (Matt, p.2) or “I am technically an administrator but I don’t identify as such and see myself as more of a teacher leader.” (June, p.2). This egocentric view was more overtly alluded to by others as well with Raven, Ben and John discussing the ways that labels are incorrectly used about them. “People here see the disciplinarian, and the organization or stern face but that’s not who I am. People out of here know the real me. Easy going, laid back.” (Ben, p.3). Raven similarly described “leaving the punctual, precise part of myself behind on the weekends” (p.6) so he can express his true self. Johns take was a bit more nuanced as he
discussed people “not thinking me worthy of labels” (p.4) and how he has “always felt like kind of an in-between… you know. Groups again… I don’t feel like I really fit into one or maybe any.” (p.2) The kids takes were a bit more raw as they were still in school and hadn’t yet distanced themselves from high school.

G2 said that “I don’t think labels define me” (p.6) and has struggled with the ways that people label her or her friends based on how they look and or act as opposed to who they “really are inside” (p.8). She talks about him being aware of the way he dresses and speaks interfering with his being successful but projects all wrongdoing or confusion entirely onto others. Speaking about his use of certain foul language and the way he dresses, “Yeah he’s aware of it and sometimes gets a little frustrated because like for job interviews that he applies for, they kind of declined him for the hoody or hat he wore and the way he carried himself, and he’s actually really smart.” (G2, p.8). She can’t seem to separate that the way one dresses or speaks for a job interview from someone not being true to themselves. B had similar feelings as he spoke to a similar point:

I’ve wanted to be a firefighter for my whole life, and the day finally comes and, say I have a piercing that I can’t have. I think it would almost be stubborn for them to take away my whole dream because I wouldn’t take my piercing out. That piercing is not who I am… but I think changing that is not being true to yourself.” (B, p.9)

Though this may have been an extreme, the students all had relatively egocentric views of the world and how they shouldn’t have to change for others but that others should not only change for them, but somehow know the honorability of their intentions, regardless of their actions. Building on this G3 talked about how she is annoyed that “people assume I am in METCO
because I am not white” (p. 5) but later discussed how she feels more normal and comfortable in her classes “because she is with more of the METCO kids who are like her.” (p.8) It is almost impossible for students to balance and navigate the labels and assumptions they encounter in school. They seem to have an equally difficult time when they are attempting to find their place in the world of social media.

All four student participant’s and two adult participant’s explicitly discussed social media. G1 talked about “kids having a real self and an online self” (p.10) while B talked about how “outside of here, like online and stuff, where I can be the real me.” (p.11) Regardless of the obvious contradiction of which self is actually ones true self, both students touch on the dual identities that they and others have to manage in today’s schools and society. G2 and G3 both felt that there online and school identities were congruent with G2 saying “they’re both the real me” (p.10 and G3 saying “yeah, I am always real but most people are fake”(p.10). G1 saw social media as “peoples escape from the real world” (p.11) where B ultimately confounded his earlier statement and said “it’s never a good thing having social media affect something in your real life.” (p.10) This is of course troubling as he earlier stated that his online life represents the real him… Teachers also noted that kids have trouble when they “try to live up to the online personas that others create and view their real lives as deficient or less than as a result.” (June, p.8) Likewise Ellen talked about kids “backing themselves into a corner with their online personas and feeling pressured to act out in school to reinforce that tough-guy image they create to mask their sadness or insecurity.” (p.6) Several other teachers also noted being thankful that social media was not part of the landscape while they were growing up’ feeling that it would only have further complicated them finding their place in the world.
Like many of his colleagues Tim said he doesn’t “fit into a neat little box” (p.8) but defined himself as “smart” (p.2), “musically talented” (p.2) and “un-athletic” (p.3). While he saw these labels as one he had chosen for himself he talked about “a kindergarten teacher telling [his] mom he was one of the smartest kids in class” (p.5) and how he felt he had to live up to that as well as a middle school teacher “inspiring him and telling [him] about his potential with music” (p.7). Conversely, he discussed negative experiences with sports relative to both his athletic prowess and sexuality and how that still is how he sees himself today:

“And I will say that that label has stuck with me for my, like, thinking of myself as athletic in any way is something that I have a hard time doing. I exercise regularly and there are physical activities that I like to do, but I don’t think of like… but I would never think of myself as athletic. Even though I play tennis and I might actually be OK at it, you know?” (Tim, p. 4)

While he has broken free of many of the labels that he felt negatively defined him as a high school student regarding his sexuality and now proudly identifies as an openly gay man; it seems that many of the less central ways he was defined by others still permeate the way that he currently views himself.

Ellen and Ben had similar difficulties separating contradictions from there past and present views. The town that Ellen grew up in was one of the wealthiest towns in the state and as such she saw her upper middle class upbringing as being less affluent than it actually was.

“It was hard being poor in such a wealthy town. Everyone else had so much and I noticed how much less we had. I didn’t have a new car until college and remember being
embarrassed to invite people back to our condo because everyone else had these giant places.” (Ellen, p.5)

Even though the rational, adult part of Ellen realizes that her parents owning property in an expensive town and being able to afford to buy her a used car of her own shows great privilege; the feelings of inadequacy that she had as a child still remain and undergird her current thoughts and emotions. Ben likewise grapples at times with helping kids who are “struggling” (p.5). “It is hard sometimes as I’ll have a parent or kid all upset about some perceived crisis they are going through when I know how hard the kids at my last school had it… that supposed crisis is a typical day for them.” (p.11) Of course to that particular student or parent, justified or not, the struggles they face and the emotions they feel are real and impact their past and present actions and views.

Everyone involved in the study ultimately seemed conflicted about at least some aspects of the way that they and others used labels in schools. Although most had found ways to move past certain negative labels and found happiness or contentment with who they currently were they all still relied heavily on labels to establish that and attempt to make sense of it all. The conflict that this confusion brings will be addressed in the following section

Theme 4: Conflicted. Although I use labels, I don’t like them.

Throughout all of the themes explored so far participants have voiced their hesitation with using labels about both others and themselves. They have discussed that although using labels is the norm in schools the meaning of those labels has changed over time and ultimately leads to confusion for all involved. This confusion results in conflict that may negatively shape individuals views of others or themselves. There is a certain acceptance that labels are
necessarily intermingled between students, staff and schools attempts to avoid overly-broad labels. While this dissension does not seem to produce much in the way of direct changes in our schools it does result in both the gradual and punctuated changes in label meanings that have occurred over the last several decades. As people internalize the meaning of these new or evolved labels with the other more stagnant labels that they use to define themselves, the discord and disunity is evident.

For Matt, one particular label that he feels friction with is the label of millennial. He articulated his feelings on that label early on in the interview:

“Millennial. The big label. I’m definitely in that group and that’s really important to me because I want to do the right thing for our generation. I hate when people talk trash about the millennials, because not everyone in the millennial group is a hipster that hangs around and kicks a hacky sack around and is just going with the flow of life. Even though I am not a millennial, I am a millennial and that is important to me to get it right for all of us and change that association. But I may be wrong… as you can see the definitions of these labels are pretty complex.” (Matt, p.2)

He does define himself as a certain type of person and sees this alternate definition of his generation as unfair or incongruent. Matt tended to see labels as oppositional, or at least hierarchical, to each other and he did not do well with the notion that someone could be two things at once. Perhaps there was no clearer example of this then when he defined himself as a “jeek” (p.2), somewhere between a jock and a geek. He could not see himself as both of these things simultaneously but instead some combination or intermediary of the two instead. What was most interesting though was that he interpreted this discord differently than many other
participants. Matt felt that being involved in multiple activities resulted in “breadth over depth” (p.8). “So I am going to say that although you participate in a bunch of different activities and you have a bunch of different friends you suffer because you didn’t develop a few solid relationships.” (p.8) G1 agreed with Matt and felt that “everyone needs to find that one thing that defines them and pursue it” (p.6).

Haylee and others felt quite differently and that experience with multiple labels serves as an essential plan B when things inevitably changed for an individual over time. G2 and G3 both discussed how their experiences with labels in other communities would help them to be more successful later in life. “It gives me perspective some of the other kids don’t have, cause they think that’s just how it is but I know it’s just how it is here, not everywhere.” (G3, p.11) G2, the METCO student, spoke about how not fitting in at home or school was in some ways a blessing for her. “I have different types of communities. I feel like that helps me when I get older to have different labels and how they’re going to affect me. I am always me, even if others don’t know who that me is.” (G3, p.12) B felt that “having more labels and being more of a well-rounded person” (p.13) would be really important of your original goals or plans changed. Haylee expanded even further:

“I think less labels is initially easier but I would argue that it’s easier to be the kid that has all of those experiences, and I felt like I could walk into the cafeteria and I could sit at 30 different tables versus just at one table, and I felt like when you really narrow down and only allow one part of your identity to become your identity, when that part comes into conflict you are really lost and don’t know what to do. For instance I was a runner and I played soccer, and I was recruited and thought that was who I was going to be but then I got really injured. So that kind of part of my identity, had that been my only part,
would have been devastating but I was able to be, you know to deal with it a little bit better because I was an artist, I was academically striving for other things. So I had other pieces that allowed… allowed me to become, me.” (Haylee, p.10)

By diversifying and struggling with her identity she increased her capacity for change and her ability to adept who and what she saw herself as. For her, conflict between labels was actually competition and that expanded her possibilities.

Ellen felt that she initially was trapped by certain negative labels that had been applied onto her by others and then internalized. “In high school I was a huge partier and I was just not confident so I made poor decisions because I was trying to be who others thought I was; who I thought I was.” (p.6) She realizes that her contention with these negative experiences with school is what drove her to pursue a career in school counseling and now sees it all as a positive thing. “I look back now and I think it’s great that I was so miserable and conflicted because it helps me to understand kids; to be non-judgmental.” (p.7) June similarly felt her self-described somewhat negative past has given her a brighter future and helped her ability to connect with kids. “You know, you grow up in a town and you kind of inherit other people’s ways of thinking and feeling and then you leave and you experience the world. It’s made me… a lot more open minded and sympathetic.” (June, p.3) Likewise, both Tim and John talked about how they have become more empathetic to the plights of others due to their own struggles with academics and/or bullying. “I assume every kid is struggling with who they are and try to approach my interactions with them from that perspective of careful-caution.” (Tim, p.10) Similarly Ben said that:
“I think the only labels that matter are the ones that people believe. And sometimes they do line up so it’s more the implicit ones than the explicit labels. Though an explicit one can be. When we differentiate kids in the academic levels and they associate themselves with that, it can very quickly become part of who they are, who they do or do not associate with. It impacts confidence, friendships and choices whether they or we realize it or not.” (p.7)

He seemed resolute that we are not thoughtful enough about the unintended consequences that using certain arbitrary levels has for kids.

Raven perhaps best summarizes the unintended consequence of this conflict for many of our students in today’s schools. “I’ve noticed there’s not a lot of personal motivation amongst the student body and a lot of that is due to labels.” (p.4-5) He feels that as we have increased the number of labels we have put on kids we have decreased the degree of autonomy that they once had. “If they are not directed to do something, they’re really not sure what to do sometimes. They look for someone else to tell them if they are good at something and use that as a sort of permission for them to like something.” (p.6) Raven feels that in a way by increasing options or levels for students we have made them that much more reliant on external justification that they are on the right path.

In conclusion, while there has always been a certain level of conflict for young adults we have unintentionally promoted this culture of comparison by applying so many labels to students in our schools. Whether athletic, academic or artistic the labels we use are accepted or rejected by students and shape the way they view others and themselves. These labels are often false in that they too quickly undermine or emphasize certain aspects of a student’s burgeoning identity.
While there was some debate amongst participants as to the benefit of this conflict they all noted that labels contributed to who they fundamentally felt they were or are today.

**Synthesis of Themes**

The collective narrative of these four themes is that labels have many unintended impacts on both individuals and schools. At this school both teachers and students acknowledged that they felt that the way that labels are used in schools today can be confining or constrictive but that it is difficult for them to imagine a school where labels are not so profusely used. Staff felt sympathetic for the many challenges that students face today as they try to manage expectations and identities in school and online. They likewise discussed the ways that as the world has changed, many of the labels we have used have changed over the years have followed suit; both for them individually and for society as whole. They also noted though that in this rapidly changing world some labels have not changed which has contributed to the confusion that both students and staff encounter when using them. For example, as more and more students are participating in honors and AP classes, how are students and teachers managing the conflicts that are created between previous expectations and current realities?

The synthesis of this simultaneous conformity, change and confusion is the conflict with labels that all participants mentioned and that a few adamantly expressed. Labels in many ways tell people who they, or other people, are and what they are expected to be capable of. This can take people outside of their comfort zone which may lead to personal growth and self-discovery or conversely allow them to languish unchallenged in sub-mediocrity. What people do in many ways defines who they are and what labels they are associated with. What is truly frustrating about labels though is the way that they seem to shake and/or shape peoples beliefs. As we have
seen through the course of these interviews, teachers and administrators implicitly reinforce this by applying broad generalizations about the motivations, temperaments and abilities of students based on these labels. If an honors student is struggling with a lesson it must be a deficiency with the lesson or something the teacher is doing incorrectly. However, if a lower level student experiences similar struggles it is easy to excuse this as being their fault due to their own academic deficiencies or dispositions. This simultaneously buttresses and befuddles student’s beliefs and understanding of their own abilities, aptitudes and attitudes; resulting in the confusion and conflict that the participants from this school felt and expressed throughout their respective narratives.

**Reflexivity**

In terms of shifts in my positionality as a student and researcher I would say that I do not feel that there were any significant shifts in my perspective. I came into this exercise wanting to better understand the way that people experienced labels and labeling in our schools and how these encounters, occurrences and ordeals serve to shape their identity. As I suspected this was not the type of study that produces clear answers to questions that one may then apply to the world, or even the rest of the school at large. The reason that the methodology chosen was interpretive phenomenological analysis and not something else is the actuality that our society is an aggregate of anomalies where exceptions to the rule are only acknowledged and accepted relative to a paradoxical median that is generally not applicable *in toto* to any singular person or place. The prototype we all ultimately use for these labels is not actually stereotypical but instead in many ways atypical of the students and people that we meet.
Regarding shifts in the role of practitioner or change agent, however, the impact of this study has been far more distressing and impactful for me. I have come to realize that while I may strive to exist above the reach of bias and assumption that I so vehemently abhor, the truth is that I have been complicit in perpetuating and priming the machinery of comparison that fuels the discomposure and inquietude that I so despise about labels in our schools. The malaise that I initially felt when I first became cognizant of this has been replaced by a commitment to more openly explore my relationship with labels and labeling and to actively work to counter the often negative and nefarious impacts that these labels have on students and staff in our schools. It is not enough to point out the elephant in the room and blame its actions as innate, expected or contextually understandable given the circumstances. We must work to shift the paradigm entirely and look away from the elephant and examine the integrity and appropriateness of the room as well. We preach inclusivity and understanding but then continuously highlight differences between students and teachers.

The desired outcome of this study was to better understand the impact and importance of labels and labeling in secondary schools by examining their roles at this northeast secondary school. As such I would have to say that the data collected and analyzed did in fact help me better understand the nuances, peculiarities and problems that using labels causes for individuals and groups. Even after all of this investigation and coding it would be overly ambitious to say that I know fully understand the consequences of labels and labeling in our schools but I do feel confident in saying that I better understand myself, my staff and my students and as we look at the greater implications of this study in the following chapter; I feel better prepared to explore this issue further moving forward. I additionally feel better prepared to have these findings inform my future work as a teacher, administrator and college instructor.
Chapter 5 – Implications

This study used a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals at a small Northeast secondary school as they explored the role that labels and labeling play in our schools. The study was guided by the central research question: *What are the ways that labels impact student’s experiences, encounters and interactions in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and their peers?* Four students and eight staff members from the same suburban school approximately 10 miles outside of Boston participated in the study. Six of the participants identified as male and six identified as female. Of the staff members, four were full time teachers from different departments, two were department heads who also taught a reduced course load, one was an adjustment counselor and one was an assistant principal. All staff participants occupied, or had previously occupied, additional roles in the school such as coach, class advisor, etc. All students involved were seniors who were 18 years of age and had attended the school under investigation for the entirety of their secondary school experience.

An interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed as it “offers an established, systematic and phenomenologically focused approach, which is committed to understanding the first person perspective from the third person position, so far as possible, through intersubjective inquiry and analysis.” (Larkin, et al., 2011) An IPA approach is sensitive to semiotics as this meaning-making (Cahn, 2011) and positionality associated with labels is at once liminal and fixed; collective and individualistic. This process is often “described in terms of double hermeneutic or dual-interpretation” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; p.363) and allows the researcher to look at both individuals and groups intentionality as well as their actual descriptions. Finally, it also incorporates idiographic practices so that in addition to the
constructed themes individuals can be viewed separately; focusing on the particular rather than the transferrable or universal.

The selection of twelve participants was a larger number than many other IPA studies but still small enough to remain faithful to the tenet of focusing on breadth over depth. (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011) The data was collected in separate but similar styles. All staff data was obtained through semi-structured, in depth, face-to-face two-part interviews. The student participants were asked the same general questions but during one single 60-minute group session. Like the research questions for the study itself; the semi-structured interview questions were inspired and shaped by both my previous personal and professional experience and a thorough review of relevant literature on the topic. Data analysis was performed in several stages and involved looking at each set of interviews individually and via a comprehensive cross-case analysis. The result of this ethnographic compilation and synthesis was the four themes discussed in chapter four. Those themes were convention, change, confusion and conflict.

The findings of this study bolster and supplement previous research investigating the impact of specific labels on individuals and staff in our schools and society. The actuality that this study looks not only at the impact of multiple labels concurrently but also at the general impact of labels in today’s schools is what makes it both distinct and important. As the overwhelming majority of previous research is much more specific in its focus and general in its application and investigation; the specificity and examination of the participant’s Erlebnis or “lived experiences” (Ponteretto, 2005) in this study adds a much needed layer of depth to what has previously somehow paradoxically been an overly-broad and overly-specific pursuit. Furthermore, while there is certainly existing research on certain labels there is very little research on the process of labeling or the interactions between multiple labels as students interact with staff and peers at
school during their formative years; particularly in terms of the type of direct personal narratives obtained through IPA.

**Discussion of Findings Relative to Theoretical Framework**

The power that labels do or do not have in our schools is the result of both individual interactions and complex group dynamics. The theoretical framework that underpins this study was critical bifocality. (Weiss & Fine, 2012) This framework champions the view that by looking at problems individually quantitative and qualitative researchers perpetuate the illusion that problems exist in vacuums and can be repeatedly reduced or simplified to identify some sort of root cause. This study did not fall victim to this tendency and instead embraced the noise that inevitably came from the messy and nettling self-exploration that participant’s underwent. As parallels or commonalities about labeling between disparate labels were investigated this at first resulted in what appeared to be no differentiable or meaningful output from the *data corpus*. However, by carefully following peoples lines of thinking backwards, forwards and sideways; to and through their messy intersections some clear and distinct findings began to emerge from the themes for both individuals and groups.

The first finding was that people can become very comfortable with being uncomfortable in school. “That’s just the way it is in schools” (Raven, p.10) and “there is something very tribal and instinctual about comparing oneself to and then labeling others based on similarities or lack thereof.” (Tim, p.4) Conformity is king. While people are prone to describe static situations as boring or repetitive the actuality for most of us is that we actually appreciate the routine and seemingly mundane. Even though the people in the study openly and actively voiced their uncomfortableness with labels and labeling they also talked about how they appreciated knowing
and understanding their world and where others felt they belonged in it. Knowing their place… having a place mattered; even if the outcome was that they didn’t like their place. “I knew I didn’t fit in with those other kids and that is what let me find out who I wanted to be, you know? If that is not me then I need to find out where I do belong.” (Ellen, p.6) Allowing others to dictate who Ellen was not allowed to be ultimately led to comfort and her finding a place where she did fit and received approval from the group which of course led to her satisfaction with herself.

While the finality, decisiveness and acceptance associated with Ellen’s previous statement on how she came to find her place in the world were equal parts tolerable and troubling it does in many ways validate my reliance on implicit bias as one of the lenses through which I sought to view this problem of people internalizing and consciously/unconsciously accepting or rejecting others views about who they are or could be. As discussed categories and labels, when placed onto people, result in individuals who are “more than the sum of their parts” (Brunn, 2009; p.21). This overall individual and societal acceptance of labels and labeling in the aggregate masks the fact that the majorities of individuals do reject or struggle with certain labels about themselves and others. This becomes even more evident when those labels and peoples applications and embodiment of certain labels change over time.

Another finding that emerged from the themes was that people are very confused about labels. How should they use labels? When should they use them? Where should they use them? Labels can describe people but they can also define people. While this may seem like a trivial matter of semantics; the truth is that description is simply an external application of someone based on their characteristics or perceived group while the latter is internalized and drives who and what they become. Critical bifocality embraces this juxtaposition between our internal and
external (solitary and social) selves and allows the researcher to not be distracted or dissuaded by the “undertow of hegemonic representations” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; p.49) that prevent the examination of the type of complex contradictions that are inherent with multiple labels during adolescence and the development of identity. “I am still trying to figure out who I am… if I am now who I am supposed to be or just who I ended up becoming if that makes any sense.” (John, p.9) He said this relative to his reconsideration of labels that had been used to describe him back when he was in school. Similarly Matt reflected on this perpetual introspection that we all undergo. “If you told the general-class, B-, JV teenage me that I would someday be a head coach, teaching Honors and getting a master’s degree I don’t think I could even conceptualize it. You don’t get there from here.” (Matt, p.11) Both realities exist and accurately describe Matt at different times in his life but the intersection between the two sides of himself are still in many ways inconceivable for him or others who often find themselves seeing themselves and framing their actions based on who they once were instead of who they currently are.

This was particularly pronounced with the students who talked about feeling fraudulent or uncomfortable with their transition to adulthood. “I am the same as I was in middle school but I am so different… unrecognizable to myself sometimes. Some of the friends I had then have changed so much that we don’t hang out anymore.” (G2, p.14) In some ways G2 is viewing this situation egocentrically and seeing others as changing while she maintains her true self but then she is simultaneously talking about how different she is and is in some ways showing a lack of confidence in herself and her ability to change. B and G3’s earlier discussion of their true selves mirrored these feelings and the issues that they had with the intersection of different labels. B reflected on how “I’m the baby of the family” (p.7) and also on how “I am the man of the house since that happened and have to take care of my family.” (p.11) Both realities may be true and
shift from situation to situation and from moment to moment. The confidence he feels during athletic competition disappears when he is in the academic arena and struggling with his learning disability. We all have multiple-selves that confront or confirm the identities that we or others have assumed.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding from this investigation was that the confluence and transmutation of multiple labels throughout an adolescents school years results in considerable conflict and confusion for both that individual and those they interact with. It is hard to stay true to oneself when that self is constantly changing. The way that our society is constructed both results in and perpetuates the current system of privilege and oppression that we encounter each day. This shapes interactions and identity and in turn leads to the disaffirmation of what was once true. Critical bifocality and intersectionality consider both simultaneity and multiplicity and the impact they have on this internal confusion and conflict. If it is not possible to separate out class, race, gender or any other number of labels from a situation (even if that situation seemingly does not directly involve all or many of those labels) how can we truly understand our own or others place in the world; particularly since all of these different labels or relationships that we have are cumulative rather than additive in the way they interact. June perhaps put it best when she reflected back on her childhood:

“When I was younger I was always trying to be what I thought others wanted me to be. What I thought I wanted to be. I guess I got dragged into it all. The labels of honors and varsity or cool and popular really mattered to me and defined what I did and who I hung out with or even was allowed to date… I didn’t realize how bullshit it all was until I was almost 30. Embarrassed to say that but it’s true…. and maybe BS isn’t the best word to use as that part of my life was real and is still really important to me. Huh, It’s just that
what mattered to me then or what I thought was important then isn’t now…. So I don’t
know if I changed or the labels changed me or what but I guess I have more work to do
then I thought I did… I just try to be kind and open-minded about others and am realizing
that maybe I am being too judgmental about my younger self…” (June, p.8-9)

Questioning who we are is important. It is also a challenging and potentially difficult endeavor
to undertake. What labels, events or past accomplishments and indiscretions from our past shape
our present? When and where are they justified and where are they inhibiting our growth or
narrowing our understanding. It seems clear that the labels we use in our schools warrant similar
consideration when they are used.

**Discussion of Findings Relative to Literature**

When considering the findings from the study relative to the pre-existing literature on
labels and labeling a variety of confirmations and contradictions were uncovered. As noted
previously much of the previous work on the subject was very narrow in its focus or rigid in its
approach; unlike this study that chose to introspectively and retrospectively look at the individual
experiences of teachers and students at one particular Northeast high school. Each of the four
themes that were uncovered are considered relative to the preceding literature in the sections that
follow.

**Convention: Labeling is normal and helps me know how I fit into the world.** As
discussed previously during chapter two, labels have historically been used to bring some order
and accountability to the very complex and dynamic system that is our society and schools. The
trouble of course is that individuals are themselves in many ways irreducibly complex as well.
“One of the most central processes in human cognition is categorization, that is, the grouping of
discriminable properties, objects or events into classes.” (Johanson & Papafragou, 2016, p.131) Labels may be used to identify positive or negative deviation from the norm (Found & Duarte, 2011) or from a seemingly desirable condition. (Granello & Gibbs, 2016). The participants in this study certainly relied on labels applied to them by peers or those in authority to gauge their successes and failures. “I was never bullied or told that I was different but I knew I was… that there was something not as good about me. Nobody had to actually tell me it because I knew” (Ben, p.6) The IEP label that he ultimately received confirmed the misgivings and perceptions that he had struggled with during school. Both Ellen and Raven talked about the potentials that labels have to unite or divide young people. “When you are in a group, even if it’s one not of your choosing there is a feeling of belonging or oneness that is healthy. Even for the burnouts or troublemakers… maybe they don’t feel like they belong at school, but they belong with the other burnouts.”(Raven, p.13) Although a bit harsh I think that what Raven was saying is that by not belonging, those students ultimately find a place to belong.

Ellen went on to say “When those kids are labeled as troubled or bad kids it brings as much unity as discord, like, it solidifies some parts of their personality that were previously still undefined. It can get them stuck, but it is also freeing in some ways.” (p.12) It stunts their growth and prevents their evolution as people and/or members of the larger school community but it also gives the placeless a place in the hierarchy. This of course ties into previous findings from the literature where Scroggins (2016) looked at group dynamics and labels and the ways that intergroup bias make “a shared group membership salient, thus conferring the benefits of in-group membership on former out-group members.” (p.220)

The participants of this study frequently discussed the ways that labels from those in positions of authority strongly shaped their perspectives and pathways. When children and young
adults are developing identity, personality and worldview the impact of authority is tremendous. Jaswal (2010) had examined the way that young adults will quickly abandon what they believe when faced with conflicting testimony from a trusted source who speaks authoritatively. The impact of authority was even more pronounced in younger children. (Lapan & Bosevoski, 2016). Haylee said “When my teacher told me that I shouldn’t take that honors class I initially believed her and that started to shift my whole future. I later fought back and that in and of itself shifted things for me too.” (p.9) Haylee, like many other participants, had allowed the categorization of an authority figure to shift her priorities and belief system; albeit temporarily in her case. Others who had not rejected their labels did not deviate from their path.

Changing: That label doesn’t mean the same thing that it used to. This particular theme was not very well investigated in the previous literature. While there has been some investigation of how power has been taken back by certain groups reclaiming particular labels that had been oppressively used against them (Biklen, 2016; Galinskey & Moskowitz, 2000) I was unable to uncover much research about the way that the use of labels or the meaning of particular labels had evolved in schools over time. As Kaufman (2012) noted, labels are “pesky” and “persistent” and ‘abandoning a label doesn’t make it disappear” (p.127) no matter how much we wish it would. The same seemed to be true of the ways that people viewed the same labels very differently. There were certainly school and societal shifts in the meaning of certain labels but they were ultimately all framed by an individual’s experiences and opinions. This was particularly true with the labels associated with learning disabilities where Raven, Matt, John, G2, June and others specifically mentioned how they didn’t see having an IEP as being detrimental for students socially or academically in schools today while then later talking about IEP”S in less than flattering terms. “I struggled a bit freshman year but not like learning
disabilities or anything just figuring it out.” (p.5) or “I was always bad at math, not like IEP bad at math but it was a challenge.” (p.7) Whether consciously or subconsciously, they all harbor resistance or resentment towards the value of this common in school label which in turn shapes their interactions with others.

The change with labels that people struggle the most with seemed to be internal. While they could comprehend the change or re-characterization of a label in the academic sense; it was an entirely different animal for them to then have them change the way they interact with labels. “I know what it is supposed to mean to be an honors student but my expectations have loosened because I know a lot of them aren’t really honors students. Even if they view themselves as such, they’re not… they’re just not” (John, p.14). What an honors student is or is not for John is framed by previous definitions or experiences with students. It may simply seem like semantics but it shows a rigid adherence to his previous definition which then frames his current understanding of the label. Mayes and Moore (2016) did touch upon this and how there is a tendency to confirm ones biases as they pertain to labels on both others and oneself. Labels imply identity (Cordiner et al., 2016) and it is difficult for students and staff to come to grips with contradictions between how they have prioritized labels and how others now use those labels differently. I suppose it just serves to reaffirm the old adage that it is easier to change reality than perception.

Confused: I am ___ and would describe myself as ___ but labels don’t define me. Labels are in part how we determine our self-worth (Hoge, 2016; Lyons & Roulstone, 2016) and shape both our own and others perceptions of identity. Even more than that, labels actually imply identity and fundamentally change the way that we interact with those around us. (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2016; Cordiner, Thomas & Greene, 2016). As such it is not surprising that people use
labels to describe both their own and others experiences. Children and young adults emulate the labels used by their teachers or caregivers (DiYanni & Kelemen, 2008; Jaswal, 2010) and information that is seen as self-relevant is prioritized (Stein, Siebold & van Zoest, 2016). The result of this is an at times egocentric view of how the world works. As Galvin said, “How we see ourselves and how we feel we are judged by others is a powerful point of influence and confluence.” (Cunha, 2016; p.214) What is of course interesting though is that information that challenges a student’s sense of self is often marginalized, if not ignored entirely.

In this study people had a very hard time separating their understanding and use of labels on others from their seeming lack of applicability to themselves. “Labels don’t define me” (G3, p.11) was a common feeling that was parroted in some form or another by the majority of participants. Ellen had not difficulty listing a number of labels that she felt applied to students but then “felt it was hard to summarize me as I don’t easily fit into a box.” (p.7) Not surprisingly many saw themselves as “unique cases”. That is the general problem with labels. We are trying to simplify that which is at its base extremely complicated and individual as even though we have lots of people who share experiences it is their interpretation or internalization of those experiences that truly matters. This aligned with the previous research which found that participants in multiple studies regularly applied stereotypes to others but were critical of such generalizations being made about them. (Galinskey & Moskowitz, 2000; Hamilton, Sherman & Ruvolo, 2016).

**Conflicted: Although I use labels I often don’t like them.** The questions associated with using particular labels are not new and some researchers such as Ho (2004) or Rothbart (2013) have been asking if we should in fact be labeling people at all. Labels have been used to elevate or diminish both individuals and groups (Bachke, 2013; Goldsmith, 2016) and to
highlight who deviates from some institutionally created norm (Cunha, 2016; Gillman et al., 2016). With this being said, the point of this study was to examine their importance, not to paint them as overtly negative as there are certainly times when they have a positive outcome for individuals as well. (Gottfried, Estrada & Sublet, 2015) This certainly seemed to be the case as this particular Northeast school where labels seemed to be described in decidedly positive or negative tones. “I’m an honors student now and can’t believe it sometimes. I guess I always knew I was even if others didn’t.” (G1, p.5) The application of this label has great meaning for her and radically changed the way that she felt about herself relative to others. Others shared even more powerful negative experiences. “I thought I wanted to be a doctor in middle school but then when I wasn’t placed in honors science and I was for math I went in that direction instead. It’s funny I hadn’t thought about that relationship and the direction I chose.” (John, p.9) One can’t but help but wonder if that placement had switched would his life path also have gone in a different direction as well?

The levels we place kids in, while obviously not entirely arbitrary, has a great impact on the way students are viewed by teachers, peers, and themselves. Examples of this from the literature include Burt & Stapleton’s (2010) research into the impact of performance testing labels on teachers, schools and individuals; with researchers ultimately finding a statistically significant difference in the favorability ratings of some commonly used testing words such as limited knowledge vs. basic and satisfactory versus proficient (p. 33). Throughout the study students and teachers directly and indirectly discussed the different expectations for students in different levels. “The way teachers talk to me in my honors classes is so different from in CP. In honors they talk to you but in CP they talk down to you.” (G3, p.8) B also had similar views. “When I hear teachers talk about the good kids at school they are talking about the good
students.” (p.7) Teachers talked about their CP classes in less than flattering terms. Examples included “having to keep an eye on those kids” (June, p.4), “adjusting expectations and attitudes between class periods so I can keep them in line” (Raven, p.12) or “It’s nice this year to have three sections of honors kids as the motivation of those CP can be infectious and draining.” (Matt, p.11). The ability that students bring to the high school classroom are not necessarily a product of motivation or interest although it seems that people tend to associate the two. This shows that labels are more than simple semantics and that the words we use truly do matter; particularly when they are negative, oppressive or undeservingly flattering.

Limitations

As mentioned previously interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a relatively new approach which involves a relatively small sample size from a very specific location. While it is always tempting to take findings from a study like this and generalize them to other situations it would not be wise to do so for a number of different reasons. Although the rigorous and intimate nature of the interview process resulted in a study thick with detail, discussion and depth of understanding the findings were all not only a result of the participant’s biases and beliefs but the researchers as well. Although my intention was to convey the thoughts, feelings, emotions and motivations of the participant’s I of course played a central role in the process as I served as not only the interpreter but the arbiter of their words and objectives as they tried to make sense of their experiences. This was even more pronounced in my analysis of all the transcripts to create the overarching themes that were discussed.

Additionally, the participants involved in this study were all volunteers and are most likely not entirely representative of others who share some of the same labels. All students
involved were seniors who were in good academic standing which of course excludes a certain percentage of the population. The staff who participated were undoubtedly the more involved, open and introspective members of the faculty who have masters degrees and the prerequisite tenure at the school. Likewise, these interviews and focus group discussions represented a singular stage of the interviewee’s self-reported perceptions based on my specific prompts. Their emotional or developmental state may have inaccurately presented or portrayed not only their own opinions but those of their presumed demographic cohort as well. It serves as one representation of labels and labeling at the school and the impacts that they have on individuals in secondary schools. As such, while this study was informative and useful for the examination of this population it is not transferable to other populations or groups.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

This study explored the lived experiences of students and staff in relation to labels and labeling in a small Northeast secondary school. The research was concerned with how these labels shape identity, experience and expectations for all involved. The previous research made it abundantly clear that labels culturally transmitted and applied onto individuals by others ultimately serve as the framework for their judgement and identity development. While there have previously been some similar studies performed they were not in schools and focused instead on adults in the business world (Burke, 2013; Corley & Gioia, 2014) or on the impact of one specific label in society or schools (Biklen, 2016; Cordiner et al., 2016). This studies focus on students and staffs makes it novel and important; particularly in light of the recent proliferation of labels in our nation’s schools and the many social justice movements that are being pursued in the public arena.
The hope is that this research may act as a catalyst for scholar-practitioners to further review the important role they play relative to labels and labeling in our schools. Recent work with implicit bias, black lives matter, DACA and #MeToo are very specific examples of how groups are directly confronting oppression, imbalance or abuse and either directly or indirectly using labels and labeling to move their cause forward. To date schools and researchers have not sufficiently investigated the unintended consequences and outcomes of using labels. My thought is that by being more deliberate and delicate with label use it can serve to increase equity, decrease anxiety and build the kind of shared communities we desire in our secondary schools moving forward. Given the themes uncovered in this study, the following recommendations are made as a result of this study.

**Recommendation 1.** The first recommendation is for a comprehensive examination of how and when labels are applied by those in authority at the school. This would take place over the course of several months via scheduled professional development time. Exactly what labels are used by teachers and administrators? When are those labels applied? Are those labels applied directly or indirectly? How do teachers and administrators definitions of these labels align with student and parent/guardians definitions of these labels. Are there power imbalances or inequities that arise amongst staff or student as a result of certain labels? The idea would be to get people talking and thinking about the way that labels can unintentionally shape the way that their classrooms and school functions. While the hope would be to come up with several products as the result of this investigation I think that it is important to note that simply going through the process of reflection is also of real significance for the school community.

The hope would be that students would also get involved in this discussion so that they could both be heard and be agents of change within their school community. All stakeholders
should have an equal voice in the process. The results of this initial undertaking would in turn inform further initiatives, actions and professional development at the school. Transparency of all results would be of paramount importance but it would also be equally critical that people’s opinions and insights be kept confidential and could not be used against them in any sort of negative way.

**Recommendation 2.** The high school should investigate the appropriateness of placing students in honors classes during their first year of high school. As students are by in large grouped heterogeneously in middle school, high school is the first time that they are definitively sorted out by ability. While placement tests are given during eighth grade and student grades are taken into consideration when assigning students to certain levels it is important to note that middle school years are a time of great development and change. An improper or premature placement into a certain level can have an imbalanced impact on that student’s self-confidence, motivation and path moving forward. High school is not only more academically challenging for students than middle school but it presents a number of new social challenges as well. The introduction of sports, intramural activities, work and relationships adds extra pressures to the student’s sizable transition from childhood to adolescence.

As previously noted in the literature and in the findings of this study, teachers and students expectations for themselves and others changes in response to placement. More is expected of honors students than those in lower tracks. Is this separation necessary or should all students be given a chance to shift into a more challenging environment and prove themselves by their own merits. As friendships, motivations and maturity levels change the kids would be able to determine their own futures instead of the unfledged cultivation that has been the norm in our
secondary schools. Maintaining heterogeneous groupings for freshman year would address a lot of these issues related to bias and inequity of access.

**Recommendation 3.** The final recommendation is to conduct a thorough and comprehensive investigation of the school's METCO program. As previously discussed, the METCO program busses students of color from inner-city Boston out to the predominantly affluent, predominantly white suburb where this school is located. How do these students view themselves relative to the school community at large? How are these students succeeding or failing relative to their classmates across all demographic levels? How does the label of METCO impact the way that teachers grade their assignments in elementary and middle school? Are their expectations identical to their classmates or is there an adjustment that ends up in a progressive and cumulative disadvantage over time? How are students succeeding or failing as they move on from the school and pursue a post-secondary education? This is an area that needs to be better understood so that those students can be better served throughout their entire school experience and maximize their academic achievement moving forward.

**Personal Reflection**

My inclination to resist labels and labeling is the product of a lifetime of positive, negative and indifferent interactions with people around the implicit and explicit use of labels. I came into this undertaking with a very low opinion of how regularly if not recklessly, labels are used in our schools and society. It is my opinion that such simplification is the basis of many if not all of our larger societal ills. Racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc. all the product of how, why and when we choose to label each other. I did not write this dissertation to shift the public narrative on the use of labels or labeling in schools. My hope was to better understand how others viewed what I
saw as a very large and real problem in our schools. Throughout all of my interviews and discussions with people I do think that I now better understand labels and labeling and just how different each individual's experience with labeling and school can be. By trying to look at others words from their perspective and then contrasting that with both my own and others understanding of the same label or type of interaction was quite eye opening and should be very useful for me in my interactions with both students and staff as I move forward both personally and professionally.

I would also like to add that I am quite humbled by this experience. This process has been an incredibly emotional and trying one for me. I have undergone three surgeries and had pneumonia twice since finishing my coursework and starting my dissertation. I am emotionally and physically exhausted but also ultimately proud of what I have accomplished. I have always been strong in math and science but have viewed writing as my weakness. Perhaps in part due to some labeling and feedback that I received early in high school I chose to pursue a career in science and avoided long writing assignments. After completing such a writing intensive program as Northeastern and such a lengthy exercise as this dissertation I have had to reassess my views on a great many things and now feel much more comfortable expressing myself through the written word. Regardless of the transferability of this study to others I know that I am fundamentally changed moving forward and I am thankful for the process as much as the product.
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Interview Protocol Form

Institution: __Northeastern University_________________________________

Interviewee __(Student/Staff/Administrator and Pseudonym): _______________

Interviewer: __Zachary Michael Billings_________________________________

RESEARCH QUESTION: **What are the ways that labels impact student’s experiences and encounters in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers and how do they impact academic success and/or their sense of self-worth.**

The interview to be conducted will take place on two days and consist of **three total parts.** The first three parts will take place during the first meeting (45-60 minutes) and the final part will take place during the second session (15-30 minutes). First, the interviewee will be asked to construct a list of labels that were particularly salient or memorable to them from high school. Next, there will be an interview conducted which will end with the interviewee constructing a visual representation of their identity using labels and visuals. This will all conclude with a follow-up interview the next day to discuss the previous day’s interview as well as to clarify the how and why of the individual’s visual piece.

The following interview protocol is designed to be semi-structured in nature. The questions below are all meant to be included but it is also the expectation of the interviewer that additional follow-up questions will be asked as a result of both particular answers that the interviewee gives and as a result of needed clarification or explanation to these questions. In addition, questions will be asked as a result of the pre-interview list of labels that the interviewee constructs and in relation to the visualization piece that they construct at the end of the first day’s interview.

**Part I: (45-60 minutes total)**

Introductory Session Objectives:

Introductory Protocol

*You have been selected to speak with us today because, as a graduate of (and employee in) an American public school you have a wealth of experience with the labels that are currently, or have formerly, been used in our society and schools. My research project focuses on the experience of labeling and being labeled in our nation’s schools and how the interactions between labels shape the development of someone’s identity. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the prevalence and impact of labels in our nation’s schools and how they may be shaping students perspectives, priorities and preferences in unexpected or unintended ways. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can better understand this process and gauge whether further study or intervention into the phenomenon is warranted.*
Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. (*Explain pseudonym as necessary.*)

I will be the only one accessing the digital recording which will eventually be deleted/shredded after I transcribe and analyze them.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me ([provide the form* when the form has not been previously filled out by parent/student]). Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview could last 60-90 minutes between today and tomorrow’s sessions (about 45-60 minutes today and 15-30 minutes tomorrow). During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

**Part II: Interviewee Background and List of Labels**

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

Initial Notes/Thoughts (Manually recorded by the participant).

*Could you please take a moment to take stock of some of your thoughts on labels and labeling in schools and society and record them on the paper I have provided you with? What were some of the labels (positive, negative or neutral) that you remember being important during high school (either as a student or now as a teacher). Any memories of labels being specifically applied to you in high school or that you applied to someone else. Any additional labels that you feel important to include from your post-secondary experience may be included as well.*

Can you tell me a little bit about your background? What is your current age? Occupation, educational history and experience level?

Where did you grow up? In the aggregate, how would you describe your primary and secondary school experience?
What led you to pursue a career in education and how are you currently feeling about this decision so far?

Part 2:

I am really interested in learning more about labels and their explicit and implicit impact on student’s successes and failures in schools. How labels applied during student’s formative years can have real and lasting impacts on both student’s present and future outlooks and experiences. To do this I am going to ask you some questions about your own views and experiences regarding labels. If you talk about someone else please use a pseudonym or tell me that one will be necessary for the transcript...

What labels would you use to currently describe yourself? (follow up and clarification as necessary).

Have these labels changed at all from the labels that you or others might have used when you were in middle school or high school? How so? What has stayed consistent and what has changed the most?

Are there any notable differences between the labels that have been applied to you by others and those that you would apply to yourself? Where do they match up and where do they differ? Any specific cases where these labels were particularly incongruent or out of alignment? In other words are there any labels that you feel have been misapplied to you? How so?

Can you describe any times that some of the labels you mentioned about yourself felt in conflict with each other? How so?

Looking at this list you created why did you include/exclude x, y, z? (Dependent on list).

Thanks for doing this. I am going to look over my notes here and 15-30 minutes more of your time tomorrow. In the interim I am going to look it over and come up with a few clarifying questions about the how and why of what you made. I would then ask that you might think of anything that you feel like you intentionally or unintentionally left out and/or would have changed and why?

Part 2: Day 2 Follow-up and Visual Clarification (15-30 minutes)

So, I am just meeting again for part two of the interview session, and I thought that we could start the interview out with just a couple of follow up questions to build on from yesterday. Does this sound all right with you?
Before we get started with my questions related to some of the things you brought up yesterday, is there anything you want to bring up? Anything you were thinking about after leaving here yesterday? (Probable on the fly follow-up questions here based on response).

Do you think that labels can be all encompassing for people? Do they point them towards one particular conclusion form the beginning? (More follow up questions).

Is there anything else you wanted to add? Do you have any recommendations for me moving forward? Any questions you wish I asked? Any questions you wish I hadn’t asked?

Thank you so much for your participation. I will follow up with the completed transcripts as soon as possible so that you may check for accuracy. Thanks again.
Group Discussion on Labels

Institution: __Northeastern University__________________________________

Participant(s) ____(18 year old 12th grade students): _______________

Interviewer: __Zachary Michael Billings_______________________________

RESEARCH QUESTION: What are the ways that labels impact student’s experiences and encounters in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers and how do they impact academic success and/or their sense of self-worth.

Part I: Overview

You have been selected to speak with us today because, as a current student in an American public school you have a wealth of experience with the labels that are currently, or have formerly, been used in our society and schools. My research project focuses on the experience of labeling and being labeled in our nation’s schools and how the interactions between labels shape the development of someone’s identity. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the prevalence and impact of labels in our nation’s schools and how they may be shaping students perspectives, priorities and preferences in unexpected or unintended ways. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can better understand this process and gage whether further study or intervention into the phenomenon is warranted.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. (Explain pseudonym as necessary.) You have each been given a name tag with a letter. This letter will be used as your pseudonym in the study.

I will be the only one accessing the digital recording which will eventually be deleted/shredded after I transcribe and analyze them.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* when the form has not been previously filled out by parent/student]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?
This discussion could last 30-50 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background and List of Labels

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

Initial Notes/Thoughts (Manually recorded by the participant).

Could you please take a moment to take stock of some of your thoughts on labels and labeling in schools and society and record them on the paper I have provided you with? What were some of the labels (positive, negative or neutral) that you think have been important during high school (either as a student or during extra-curricular activities)? Any memories of labels being specifically applied to you in high school or that you applied to someone else. Any additional labels that you feel important to include from your post-secondary experience may be included as well.

Can you tell me a little bit about your background? What is your current age? What clubs, activities are you involved with here?

As you look back, how would you describe your primary and secondary school experience?

Part 2:

I am really interested in learning more about labels and their explicit and implicit impact on student’s successes and failures in schools. How labels applied during student’s formative years can have real and lasting impacts on both student’s present and future outlooks and experiences. To do this I am going to ask you some questions about your own views and experiences regarding labels. If you talk about someone else please use a pseudonym or tell me that one will be necessary for the transcript...

What labels would you use to currently describe yourself? (follow up and clarification as necessary).

Have these labels changed at all from the labels that you or others might have used when you were in middle school or earlier in high school? How so? What has stayed consistent and what has changed the most?

Are there any notable differences between the labels that have been applied to you by others and those that you would apply to yourself? Where do they match up and where do they differ? Any specific cases where these labels were particularly incongruent or out of
alignment? In other words are there any labels that you feel have been misapplied to you? How so?

Can you describe any times that some of the labels you mentioned about yourself felt in conflict with each other? How so?

Looking at this list you created why did you include/exclude x, y, z? (Dependent on list).

Thanks for doing this. I am going to look over my notes here and see if there is anything I missed. I would just ask that you might look over the list of labels you originally created and use this red pen to note anything that you feel like you intentionally or unintentionally left out and/or would have changed and why? Thanks again!
Hello,

My name is Zachary Billings and I am a teacher at XXXXX High School who is currently working on research for my doctoral dissertation with Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons at Northeastern University. We are conducting research to better understand the importance and impact of labels in our secondary schools and society for students and teachers. We are specifically interested in how labels shape the way teachers view students as well as how these students then view themselves and others as a result of their interactions and experiences with these labels.

I am emailing to ask if you would grant your student permission to participate in a 30-50 minute group discussion (of 3-10 students) on labels. Another teacher will be present during the discussion. Participation is completely voluntary and all student answers will be anonymous. If you are interested, please see the attached consent form for additional information. If you do decide to grant your student permission to participate then please print and sign the attached form.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at billings.z@husky.neu.edu or at 781-334-5820.

or

My name is Zachary Billings and I am a teacher at XXXXX High School who is currently working on research for my doctoral dissertation with Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons at Northeastern University. We are conducting research to better understand the importance and impact of labels in our secondary schools and society for students, teachers and administrators. We are specifically interested in how labels shape the way teachers/administrators view students as well as how these students then view themselves and others as a result of their interactions and experiences with these labels.

I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to participate in the study. Your time commitment would involve up to two interviews totaling between 60-90 minutes in length. The interview will take place at a time and location of your choosing. Participation is completely voluntary and all information and answers will be anonymous. If you are interested, please see the attached consent form for additional information. If you do decide to participate then please let me know and print and sign the attached form.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at billings.z@husky.neu.edu or at 781-334-5820.

Thank you for your time.

Zachary M. Billings

Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University
Completed IRB

For NU IRB use:

Date Received: 12/9/17 reviewed 12/20/17  
NU IRB No.  CPS17-12-02

Review Category:  
Approval Date:  

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Before completing this application, please read the Application Instructions and Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protections to understand the responsibilities for which you are accountable as an investigator in conducting research with human participants. The document, Application Instructions, provides additional assistance in preparing this submission. Incomplete applications will be returned to the investigator. You may complete this application online and save it as a Word document.

If this research is related to a grant, contract proposal or dissertation, a copy of the full grant/contract proposal/dissertation must accompany this application.

Please carefully edit and proof read before submitting the application. Applications that are not filled out completely and/or have any missing or incorrect information will be returned to the Principal Investigator.
**REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**

Under the direction of the [Office of the Vice Provost for Research](http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php), Northeastern University is now requiring completion of the NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research, regardless of whether or not investigators have received funding to support their project.

The online course titled “Protecting Human Research Participants” can be accessed at the following url: http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php. *This requirement will be effective as of November 15, 2008 for all new protocols.*

Principal Investigators, student researchers and key personnel (participants who contribute substantively to the scientific development or execution of a project) must include a copy of their certificate of completion for this web-based tutorial with the protocol submission.

□ Certificate(s) Attached  
□ Certificate(s) submitted previously – on file with the NU’s Office of Human Subject Research Protection

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### A. Investigator Information

Principal Investigator *(PI cannot be a student)*  
Kristal Moore Clemons

Investigator is: NU Faculty ___ X ___  NU Staff _________  Other ___________

College: ___ NEU - CPS _______

Department/Program  
Curriculum, Teaching Learning & Leadership

Address  
20 Belvidere  360 Huntington Ave, Boston MA 02115 ____________

Office Phone _______ 773-396-6499 _______  Email  k.clemons@northeastern.edu

Is this student research? YES ___ X ___  NO ______ If yes, please provide the following information:

Student Name ________  Zachary M. Billings ______ Anticipated graduation date  May 2018

Undergrad ___  MA/MS ___  PhD ___  AuD ___ X ___  EdD ___  DLP ___  Other Degree Type ___
B. Protocol Information

Title_ The Importance and Impact of Labels on Individuals in our Secondary Schools

Projected # subjects _6-10_

Approx. begin date of project 01/25/18  Approx. end date 01/16/19

It is the policy of Northeastern University that no activity involving human subjects be undertaken until those activities have been reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

- Anticipated funding agency/source for project (or none) _N/A no funding_

- Has/will this proposal been/be submitted through:
  - NU's Office of Research Administration and Finance (RAF) ______
  - Provost ______
  - Corp & Foundations ______
  - Other ______

- Grant Title: _N/A________________________________________

- Grant ID: _N/A________________________________________
C. Will Participants Be:  

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<td>People Living outside the USA?</td>
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<td>Audiotapes/videotapes?</td>
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Please answer each of the following questions using non-technical language. Missing or incomplete answers will delay your review while we request the information.

D. What are the goals of this research? Please state your research question(s) and related hypotheses.

The goals of this research are to better understand just how pervasive labels are in secondary schools and what the impacts of these labels are on specific students and staff in these schools. As such the overarching research question is: What are the ways that labels impact student’s experiences and encounters in a traditional high school setting with both their teachers and peers and how do they impact academic success and/or their sense of self-worth.

The related sub-questions would be:

How, when and why are labels applied to students in both our society and schools?  
How do these labels relate to students’ motivation, performance and achievement?  
In what ways might these labels potentially benefit or inhibit an individual’s development?

E. Provide a brief summary of the purpose of the research in non-technical language.
The purpose of this research study will be to better understand the importance and impact of labels in our secondary schools and society for students and teachers at a small Northeast High School and, in turn, how they view themselves and others as a result of their interactions and experiences with these labels.

F. Identify study personnel on this project. Include name, credentials, role, and organization affiliation.

The Principal Investigator on this study is Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons of Northeastern University. The interviews, research and analysis in the study itself will be conducted by Zachary Michael Billings; an EdD candidate at Northeastern University. Transcriptions will be completed by Zachary Michael Billings and/or Heather Raper (a part-time transcriptionist recommended and used by Dr. Clemons on previous studies). XXXXXXXX, a teacher/department head at the school will be available/present to serve as an adult witness as needed.

G. Identify other organizations or institutions that are involved. Attach current Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals or letters of permission as necessary.

XXXXXXXXX Public School district does not have its own Institutional Review Board but a signed letter of permission/approval from the school district superintendent is attached.

H. Recruitment Procedures

Describe the participants you intend to recruit. Provide all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Include age range, number of subjects, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level and health (as applicable) and reasons for exempting any groups. Describe how/when/by whom inclusion/exclusion criteria will be determined.

This sample will be purposeful and will include 6-10 12th grade students (age 18 or older, with additional parental/guardian consent) who will take place in a group discussion about labels and labeling in the school. An additional 6-10 participants will be drawn from school staff (teachers, administrators, coaches, guidance counselors etc.). Attempts will be made to include a sample of the school population that includes as wide a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, academic disciplines, educational levels, genders, races, religions, participation levels and ages.
All participants will be age 18 years or older. In the case of students, all will be in good academic standing and additional steps will be taken to make sure that none of the students involved receive social-emotional health services at the schools or meet regularly with the school psychologist or social worker. In the case of staff, all participants will have worked at the school for at least two full years prior to their interview and will have obtained a master’s degree or better in addition to their teacher licensure. The sample aims to include as wide a range of experiences as possible.

Describe the procedures that you will use to recruit these participants. Be specific. How will potential subjects be identified? Who will ask for participation? If you intend to recruit using letters, posters, fliers, ads, website, email, PsyLink description, HIT, etc., copies must be included as attachments for stamped approval. Include scripts for intended telephone recruitment.

As previously noted, the selection/recruitment of these participants will primarily be purposeful in nature. With this said, convenience sampling will also play a small part in who ultimately participates as the participants will all hail from a small, high-performing New England secondary school.

Only ONE email will be sent to students and parents at the same time asking for volunteers for the focus group portion of this study. No verbal recruitment will take place, as that would be coercive to potential participants. Parent Email attached. Student Email attached. Both will be sent from the student researcher’s husky.neu.edu email address only.

School staff will also be emailed ONE recruitment piece from the student researcher’s husky.neu.edu email address only asking for volunteers. It will be made clear to staff, students and parents that any emails to the Lynnfield email address will be deleted with no response.

The student researcher is aware that any one-on-discussions with minors regarding this study will be in violation of the IRB. Everything will go through email only to safe guard the privacy of students of XXXXXXXXXXX.
What remuneration, if any, is offered?

There will be no remuneration offered in exchange for participation.

I. Consent Process

Describe the process of obtaining informed consent*. Be specific. How will the project and the participants’ role be presented to potential participants? By whom? When? Where? Having the participant read and sign a consent statement is done only after the researcher provides a detailed oral explanation and answers all questions. Please attach a copy of informed consent statements that you intend to use, if applicable. Click here for consent form templates.

If your study population includes non-English speaking people, translations of consent information are necessary. Describe how information will be translated and by whom. You may wait until the consent is approved in English before having it translated.

Potential research participants will be recruited via email based on known applied labels, affiliations and demographics. A copy of the overarching research questions will be presented to the individual while the conversation is taking place. They will be informed that the research relates to my dissertation for Northeastern University. The research problem and interview protocol will be discussed during this brief meeting.

A copy of the informed consent form will be emailed to the parent after the parent has contacted the student researcher agreeing that their child may volunteer for this study. No student will sign a consent/assent form until their parent has given consent.

School staff will be provided at the interview. It will be discussed and after all questions are answered by the student researcher, the participant will sign the form.
If your population includes children, prisoners, people with limited mental capacity, language barriers, problems with reading or understanding, or other issues that may make them vulnerable or limit their ability to understand and provide consent, describe special procedures that you will institute to obtain consent appropriately. If participants are potentially decisionally impaired, how will you determine competency?

This study will not involve participants who are potentially decisionally impaired. All students involved in the study will be at least 18 years of age; first parents/guardians will be asked to sign the consent form and then the student will sign the form.

*If incomplete disclosure during the initial consent process is essential to carrying out the proposed research, please provide a detailed description of the debriefing process. Be specific. When will full disclosure of the research goals be presented to subjects (e.g., immediately after the subject has completed the research task(s) or held off until the completion of the study’s data collection)? By whom? Please attach a copy of the written debriefing statement that will be given to subjects.

There is not a need for incomplete disclosure. The research goals will be presented prior to data collection, during the interview portion(s) and following the collection of data as well.

J. Study Procedures

Provide a detailed description of all activities the participant will be asked to do and what will be done to the participants. Include the location, number of sessions, time for each session, and total time period anticipated for each participant, including long term follow up.

The student researcher will never be alone with a student throughout the entire research. Depending on how many students elect to participate in the focus group portion of the project there may be two separate sessions of 3-5 students or one larger 6-10 student discussion. The length of this discussion will be between 30 and 50 minutes in length. The interview participants will have a quick conversation with the researcher (me) about what I am studying and what I am asking them to do (in terms of time commitment). The interview to be
conducted will consist of three parts and take 60-90 minutes or more to complete. During the first 45-60 minutes, the interviewee will be asked to construct a list of labels that were particularly salient or memorable to them from high school. Next, there will be an interview conducted. This will all conclude with a 15-30 minute follow-up interview the next day to discuss the previous day’s interview. Member checking will additionally take place once the interviews have been transcribed.

Who will conduct the experimental procedures, questionnaires, etc? Where will this be done? Attach copies of all questionnaires, interview questions, tests, survey instruments, links to online surveys, etc.

All group discussions and individual staff interviews will be conducted in person and will take place within a neutral space within the school itself (i.e. conference rooms or study areas). An adult witness will be present for the focus group discussion(s). Staff interviews will take place at a location the participant chooses to ensure confidentiality and reduce the appearance of coercion.

No interviews will take place in any room where the student researcher works, including classrooms and/or office space.

K. Risks

Identify possible risks to the participant as a result of the research. Consider possible psychological harm, loss of confidentiality, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks. What is the seriousness of these risks and what is the likelihood that they may occur?

Whenever one is discussing personal issues, experiences and opinions there is a chance that someone could become upset, confused or disappointed. With this said being said, the risk of psychological harm to the participants in this study is very low due to the nature of the questions and the fact that those involved are all either in good academic standing or employed in the field of education. Confidentiality issues will be addressed both within the paper itself
and the storage of the data. There is no apparent risk in terms of financial, social or legal damages for the individual, researcher or University.

There is a great risk of coercion as the student researcher works at the study site.

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Describe in detail the safeguards that will be implemented to minimize risks. What follow-up procedures are in place if harm occurs? What special precautions will be instituted for vulnerable populations?

By not verbally discussing this study with any potential participants and relying solely on emails from the student researcher’s husky.neu.edu email address, the risk of coercion is lessened. No students will ever be in a room alone with the researcher, lowering any risk of backlash after the study is complete.

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L. Confidentiality

Describe in detail the procedures that will be used to maintain anonymity or confidentiality during collection and entry of data. Who will have access to data? How will the data be used, now and in the future?

During the interview names will not be used. The name of the school district will also not be used. The findings of the study are not intended to be shared with the school/faculty at large. There will be no meetings besides the individual one on one interviews and discussions. As noted in the next section, all data, transcripts and pseudonym information will be stored in a password protected electronic device and/or locked in a fire-resistant steel filing-cabinet. All names and identifying information will be edited out of the audio recordings before granting a transcriptionist access to the files and will not be written on the transcripts during my own analysis.

How and where will data be stored? How will electronic data be encrypted? When will...
data, including audiotapes and videotapes, be destroyed? If data is to be retained, explain why. Will identifiers or links to identification be destroyed? When? Signed consent documents must be retained for 3 years following the end of the study. Where and how will they be maintained?

All data, transcripts and pseudonym information will be stored in a password protected electronic device and/or locked in a fire-resistant steel filing-cabinet. Data files will be transferred to an external hard drive as soon as is possible following transcription. Only I will have access to the data and the key for the locking cabinet. All names and identifying information will be edited out of the audio recordings before granting a transcriptionist access to the files and will not be written on the transcripts during my own analysis. At the conclusion of the data collection all transcripts will be removed from the electronic device and stored on an external hard-drive in the locking filing cabinet. Once the degree of doctorate has been conferred and three years’ time has passed, all notes, transcripts, recordings and signed consent forms will be destroyed.

M. If your research is HIPAA-protected, please complete the following;

Individual Access to PHI

Describe the procedure that will be used for allowing individuals to access their PHI or, alternatively, advising them that they must wait until the end of the study to review their PHI.

N/A

N. Benefits

What benefits can the participant reasonably expect from his/her involvement in the research? If none, state that. What are potential benefits to others?

There are NO direct benefits to any participants or parents. Potential benefits in the future include favorable opinions by the student researcher if their professional or academic paths cross in the future. Part of the purpose of completing this doctorate is to move to a leadership
position in a different district and the possibility exists that at some point in the future one of
the members of staff or student-focus group participant’s at the school may seek employment
at that other district. As the Principal Investigator and student researcher also teach
secondary/post-secondary classes at the University level there is always the possibility that
someone takes a continuing education class taught by one of the researchers. The likelihood of
this is somewhat minimized by the fact that all staff participants are required to have a master’s
degree to be considered for participation in the study.

O. Attachments

Identify attachments that have been included and those that are not applicable (n/a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Copy of fliers, ads, posters, emails, web pages, letters for recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>(see our templates for examples)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Scripts of intended telephone conversations*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Copies of IRB approvals or letters of permission from other sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Informed Consent Form(s)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Debriefing Statement*</td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Copies of all instruments, surveys, focus group or interview questions, tests, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form <em>(required)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>NIH Human Subject Training Certificate(s) <em>(required if not already on file at HSRP)</em></td>
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*(Approved forms must be stamped by the IRB before use)*

P. Health Care Provision During Study

Please check the applicable line:

___X___ I have read the description of HIPAA “health care” within Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. I am not a HIPAA-covered health care provider and no health care will be provided in connection with this study.

_____ I am a HIPAA-covered health care provider or I will provide health care in connection with this study as described in Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. This health care is described above under
“Study Procedures,” and the Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization form will be used with all prospective study participants.

If you have any questions about whether you are a HIPAA-covered health care provider, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588.

Completed applications should be submitted to Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection with the exception of applications from faculty and students of the College of Professional Studies, which should be submitted to Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for CPS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nan C. Regina, Director</th>
<th>CPS applications only</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern Univ., Human Subject Research Protection</td>
<td>Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 Huntington Ave., Mailstop: 560-177</td>
<td>Northeastern Univ., College of Professional Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA 02115-5000</td>
<td>Phone: 617.390.3450;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone: 617.373.4588; Fax: 617.373.4595</td>
<td><a href="mailto:k.skophammer@northeastern.edu">k.skophammer@northeastern.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:n.regina@northeastern.edu">n.regina@northeastern.edu</a></td>
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The application and accompanying materials may be sent as email attachments or in hard copy. A signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form may be sent as a scan, via fax or in hard copy.