

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: SCHOOL-IMPOSED LABELING IN A “NO-EXCUSES” CHARTER SCHOOL

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Abstract:

In this article, the author explores the ways in which school-imposed labeling at one “no-excuses” public charter school impacts teachers’ perceptions of students who were labeled as being high risk or struggling academically, and how these students perceive their own schooling experiences. A primary aim was to extend how labeling is viewed in schools, from that as a innocuous practice to a mechanism of symbolic violence that can disproportionate affect males of color and particularly, as evidenced in this study, Black males.

Key Words: *Labeling, Symbolic Violence, Black Males, Urban Education, Teacher Preparation, Student Voice*

Introduction

The act of labeling of students is often viewed as innocuous. Labels offer *abrief* description for the purposes of identification to gesture an abbreviated, yet symbolic message to others about whom the label is affixed. However, these labels can become *permanent* markers that are attached to an object or individual. The practice of labeling in schools particularly when describing a student’s academic ability, behavior or character—is not new (Harris, 1967; Bianco & Leech, 2010). This practice persists despite a body of research demonstrating the harmful effects of labeling on students’ self-image, academic performance and behavior in schools throughout the United States (Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Taylor, Hume, & Welsh, 2010). For students of color, the practice of mislabeling often has lingering negative effects (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1972; Fairbanks, 1992; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). In her ethnographic study of elementary school disciplinary practices, former school teacher Carla Shalaby found the everyday lives of four children who were labeled “troublemakers” consisted of being detained, isolated and removed from school spaces with regularity (Shalaby, 2017). Shalaby revealed that a child’s path to excessive punishment and exclusion due to school-imposed labels can begin within the first few years of schooling. Research by Gay (2000) and Tyler, Boykin, and Walton (2006) showed that teachers preferred classroom behaviors of students that often align with dominant, White middle-class, rather than minoritized groups. As a result, low-income Black children are suspended far more frequently than White children in general, with especially high racial differences in middle school, causing students to miss valuable class time during a crucial period in their academic and social development (Losen & Skirba, 2010).

In this article, I take another look at the practice of labeling of Black male students as “high risk” or “struggling academically” (Marsh & Noguera, 2018) as a form of symbolic violence. Introduced by French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu (2001), symbolic violence draws attention to those forms of violence which do not involve physical force. Thus, symbolic violence is an invisible violence that is not recognized as such and is exercised often with the unwitting consent of those impacted by its effects. The context of this study is an urban public charter middle school espousing a “no-excuses” orientation. I focus on the following questions: (1) *how does school-imposed labeling act as a form of symbolic violence towards Black male students and* (2) *how does school-imposed labeling affect the labeled students’ schooling experiences and their teachers’ perceptions*. The discussion shifts at this point to a look at the literature on the practice of labeling at “no-excuses” public charter schools.

Labeling and “No-excuses” Schools

In the context of schooling, the practice of labeling is often associated with an educator’s or a school’s evaluative and subjective processes that result in the designation of categorical diagnostic terms (e.g., divested, hopeless, etc.) that affect the student’s positioning. Thus, labels can also serve as a discriminatory purpose of distinguishing an individual (and others similarly labeled) from the broader context of the school and provide information about the individual regardless of its accuracy (Gold & Richards, 2012). As a result, labeling has commonly been associated with segregating and marginalizing individuals with assumed or legitimate learning, behavioral or physical variations (Thomson, 2012). These variations then translate, for example, to arbitrary applications of out-of-school suspensions for students who have assumed “bad reputations” in schools (Lindenberg, 2013). Thus, when a student is assigned to an “at risk” category, they are often withheld from “normal” membership and a positive status in the larger school community (Pfeiffer, 1998). Noguera (2008) contends that subjective dimensions of students’ identity which are related to race (e.g., Black and Latino) and gender (e.g., male) are often constructed in schools and can adversely influence students’ academic performance. Research on Black and Latino males suggests that they are more likely to fall prey of being unjustly victimized by the widespread mislabeling processes that occur within school (Noguera, 2003a, 2008), even while attending sites serving predominantly students of color. Said differently, Black and Latino males are constantly under assault of symbolic violence, whether attending schools where they are in the majority or not. As a result there are higher rates of discipline, particularly in some large urban districts, where schools were often found to have suspended a third or more of their Black male students in a given year (Losen & Skirba, 2010).

Certainly, school-imposed labels often are not intended to be caustic towards students. The labels are used to justify provision of services that are intended to assist a student with perceived challenges. The rationale offered is that by pinpointing students in need, schools can provide preventative supports (Taylor, et al., 2010). However, McNulty & Roseboro (2009) found that educators are frequently oblivious to how students, who are the victims of this symbolic violence, may find themselves in clashes with school personnel who may hold deficit frameworks or lowered expectations because of a student’s race accompanied by the school-imposed label. For instance, students in remedial classes are frequently offered fewer didactical and social-emotional supports because they may be taught by less skilled teachers, or are perceived by their teachers as incorrigible. And when these students are Black or Latino/a, or live in lower socioeconomic communities, there is an extra layer of uncertainty from teachers about students’ abilities. Cherng (2017) recently used data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, which surveyed 10,000 high school students and their teachers, to uncover teachers’ perceptions of students. This survey asked teachers about their perceptions of students, which Cherng compared to students’ perceptions of themselves and their GPAs. His findings revealed stereotypes about students’ race and socioeconomic status affect how math and English teachers perceive student performance. Overall, students’ grades are negatively impacted by teachers’ underestimations.

Although labeling is also seen as a process that occurs naturally as “a way to distinguish who is included and who is excluded from a group, to ascribe particular characteristics, to prescribe social roles, and to assign status, power, and privilege” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001, p. 52), when carried out in schools, Black males are disproportionately affected. That is, they are more often subjected to symbolic violence in the form of labeling than their peers, and these labels result in harsher penalties (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Seider, Gilbert, Novick, & Gomez (2013) found in a study of three “no-excuses” schools that the students most likely to receive the worst penalties and become victims of symbolic violence were Black males who were low-achieving. It has been widely cited that “no-excuses” charter schools characteristically apply strict discipline that frequently results in higher levels of students receiving school-imposed labeling, suspensions and ultimately attrition (Fergus, 2016; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998). And even while Mathematica’s (2010) nationwide study found that the attrition rate for Black male students in some charter schools is as high as 40 percent, the assumption held by many “no-excuses” leaders and policymakers that rigid discipline is necessary for student achievement in urban schools has not waned (Lake et al., 2010; Whitman, 2008; Woodworth et al., 2008). Accordingly, support to continue scaling “no-excuses” public charter schools has not abated (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Finn & Wright, 2016; FY 2017 Charter Schools Program State Entities).

While the term “no-excuses” comes from the idea that schools should make “no excuses” for student failure (Carter, 2000), the rapid spread of charters is often rationalized by pointing to the “success” of urban charter schools, particularly those identified as “no-excuses” schools. In current school choice rhetoric, “no-excuses” models are viewed by some charter advocates, including policy-makers, as having demonstrated success in raising the achievement of Black and Latino/a students living in high poverty communities and narrowing the persistent “achievement gap” with their middle-class, White and Asian peer groups (Abdulkadir, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, & Pathak, 2009; Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2011; Davis & Heller, 2017; Dynarski, 2015). The “achievement gap” is typically measured in the forms of raising students’ math and English language arts scores, high school graduation, and students’ acceptance rates into college. Many charter supporters say the “no-excuses” context provide evidence that schools can get all students to achieve at high levels, regardless of race, zip code, or skill-level (Carter, 2000; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). And teachers, who have embraced the “no excuses” model, have argued that charters are more successful than traditional public schools because they allow for innovation and are more responsive to students, particularly students of color. The “no-excuses” schools share several practices, including strict disciplinary codes, frequent assessments, increased instructional time, parental pledges of involvement, aggressive human capital strategies, and a relentless focus on math and reading (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Yet, few empirical ethnographic studies have been situated in the context of a “no-excuses” public charter schools (Golann, 2015; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Sondel, 2015). Even as there are existing empirical studies that examined the impact of teacher perceptions of labeled Black students

(Ferguson, 2000; Tyson, 2003), including its insidious effect on Black male students, most of these have focused on students in traditional public schools (MacLeod, 1995; Ogbu, 2003), younger children in elementary schools (Tyson, 2003), or Black students in a racially-integrated institution (Ferguson, 2000). There continues to be a dearth of research centering Black male students' narratives within a "no-excuses" context and virtually no studies that interpret school-imposed labeling as a form of symbolic violence. This lack of attention includes Black male students who have been labeled by their schools and what the effect of those school-imposed labels have on students' and teachers' perceptions and how these labels may affect students' experiences within school.

This is an important gap in education policy that examines school discipline methods as effective means to ensure supporting environments. This is also important in teaching and learning research as well as multicultural studies due to the continued rise of "no-excuses" schools that claim inclusion, fairness, equity and higher education for all students in attendance. With a review of the literature established, the discussion shifts now to the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

Classical Labeling Theory and Schooling

In sociology, classical labeling theory (Becker, 1963) provides a framework for understanding how labels are constructed and how the constructed labels of a group influence the perceptions of those who are labeled. This labeling occurs while reinforcing core values and norms for other members of society. He concluded that when certain behaviors are regarded as different from societal norms, any individuals exhibiting such behaviors may be ostracized and looked down upon so that the core values and norms are reinforced. Yet, as a result of being labeled, the sanctioned individual may eventually embrace their deviant status. As Noguera (2003b) asserted about this theory in the context of schools, "As [students] internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms" (p. 343). This process occurs both because they may be shunned and because they may be compelled to socialize with others who have also been labeled (e.g., juvenile delinquents, drug abusers, etc.). As Noguera (2003b) further notes, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students; the assumption is that safety and order can be achieved by removing "bad" individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be "good" and law abiding. These are frequent practices in educational settings when Black male students, who have been adversely labeled for their scholastic performance (i.e., disinvested) or behavior (i.e., bad boys), are consequently grouped together with other Black male students that have been similarly labeled.

Labeling can frequently start on the first day of school for Black male students, particularly when the transition from home to the school context is strained and made more difficult by cultural mismatches (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When predominantly White, middle-class female teachers are unfamiliar with the communication and behavioral norms, styles, and values that may be exhibited by Black male students, teachers may regard the students as deviant. That is, Black male students may not engage (or know how to engage) in the "politics of politeness" that the White female teachers are anticipating. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) proposes that the tacit "politics of politeness" approach actually embodies, objectifies, and institutionalizes forms of cultural capital "previously invested by the family" that maintain the hierarchies of social class (p. 3). But when Black males do not convey these "politics," their teachers most often fail to provide them with the assistance needed to successfully make the transition from home to school (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2003). As a result of the pervasive academic and social marginalization, Black male students are more likely to experience symbolic violence of being labeled and thus deemed "involuntary minorities" (Ogbu, 2003), considered "underachievers" (Brown, 2011), treated as though they were "beyond love" (Duncan, 2002), shunned because they seem to be "at-risk," (Anderson, 2008), viewed as "in crisis" (Noguera, 1997), and receive harsher consequences (Losen & Skirba, 2010).

Symbolic Violence Against the Black Male and His Masculinity

Like the practice of labeling, the racial ideological construction of Blacks as deviant and different is not new. Dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, Black people have historically been designated by White men as objects to be bound in chains, forcibly separated from their families, and bought and sold as property. When Black people were forced to come to America, they were not recognized as humans. And then there is the Black male. It seems Black males were what philosopher Ian Hacking (1995) referred to as a *human kind*. Hacking defined human kind as a form of "classification that could be used to formulate general truths about people; generalizations sufficiently strong that they seem like laws about people; their actions or sentiments" (p. 352). Historically, Black men in America drew fear from White Americans whose constructions usually swelled with deep racist imagery and embodied sexualized meanings (Collins, 2005). Anthony Brown's (2011) historicizing of knowledge— a method of analysis introduced by Popkewitz (1997) to examine how trajectories of the past help to shape how ideas of the present are constructed— summarizes the racialized pronouncements concerning Black males. From the 1930s to the present there have been four recycled narratives concerning Black males that have informed the general U.S. populace. These include: (a) absent and wandering, (b) castrated and emasculated, (c) soulful and adaptive, and (d) endangered and in-crisis. Combined, these themes are considered staples in the normalized manner in which Black males are seen within popular media.

In the context of U.S. schooling, the historical compulsion of protecting Whites (particularly women) from Black males, to the suggestive nature of Black males possessing unregulated bodies, to the normalized deficit framework concerning Black males' characters, has shaped the discourse and labeling actions of a White majority-female teaching force unsure of how to *regulate* Black male bodies in their classrooms. As a result, Black male students are excessively caged to achievement classifications associated with deficiency or high risk, and inadequately represented in those linked with schooling success (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014). As Tyrone Howard points out, "Black males are frequently thought of as a problem" that must be dealt with (Howard, 2013). The persistence of these socially constructed notions of Black masculinity as deviant often has the effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes toward Black males that can further undermine their academic performance and positioning in schools. I turn now to discuss the research site, followed by the research methods and analysis employed in the study.

Access and School Site

In October of 2012 I began tutoring at a new intervention program called Excellence Counts (EC)[1], an after school program located within Leadership Academy designated for male students who had been held back a grade in middle school due to failing academic performance or behavior. After nearly four months of working one-on-one with students belonging to Excellence Counts on their homework at least once per week, I was slowly becoming aware of how the boys began perceiving their lowly status, being referred to as the "EC" boys within the larger school context, due to their previous academic performance or behavior. At the close of May 2013, I created EC@University (EC@U), an out-of-school mentoring program that paired Black and Latino Metropolis University undergraduates with EC-labeled students based on academic- and extracurricular-related interests. Initially facilitated by myself, with the permission of their caregivers, EC students met with their Metropolis mentor for monthly Saturday cohort activities in the summer of 2013 and continued into the 2013-14 academic year, which focused on students' (re)discovery of self-empowerment, self-confidence and introspective leadership. After institutional approvals were secured to collect data and informed consent was obtained, over the course of five months, hundreds of hours of observations and dozens of formal and informal interviews with students, teachers, and administrators were conducted. Unfortunately as the research within the school increased, the time to facilitate the EC@U program lessened. The EC@U program has been put on hold since the 2014-15 academic year.

Table 1. Students at Leadership Academy 2013-2014

| African American | Latino/a | Total No. of Students |
|------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| 98% | 2% | 364 |

Table 2. Students in Excellence Counts 2013-2014

| African American | Latino | Total No. of Students |
|------------------|--------|-----------------------|
| 26 | 3 | 29 |

The research was carried out in Leadership Academy, a public charter middle school with a “no-excuses” orientation located in a large northeastern urban city that touts a college-for-all ethos. Founded by Stan Jones in 2004, Leadership Academy is part of a larger charter management organization (CMO) that started with 72 students in the fifth grade, and has grown to serve 364 students in grades 5 through 8 (Northeastern City Board of Education, 2013). The majority of the students are Black (~98 percent) and qualify for free or reduced lunch (~90 percent).

Although adjoined to a larger network of highly regarded charter schools, Leadership Academy has struggled in achievement. The brainchild of five Black male staff members, the Excellence Counts program was created in the summer of 2012-13 after twenty-one sixth, seventh, and eighth grade Black and Latino male students failed and were not promoted to the next grade level. EC was designed for the specific purpose of raising achievement among these particular male students because they had been labeled by their teachers as being “at risk” for not being promoted due to poor academic performance or behavior. The original mission was to be an “academic and character/leadership intervention...to ensure that [EC-labeled] young men successfully complete their current grade level this school year” (EC Newsletter, October 2012, p.1). With mandatory attendance, the group assembled every weekday after school to complete homework. While the group started with twenty-one students, sixteen students were successfully promoted to the next grade (the remaining five transferred to another school before the close of the year).

When EC first began in the fall of 2012 it was limited to students who were mandated to repeat a grade due to previous failed academic (or behavioral) performance. The 2013-14 academic year was not the same. That is, despite the fact that students from the previous 2012-13 cohort had been promoted, they were forced to participate in EC for a consecutive year due to teachers’ views that they would require additional support, either academically or behaviorally (or both). Thus, the 2013-14 EC cohort included twenty-nine students: one fifth grader, twelve sixth graders, eleven seventh graders, and five students in the eighth grade. Of the 29 students, fourteen were officially unsuccessfully promoted, or labeled “at risk” for retention due to poor grades or behavior, and the remaining fifteen were from cohort one. The average age was 14.33 years, and 1.25 average years of being held back in school. EC also hired two new personnel: a paraprofessional assigned to EC-labeled students and a college intern, both Black males in their early-twenties. Moreover, unlike the first EC cohort, for the 2013-14 year the school’s guidance counselors and grade-level teachers played a role in identifying students for EC.

Research Methods and Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected for five months, from mid-October 2013 to mid-February 2014. To try to understand the participants’ experiences, observations in classrooms, as well as in other contexts, and interviews were conducted with students and teachers. Throughout the study I attended and observed EC students’ classes; mandatory afterschool EC sessions; and other school-related activities, events, and spaces such as school wide assemblies, the cafeteria, one Saturday *EC@U* workshop, and one rapid dismissal/fire drill. I wanted to learn as much as possible about the nature of the school to provide rich and deep details about the context and those in it. Specifically I wanted to know what life was like for students in EC and the teachers that taught them, not only in the classroom but also in other locations in the school. The observations and interviews were used to identify and understand how school-imposed labeling of students (i.e., “EC” and “at-risk”) affect the labeled students’ and their teachers’ perceptions about the students and the effect of the school-imposed label on the labeled students’ schooling experiences. After each observation, detailed field notes were written.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four EC-labeled students (including original and new members) and one Asian female guidance counselor. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Guided by Rodríguez & Conchas’s (2009) inductive open-coding approach, I employed open coding when analyzing field notes to allow for a loose categorization of the data and the emergence of themes that may not have been identified in the field. After interviews were transcribed, transcripts were uploaded into the text analysis software, *ATLAS.ti 7*. Using Code Manager, codes that were established from the observations were input into *ATLAS.ti 7* for a basis. Codes were chosen based on their frequency in both the observations and interviews. Next, relationships between the codes were identified and, from this process, themes emerged. The school counselor transcript was analyzed using techniques from *The Listening Guide*, a “series of sequential listenings, each designed to bring the researcher into relationship” with the interviewee’s multilayered voice (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003).

Findings

“You see obstacles in your life, you just have to overcome them and that’s what I’m trying to do, overcome my hardships. And everything’s not going to be right the first time, you have to go through some struggle to get where you got to be at and this is my struggle. And I’m just coming out of it now; I’m doing my work, doing EC.” (Austin, 15, seventh grade)

There is no evidence that school-imposed labeling translates to positive student achievement outcomes. Rather, research has shown students are most likely to perform well academically when their schooling environment and its embedded culture meet their developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). School culture has often been defined as the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape interaction, drive behavior of student life and learning, and are shared in varying degrees by members of a school community (Schein, 1990; Thapa et al., 2013). Though EC is part of Leadership Academy, because of how the program was developed and who it serves, EC has developed a distinct *subculture* within the larger school community. Teachers subscribe to perceptions about all EC-labeled students and their exhibition of patterns of behavior that seemingly differ from non-labeled students. I re-analyzed themes in this section to reflect what I identified as most salient to understanding how the EC labeling of Black males serves as a form of symbolic violence and how the label affects their and their teachers’ perceptions, as well as understand the effect the label has on the students’ schooling experiences at the “no-excuses” school.

Pushups, Public Insults, Pass-alongs & Put-outs for EC-labeled students

Shortly after entering the site I learned that Mr. Smith, the EC Director, had implemented an accountability system he called “Man-Up.” This was a time when students in EC were expected to confess and take responsibility for lapses of judgment during the school day in front of the EC group. Some lapses included not completing assignments or being “disrespectful” to adults. During this public shaming, students were expected to apologize to their EC peers for their misbehavior. On other occasions, I witnessed boys asked to do pushups as a group, or what was termed by EC personnel and students as a “consequence” for the misbehavior of an individual student[2]. When I interviewed George, a 15 year old eighth grader who repeated seventh grade twice, he offered that the “Man-Up” moments never considered the position of the student due to students not ever being able to share their interpretation. In an interview, while he hesitated to outrightly denounce pushups, he said “I’m not saying it’s wrong, or right, just they rather not [listen]; they would give a consequence and give pushups. I know [Mr. Smith] want us to get the point. But not every point [he] give does not have to be given across with a consequence. It doesn’t always have to be a consequence. It should be speak, then get the consequence.” Later, George declared his disdain with pushups as a form of punishment, as too harsh for students’ action. In an interview he said pushups were given for “little things, for us talking in the morning!” Traditional public schools, he suggested, allowed students to communicate. However Leadership Academy was different: the charter’s policies are more rigid. “We are here like 10 hours a day; we only get to talk for like an hour, not even an hour, 40 minutes at lunch,” he explained.

As retained students who are known to have experienced a variety of academic and behavioral challenges, students with the EC-label are rarely outside of the purview of school authorities. During my observations of classes, I also found that it is not unusual for students associated with EC to be subject to public insults by teachers for incidents that would normally be reserved between the teacher and student. One such student is Bruce Pinters. Bruce is an eighth grader who was retained as a seventh grader and belonged in high school. Weighing nearly 300 pounds and standing shy of six feet, he stood out at Leadership Academy. One day in October 2013 I observed Bruce’s eighth grade math class; he was the only EC student present. At dismissal, students were told they could only exit class by “being ready.” I presumed the teacher or administration had modeled this ready-posture previously as no further instructions of “being ready” were articulated. As the math teacher, a White woman just over five feet, moved closer to the door, she shouts from across the room, “Bruce! I’m looking for leadership from you!” As I, and the other 20 students, switched our attention exclusively to Bruce, I did not know what she was referring to. I wondered, Does he? From my vantage point in the back of the room, I didn’t observe Bruce doing anything more unusual than the other students who were also organizing their belongings to exit the classroom.

This could be an instance of Bruce being singled out due to his EC-label. Once all the students exit the math class, I approached the math teacher. Voluntarily she tells me that Bruce can "Be so lazy, it's hard for him to move his pencil." The math teacher's assistant, another young White woman, agreed with laughter. For me, this incident strongly captured an *idea* that teachers' reprimanding comments in class could be interpreted as a form of positive encouragement, as the teacher originally indicated she was looking for Bruce's "leadership." Yet, the teacher's confidential, disparaging comment after class concerning Bruce's "laziness," and the teacher assistant's confirming laughter, solidified the real perception: a sarcastic, public insult. In this interaction, Bruce's teacher could have called on the whole class to demonstrate their leadership with exiting the classroom; perhaps everyone in the class needed to pick up their pace or collectively do something different. Instead, she used the occasion to tacitly remind the other nineteen students that Bruce is different. He participates in EC; he should be in high school and thus should be demonstrating some form of leadership. While she did not use the EC-label, she effectively singled him out, denying him normal membership in the school's community. Incidents such as these when EC-labeled students were singled out for chastisement by teachers in front of non-EC students is one of the ways in which the symbolic violence was practiced on a daily basis and I began to understand the impact of school-imposed labeling on teacher perceptions and the impact these perceptions have on students' experiences within the school.

Bruce was not the only student who was subject to symbolic violence due to his EC-label. In fact, based on my observations, most of the boys in EC were subject to some form of isolation. For instance in the cafeteria during lunch, while it was common for teachers to walk around and communicate with students, there was often an isolation en masse, as no teachers approached or communicated with the boys unless they were doing something "wrong." In the same way, like Bruce, EC students often experienced some form of separation in classrooms. Arthur was one such student. Not only was he imperiled to the label of EC due to repeating his sixth grade year, he was also perceived by teachers (and students) as having a learning disability. While I was unaware that he had a formal individual education plan[3], he was assigned a paraprofessional. On one occasion I observed Arthur in seventh grade literature. In my field notes I referred to this moment as "isolation and pass along."

As I slid in from the back of the room, the 20 students faced the front so no one pupil noticed I entered, not even Arthur and Lucas, two students who were in EC and were present in the class. From my vantage point—the last row on the right side of the room—I had a clear sight to entire classroom. From the chalkboard I noticed the lesson is about *John Steinbeck*. There were three adults present. One teacher, a White female was sitting on a stool at the front completing fill-in the blanks on the overhead projector, while her co-teacher, a White male, was walking around the classroom between students' rows asking questions to capture the answers for the fill-ins. There was also a Black woman sitting off on the left hand side of the room—she looked familiar. I recalled that she was Arthur's paraprofessional. As I shifted my focus back to the students, I noticed Arthur, who was sitting in the second chair in the second row from the front, had his head in his hands and was looking downward at his desk. I looked over at his paraprofessional thinking she would intervene. But she did not. Arthur had now begun to doze off. Immediately his head was flat on the desk and his eyes were glazed-over. But the adults remained quiet. They seemingly ignored this rather obvious instance of a student not following instructions in class. I wondered who was responsible for Arthur. This was surprising to me as I had been in other classes at the school and students were put on notice for not tracking the speaker. That is, students got into serious trouble for not following the teacher with their eyes as he or she may move throughout a classroom. This was the first time I had observed a student sleeping in a classroom without adult acknowledgement. Alas, the female teacher at the front got up and walks towards Arthur. And just as I think she is going to his desk, she passed right by Arthur to go to the desk of his classmate, a young lady who I had observed previously. The student was playing with a hair barrette during class and the teacher demanded that the barrette be handed over because it was a distraction. The child was twirling the barrette on her finger, but I wondered how adults could be (overly) concerned with one student's learning, but (under) concerned for another student.

In this instance Arthur was being passed along, seemingly no adult wanted to take responsibility for him or his (in)actions. Perhaps the combination of his school-imposed EC-label and the notion that he may have a learning disability was impenetrable. They assume him to be incorrigible. But this adult inaction and ostracizing and ultimate refusal of membership in the school is one of the results of the symbolic violence which was practiced on a daily basis and I continued to understand the effect of school-imposed labeling on teacher perceptions and the effect these perceptions have on students' experiences within the school.

Due to the school-imposed label, the Black males in EC have been given a school wide reputation for being disruptive and/or disrespectful. Teachers and administrators gaze at EC students more closely, and consequently they experience different outcomes than their peers. "I get a debit[4] if I sneeze [during class]," one of the EC students tells me when discussing his interactions with teachers. The label of Excellence Counts has translated into disproportionate pushups, public insults, pass-alongs, and, for some, more punitive consequences, like put-outs. Students in EC were often subjected to being put-out of class. Leadership Academy used both in-school detention as well as out-of-school suspension, each resulting in students missing valuable class time. The following data, however, is for out-of-school suspension. During 2012-13 there were 196 unique students who received out-of-school suspensions at Leadership Academy. Of the 196 students, 15 (out of 21) were EC students. EC students spent 40 days out of school due to their suspensions. The following academic year, 2013-14 (the time this study was conducted), I was given discipline data that stretched only through the first half of the school year, from August 2013 to December 2013. During that time frame, 99 unique students at Leadership Academy had already received out-of-school suspension and 25 percent were students labeled-EC. And, combined, these 25 boys missed 42 days of school. This is significant not only because of the negative outcomes of missing school but because the discipline data was only for the first half of the year, and already both the count of EC students who were suspended and the number of days they spent out-of-school had increased from the previous full academic year. As I reviewed the discipline data I wondered how EC-labeled students felt about being singled out and forced to miss school; often their nonverbal cues revealed lack of surprise. For instance, each class I observed and Bruce was present, he was the focus of the teacher's reprove but he remained stoic, seemingly unfazed by the excessive nature of being identified as the problem student. Bruce, like most of the first cohort of EC boys, accommodate to this form of symbolic violence at the school. Students cannot speak and reflect about their feelings because this may be misinterpreted by teachers as being defiant. And while subjective, each accusation can come with at least one day of out-of-school suspension at Leadership Academy. Rather than finding responsibility in teachers' perceptions, the students are to blame. Through their EC-label, students continue to be assaulted. Next, I review three staff members' perceptions of Black male students relegated to Excellence Counts.

Leveled Aspirations and Limited Perceptions for Teachers and Students

From volunteering and research with other charter management organizations and even traditional public schools in the U.S., I have often observed schools displaying college banners in order to expose students to the importance of higher education and the degree opportunities that wait in these spaces. In addition, for some urban public charter schools, like the one in this study, students' advisories are named after the college the teacher graduated from to encourage students to think early (and often) about higher education. However, it was unclear if school staff at Leadership Academy believed college was a reality for EC-labeled students. Below, I highlight staff members' opinions and deficit-framed teacher prompts used towards the students in Excellence Counts.

While describing EC students' future endeavors, Ms. Sasha used her hands to form a 'V shape.' This demonstrated the boys were at a junction in life, a junction that consisted of a predetermined binary according to Ms. Sasha. "The [EC] boys can go two ways," she proclaimed. "They're at that split. The right way, this is high school [and] college; or the wrong, unsafe way, [which is] being in the streets and hanging out with the wrong crowds." When I asked for clarification about the "right way" for EC-labeled students, repeating precisely what was said, Ms. Sasha rejected her earlier claim about the importance of traditional higher education. The EC boys' options would be leveled implicitly. "To be honest with you, college isn't for everyone," she said. "College is just one way... [EC-labeled boys] can go to trade school and be productive." Ms. Sasha's estimation about boys in EC and their participation in some form of career and vocational education was the only articulated pathway towards success. For boys in Excellence Counts, a site where they could learn a trade would lead to their becoming productive citizens. Ms. Sasha's admission that college might not be the right fit for EC-labeled boys is important. This embodies the daily experiences of the labeled: the denial of normal membership in the charter school's college-going community.

The leveled perceptions of EC-labeled students held by Ms. Sasha specifically about their higher education attainment mirror that of her charter school teaching colleagues. For instance, James, a sixth grade student in EC was observed eagerly discussing his prospects of attending one of the nation's elite private universities. Yet, his teacher, a Black woman, told him, "You have the *potential* to obtain grades for the university, but you don't have the character [to attend] the university" [emphasis by interviewee]. Refusing to stand quietly in the face of this symbolic violent act, I quickly transformed into an observer-participant role and politely asked for an explanation. I was informed about James' behavioral flaw. He, like many of the boys affiliated with EC, was accused of "talk[ing] too much" in class. As the teacher walked away, I turned to James and asked if he understood what his teacher was implying. With his hands tucked deep into his pockets and staring at the ground, he quietly said, "I have to hang out with the right crowd." EC-labeled students' interactions with teachers, such as the scenario above, is another way in which school-imposed labeling acted as a form of symbolic violence and affected students' schooling experiences. As illustrated, teachers' perceptions about proper classroom norms, or lack thereof, was based not on students' future aspirations or their current strengths (i.e., the ability to communicate), but rather on their ever-present school-imposed label.

One of the final observations with the EC-labeled boys, which allowed me to understand how symbolic violence manifested due to their school-imposed labeling and the effect these labels can have on teachers' perceptions and consequently on students' schooling experience, was during an after-school activity. As a volunteer with Excellence Counts the year before, I observed several "lessons" facilitated by adults affiliated with the school. One afternoon, Mr. Taylor, a Black male literature teacher, led a pen-pal writing lesson. Responding to some of the boys' queries about the writing activity, Mr. Taylor became palpably annoyed with their inexperience. Jackson, a sixth grader asked, "What do I say first?" referring to his pen-pal letter. Karl said, "How do I start [the letter]?" From the front of the classroom Mr. Taylor exclaimed, "Letter writing is the only way people in prison can communicate with the

outside world.” He continued, “So it’s important to know how to write.” I was baffled. I understand the significance of Gay’s (2000) culturally responsive teaching to improve the school performance of underachieving students of color as well as Sleeter’s (2017) culturally responsive curriculum that encourages teachers to use transformative (not additive) approaches, but Mr. Taylor’s example was beyond violent. Could he not imagine another scenario for Black males to consider, I pondered, maybe writing a letter to their local community board representative or even a letter to then the first Black president of the United States? But Mr. Taylor seemingly consciously evoked a reference to prison.

Even in closed-door spaces facilitated by Black male EC leadership, the boys could not escape the stereotyped impressions adults had towards them and, explicitly in this case, were marked as citizens whom one day would be intimately familiar with the institutions of the criminal justice system. As other studies on labeling have shown, *self-loathing*, uncertainty, depression and feelings of worthlessness tend to arise from membership in outcast groups. During this pedagogical interchange, Mr. Taylor could have exhibited understanding for the students’ naïveté with the concepts of pen-pals and created an opportunity to expose the boys to new knowledge and processes of writing. Instead, the learning moment was sabotaged. Students were reacquainted with their devalued status within the school, definitively drawing equivalency to lawbreakers who are commonly shunned in the greater society. In the final section, I attempt to expand the notion of the practice of labeling as symbolic violence based on this study, and share some implications for researchers and practitioners.

Discussion and Implications

In this article I attempted to explore the ways in which school-imposed labeling affects teachers’ perceptions of Black male students who were labeled as being “high risk” or “struggling academically,” and how these students perceive their own schooling experiences. A primary goal was to extend how labeling is viewed in schools, from that as an innocuous practice to a mechanism of symbolic violence that can disproportionately affect males of color, particularly Black males.

Similar to how the U.S. school system innately privileges Whiteness and middle-class values as standard, the practice of labeling has become commonplace. Labeling is deemed an intuitive function of the teaching, learning and discipline processes within schools. In particular, students of color and students living in poverty often face adverse labeling when they do not fit the norms and the confines of school. One may give consideration about the connection of labeling practices as a mechanism of symbolic violence to that of the criminal justice system. Noguera (2003b) asserts, “Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society...Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society” (p. 343).

The participants in this study have endured a range of racialized and gendered perceptions established by their teachers that have been rooted in their school-imposed labels in similar ways. In particular, the students’ daily experiences and exchanges with teachers exemplified how teachers perceived students in EC. That is, as Black males who have been restricted to a program for students who have been “held back,” the excessive amounts of public correction—which for some of the students resulted in out-of-school suspensions—should be interpreted as necessary because the students’ lack of respect. Further, because of the students’ leveled trajectories, they should only consider a vocation that would enable them to get a trade and be “productive” citizens while non-labeled students were encouraged to be “engaged” citizens through attainment of post-secondary education. And perhaps the most symbolically violent act, as one teacher leader insinuated, some of these Black males may already be bound for the criminal justice system.

While urban P-12 schools have increasingly focused on infusing culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004) as strategic classroom initiatives, teachers’ understanding of labeling and how it may affect their perceptions about their students due to their racial, ethnic or socioeconomic background have generally not been addressed. There is a pervasive color-blind perspective that assumes that discrimination and racism is a thing of the past and the playing field has been made equal (Collins, 2005). Thus, when schools define and practice equality, they are often attempting to provide the same opportunities, experiences, curriculum, and instruction for all students in different learning environments, regardless of the needs of those in the contexts (Milner & Tenore, 2010). However, Ladson-Billings (2000) declares the “rhetoric of equality” was meant to ignore the unique qualities of students, namely Black Americans (p. 208). As a result, when Black students exhibit distinctive cultural qualities that may not be recognized by the mainstream, they are often labeled. School-imposed labeling can also represent a form of macro cultural racism, institutionally privileging White, middle-class norms while deeming the culture of the labeled Black male student as inferior (White, 2105). As evidenced by the data, Black male participants of the study faced cultural racism at the classroom level due to teachers’ use of deficit language and pathology towards the “EC” label. This creates a devaluation of students in EC, their actions, their local knowledge, and their future collegiate and professional capabilities.

More efforts to genuinely utilize students’ voice and experience, however, could start to address the symbolic violence incurred by EC students. Employing a photovoice project that entrusts EC-labeled students to document the strengths and concerns of Excellence Counts, for instance, would position the boys as creators of the object of knowledge and provide a space for them to furnish evidence of their social (and mental) landscapes through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Rooted in Freirean principles (Freire, 1970), students in EC must be supported to participate in any (re)articulated purpose, blueprint, development and fidelity of the EC program. The boys must be viewed as collaborators, who are encouraged to identify and discuss their truth. This process understands plausible solutions can only be sustained with the active collaboration and leadership of students who have been labeled.

Encouraging students’ voice and experience could empower both students and educators at Leadership Academy in three ways. First, to honor students’ viewpoints allows for them to discover their agentic selves and effectively use photography as their “voice” to speak their truth (through photography) to adults, who for many students represent the power (structure) of the charter school. Second, EC-identified students could share their images with their non-labeled peers to begin conversations about shared commonalities that may exist across students inside and outside of the charter school. Third, the educators could engage in dialogue with the students about their images to understand how EC-identified students may make meaning of their very existence as Black males in and outside of school, particularly as Frank Wilderson (as cited in Dumas, 2016) asserted to be Black is, “a paradigmatic impossibility” because to be Black is to be “the very antithesis of a Human subject” (2010, p. 9). Thus, this space could also serve as a time when students could speak openly about the strengths and, for some, the social sufferings of being a Black male in America. Combined, the students’ images and narratives could serve as instructive tools for teachers and administrators at Leadership Academy who may have different lived experiences from their students and further help educators understand (and reduce) their biases and acknowledge the importance of addressing the intersection of race and gender inside of “no-excuses” schools. But this requires a level of humility and reflection from the adults. When adults cultivate a safe, affirming space for students in EC and allow students themselves to be part of the formation and improvement processes, eventually the perpetual deficit ideologies diminishes and the symbolic violence against the boys should come to an end.

[1] *The program, school, students, and any other name, dates, and titles in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and their lived experiences.*

[2] *After the research was collected, I was informed by an attorney that pushups can be interpreted as a form of corporal punishment and is against the law in the state Leadership Academy is located.*

[3] *When I used to tutor Arthur, it would seem that he did not understand basic concepts, concepts that the other sixth grade students in EC were easily grasping. I spoke with one of the EC leaders who informed me that teachers were incessant with Arthur’s mother to schedule him to be assessed for a learning disability, but she refused.*

[4] *Four debits in a day or week is an automatic in-school detention.*

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