Multiple forms of evidence:
A longitudinal case study of student achievement
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A longitudinal case study of student achievement

Student learning and the assessment of student learning are primarily a social and discursive practice (Johnston, 1997, Moss, 1998). Assessment is a broad range of behaviors that represent student learning and achievement across domains and over time. This may include both formal (e.g., standardized tests) and documentary (e.g., running records, observations, writing samples) types of assessment. From a social constructivist lens, all assessment practices are essentially interpretive in nature. This view has implications for the consequences of student learning and achievement. With teachers as the primary assessors in the school contexts (Johnston, 1997), educators construct various assessment decisions about students.

The concept of tension is prominent in educational research and has strong implications for assessment consequences. Within different domains, tensions occur between the student and the curriculum (e.g. Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981; Lee, 1996); the student and the teacher (e.g. Kos, 1993; Ogbu, 1991), and student’s developing literate identity based on gendered or classed curricula (Lee 1996; Collins, 1986,1996; Shannon, 1995). Research has shown how individual children have difficulty when the instructional contexts do not meet their current base of knowledge or their strategies for constructing knowledge. From within the social constructivist perspective, these sources of mismatch, or tensions, are seen as clashes between the cultural assumptions of the home and the school (Au, 1980; Heath, 1983, 1993; Michaels, 1981). Tension and conflict may result from competing social agendas in the classroom.

This research base suggests tensions are a source for learning about invisible relationships that occur within schools. Assessment of student learning and achievement involves a number of perspectives and foci. Of these, the tension between formal and documentary types of assessment is central (Johnston, 1998). Lipson, Wixson & Valencia (1994) wrote specifically
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about the tensions between external and internal assessment systems. A strand within this literature examined the value attached to "formal" evidence of student achievement and those attached to teacher-based or "documentary" evidence (Hodges, 1997; Johnston, et. al, 1995). Given this, the difficulties that students may face in terms of reading and writing need to be analyzed in terms of the interactions between various participants and social structures (e.g. classroom, district, state and national levels) rather than residing within the child.

We present a case study of Marty, examining his learning across the elementary grades to address the research question: In what ways is learning in language arts assessed and what are the consequences of these assessments? Marty’s profile from first to fourth grade showed persistent tensions based on multiple forms of assessment used during these years. The sources of tensions are located in mismatched assumptions about learning and achievement and how educators talked about and acted upon such assumptions. These tensions in representation of student learning led to instructional consequences.

Methodology

Description of the Research Context

Marty, the case study student, attended a K-4 elementary school located in a suburban district in upstate New York. Pepper Street school includes a population of students who are primarily Caucasian, though the diversity of the student population is increasing each year. Approximately 10% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school participated in a federally funded five-year research project examining the integration of literacy, social studies and literature in an elementary school.

Marty attended this school beginning in Kindergarten. During first and second grade, he was in a looping situation with a teacher named Jane Larson. For third grade, he attended Linda Barkley’s classroom. In fourth grade, he moved to Lucy Grey’s class for the 1998-99 school
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year. Both Jane Larson and Lucy Grey participated in the professional development aspects of the research project, with a focus on integrated instruction. We selected Marty as a case study student when he was in second grade due to his participation in the remedial reading program and his teachers’ observation that he was one of the lower students in her class for reading ability. Further, all of Marty’s teachers expressed concern about the complexity of Marty’s learning.

Marty is a tall Caucasian boy with blondish-brown hair, who comes from a working class home. His parents divorced when he was in second grade. Marty and his two older sisters divide their time equally between their mother and father. When Jane Larson suggested to his parents that Marty receive extra tutoring support, his mother told her they did not have the money for it (fieldnotes 3/18/97). Marty is well known by other students for his athletic talents, including his yearly first place finish in a running race.

Data Collection and Analysis

This case study is based on ethnographic data from four years, including: (a) formal and informal assessment measures, (b) fieldnotes and audiotapes from classroom observations, (c) student and teacher interviews, (d) copies of student work, and (e) portfolio documents. For Marty’s kindergarten and first grade year, we have only written assessment documents. For both second and fourth grades, we draw on extensive fieldnote observations of thematic units in which Marty participated (e.g., 25 observations over a two month period). In addition, for second, third, and fourth grade, researchers observed Marty on a monthly basis during academic instruction in various subjects.

Data analysis involved the examination of fieldnotes, formal records and interviews with teachers to document the assessment practices in the domains of literature, literacy and Social Studies. These included Marty’s standardized measures (e.g., CTBS scores, New York State
assessments), and informal measures (e.g., district assessments, report cards, teacher observation logs). Next, we analyzed contextual data (e.g., fieldnotes and audiotapes of classroom interactions; student interviews) of classroom instruction, Marty’s participation in this instruction, and his ideas about this learning. Further, we coded Marty’s writing samples during activities such as journals, process writing, and writing assessments looking for evidence of student learning. We also drew on supporting documents associated with educational experiences (e.g., letters to parents). From this analysis, persistent tensions appeared in Marty’s case throughout his elementary school career. One example of such a tension is that despite Marty was reading on “grade level” he continued to be defined as a “low reader” and be placed in a remedial reading class. We organized these tensions into three overlapping categories, presented below, as they related to Marty’s achievement over time.

In order to make sense out of these tensions, we turned to the concept of restructuring social theory based on the data that we had collected and analyzed (Burawoy, 1991). The extended case method, as this conceptual and analytic framework is labeled, functions by looking for anomalies or surprises in the data. Working from a framework that views assessment as a socially constructed and represented practice (e.g. Johnston, 1997, 1998) along with more recent views of assessment as discursive process (e.g. Moss, 1998), we examined the evidence to reconstruct these theories of assessment, rather than construct theories from the “ground up”. Part of assessment expertise, as Johnston (1997) reminds us is collecting data that help researchers to confront their own knowledge and restructure ways of thinking about learning and teaching. We focus on the concept of anomalies as producing useful conceptual and practical insight into discussions of assessment and representation of student learning and achievement.
The Case of Marty

In this section, we present multiple lenses from which to look at Marty’s achievement over a four-year period of time. First, we describe the institutional context for Marty’s elementary school. Then, we examine the different assessment measures teachers used across the four years.

Classroom Contexts

In first and second grade, Marty was in Jane Larson’s classroom. The school had a looping program where Jane moved with her students from first to second grade. Jane described her reading and writing program as student-led in which she placed a strong emphasis on students becoming independent learners through collaborative inquiry. Reader’s workshop in block periods characterized reading in her classroom, with Jane providing individual instruction and small guided reading groups. She utilized student-created texts, which combined both literacy and content area instruction, in both first grade and at the beginning of second grade. Students routinely used these texts to read to each other. In both first and second grade, Marty participated in classroom remedial reading instruction when the reading teacher led small group activities associated with decodable texts. In second grade, Jane continued with a literature based reading program. She used trade books to supplement her conceptually driven social studies curriculum, using the social studies textbook as a resource.

In third grade, Marty went into Linda Barkley’s literature-based classroom. Linda was a teacher who did not participate in the professional development aspect of the research study but was willing to allow researchers into her room to observe the students. Linda described Marty as a low to average student in her classroom who continued to exert effort and a positive attitude across curricular areas (report card 12/98). Mixed in with new students, Marty did not appear to have the same sense of community that he experienced in first and second grade. Linda’s social
studies program was textbook driven. Analysis of writing samples in student journals and writing portfolios revealed that entries were often connected to content area topics.

Marty participated in reading groups with the Reading Specialist three times a week. In locations outside of the classroom, these students read books that were thematically similar to all students but easier to read. Linda noted that work in content areas was difficult for Marty because of his difficulty with reading. The Reading Specialist said that Marty needed to continue to build his vocabulary, work on medial vowels and use predictions to aid comprehension (Report Card, 12/98). By June of third grade, the Reading Specialist indicated that Marty was reading “orally” at a 3.8 grade level equivalent according to the IRI (Informal Reading Inventory). Marty continued to progress in writing but needed to focus on editing and revising in order to make his thoughts clear on paper. His standardized test scores, both Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the New York State Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP), showed that he was above grade level. The reading teacher and the classroom teacher recommended Marty for reading support for the following year.

In fourth grade, Marty entered Lucy Grey’s literature-based program. Lucy organized her Language Arts and Social Studies programs around conceptual ideas. Students read trade books, newspapers, primary documents, and other texts in social studies. They read a range of novels across the year and participated in student-led discussion groups. They participated in extensive writing activities, associated with literature, social studies, other content areas, and story writing. Again, in fourth grade Marty received remedial reading support. Generally, the reading teacher participated with Marty and other students qualifying for remedial services within the classroom, usually in small groups within the regular classroom instruction. Occasionally, at other times of the day, she took him and other students to another room for targeted instruction.
Assessment Measures

Figure 1 outlines Marty’s assessment measures at the national, state, district and classroom levels. Marty took the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) in reading, language, math, social studies and science in first through third grade. Within New York state, Marty took the PEP test as a third grader and the English Language Arts test in fourth grade. The PEP test was a series of cloze procedure multiple choice questions. The new fourth grade ELA state assessment in 1999 included short passage multiple choice questions and extended writing connected with listening, reading and writing passages. At the district level, Marty’s reading and writing growth overtime was documented in a K-2 literacy assessment, a 2-4 writing portfolio, and report cards. The K-2 is a documentary assessment that includes running records of Guided Reading according to Pepper Street benchmark books. At the classroom level, there were a range of performance-based assessments including daily writing, teacher-made exams, anecdotal records, class checklists, running records and spelling tests.

Based on these assessment measures, three categories emerged that had a substantial impact on the way educators used and interpreted assessments. We framed these categories as tensions that became apparent in Marty’s case over a four year time period. The tensions are embedded within the categories: (a) individual progress and social expectations, (b) representation of student learning and achievement, and (c) construction of literate identity. These categories stemmed from our analysis and reflect the events and issues that most clearly showed tensions between Marty’s progress in his learning and the assessments that indicated his achievement. In the next section, we focus on each one in turn; first defining the issue or the tension, asking an overarching question, and providing illustrations from the data.
Figure 1. Measures of Achievement and Assessment

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{National} \\
1996-99 \text{ CTBS test: reading, language, math, social studies, science} \\
\text{State} \\
1998 \text{ State PEP tests: reading, math,} \\
1999 \text{ Fourth Grade ELA, Science, Math} \\
\text{District} \\
K-1 \text{ Assessment: Reading and writing,} \\
2-4 \text{ Assessment: writing} \\
\text{Report Cards} \\
\text{School} \\
\text{Grade Level} \\
\text{Classroom} \\
\text{Performance-based assessments, daily writing, teacher-made exams, anecdotal records, class checklists, running records, student work, spelling tests}
\end{align*}
\]
Individual Progress and Social Expectations

The first tension involves representations of student growth across assessment measures that extend beyond narrow or surface level indicators. In this category, we focus on the question “What counts as evidence?” to examine the differences between individual progress and social expectations. Assessment is a social achievement. Further, within our current educational system, assessments are normative interpretations. That is, educators often interpret individual progress in comparison to grade level peers. Marty made substantial growth over time and yet continued to be "at-risk" when he was compared with his peers, in both reading and writing.

First, we discuss Marty’s individual growth in literacy in first and second grade that led to questions about his placement in remedial reading. Second, we illustrate Marty’s growth in literacy within his fourth grade year and juxtapose this growth with his subsequent score of a “2” on the English Language Arts test, a standardized measure of student achievement.

Developing Literacy

Jane Larson, Marty’s first and second grade teacher, indicated that in the beginning of first grade Marty had difficulty spelling his name and was not able to identify all of the sounds and letters. By January, he was reading level 5 books and had progressed to a level 17 by the end of his first grade year (Reading Recovery levels). In second grade he was reading Guided Reading leveled books that were equivalent to a second grade level (see Fountas & Pinnell, 1999, pp. 24) at an instructional level but still was considered below average in terms of the K-2 assessment. Jane noted the significant gains attached to this increase in his reading level. Marty demonstrated strengths as a reader and writer. He showed a range of strategic behaviors in both his reading and writing and maintained his enthusiasm for reading. Jane Larson reiterated that she believed that raising twenty-two levels in one and a half years was a remarkable increase (fieldnotes 3/18/97).
When Marty looped with Jane into second grade, Jane was able to continue literacy instruction based on what she already knew about him. According to teacher comments and report card measures, Marty was reading in grade level range. He was still learning to be flexible with his strategies and working on fluency and comprehension. By the end of second grade, Marty was reading on grade level at an instructional level. He had increased his fluency in writing, producing more self-chosen writing pieces with increasingly conventional spellings. His teacher noted that his confidence had increased over the course of two years. Despite this growth and reading grade level books at an instructional level at the end of his second grade year, both the Reading Specialist and the classroom teacher recommended that he receive reading support the following year. Compared with his peers and the expectations of the class, Marty was considered still to be a “low” reader.

**Ongoing Literacy Development**

As Marty progressed through the grades, the issue of “what counts as evidence” was compounded with the question of “what counts as reading”. By fourth grade, the emphasis was on comprehension of text and reading connections to writing. In many cases, the evidence from previous years (e.g., CTBS, PEP score, K-2 assessment) did not capture the elements of comprehension required for successful reading and extended writing. Comprehension appeared to be one struggle for Marty based on the documentary evidence. For example, on a running record of the novel he was reading in November of fourth grade, *Children of the Longhouse* (Bruchac, 1996), Marty had a 97% accuracy rate. However, when asked to discuss what happened, Marty identified the characters and events but struggled with how to discuss the main points of the book.

Marty’s participation in the regular classroom instruction appeared to be quite beneficial to him in focusing on these comprehension and response issues. He participated in small group
discussions, where the main intent was to discuss the ideas and issues raised in the book. Marty started to take an active role in these groups, at one point in October arguing loudly for his interpretation of the book cover that was in contrast to others in his group (fieldnotes, 10/28/98). On almost a daily basis, Lucy Grey talked with him 1:1 at times around the book to assist him with comprehension and to further encourage his success in the discussion groups.

While Marty’s teacher indicated he made substantial individual growth within fourth grade, this contrasted with his standardized test scores. Marty’s writing showed marked improvement within his fourth grade with a clearer expression of his ideas, better organization of his thoughts, and recognizable voice in his writing. Marty’s individual progress as a writer was held to social expectations through the standardized English Language Arts exam.

On the fourth grade New York State English Language Arts (ELA) test given in January, Marty received a holistic score of 2 out of 4. For the independent writing section, he received a 2 out of 3. These meant that Marty passed by state requirements but was required to go to a summer school program for falling below the district cut-off line. However, this score does not reflect the growth as a writer and thinker embedded in these scores for Marty.

Marty’s writing on the independent writing part of the assessment, which involved looking at a picture of five frogs and writing a story about it, included a narrative structure and writing conventions. Marty’s wrote:

One day there were 5 toads. Their names are Marty, Len, Nate Chris and we all can’t forget Jake. So the 5 toads need water so they went into a pool. The 5 toads drink all of the water in the pool. They were stuffed. Nate, Len, Marty, Chris and Jake went home. Nate said something bad is going to happen. Jake got hurt. A tree fell on him. But he was ok. So the five toads went home. Look on back. The end.
This writing piece reflected his more in depth thinking about reading and writing that started to emerge in fourth grade. His voice came across in the passage as he used his friends from his class as examples of frogs in the story. Further, Marty indicated an awareness of audience and an uncertainty if the reader would know to turn the page, he wrote “look on back”. Lucy who was trained as a scorer for this state assessment said, “he has a clear beginning, middle and attempted an ending. There is a definite structure to his story”.

Even though he received a 2/4 on the state ELA assessment, his reading and writing showed significant growth for Marty as an individual noted by both his classroom teacher and the principal. However, because of the district cut-off he was eligible for summer school. This alongside of an analysis of Marty’s other writing showed his growth as a writer in terms of voice and in communicating a point clearly. In an interview, (7/99) Lucy noted, “I think as a writer he really grew a lot. He was much more able to...make and develop a point.” In both of these examples, Marty’s learning and a definition of success is contextually bound. This comparison or difference between individual growth and social expectations has consequences on placement and instructional decisions as well as how Marty learns to think about himself within these communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

**Representation of Student Learning and Achievement**

Student achievement is a matter of representation (Moss, 1998; Johnston, 1999; Murphy, 1997). Language plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of student learning and achievement. As McDermott (1996) points out, “language is not a neutral medium; it comes to us loaded with social structure…It comes to us biased with social agendas of a school system that pits all children against all children in a battle for success” (293). We define this category by the different types of language practices (both oral and written) used to make sense out of and view Marty’s learning and achievement. Examples of such language practices include teacher
evaluations, report cards, standardized test scores and how information is communicated to parents. The focus question in this category: *How is evidence of student achievement represented?*

In this section, we present two examples. First, we juxtapose a “snap shot” picture of Marty’s learning and achievement as represented on written documents and compare these with how Marty’s teachers talked about the complexity of his learning. Second, we examine representation of student achievement on a form letter describing the results of the state English Language Arts assessment.

**Marty’s Standardized Test Score Data**

The California Test of Basic Skills is a standardized achievement test given to all students in the district each spring. The components of the test are reading, language, math, social studies and science. Figure 2 (a chart of assessment measures) lists Marty’s test scores and report card markings across grades 1-4. The district used a combination of standardized test measures, K-2 portfolios and teacher recommendation in order to make decisions about remedial reading. At the end of both second and third grade, Marty’s scores on the CTBS test were on “grade level”. Further, his teachers thought he made a lot of growth in terms of his ability to read connected texts with comprehension. However, based on comparison with the overall level of reading in the class, Marty qualified for placement in remedial reading. This decision was based on comparison with his peers, and his proficiency with reading connected texts.
### Figure 2. Marty's Achievement Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) Reading</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.4 GE</td>
<td>3.1 GE</td>
<td>55 NCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTBS Social Studies</td>
<td>2.9 GE</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.8 GE</td>
<td>3.6 GE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTBS Language</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.6 GE</td>
<td>3.7 GE</td>
<td>58 NCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Services</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Representation</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Average/Low</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Card Reading</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Card Social Studies</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Card Writing</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York (ELA) Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TOT- SS 632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RDG- SS 630</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At both the school and the district level, educators raised concerns about the CTBS test. Consequently, Marty’s fourth grade year was the last time the districts used the tests. These concerns included: (a) the state curriculum and standards extended beyond the CTBS assessment, (b) teachers were familiar with the forms of the CTBS tests leading to concerns of inflated scores, and (c) the need for an assessment that was more closely aligned with the state assessment to monitor student progress across grade levels.

Marty’s teachers expressed concerns with Marty’s scores. Jane stated she was puzzled by how high his scores were at the end of second grade. Lucy Grey remarked in October of Marty’s fourth grade year upon examining the results of his third grade test, “these seem much too high for Marty”. In July, when Lucy was asked again about the scores she stated, “This was always curious to me. That’s not the way he presented himself as a reader and compared to other students with similar scores he seemed much weaker.” These numbers seemed most significant because the CTBS did not involve the same assumptions about “what counts as reading” as those of his teachers.

**Teachers’ Representation of Marty’s Learning**

As Johnston (1997, 1998) pointed out, teachers are the primary agents of assessment. They are also the primary agents of representing their “findings” either in writing or orally about student learning. Marty's second and fourth grade teacher knew a lot about Marty that was not included in any of his formal or documentary assessments. While the chart and the numbers present one “snap shot” of Marty, in the following section we illustrate how Marty’s teachers represented his learning. Both Jane and Lucy sought out ways to work one-on-one with Marty to nurture his progress and consequently had much to say about his learning.
Second Grade Teacher

Jane reported that Marty was one of the most complicated students with whom she had ever worked (fieldnotes 1/97). Jane spoke at length about Marty's strategies with literature. During observations and conversations with Jane in her classroom she consistently called on the texts Marty was reading, pointing out what level of the text and characteristics of the texts that supported Marty as a reader. Jane kept a file on each child with on-going documentary assessments and completed running records, pointing out where Marty did and did not use strategies, his self corrections, and the questions and statements he made during and after he was reading. She showed awareness of his writing, commenting that she was particularly proud of the connections he had made in the piece he wrote about the Underground Railroad because he had pulled in information from social studies as well as taking risks in his writing (summary of fieldnotes 2/97).

Despite Jane's emphasis on his strengths, that he had improved twelve levels in less than a year, and her on-going articulation of this, he remained one of the lowest readers in the room and as a result continued to need to receive remedial reading support from the reading teacher. Jane continued to collaborate with the reading teacher throughout first and second grade to provide consistency in their approaches to reading instruction.

Fourth Grade Teacher

Similar to Jane Larson, Lucy Grey, Marty’s fourth grade teacher, expressed awareness of Marty’s progress during several points in the year. In July, reflecting on his growth, Lucy Grey expressed detailed observations of his progress. She stated, “I think he made a lot of progress this year. In the beginning of the year, he literally cried every day for the first month and a half of school. Every day…I wouldn't have given the assignment yet and he would cry. I would just say what we would do and show it to him and he would just would shut down and panic. I mean
he never articulated this but my thought was that he was thinking, "I'm not going to be able to be successful. I won't be able to do this" (Interview, 7/99).” Her first goal was to help Marty realize that he could do the literacy activities and be successful.

Lucy Grey attempted to help Marty with this area by working with him one-to-one at certain points. She said of his early work, “So I would try to get him to that point where I thought if I leave now he will still read and he won't just shut the book. That took a lot of time and I was disappointed at that point in the year, Marty still needed that kind of a 1:1, when he was in a book that he was capable of reading independently (Interview, 7/99).” For Marty, the issue was not whether he could read the books but if he perceived himself as successful with these books and according to Lucy, “interested enough in what he was reading to continue on his own”(Interview, 11/99).

Both Jane and Lucy focused on a discourse of strengths when they talked about Marty. Further, they both recognized him as a complicated, fragile student who made extensive growth in different areas. Both teachers expressed some uneasiness in placement decisions for Marty. They both recognized a need for extra individualized help beyond what they could give him. Like other educators, they struggled with how to provide assistance within current school structures.

**Representation to Parents: The English Language Arts Letter**

The second area of representation is communication of Marty’s test results on the state fourth grade English Language Arts exam to his parents in a letter. While Marty’s score of 2 placed him above the state cut-off line (1 for failing), he was strongly encouraged to attend summer school classes. Student who scored within the “2” range received the following comments in the State Education report to parents:
Students demonstrate partial understanding of written and oral text at a literal level. They can recognize basic story elements, make some inferences, and identify some similarities and differences in two related texts, providing limited supporting information. Students’ writing shows some focus and basic organization, and uses simple correct spelling, grammar and punctuation, but errors sometimes interfere with readability.

(CTB/McGraw-Hill)

This letter, which represented Marty’s score on the fourth grade ELA, stood in contrast to how Lucy talked about his learning and the progress in his writing. The letter referred to Marty’s "growth" on the test as a matter of mechanics and readability rather than on the growth in thinking, writing and level of independence embedded in this writing during a test-taking situation. Both Lucy Grey and the principal expressed their recognition of this score as significant progress for Marty.

Representation involves consequences for student learning and achievement both in terms of placement decisions and how students and their families learn to make sense out of their achievement. The language of documents representing the interpretation of test scores has consequences that extend beyond the education community. These consequences include how students and parents are positioned with regard to knowledge, how these beliefs are internalized, and how this information influences daily lives, including their literate identity, an issue we address in the next section. Lucy Grey put it this way, “the harsh realities of the big picture means in many ways losing perspective on the individual child. You are no longer looking at individual growth but a child thrown in with the masses. [It’s] the difference between being a number and an individual in the system” (Interview, 11/99). In New York stat, fourth graders are tested on math, science, and language arts, and the scores on these tests make the front page of
the newspaper. Lucy regularly struggled with how to make sure students learned what they needed to know while also giving each of them the individual support they needed.

**The Construction of Literate Identity**

This category is the relationship between the development of literacy and overall achievement in school and the student’s developing literate identity. The framing question of this section is: *What are the consequences of evidence on student identity?* One of the areas that arose in Marty’s assessment data over time was his fragile identity. Notions of student literate identity include issues such as developing confidence as a reader, participating in book discussion groups, taking risks in reading and writing and articulating decisions and choices within broader social, cultural and political contexts. In this section we include examples that represent Marty’s literate identity: (a) his fragility as a learner and (b) his risk-taking.

**Marty’s Fragileness**

In first, second, third, and fourth grade, each teacher described Marty as a “low” reader. Observations of Marty suggested that he did not want attention brought to the fact that he was struggling with reading. For example, at the start of each thematic unit in fourth grade, Marty often selected the more difficult books that he knew would not be read by the students who saw the reading teacher. Lucy Grey said, “He would be upset about going to sit at the back table with Marianna [Reading Teacher]. He deliberately chose books to read that he thought the other kids that he normally was with wouldn't read… He figured out that if he did that [pick out other books] he wouldn't have to sit back there” (interview 6/99). Marty avoided tasks that placed him in situations where he might be perceived as a “low” reader.

Marty’s teachers consistently reported that Marty seemed to be a sensitive and fragile student. Jane Larson noted that in second grade it took a whole class effort to get Marty to answer a question in class (fieldnotes, 3/18/97). She reported that Marty would start to cry if she
pushed him too hard (fieldnotes 3/18/97). However, at the end of Marty’s second grade year, Jane Larson was confident that Marty had made a lot of growth in terms of seeing himself as a reader and writer (fieldnotes, 5/15/97). She was concerned that he would lose the growth he had made if he did not continue to practice reading over the summer.

Similarly, in fourth grade, Marty did not like to be pushed out of his comfort zone. When this happened he would cry (fieldnotes date, interview 7/99). Lucy Grey remarked in an interview about her academic expectations for Marty, (7/99) “And I was always worried about Marty’s self esteem because he seemed so fragile to me and I think he is really fragile… He knows that he needs extra help and he hates the fact that he needs extra help.” Lucy struggled with whether to make modifications to Marty’s work. Lucy further indicated that Marty thought he would not be able to accomplish assignments and was not comfortable in taking a risk to even attempt them.

At the end of fourth grade, Marty wrote in Lucy Grey’s class yearbook “I promise I will start with what I know (interview 7/99).” This quote summarized Lucy Grey’s view of Marty at that point, in that he appeared to have conquered many of his struggles with the progress he has made. Lucy Grey attributed this quote to what she told him during the school year. She stated, “…He told me that at the end of the year, because I would tell him that every time he cried. I would go up to him and say to him "[c]rying is not going to help you here Marty. You need to pull yourself together and start with what you know. You know something. Find out what you know.”

These strengths and this progress, however, are not reflected on standardized tests of achievement or in the amount of growth he made from the beginning to the end of his fourth grade year. Further, it is likely that part of the reason Marty was placed in remedial reading classes despite his on “grade level” test scores was his fragileness as a learner. Further, Marty’s
teachers expressed a concern that he would get “lost in the cracks” if he did not receive additional reading instruction.

**Risk Taking**

Marty’s literate identity included how he handled risk taking as a reader and a writer. Marty made substantive growth in this area. For example, being able to articulate his recommendation of a book was a marked improvement from third grade when he was unable to tell, in an interview, what books were his favorite and what books he would recommend (student interview, 5/98). In contrast, at the end of fourth grade, Marty wrote about books in a written survey. He wrote about his favorite books and what books he would recommend for the students next year. Marty wrote:

I would recommend **Patrick Doyle** because I think kids next year would like this book. I would recommend **Printer’s Apprentice** because it was funny. I would not recommend **Mystery in the Sand** because you can’t tell right away who it is. I would not recommend **Toliver’s Secret** because it did not seem real. [survey 6/99]

Marty could read both **Patrick Doyle is Full of Blarney** (Armstrong, 1997) and **Printer’s Apprentice** (Krensky, 1996) at an independent level, while **Mystery in the Sand** (Chandler Warner, 1990) and **Toliver’s Secret** (Wood-Brady, 1993) were more difficult for him in terms of comprehension. This seemed to indicate Marty’s awareness of when he knew he could read successfully and books he had difficulty understanding.

Lucy stated, “Marty needed to know someone perceived him as capable before he could trust himself to take risks. I really think that for Marty someone believing in his potential, his own confidence and performance are intricately interwoven” (interview, 11/99). As Johnston (1998) wrote, “[s]tudents who learn they are, in norm-referenced terms, “unable” become essentially helpless when they face new performance situations; they fail to use even those
strategies that they have, let alone seek new ones” (pp. 94). Marty’s teachers saw his emerging identity as fragile throughout his elementary school years. Lucy Grey was concerned about his transition into middle school, even with the growth he had made as a risk taker. How educators talk about, make sense of and communicate children’s achievement matters to students. In Marty’s case with reminders that he needed to “start with what he knew” and that he could be successful helped him to grow as a reader, writer and thinker.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The three themes (i.e., individual versus social expectations, representations of student learning, and literate identity) are overlapping rather than disconnected threads for understanding Marty as a learner. One of the striking contradictions in this case study is how the assessments that recognize the social nature of the student and learning (e.g. documentary assessments) are the ones that indicated that he was less “able” than his peers throughout his elementary career. For the most part, the standardized measures indicated he was progressing successfully. This finding seems related to two important issues. First, each of the assessments differed in terms of “what counts as reading”, leading to further complexity in how we could understand Marty. Second, it is clear that the teachers knew Marty better than either formal or documentary evidence. However, the teachers are working with a set of social arrangements that maintain a competitive-comparative notion of ability and learning.

“Snap shot” views of achievement, either formal or documentary, revealed an incomplete portrait of Marty’s learning and achievement over time. We cannot understand Marty without also understanding the context, overtime, in which his identity as a struggling reader emerged. Marty’s learning was much more complex than the level of book that he was reading. There were issues of confidence and risk-taking that were a part of his placement, his thoughts about himself in relation to texts and contexts, and his achievement. As we saw in his case, students internalize
ways of thinking about the relationships between themselves, texts and contexts. Throughout his schooling, Marty showed troublesome ways of viewing himself in relation to literacy and learning that resulted in an unwillingness to take risks and to avoid tasks that he perceived to be too difficult for him. Nicholls (1989) pointed out that in the culture of normative comparisons, children learn to identify with and develop a comparative-competitive notion of ability. In this framework, students are more apt to reflect on their progress compared with peers rather than if what they are learning makes sense. Without the social arrangements for making something of differential rates of learning, there is no such thing as learning difficulties (McDermott, 1996). However, schools, as they are currently arranged, often focus on individual difference and a comparative-competitive notion of achievement – one that is communicated to students in work expectations, grouping patterns and written assessment measures.

Growth is a more complex representation of what a child can do as well as the logic of his/her errors and the place for assessment. A focus on gains implies a linear sequence between teaching, the curriculum and a student’s scores over time. An increase in test scores is generally thought of in terms of positive gains. In the anomalies that appeared in Marty’s case, we found growth does not always imply gains on standardized test scores nor do gains imply growth in thinking and reasoning through a domain. Assessment may also involve more subjective understandings such as how Marty grew in terms of his self-confidence and his ability to take risks in both reading and writing. These include a set of literate dimensions not reflected on traditional measures of achievement. This means that educators need to continue to shape different discourses to represent children’s literacy learning. It appears that the school district was taking this issue seriously as they made decisions to change the assessments toward those that more closely aligned with their views of reading and curriculum. Tensions in student
learning and achievement may result in the restructuring of discourse around learning and continued learning for both teachers and students.

This data show that the teachers gave priority to observing literate behaviors in order to understand their students. Often, these observations were in contrast the types of literacy activities tested on the formal measures. Trajectory of assessment as ethnographic and context-based and issues of validity evolve from an anthropological framework of valuing ways of learning and knowing through observations and theorizing about connections. In this case, the educators were engaging with three constructs of validity. First, teachers may seek to establish and create documentary evidence across time and contexts (Gipps, 1994). Second, student learning and achievement should be viewed from a range of sources. Third, teachers taking an ethnographic approach to assessment may focus both on the confirming and the (dis)confirming pieces of evidence in student learning. As we have found in this case study, the places of tension in the assessment data are the places that provide useful insight into the complexity of learning. It seems clear that the teachers’ knowledge of Marty’s literate growth helped him to start to feel secure and confidence in his progress to allow him to be more successful in his own views of his literate identity.
References


