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## Juxtaposition: The Coexistence of Traditional Navajo and Standards Based Curricula

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## Juxtaposition: The Coexistence of Traditional Navajo and Standards Based Curricula

### Abstract

Northridge Elementary, a small public school serving almost entirely Navajo students, was recently labeled with a failing grade from the New Mexico Department of Education. This study explores what this label reveals and what it conceals. Using educational connoisseurship and criticism as the method of inquiry, this study considers how the label interacts with the structural, intentional, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions within the school. As offered in the thematic aspect of the analysis, the label overgeneralizes realities of Northridge Elementary and is hindering rather than benefiting students.

### Keywords

Labels, Navajo, Ecology of School Improvement, Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism

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## **Juxtaposition: The Coexistence of Traditional Navajo and Standards Based Curricula**

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*Northridge Elementary, a small public school serving almost entirely Navajo students, was recently labeled with a failing grade from the New Mexico Department of Education. This study explores what this label reveals and what it conceals. Using educational connoisseurship and criticism as the method of inquiry, this study considers how the label interacts with the structural, intentional, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions within the school. As offered in the thematic aspect of the analysis, the label over-generalizes realities of Northridge Elementary and is hindering rather the benefiting students. Keywords: Labels, Navajo, Ecology of School Improvement, Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism*

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Labels in education are words or phrases assigned to students and schools in order to reflect academic achievement. For centuries students have been assigned labels in the form of letter grades. The labels “A” or “F” carry with them certain meanings, which translate to student achievement and imply accountability for one’s own learning. Sociologists have challenged the use of labels in society (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1951). Society uses labels in the form of stigmas to describe individuals considered abnormal or exhibiting undesirable behaviors (Goffman, 1963). Thus, labels are not necessarily a characteristic of the individual being labeled, but rather the label is a characteristic of a society concerned with normalcy (Becker, 1963). Labels can have unintended consequences. They can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, where individuals repeat undesirable behaviors because the label to describe these behaviors becomes part of their identity (Lemert, 1951). Yet, despite these understandings, labeling learning remains a key component of education and educational systems.

Throughout the standards movement, public schools have been assigned labels based on student achievement. The aim of this study is to try to understand what qualities are revealed and what qualities concealed though achievement labels, as well as how those labels affect the ecology of school improvement (Eisner, 1988).

### **Literature Review**

While labels attempt to appraise learning environments, they do not fully appreciate the characteristics and nuances within learning environments. Labels can be used to draw attention to educational deficiencies, but they can also take away resources from underprivileged schools. Furthermore, labels can have colonizing effects on indigenous perspectives, such as American Indians and Native Alaskans.

### **Accuracy of Labels**

The specificity of high stakes assessments and non-school factors affecting teaching and learning make it difficult to imagine how a label could accurately describe what is happening in a school or classroom. There are not always big differences in “high-performing” and “low-performing-schools” (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). Douglas, Paul, and Hughes (2008)

questioned the legitimacy of the label “failing school” and concluded if non-school factors were intentionally accounted for less than half of “failing” schools would be considered “passing.” Studies have shown non-school factors contribute to or limit student achievement (Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2002; McDermott, 2007; Walker & Mohammed, 2008). Labels are an external form of accountability, but they do not capture the unique characteristics of each school or student.

### **External Forces of Accountability**

As a central tenet of the accountability movement, external accountability is used in an attempt to close educational achievement gaps and expand opportunities to all children. While there is a range of research both supporting (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012) and refuting (Thompson & Allen, 2012) the effectiveness of accountability in addressing educational inequalities, it is clear accountability forces can take away resources from underprivileged schools (McDermott, 2007). Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, and Diaz (2004) found negative labels make it more difficult to attract quality teachers. They also found negative labels are a reason for teachers to leave a school (Clotfelter et al., 2004). According to a study from Finnigan and Gross (2007), teachers are sensitive to public shame, such as labels. Teachers experience more confidence and willingness to improve instructional practices with less external pressure (Clotfelter et al., 2004). While labels may very well be used with the best intentions, they can make it difficult to improve the conditions of the school.

### **Colonizing Effects of Labels**

After decades of boarding schools and other assimilation policies (Tiller, 1979), the U.S. government promised to allow for greater tribal sovereignty on matters such as education (Indian Self-Determination Act, 1975). Yet, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), about one in every six eighth grade students identified as American Indian and/or Alaska Native is considered proficient in reading, and the proficiency rate drops even further in math. As a result of these perceived shortcomings, the U.S. Department of Education has made it a priority to help close the achievement gap for Native American and Alaska Native students.

Brayboy (2005) argues that the U.S. education system has colonizing effects on American Indians. These colonizing effects are evident when schools serving primarily students identified as American Indian or Native Alaskan are forced to adopt the educational values and practices from a dominant culture. In a previous study (Conn, 2013), I constructed a portrait of Northridge Elementary where Navajo culture and the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (N.C.L.B.) appeared to be at a point of juxtaposition with one another. Despite the “worst school” label given by the *Albuquerque Journal* (Salazar, 2010), I noticed a school performing important local functions, such as providing daily Navajo language instruction. The scientific approach to learning, where students and teachers are evaluated based on standardized test scores, was not capturing some of the qualities of the school. Native cultures have different ways of telling stories (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Edler, 2007), different ways of learning science (Knapp, 2010; Lambert, 2003), different ways of understanding language (Calsoyas, 2005), and different ways of knowing than Western culture (Cajete, 2010).

While I do not come from a Navajo background, I taught in a rural public K-12 school in Colorado for 10 years. After spending time in Northridge (Conn, 2013), I often thought about the effects of the label “worst school.” From my experience in rural schools, I can relate to outside accountability forces conflicting with the culture of the local community. I wanted to know how the label “worst school” affected the curricular and pedagogical practices within

classrooms. I wanted to know how the educators within the school balanced the accountability requirements set by state and federal agencies with the cultural identity of the local community. It also seemed like I needed to find a different qualitative lens to understand the Northridge Elementary. As these curiosities continued to hold my attention, I read *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* by Elliot Eisner (1998) and realized that this arts-based approach of qualitative inquiry might pair well with some of my lingering questions. I decided to revisit Northridge in order to pilot a study about the effects of accountability-based labels on classroom environments.

### Present Study

This study employs a qualitative form of inquiry called educational connoisseurship and criticism, commonly referred to as educational criticism (Eisner, 1998). I chose this method of inquiry because it provides an arts-based approach in which I could notice subtleties in the classroom, while also appreciating culture and local flavors. Through this method of inquiry the researcher perceives educational environments through the lens of an educational connoisseur and critic “Connoisseurship, generally defined, is the art of appreciation” (Eisner, 2002, p. 215). “Criticism is the art of disclosing qualities of objects or events the connoisseur perceives” (Eisner, 2002, p. 219). Educational criticism has four phases: the descriptive, the interpretative, the evaluative, and the thematic (Eisner, 1998).

This study investigated three guiding research questions:

- *What do labels from state assessments reveal and what do they conceal about learning?*
- *How do labels in achievement affect the ecology of an elementary school classroom where a large proportion of students have a Navajo heritage?* This question is grounded in Eisner’s (1988) framework of the school ecology, which is the interaction of intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions within a classroom.
- *What are the implications of studying how labels affect learning environments?*

### Participants

I used a purposeful sampling method (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) to find individuals who knew about the impact of accountability labels on classroom environments. To understand how labels were affecting Northridge I decided focus on one administrator and one veteran teacher among the school’s teaching staff. There is only one principal, Mrs. Linda Toledo, in the school, and I asked her to recommend a classroom teacher for that study that had been with the school for at least three years. She said the school had a high turnover of teachers and suggested I ask Mr. Ray Chavez to participate in the study. Mr. Chavez remembered me from the previous study (Conn, 2013) and immediately agreed to participate in the study. I spent most of my time with Mr. Chavez and his first grade class. Additionally, Northridge’s speech therapist, Mr. Don Reynolds, insisted that I come into his classroom to observe language development for students at Northridge. Mr. Reynolds’ was not included in the original plans for the study, but it became apparent that this aspect of school life, speech therapy, was an important part of the school day for several students. Thus, the study included three participants: Mrs. Toledo, Mr. Chavez, and Mr. Reynolds. I did not include participants from a vulnerable population (e.g., children or adolescents, individuals with cognitive disabilities, pregnant women, prisoners). Pseudonyms were used in the place of all names and schools

mentioned in the study. The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado; see Appendix A.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data came from four main sources: teacher interviews, principal interviews, school artifacts, and classroom observations. Data collection from the teacher and principal interviews included an initial interview as well as ongoing interviews throughout the research process. The initial interviews were each about 30 minutes and followed a semi-structure format; see Appendix B and Appendix C. After transcribing the initial interviews, I asked follow up questions to clarify the answers and connect them with my own observations. School artifacts, such as daily reading and math assignments, were collected from the classroom so that I could have a better understanding of the curriculum employed at Northridge. Observations included how the school day was structured, seating arrangements, classroom realia, when and how instruction occurs, teacher autonomy, and what, if any, pressures were applied to the classroom environment to encourage student achievement. The observations were recorded in a research journal as a form of field notes. I visited the school for three days, and most of the observation time was spent in a first grade classroom.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis began with a connoisseur perspective, where I drew from my own expertise as a veteran classroom teacher when interpreting the data (Eisner, 2002). As a connoisseur, I looked for “subtle particulars of educational life” and “the way those particulars form a part of a structure within the classroom” (Eisner, 2002, p. 217). I tried to find the rules by which educational life at Northridge is lived. The analysis process began along with the data collection. In the analysis, I attempted to go beyond the data given to “fill in gaps, generate interpretations, to extrapolate, and to make inferences in order to construe meaning” (Eisner, 2002, p. 211). I wrote these observations in a research journal and looked for common themes that eventually were used to organize my findings. I used vignettes to describe and interpret my findings.

Educational criticism includes four aspects: descriptive, interpretative, evaluative, and thematic dimensions. I described the structure, curriculum, pedagogy, classroom environment, and the school community relationship. Descriptions come from the interviews, observations, and artifacts. While there is not a definite distinction between the descriptive and interpretive aspects, interpretation focuses on “ideas, concepts, and theories” that be used to explain what is happening (Eisner, 2002, p. 229). The evaluative aspect considers the realities of the label and how it affects school ecology (Eisner, 1988). The thematic aspect draws from the literature to reflect implications beyond Northridge Elementary. Do school labels in the form of grades from outside agencies help children inside the schools to which the grades have been assigned?

### **Description and Interpretation**

Northridge has changed since my last visit. The staff at Northridge made the decision to go to a year round schedule. This decision was made for two major reasons: (1) they wanted to help raise student achievement and (2) the staff felt the students actually preferred being in school as opposed to hanging around their homes all summer. However, a week before the new school year was scheduled to begin the school was vandalized, including a fire started in the administrative offices. The local law enforcement authorities were investigating the

incident during the time of the study, and an entire wing of the school, where the administrative offices were located, was sealed off while extensive repairs were being made.

### **Mrs. Toledo**

Northridge also changed administrators and reduced the staff size by about 40%. The former principal, Mrs. Knowles, was deeply committed to raising student achievement, and she especially focused on applying for grants to fund after school programs, tutors, technology, as well as literacy and math support systems. After nearly a decade at Northridge, Mrs. Knowles resigned abruptly halfway through the 2012-2013 school year. The grants she helped secure were coming to an end, and the school was left with no administrator and significant funding issues. Mrs. Loretta Toledo was the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Northridge during this period, and she was asked to fill in as an interim-principal for the remainder of the school year as well as continue to teach 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The loss in grants forced Northridge to reduce its staff size and cut many of the programs, including the after school program, Mrs. Knowles had worked to establish. Teachers were asked to teach multiple grades at once, and Mrs. Toledo was eventually offered a full-time position as school principal.

By accepting this position, Mrs. Toledo was allowed to resign her duties as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. The staff I spoke with expressed an appreciation of Mrs. Knowles' hard work and dedication, but they felt a sense of abandonment. While the repairs from the fire were well underway, Mrs. Toledo made her office off the stage, above the cafeteria/gym floor. The stage was used as a makeshift teacher lounge, complete with an old coffee maker and a photocopy machine.

Mrs. Toledo has a different style of leadership than I observed with Mrs. Knowles. Mrs. Knowles was unapologetically committed to raising student achievement, especially raising scores on the state assessment (Conn, 2013). By contrast, Mrs. Toledo seems more concerned with the overall well-being of her students. "I want them to feel valuable...Feel in themselves, in themselves, that they have intrinsic worth." Student achievement is a high priority for Mrs. Toledo, but so is suicide prevention and making sure students were able to get to and from school safely. Mrs. Toledo's approach to education, caring for needs of the students first, is a major theme I notice at Northridge.

### **Mr. Chavez**

The school day starts pretty early for Mr. Chavez. After making a 45-minute commute to Northridge, Mr. Chavez is typically one of the first people in the school-- about ninety minutes before the morning bell rings. There is a great deal of prep work that goes into first grade instruction, and, when Mr. Chavez walks into his first grade classroom, he is ready to get to work. There are writing journals to grade, math lessons to prepare for, and learning centers to set up.

By the time the students arrive, Mr. Chavez is ready for them. The door opens and 14 students scatter to their seats. All of the students are Navajo, and most wear their hair long and braided. After some morning announcements, Mr. Chavez begins his writing instruction.

Open your journals and tell me what you did this weekend...I went camping, but I got sick. (Several students laughed as Mr. Chavez grabbed his stomach). I got so sick I had to come home. (Mr. Chavez began writing on the white board). My journal would be...went camping, got sick, came home, went to bed, the end.

The children reach in their desks and pull out black horn-rimmed glasses along with their journals and pencils. They all put their identical glasses on at once and begin writing in their journals. “Why are they all wearing the same style glasses?” I wonder to myself.

Mr. Chavez moves about the classroom, prompting students to stay on task and to use the proper rules of grammar. A few students get up to consult with words written on the word wall. Finally Mr. Chavez sits at a large kidney table, as he announces that he will check the journals when the students finished. Within seconds a line of students begins to form at the table. While the first student, a little girl named Rachel, passes the inspection, the rest of the line is eventually sent back to their desks, one at a time, to address the various grammar problems Mr. Chavez identified in their journals. The class does not seem understand the concept of capitalization and punctuation. Finally, after a few attempts, the vast majority of the students have a journal entry Mr. Chavez will accept.

I later ask Mr. Chavez why the class was all wearing horn-rimmed glasses. He laughs and explains that they are “smart glasses” for the students to feel smart in. Mr. Chavez requested movie theaters in Farmington and Albuquerque to donate used 3-D glasses for his students to use in class. He then takes out the lenses, and gives them to his students to wear during school. “It makes them feel smart. I want them to feel smart.” This intention, for students to feel smart, is evident in Mr. Chavez’s classroom. While he does not hesitate in asking his students to make corrections or rethink certain aspects of their work, Mr. Chavez is also quick to point out the intelligence of his students. “You guys are so smart,” he often reminds his first grade class.

Despite being highly regarded in the school and community, early retirement appeals to Mr. Chavez. What seems like a never-ending cycle of limited resources coupled with unattainable expectations from the state has left Mr. Chavez feeling exhausted and defeated. Mr. Chavez’s students seem unaware of his frustrations. He has affectionate nicknames for every student and delivers a high-energy performance of instruction throughout the day. The students giggle as Mr. Chavez moves around the room mixing literacy content with humor. When I asked Mr. Chavez what he wants his students to take away from their experiences in his classroom his answer was simple, “The value of culture and education.” Mr. Chavez has high expectations for his students, but it is also clear that Mr. Chavez cares for the well-being of each and every child in his class.

**Schedules.** Mr. Chavez’s classroom is based around two major focal points, literacy and math. The students spend the first ninety minutes of the day writing in their journals. After a short recess, the students spend the remainder of the morning working through a phonics-based curriculum. Students then go to recess again, followed by lunch, and then back to class for math instruction. Some students are pulled out of class to go with Mr. Reynolds for speech therapy. Mr. Chavez gets a break when students are dismissed to specials. Specials include physical education, library time, art, and Navajo language. Each day of the week a different special, so it is rare for students to attend the same special more than once a week.

Mr. Chavez says he was reprimanded for getting off the schedule, when the former principal, Mrs. Knowles, was in charge. “Even bathroom breaks were not allowed, if they interrupted the 90-minute blocks of reading, writing, and math instruction. Under the new administration, Mr. Chavez tries to keep the schedule, but he also feels like he has permission to attend to the needs of the students. I especially notice Mr. Chavez’s willingness to prioritize what he perceived as the students’ needs ahead of the schedule.

It was almost an hour since the students had recess, and lunch was still over 30 minutes away. Except for Cindy, the students appear to be no longer focused on the long “e” sound. Despite his jokes and continual promise of a pizza party “if everyone comes to school and does



good,” the majority of the students are disengaging from the lesson. Mr. Chavez notices what is happening and says, “Wait a second guys, we need to get our blood flowing again. Everybody stand up.” Mr. Chavez instructs the students to mimic him, as he performs an impromptu dance using his hands and arms. After about thirty seconds, Mr. Chavez directs the class to follow Lawrence, one of the students, and Lawrence starts lightly punching his own head. The class laughs and follows Lawrence’s lead. After a few seconds, Mr. Chavez directs the class to follow another student, Rebecca. Rebecca begins marching in place, and pretty soon the whole class is marching in place. The game goes on until almost every student has a chance to lead the class. Laughter fills the room, until finally Mr. Chavez asks the class if they are now ready to learn. Despite a mixture of “yes” and “no” responses, the students sit back down as Mr. Chavez transitions back to the lesson.

I later asked Mr. Chavez about the decision to interrupt the phonics lesson. “Mrs. Knowles would have yelled at me if she walked in while we were doing that. They weren’t even allowed to go to the bathroom or get a pencil if it was during reading, writing, or math.” Under Mrs. Toledo’s leadership, Mr. Chavez feels a renewed sense of autonomy. “We try to stick to the schedule, but we don’t always have to stick to the schedule.” While it took a few minutes to refocus the class once the interruption was over, the students seemed to respond positively to Mr. Chavez’s interruption activity. Most of the students worked attentively through the final stretch of the phonics lesson before lining up for lunch recess.

**Caring for Lucy.** During my time in Mr. Chavez’s class, one of the students, Lucy, is especially fascinated with the *iPad* I used for the audio recordings. Mr. Chavez allows Lucy to roam the class and do basically whatever she wants as long as she does not disrupt the other students. According to Mr. Chavez, Lucy is on an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) legally requiring a fulltime aide throughout the school day for her. Despite this requirement, Lucy only gets an aide the first hour of the day, when one of the bus drivers comes in to get Lucy started. Lucy barely speaks and only seems to understand basic phrases. When the aide leaves for the day, Lucy is on her own. Mr. Chavez simply does not have the resources to help Lucy while trying to teach the rest of the class. “We are failing that girl,” Mr. Chavez confesses.

Lucy walks around the room as students work on their subtraction math assignment. Mr. Chavez and the rest of the class go about their routine, while Lucy walks back and forth, occasionally giggling or screaming. Lucy finally stops at the mirror where she can see her reflection. Mr. Chavez is walking around the room helping students as they complete subtraction problems when he notices Lucy putting my iPad her mouth. “Crazy, girl. You can’t eat that,” Mr. Chavez smiles at Lucy while handing me the iPad.

Taking care of Lucy is a big responsibility for Mr. Chavez and the rest of the class, but they seem to embrace their role. Some of the girls in the class volunteer to take her to the bathroom. When Lucy bothers the other students while they were working on an assignment, they politely ask her to stop. Mr. Chavez blames staff reduction, a decision from the district, for Lucy’s situation. “She’s supposed to have an aide,” Mr. Chavez said while shaking his finger.

## Positive Reinforcements

With a clear, warm voice Mr. Reynolds greets me and asks what I was doing in the school. Mr. Reynolds is not from the Northridge area and it shows. His debonair clothing and immaculate mustache mixed with a mid-Atlantic accent to contrast with the rich Navajo culture of the school. After explaining the purpose of my visit to Northridge, Mr. Reynolds invites me to watch him guide students through speech therapy. I do not want to miss any of Mr. Chavez’s

class, so Mr. Reynolds suggests I stop by during Mr. Chavez's plan period, during the specials time. I accept the invitation on my second and third days at Northridge.

Mr. Reynolds's room looks like an engaging place for children. There are games and activities all over the walls and on the floor. "Just notice how we have to talk to them," he whispers to me as I sit down at a kidney table to two kindergarten students and colorful foam animals. He grabs a foam zebra in one hand and a foam elephant in the other. "Which one do you want, Seth? Spots or stripes?" Seth points to the striped zebra, "Spots...stripes." "That is a perfect answer," affirms Mr. Reynolds. Mr. Reynolds believes students need affirmation, encouraging them to say words like "horn" and "flipper" to describe the various animals lying down on the table. He views negative terms and negative labels to be harmful to the students at Northridge. While the animals are engaging for the first several minutes, Seth is soon out of his seat across the room in the opposite corner of the table. Mr. Reynolds confronts Seth and makes him go back to his chair, but he intentionally avoids saying "no" or "stop." Mr. Reynolds just slightly raises his voice and commands Seth to join the group.

Stacey, the other kindergarten student at the table, has a difficult time saying words, like the word "hippopotamus." Rather than correct her speech, Mr. Reynolds waits and praises her for saying the word "horn" correctly. "Two months ago this one (pointing to Stacey) only owned 10 words," Mr. Reynolds says as he proudly smiles.

Although he grew up near Baltimore, MD, Mr. Reynolds has worked with Navajo students for decades. Mr. Reynolds believes negative reinforcements are part of the problem in Northridge. "When not being able to answer a question in front of your peers is not a positive experience, behavior (problems) will follow." Mr. Reynolds believes labels are also a problem. "Northridge for two years was the *lowest* school in New Mexico." He went on to explain his understanding of the situation at Northridge.

From victim to victor...you defy it (the label) no matter what label you're working with. And that's a label right there. You go, "I'm going to take this little baby step." And you say, "I'm one up." If I could lose weight as well as this kid is improving (his speech)...

Although Reynolds is not from Northridge originally, he believes the students of Northridge need more encouragement and less criticism.

### **The "F" Label**

I walk into Mrs. Toledo's office for our scheduled interview. She is in the process of sending out a letter to the parents to inform them about the "F" label Northridge has received from the state of New Mexico for the 2012-2013 school year. Clearly frustrated, Mrs. Toledo confesses:

I don't know exactly what the deal was that got us an "F." Because our scores came up! They really came up on our short cycle test and on our state assessment. Our scores came up. So, I don't know.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Toledo points back toward the letters:

We made fantastic growth. Then, somehow or another (she sighs), we got this "F." It was like a punch in the gut. How could have we gotten an "F?" How? How? How? How was it possible to do that? So, I don't know. I can hardly explain this "F," but I feel like we need to admit what the score was, and own

up to it, and try to improve it. But, I'm frankly stunned. Our scores came up, and they came up across all grade groups!

She throws up her hands in exasperation and then retreats to a sunken, defeated posture, and leans forward in her chair.

The afternoon gym class echoes through Mrs. Toledo's office, as I conclude the interview. At this point several students and a few adults are beginning to interrupt our meeting in an attempt to speak with Mrs. Toledo. She plans to send the letters about "F" label home that day, but it is also clear there were more pressing concerns that have to be addressed first.

As I consider what "ideas, concepts, and theories" can be used to explain what is happening at Northridge, it clear Mrs. Toledo, Mr. Chavez, and Mr. Reynolds all care deeply for the students of Northridge (Eisner, 2002, p. 229). Nell Noddings (2013) has extensively researched the topic of care in education. According to Noddings (2013):

Everything we do, then, as teachers has moral overtones. Through dialogue, modeling, the provision of practice, and the attribution of best motive, the one caring as teacher nurtures the ethical ideal. She cannot nurture the student intellectually without regard for the ethical ideal unless she is willing to risk producing a monster, and she cannot nurture the ethical ideal without the whole self-image of which it is a part. (p. 179)

Writing letters to parents about the "F" label from the state of New Mexico is a humbling task. Despite their best efforts, Northridge Elementary was labeled a failure, and it was time to own up to this label. Still, the "F" label conceals the extent to which the staff at Northridge cares for their students. The state may label as Northridge failures, but they do so without regard to the ethical ideal.

### **Evaluations, Thematic, and Implications**

The use of labels continues to be a key component of the accountability movement in public education. Tannenbaum (1938), Lemert (1951), Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), and others developed labeling theory to describe the stigma associated with using labels to generalize characteristics about people. In regards to education, labeling teachers has its roots in Bobbitt's (1913) concept of factory model schools where labels such as "weak" or "strong" were used to identify general characteristics believed to affect student outcomes. Public schools have also been assigned labels, particularly as mechanisms of accountability in response to *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report and *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001; NCLB).

While labeling schools is not legislated by NCLB, states and media outlets began using terms like "failing schools" to inform the public about schools believed to be deficient in student achievement, particularly regarding standardized assessment results. Bennett (1994), Hirsch (1996), and others reference these types of labels in arguments aimed at exposing a lack of functionality in the American public school system. Other voices, including Darling-Hammond (2004) and Ravitch (2014), have challenged the use of labels, citing their punitive nature that worsens, rather than improves educational conditions.

To understand the impact of the "F" label given from the New Mexico Department of Education, I reexamine my research questions.

## **What Do Labels from State Assessments Reveal and What Do They Conceal about Learning?**

The New Mexico Department of Education assigned Northridge the label “F” to indicate failure as a school. Mrs. Toledo is still not sure why Northridge received a failing label from the state. Notwithstanding growth on the state assessment, Northridge is still considered a failure. After observing the school, particularly Mr. Chavez’s class, for three days, I could see how a vast majority of the students would fail a standardized test based mostly on dominant cultural understandings of reading, writing, and math. I observed Mr. Chavez teaching students proper capitalization and punctuation in simple sentences for about 230 minutes during my time at Northridge. Yet, when Mr. Chavez would formatively assess them, 13 out of the 15 students still could not demonstrate they knew how to capitalize and punctuate simple sentences. Math was also a struggle for most students. Counting by tens proved to be a frustrating task for almost every student in the class. I can see why a statewide-standardized assessment would be difficult for students at Northridge.

What the label does not account for, however, are the extreme hardships students at Northridge face. When asked by Mr. Chavez, many of the students said they do not have running water at home. Mrs. Toledo said that a large number of the students spend two to three hours on the bus every day because they live in such remote areas from the school. The label does not say that when it rains the school must close because the rough dirt roads leading to Northridge get washed out. School was closed in the afternoon due to rain during my third day at Northridge. The label conceals students often begin attending Northridge with very limited use of the English language. Mrs. Toledo recently discovered a nine-year old girl that had been kept at home and had never received a formal education before. Mrs. Toledo knows when this girl takes the state assessment she probably will not pass, but, to Mrs. Toledo, it matters most that she is finally enrolled in school.

The label conceals the decision by the staff to have year-round school, or the vandalism and the fire that prevented this effort. The label conceals that last year Mrs. Toledo had to take over as interim principal, while still teaching 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This label also conceals a 40% reduction in staff at Northridge. The label conceals that fact that Mr. Chavez is doing just about all he can do to help his students, and he has grown weary of hearing that it just is not enough. The label “F” says a lot about Northridge, but it does not begin to address the daily challenges the students and staff at Northridge must face. The label also conceals the degree to which the staff at Northridge cares for their students.

## **How Do Labels in Achievement Affect the Ecology of an Elementary School Classroom Where a Large Proportion of Students have a Navajo Heritage?**

Eisner (1988) defines the school ecology as the interaction between structural, intentional, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions within the school environment. I noticed the “F” label, an aspect of the evaluative dimension, interact with the other dimensions. Mr. Chavez’s classroom structure is based on 90-minute instruction slots of reading, writing, and math. This structure was established under Mrs. Knowles in order to raise student achievement when Northridge was labeled the “worst school.” Students are allowed one hour per day to go to specials like library and physical education. But they do not have time for science or social studies. 240 minutes each day are devoted to learning about the subjects that will be on the state test.

The curriculum is focused on raising student achievement with regard to the state assessment as well. While Mr. Chavez includes some holistic language instruction in the journaling activity, the school endorsed curriculum is based more on phonics and spelling. The

math curriculum is a workbook filled with computation-focused lessons designed to raise student scores. While Mr. Chavez would like to experiment more with centers for differentiated instruction, he believes that whole group instruction is the best pedagogy for making sure students have what they need to succeed on the state assessments. The failing achievement labels have affected the school ecology at Northridge.

The intentional dimension, however, seems to be a less impacted by the labels. At first, both Mr. Chavez and Mrs. Toledo mentioned that they felt the labels affected their intentions. However, after observing Mr. Reynolds and listening to his comments about defying the labels, I began to notice that the perceived needs of the students influence the intentional dimension more than the label. For example, Mr. Chavez stopped in the middle of this 90-minute phonics lesson to allow the students to be silly and exercise before refocusing their attention back to the lesson. When asked what she wanted her students to experience at Northridge, Mrs. Toledo said, "I would want them to feel like I have a place that I call home." She went on to say; "I want them to feel valuable...Feel in themselves, in themselves, that they have intrinsic worth."

During my last day at Northridge, I asked Mr. Chavez if in fact his intentions were more affected by his perception of student needs than they were the labels. After thinking about the question, Mr. Chavez agreed with my observation. "I just want these kids to know that they are loved." The label affects the school ecology, but the educators at Northridge refuse to allow it to trump their core intention of caring for the well-being of students.

### **What are the Implications of Studying How Labels Affect Learning Environments?**

What does it mean to say a school is doing well? Elliot Eisner (2001) posed this question several months before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 became the law for public schools throughout the United States. Eisner warned that the answer to this question was more complicated than assigning labels generated by standardized assessments. "It's what students do with what they learn when they can do what they want to do that is the real measure of educational achievement" (2001, p. 371). The staff at Northridge embraces the idea of accountability and students achievement. However, labeling Northridge as a "failure" has begun to take its toll on the students and staff at Northridge. Mrs. Knowles, who was perhaps the most determined to improve upon the label, left half way through the 2012-2013 school year in frustration. While Mrs. Toledo and Mr. Chavez certainly want to improve Northridge's label, they realize that the label is not a true measure of student achievement at Northridge. For Mr. Chavez, evaluations would be far more helpful than labels:

Here's the bottom line...Do you really want to give fair grades...fair grades...Let me put it this way, if they want to give grades and they want to be fair about it, the only way is if they actually come to the school, instead of getting a faxed report from our school system. Let them ride a bus in the middle of winter through these dirt roads and get stuck like these kids do all the time. Let them see the houses these kids live in. Let them hear the stories these kids have to hear about, all that goes on on the "res" (reservation)...not pretty; it really isn't. I wouldn't want to live on the res because of what these kids have to go through. They tell me stories every day that horrify me, because, you know, my uncle this, and my aunt that, and my cousin died because of this or that. A lot of that goes on. And, unless these people come and weigh everything, weigh everything...How can you give a true grade?

Mr. Chavez' beliefs support arguments made by Eisner (1998, 2001, 2002) and others that if we really want to help schools, blinkered standardized assessments are not enough. Schools

need to be evaluated, because sometimes the culture and the intentions of teachers matter more to students than their scores on a state assessment.

## Discussion

As a way to offer recommendations and further explore the implications of labeling schools based on student growth, I turn to Eisner's question, "What does it all add up to?" (Eisner, 2002, p. 233) Do school grades from state departments help or hinder the children inside the schools to which the grades have been assigned?

Accountability labels generated by standardized, high-stakes assessments do not tell the whole story of what is happening in the classroom. This limitation occurs, at least in part, because of the specificity of high-stakes assessments and non-school factors that affect teaching and learning. As mentioned earlier, the idea for this research originally came to me in a previous study (Conn, 2013) where I concluded the label "worst school" in New Mexico was not an accurate description of what I was observing.

It is debatable whether AYP is an accurate instrument by which to label schools. Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor Richard Elmore observed: "The AYP requirement, a completely arbitrary mathematical function grounded in no defensible knowledge or theory of school improvement, could, and probably will, result in penalizing and closing schools that are actually experts in school improvement" (Elmore, 2003, p. 6). The label "worst school" assumes that AYP is a fair, legitimate standard by which to judge school systems.

Douglas et al. (2008) previously questioned the legitimacy of the label "failing school." They concluded less than half of "failing" schools would be considered "passing" under an achievement-based criterion, where non-school factors are intentionally accounted for. They found the label "failing school" "likely underestimates the effectiveness of schools that serve disadvantaged populations" (p. 242). The study also revealed some more affluent schools dropped from a status of "passing" to one of "failing" when using an achievement-based criterion instead (Douglas et al., 2008).

Not only are labels about failure susceptible to inaccuracy, labels of success can be misleading as well. Mintrop and Trujillo (2007) found there was not a big difference in "high-performing" and "low-performing-schools." The definition of proficiency varies from state to state, leaving Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, and Kang (2007) to question whether the states are lowering the bar of student achievement in order to claim that NCLB is helping student achievement. In addition to lowering the bar for student achievement, Lee (2008) believes some achievement scores could be inflated due to the focus of drills and classroom activities centered on passing a high-stakes tests. Lee's understandings support Douglas et al.'s (2008) claims that student achievement on state assessments does not always transfer to achievement on national tests, like those produced by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). States design their own assessments, which means that they can make them more rigorous or less rigorous than NAEP and other national assessments.

While labels themselves can be misleading, the implications of the labels also imply a false sense of the causes for the labels. James Coleman (1966) led a government research effort to determine the educational opportunities afforded at a variety of school settings. The study later became known as the *Coleman Report*, and it concluded that non-school factors, like student background and socio-economic status, had more of an effect on student achievement than school factors, like facilities and curriculum (Coleman et al., 1966). While the *Coleman Report* offered other findings and implications, the report sparked significant debate within the public policy and the educational field. Critics of the report pointed to design flaws of the study, such as the lack of longitudinal evidence and a bias of self-selection (Kahlenberg, 2001);

however, the claim that non-school factors contribute to or limit student achievement has been supported in other studies (Douglas et al., 2008; Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2002; McDermott, 2007; Walker & Mohammed, 2008).

Rural schools must often balance competing visions of what teaching and learning should look like. The culture of rural education coupled with the pressures of accountability means rural teachers often use more traditional forms of curriculum (Howley, 2003). While more traditional curricula might be seen as a positive consequence of accountability by some, Penrice (2012) concludes state departments of education, local school boards, administrators, parents, and community expectations contribute to an environment of accountability with layers of surveillance, judgment, and control. Inflexibility and underfunded mandates from accountability measures like NCLB compounds the challenges rural schools face, such as high poverty and teachers being asked to teach courses they are unqualified to teach (Lewis, 2003). A focus group of rural school principals indicated bureaucratic functions associated with large-scale assessment conflicted with the nature of rural education; they cited challenges with small student populations, multi-graded classrooms, and a lack of professional support systems (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). External accountability measures can particularly impact rural schools because of limited resources and local preferences of the community. Given the inaccuracies of labels as well their potential to take away resources from the very schools they schools they are supposed to benefit, I have concluded labels hinder rather than help students.

### **Limitations**

The present study focused on one school for three days. Consequently, this study is limited to the experiences and insights perceived through this window of time and space. Additionally, as I do not have a strong background in Navajo culture, I may have not noticed certain cultural dynamics that could have informed the research question: How do labels in achievement affect the ecology of an elementary school classroom where a large proportion of students have a Navajo heritage? Furthermore, this study was intended to be a pilot study to a larger research project focused on the impact of labels on rural elementary schools, so the research design is limited to the developmental nature of a pilot study.

### **Generalizability**

The study draws its generalizations in the thematic aspect of the analysis. I look to the literature in an attempt to understand “What does it all add up to?” (Eisner, 2002, p. 233) Do school grades from state departments help or hinder the children inside the schools to which the grades have been assigned? The findings of the present study are paired with the available literature in an attempt to make sense of the big picture regarding the affects labels have on schools. Labels hinder rather than help students.

### **Future Research**

This study is precedes a larger examination on the impact of accountability labels on rural elementary schools. It would also be interesting to notice how labels affect urban or suburban schools. As this study and the ones following it focus on elementary schools, future research should also examine the impact labels have on secondary schools. Finally, future research should continue to focus on the effects of the accountability movement on students from indigenous backgrounds. From my experiences at Northridge, I could clearly notice Brayboy’s (2005) claim of the modern colonizing effects from the U.S. education system. The

educational field needs to continue to monitor and be made aware of how policies impact students living outside of the dominant culture.

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## Appendix A

### Institutional Review Board Approval



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: August 29, 2013

TO: Daniel Conn, B.A.,M.A., Ed.D. candidate  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [422481-4] Juxtaposition: The Coexistence of Traditional Navajo and Standards Based Curricula  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: August 29, 2013  
EXPIRATION DATE: August 29, 2014  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of August 29, 2014.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

## Appendix B

### School Principal Interview Guide

1. Describe your education background.
2. How long have you been a principal?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. Describe your understanding of the recent grade assigned to your school from the New Mexico Department of Education.
5. What, if anything, is accurate about this label?
6. What, if anything, is not being taken into consideration when assigning this grade to your school?
7. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you approach your job?
8. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the structure of the school calendar?
9. How do grades from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the way the school day is structured?
10. How do the grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the curriculum at your school?
11. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you approach professional development for the teachers in your school?
12. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the way in which you evaluate teachers?
13. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you relate to the community outside the school?

### Follow Up Interview Guide

1. Would you elaborate about . . .
2. Tell me more about . . .
3. Can you give me an example of . . .
4. How do you perceive this impacting your school?
5. Could I add my observations, I noticed . . .

## Appendix C

### Teacher Interview Guide

1. Describe your education background.
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. Describe your understanding of the grade assigned to your school from the New Mexico Department of Education.
5. What, if anything, is accurate about this label?
6. What, if anything, is not being taken into consideration when assigning this label to your school?
7. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you approach your job as a teacher?

8. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the structure of your classroom?
9. How do the grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect your curriculum and how you use it?
10. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you teach students?
11. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect the way in which you approach your job evaluation?
12. How do grades assigned from the New Mexico Department of Education affect how you relate to the community outside the school?

#### Follow Up Interview Guide

1. Would you elaborate about . . .
2. Tell me more about . . .
3. Can you give me an example of . . .
4. How do you perceive this impacting your classroom?
5. Could I add my observations, I noticed . . .

#### Author Note

After ten years of teaching in the regular classroom in Colorado, Daniel R. Conn, Ed.D., accepted an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education position at Minot State University. Dan's teaches elementary education pedagogy as well as graduate level education courses. Especially influenced by the late Elliot Eisner, Dan's research interests include curriculum, pedagogy, and the interaction of dimensions within school ecology. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Daniel R. Conn at his E-mail: [daniel.conn@minotstateu.edu](mailto:daniel.conn@minotstateu.edu)

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