

Running Head: THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

***Through a Glass Darkly:
The Role of Culture in the Classroom***

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Abstract

This study is a reflective look at the role of culture in an elementary classroom. Using Evelyn Jacob's CIP model as a framework, the author investigates and celebrates the cultures of her students. Twelve of the students in this third/fourth combination class had parents born in other countries. They spoke many languages and practiced a variety of religions. By tapping into the unique resources of each student, and providing a venue for students to share their backgrounds, the class culture as a whole benefited. In order to advance the academic potential of all students, relevant cultural information was woven into the fabric of instruction. The needs of advanced ESL learners were also addressed through specific instructional interventions.

Through a Glass Darkly

Student journals sometimes allow teachers a glimpse into the lives of their

Figure 1



authors. In the beginning of the year, my students were asked to describe a memory or share something about themselves in their journals. The entry *About Me* came from a fourth grade student. In her journal, she thoughtfully describes her identity as a Sikh and ends her message with a plea, “don’t make fun of me” (see Figure 1).

This journal entry, and others like it, prompted me to reflect on how little I knew about the home lives and cultural heritage of my students and how little they may know about each other. It opened up conversations between us that led to the focus of my teacher research. What role did culture play in their lives? How did it affect their lives at

school? What were the benefits to be gained from an exploration of culture in the classroom?

There is a quote from I Corinthians 13:11; a Bible verse I memorized as a child, that includes this line attributed to St. Paul, “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face.” The “glass darkly” may refer to the reflective effect of an ordinary pane of glass when it is darkened or an imperfect vision of the events in our lives. In both cases, when looking out through the glass, one ends up seeing a cloudy, imprecise reflection of reality.

Before pursuing my research and investigating the cultures of my students, I sometimes saw through that “glass darkly.” I knew little about the cultures around me or the importance of culture to my teaching. Through the reflective quality of my investigations, I was also able to come “face to face” with many of my own preconceptions, establish new viewpoints, and come away with a new understanding of the role culture can play in the classroom.

Research Questions

The purpose of my teacher research was to investigate the role of culture in my classroom. Specifically, my focus was to answer the questions:

- How do the home cultures of my students influence their lives at school and how will focusing attention on my students’ home cultures affect their classroom interactions?
- Will the information I gain about students’ cultures help me to modify and implement instructional practices that better prepare my students be successful in the classroom?

Background of Participants

I spent the last year student teaching in a 3rd/4th combination class in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The school is located in a diverse middle-to-lower-middle

class community of many languages, cultures, and religions. Our school has students from a variety of African nations, the Arab world, Central America, Europe, and Asia.

My class this year is made up of twenty-two third and fourth graders. Half of the students in my class have parents who were born in different countries and who speak languages besides English at home. All of the students were born in the United States. Most of them come from middle class, two parent households. Their parents value and are supportive of education, but most do not socialize with each other or regularly attend school events.

All of these students came to school carrying a piece of their heritage with them. It is my assertion that unless I tap into that heritage to better understand my students, I may miss valuable opportunities to connect with my students and enhance both their learning experiences and the experiences of the other students.

Definition of Culture

An investigation of culture must first begin with a definition. Culture refers to the “shared meanings, patterns of behavior, and artifacts” of a group of people (Jacob, 1995, p. 454). These shared meanings and patterns of behavior can include those of ethnicity, gender, social class, languages, religions, or those of any group with a set of shared values. They can also include the rules and mores that govern behavior within those groups. The school is a place where diverse home cultures meet within a shared school culture.

Class Culture

For the class culture to function effectively, it should utilize the resources of all its members. There is evidence that students will be able to be more successful in the classroom if there is “greater congruence between their cultural backgrounds and such school experiences such as task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability” (Gay, 2004, p.34).

By focusing on the home cultures of all of my students, I hope to celebrate and utilize the gifts each student brings “to the table.” Too often, class cultures are defined by the presence or absence of student behavioral issues. The energy of the classroom teacher goes toward the students who exhibit inappropriate behaviors. In this climate, the resources of the other students can go unnoticed and not be stitched into the fabric of the class culture. It is my assertion that if the resources of all the students are celebrated, the class as a whole will benefit.

Cultural Inquiry Process

I used the Cultural Inquiry Process (CIP) model developed by Evelyn Jacob of George Mason University as a framework for my investigation. The CIP model focuses on an original “puzzlement” that an educator might have about a student or group of students. The educator then considers various cultural factors that might have contributed to the puzzling situation in an effort to understand it, and develops appropriate interventions to address it (Jacob, 1999-2000).

Since my research involved a cultural investigation rather than a “puzzlement”, I couldn’t use the Cultural Inquiry Process in its purest form. Instead, the CIP focusing questions (in CIP Step 3) allowed me to “tease” out potential issues and helped me better understand the cultural negotiations my students may be facing in the classroom.

Personal Cultural Identity and Perceptions

By reflecting on my own background and culture, I was able to consider the influences of my beliefs or values on the culture in my classroom. Rosemary Henze and Mary Hauser define cultural knowledge as what we need to know about to participate in a particular culture. Perceptual knowledge, alternatively, is the way we perceive or interpret the culture of someone else. These perceptions of others,

reflected through our own eyes, can also provide us with a new awareness of our own culture (Henze & Hauser, 1999, p.5).

An important first step in analyzing my knowledge of culture was to study my own cultural identity. I am Caucasian, Protestant, and I grew up in a middle class neighborhood in the suburbs. My ancestors were northern European, but both my parents and grandparents were born in this country. I have never lived in another country and my understanding of different religions and cultures up to this point was non-specific and filled with generalities.

I reflected on how these deficits could influence my behavior in the classroom. Was I calling on all students equally or was I calling on the most outgoing students more often? Toward which students did I direct most of my energy and attention? Did I make assumptions as to the abilities of my students based on their background knowledge, use of English conventions or grammar? Was I providing opportunities for students with background knowledge dissimilar to my own to add to the instructional content of my lessons?

Learning About Students' Cultures

I focused a major portion of my research on learning about the cultures of my students. The information I gained helped me to break down many of my original preconceptions, added to my culture knowledge base, and allowed me to see each student's unique cultural framework.

School Rules and Expectations

In order to address Evelyn Jacob's second question about school culture in my investigation, I looked to see if rules and expectations were clear throughout the school and whether the implicit rules of conduct matched the resources of my students.

Students bring different resources with them to school. Some students have physical, economic, and emotional resources in their families and communities, while

other students are lacking in those support systems (Payne, 2001). Students lacking in resources may have difficulty meeting school expectations for behavior. A positive school culture is defined by the successful integration of students bringing different resources and value systems from the community.

Evidence of Cultural Mismatch

I considered whether there was evidence of any cultural mismatches between the school and home cultures of my students. I asked students to complete surveys that addressed this issue and asked similar questions of parents both orally and in written form. To compensate for mismatches in their home and school cultures, students often develop academic learning behaviors to adapt to their situation. Ken Pransky and Francis Bailey (2003) identified academic learning behaviors as those that students learn to survive in the social and cultural context of the classroom when they are unsure of the rules.

I have also observed other teachers stereotyping and making generalizations about particular cultures such as, “the Indian children are always well behaved so I don’t have to focus on them.” This type of attitude, although meant as a compliment, could produce a shift of teacher resources away from certain populations of students, toward those she considers more needy.

Student Experiences and Cultural Meanings

In order to look at the effect of students’ experiences and cultural meanings outside of school, I considered their personal resources and peer influences. I asked questions that addressed these issues on a student survey as well as ones that brought out any perceived imbalances in power that could have affected their learning environment. The data showed that these were not major issues in my classroom. Most of the students were of similar socio-economic status and had similarly strong personal and family resources to support them. Peer influence, however, did affect

how students perceived themselves, but I found that the stronger the students' self image became, the less this was a negative factor.

Cultural Negotiations

In addition, I investigated the question of whether students had to negotiate between different cultural identities through a survey question that asked students if they sometimes felt like they lived in “two different worlds” with different codes of conduct. The results showed that this was an area of concern for some students. I developed the “cultural celebration” portion of my action research as a response to the stress some students felt as they tried to incorporate both their home and school cultures into their definitions of self.

Research Design and Data Collection Techniques

In order to celebrate the cultural experiences of my students and tap into the diversity of my classroom, I first needed to educate myself on my students' various backgrounds. Through formal and informal interviews, Internet research, and communications with parents, I learned about the cultural backgrounds of my students. I polled my students on their experiences, attitudes, and cultural practices by administering surveys early on in my research and again at its conclusion. I communicated with parents in a variety of venues and mediums including Back-to-School Night, parent-teacher conferences, an evening Cultural Tea, a reflective survey, a school-wide International Night, and personal emails. I also found other classroom teachers and the school administration to be valuable resources.

I then analyzed my data as I went along in order to plan next steps and implement instructional practices that would enhance the learning experiences of my students. Finally, I analyzed and reflected on my ending data to draw conclusions and recommend future actions.

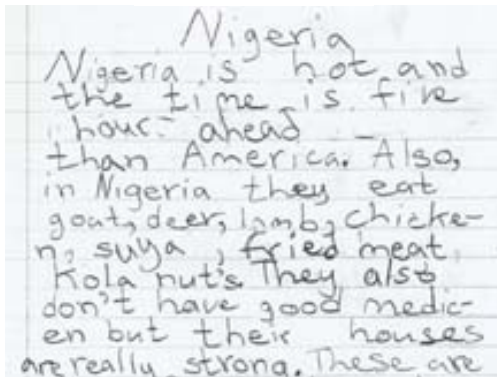
Student Culture -- Funds of Knowledge

In order to develop a knowledge base on the cultures of my students, I created formal interview questions and followed up with multiple informal interviews and conversations. In their research, Rosemary Henze and Mary Hauser (1999) recommended this “personalization of culture” and seeking out the “funds of knowledge” each student in the classroom possesses

I found out that Grace [all student names are pseudonyms] was Muslim and spoke five languages (in addition to English): Arabic, Pashtu, Farsi, Hindi, and French. Her mom doesn’t speak much English and has told her that if she speaks English she will forget her own language. Her parents fled Afghanistan in the 1980’s. Natalie, whose parents are from India, is a Sikh (pronounced sick). She speaks Punjabi, Hindi, and a little French. She is very proud of her heritage and went into great detail explaining her Sikh customs.

Chuck’s parents are from Nigeria (see Figure 2). He speaks Elbe at home. He

Figure 2



explained the special clothing an African chief wears.

was very pleased that we had just read a folktale from Africa called, *Koi and the Kola Nuts* since his family has eaten them at home. Kevin’s family was from Ghana. He speaks Twi at home. He told me that in the old days, people used to worship different gods and

As more students found out what I was doing, they also asked to be “interviewed.” My interviews took on a more informal tone as students shared their histories and brought in artifacts. These impromptu sessions were documented through anecdotal records and journal entries. I found out that Sally was a Buddhist whose parents were refugees from Laos and that Linda’s parents escaped from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Helen was also from Ethiopia, but from the southern portion.

Rebecca, Josiah, and Samson were from India. Tammy’s parents were from Portugal and Honduras.

Based on my preliminary information, I conducted further investigations into my students’ religions, languages, and cultures on the Internet. I was amazed at the variety of religions and languages in my students’ home countries. I compared their religions and learned their beliefs and practices.

In social studies, the fourth grade students were learning about culture as part of their Native American unit. For homework, they were to find out about their family’s home culture. I took the opportunity to sit in with them for the day and learn about their histories and heritages. I realized that many students whom I hadn’t spoken to as of yet had rich stories to tell that would have gone unheard if they had not had the opportunity to share. By focusing up to this point on only those students who were the most obviously international, or were the most vocal about sharing their cultures, I had limited my student’s voices.

Jorge explained the huge decision he had to make in a couple of years when he would choose whether or not to follow his Bahai religion. I found out that Katie spoke three languages (French, Arabic, and Walav), was Muslim, and her parents were from Senegal (see Figure 3). Allen’s parents were Filipino and Dominican.

The cultural focus of my research became noticed around the school. Several students from other classes came up to me at recess to give me a lesson on the many

Figure 3



religions and languages spoken in their country (India). The students delighted at being the “experts” as they pointed out the unique attributes of both themselves and their friends.

During my 3rd grade reading intervention group “SOAR to Success”, students from other classes asked if they too could share information with me and celebrate their cultures. From these casual discussions, I learned valuable information about the languages spoken by two of my students.

Early on, I created a survey to document some of the changes that were taking place and to explore some of the questions from the CIP model. Nine students chose to fill out the survey. Among them, three spoke English at home, but the other six were in homes where English was not the primary language.

This initial survey was useful to gain preliminary information on student attitudes and behaviors and to compare the responses of the English-dominant students with those who spoke other languages at home (see Appendix A). There was some indication from these results that there are perceived differences between school and home cultures. Several of the students indicated that they often felt like they lived in two different worlds and said that their parents didn’t like it when they acted too American.

They also thought that the rules were often different at home than they were at school for the same thing. Interestingly, only four of those students thought the rules at school were harder.

I also asked questions in the first survey related to how the students saw each other (see Appendix B). Three students indicated that they only “sometimes” got along with kids of other cultures. Also significant was the fact that 5 of the students were sensitive about the pronunciation of their names.

I continued to learn from the cultural lessons my students taught me. I experienced the diversity of India and Rebecca treated me to daily adventure stories of the Jain gods. During Ramadan, my two Muslim girls gave me a crash course in the proper technique of using a prayer rug.

Sharing of Cultural Artifacts in the Classroom

More students started bringing in artifacts to share with each other. Students brought in folk handicrafts, jewelry, and clothing. Kevin brought in a coin his father had brought back from Ghana. Tammy arrived with wooden toys her father had made in Honduras. Mary brought in an Irish dance tape and danced for us on St. Patrick's Day. One day, Grace brought in Muslim clothing and other cultural and religious artifacts to show the class. I was very impressed both by her confidence and by the respectful attention the class gave her. They listened attentively and asked probing questions of her afterwards. Without direct teacher involvement, the students had begun to connect with each other through the sharing of cultural experiences.

A study by Sandy Kaser and Kath Short (1998) showed me the benefit of allowing students to converse among themselves about cultural issues and about allowing inquiry to guide cultural discussions. Sometimes it's important to "get out of the way" and allow students to share with each other.

Later at my Cultural Tea, one mom expressed her surprise the day her son came home and explained how to be a good Muslim! As the sharing of classroom experiences, books, and artifacts continued, I was able to witness students learning from one another and developing new appreciations of their classmates.

Positive Benefits for Students

The celebration of culture in my class was creating positive effects. Children were clearly pleased to have their culture spotlighted through books either read in class or purchased in their honor. They delighted in sharing artifacts and were eager to share their cultural histories. Students who were previously quiet and disengaged during discussions became more animated and interested in life in the classroom. As their confidence grew, students also showed more risk-taking in their creative writing. Excerpts from Tammy's report card comments show her expanding skills as a writer.

Tammy's writing really blossomed this quarter. She has wonderful ideas for her writing and she expresses those ideas well on paper. She is developing her own writing voice and that is not something that comes easily to a third grade student.

Report card comments 01/24/04

Kevin, who stuttered and had previously showed evidence of low self-esteem, was lively and happy in the classroom. He would often come up to me during the day to share information he found related to Ghanaian or West African culture. He seemed surer of himself and his relationships with other students started to improve.

By focusing my attention on the cultural backgrounds of my students, I was listening to their stories and allowing them opportunities to be classroom ambassadors for their various cultures. I was not only giving them the attention all children crave, but I was helping them connect their lives at home with their sometimes very different lives at school.

Multiple Cultural Identities

During interviews and informal conversations, students also shared with me some of their multiple cultural identities and the importance of cultural context in their lives. Natalie, my Sikh student, saw herself as very dissimilar from her Hindu and Jain classmates, whose parents are also from India, but feels more in tune with Grace since they both love to perform traditional dances from their cultures.

Linda and Helen, both Ethiopian students, explained the differences in language and culture between them that made them more different than alike in their eyes. Katie, whose parents are from Senegal, has much more in common with Grace since they are both Muslim, than she does with Kevin whose family is from Ghana. Kevin and Chuck (from Nigeria), however, feel connected in their West African heritage. Students also showed me that sometimes their cultural identity is self-

defined. Josiah was much more interested in being defined by his Pentecostal religion than by his Indian heritage or the six languages he spoke.

Listening to and observing these students helped me get past generalities and the tendency to lump students together by country, religion, or language and to appreciate the individual contexts that defined my students' cultures.

Cultural Connections

The more I found out about my students, the more I wanted to learn about their cultures and provide them with more opportunities to learn about themselves.

I started collecting newspaper articles that referred to countries, religions, or other cultural groups to which my students belonged and shared some of them in class. I paid more attention to world events so that I could better understand the home cultures of my students. During indoor recess, the students from Ethiopia and Laos captivated me with the adventures of their refugee parents. Later, I brought in a newspaper article about Hmong war refugees from Laos hiding in a temple in Thailand to see if Sally's relatives were among them.

Both the students and I were using our past experiences and unique histories to connect with new information in ways that synthesized the two together into new frameworks of knowledge. We were creating our own "discourse communities" within the culture of the classroom (Pransky & Bailey, 2003).

Henze and Hauser (1999) have discussed "personalizing culture" and that it is the meaning that people bring to cultural experiences that creates cultural context. I had provided an interested audience for the students as they described and related tales from their parents' cultures and they had provided audiences for each other. Encouraged by my reception, they had found out more about themselves and then shared that knowledge with the class. Through our listening, responding, exploration,

and validation, we had personalized each cultural experience and created new rich contexts on which to affix cultural labels.

Parent Communication

Information and insights from parents also served as valuable sources of culturally relevant data. Guided by the research of other teacher researchers, I made an effort to give parents “multiple entry points” from which to engage in a dialogue about culture (Jervis, 1999).

Early on in my data collection process, school data sources provided accurate and telling information as to the cultural makeup of the school outside my classroom. At Back-to-School Night we created a poster where parents could fill in their family name, languages spoken in the home, and country(s) of origin. Conversations overheard between parents showed that they were both proud of their heritage, and curious about the backgrounds of others. This information helped me get a better picture of how my class fit within the larger cultural puzzle of the school community.

To further open up cultural channels of communication with parents, I held an evening Cultural Tea for the parents in my class. This provided an opportunity for me to meet and talk to parents about their cultures on an informal basis. I created a parent reflection form that parents could fill out before or after the tea. Interestingly, although the tea was well attended, only three surveys were returned and just one of these was from a parent who spoke another language besides English.

This lack of participation in the survey stood in sharp contrast to the positive environment of the tea itself. It may represent parents’ reluctance to respond in writing because of a discomfort with their English writing abilities or reluctance to respond to the personal nature of the questions. Another interpretation I could infer is that the parents are very satisfied with the education

their children are getting and felt that any responses could be perceived as a criticism of the teachers and the school. This last explanation could represent a cultural difference whereby what constitutes an appropriate response in our country is perceived as inappropriate in another culture.

At the tea itself, parents took turns sharing the unique attributes of their cultures. They relayed a strong desire to both preserve and pass on their home cultures. The following was captured in my Cultural Tea notes.

Since we had so many parents who were first generation Americans, the liveliest conversation revolved around the issue of whether or not to speak English in the home. Most of those present strongly supported the importance of their children speaking their native tongue or tongues. This belief was tied to a more general wish for their children to keep and further develop strong ties to their home culture.

Journal 01/21/2004

Although I had originally only invited the parents, many students asked if they could attend. They said that their parents could speak English, but that they were “shy.” In a study on Latina and Latino students, Robert Jimenez (2001) discussed the role that bilingual students often had to play as “language brokers” for their families. Although my students didn’t have to do direct translating for their parents, many of them served as a sort of “cultural broker.” The students were much more comfortable in social settings and interacting in an American style both with me and with each other. The parents were much more reserved and formal in their behaviors.

As part of a school-wide Cultural Inquiry Group, I enlisted a parent to serve as a cultural liaison. She was an Indian mother whose two sons have gone through our school. Her perspective contrasted with the opinions of most of the parents at my Cultural Tea and speaks to the strong emotions tied to these issues. Below is an excerpt from my Cultural Inquiry Minutes.

P. J., a parent of a 5th grade student, raised her two sons in an English-only household even though she and her husband speak another language (Hindi). As a result, P.J. suggested that the boys had fewer problems with language confusion in school. She also shared, however, that others have been critical of the fact that the boys did not speak her native language in the home. She offered that ten years ago there were less foreign nationals in our area and less opportunities for them to socialize with members of their cultural group. Those that were here saw a need for themselves and their families to acquire English skills quickly in order to communicate with people around them.

Meeting notes 01/22/2004

Culture Through the Arts

Our school is an Arts Integrated Model School (AIMS), so there were several school-wide opportunities for students to experience culture through the arts.

Recently, students were learning to integrate dance techniques from India and Southeast Asia with the elements of folktales. Throughout the year, they were participating in arts integrated lessons that combined language arts, social studies, science, or math objectives with specific arts objectives. In addition, they participated in cultural arts assemblies and experimented with art forms from other cultures throughout the year in their weekly art and music

classes.

Table 1

Our school-wide International Night is an opportunity for students and their families to explore the foods, crafts, music, and artifacts from many cultures. For my contribution, I implemented a “language lab” area where students “taught” other

Languages Recorded by Students during International Night <i>Language Lab</i>	
Korean	Russian
Spanish	Japanese
Tamil - Indian	Gujarati- Indian
Marathi - Indian	Arabic
Pashtu - Afghanistan	Portuguese (Brazilian and Portuguese)
Laotian – Laos	Twi – Ghana
Igbo - Nigerian	German
Tigrinya - Ethiopia	French
Punjabi - Indian	Urdu - Indian

students how to speak their languages by recording a word or phrase into a tape recorder. By the end of the night, I had 28 entries of languages recorded by students and many “customers” who tried to learn one or more of these languages (see Table

1). It was gratifying to see how excited the children were to hear and speak each other's languages. There is no doubt that the children who shared their languages and the families who were with them felt their cultures and language skills valued.

Incorporating Culture into Instruction

My second research question asked whether the information I gained from the cultures of my students would have an impact on my instruction in order to help make my students more successful in the classroom. In order to answer that question, I now began looking for ways to incorporate this cultural knowledge into classroom instruction. "Once teachers have begun to acquire personal cultural knowledge and cultural knowledge of the students they teach, a natural progression is to look for ways to utilize this information in their classrooms" (Henze & Hauser, 1999).

I researched both fiction and informational books related to my students' cultures and purchased them for the class library. Students began bringing in their own books with cultural themes from home. I started a book recommendation chart where students could

Figure 4



recommend books they had enjoyed to other students (See Figure 4). Cultural books often showed up in their thoughtful recommendations to each other. I had my own pocket on the chart, and I sometimes used it to ask students what they thought of the cultural books I had brought in or purchased for the class library. In response to these queries, impromptu written dialogues sprang up both recommending and praising many of our cultural books. These responses in turn motivated a new group of readers. Books on Ramadan and African folktales appeared in the classroom. Our celebration of culture was providing a natural context within which to teach a love of reading and writing.

I found ways to use the curriculum as both a showcase for our cultural explorations and as a medium through which to reflect on culture. As a teacher, I

understood that the “key to creating a successful learning environment for all students is to tap into the prior knowledge and skills that students bring to school and to make connections between their prior knowledge and new knowledge (Henze & Hauser, 1999).

I used books with multicultural themes to teach, not multiculturalism, but setting, theme, and character traits. “Making explicit connections between multicultural education and subject and skill-based curriculum and instruction is imperative” (Gay, 2004, p. 31). I used culturally-themed books as examples of folktales and historical fiction. We looked for evidence of mood in the books, *The Boy of the Seven Year Nap* and *The Little Painter of Sabana Grande* and discussed what made *Encounter* and *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* historical fiction.

In addition, I used multicultural literature to allow students opportunities to learn from each other. Students familiar with the setting or cultures mentioned in the books were able to share that knowledge with the class. Other students benefited from seeing familiar concepts and themes presented in new perspectives or settings. By listening to the interpretations and the cultural connections of other students in the class, all students benefited (Giorgis & Johnson, 2003).

Academic Achievement through a Cultural Lens

Another way that my cultural focus influenced my instruction was that I became aware of the struggles many of my students experienced with their academic subjects. The questions I asked myself were:

- To what extent were language or other cultural issues affecting the students’ academic performance in my classroom?
- Could information I gain from analyzing the reading and writing behaviors of my students be used to make them more successful in school?

Writing assignments since the beginning of the year hinted at the language issues my international students faced in order to make their thoughts clear in English (see Figure 5).

Student survey results from early in the year showed that all of the students who spoke other languages experienced difficulties communicating in either speech or writing. The individual writing conferences I had with these

students and analyzing their student work further supported my data. I also noticed that students would sometimes speak in truncated thoughts and sentences when they were engaged in casual conversation, often leaving off plural endings, possessives, and proper verb tenses.

I began to consider some of my students as advanced ELL students. These were students that either graduated or were never in ESOL (English as a Second Language) programs, but spoke another language besides English at home. According to Jim Cummins (1996), the advanced and continuing language development phase that English language learners (ELL) go through to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency can take 5 –7 years. This is the level of proficiency necessary to understand and respond to academic English; the language found in textbooks and the language used in developing higher-order thinking.

In his research, Cummins explains the difference between proficiency in the language necessary for communication and proficiency in the language necessary for success in content areas (Cummins, 1982). This proficiency can be attained in part by offering advanced ESL students rich authentic content area texts, explicitly teaching academic and content-specific vocabulary, integrating writing in context, providing

Figure 5

Our India culture.
 People speak in another
 language. They were dresses
 that have strips. Men's
 were buttoned shirts.
 There's different
 country's. Malaysia, Dhruv
 and Madras. They have
 kind of lake water.

opportunities for discussions and cooperative learning, and by supporting continued language skill development (Chamot & O'Malley, 1991).

I decided to investigate some recent test scores and report card grades to see if any students had exhibited problems that could be related to language issues. I first analyzed the results of a multiple-choice reading comprehension assessment called Test Ready. I then compared the Test Ready results to the language arts grades for the quarter (see Appendices G & H).

Although the data were not conclusive proof that my advanced ESL students struggled in academic subjects in comparison to other students, it did show a trend in that direction. In both overall grades and on the Test Ready assessments, the students who were the least successful were those that spoke other languages at home. Perhaps targeting these “invisible” ESL students for interventions in vocabulary, background knowledge, and language use, could help them catch up to their classmates.

Conversely, the data also showed speakers of other languages distributed throughout the score graph. This illustrates the fact that language issues are not the only factors involved in academic success and individual differences must be taken into account. Most of the students in the class come from strong families and draw from rich cultural resources. These strengths may help counter the early negative effects of second language acquisition.

Classroom Language Interventions

I determined that instructional approaches that benefit advanced ESL learners could also benefit the students in my class that spoke languages besides English at home. An awareness of the needs of these “invisible” ESL students helped me include many of these elements into my guided reading and writing sessions. I used every

opportunity to teach text-specific vocabulary in guided reading and began to more explicitly use and teach academic vocabulary to all the students in the class.

I created a semantic cluster bulletin board and had students sort and group related academic vocabulary (see Figure 6). These words were those found in

Figure 6



questions on many informal, county and state assessments. They were not words heard in conversation or generally seen in grade level texts. By providing and having students create their own semantic maps, students could begin to see connections between similar words and

to see the relationships between related or opposite words. These relationships could then help them interpret many of the nuances of academic language that appear in test questions. I took advantage of further opportunities to define and include academic vocabulary on class work assignments and in class discussions.

I was now also more in tune with possible reasons why students were giving me answers riddled with vocabulary, grammar and syntax errors. Instead of simply writing, “don’t forget to proofread” on their papers, I was now able to provide specific suggestions tailored to their needs.

Sally is one of the fourth graders in my class who speaks another language besides English at home. During guided reading one day, Sally shared a written answer where her syntax was out of order and her words were missing the appropriate endings. Sally’s parents are from Laos and she has exhibited similar problems in her speaking. The fact that I was aware of her language and cultural history allowed me to “zero in” on the problem and offer her concrete suggestions and strategies to help her improve her grammar and syntax. In order to help these advanced ESL learners be

successful in their language skill development, I can model these strategies in the same way that I model strategies that good readers use in my reading instruction.

Student Goal-Setting

A benefit from “spotlighting” the language issues that influence reading comprehension and writing problems is the resulting ownership it has given the students involved. My advanced ESL students are now very aware of what they need to do to help others understand their writing and speaking and to understand for themselves, what they read. They have come up with goals related to these outcomes when they have filled out their weekly goal-setting sheets with their parents. I then continue to work with them to make those goals specific and attainable.

Survey Results -- Language

I issued an ending survey to all 22 students (see Appendix D). In reflecting on their reading and writing, the most affirmative responses were in answer to the questions, “I make sure what I say and write makes sense” and “ I think I am smart even if I don’t get the grades I want.” This is a testament to the fact that students are paying attention to their speaking and writing behaviors. It also shows that their self-perception was high even in the face of disappointing grades. .

Conclusions for Language Instruction

It is my hope that daily teaching and modeling of reading and writing strategies, direct instruction of vocabulary and language skills, access to appropriate grade level texts, and opportunities to discuss and analyze literature will continue to help students make progress. If I am cognizant of the issues advanced ESL learners face, I can continue to develop appropriate classroom interventions to address the needs of these students. The key is to realize that even though students are conversationally fluent, they may still be lacking in some of the important skills and background they need to succeed in the classroom.

Results -- Attitudes and Perceptions

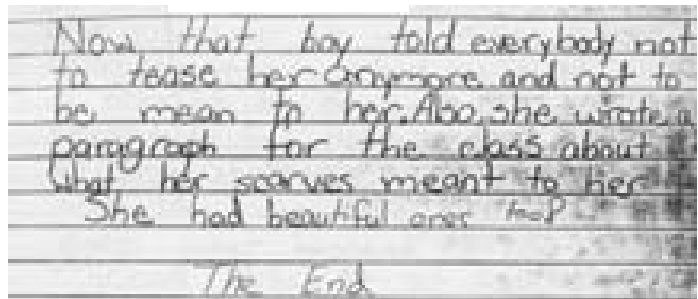
The primary purpose for the rest of the survey was to look for changes in students' attitudes and perceptions toward other students, toward themselves, and toward learning about the different cultures in the classroom (see Appendices E & F). The results showed that the students loved the positive attention they received from talking about their culture. In addition, almost 60% of the students had talked to their families about our cultural discussions. That meant that most of the students in the class had gone home and shared something we were talking about. This important link between home and school served to support and nurture the students more than either home or school could do in isolation from one another.

The majority of the students felt their culture and traditions were valued in the classroom. The students who had shared their culture with the class reaped enormous benefits from the cultural exchange. They felt more secure about themselves and valued in the classroom.

A student's writing assignment illustrates the attitude of cultural acceptance. Grace wrote a picture book titled, *The Muslim Scarf*. In it, she tells the story of a girl with a beautiful scarf that she valued highly. Others could not see its value and took it from her. The last line of the story reflects the new respect a classmate had for the scarf (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Students replied that they understood themselves and their family better now after our period of cultural sharing. More than half of the students who spoke to me about their culture have experienced a positive change in the way they see themselves and their families.



The survey results showed that by far the most popular venue for learning about culture was through the arts. Over 90% of the class liked learning about culture in this way. Art forms are motivating in and of themselves, so that students are fully engaged in the various mediums that are delivering the cultural information.

Just over 60% of the total students have read cultural books on their own at home this year. This takes a specific effort on the part of students to apply and extend what they have done in the classroom. In seeking out literature on their or other cultures, they have taken the learning out of the classroom and made it their own.

The last group of questions centered on whether students had learned from other students and if they felt more connected to their classmates (see Appendix F). The question that got the strongest affirmative response was, "I think speaking in another language is cool." Eighty-five percent answered positively. This was a very affirming result of the positive attitude toward speakers of other languages in the classroom.

The most gratifying responses of the survey showed that just under 80% of the whole class felt slightly more connected to or understood their classmates better as a result of our cultural journey. One of my goals was to create a class culture that had the shared values of larger cultures. Although this number is not 100%, it still indicates that the sharing of traditions, art, languages, religions, artifacts, stories, and other pieces of ourselves brought about some significant change in the way we perceived each other.

Conclusions

When I started my investigation, I wanted to first find out how the home cultures of my students influenced their lives at school and what would happen in the culture of my classroom if I focused attention on those cultures. I learned about my students and their cultures from a variety of sources including interviews, conducting surveys,

gathering information from the Internet, books, and other media, reviewing academic literature, and hearing from parents. We then shared and celebrated culture in our classroom in a variety of ways. We learned about our own and other's cultures through discussion and the reading and sharing of books with elements of culture. We also used books with cultural themes as part of our instruction and had opportunities to write about our cultures. We learned about culture through the sharing of artifacts, and celebrated culture through the arts. We personalized culture by listening to each other's stories, hearing each other's languages, and seeing each other in different contexts.

The culture of the classroom included students' perceptions about themselves, attitudes between students, and my own perceptions. We explored these perceptions and feelings through survey questions and through discussion. Those who did not have a dominant culture from another country were encouraged to value the cultural contributions of others and to appreciate their own uniqueness. I tried to respond to each student in a way that celebrated their individual gifts and affirmed their value to the class culture.

For my second question, I asked whether the information I gained about the students' cultures would help me to modify and implement instructional practices that could better prepare my students to be successful in the classroom.

The integration of information from the students' home cultures into the instructional curriculum helped my students be successful. Students were seeking out and reading books at home and school about their culture and the cultures of others. The more students read, the more they could add to their background knowledge, vocabulary, and experience with language structure. Using cultural materials to teach instructional objectives gave students of international heritage opportunities to utilize their own background knowledge to help them focus on the lesson objectives. Using

books they could relate to gave them a “leg up” on understanding the objectives of particular lessons.

Explorations into student cultures, shed light on the language difficulties advanced ESL learners face in the classroom. I was able to identify several “invisible” ESL students and then develop instructional practices designed for advanced speakers of other languages. I am now in the process of applying those strategies in the classroom.

Recommendations for Future Action

Explorations of culture can benefit any group of students and are not unique to the demographics of this class or this school. Knowing my students is the key. I can then continue to apply the interventions and instructional practices that most benefit that particular group of students. It is my hope that in the future, students with diverse home cultures will become strong role models in their schools and communities. These children can be positive influences in every classroom that celebrates the unique resources children bring to the cultural table.

Personal Reflections

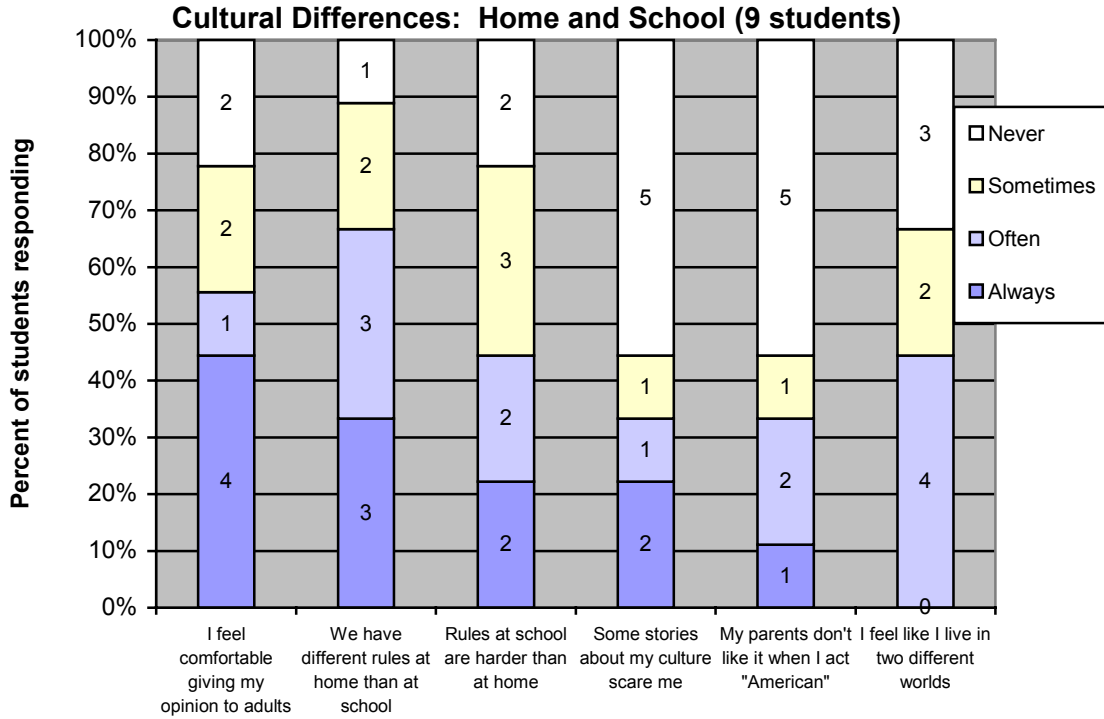
I am more aware of languages, religions, and cultural events in the world. I see my students differently. I used to be proud that I never noticed the color or race of my students and that I treated them all the same. Hidden in that statement is the reality that the “sameness” I saw in them was really a projection of my middle class Euro-American values. Instead of trying to see or appreciate their own cultural uniqueness, it was easier for me to blend them into a reflection with which I could identify. I now see that by ignoring what made them different, I was forcing them to come empty-handed to the table. Worse than that, they were not encouraged to use their rich and varied home cultures to help them build bridges to the academic demands of the class and school cultures. By denying their differences, I had shut a part of them outside the

school walls. The resources they had to give went unused and were seemingly unappreciated.

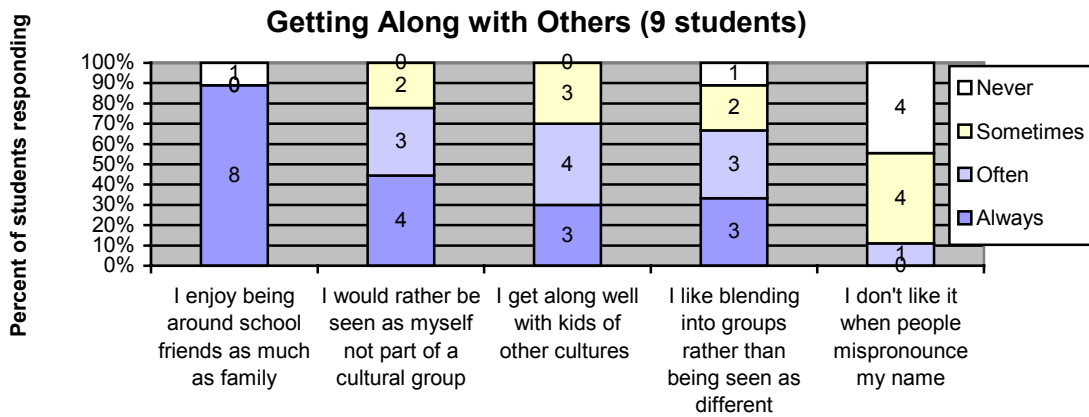
I now understand the significance and vanity of my omission. It is one played over again and again in classrooms everywhere. In order to give equal chances of success to my students, I must take the time to find out, to listen, to value, and to incorporate the gifts each child brings to my classroom. First and foremost, I must know my children and the families they come from. In knowing them, I can begin to find ways to use what they have, and get them help for what they need, in order to teach them. I can explore different contexts for learning and incorporate the unique strengths of my students.

The quote from I Corinthians 13:11 finishes in this way. “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as also I am known.” I still only “know in part” what the role of culture in the classroom can or should be, but I am sure that what I came “face to face” with was my own murky reflection and preconceptions about students and culture. What I see now through that dark glass are the individual, illuminated faces of my students whom I now know, “even as also I am known.”

Appendix A

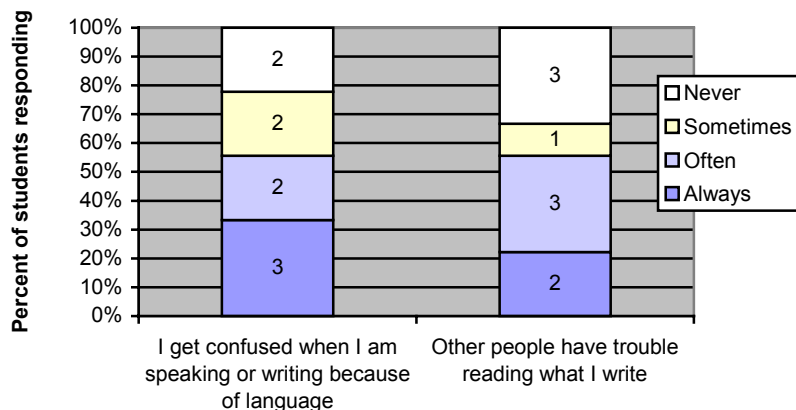


Appendix B

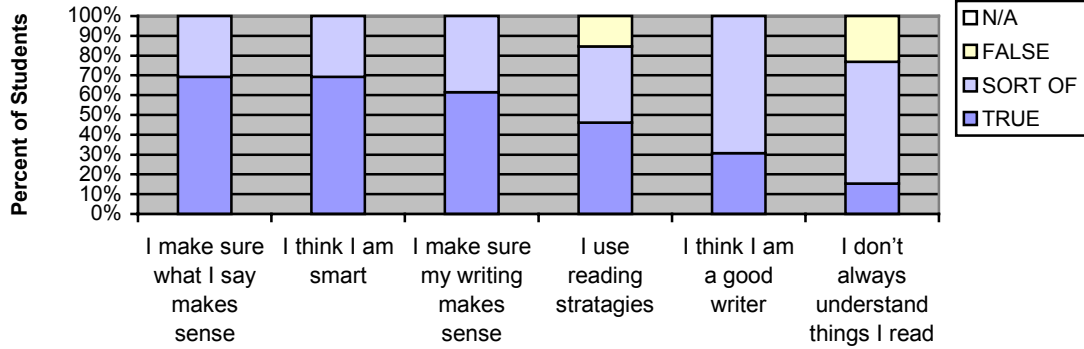


Appendix C

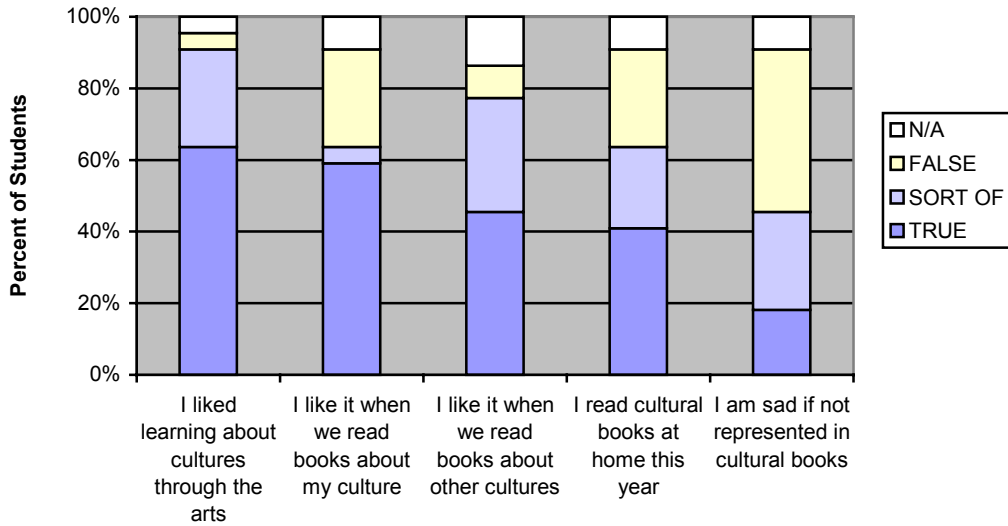
Writing and Speaking: Beginnings (9 students)



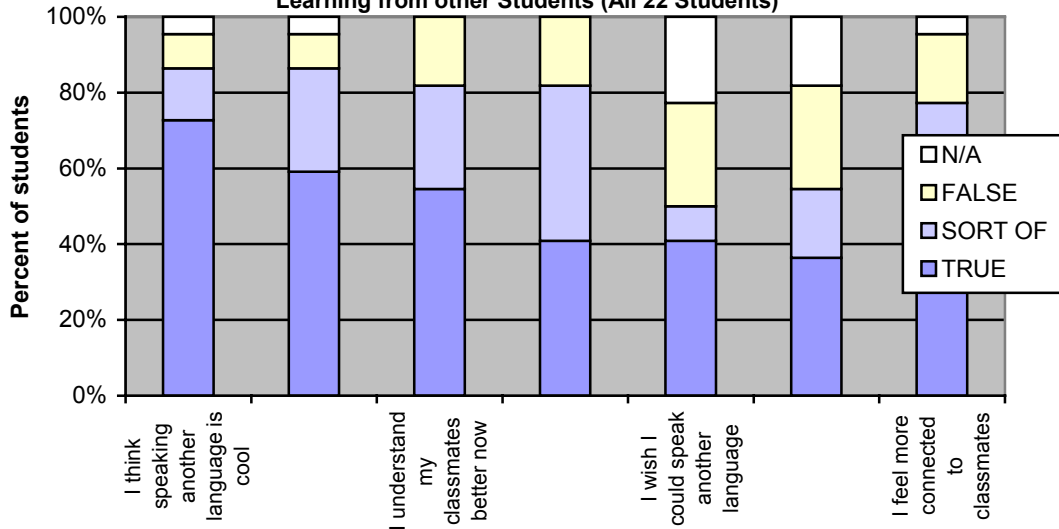
Appendix D
Reading and Writing: Speakers of Other Home Languages



Appendix E
Learning about Culture (All 22 students)

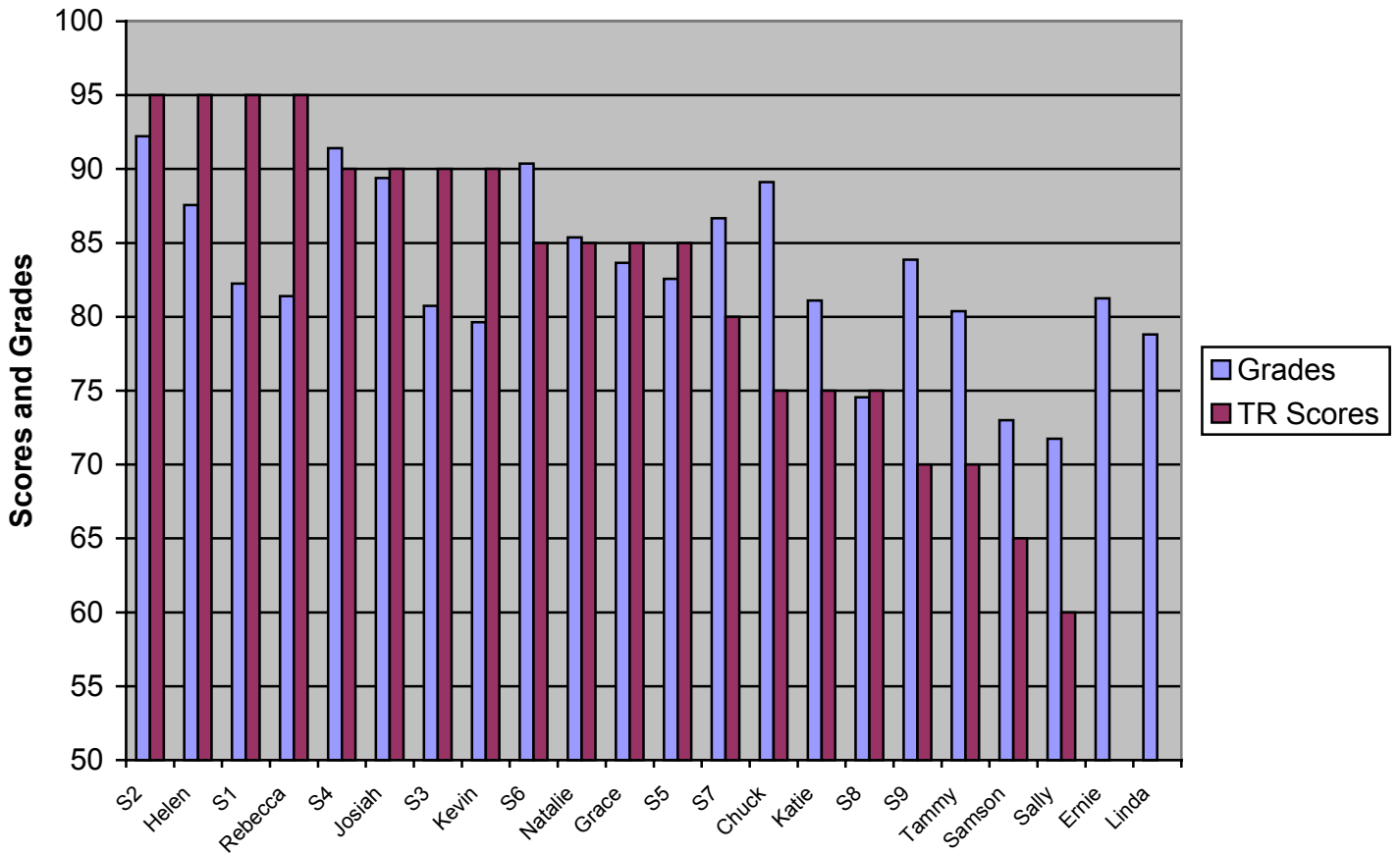


Appendix F
Learning from other Students (All 22 Students)

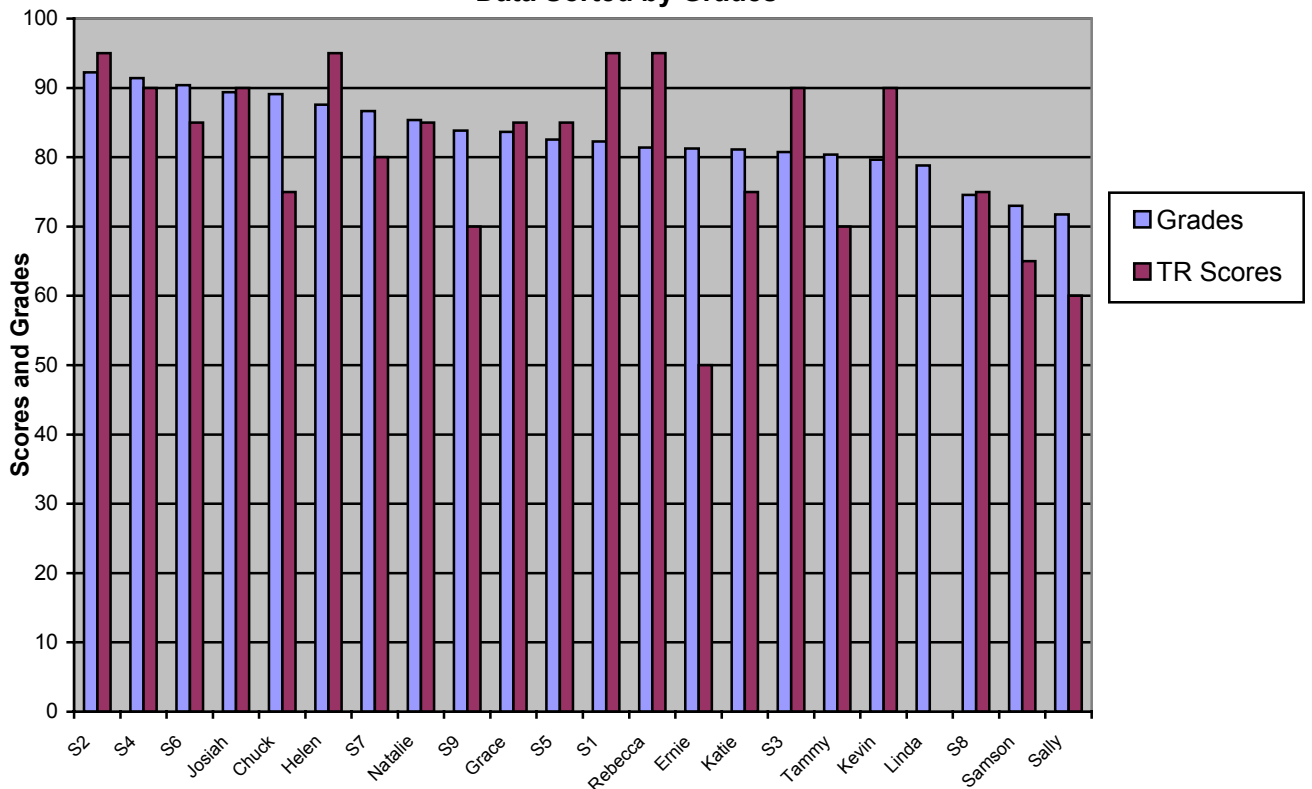


Through a Glass Darkly 31

Appendix G Data Sorted by Test Ready



Appendix H Data Sorted by Grades



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