WHY DO BAD TEST SCORES HAPPEN TO GOOD STUDENTS?

A COMPARISON OF TEACHER ASSESSMENTS WITH STANDARDIZED TESTS

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QUESTION

What can we find by comparing standardized test scores with detailed teacher assessments of a particular student?

RATIONALE

Popular media are fond of celebrating the "Kodak moments" of teachers' careers – the breakthrough with the difficult teenager, the struggling reader inspired to explore the world of Shakespeare, the adult returning years later to tell how a chance comment inspired her to pursue her dreams of college. In my twelve years as an educator, I have had my share of such moments. In fact, that's what keeps me coming back to the classroom year after year.

However, outsiders don't often see the frustrating moments of our careers. Some of these moments are similar to anyone's; being human, we can be impatient, lacking in understanding, or simply unable to find ways of reaching a child. These moments are indeed frustrating, but part of the joy of teaching involves finding ways to overcome these challenges. The worst moments of my career have not been difficulties with students, but rather difficulties with the educational system itself. At these moments, I have felt helpless in the face of the limitations and regulations of the system. I have given my students less than my best, feeling forced to make compromises that went against my professional judgment.

One such experience occurred for me at the end of the 2001-2002 school year, and that experience inspired me to conduct this research. At the time, I was teaching English and social studies to seventh graders. I had worked intensively with my students to foster both their reading skills and their love of reading. We read books, discussed books, and wrote about books. Most students responded beautifully, and some students in particular became such avid readers that they began taking home books every weekend, devouring them and coming back for more.

In April, my students took the New York City standardized reading test. Along with attendance and grades, this test was one of three factors determining promotion to the next grade. I took the test very seriously, and we spent a fair amount of class time practicing for the test and discussing strategies for successful test-taking. Most of the students did as well or better than I expected. Of my class of 30, 25 either met standards or were slightly below standards. Five students fell into the "failing" category. I was disappointed, but frankly, the scores of three of these students were no surprise to me. In spite of my best efforts, I agreed that their reading was still far below grade level.

However, two of my star readers also scored in the "failing" category. These two girls both had read numerous grade-appropriate books, had written creative and insightful responses, and would frequently take extra books home for the weekend. As the year went on, they had been able to read more difficult books and to read them faster. It broke my heart to have to present these girls with the mandated papers that informed their parents of their "failing" status. According to the city's policy, the girls were in danger of failing the grade and might have to go to summer school. What kind of reward was this for all of their hard work? How would this make them feel about themselves and about reading? I questioned the test. What kind of assessment could miss these girls' talent and progress? How could other students, who didn't read as well, have scored higher? I also questioned my teaching. Was it possible these girls really didn't understand the books they had read all year? Had I missed important clues when assessing them?

The questions raised by this experience mirror questions raised by my teaching colleagues across the country. As a nation, we are struggling to raise the academic performance of all students. City, state, and national governments are taking action to ensure greater progress and accountability, and much of their action is based upon test scores. The federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates that states develop content standards and testing systems for all students in grades 3-8, with strict yearly progress objectives based on the tests. In New York State, high school students will soon be required to pass a certain number of Regents exams to graduate, while younger students must take an increasing number of state exams. In New York City, the schools Chancellor recently linked pay incentives for district superintendents to the test scores of their students.

Teachers across the country wonder about the impact of such regulations on our lives and the lives of our students. What will happen to students like these two girls? What will happen to us as their teachers? What will happen to the systems where we work? Most teachers I know do not want to avoid accountability, but many have had experiences like my own. We question both our own pedagogy and the accuracy of the tests. We want to do our best for our students, and we want the system to reflect our progress fairly.

Because I would also be teaching these girls during the following year, I decided to use my questions about their test performance as a basis for my action research for the 2002-2003 school year. I decided to investigate the disconnect between my own knowledge of my students'

progress and their standardized test scores. I wondered what I could find by comparing standardized test scores with detailed teacher assessments of a particular student.

CONTEXT

I teach at a large public middle school in New York City. During the 2000-2001 school year, the school served 1, 680 students in grades 5-8, operating at slightly over 100% capacity. Of these students, more than 88% were eligible for free lunch. The ethnic composition of the student body was 95% Hispanic, 4% African-American, and 1% from other ethnic groups. Approximately 10% of the student body consisted of recent immigrants, and 470 (28%) were designated English Language Learners because they have not passed an English proficiency test. We boasted a 93% attendance rate.

Of the school's teaching staff, 65.4% were fully licensed and permanently assigned to the school. Only 49% had more than five years of teaching experience, but 69.2% had received a masters' degree or higher.

The school struggles with the issue of test scores each year. Our students take one of two language arts tests, both of which are published by CTB/McGraw-Hill.² Fifth, sixth, and seventh graders take the CTB-Reading test. According to the New York City Department of Education, this test includes a variety of genres and measures students' attainment of skills such as basic understanding, the analysis of text, evaluating and extending meaning, and identifying reading strategies. It is a timed test that includes 50 questions to be answered in 70 minutes. The test is machine scored at a central location.

Eighth graders take the New York State English Language Arts exam (ELA). This test contains both multiple-choice questions based on brief reading passages and performance assessment items. According to the Department of Education, this test measures students' attainment of skills such as understanding story events, drawing conclusions, making predictions, identifying the main idea, using vocabulary strategies, identifying supporting details, identifying point of view, evaluating ideas, understanding features that distinguish genres, and using figurative language to interpret text. The eighth-grade test is a timed test that is given over a two-day period. It contains the following sections:

¹ Information regarding the school's demographics and test scores is taken from the following source: (New York City Department of Education, *2000-2001 annual school report*, 2002).

² Information regarding the CTB-Reading and ELA tests is taken from the following source: (New York City Department of Education, *State and city ELA/reading test results*, 2002).

- 25 multiple choice reading questions, to be answered in 40 minutes;
- listening, in which students take notes on a passage read aloud, and then construct both short and long written responses;
- reading, in which students read two passages, and then construct both short and long written responses using information from both passages; and
- writing, in which students construct an extended essay.

The multiple choice portion of the test is machine scored at a central location. The written portions are scored at the district level, using local teachers and staff trained using state materials. However, because of concerns over reliability, the multiple choice questions account for well over 50% of a student's overall score on the ELA exam.

On both the CTB and the ELA, student scores are reported as both scale scores and performance levels. The performance levels are meant to indicate the extent to which students have met the learning standards for their grade and are designated as follows:

Level 4: Students exceed the learning standards for English Language Arts. Their performance shows superior understanding of written and oral text.

Level 3: Students meet the learning standards. Their performance shows thorough understanding of written and oral text.

Level 2: Students show partial achievement of the learning standards. Their performance shows partial understanding of written and oral text.

Level 1: Students do not meet the learning standards. Their performance shows minimal understanding of written and oral text.

Because not enough of the students in my school are meeting or exceeding the standards, we are currently in corrective action status, a prelude to a takeover by the state. For example, in 2001, a lower percentage of our students met or exceeded standards than students citywide. Even when compared to similar schools (defined as school with similar proportions of students eligible for the Free Lunch Program, tested special education students, and English Language Learners) a lower percentage of our students reached the standards.

Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards (Scoring at Levels 3 and 4)

	My School	Similar Schools	Citywide
Sixth and seventh grades	21%	24.5%	34.2%
Eighth grade	21.1%	23.9%	33%

However, our school also tends to have slightly fewer students scoring far below standards when compared to similar schools (although not when compared to schools citywide.)

Percentage of Students Scoring Far Below Standards (Level 1)

	My School	Similar Schools	Citywide
Sixth and seventh grades	26.9%	30.2%	23.8%
Eighth grade	27.8%	29%	22.8%

One notable factor affecting test scores may be our high percentage of English Language Learners. Of our non-ELL students, 23.9% of sixth and seventh graders, and 25.8% of eighth graders met or exceeded standards. Even among our students who aren't officially designated English Language Learners, most speak English as their second language. For example, in my homeroom of 30 students, only 4 spoke English as their primary language at home.

LITERATURE R EVIEW

For most educational questions, researchers investigate a practice and then conduct tests to determine the effectiveness of the practice. When investigating testing practices, how does a researcher test the effectiveness of the test itself? Part of the answer depends upon the values and beliefs of the person conducting the research. However, in looking at the literature on testing, I found a few basic ideas helpful in shaping my thoughts.

One of the most important questions is what a test should measure. This question relates to the statistical question of validity. If a test is to be considered valid, then it should actually measure what it is intended to measure. To what extent do the test questions actually measure the subject about which conclusions are to be drawn? For example, if a test claims to measure reading skills, then what skills make a good reader? What types of questions will most accurately measure these skills? Most standardized tests break reading down into component skills, such as sequencing, main idea, and character analysis. To accept these tests as valid, a person would have to agree both that the test questions accurately evaluate student skills in these areas and that these areas are the crucial skills in good reading. Many researchers question the validity of multiple choice tests in the area of language arts because they doubt that reading a passage and choosing one of four answers can capture the complexity of reading-writing tasks. Such researchers support authentic assessment, involving real academic tasks, such as reading and responding to whole texts, or researching, writing and revising papers. These researchers

argue that these authentic tasks provide a better picture of students' skills than one-shot paper and pencil tests. (Wiggins, 1990)

A related question in terms of test fairness is whether or not the test measures material the students have been taught. One would assume that tests given by cities and states should correlate to the standards they set. For example, a valid New York City test would measure skills delineated in the New York City Performance Standards for Language Arts. However, one can't assume that such correlation exists. In a Michigan State University study, researchers found that between 50% and 80% of skills measured on elementary mathematics tests weren't suitably addressed in a variety of textbooks. (Freeman *et al*, 1983)

Another important question in evaluating a test is reliability. A reliable test would produce consistent results for the same individual on different occasions or with different sets of equivalent questions. Reliability becomes particularly important with assessments based on written responses, rather than multiple choice questions. If scorers are not trained thoroughly to ensure a common understanding of the standards, a student's score on the same essay might vary significantly depending on who graded the essay.

Several other external factors might cause unwarranted variation in student scores. For example, many students, particularly females, find tests anxiety-provoking and are unable to function at their normal levels in a testing situation. (American Association of University Women, 1992; Childs, 1990; Rudner, 1994) In addition, many researchers have postulated that test questions can be biased in favor of middle class and affluent students. (Hambleton & Rodgers, 1995) Almost any question is easier if the test taker has prior knowledge of the topic, and biased test topics reflect the experiences of middle class and affluent students. For example, a few years ago, many of my students were puzzled by a math question relating to parking garage rates. Since many of my students' families rely on public transportation, it wasn't surprising they found this question confusing.

Even if a test were completely fair, the question would still remain of what to do with the results. Policymakers have proposed that student test scores be used for a variety of purposes: promotional decisions for individual students, determinants of teacher and administrator salaries, and incentives and penalties for schools and districts. However, not all tests are appropriate for all purposes. For example, one test may be designed to measure the performance of large groups, and the results may not lead to valid comparisons between individuals. (Holloway,

2001) The results of another test may allow for reliable comparisons between schools for one year, but not be appropriate for measuring changes over time; since the data from both years is subject to unreliability, the estimates of changes will be even more unreliable. (Linn, *et. al.*, 2002) For these reasons, researchers argue against the indiscriminate use of test scores for purposes other than those for which they were intended. (Popham, 1999)

METHODOLOGY

My research question asks what we can find by comparing standardized test scores with detailed teacher assessments of a particular student. I decided to focus on a case study of one student, giving me the time to gather as many measures of her progress as possible. I chose "Kayla," one of the two girls who had scored at level 1 on the seventh grade CTB, in spite of what I considered considerable skills and progress in reading. I used a variety of measures to evaluate her progress, including:

- Interviews with Kayla
- Interviews with peers and other teachers
- Administering a reading inventory
- Examining her reading journal
- Examining her district writing folder (containing work from grades K-5)
- Examining her portfolios from my seventh and eighth grade English and social studies classes (containing tests, essays, reports, and projects)

Using these data sources, I looked at Kayla's performance in the areas of reading and writing. I also looked at her personal development, particularly as it impacted her development as a reader and writer.

After making my own assessments of Kayla's strengths and weaknesses in language arts, I also looked in detail at her testing performance, including:

- the spring 2001 CTB-Reading test, and
- the spring, 2002 ELA test.

OBSERVATIONS

Personal History and Development:

Like most of the students in my homeroom class, Kayla is of Dominican ancestry. Both of her parents immigrated to New York from the Dominican Republic before she was born. Her father is a teacher, and her mother works as a home health care attendant. Although Kayla's mother speaks primarily Spanish, Kayla is more comfortable in English. She has told me that

her mother laughs (nicely) at her Spanish; and unlike many of the students, she feels uncomfortable translating if the need arises. Kayla also has a brother who is three years younger, whom she consistently described as "pesky" or a "pain in the butt."

Kayla's family seems very close-knit. When I looked at her writing folder from elementary school, it was full of references to her family: her father barbecuing chicken; her grandmother buying a parrot; going to the beach with cousins; conversations with her mother; and family trips to places near and far, from New Jersey to the Dominican Republic. Even in middle school, her father drove her to and from school each day, and in many conversations with me, she made reference to discussions she had with her parents.

Kayla's educational background was very stable: she spent grades K-5 at a single elementary school in our district. In sixth grade, she moved on to our middle school. She did not stand out academically, but neither was she a failing student. She enjoyed language arts, but found math difficult. Her sixth grade teachers told me she was sweet and helpful, although very quiet and shy.

When Kayla entered my seventh grade class in the fall of 2000, she was indeed quiet and shy, rarely volunteering in class. At one point, when she wanted to use another teacher's printer, she asked me to make the request because she was afraid! She also had a physical problem in which she would feel heart pains whenever she became excessively upset. However, when she felt comfortable with people, Kayla was far from shy. With her friends, she would giggle and make silly jokes. As the year went on and we grew closer, she would also share questions, ideas, and jokes with me. At the end of the year, she participated in a three-day trip to Boston. The first night, she seemed to feel very anxious, complaining of heart pains. For the rest of the trip, however, she joined wholeheartedly in all the activities and fun.

During eighth grade, Kayla underwent several important changes. Even though the vast majority of the class stayed together the following year, her closest friend was transferred out. Another close friend, "Ana," began to change in ways that were disturbing to Kayla. Although Kayla still wasn't particularly interested in boys, Ana became what might be described as "boy crazy," talking about boys and flirting for a good part of her time in school. Kayla sought my advice about what to do, and she finally decided to ignore Ana whenever she became uncomfortable. She also sought out the friendship of another girl, "Sarah," because Sarah was

also an avid reader and liked the same kind of books as Kayla. Reading had become an important part of Kayla's identity.

However, not too long after Ana "changed," Kayla too began to break free of her "good girl" image. In early December, she came to school with scratches on her face. Both her math teacher and I noticed the scratches and asked her about them. Her answers didn't seem to add up, and the school began an investigation. She finally broke down and told a counselor that she had scratched herself in a fit of desperation. She later wrote me a heartbreaking letter, in which she explained the incident this way:

I'll tell you Ms. Peterson who did the strachthes it was me. I wanted to die. Ever since when my godmother and grandfather or cousin, and anut died I just wanted to die with them. In 7th and 6th grade people made fun of me. Because I was shy. In 6 grade a fat ass boy stuck a ruler in my head and hit me I was bleeding. I still feel that I want to die. I am not worth it...

Her counselor and the other adults concerned believed that the scratches were a cry for help. Kayla seemed to be letting out feelings of anger and helplessness that she had kept inside during her many years as a sweet, shy "good girl." Over the next few months, Kayla spent several sessions with a counselor, who also spoke with her family and teachers about some of the issues she was facing.

After this crisis, Kayla also began to challenge others, from her parents to her peers. At different times, she expressed a great deal of anger at both of her parents, and she began to talk back to her mother, sometimes very disrespectfully, at home. She began to pepper her writing assignments with profanity. (Since we studied many topics like slavery, where profanity was part of the historical reality, I said that I would accept profanity in written assignments when it was relevant. Kayla carried this idea a little further than most students!)

Kayla also began challenging her peers. Several times, I witnessed her being rude to fellow students, albeit in a playful way. But she also seemed resolved not to be a doormat any longer, standing up for herself in confrontations with others. As with her parents, she may have carried her newfound assertiveness a little too far. By the end of the year, the same friend whose changes had so disturbed Kayla in the fall, wrote me a note telling me how much Kayla herself had changed. "Well, before she used to be innocent, and 'blind,' kind of ignorant, but in a good way. Now she gets an attitude for no reason, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but she's acting like a hick, in other words, a wannabe."

Kayla also began to express and explore her sexuality. Middle school is rarely an easy time in anyone's sexual development – the feelings, both physical and emotional, are too new for most people to handle them well. In my opinion, our school is a particularly difficult place for adolescent girls. On one hand, a strong pressure exists to be sexually active. When another English teacher and I assigned an essay about problems in the school community, both of us received essays from girls about the pressure to perform oral sex. On the other hand, girls who are known to engage in this sort of activity, or who flirt too openly, are often stigmatized as 'hos, or sluts. Kayla was caught in the middle of this dichotomy. On one hand, she still expressed issues with girls who did too much or dressed too revealingly. On the other hand, she began to flirt quite a bit herself, talk more openly about sex, and wear more daring outfits. This change was reflected in her schoolwork as well, where her choice of both books and writing topics began to reflect her fascination with sex.

Kayla's newfound assertiveness did have a positive impact on her academic development. In the past, she had struggled terribly with shyness in oral presentations. By the end of the year, while she was still very nervous, she was performing much better. She used coping strategies, like combining her presentation with a friend's, and she was able to speak more loudly and clearly, as well as maintain eye contact with her audience.

By the end of eighth grade, Kayla was still testing limits, both at home and in school. In our conversations, I tried to instill in her the idea of being strong while still respecting others. I hope and believe that she will be able to reach a "happy medium" as she matures.

Reading:

First, I looked at Kayla's performance reading in class. My reading program is based on the reading workshop approach. (Atwell, 1987; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) Students choose their own books from a class library. I begin most classes with a mini-lesson about a language arts skill or strategy, and then the students spend about 30 minutes reading their books. I meet with them to discuss their books, and they write reflections in response journals. Occasionally, we read and discuss different forms of literature, such as short stories or poetry, as a whole class; and a few times a year, the students participate in literature circles, in which they read and discuss a book with a small group of peers.

During seventh grade, Kayla became an avid reader. She found books that she really enjoyed, and she began taking them home to read outside of class. I no longer have her response

journal for that year, but I was able to examine her projects for the two literature circles in which she participated. For both projects, Kayla chose to make illustrated cartoon booklets summarizing the story. The two books she read were *P.S. Longer Letter Later* and *Freaky Friday*. Both of these books were grade appropriate, recommended for grades 5-9.

Kayla's projects show several indicators of good reading comprehension. First, both of them utilize conventional narrative structure. Knowledge of narrative structures can help assist students in reading comprehension by providing them with models of what to expect. (Dudley-Marling & Rhodes, 1988) At the beginning of each booklet, Kayla clearly sets out the characters and the conflict in the story. For example, her booklet for *P.S. Longer Letter Later* begins like this:

Where do I start, I know! There are two best friends. Named Tara*Starr and Elizabeth. But then Tara moves to Ohio. To communicate they send letters. There parents don't what to waste so much money on long distance calls.

The friends are different. Elizabeth is shy. Tara is more outgoing. But this doesn't keep them apart. Even though their are some problems they have to handle in their family. Sometimes they call each other. Elizabeth told Tara about her dad drunkness. Also he didn't move back with her to her mom's new apartment. He just was mad and sad of losing his job.

Both booklets include most of the main events of each story and conclude with the resolution of the conflict. For example, Kayla's booklet for *Freaky Friday* concludes with the following page:

Annabel work all night and weekend [to finish her project.] McGuirk gave her an 88. As you know Annabel turn to herself again. Her project was a sussess. The way that I read the story is the way Annabel gave her project in.

In this book, Annabel, the main character, woke up one morning to find herself in her mother's body. At the end, she wrote the story of her adventures as a term paper for English, and this term paper is actually the story that the reader experiences as the book *Freaky Friday*. Kayla appears to understand this complicated idea ("The way I read the story is the way Annabel gave her project in,") although she has difficulty expressing it.

In both booklets, Kayla uses captions in her illustrations to develop the characters. For example, the picture on the first page of her *Freaky Friday* booklet depicts the conflict between the main character, Annabel, and her mother. Annabel's mother is saying, "Clean your room," and Annabel is replying, "Mom, you always fuss about how I keep my room." Annabel is also

saying, "Can I go to my friends house?" to which her mother is replying, "Maybe on your birthday."

These two booklets indicate an understanding of narrative structure, a literal understanding of the events of the two stories, and through the comments in the cartoon panels, an understanding of dialogue and characterization. However, in both booklets, Kayla appears to have difficulty maintaining a coherent voice. In the booklet about *Freaky Friday*, she starts out in the first person, but switches to the third. In the *P.S. Longer Letter Later* booklet, she starts in the third person, but then switches to letter format (mirroring the format of the book itself.)

Although Kayla read and comprehended these books at least partially on her own, her understanding was certainly enhanced by the conversations with her peers. The understanding she displayed in reflections about her independent reading, ho wever, would be entirely hers. I have a copy of the section of her response journal that extends from September 11, 2001 to November 29, 2001, the fall of her eighth grade year. During this eleven week period, Kayla read between six and nine books from Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Alice* series, one *Full House Michelle* book, and two S.E. Hinton books (*That was Then, This is Now* and *Tex*). The books represent a variety of levels: the *Full House Michelle* books are designed for much younger readers, the *Alice* books are geared for ages 8-13, and the S.E. Hinton books are considered appropriate for grades 7-12. Although it is not recorded in her journal, Kayla also read a book with a literature circle during this time period. Therefore, over an eleven week time period, she completed between ten and thirteen books.

For most of these books, Kayla's responses include details that show a literal understanding of the story. However, the entries for her first book, *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, show only that she understands that the girl has a mental problem and is having difficulty with her family. Kayla abandoned this book after just a few days, telling me it was hard to understand. One sign of a good reader is the ability to recognize when his or her comprehension is breaking down. (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) This book was indeed very difficult, and I considered it a positive sign that Kayla knew it was beyond her capabilities. All of her other journal entries contain multiple details about plot or characters.

In their journals, students could respond to a variety of prompts designed to elicit higher-level thinking. Over the eleven week period of this journal, Kayla wrote 22 responses. Most, but not all of these, contain evidence of higher level thinking. The most common type of higher

level thinking she exhibits is identification with the main character. Her journal contains eleven examples in which she states what she would do or feel in the main character's position, or in which she gives advice to the main character. For example, on October 9, she explains how she thinks Alice should deal with a problem with her friends.

Oct 9, 2001

The Agony of Alice

Alice thinks that Pamela is a big mouth non-good friend. The only friend she has is Elizabeth even though she doesn't see her that offen. Elizabeth is the type of friend that is quiet, shy, turns red when you embrass her. I think Alice should met more friends. To not be lonely. Cause when her father is working and her brother is at school the only person she has is Anut Sally which is an mining people's business.

On November 29, Kayla gives advice directly to the main character in the form of a letter.

Nov 29, 2001

<u>TEX</u>

Dear Mr Tex sir

Mason is growning up and your acting like a kid. Grow up. Get a job your family's poor. But you hate begin call that So if you don't like people calling you poor then work. Mason sold your horse because their was no money or food left. So live you life don't waste it!

Sciencely Kayla

Kayla's journal entries also contain examples of other types of thinking about her books. In five instances, she offers her comments or opinions, a sign of an active reader. In nine instances, she asks questions about her book, another important skill exhibited by proficient readers (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Moreover, she doesn't merely ask questions, but she attempts to predict the answers, as she does in this entry from September 14.

9/14/01

SCHIZOPHRENIC GIRL

I think if Renne has these mental problems why doesn't she tell her mom. I think Renne scarced of tell her family. I think she should speak out her mind. But if she tell her family they might think she's crazy. Can she tell her parent or her parent's will find out themselves.

While most of Kayla's journal entries indicate a good understanding of her books, she does show some misconceptions. This entry from November shows an understanding of the broad outlines of a story, but a misunderstanding about the subtleties of one of the relationships.

Nov 20, 2001

"That Was Then This Now"

Dear SE Hinton.

I've just finish your book it was funny, sad, and also makes me happy. It makes me happy because I'm glad you called the cop when you found out what Mark did. I know Byron thought he was his brother. Some people don't come out the way you thought they would. I also hope you and Cathy have a long lasting relationship with you. She was there whenever you need her. I just don't get it you don't mention your dad?

Scinerely Kayla Fastest reader in class

Perhaps the most disconcerting fact about this journal entry is the way Kayla switches back and forth between writing to the author (S.E. Hinton) and the main character (Byron). In her first and third sentences, she appears to be writing to the author, while in the rest of the letter, she appears to be writing to the character. This difficulty mirrors her difficulty maintaining a coherent voice in the literature group booklets. For some reason, her concept of narrative voice seems strangely fluid.

However, I don't think Kayla's difficulties with voice are caused by comprehension difficulties. From this entry, it is clear that Kayla understood one of the main threads of the story, the relationship between Mark and Byron, which was destroyed when Byron turned Mark in to the police for selling drugs. Even though Mark and Byron were like brothers, Byron decided to call the police because Cathy's brother had suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of drug use. In this way, Byron ended up choosing his girlfriend over his best friend. However, in his guilt over Mark's arrest, Byron ended up sabotaging his relationship with Cathy as well. Kayla seems to have missed this point entirely. I find this understandable for two reasons. First, this book was substantially more difficult and complex than the Alice books she had been reading previously. Second, the disintegration of Byron and Cathy's relationship was drawn more subtly than the conflict between Mark and Byron. Rather than a engaging in a dramatic confrontation, Byron merely stopped calling Cathy and described the emptiness he felt inside, his lack of feelings about anyone. This journal entry points out the limits of Kayla's comprehension

at this point in time. Reading a grade level text, she was able to comprehend the overall picture, but missed some of the more subtle aspects. (However, she did make the sharp observation that Byron, unlike Mark, seems not to miss or mention his absent father. It's an interesting point, and one that I hadn't noticed before.)

Later in the year, I did observe Kayla picking up on subtleties and connections within texts. The time period of the journal actually marked an important transition for her. The *Alice* books are geared primarily for younger readers (ages 8-13), while the S.E. Hinton books are geared for teenagers (grades 7-12). After finishing those books, Kayla began reading more teen novels. Perhaps because these novels contained more abstract ideas, or perhaps because her thinking was maturing, I noticed that she became more attuned to symbolism and theme in her books. For example, on her English midterm at the end of January, she chose to write an essay about the book *Romiette and Julio*, a teen novel similar in length and complexity to *That Was Then, This Is Now*. In her essay, she pointed out the thematic connection between the main character's fear of drowning, described in the opening scene, and the fact that at the end of the book, he needed to overcome that fear in order to rescue his true love.

Finally, an extremely important aspect of Kayla's development as a reader was the extent to which she connected the ideas in her reading to her own life. Good readers make connections between their lives and their reading (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997), but I have found that many students make surface-level connections, designed to please their teachers. Real "readers" think about their books away from school, wonder about them, and are influenced by the ideas they contain. I observed Kayla doing just these things. Perhaps the best example of this occurred during the winter when she read a book about a girl who had been sexually harassed at school. In the story, several boys eventually got in trouble for the harassment. Kayla was puzzled by the fact that the boys got in so much trouble when they hadn't hurt the girl physically. We discussed this, and I explained that in my opinion, the harassment harmed the girl mentally. I explained that no one has a right to terrorize another person, whether or not they cause physical harm. A few weeks later, Kayla was present at an incident when a male classmate, with questionable taste and a less-than-mature sense of humor, responded to a dare by exposing himself to a group of girls. She reported the incident, and the student was suspended. Later, she felt a little guilty, because he hadn't actually hurt anyone. In discussing it with me, she mentioned that it reminded her of the book she had read. This incident shows how Kayla was reading at a deep and

thoughtful level; the books she read were affecting her ideas and actions as she moved through life.

Although I had observed Kayla engaging successfully in a variety of authentic reading tasks, I also wanted to evaluate her reading in a more structured way. I decided to administer the *Qualitative Reading Inventory* (Leslie & Caldwell, 1990), an informal diagnostic assessment. The conditions under which I administered the test were far from ideal: because of time constraints, she only read one passage, and because of difficulty finding a quiet place for the test, we ended up changing rooms three times. Therefore, I hesitate to use the test to draw any firm conclusions about her reading level, but even under imperfect conditions, I was able to observe trends and patterns among her answers.

I started Kayla with the junior high level passages (designed for grades 7-8), and I allowed her to choose her own passage. She chose one about Peter the Great. First I tested her prior knowledge about key topics in the passage, and she scored a 0. Basically, she had no prior information whatsoever about Peter the Great, which would naturally make it much more difficult to comprehend the passage. She read the first paragraph (110 words) out loud, and I recorded her miscues. She wasn't able to pronounce a few specialized vocabulary words: *tsar* (even after I helped her, she pronounced it *scar*), or *Parliament*. Other than that, her miscues consisted of reading two words partially (*even* for *eventually* and *sail* for *sailcloth*), and mispronouncing *variety* as *varety*. In addition, she repeated a few words and self-corrected a few times. The 110 words of the first paragraph represent approximately ¼ of the total passage (404 words.) If Kayla had continued making miscues at the same rate, she would have scored at the instructional level for this junior high level text.

While reading the first paragraph to me, Kayla displayed active reading techniques. She asked a few questions regarding Russia, and when the passage mentioned the Netherlands, she connected it to Hitler (we had just been studying his takeover there during World War II.)

After hearing Kayla read the first paragraph aloud, I concluded that she wasn't having much difficulty decoding the passage. Because most fluent readers comprehend better when reading silently (Dudley-Marling & Rhodes, 1988), I decided to offer her the choice of how to continue. She decided to read the rest of the passage silently, but even then, she still stopped occasionally to offer comments or questions. For example, when assessing her prior knowledge,

I had asked her the meaning of *autocrat*. When she came to the section of the passage that defined the word, she looked up and said, "Oh, that's what *autocrat* is!"

Next, I asked Kayla to retell the passage. She was able to recall many of the concepts presented, but missed several others. What I find significant is that the topics she recalled were not necessarily those covered at greatest length in the passage, but rather those about which she had prior knowledge. For example, she recalled the idea that Peter the Great tried to bring modern industry to Russia. Although this topic was mentioned in only two sentences of the passage, we had recently completed a unit about the Industrial Revolution. Of the seven topics that Kayla recalled, four of them were topics we had studied in class, and two were familiar from everyday life. She also recalled the word *autocrat*, since she had just been asked to define it. The concepts that Kayla missed included the East-West divide in Europe and the idea of self-government. We hadn't discussed the East-West divide at all, although we had discussed the ideas of Parliament and self-government while studying the American Revolution. I don't know why she didn't pick up on that connection: perhaps she didn't remember because the unit wasn't recent, or perhaps she had difficulty with the relatively abstract idea of self-government.

Another interesting feature of Kayla's retelling was her difficulty with sequence and structure. She started retelling the passage in order, but ran out of details. She then added more information, but out of sequence. However, she was aware of this fact, telling me, "This isn't in order." In addition, the scoring sheet was structured in the following way: Background, then goal, events, and resolution, then another goal, events, and resolution. Kayla recalled details from every section except the two goals sections. Again, I can see various explanations for this phenomenon. Possibly, Peter's goals (to establish a modern government for Russia and to change people's ways of thinking) were too abstract or not rooted in areas about which she had prior knowledge. Perhaps, she wasn't effectively using the implicit structure of the passage.

The last part of the QRI calls for the student to answer ten comprehension questions, 5 implicit and 5 explicit. Kayla got 4 of the 5 explicit questions correct, but only 1 of the 5 implicit questions. This put her at the questionable, rather than instructional level for this text. Her difficulty with the implicit questions reflects a partial, rather than a deep understanding of the text. However, given her complete lack of prior knowledge of the topic and the fact that she had to move three times while reading and retelling, I don't draw any firm conclusions from this.

In fact, I would say that she probably can read junior high school texts at the instructional level, as long as she had help with prior knowledge and concept development.

Writing:

Because I saw Kayla's class for English and social studies, I taught writing through both subjects. From her English class, I have essays about books, persuasive essays, poetry and two memoirs. From her social studies class, I have research projects, historical fiction narratives and essays. I examined all of her work as a body and picked out various trends.

The most striking trend I noticed was the development of style in Kayla's writing. From the beginning of seventh grade, she had a strong sense of dialogue and descriptive language. Her first writing project was a personal memoir about the death of her godmother from lung cancer. I worked with the students on crafting an opening paragraph that would draw in the reader, and Kayla came up with this:

"Kayla! Kayla! Wake up. We're going to the hospital." My eyes didn't feel like opening, but I opened them. It was 9:00 am. Everyone was ready to go to the hospital except me. I got ready in eight minutes flat. My family and I left, but I didn't know why or where we were going.

Kayla uses direct speech to bring us into her narrative, and at the end of the paragraph, she leaves us with a question that prompts us to read on. Although the language of her narrative is simple, she uses some original descriptive phrases. For example, when describing her godmother, she says, "I loved her green eyes but even though my godmother was beautiful on the outside, she was ugly on the inside because she smoked." She also attempts to end her narrative in a way that provides closure, but also kayes the reader thinking:

Twelve downhearted days passed. One night, at 3:00am, my godmother died. God had let me down. You don't know if the same thing could happen to you. Remember my motto "If you smoke, you'll choke."

Many students find it easy to be creative in personal narratives, but Kayla's writing shows two other strengths. First, her creativity extends to other genres of writing; and second, her writing incorporates stylistic elements picked up from her extensive reading. Both of these strengths are demonstrated in her seventh grade social studies project on Columbus. For this project, students wrote two fictional journals: for one, they took on the persona of a Spanish sailor from Columbus' crew, and for the other, they took on the persona of a Taino Indian on

Hispanola. Kayla's journal for the Spanish sailor demonstrates a knowledge of the facts and the perspective of the character, as can be seen in this excerpt from one of the entries.

November, 1492

Dear Journal.

Land! We said. The sailors lower the anchor. Asia! Columbus step on the new land. He walked a little more until he found people with arrow and bows. Half naked people. What is this! Where is the silk, the gold, and the porcelin! To me Christhpher seem relly mad. The naked people had earring on there nose. Columbus tired to translate but all he heard from the naky people was a mumble...

However, I had read the students Jane Yolen's book *Encounter*, which depicts the coming of the Europeans from a Taino perspective. In Kayla's Taino journal, not only was she able to include facts from the Taino perspective, but she also imitates some of the descriptive imagery from the book, as this excerpt shows.

November, 1492

Dear journal,

This day was weird. This triangle thing was coming toward the Taino land. As the triangular shape landed, strange things walked out. Were they gods? These creatures had arms, legs, and white skin. Their mouths had been surrounded by hair. The creatures spoke. What? All we heard from them was a mumble. It seems that they hadn't understood us. We started to communicate with them. We laughed at their clothing, and they had no feet. It kind of look like the moccasins we wear...

In seventh grade, Kayla was able to transfer the imagery of a specific text to a similar writing assignment. By the eighth grade, her narratives began to show the overall effects of her extensive reading. More advanced vocabulary and descriptive language began to permeate her writing. In December, the students researched the conditions of slavery and wrote historical fiction short stories that incorporated this information. Kayla's story reflected her knowledge of slavery, but it also reflected growth in her vocabulary and descriptive ability. In this excerpt, she is describing her attempt to escape with her boyfriend, John.

One warm night John and I were going to escape. We put pillows under our blanket so Massa could think we were there.

I asked John "Were will we go?"

"Ohio" he said, "Were the slaves are free as a bird."

I listen to him as his hazel eyes were glowing under the moonlight.

As we walked to the dark woods I could hear all the creatures singing each a different melody and suddenly I heard a gun shot, it was Massa. He heard our footsteps. I ran and so did John but Massa had all of a sudden grabbed him. I couldn't go without John so I returned. Mass was drunk I could smell the thick alcohol from mouth as he held me by the neck. He cussed at us.

Kayla's sense of artistry wasn't limited to narrative forms. She also began to incorporate descriptive language into her research papers. In seventh grade, her first research project was a persuasive essay that used facts to convince the reader to vote for a particular candidate in the presidential election. The result was a flat research report, and Kayla was well aware of this problem. At the conclusion of the project, she filled in a self-evaluation rubric. In the area of voice, she gave herself a lower rating because "I don't keep that attention." She also states that her concerns "aren't catchy."

In her second report, about the Algonquian tribe, she began revising her introduction to make it more interesting. The introduction to her first draft reads:

Algonquian? Where did they come from, How did they get here, What do they eat? Do they still exist? You'll be impress! With this report you will learn everyday life of an Algonquian.

The introduction to her final draft reads:

Algonquian? You know, the ones who live on the Eastern Woodlands. The one who make pot with there bare hands. What do they eat? Enough! I am not a book. With this report you will learn the everyday life of an Algonquian.

The second introduction contains more interesting facts and more of Kayla's authentic voice than the first, but it certainly does not qualify as high-level writing. However, just as her narrative writing became more sophisticated, so did her research writing. At the end of eighth grades, all students needed to produce an independent research paper. Kayla's paper dealt with the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. The paper she produced was anything but the typical semi-plagiarized piece that English teachers dread. Instead, her paper incorporated much of the artistic and descriptive language that she had absorbed from her reading:

It's dark, hot and stuffy, and thousands of people are dead: others have suffered tremendously. The radiation fills their bodies, as the people shake and their bodies are under the rebels [rubble] and wreckage. What does this sound like? An atomic bomb attack of course. Where? On Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

two cities full of life, that became mere shadows. Now it's up to America to make there comeback.

To Attack Pearl Harbor was the Japanese mission. On December 7, 1941 they struck. The heat of the flame burned even though the attack was on water. This was one step closer to the fighting. The American couldn't just ignore Japan, so they had to do something or they will be the ones who will lose their battle. There were 19 ships sunken and about 2,400 soldiers and sailors were killed. The Japanese would fight to the end, even though they were losing and that's what was their tradition.

Another interesting trend I observed in Kayla's writing was the manner and extent to which she internalized social studies content knowledge. I noticed that she was able to process larger amounts of more complicated information when she could relate the topic to her own experience or prior knowledge. For example, over spring vacation during her eighth grade year, I assigned the students an independent project about immigration during the 1800's. I specified the topics that students needed to cover, but they had to complete the research on their own. She used her computer encyclopedia and the Internet to compile detailed information, and then she wrote her report in the form of the journal of an immigrant girl. One of the required topics was the treatment of immigrants in the New World, and her entry for that topic reads as follows:

Dear Dairy,

As I grew I hated Americans even more. People who came to America from my country formed our own communities. We were not accepted were America were. Good! I didn't want to go to there hick town anyways.

Even more bad new came, and Immgration and Naturalization Service (INS) have to maintain it's image and reputation so it started to put people in jail. I mean we people are working our asses off for a damn penny! That's when I decide to work. I went to interview as a teacher. The boss was cruel. He kicked me out of the room, right when he saw me. The only job we were allow to work as is dry cleaners, newsstands, grocery stores, machine shops, and garment factory. For those jobs payed little.

This journal entry contains several relevant details on immigration: the formation of enclave communities, prejudice, and job discrimination; and the narrator conveys believable emotions in regard to those topics. There is a slight inaccuracy -- the INS wasn't formed at that time in history, but for the most part her information is correct. I believe that Kayla was able to research and write about this topic in such detail because she had experience with these issues, both from her own community and from other topics we had studied during the year.

The sense of social justice displayed in this journal entry was typical of Kayla's social studies-related writing in the eighth grade. Perhaps because of her own experiences trying to

stand up for herself, she became increasingly attuned to issues of oppression. Even when given creative writing assignments, the theme of justice appeared frequently in her writing. For example, when students were given a chance to write and perform a poem, most of them focused on love-related themes. By contrast, Kayla wrote this poem about slavery:

"Slavery to Freedom"

Every slave is hated

By a person that they ain't.

Can they survive in this world,

Or be saved by a saint?

Soon they'll die.

Soon the'll faint.

Soon they'll say that they hate this ugly place,

As I see their empty face.

The whip bites their skin,

A flash of blood without a sin,

Dripping like tears

Trapped behind a door, for many years.

Continue your path.

Freedom will be there.

Don't look back.

While Kayla dealt skillfully with broad issues of social justice, she had difficulty with more abstract political and governmental issues. A few months earlier, I had asked the students to write an essay analyzing the Dred Scott decision. Even in an expository format, Kayla attempts to personalize the content:

Back in the day, slaves were fighting for there rights. They did not want to be know as "niggers." They didn't want to be property. But in this problem a slave will goes up to the Sumpreme Court for his rights.

Dred Scott was a slave sueing for his freedom. He said "Since I was in Missouri in a slave territory then my master took me to Illinois, so I should be free." Dred thought could be free he wouldn't give up. Couple a years then his

owner died. What the hell he thought. I am going to take this until the Surpreme Court!

Chief Justice Roger Taney was a different story. This jerk runed courts. He told Dred Scott "Sir, you have no right to sue in the cournt. 2 You have went to Illinios doesn't make you a citizen, you are black. Finally the Supreme Court said that the Constitution gave Congress no power" Right there Dred wanted to slap the shit out of this Taney guy.

Kayla certainly understands the overall issue and the emotions involved – Dred Scott was considered property, rather than a human being, even when his owner brought him to a free state. However, she misses the constitutional issue of whether Congress could make decisions on slavery in the territories. Later in the essay, when asked to evaluate the effects of the decision on different groups of people, she understands how it would impact slaves and slave owners, but she has difficulty with groups affected less directly, such as northerners.

Similarly, in Kayla's research project about the atomic bomb, she understands certain issues more fully that others. She clearly articulates the idea of fighting for revenge for Pearl Harbor and the idea that the Japanese kamikaze pilots would fight to the death. After September 11, the idea of fighting back after a surprise attack was certainly very familiar to her, as was the idea of suicide bombers. She also grasps the devastation caused by the bomb and describes it at length. However, while she mentions the more subtle issue of whether the atomic bomb might result in fewer lives lost than an island by island campaign to take Japan, she doesn't appear to be aware of the full implications.

Truman wanted to fight the war to the death, but he somewhat drop an atomic bomb and get over with it, rather than kill all the army of the Japanese. If they did fight to the death then all the 5 million army force would die of Japan, which is more than the atomic bomb would kill.

Kayla doesn't mention the moral dilemmas inherent in the decision to save American lives at the expense of Japanese lives, or in the decision to save military lives at the expense of civilian ones. These moral questions are much more subtle and abstract than the mere idea of revenge, and they are not ideas to which she had much exposure. Her ability to process content information was affected both by her prior experience with the topic and the level of abstraction involved.

Another issue I noticed in Kayla's writing was her organization. As a teacher, I spent a great deal of time working on effective beginnings and endings. In any genre, Kayla's writing showed considerable strengths in these areas. From her first memoir about her godmother's

death to her final research project, her writing begins with attempts to engage the reader. Unlike many students, Kayla consistently provided a sense of closure to her writing assignments as well. Even in her first memoir, she tries to end with a catchy saying, "If you smoke, you'll choke." Later, as her topics and style became more sophisticated, she would aim for more dramatic effects. For instance, in a personal memoir about the World Trade Center attacks, she ends with the following:

Finally, I have so many questions. I wonder will I ever be safe in an airplane? Could I travel back to my country? [Dominican Republic] Only the future awaits.

I also worked very hard on getting my students to organize their writing into paragraphs and to use one paragraph for each topic. Kayla successfully organized her writing into paragraphs on a consistent basis. She sometimes had difficulty elaborating on a topic, however, and rather than add details to the paragraph, would incorporate additional topics. For example, in this excerpt from a book review of *Go Ask Alice*, she includes three separate ideas in the first paragraph, but is able to stick to one topic in the second:

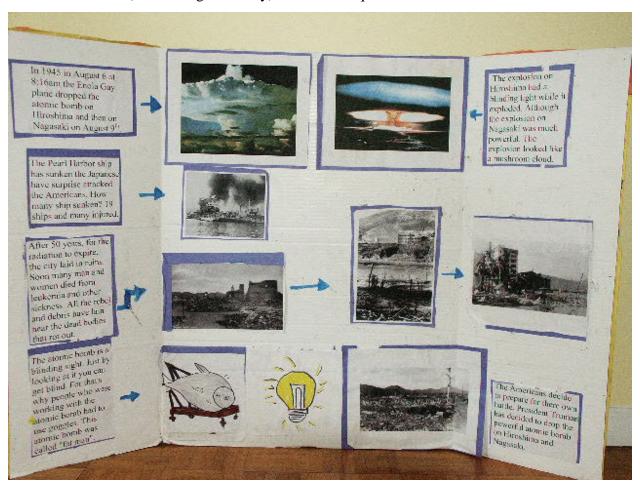
One reason that this book is good is because it is filled with Alice's own words. People found her diary and turned it into a book. Another reason I like this book is because it reminds me of my cousin who is on drugs. It also teaches me that crack is wack.

Finally, this book is good because Alice was a good student. Even good students do bad things. It is like if Alice had a good side in school and a bad one in the community.

Although Kayla generally organized her thoughts into topics, she had more trouble sequencing those topics. Many projects, such as her literature group booklets and immigration journal, show a coherent ordering of events. However, when dealing with more complex organizational tasks, she exhibited difficulties with sequencing. For her final research project on the atomic bomb, Kayla was responsible for synthesizing and organizing the information herself. She was able to categorize the information into subtopics, but she had difficulty putting her subtopics in order.

For example, she created a display board which begins with the dropping of the atomic bomb, continues with Pearl Harbor, and then ends with the aftereffects of the atomic bomb. She correctly groups the information within each topic (as shown by the horizontal arrows), but the

events themselves (descending vertically) are out of sequence.



Kayla's first draft contains similar sequencing issues, although she was able to correct these problems in her final copy.

Finally, I observed a great deal of inconsistency in Kayla's use of punctuation and spelling. In first drafts or more informal assignments, such as her response journal, her writing contains frequent errors; but in final drafts of important assignments, she does much better. For example, in her response journal, she spells "sincerely" wrong four out of four times, while in her summary booklet for *P.S. Longer Letter Later*, she spells it correctly seven out of seven times.

Kayla's misspellings fall into two categories: phonetic and visually oriented. Sometimes, she misspells words as they sound (e.g. *surprized*); while at other times, she includes most of the letters that appear in the word, but in the wrong order (e.g. *scinerely* or *anut*). The visually oriented misspellings, in which she uses correct letters in the wrong order, seem more common

in her writing. However, she spells some of these words correctly when she takes the time to edit.

Kayla's grammar appears stronger than her spelling. She does make careless mistakes, such as leaving out words, but she also observes most conventions on a consistent basis. For example, she generally uses periods, commas and quotation marks when appropriate. Like her spelling, her grammar is better on more formal assignments.

ANALYSIS

After working with Kayla for two years, I have amassed a great deal of data about her progress as a reader and writer. Analyzing this data, I believe I have a clear picture not only of her strengths and weaknesses, but also of some of the reasons behind them. When I compare my own knowledge to the score report produced by the CTB, I do find that the CTB picks up on a few of the more pronounced issues in her literacy development. In general, however, the test presents a woefully incomplete picture of Kayla's overall progress.

Examining the evidence, I believe that Kayla is a generally strong reader, able to comprehend material at or close to grade level. In numerous written and oral assignments, she demonstrates a literal understanding of grade-appropriate texts. She utilizes many of the strategies used by proficient readers, as outlined by Keene & Zimmermann (1997). Her response journal, essays, and performance on the QRI all show her ability to question the material she reads, to make connections to the characters and situations, and to realize when her comprehension is breaking down. Her performance on the QRI also indicates her ability to use prior knowledge: she was able to comprehend and recall nearly all the material with which she was familiar. Her success in the independent research project on immigration also points to her ability to use prior knowledge as an aid to comprehension. Most encouraging for her future development, Kayla sees herself as a good reader and has developed a real love of reading. Although attitudes like this are not measurable, they affect a person's lifelong habits. I suspect that if I run into her on the subway in five years, she will be carrying a book. Since students spend fewer than six hours a day in class, avid reading outside of school can have a significant impact on their future literacy development.

Kayla's writing also shows many strengths. Perhaps the most striking is in her ability to use dialogue and description effectively, across a variety of genres. This strength also provides another indicator of good reading, since the development of her style is most likely the result of

exposure to a variety of literature. Kayla's writing is generally well-organized. In particular, she has a good sense of beginning in a way that interests the reader and ending in a way that provides a sense of closure. She organizes her writing into topics, and is usually able to sequence them correctly. Again, one of the most encouraging signs for her future is that fact that Kayla genuinely loves writing; in fact, she has told me that she wants to be a writer. Just as she reads to develop her own personal ideas and interests, rather than to please a teacher, she also writes to express herself, rather than merely for a grade.

However, I do not mean to say that Kayla has no weaknesses in her reading and writing. Although the basic structure of her writing is solid, she definitely needs practice and support to keep her work clear and organized. Her shifts in narrative voice and difficulties with sequencing complex material can both be confusing to a reader. She also needs to devote her full attention to grammar and punctuation. Although she is strong in creating overall feelings and impressions, she needs help in communicating them precisely.

Finally, Kayla needs to develop the ability to interpret the abstract ideas implicit in many texts. Social studies topics that she comprehends well tend to be very concrete – the oppression of marginalized social groups, the development of industry, and the horrors of war. By contrast, she has difficulties interpreting more abstract political or moral issues. I believe her difficulties in this area stem from two sources, both of which transcend simple reading and writing ability.

First, most adolescents are just beginning the transition from concrete to abstract thinking (Crain, 1990; Elkind, 1994; Feldman & Elliot, 1990) As their thinking matures, they are able to deal with more complicated issues, but it is unreasonable to expect young adolescents to comprehend abstract ideas as easily as adults. Moreover, the capacity for abstract thought develops at different rates for different people in different areas. Perhaps this is why Kayla was beginning to make abstract thematic connections while reading novels like *Romiette and Julio*, but not when discussing the Dred Scott decision.

Second, both the ability to comprehend and the capacity for abstract thought are related to a person's prior knowledge and experience of the topic. Kayla's difficulty with certain aspects of the QRI appeared to be strongly related to a lack of prior knowledge about Peter the Great. From my experience with the New York City educational system, I have observed that students are consistently deprived of academic experiences that would give them the depth of knowledge they need to comprehend grade-level material. Like Kayla, most of my students find it fairly

easy to understand teen novels about familiar topics, but they find content area texts more difficult. Why is this? Because of constant pressures to prepare for standardized tests, many elementary school teachers spend their time primarily on reading and math. When students enter middle school, they have little knowledge of history or science. To cite just one shocking example, before beginning a unit on the Revolutionary War, I asked Kayla's class what they knew about the war. None of them appeared to have heard of it, although they were eventually able to recall some fragmented details (i.e. George Washington, the Boston Tea Party) when prompted. I believe Kayla's ability to comprehend many texts is adversely affected by a lack of prior knowledge, rather than a lack of reading ability.

My interpretation of Kayla's language ability includes many areas of strength and a few areas in need of significant development. The chart below provides the interpretation of her skills as measured by the CTB-Reading exam.

Performance on Spring, 2001 CTB-Reading Exam

Source: www.grownetwork.com

	Average percent correct	
	Kayla	NYC Students
Tools and Techniques		
Stated Information	67	83
Words and Phrases in Context	52	66
Genre and Literary Terms	6	53
Bringing Texts to Life		
Sequence	35	55
Setting	0	69
Character	79	73
Evaluating Evidence		
Cause and Effect	36	63
Overall Meaning		
Main Idea and Theme	47	68
Author's Purpose	45	64
Predicting Outcomes	55	75

Examining this chart, I looked first at the *shape* of the data. In what areas is Kayla considered strongest and weakest? According to the chart, she is particularly strong in interpreting characters and understanding stated information. This information correlates with what I observed in her reading journal, where she displayed a general understanding of events and

focused many of her comments on the characters. The test indicates that she is particularly weak in the skills of sequence, setting, cause and effect, and genre and literary terms. A weakness in sequencing makes sense in light of her difficulties with sequence on both the QRI and her final research project. I don't believe that she really has a problem with genre and literary terms, but most of my students scored poorly in that area. Even though I had covered several genres and literary terms over the course of the year, my students were probably not familiar with the particular terms on that version of the test. Therefore, her low score in this area also makes sense to me. Her low score in cause and effect surprises me a little, but it's certainly plausible given her difficulty with some abstract and implicit questions. However, her score of 0 in the area of setting makes little sense. Her writing indicates a good sense of narrative structures, including setting; and her historical fiction in particular, conveys an awareness of how setting affects the action of a story. A score of 0 in this area seems unreasonable.

Although most of the trends in Kayla's test data correlate with my observations, the overall levels do not. In only one area (character) does she score above the typical New York City student, and in most areas, she scores far below. While her literacy skills certainly aren't perfect, such low scores don't seem warranted. Why, then, did Kayla perform so poorly on this test? One possible reason might be test anxiety. She told me that she was very nervous on the day of the test; and given her history of shyness and her physical problems with stress, it seems more than likely that her nerves impacted her performance. Another reason for her poor performance may be the nature of the test questions themselves. Her weaknesses with sequencing, precision, prior knowledge, and to some extent, abstract ideas would all be fully captured on a multiple choice test. However, her strengths, particularly with writing, would not be measured. In fact, some of her abilities might even hurt her performance on a multiple choice test. One of her strengths is the ability to express ideas and to see patterns in ways that others don't. For example, her description of her godmother as "beautiful on the outside, [but] ugly on the inside because she smoked" uses a conventional expression in an original way. Although she failed to grasp the full implications of the ending in *That Was Then, This is Now*, she did make an important point about Byron's relationship to his father that had never occurred to me. On a test with only one "right" answer, Kayla's unique views would not earn her any points, even though they might actually be valid.

As I might have expected, Kayla did better on her eighth grade test, in part because the test contained several essays in which she could draw upon her strengths and express herself more fully. After the essay scoring was complete, I had a chance to talk with one of the teachers who had read my class' work. Without any prompting from me, she specifically asked about Kayla because her essay had demonstrated such a strong sense of personality and voice. Kayla's ELA score wasn't perfect – she only reached Level 2 – but I considered it a much fairer representation of her abilities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the current political environment, Kayla, her teachers, and her school are all considered failures. Because Kayla scored a Level 1 on her seventh grade reading test, she was in jeopardy of failing the grade. Luckily, the test was only one of three promotional criteria, so she wasn't held back. Although she performed better on the eighth grade ELA test, a Level 2 is still below standards. Her improvement isn't considered relevant in moving the school out of corrective action status; instead, her performance brings us one step closer to being taken over by the state. If I were evaluated and paid on the basis of her test scores, I would also be negatively affected.

However, I have demonstrated that Kayla possesses considerable language skills and has made a great deal of progress over the past two years. I consider her a success story, not a failure. So what would be a fair way to measure her achievement? What should policymakers do to ensure that their evaluations of students and schools allow them to make meaningful and appropriate decisions?

First, I believe that policymakers need to recognize that learning is a complex act. Although students and teachers can and should be held accountable for their progress, the assessments used should provide a thorough picture of a student's abilities. As Kayla's case shows, no individual's learning can be adequately captured by simple multiple-choice questions. At the very least, exams should include a performance component, such as the essays that comprise a large part of the ELA. Because raters must be trained and then take the time to read such exams, performance-based assessments are more expensive to score in a way that ensures reliability. However, the better quality of the results would make the investment worth it. If scoring became prohibitively expensive, then perhaps assessments could be given every other year, rather than yearly.

Even more importantly, policymakers should recognize the complexity of the teaching and learning process. To foster Kayla's development effectively, I needed to assess her progress using a variety of tools. I also needed to understand how to address her particular needs using a variety of methods. Both of these tasks required specialized training Finally, I needed to devote a great deal of time and thought to helping her. Teachers need to be well-trained, supported in their own development, and they need to be given adequate time and resources to help their students.

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