

Tatom 1

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Ethnographic Case Study

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Mrs. Harvey's fourth grade classroom at Sacajawea Elementary School is diverse and challenging. The focus is largely on community learning and growing together and helping each other to achieve success. The class is largely from low socio-economic situations. There is not currently any students within her classroom that do not qualify for free or reduced lunch. A large majority of her students are also English Learners, whose background before school is only in Spanish, as it is the only language spoken at home.

The classroom is made up of 25% EL Students (6/24), 12% on an IEP plan (2/24), 41.7% Female (10/24) and 58.3% Male (14/24). The student is set apart by about 75% Hispanic (18/24) and 25% other races (6/24), typically Caucasian. The classroom is characterized by many students who participate in the school's low income programs, such as assistance with lunches, backpacks with food for the weekends, and washing students' clothing when they are unable to. The school has been designated at a Title I school and thereby eligible to receive money from the federal government for a large number of students who are at-risk or from low socio-economic backgrounds (Green, 2008).

The school itself is within a neighborhood largely categorized by poverty with few resources available to the students within walking distance. The majority of support systems that are developed for the students are directly dependent on the school's

participation, such as through after school programs and teachers that create supportive, inclusive environments. A large amount of the students find themselves with few options to become someone significant. Many of the students though, find significant success through the school's efforts to bring everyone to the expected skills required by standardized testing. It has prompted a larger focus on helping students achieve more. This has led many EL students to become declassified as EL because of their growth in language skills and abilities based on the focus on those necessary tested skills.

As I have observed, I have noticed a large population of Hispanic learners within the school. This is minority population within the US and has become a highly controversial issue because it is directly influenced by policies on immigration. There is also a large quantity of students who are categorized at low socio-economic status. The purpose then of my case study was to develop a study based upon learning about a student of Hispanic heritage who was from a low socio-economic situation. As I have observed, I have noted a large emphasis on inclusion and praising differences as positive attributes. The lead teacher I observed also focuses on integrating examples that adequately reflect students' actual lives. She also works to constantly adapt her classroom. "You continue to learn new situations. Diversity is not only race but family environment, SES, and experiences they have had. I can't assume they know something. I try to bridge what they know to what they are learning. Always have an open mind and be sensitive to each student" (Harvey, 2011).

When I interviewed my lead teacher about this student, she described him as passive and shy, struggling with the language, but thinking hard. She said that he is a

really good kid and very caring of his siblings. She also described his learning style as very visual. "He has to see pictures and have experiences to go with learning" (Harvey, 2011). This very much fit with what I had observed both in seeing the lead teacher teaching and with the lessons that I had taught. If you can produce some idea of a visual, then he tended to do much better. Scaffolding the material and giving him strategies for learning are also highly helpful (Harvey, 2011). He "thrives on positive words of affirmation" and relies largely on teachers remaining within close range and acknowledging their presence (Harvey, 2011). He also tends to "stick to other ELL students who he can relate to" (Harvey, 2011). This was also evident in the interview I did with him. I noticed that he said 7 names out of 24 students in the class and all of those he listed were Hispanic, many categorized as ELL. The ideas presented in Framework for Understanding Poverty that poverty cultures are frequently cultures made up of collective sharing was also evident (Ruby K. Payne, 1996). "Because poverty is about relationships as well as entertainment, the most significant motivator for these students in relationships" (Ruby K. Payne, 1996). He stated, "We always play together. We like to share stuff. We always have fun" (Student, 2011). I thought this was interesting because when I talked to the lead teacher about grouping, she said that this was pretty typical to split into groups based upon race. While she felt it was not nearly as evident this year, she stated that it has been present many times within the school.

Another element that was highly evident within my interviews was that the student was extremely protective and caring of his siblings. Many times this also colored how he viewed administrators and teachers within the classroom. The interview revealed that he felt that principals "take care of us" (Student, 2011). Likewise, teachers'

roles typically were more geared towards helping to learn and being able to help if the student were hurt so that they could call home. Noticeably absent was any sort of relationship evidence that would have concluded that the student viewed the teacher or administrator as a friend, mentor, or second-parent.

Another noticeable absent element was any mention of the student's parents. This very much coincided with what I had learned from my lead teacher. "There are five kids and he is usually the care taker for them. Dad is absent most of the time" (Harvey, 2011). She also described a situation in which the student had won an award so the mother had come to school, bringing the new baby with her. The teacher came into the lunchroom to see that the student was actually holding the baby and attempting to eat at the same time. The mother was absent, somewhere in the building but not within eye sight. The teacher then proceeded to hold the baby so the student could eat and receive his award. The mother did not ask for the baby back at any point until she was leaving.

This story, the lead teacher related was only one of many instances in which she believed the student functioned in a parental role. This seemed to coincide with the reading in Framework for Understanding Poverty that stated that in many of these families older students serve as a stand in babysitter many times while still a child themselves. The student's answers during the interview really reinforced this, such as when I asked him "What would you do if you had twenty dollars you could spend on anything?" His answer was simply, "I would buy anything for my brothers and sisters. They are my best family" (Harvey, 2011). In fact out of the twenty one questions that I asked, 7 of his answers concerned family, many times when the typical response would not. He did not seem to view his parents as role models and really seemed genuinely

confused with the question I asked about who his role models were (Harvey, 2011). At first, I thought this was a language barrier, but even leading questions did not seem to help. Finally, he said that question was hard so we moved on with the interview. It surprised me that there was really no one that he could think of at first who could be considered a role model for him. Indeed, the students seemed sorely lacking in the resource of relationships/ role models, which is defined as "having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior" (Ruby K. Payne, 1996).

Another thing that makes this student distinctive from his peers is the exceptional poverty that he has experienced. The lead teacher made sure to point out to me that the family lives in extreme poverty. She told of situations in the past where the children were actually removed from the home. While the situation was not entirely clear to the faculty, it is believed that it was because the children were being asked to steal from grocery stores because the family did not have enough food. Likewise, the teacher said that at the beginning of the year she had to work with the student because he was stealing supplies. The faculty worked together to develop a system where the student can earn supplies for good behavior and since implementing it have not had any issues with stealing at all. In general, there are very few behavioral problems. Indeed, in the interview, there seemed to be an extraordinary effort to please, saying all the right things about school almost as if rehearsed. This fits with the reading on penance and forgiveness when behavior is corrected within the community (Ruby K. Payne, 1996).

One thing that I found difficult while observing within this classroom is really being able to get to know the student. He is very quiet and tends to be far more

introverted than many of his classmates. For this reason then, it was more difficult to observe any behaviors that might be occurring. I would have also liked to conduct another interview because I found that my questions really did not cover all that I wished to know to be able to understand this student. I also found that the culture difference also made it slightly difficult. This especially came into play when I was interviewing him. It would have been helpful in advance to prepare more scaffolding attempts and possibly visuals as well. Though I attempted at the time to scaffold the questions and tailor them to the individual, I would have liked to plan ahead of time certain questions that might have been more helpful.

This observation and case study was far more difficult than I thought it would be. At first, I thought I could be an impartial observer that objectively observed everything about the student within the classroom. That though, I believe, is nearly impossible. When you spend thirty or more hours with these students you cannot help but to become attached and it became far more difficult than I thought it would be to actually analyze what I was seeing. How do you attempt to convey everything about a person within 5 to 8 pages of writing? Indeed, I was surprised and saddened by how much this young student has experienced.

I had learned previously about students who took on parental duties early, but was shocked and dismayed to see it first-hand in one so young. It was strange and eye-opening to find out that there were actually students who would steal not because of malicious intent, but simply because they could never afford the item. I also had never thought about how much we as educators really take for granted that students have. For example, I had never considered the idea that a student of mine would come to school

confused with the question I asked about who his role models were (Harvey, 2011). At first, I thought this was a language barrier, but even leading questions did not seem to help. Finally, he said that question was hard so we moved on with the interview. It surprised me that there was really no one that he could think of at first who could be considered a role model for him. Indeed, the students seemed sorely lacking in the resource of relationships/ role models, which is defined as "having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior" (Ruby K. Payne, 1996).

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One thing that I found difficult while observing within this classroom is really being able to get to know the student. He is very quiet and tends to be far more

with a dirty shirt and without food simply because the family could not afford extras like a washing machine and sometimes even struggled with the necessities, in this case food. But I don't wish anyone to simply view the student I observed with pity and sadness because who he is is influenced by so much more than just his background. He is funny, charming, and helpful. He needs extra help to understand but in no way uses this as a handicap.

I also have once again been reminded how important scaffolding and a true understanding of students' previous knowledge really is. I have been lucky in having a tremendous educational background and a wide variety of life experiences that help me to understand the world around me. It's startling to me to then realize that many of the students in the classroom I observed have never left Idaho, some of them never going more than 30 miles away from where they grew up. This really limits how much they understand about the world around them. The other day in one of my education classes we were discussing how to really see how much students know and the topic of the ocean came up.

The idea that many students had never seen the ocean, sometimes the only experience may have been a movie was stunning to me. In the case of these students, I guess that you learn to do what my lead teacher does in every lesson of the year: scaffolding. As Human Diversity in Education states, "Educators are beginning to seek out concepts, skills, and strategies that will help students understand what is happening in other parts of the world so that they can function more effectively in a globally interdependent world" (Cushner, 2009). This I think is especially important when preparing students, especially ELs to perform in the formal register of standardized



testing (Ruby K. Payne, 1996). I have seen firsthand then, why it is important to actually teach students to take certain tests. They may actually have no knowledge of the formal register and thereby find it difficult, if not impossible to demonstrate their language skills.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, has been the revelation that I need to really make sure that I do not make assumptions about students without learning about home situations, past experiences, and knowledge. It would be easy to assume that a student simply is not trying hard enough or really just does not want to learn. Sometimes though, there is far more at play. They may be serving as parent to younger siblings. They may be struggling with the formal register and therefore find themselves unable to demonstrate their language skills. They may be from a family where poverty is an everyday present element. Indeed, the thing that sticks out to me the most from this experience is that students' home lives have a direct impact on the classroom. Indeed, it all comes back to knowing your students. You must really learn about your students in order to really be able to teach them.

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