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"My mom says I'm really creative!": Dis/Ability, Positioning, and Resistance in Multimodal Instructional Contexts

"I like to draw and paint. I have 249 drawings at home in my room of knights, dragons, superheroes, cars, trucks, and sunsets. These are my favorite things to draw. My mom says I am really creative!"

—*Christopher, age 8, pre-interview*[1]

"Christopher's sketches are one of a kind. I really like the design of the costumes. I think the audience will be amazed by the design."

—*Rachel, professional artist*

"Christopher is very shy; at times he hides under his desk. I think he has significant emotional issues and a very poor self-concept. His first-grade teacher referred him to the Student Study Team, but his parents resisted. I'm not sure what to do."

—*Margaret McSweeney, second-grade teacher, pre-interview*

How are we to reconcile these different verbal portraits of Christopher? Is he the "really creative" artist who designs "one of a kind" costumes, or is he the shy second grader who hides under his desk and needs to be referred to the school psychologist? What factors influence who the children in our classrooms are able to be? How might exploring the answers to these questions lead us to create classroom communities that are more inclusive, livable, and equitable?

In this article, I examine the ways in which Christopher employed a range of strategic literacy moves to counter being labeled "deficient." Drawing on the literacy tools and interactional opportunities present within his teacher's multimodal instruction, he worked to present an alternative portrait of himself as competent. Christopher's efforts to present a "possible self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) that was recognized as valuable within his classroom community illustrate how everyday interactions and instructional choices work to position children as "normal" or as "deficient."

[1]All names of individuals and institutions are pseudonyms.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RELATED LITERATURE
Sociocultural Perspectives on Dis/ability

Bringing coherence to the many "readings" of Christopher involves moving beyond the assumption that abilities and disabilities are located solely within learners. When we go beyond viewing ability as "beneath the skin and between the ears" (Mehan, 1996, p. 241), we can ask questions about the contextual and interactional affordances (and constraints) that support (or suppress) children's meaningful participation in classroom contexts and their expression of abilities.

Sociocultural theory offers one lens through which to ask such questions. Rather than looking for a deficit or impairment within learners, a sociocultural perspective suggests examining the intersection of environment and individual to understand how they mutually construct each other (Collins, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1998). Ability and disability are seen as constructed in the relation between individuals and the opportunities provided by the activity setting in which they are engaged (Collins, 2003;

Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). The term "opportunities" here encompasses aspects of the social organization, such as the roles that are available to take up ("costume designer" or "boy with an emotional disturbance"). It also includes an understanding of the curricular affordances available, such as the kinds of participation and forms of representation (or literacies) that are valued in a given activity context.

A sociocultural understanding of dis/ability has at its core the relationship between people and their interactional and institutional environments. As Alfredo Artiles notes, "The unit of analysis is not the individual child, but rather the-individual-in-action-within-special-contexts" (1998, p. 34). It is thus through socially and culturally situated, symbolically mediated interaction that development, and the appearance of dis/ability, takes place.

From a sociocultural perspective, "What is this child capable of?" is simply not a productive question for teachers. Recognizing dis/ability as performed by an individual child acting within a specific context, the questions that *are* productive include: *What is this child able to do in this context? How is her participation shaped by the responses (or lack thereof) of others in this context? How might the forms of literacy and modes of meaning making available within this context support or (suppress) her participation? How might the context be shifted—through different sorts of social responses, different forms of literacy—to more effectively support this child's full participation and her demonstrations of competence?* Informed by these questions, we should, as we will observe Margaret doing, attempt to design more supportive and inclusive instructional contexts that derive from "local understanding" of how to support children's full participation (Kliewer, 2008).

Positioning Theory as a Lens on Local Identity Construction

How, then, might we begin to identify and examine the *process* through which an individual student becomes recognized as "competent" or "disabled" in a given educational context? *Positioning* offers one way to identify and describe this process by focusing attention on the role(s) of culturally and historically situated discursive interactions, cultural and curricular resources, artifacts, narratives, and other resources in local identity construction (Collins, in press; Davies & Harré, 1990; Moje & Luke, 2009; Wortham, 2004).

Positioning offers a way to describe the process through which people are placed into different identities (roles, categories, storylines) and the ways in which they respond by taking up that identity or by attempting to *re-position* themselves (Davies & Harré, 1990). The concept of *thickening* describes how socially recognized identities get built and inscribed over time through discursive interactions, or *positioning events* (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2004). Repeated instances of positioning lead to students becoming recognized by peers and teachers as a certain "type" of student (Wortham, 2004). Identifying moments of positioning and how they contribute to the local identity being built or "thickened" allows us to examine how students come to be identified over time within their classroom (and school) communities as "disabled."

The Political and Ideological Nature of Dis/Ability, Literacy and Positioning

Together, sociocultural and positioning theories call our attention to the ways in which tools, practices, events, and discourses are enacted by particular people who are situated within specific social, historical, and cultural contexts. These lenses allow us to make explicit the historical, cultural, and ideological nature of identifying some children as "less than" others. Consider, for example, the choice Margaret McSweeney faces in referring Christopher to the Student Study Team (SST) and setting in motion the testing and identification process that may result in labeling Christopher as "emotionally disabled." Margaret's choice is reflective of her position as a teacher within a culture that places value on sorting children in this manner, one that has created institutional practices and spaces to support such sorting, and that emphasizes demonstration of facility with print-based, academic literacies in English as a demonstration of competence.

In additional, Christopher, an African American boy, was "at risk" of being viewed by his

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peers and teachers through a deficit lens because of the influence of broader social categories, roles, and stereotypes. He and Margaret, a European American woman, are both living and working in a culture that provides ample models of "dangerous black boys" that need to be feared and hence contained (see discussions in Ferguson, 2001, and Fordham, 1996). Drawing on Bakhtin (1981), Wortham (2004) notes that "individuals and groups do not create unique categories de novo, but must instead 'rent' categories from the society in order to make sense of themselves and others" (p. 167). As Claude Steele's (2010) work on *stereotype threat* makes clear, awareness of these categories influences the behavior of all of the participants in positioning events.

One of the effects of applying such deficit categories is to shape who gets identified as "different" or "deficient" and, therefore, segregated from general instruction. By virtue of his ethnicity, Christopher is already at greater risk than his peers of being identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002). He is more likely to be placed in special education (National Research Council, 2002) and, once there, "more than three times as likely to be placed in more restrictive environments as [his] White counterparts" (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007, p. 351).

Children of color and low-income children of all ethnicities are drastically overrepresented in special education categories (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Harry & Anderson, 1999; National Research Council, 2002) and underrepresented in gifted education programs (Ford, 1998). The complete history of how these practices came to be is beyond the scope of this article; however, Narain (in press) offers an analysis of how this history comes to bear in current constructions of "inclusive classrooms." In addition, an excellent overview illustrating the intersecting histories of *ableism* and *racism* appears in Ferri and Connor (2005), who trace the history of legalized school segregation in the United States based on social class, race, linguistic markers, and perceived dis/ability. This body of research clearly demonstrates that the educational sorting practices represented by segregated special education programs,

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tracking, and ability grouping have resulted in legally sanctioned forms of school segregation and unequal educational opportunities for students of color, children from low-income homes, and students identified as having special needs.

"Literacy" often functions as a sorting mechanism within these practices of educational segregation. Questions of what counts as "literacy" and of whose literacies count are at the center of school taxonomies. It is well documented that teachers' assessment and interpretation of students' use of various oral and written forms of literacy are influenced by the degree to which students' primary discourse differs from "standard English," and that these assessments influence the ways in which schools position children in marginalized or "low-performing" categories (Heath, 1983; Cazden, 1988/2001; Delpit, 2002; Gee, 1996).

Proposing an Expanded Understanding of "Literacy"

Fueled in part by findings such as these, New Literacies scholars have proposed challenges to functional definitions of what counts as "literacy" in school. The "New Literacy Studies" are based on the tenet that literacy practices "only make sense when studied in the context of the social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part" (Gee, 2000, p. 180).

An important theme within empirical research conducted from the perspective of the New Literacy Studies is the notion of *multiple literacies* (Gee, 1996). A multiple literacies perspective asserts that printed forms of academic or standard literacy are just one form of making and communicating meaning. Visual, graphic forms of meaning making (such as a map, flow chart, or illustration) and physical kinesthetic forms of meaning making (such as movement, dance) are all considered literacy practices, for example. Thus the broadening of the lens through which we examine literacy practices calls for an examination of the multiple semiotic modes through which humans in a particular social group and participating in a particular activity engage with and construct meaning from the world (Albers & Harste, 2007; Eisner, 1994; Kress, 2000). From

this perspective, "academic literacy" is seen as privileging particular discursive features, textual structures, patterns of classroom interactions, and ways of making meaning.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research reported here, Collaborations between Teachers and Artists (CoTA; see http://cotaprogram.org/), was conducted as part of a larger project investigating the influence of a three-year model for professional development. Informed by the expanded view of literacy described above, CoTA aimed to help teachers design instruction that drew on multimodal forms of literacy as tools for constructing and representing meaning (Collins, 2009; Collins & Griess, 2011).

Over a three-year period, I worked with participating teachers and artists to assemble detailed case study reports tracking the participation of 24 focal students across eight classrooms (grades 1–5) (Collins, 2009). Data for the cases included video, audio, and still recordings of children, field notes taken from a participant-observer stance in each class, instructional notes and reflections recorded by the classroom teacher, planning documents, interviews with students and teachers, and student work.

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During our first year of collaborating, several teachers reported that the multimodal, multiple literacies approach we employed seemed to correspond with changes they observed in the social and academic positioning of students whom they had previously identified as "struggling." During our second year of working together, I set out to investigate this claim more closely. I began by analyzing the transcripts, videotapes, and field notes of classroom activities within each case to identify moments of positioning and students' responses to those moments. I then coded and categorized these positioning events across the cases to investigate the range of ways students were positioned during CoTA instruction and their strategies for responding. This cross-case analysis revealed a pattern of students' engagement in a range of strategic literacy moves to counter their dis/ability label(s) or positionings (Collins, 2009; Collins & Griess, 2011). In this article, I draw

from the case study of one student, Christopher, to illustrate the strategies of resistance and re-positioning exhibited across the case studies.

About the District

My work was conducted in collaboration with Buena Vista School District, a large urban school district located near the border of the southwestern United States and Mexico. During the period of our work together, approximately 33% of the students in Buena Vista were English language learners, 43% qualified for reduced or free lunches, and 11% received special education services.

Buena Vista prides itself on being *inclusive* in response to children with special needs. The district's mission and values statements, as well as those of the individual schools in which I conducted this work, include frequent repetition of phrases that could be read as supporting full inclusion for a range of special needs in the classroom community. For example, "developing each child's full potential while recognizing his or her uniqueness," a phrase that is repeated throughout district and school documentation (including parent handbooks, websites, school report cards, etc.) suggests that classroom instruction might be designed to include a range of "unique" ways of participating. However, it also allows space for claiming that a particular child's "full potential" might best be realized through exclusionary educational practices, such as removal from the classroom community for special services designed to support their "uniqueness." While working at various schools in Buena Vista, I observed practices suggesting both interpretations were at work.

In Buena Vista, "inclusion" meant that students with identified disabilities were often allowed in classrooms with their non-identified peers. These arrangements did not constitute "a rejection of the status quo of segregated schooling" (Kliewer et al., 2004, p. 398). It was incumbent on the teachers to decide which classroom activities identified students would have the opportunity to participate in; CoTA teachers made the choice to include the focal students during our collaboration. I also observed instances where children themselves

refused to be excluded from specific classroom activities. One six-year-old refused to leave her first-grade classroom during CoTA instruction to attend speech therapy, telling the speech therapist, "I can't go to speech because my art is at this time. I can't go until my time [for speech therapy] changes." Her classroom teacher supported her refusal, and the student's speech therapy was rescheduled (Collins & Griess, in press).

Original Fables in Margaret McSweeney's Second Grade

Each participating teacher met individually for 30 minutes once a week with a professional artist and a member of the research team to design and plan instruction for the following week. These collaborative lessons, termed "units of inquiry," were designed to meet the teachers' content-area instructional goals while incorporating multimodal forms of literacy.

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Margaret McSweeney, Christopher's second-grade teacher, told us in our initial planning meeting that she was nearing completion of a genre study of folktales and fables with her students. As a follow-up, she wanted to have the students work together to write a class fable. Rachel, the artist collaborating with Margaret, suggested that drama might support this goal; Margaret enthusiastically agreed.

Over the ensuing 12 weeks, Margaret's children wrote three scripts, *Kindness, Never Give Up,* and *Always Tell the Truth.* The production of the plays required students to choose "jobs," such as acting the part of a character, designing and building the sets, directing the plays, designing and making the costumes, and writing invitations and programs. Margaret's class performed the plays on stage for their family members and for students from eight other classes.

Margaret's instruction included traditional academic literacies in the form of writing scripts, invitations, and programs. To facilitate her students' writing, Margaret used the writers' workshop approach already in place in her classroom. In addition, Margaret provided opportunities for the children to communicate their understanding of character, plot, and theme in multiple ways. One example of the children's response is evident in the backdrop for the play *Kindness.* Led by

Christopher, who became chief set designer, they created a backdrop depicting a row of houses. The houses for the kind characters (rabbits) were pink and tan and surrounded by birds and flowers. The home of Buster the Bull (the "bully" and villain) was deep red and surrounded by cacti, snakes, and vultures.

CONSIDERING CHRISTOPHER'S (RE)POSITIONING STRATEGIES

In the following section, I share excerpts from Christopher's case study to illustrate three repositioning strategies that were employed consistently by the case study students across the intervention classrooms. I selected Christopher's case because, in the context of sociocultural perspectives on dis/ability and positioning theory, his story functions as a "telling case" (Rex, 2000) that "serve[s] as a site for making logical inferences that will illuminate formerly obscure aspects of general theory" (p. 322). Christopher's literacy moves and efforts to reposition himself help illuminate our understanding of the contextual features that shape dis/ability.

Strategy 1: Opting Out

Each of the focal students had school biographies that included a history of "opting out" of traditional instructional contexts. Absenting themselves from instructional contexts in which they were positioned as deficient took a variety of forms for these children, from finding "reasons" to leave an activity (e.g., frequent bathroom breaks) to remaining silent.

As noted earlier, for Christopher, "opting out" meant choosing to be silent and, when pressed to participate, retreating under his desk. Christopher seemed to seek out solitude whenever possible by moving away from group activities and electing to sit alone. When his classmates circled around Margaret during "carpet time," jockeying for positions close to the teacher and bumping their knees against their classmates' as they gathered their legs up "criss-cross applesauce," Christopher hung back, eventually taking a seat on the periphery of the circle and carefully folding his body up in a manner that maintained several inches of open space around him. Although of average size among his peers and apparently physically

fit, Christopher also elected not to engage in their games of four-square and soccer during recess, choosing instead to watch quietly or to go on the swings alone.

Margaret noted that Christopher often refused to participate, especially in group collaborative activities, and that at times he even crawled under his desk and stayed there until asked to return to his seat. Margaret shared her fears that she might not be able to reach Christopher, noting, "Christopher doesn't act up, become disruptive, or fool around. He spends a lot of time staring into space, daydreaming." At the time we began working together, Margaret had started the paperwork to continue the Student Study Team process for Christopher (a process that had begun with his first-grade teacher and that was then put on hold by his parents). Margaret stressed wanting to find a way to reach Christopher and explained that she was holding off on submitting additional paperwork because, "There is just something there, there *is* ability there."

I observed students engage in the strategy of opting out most often when participation relied heavily on oral and print forms of academic literacy; Christopher was the only child who also opted out of playground activities. This strategy may have been effective for some of the case study children in maintaining a sense of self in the face of negative or problematic social positionings. However, it also served to further the teachers' emerging interpretation of them as deficient, to "thicken" the negative social identities that were already at play. What may have been necessary for self-preservation was not necessarily useful in school.

Strategy 2: Telling Stories

As I spent time in their classrooms, each of the focal children took advantage of moments where they could share autobiographical stories with me. Usually these moments were an aside, a brief interlude of time stolen from engagement in their classroom activities. When those moments occurred, and in my position as a researcher-guest in their classrooms, I was simply charmed that the children trusted me enough to share personal thoughts with me. I listened, took down their stories, and encouraged them to continue.

> Christopher identified as an artist, and he was supported and encouraged in this self-identification by his family.

Upon reflection and analysis, however, a pattern emerged suggesting that these moments were not without purpose. They occurred regularly when the children were confronting deficit identities, suggesting that they seized strategically upon these opportunities to resist being marked as deficient, to craft alternative identities of achievement and possibility, and to have those identities documented via text, video or audio recording.

As noted at the beginning of this manuscript, Christopher identified as an artist, and he was supported and encouraged in this self-identification by his family. When I first met Christopher, however, I didn't know this, and neither did his teacher, Margaret. On my second visit to his classroom, I sat down at an empty desk next to Christopher. He was sitting quietly by himself, sketching on a piece of paper, and I was similarly working alone, drawing a diagram of the classroom layout. After several minutes, Christopher whispered, "What are you drawing?"

"I'm drawing the classroom, like where everything is located, to help me remember. There's your desk." As I pointed it out to him on my paper. I asked, "What are you drawing?"

Christopher suddenly became very animated, "I'm drawing a knight and a castle! See his sword!" I agreed that it was a great sword, and he continued, smiling, "My mom says I'm a really good artist."

The following week, I returned with a video camera. My custom the first time I used the camera in a classroom was to demonstrate its use for the children and let them watch some tape of themselves. After demonstrating the camera to Margaret's students, I asked for volunteers to be interviewed "about what they liked." Christopher was among the first group of students to be interviewed, speaking up clearly and smiling:

"I like to draw and paint. I have 249 drawings at home in my room of knights, dragons, superheroes, cars, trucks, and sunsets. These are my favorite things to draw. My mom says I am really creative! My uncle made a painting of an ocean that I really liked. It has this blue green color that is really pretty that I liked the most. I used it to paint another picture for my mom."

Christopher's teacher, Margaret, and several of his classmates watched this initial taping; several more watched it the next day as a demonstration of the interview process. This storytelling episode began as a side conversation between Christopher and me, but became, through Christopher's pursuit of an opportunity to have it recorded, part of the formal documentation of CoTA activity in Margaret's classroom. Margaret was delighted to learn of Christopher's affinity for art and began to reinforce it as part of daily activities, creating an opportunity for him to sketch costume designs, for example.

Christopher's identity as a skilled artist began to thicken in the classroom over the next several weeks. As the class began to design and create sets for their play, Christopher emerged as an authority, and his classmates positioned him as such by asking for advice before proceeding with particular colors and set designs. As the day of their performance drew closer, the class worked on the backdrops outdoors, kneeling around large swaths of paper with paintbrushes and cups of paint. One of Christopher's classmates, Rebecca, turned to me as I filmed the scene, nodded towards Christopher, and commented, "He's the artist, the real artist here."

Rather than reading Christopher's original aside to me about being an artist as "off-task" behavior, we can read his use of personal narrative as an attempt to *strategically disrupt* classroom norms that are serving to marginalize him. This reading is further underscored by Christopher's volunteering to be recorded on film; he clearly wanted to make his identification as an artist, indeed, as *"a really good artist,"* known to me, his teacher, and his classmates. The strength of his desire to be known in this way can be understood in comparison with his past behavior; rather than withdrawing from his classmates, Christopher seized this opportunity to participate in a very public manner. As Elizabeth Dutro (2009), drawing on Friere (2000) and Hall and Jefferson (1990), noted, "human agents resist their marginalization, be it through voicing their lived knowledge in school or organizing large-scale social movements to enact change" (p. 90). Or, as Christopher teaches us, they resist by telling alternative narratives of themselves as competent, and by seeking to get those narratives documented in the "official record."

Christopher's use of storytelling to display a self previously unseen in his classroom was

successful. Christopher's teacher, Margaret, was actively seeking ways to reach him and seized on his self-story of *ability* as a means of doing so. She aided Christopher in disrupting his previous identity as a "shy" child by creating a purposeful place for Christopher-the-artist within the classroom activity and by encouraging the other children to see Christopher the way he wanted to be seen: as an artist.

Strategy 3: Doing It My Way

Across the case studies, focal children found ways of entering the activity that were consistent with how they saw themselves. In the multimodal tools and activities, they found invitations to take up roles consistent with their self-identified strengths as learners and that reflected their personal interests.

Christopher's participation choices demonstrate this. When his class was preparing to perform their fables, Rachel, the artist in his classroom, spoke to them: "Think about what part you would like to participate in—script, set design. We will make groups for each. Think about if you are interested in acting, designing the costumes, or directing. Think about two things you would like to do." Margaret began taking down names for various jobs and roles, and several classmates suggested that Christopher play the part of "father" in the play "Truth." Christopher quietly refused, shaking his head and looking down, until they assigned the role to someone else. However, shortly after this, he eagerly volunteered for costume design.

The first costume Christopher designed was for a lion. He purposefully made the lion "look like a kid," explaining, "I chose a green shirt and blue pants so he could look like a kid" (see Fig. 1).
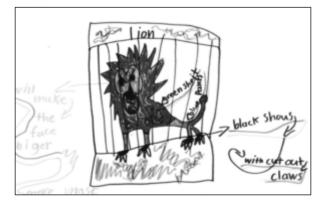

Figure 1. *Christopher's first costume design, a lion.*

Figure 2. *Christopher's drawing for the character of Buster the Bull(y).*

Christopher then designed costumes for several more characters across the three plays, including a revision of another child's costume for Buster the Bull, which Christopher pointed out needed to incorporate a hands-free mask so that Buster could hold the four-square ball in his scenes (see Fig. 2). Christopher's classmates were so impressed with his designs that they later encouraged him to become lead set designer, a role he eagerly embraced.

When asked about his favorite part of the unit after the performances were over, Christopher excitedly shared, "I can't really pick one, I liked it all. I controlled the curtains in the play, gave directions backstage. I also painted the set. I enjoyed working with other people. The scary part was going out to take a bow. . . . I think this is a good way to learn so I can learn to not be shy and to share my drawings. In first grade, I was teased for not being able to do things and because I was shy. My second-grade teacher taught me not to be shy. I am glad because I did it and want to do it again. It was fun, but sad because it is over."

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IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Christopher resisted marginalization and persisted in finding ways to enact his competencies through his employment of three re-positioning strategies, which I've termed *opting-out, telling stories,* and *doing it my way.* What can we learn from his resistance that reveals how teachers might facilitate and support the kinds of positioning moves engaged in by Christopher? How can teachers actively make positive social identities available and accessible to children who have been placed in deficit categories?

The resistance strategies employed by Christopher illustrate the need for teachers to consider how behavior that appears as *misbehavior*—disruptive, off-task, oppositional, or just unusual—may be serving a purpose. Danforth (2001) notes that resistant behaviors may reflect political and cultural tensions—resistance to negative stereotyping and marginalized positionings, for example. This type of resistance may also be personally protective, if not always educationally productive.

The importance of attending to children's interactions within spaces and conversations that were outside of the "official" classroom activities is another lesson illustrated by this work. It was in these spaces that risk taking most often took place, as in Christopher's introduction of himself as an artist. It was in these "unofficial" moments that children demonstrated strengths (and literate capabilities) that, when taken up and supported in the official spaces of schooling, were successful in re-positioning them as competent, fully participating members of their classroom communities.

Christopher's story also suggests the importance of changing the definition of literacy from the "stepladder acquisition of subskills" (Kliewer et al., 2004) to one that includes a range of ways to make and represent meaning. When Margaret changed the literacy tools and practices available in her classroom, she changed the forms of participation and social identities that were available for children to take up and "try on."

As Margaret reflected in her teaching journal,

For some [children], the opportunity to select their own forms of participation allowed them to demonstrate traits that had previously gone unobserved in the classroom. For example, a student who had exhibited significant emotional issues chose costume and set design. Christopher's artistic achievements in these areas promoted a noticeable increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. . . . Christopher demonstrated leadership qualities and experienced positive peer relationships. The transformation was amazing! . . . As a teacher, I learned several valuable lessons about

the incorporation of the arts into the academic curriculum. I now feel that it is best not to have preconceived notions or stereotypical ideas about which children might perform successfully in various roles or positions. . . . Respecting children's ideas and allowing them to creatively express themselves opens up a whole new area of personally relating to your students.

Margaret thus emphasized the role of the arts and multimodal forms of literacy in creating opportunities for Christopher to participate successfully within her classroom community. Perhaps the most important lesson to be gleaned, then, from Christopher's story is about the classroom communities we must strive to create and the potential role of multimodal literacies in supporting students' participation in those communities. What Margaret describes as "a whole new area of personally relating to your students" is described by Christopher Kliewer and Douglas Biklen as "local understanding":

"[. . .] an educational dialectic in which the value, intelligence, and imagination (taken together; what we term citizenship) of all students, including those with significant developmental disabilities, are recognized and responsive contexts are crafted that foster increasingly sophisticated citizenship" (Kliewer & Biklen, 2007, p. 2580).

The teachers in Kliewer's ethnographic research designed multimodal literacy contexts guided by local understanding of the children with whom they worked and a sense of moral imperative to support each child's right to literate citizenship (Kliewer, 2008). Margaret began by incorporating multimodal literacies and, primarily through her work with Christopher, became excited about the potential to create a more inclusive classroom community through expanded notions of "literacy" and "participation."

A sociocultural understanding of dis/ability has at its core exactly this sort of relationship between people and their interactional environments. In a culture that emphasizes the opposite— that in fact proposes to assess teacher quality in terms of students' decontexualized performances of capability as measured by standardized

tests—this is a not a view of dis/ability that we are encouraged to take (Collins & Valente, 2010; Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Valente & Collins, 2010).

The view of dis/ability we *are* encouraged to take, one that locates dis/ability and responsibility for school success solely within each child's embodied self, effectively de-professionalizes teachers. This stance encourages us, when in Margaret's position of working with a child who initially appears disconnected or "stuck," to locate the problem within the child, absolve ourselves of responsibility, and to perpetuate forms of educational segregation. Christopher's story teaches us the importance of working against the dominant view of dis/ability and, as Kliewer asserts, shifting our questions from, "Do you really belong here?" to "How do we support your belonging here?" (Kliewer, 2008, p. 47).

> Christopher's story teaches us the importance of working against the dominant view of dis/ability.

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