"We Have a Brain and a Heart": Seeing Beyond the Surface of English Learners' Social Identities

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This study explored English Learners' individual identities within the context of their social world at school and was conducted as part of a larger study on the ways English Learners navigate their social environment. A focus group of nine English Learners met on a weekly basis for a period of about five months to discuss and write about their social identities. These students ranged in age from twelve to fourteen years old and were diverse with regard to gender, race, nationality, home language(s), time spent in the U.S., and proficiency level in English. The primary finding from this study was that these nine adolescent English Learners recognize and possess a wide variety of social identities amongst themselves. Additional studies of this nature, conducted with English Learners in other school settings, would add meaningfully to the current understandings that exist surrounding English Learners' social identities.

Keywords: English Learner, social identity, adolescent, culture, teacher research

Introduction

In the corner sits a student, an English Learner, working quietly, alone. Although he appears to be completely immersed in his task, he is not. In reality, he is surveying his environment, watching his teacher and native-English-speaking peers with an intensity unknown to them. Equipped with a pencil in hand, eyes on the teacher, and an eagerness to please, he plays the part of a studious kid. Then, the bell rings, signaling the end of class and the beginning of his grand

transformation. It is at this point that this quiet, studious individual turns into the star of the hall, walking confidently with a few "bros," exchanging words in a familiar language, and, of course, smiling at all the pretty girls.

In another classroom, near a centrally located seat, stands a very communicative young lady. Surrounded by her friends and other peers, she is talking a mile a minute, utilizing words from multiple languages, in an effort to share as many newsworthy details as possible before the passing period officially ends. At the sound of the bell, she is still chatting away, silenced kindly, after several attempts, by a teacher who is ready to get class started. Throughout the period, she dutifully perseveres in attending to her friends, securing weekend plans, and checking her appearance by means of her computer's photographic features. Her expertise with words, however, has not yet been captured in her written piece, which ends abruptly midsentence in the middle of paragraph number one. Little do her teachers know that, in the absence of peers, she becomes extremely focused and driven, reading voraciously and aspiring to become a journalist.

These vignettes, though imaginative in nature, are inspired by daily observations of the fascinating, complicated, real-life personas of my adolescent English Learners, individuals whose social identities are much more complex than they appear at first glance. Adolescents, in general, are at a stage in life where they "try on different identities for size and fit" (Pipher, 2002, p. 168), determining who they want to become. Yet, for English Learners, this process is even more complex, since they are simultaneously navigating between and among cultures, as well (Limberg & Lambie, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Some, like the two students previously described, have an uncanny ability to engage in "cultural switching" (Pipher, 2002, p. 172), taking on different identities in various contexts to be successful in the eyes of teachers, peers, family members, and other important people in their lives. This skill, however, flies under

the radar at times when those people fail to see beyond the surface, fail to recognize that there is a beautiful depth to English Learners' dynamic, multifaceted social identities.

Defining the Impossible: Key Concepts and Terms

In life, there are some words that are nearly impossible to define, since they have the potential to hold vastly different meanings for each individual. For example, *happiness* could mean reading a good book, being surrounded by loved ones, achieving fame or fortune, and the list continues. It all depends upon one's personal perspective. At the outset of this research, it is of paramount importance to define two such words – identity and culture – within the context of this particular study, discussing the most relevant theories surrounding these concepts.

Firstly, there is the idea of *identity*, which is a dynamic force, constantly changing a person over a lifetime (Erikson, 1956). According to Moje and Luke (2009), identity is commonly viewed in five different ways, two of which hold special relevance for this study: identity as "narrative" and identity as "position" (pp. 427-430). *Identity as narrative* is when individuals define themselves by telling their own life stories, rather than letting others do it for them. In this study, nine of my adolescent English Learner (EL) students engaged in discussions of their social identities, narrating their own realities. *Identity as position* is when individuals accept or challenge stereotypes and any other identities that others have tried to pin upon them. Throughout the study, my students expressed agreement, as well as disagreement, with others' perceptions of their identities, not being afraid to voice their own opinions about who they were or wanted to be. This intersection between the students' self-images and social images within the group represents the complexity of identity development, which is both individual and social in nature (Moje & Luke, 2009).

With regard to the social influence on identity, Rosalind Wiseman (2009, 2013) has made some interesting observations, describing ways in which adolescents' identities can take shape within a peer group. From her research, one can see that in any given social group, there might be some teens who hold the power, some who fear speaking up, some who gain recognition from being a comedian or spreading gossip, etc. Outside the group, there are individuals on the fringes who desperately want to be "in," as well as those who follow their own paths and stand up for others. Although this information only serves as a brief highlight of Wiseman's work, it illustrates the presence of individual roles, recognized and enacted within groups. This is the *social* aspect of identity, which my students also discussed.

In addition to the individual and social elements that influence identity, some aspects of identity are also inherent. These aspects, among others, include gender, race, and disposition. For instance, dispositional traits like the tendency to be introverted are often rooted in one's genetics. Susan Cain (2012), writer and advocate for introverts, discusses various studies in the field of psychology, which show that life experiences can indeed play a role in the development of personality, but one's underlying dispositional trait to be introverted or extroverted still has a significant influence. Furthermore, Pipher (1994) says that whether an adolescent is naturally gifted or acquires skill through diligent work, traits such as intelligence, creativity, and/or athleticism can become defining elements of his or her identity, as well.

What is more, the concept of *culture* is also at play in this. Moje and Luke (2009) describe the area between identity and culture as "murky" and "unexplored." They question, "Where does identity stop and culture start? Does one presuppose the other? Are these synonyms? What is the difference between a social identity and a culture?" (p. 420). There are no easy answers to these questions. Pipher (2002) defines culture as "constantly changing,"

explaining that "within any given culture there are many points of view and many different groups and members" (p. 338). In light of this, one could say that culture, while being a part of an individual's identity, is larger than the individual. It is the stage that surrounds the individual. Identity, on the other hand, is centered on who the individual is within, and also among, cultures. Therefore, it is the dancer on the stage, performing in certain positions as a member of the company but still free to interpret the choreography with flair. For adolescents, this dance between identity and culture is a cornerstone of healthy development; yet, for EL students, it must be performed on two or more stages simultaneously, a slightly difficult task.

Context: Doing the Impossible

Adolescent EL students have a bewildering journey to undertake in the United States, even beyond the multiple-stage performance. Not only are they navigating the sociocultural aspects of their environment, but they are also, according to Thomas and Collier's (1997) Prism Model, developing cognitively, academically, and linguistically in two or more languages. Growth in all four of these domains is crucial to their overall success, although this study does place a greater emphasis on exploring the sociocultural domain.

In the case of EL students who are new to the United States, ideally, they are learning to "embrace the new culture," maintain a "connection to their first culture," and develop a "third culture" that combines the two (Limberg & Lambie, 2011, p. 50). This is easier said than done. According to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), experts on children's experiences living outside their home countries and cultures, newcomers' transitional process after they arrive may be paved with mixed feelings, chaos, and a constant need to focus on survival. Moreover, many EL students come with memories of trauma or the grief of losing loved ones, further complicating and delaying their adolescent quest to discover who they are.

There are also EL students who were born in the United States but feel alienated for one reason or another. On this subject, well-known psychologist Mary Pipher (2002) imparts these words of wisdom: "At school they may not be considered American and at home they are considered too Americanized" (p. 168). This is a tension that many EL students experience, particularly those who are U.S. natives. Nonetheless, for *any* EL student, whether born in the United States or not, the process of exploring one's identity and finding a place within the social world at school is messy to say the least. It is no wonder that EL students often develop dynamic, multifaceted identities, changing who they are over time and with different people.

A Question that Led to a Different Story

Although explored within the context of a larger study, the following question was most prominent in my quest to understand who my students were among their peers: *what are EL students' individual identities within the context of their social world at school?* In the process of considering this question, I was floored the day one of my students, Savana[1], casually stated that there were two social groups at our school, boys and girls, and only four social identities within each of those groups (see Figure 1). Some of these were positive, some negative, but both the boys' and girls' groups included an "ESL"[2] social identity.

What astonished me about this was that anyone, especially another EL student, could simplify all EL students' social identities into one category: ESL. Savana was simply sharing what she believed to be the commonly recognized social identities at our school, but what stood out, even in this simple act of sharing, was the swiftness with which a generalization like this could take away EL students' uniqueness. The plethora of identities that I had previously observed in my students vanished in that instant. Gone. Luckily, my data tells a different story.

Method: Discovering that Story

Over a five-month period of time, I discovered that story, together with nine EL students, four being in 8th grade and five in 7th grade. These students met with me on a weekly basis to participate in a focus group (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001), discussing and writing about their social identities, among other topics. The data types I collected ranged from oral discussion, documented through tape-recording and extensive transcriptions; students' written thoughts and reflections; my own written reflections after each meeting from a teacher researcher's point of view (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005); and my observations of the students' interactions. As the study progressed, I began to analyze the data on two levels: (1) explicitly, through what the students said about their social identities, and (2) implicitly, through what the students did as they enacted their various social identities within our group.

It is crucial to note that my connection with the students was highly significant in the process of data collection. Since this study was conducted in the tradition of teacher research, it possessed what Falk and Blumenreich (2005) articulate as "the potential to contribute useful understandings that outside researchers cannot possibly hope to obtain" (p. 14). By conducting research with students I had already gotten to know prior to the study, as well as participating *in* the study as a researcher and observer (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005), I was in a position to have, to a certain degree, an insider's perspective. There was a comfort level among our group, creating more openness during discussions than there might have otherwise been.

In considering the strengths of this connection, however, there is another perspective on research that must also be acknowledged: connectedness with participants can lead to subjectivity. I recognize this fully and have taken extra precautions to ensure the accuracy and validity of my findings. These measures include *triangulating* my data, meaning that at least three different pieces of data support each finding (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; MacLean &

Mohr, 1999), and engaging the participants in *member-checking*, during which my student

participants gave input about the accuracy of my findings and even some of the specific

instances where I had quoted them in my writing (MacLean & Mohr, 1999). Through these

efforts, it was my intention to increase the validity of my teacher researcher perspective, while

still maintaining a safe, connected environment for my nine EL students, where their diverse

social identities could shine.

Participant Backgrounds: A Special Diversity

To understand the unique nature of the diversity among these students, it is valuable to be

equipped with some information about their backgrounds, beginning with their educational

surroundings. Our middle school, home to both 7th and 8th graders, is located in the state of

Indiana, which reported, at the time of this study, that 5.3% of its population consisted of EL

students (State of Indiana, 2014). This was quite a striking contrast to our district and school

percentages, which were both right around 20%. Having a high percentage of EL students has

brought a distinct diversity to our middle schoolers' social and academic environment.

The individuals in this study represented this diversity at our school quite well. Six were

girls, and three were boys, all around twelve to fourteen years old. These students were natives

of Burma, Mexico, the United States, France, or Nigeria and spoke a wide variety of languages

and dialects. Some had lived in the United States for only eleven months, while others had been

U.S. residents since birth. Their current levels of proficiency in English were also diverse,

ranging from Levels 1 to 4[3], with most being on the more advanced end of the spectrum. (To

view more detailed demographic information about the students in this study, see Table 1.)

It is, in fact, this special diversity at our school that convinced me of this study's

importance. While others had already investigated adolescent identity development (Erikson,

1956; Flum & Lavi-Yudelevitch, 2002; Pipher, 1994; Pollack, 1998) and EL students' particular struggles in the search for identity (Campano, 2007; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Limberg & Lambie, 2011; Pipher, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), this had not been done with our unique population of EL students. I knew that exploring my research question within our school context would hold the most relevance for my daily practice.

Hence, the purpose of this study, being one teacher's journey of learning more about her EL students, is not to prove a theory or form any type of generalization across the EL population. It is simply my effort to join the discourse surrounding EL students and identity development in an informed, meaningful way (Shagoury-Hubbard & Miller-Power, 2003), encouraging others to look beyond the surface, too, and follow their own paths to discovering who their EL students truly are within their social world at school.

<div align="center">**The Students' Social Identities through Multiple Analytical Lenses**</div>

Just as one eye cannot view the full picture, one perspective cannot represent the full story about these EL students. By examining the data through multiple lenses, however, one can begin to distinguish more clearly who these remarkable individuals are in the context of their social environment at school. The multiple lenses to be explored include (1) how the students viewed their own social identities, (2) how they viewed the social identities of their peers in our group, and (3) how I, as a teacher and researcher, viewed the students' social identities. With the combination of these three lenses, one will be able to see that *these nine adolescent EL students recognize and possess a wide variety of social identities amongst themselves.*

In Their Own Eyes

On December 11, 2014, I asked my students in the group, "What is your identity when you socialize with other students?" We had discussed this before, but I was interested to see what

they would say in writing, without the worry of what others would think. Some noted positive words in relation to their social identities, stating that they were known as "happy," "funny," or "nice." Others discussed how they acted inside versus outside of school. For Violeta, school was different "because I try to stay out of trouble." King, however, indicated that she was the "same everywhere," unfazed by either social environment. There were also a couple of students who referred to negative feelings as part of their social identities. Johnny, for example, wrote, "I get nervous" when meeting new students. When Violeta heard Johnny share this sentiment, she added, "I don't get comfortable." Their social identities, it seemed, were varied.

On February 12, 2015, not much had changed in terms of the variety within the group; however, on an individual level, some students described their social identities differently. This time, I had phrased my question in the following way: "What is your social identity? I am wondering, when you are with other people at school, whether they are your friends or not…what are you like with them?" I also shared a personal example, saying that I am a listener, since "I end up listening when I'm socializing with people." That seemed to spur some ideas because Violeta, Barbie, Savana, Gizelle, and Johnny all wrote about their social identities in terms of how much they did or did not talk, which none of them had done before. Savana stated, "I talk too much," and Barbie inquired, "Miss Gaisser, do I talk too much?" Gizelle took it upon herself to offer an answer: "Yes, you do." Then, there was Johnny, who said, "I don't talk too much because I don't have a lot of friends." Back in December, Johnny had said, "I have a lot of friends," so this was an interesting change, reminiscent of the dynamic nature of adolescents' social identities (Erikson, 1956), which truly do seem to change in students' own eyes over time.

In the Eyes of Peers

"[W]e've been talking about your social life at school," I said, "but I don't know if you thought about it….I'm wondering, *What would you say about each other…?*" As soon as these words had left my mouth, King asked, "Can we take turns going around?" She was ready! I responded, nonetheless, by explaining, "I'm gonna have you write it."

On a piece of paper created expressly for this purpose, the students recorded their perceptions of one another, which, as it turned out, were as varied as their ideas about their own social identities. They listed everything from communication styles (e.g., speaker, storyteller, joker, laugher, listener, etc.) to level of connection with others (e.g., not well-known, talking often with the teacher, etc.) to talents and physical appearances. Students even noted each other's personality traits – "caring," "crazy," "helpful," "private" – which seemed to represent their current understandings, at this developmental stage in their lives, of the concept of identity.

Of all the ideas they generated about one another's social identities, the identifications that occurred most frequently were quiet, speaker, funny, nice/kind, and smart. There was an interesting dialogue regarding this concept of *smart*, as well. Three students described King as "smart," but she spoke against her intelligence, claiming, "I'm not smart." Violeta responded right away, "You're, like, the smartest in here." Violeta, too, was described as "smart" among peers, and King wrote to explain why: "She correct [sic] me everytime [sic]." It was interesting that King could see in another what she could not, or perhaps *would* not, see in herself.

In general, the students did not always agree with others' perceptions, which is seen in King's protest against being viewed as "smart." On a similar occasion, some of us were discussing John's private nature in the group, and King corrected us, saying, "Nooo, John's not private." Others disagreed at times, as well, such as when they considered my social identity. Gizelle said, "She talks too much," and Savana also called me a "speaker." Alex, however,

disagreed, stating, "She doesn't speak a lot." These were moments when the students challenged others' perceptions, resisting identifications that peers in the group had tried to attach to them or to their group members, which represents identity as position (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 430). Identity as narrative is also of importance (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 427), since students discussed the communication styles through which they share, or do not share, their personal narratives.

In spite of their disagreements, the students did find their perceptions to be in alignment in certain instances. For example, King and Violeta both identified Woo as a "tomboy," with Violeta writing, "She doesn't like been [sic] a girl." When Woo heard King say conversationally, "For Woo, she considers herself as a tomboy…," Woo strongly exclaimed, "Yeah!!!" This was a moment when three students were in agreement about Woo's social identity, yet they were still resisting an identity, challenging traditional gender roles for girls in society (Pollack, 1998; Wiseman, 2009). Whether in agreement or not, these students had definite convictions about their own and others' social identities, which became apparent through this activity.

In My Eyes

As a teacher and researcher, I, too, had made some observations about the students' social identities. Although data exists to support the presence of numerous different social identities among my students – frequent speaker, average speaker, quiet/occasional speaker, outgoing leader, quiet leader, active listener, storyteller, interviewer, connecter of ideas, differentiator of ideas, laugher, funny/Entertainer (Wiseman, 2013), Champion (Wiseman, 2009, 2013), and tomboy – only several of these social identities will be highlighted in this section.

Leaders among the outgoing and quiet individuals.

Two individuals with natural leader instincts were King and John. King would take charge of situations, making statements like, "Okay, we need ya. We'll assign jobs," and John

would follow up to support her. As an example, when King said that two people needed to categorize sports ideas, she questioned, "You wanna take care of sports?" John's response was a simple, "Yeah." John's role seemed to be to listen first, before speaking or acting. As Cain (2012) says, "Because of their inclination to listen to others and lack of interest in dominating social situations, introverts are more likely to hear and implement suggestions" (p. 57). Thus, these two leadership styles complemented each other well, with the one setting events into motion and the other being attuned enough and willing to support those events. Furthermore, these were both students who had been recognized by our school as leaders. Regarding John, on November 9, 2014, I wrote, "[H]e was a mentor to many of my students [the previous year], who said he helped them understand things in class. He was also someone I saw around school, who school personnel asked to speak, volunteer, etc." (Teacher Journal). For these and other reasons, these two very different individuals were both viewed as leaders in the social world at school.

   Laughter gives a voice.

   Within the transcriptions, I notated as frequently as possible who spoke directly before the group started laughing, as well as which particular students laughed. Since Gizelle was the most notable creator and appreciator of humor in our group, her social identity as an Entertainer (Wiseman, 2013) merits attention. In fact, it caught the attention of many. "Dude, you always laugh, man," remarked Woo (November 6, 2014). "What's so funny?" Alex questioned another time. "C'mon, Gizelle. We need ya," I added. "Sorry. Sorry," she responded (November 20, 2014). When the students were writing paragraphs to introduce themselves, I even commented, "Gizelle is always laughing! Did you put that in there?" (January 9, 2015). Like Wiseman (2013) described, it seemed at times that Gizelle could not control the laughter. It just came out. In contrast with Wiseman's ideas, however, Gizelle certainly proved that an entertainer is not

always a boy. It could be anyone. After the transcriptions had been completed, Gizelle's laughter

still lingered in my mind. I could hear her voice, and as I thought about this, I wrote that

laughing "is one of the ways she communicates" (March 1, 2015). For Gizelle, a student who

spoke sparingly, her laughter gave her a voice, a place within the group.

Standing out from the crowd.

As mentioned previously, Woo and her peers agreed that she was a "tomboy." Woo also

shared one time, "I think about a lot of girls. They're so cute" (November 13, 2014). These

aspects of her social identity make her *stand out* as being different from others, but this is not all

that she does: she also *stands up* for others. This beautiful trait first became apparent to me

through one of Woo's many stories. It was about a friend of hers who, according to Woo, is gay:

"[T]he boy make fun of him, because they say, 'You're gay…' like that, right? So, somehow, I

don't like what the people call each other, like, 'gay' and those….I's like, 'Stop calling people

gay. What about you?'"[4] In a rather humorous turn of events, Woo managed to confuse those

boys into thinking that her friend was older and that they had offended him. "Sorry, sorry, sorry,"

they pleaded in the end (November 13, 2014). On a different day, she defended a friend in our

group by saying, "Man, you should…be nice, right?...If you hear me, Man, you have ear? Yeah,

you do" (November 6, 2014). As the evidence shows, Woo, with her tomboy personality and

caring spirit, epitomizes Wiseman's (2009, 2013) Champion identity, standing up for others with

cleverness and bravery. She stands out in the very best of ways.

Conclusion: They Are More

As one can see from the perspectives of the students, their peers, and my teacher researcher point

of view, *these nine adolescent EL students recognize and possess a wide variety of social*

identities amongst themselves. Some are speakers, listeners, and laughers, basing their social

identities on the ways they communicate. Some are admired for their talents and intelligence, respected by their peers. Some are nervous or confident, highly connected to others or virtually unknown, leaders or supporters. And some go against the grain, defying the crowd.

While it is true that these students may appear to be that quiet boy in the corner of the room or that talkative girl neglecting her studies at first glance, they are so much more. Their identities are dynamic and multidimensional. In spite of the added challenges they face as adolescent EL students navigating between and among cultures and languages, they can and will, in a supportive environment, use language, brainpower, and courage to enact their social identities in their school world. It is the duty of all educators and other professionals working with EL students to create that environment, a comfortable, caring, open-minded place where students can break free of that "ESL" stereotype and teach others about who they really are. After all, as my student Savana says, "We are maybe ESL students, but we have a brain and a heart." There is more underneath the surface.

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NOTE: This research would not have been possible without the active participation of the nine incredible EL students whose insights are shared within this article, as well as the support of their families, Butler University, the township and school, and my family.

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<div align="center">Footnotes</div>

[1]Throughout this study, pseudonyms are used for the names of the students to protect their confidentiality. The students chose their own pseudonyms for their names.

[2]ESL means English as a Second Language. Although the terms EL (English Language) and ENL (English as a New Language) are becoming more widely utilized, recognizing English learners who also know two or more other languages, the ESL acronym is still in use.

[3]The levels signify the students' proficiency in English, as determined by our annual statewide EL assessment, which was LAS Links at that time. Students at Level 1 were our beginners, with students at the higher levels being more advanced in English.

[4]In transcriptions of students' speech, I prefer to honor their courageous oral production in English, rather than repeatedly pointing out their errors by inserting [sic] after each mistake.

APPENDICES

Table 1

Student Demographic Information

Information Type	Alex	Barbie	Gizelle
Grade Level	7th	7th	8th
Age	13	14	14
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Race	Mexican	Nigerian	Mexican American
Native Country	United States	Nigeria	Mexico
Time in the U.S.	13 Years	11 Months	8 Years
Languages	Spanish	Yoruba	Spanish
ELP Level	3	1	3
Information Type	John	Johnny	King
Grade Level	8th	7th	8th
Age	14	13	14
Gender	Male	Male	Female
Race	Asian	Asian	Burmese, Filipina, Thai Hun, Asian
Native Country	Hakha, Burma	Burma	Myanmar
Time in the U.S.	4 Years	5 Years	5 Years
Languages	Chin	Tidem (a dialect of Chin)	Burmese, Filipino, Thai Hun Mai
ELP Level	4	4	4
Information Type	Savana	Violeta	Woo
Grade Level	7th	8th	7th
Age	12	14	13
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Race	French, Malian	Latina/Mexican	Asian (Chinese, Korean, Chin)
Native Country	Strasbourg, Alsace, France	Mexico	Chin State, Myanmar
Time in the U.S.	11 Months	3 Years	3 Years
Languages	French	Spanish, English	English, Chin, Myanmar; a little Korean, Chinese, Japanese
ELP Level	2	4	3

Note. Students self-identified the majority of their demographic information, such as age, race(s),

and language(s), as the school-wide database does not always contain accurate information in

these areas. Their English-language proficiency levels, however, were verified on our database.
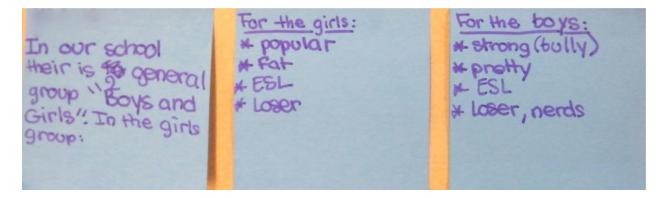

Figure 1. These are Savana's notes about the social groups and identities that exist within our

school. After Savana had discussed these groups and identities informally in conversation, I

asked if she would be willing to make a written note of the observations she had shared.