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Becoming Theatrical:
Performing Narrative Research, Staging Visual Representation

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Abstract

This article describes a collaborative project among the author of a book about mothers and special education (based on a collection of oral narratives of mothers who represent diverse generations, races, and social classes), a playwright, and an artist. Together, they created a theatrical and visual staging of the author's narrative research. The staged reading included a post-performance discussion with the cast, two mothers whose narratives appear in the work, the co-authors and the audience. This discussion indicated a positive response to this alternative form of research representation and generated meaningful dialogue about mothers' experiences with special education and its unintended consequences in the lives of their families.

Introduction

The subject of this paper—theatrical and visual staging of narrative research—is a collaborative theater project between the co-authors who work within the emerging discipline of disability studies in education (DSE). Based upon narratives told by mothers of children with disabilities, The M.O.M. Project (*Mothers on Mothering: Narratives of Disability)* (re)presents textual data as oral and visual performance. In keeping with our interest in alternative modes of presentation, we describe our process for this project by integrating conventional academic writing with ongoing dialogic exchanges between ourselves as well as script excerpts accompanied by visual representations.

We come to this work from the theoretical perspective of disability studies in education (DSE). In contrast to the conceptualization of disability as a deficit, disorder, or dysfunction—known as "the medical model" orientation of special education, DSE scholars examine the social construction of what constitutes disability (and conversely, reinforces ability) that is particular to a specific time and culture (Gabel, 2005). Unlike the positivist foundations and "scientific" claims of special education, DSE is interested in cultural understandings of disability as a phenomenon that intersects with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and so on (Gabel & Danforth, 2008). We view disabilities, then, as residing primarily within the eye of the beholder, rather than a solely scientific and immutable fact. In other words, by reframing disability as a natural way of being within human diversity—and not something to cure, remediate, or fix—we shift away from a deficit model in which children are viewed for what they cannot do toward a strengths-based approach that values what they can do[i]. Thus, DSE explicitly troubles widely accepted notions of what constitutes "normalcy" and its oppression of many individuals who cannot or choose not to conform to culturally determined standards (Davis, 1995).

Our work is also influenced by a related discipline, Disability Studies (DS), an interdisciplinary field that relies upon the humanities as a framework for studying disability (Snyder, Brueggemann, & Garland-Thomson, 2002). DS scholars have contributed much to legitimizing narratives of individuals with disabilities as scholarly sources of valued knowledge (Couser, 2009) that, in turn, have given rise to new theories about human variation and the social significance of ascribed differences (Siebers, 2008). Theater-based scholarly work within DS has opened space for creative works (Lewis, 2006) and theories (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005) that seek to push (even dissolve) traditional boundaries and move toward different ways of understanding disability. Moreover, the visual arts also play a role in DS scholarship, encouraging reader-viewers to develop a greater sense of how bodies influence

the creative processes and their role in developing a disability aesthetic (Snyder & Mitchell, 2005; Ware, 2008).

Origins of The M.O.M. Project

The M.O.M. Project is based on the first author's collection of narratives told by 15 mothers of children with disabilities representing diverse generation, class, and race/culture (Valle, 2009). This collection reveals the significant (and lasting) material consequences for mothers who encounter devaluation of their knowledge by "experts," an experience that mothers describe as a defining feature of their motherhood. As former special education teachers, we both worked closely with parents of children with disabilities in accessing their rights under special education law—specifically, the right to be informed, the right to participate in educational decision-making, the right to challenge, and the right to appeal (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) and routinely observed how the knowledge of mothers, in particular, became downplayed within conversation or entirely dismissed by professionals. It seemed that naturalized professional practices functioned in ways that excluded parents from the decision making process, despite their legal right to participate.

In light of the unprecedented parental rights guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act (I.D.E.I.A.), parent and professional collaboration has been a subject of ongoing study since the law's inception. However, more than three decades of research confirm a largely problematic relationship between parents and special education professionals in regard to decision-making (e.g., documentation of passive parental participation and/or confusion about team decisions, unclear explanations about psychological testing, inadequate opportunity for parents to ask questions or give input, resistance toward parents perceived as challenging professional decisions, preparation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with little or no parental input, the influence of race/culture, class, and gender on professional interactions with parents, and skewed decision-making power toward professionals despite a legal guarantee of collaborative decision-making) (Harry, 2008; Valle & Aponte, 2002; Engel, 1993; Malekoff, Johnson, & Klappersack, 1991; Lipsky, 1985; Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982; Sonnenschein, 1981; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978).

Despite the long-standing documentation within the literature of issues between parents and professionals, none of this scholarly research has contributed to significant changes within public schools. As active scholars, we are troubled by this fact troubling and admit to growing increasingly disheartened by the disconnect between the work that we do and its lack of

translation to the "real world." How might the voices of parents, particularly mothers, be emancipated and made public?

JAN: When I think about The M.O.M. Project, I can't separate out all that led up to it. Looking back on that trajectory, it reminds me of rock climbing. Clinging to the face of a rock, you have to look for a way to move up. Sometimes this is obvious, but most times it is not. For me, there was a lot of thinking about where to put my hand or foot so that I could move to a different place on the rock. And even when I could see where to go, it was sometimes hard to get my limb to "go there" because my mind was convinced I couldn't make it. All that to say, my path in special education feels something like that. When faced with systemic issues not easily resolved, I kept trying to find different places to put my foot or hand so that I could move to another place—a place where things could be better for kids and families. Having now moved into academia, I guess it is kind of like the next "toehold" up that rock face—another place from which to look at the issues in special education. Climbing up a rock is excruciatingly slow. The reward for me is the speed in rappelling back down the rock. After spending years making deliberate moves in special education to get to different places, I think I might be looking for something more like rappelling— something more immediate than publishing. The immediacy of live theater attracts me as another place to move this work. I recognize that academic writing has little to no impact upon the lives of those we write about. What motivates me is the challenge of figuring out how to make the work we do matter in the world. And theater, as an art form, has the capacity to move people to think and feel differently. I guess I'm looking for that next good "toehold" from which to figure out where to go with all of this.

DAVID: When you invited me to contribute a series of visual images to be projected onstage for The M.O.M. Project, I became excited because I have enjoyed working on other projects with you. However, I felt that this one would be different. I was drawn to the use of narratives, the focus on mothers of children with disabilities and what I knew would be an alternative telling of kids, schools, families, and disabilities in some way. As former teachers, we have both experienced working with many children and their families, and know how alienating and

dehumanizing the special education system often is to parents. As educational researchers, we have resisted the dominant meta-narrative of special education, one of benevolent benefits and accommodations of difference, preferring to focus on groups that have been marginalized, ignored, or neglected in mainstream special education literature. One such group is mothers who challenge what the system offers their child and refuse to be compliant. The idea of your research being transformed into an event that would be accessible to members of the public appealed to me because I have often felt saddened by the purpose, nature, and format of educational research. The majority of it is still quantitative, filled with charts, tables, graphs, and lists of numbers--all signifying a knowledge claim about complex phenomena such as disabilities--that has been reduced to a number. This uncritical acceptance of research being generated, accessed, interpreted, and discussed by a few ivory tower careerists insistent on their notions of "Truth"--and the rejection of research by educators who believe it is inaccurate, untrustworthy, and irrelevant to their lives and the lives of their students--bother me. What might be gained by staging these narratives as interlocking scripts, performed by actors for a live audience? How might visual images complement the words without overwhelming or detracting from them? As an artist who rarely finds the time to create because of a time-consuming academic career, I have grown to integrate visual work into research projects as a way to "stage" data. It's almost like a compulsion I have to "draw it." For many people, there's a visceral connection to art--visuals have the power to become imprinted upon a memory. How could I portray these mothers in a way that "fit" the stories that are, without a doubt, the center of the research?

The Promise of Arts-Based Research

The practice of staging narrative research emerged out of arts-based research that developed during the1970s -1990s (Sinner et al, 2006) in response to such factors as "the effects of the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise in autobiographical data across the social sciences, critical theoretical perspectives, advances in embodiment theory, and moves towards public scholarship" (Leavy, 2009). Over the last four decades, arts-based research has broadened and deepened the qualitative paradigm through varied representational methods and forms (e.g., fiction, dance, poetry, readers theatre, film, painting, drawings, song, narratives, theater performance, documentaries, visual art, collage, applied theater) that continue to contribute new theoretical perspectives (Leavy, 2009).

In contrast to data presented through the positivist framing of statistical analysis (as is typical in special education research), arts-based research has the capacity to transform consciousness, refine the senses, promote autonomy, raise awareness, and express the complex feeling-based aspects of social life (Eisner, 2002, 10-19). Likewise, Leavy (2009) argues that arts-based research practices are a means through which to promote critical awareness and are particularly relevant for "social-justice-oriented research that seeks to reveal power relations (often invisible to those in privileged groups)…build coalitions across groups, and challenge dominant ideologies" (p. 13).

From the Margins to Center Stage

Performative inquiry, an umbrella term for arts-based research practices that rely upon the dramatic arts, includes such methods as ethnographic performance text, performance ethnography, ethnodrama, nonfiction playwriting, theatre of reenactment (Saldaña, 2008), reality theatre, ethnodrama in health care (Mienczakowski, 1995), data-based readers theatre (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008), and popular theatre (Conrad, 2009). Given that space prohibits discussion of the differences among all of these methods, we focus upon the mixed methods used for staging The M.O.M. Project—data-based readers theatre, ethnodrama and ethnotheater in combination with visual art.

The M.O.M. Project grew out of a course the first author created and taught, *Disability Studies and the Arts,* for the master's program in educational theatre at The City College of New York (CCNY). These graduate students come to the program with backgrounds in the dramatic arts, e.g., actors, dancers, playwrights, filmmakers, directors, singers, casting agents, choreographers. After reading mother narratives as part of the course curriculum, Pamela Ritke, a student with a background in acting and directing, asked to adapt the narratives into a readers theater for her final class project. This piece became the basis for The M.O.M. Project that debuted on the CCNY campus to a full house of approximately 100 audience members.

> JAN: Having originally collected these mother narratives for my dissertation, I am aware that the stories told to me became something else under the dissection of academic analysis. While I understood and acknowledged the co-constructed nature of the interviews (as well as the purpose of the dissertation process), I always felt some vague discomfort about what essentially was my appropriation of the words and experiences of these mothers I knew so well—even for what I deemed to be a "noble"

purpose. No matter how committed and passionate I might believe I am about these mothers, I can't deny that my personal agenda—the completion of a terminal degree—influenced this work. I thought I would feel better about it all when my dissertation was published as a book—thereby giving the work a purpose beyond my degree. It did help. But I kept thinking about issues of representation. Their words appear in print just as they were said. Yet, my mediation in the presentation of those words make them something different. Not untrue. Truth with an angle. Interpretation of words. Mediated truth.

DAVID: A related question that I considered in this project is who has access to the findings/discoveries/constructions of educational research? Who benefits from engagement with the topics raised? Having work performed live, and video-recorded, opened up the stories of "every mother," through this small constellation of maternal experiences. That said, theater itself as most people know and experience, is a very middle class institution. Still, it opens up a new space for the audience to think in terms of the relationships they have with each other--how we all come to understand human differences, the meanings we ascribe to it, and mothers' perspectives about all of these interconnected, highly personalized and highly politicized issues. So, for me, the visual images I was asked to create had to visually complement, but never try to never overwhelm their voices. The usually absent parent voice was "it" –the thing you were presenting in public.

The Use of Mixed Methods in Staging

As noted elsewhere, the staging of The M.O.M. Project relied upon the mixed methods of data-based readers theatre and ethnodrama in combination with visual art. The primary features of readers theater include,

> a joint dramatic reading from a text, usually with no memorization, no movement and a minimum of props, if any at all. Participants read aloud assigned parts from prepared scripts often derived from literature. Unlike traditional theatre, the emphasis is on oral expression of the text, rather than on acting and costumes (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 140).

Readers theater requires minimal staging and is an accessible theater art form for most any participant. The readers do not exit the stage and usually do not interact with one another. Oftentimes, research participants or other participants (not actors) perform the script. In the

staging of The M.O.M. Project, six women, dressed in clothing of their choosing, sat on stools reading from scripts—as is expected from a readers theater performance. However, this staging also drew upon elements of ethnodrama and ethnotheater, as described by Saldaña (2008):

> An ethnodrama is a written, artistically composed arrangement of qualitative data using such dramatic literary conventions as monologue, dialogue, and stage directions. Ethnotheatre is the synchronous, three-dimensional, mounted performance display of the ethnodrama for spectators (p. 196).

The M.O.M. Project goes beyond a readers theater performance in its staging in a black box theater with lighting, the use of professional actors, a script that creates dialogue and interaction between characters, and the inclusion of movement (walking upstage for extended monologues) and gestures (acting out dialogue). However, the staging stops short of being a fully realized ethnotheatre performance as it does not rely upon plot, costuming, or sets.

Lastly, the second author contributed a series of visual images that were projected onto a screen behind the actors. These visual images reflected themes within the script and augmented the dialogue of the actors. We contend that "visual images occupy an elevated place in memory" (Leavy, 2009, p. 216). Thus, in addition to the performed narratives, we included visual images to further "provide a way to connect with, represent, and give meaning to inner experiences" (Jongeward, 2009, p. 241).

Visual information can be primary or supplemental, conveying core knowledge directly or clarifying accompanying oral or written texts. There exists a small but significant body of knowledge in which qualitative researchers utilize the visual arts for purposes of self-representation (see, for example, Lutrell, 2003; Connor, 2008). However, the researcher who creates representational images of participants is a relatively novel approach that is underexplored.

JAN: Although months of preparation preceded the production, one particular aspect was reserved for the day of the performance. Rehearsal. The actors would meet and read together for the first time in the morning, rehearse all day, and perform that night. Despite having been repeatedly assured by the director and actors that this was standard protocol for staged readings, I was pretty much a nervous wreck. "We are professionals. This is what we do. You'll see. Just relax." Right. I volunteered to feed the cast and crew. I figured that was the least I

could do. And pretty much all in this situation that I knew how to do. I was protective of this work. I knew these mothers well. I had turned over their words to strangers to perform. Was this a crazy idea? Two of the mothers played onstage would attend the performance. Would they think the actors got them right? The script was created only from words spoken by the mothers, thereby eliminating my interpretive voice. Your drawings (projected on a screen behind the actors) represented themes found within and across their words. Would the integration of theater and visual art create a less mediated, purer representation? Would it matter?

DAVID: The expression on the face of "everywoman" that I portrayed in my drawings deliberately did not vary much. I didn't want a blank look, but I did seek a "hard to interpret" look that could be "read into" according to being passive or calculating, exasperated or quietly gathering strength, stoic or temporarily defeated. This, to me, suggests: Who recognizes me? Who "reads" me? Based on what? The "markers" were already there in that the script was delineated in terms of recurring concepts that were pertinent (in varying ways and degrees) to all of the mothers. I wanted to distill the concept into one visual that would be simple and strong. At the same time, the pathos and humor (often submerged) I found within their dialogues influenced me in the choice of what to present in visual form. I could have created images that symbolized situations and experiences, but I much preferred to literally draw mothers, in quasi-cartoon style. This is partly because of the simplicity and clarity such renditions offer, and the "accessibility" of such renditions--as everyone should "get" them.

A Glimpse into the Performance

An additional challenge of arts-based research is how to describe performative events in a textual format. We have chosen three excerpts from the script with their accompanying visual images to illustrate the nature of this work. Each excerpt represents a particular theme from the performance.

1) Under The Microscope
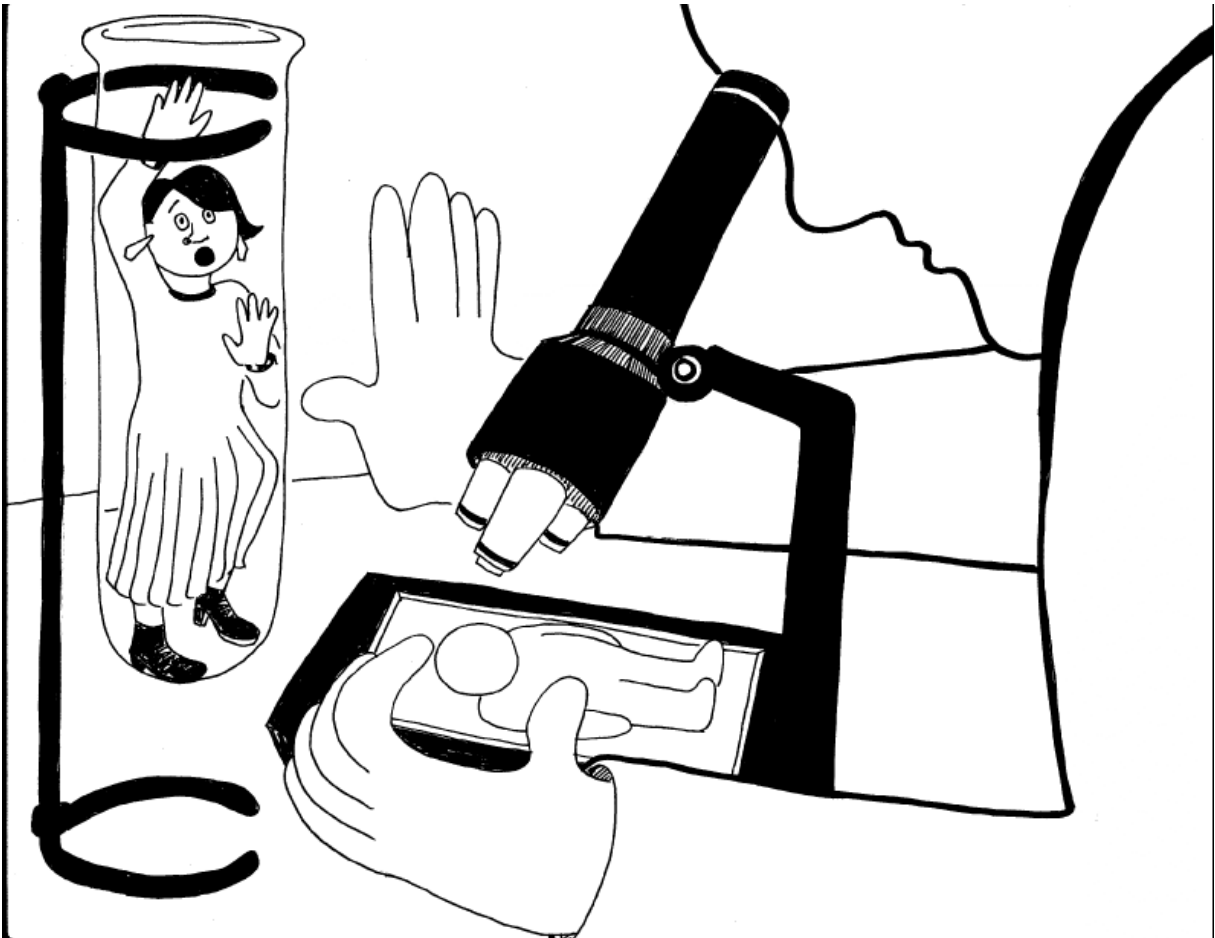
LINDA: What was the most odd, from the very start, from the very beginning of testing, the assumption was that the parents were doing something wrong to have caused these problems.

JANENE: What have you done?

ELSIE: What have you done?

MIMI: A psychologist did a social study on *us*—on my husband and me—and asked the most incredibly penetrating questions you have ever heard in your life I mean about our family,

JANENE: about our family relationship,

MARIE: about my husband and me,

ELSIE: about our place in the community,

KIM: about did I spank my children,

MARIE: did I do this or that—

MIMI: it was just awful.

MARIE: In every situation I went to, I can never remember where I didn't have to first emotionally and verbally battle—What's going on in your home?

LINDA: Is there dysfunction in your home?

JANENE: Is there violence in your home that would be causing this child to have these problems?

LINDA: And as a mother who is already hurting because -- you already feel like, you know, she was in my womb. What did I do that would have caused this child not to be right. And then when people start bombarding you with suggestions that it may be your fault...

ELSIE: They always make it like it's your fault.

As Marie speaks, Janene starts pulling out imaginary clothes.

MARIE: The judgment. It was endless. Every time I put something on him before he went in for testing, I thought, "Is this the right thing? If he wears this, will they think that I am a prissy mom that is spending too much time dressing my child? That I have my priorities in the wrong place?

2) Meetings
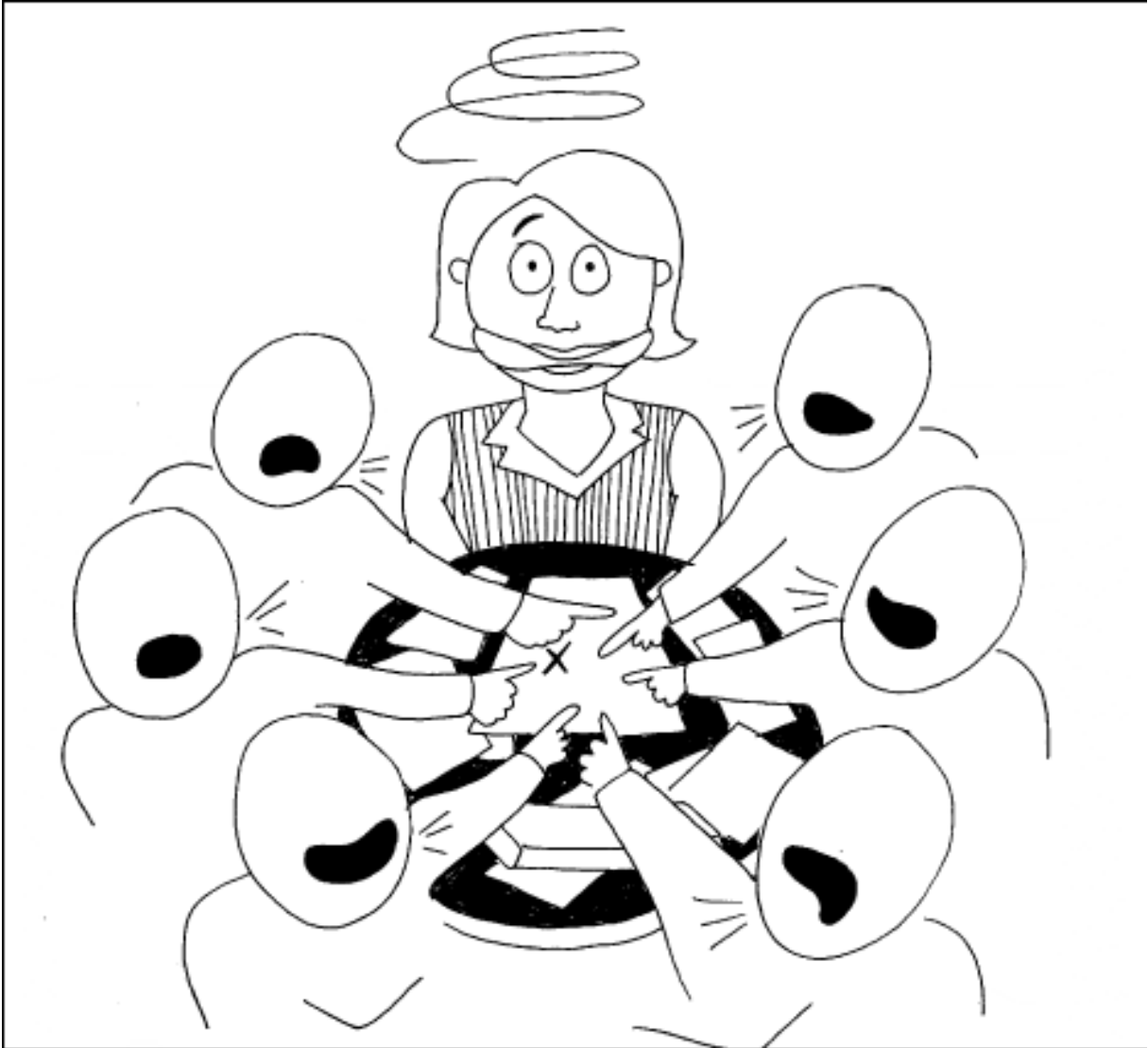
ELSIE: I remember the very first meeting— my very first IEP meeting. I had met with all those people individually, so now here they are coming back with their results. I sat there very quietly, very nicely,

As they speak, they all do the movements as if they are in the IEP meeting

.

MIMI: crossed my ankles, and folded my hands on my lap

ELSIE: And didn't fidget

JANENE: You know, all the things that you were taught to do in an interview.

ELSIE: I'm sitting there very still with my heart coming out of my chest thinking

KIM: "What the hell am I doing here? I don't know what they are talking about!"

ELSIE: Because the funny thing is, as an adult, you remember when you were a child and having to be obedient to your teachers.

Janene turns and addresses the group.

JANENE: No. No. Wait. I'm an adult. I don't have to sit there and say "yes ma'am" any more to the teachers.

ELSIE: I didn't have the language at the time —the educational - or what do you call it?— the language that has to do with special ed.

                              * * *

ELSIE: So I come in the next time. I was prepared.

The other women start miming the actions of the administrators as Elsie tells her story.

ELSIE: So I come in and I sit down. I have the tape recorder in my lap, waiting for the opportunity. They all introduce themselves:

Each woman shifts in her chair, taking on the characteristic of one of the people as mentioned.

ELSIE: I'm so and so. I'm the psychologist.
            I'm so and so. I'm the social worker.
            I'm so and so. I'm the ed evaluator.
            I'm so and so. I'm the parent advocate."
            And *I* go, "I'm *his* mother and *I'm* taping this meeting!!" [*laughter*] I

can still see it. It's like slow motion. Everybody just looks at each other. Then they look at me. Still with frozen smiles on their faces. I started taping. But then there was no talking. You hear all the papers shuffling. Papers are being shuffled. Very minimal comments are being made. I don't remember what the end result was at that meeting. But— it was a useless meeting.

MARIE: I remember when I came in with my notes. They wanted nothing to do with it.

They all become the professionals and perform the body movements described.

MARIE: Body language changed,

KIM: folders were closed,

ELSIE: Hands put on top of them like –

LINDA: "We can't do anything with this woman."

MIMI: People sat up straight.
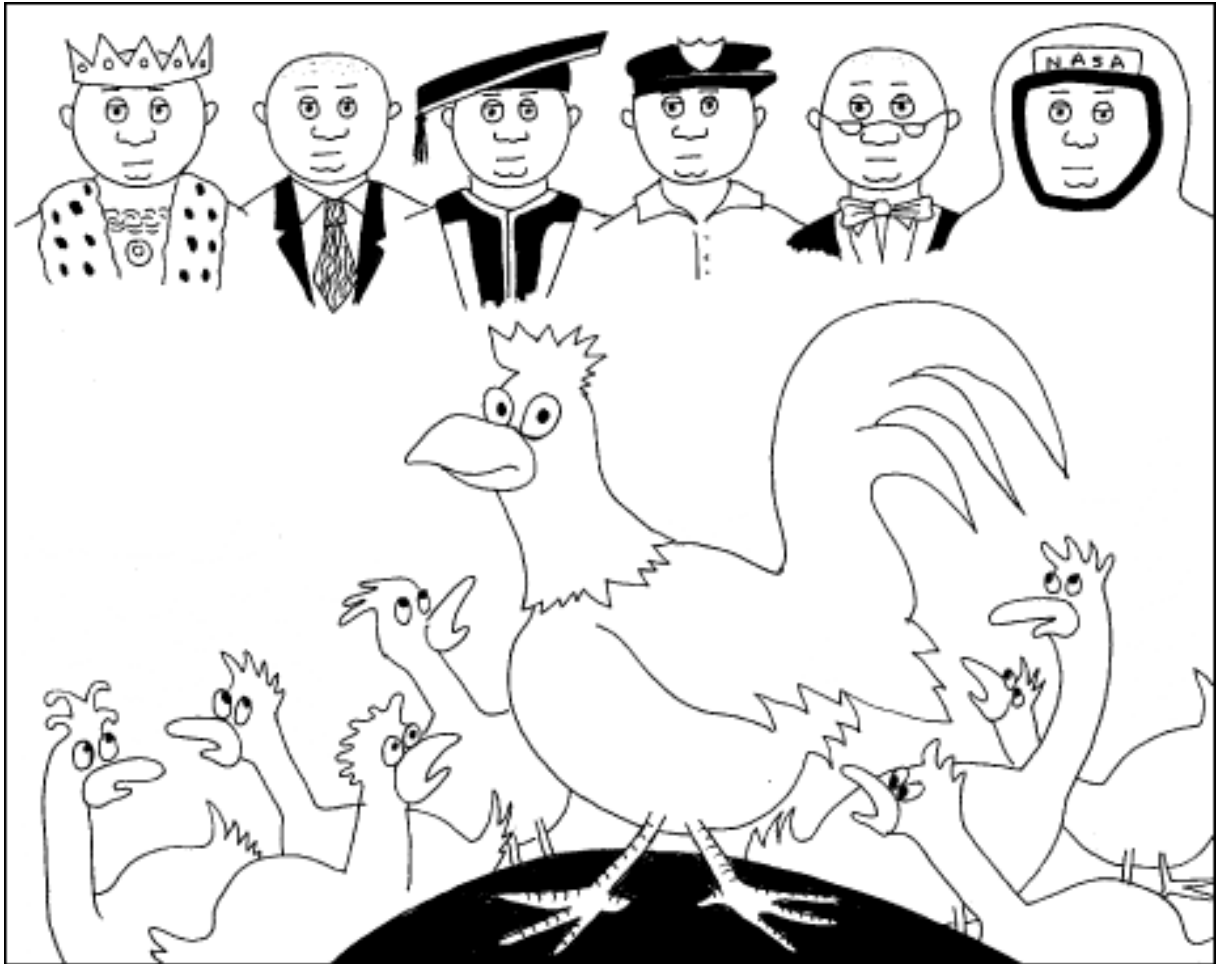
LINDA: Sat up straight and square,

KIM: their shoulders like—

JANENE: "Who does this woman think she is?"

MIMI: You know? And they would sort of ....

ALL: Dismiss me.

3) Men

KIM: I was definitely getting smarter. I realized that when I went to meetings—even though he never said anything—my best weapon?

The women all look at each other, then turn around and look at the visual image behind them.

MIMI: He honestly didn't say anything. He just came and sat in the room.

KIM: But when he was not there, they were treating me like an hysterical woman.

MIMI: We walk in and, yes, Mark is the man. "Hello, Mr. Strauss. Can I get you coffee?" All these women who are administrators and teachers and psychologists and this and they're acting like gofers for my husband.

KIM: I didn't notice it at all until Dave just happened to go with me to an IEP meeting and I could see right away that it was a totally different setting.

MIMI: It went from being— you know— little neighborhood mom who's coming in for PTA in her jumper doing the fundraising activities—

MARIE: to being a business meeting.

ELSIE: The language was different.

LINDA: It was more professional.

MIMI: We stayed on track.

JANENE: We didn't chit-chat.

KIM: We didn't have to talk about everybody— you know about what everybody did on the weekend.

MARIE: And he would go, "Gee, I don't know why it's such a big deal! I'm in and out in ten seconds. Why won't they listen to you?" I would come and present a very professional argument and here are the scientific facts and showed them all their first picture of the PET scan of the brain and all of that. Nobody had ever seen that before. So then they would turn to him and say,

JANENE   [*as administrator*] "Well, John, what do you think?"

MARIE: I was a little perturbed to say the least. But fortunately, he learned to say, "What *she* said!" [*laughter*].

ELSIE: I didn't get the respect. I got questioning of everything I said and a lot of placating.

LINDA: So what do you do if you don't have a husband or the father or a
            lawyer? Then what?

A Behind the Scenes Discussion

In this section, we briefly describe six elements that gave rise to the culminating performance. Each element contributed to a creative work that became more than the sum of its parts. The nature of theater is fluid and in sharing data "live," like all theater, there are always elements of risk, unpredictability, and chance. In sum, each element contributed to how the research was performed, and in the actual performance, the once-clear lines that demarcated these sources become blurred beyond distinction.

(1) The Script

The script for The M.O.M. Project is comprised of verbatim transcriptions of the mothers' words, thereby eliminating the researcher voice. Given the volume of material (15 lengthy oral narratives), the decision was made to collapse the narratives into six roles. In other words, each mother on stage is a composite representing primarily one mother's story but with pieces of other mothers' stories intertwined into her own. Given that the narratives are both particular and universal, this decision worked well with the nature of the material. This process reflects what Butler-Kisber (2010) describes as the difference between traditional presentation of qualitative data and the crafting of a research performance script:

> Both processes involve a reduction of data, crafting, and may involve a "restorying," but the writing of a performance script explicitly involves reducing the data to the most dramatic parts. Moreover, even when the data being used comes from interview research and the like, the interviewees still need to be transformed into "characters." The process of characterization involves many choices. (pp. 261-62)

Once a first draft was completed, fellow actors were recruited to "workshop" the script—a collective creative process in which actors read the script aloud while making edits and changes. The script underwent subsequent revisions following this feedback session.

(2) The Director

Much like the choices made about which narratives to include (and omit) within a script, the director likewise makes decisions about how the chosen narratives are performed. It seems, then, that data representation is inevitably influenced by those who seek to (re)present it. In the form of a staged reading, the narratives "come to life" in the words of mothers as

spoken without the additional layer of a researcher's analysis and interpretation. Yet, the director influences the *interpretation* of those words through coaching the actors in regard to intonation, facial expression, pacing, and body language. Moreover, mood is created—and intended to manipulate the audience's experience—through the director's decisions about lighting as well as the placement and movement of the actors on stage.

As researchers interested in disseminating data, we acknowledge the challenges inherent in any kind of representation. Theatrical representation of data seems to diminish some of the problematic aspects of traditional research analysis, yet creates other issues of representation. Despite inherent challenges of representation, we contend that the theater offers a powerful venue for "getting the issues out there" for *public* consumption—unlike scholarly work that all too often remains within the academy.


(3) Visual Images

Before designing the visual images to be projected onstage behind the actors, I (David) consulted with the director to share ideas and verify her overall vision for the script. We agreed that the creation of "everywoman" figure seemed an appropriate choice, a composite of all mothers featured in the play, who were already an amalgamation of sorts. Crafting a shared representation of a singular "identity" has been used by researchers using collective

memory work (Gannon, 2001). In creating the image of a mother, I understood that all six women in the play were both different in some ways, and yet the same in many other ways.

I made "the composite mother" somewhat racially and ethnically ambivalent. She is Caucasian/Latina for the most part, although I attempted to include all ethnic groups to convey the universal situations experienced by mothers of children with LD. In addition, the same protagonist also straddles a few ages to reflect multiple generations involved in the study. The images that evolved were generalized, and not meant to be "matched" to names within the script. Furthermore, I only featured faces of mothers as I had a strong feeling that despite the broad focus being on children and motherhood, the main focus was decidedly upon the actual life stories of mothers.

In terms of style, I chose simple black lines and used block color to differentiate textures. This was influenced, in part, by desiring images that would not overshadow, distract, or dominate the oral presentation, but would rather serve to evoke the same themes raised albeit in a different medium. Ultimately, the goal was to help the listener-viewer to holistically understand the context and value of mothers' knowledge. The culminating image of the play was drawn by a mother in the original study. It is the only visual that the mothers interact with onstage and serves to end the play on a powerful note.
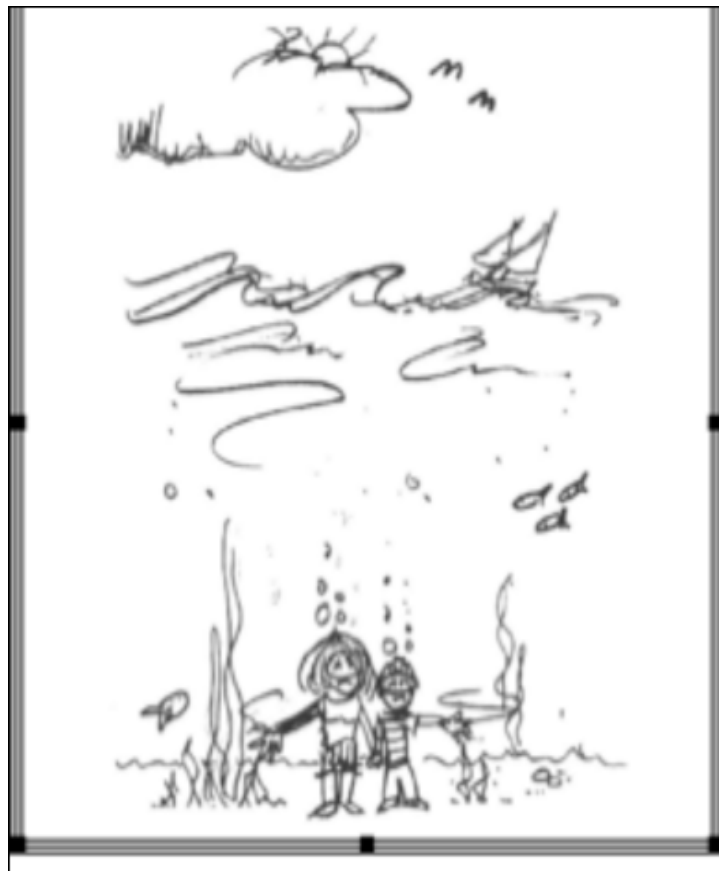
(4) The Staging

The college campus theater is a facility used for major productions. At the same time, it is small enough to provide a level of intimacy. With walls covered in black curtains and dimmed lighting, the venue felt professional and audience members easily transitioned into "theater mode." The stage had six stools, one for each mother. Rehearsal for the staged reading took place on the day of the performance—starting in the morning and ending in the late afternoon. The lecterns on which the scripts were originally placed were deemed as blocking the energy flow between actors and audience. Instead, actors opted to keep their books in hand. Having a very limited amount of time to rehearse was risky, yet it enhanced the creative process and contributed to the actors' energy. A screen was placed behind them, onto which the images were projected throughout the performance, changing to match each of the nine sections. The performance lasted approximately 60 minutes without an intermission and was recorded by a documentary filmmaker.

(5) The Actors

The all-professional cast was solicited from within the educational theatre program as well as New York City's theatrical community. The six women selected represented a range of race/ethnicity and age (20s-60s) that matched the women whose narratives were performed. These six roles (collapsed from the 15 narratives) embodied women of varying social class (from poverty to extreme wealth) who live in multiple regions of the country and multiple contexts (rural, small town, suburbs, metropolitan city). All of the mothers portrayed in this theatrical rendering have children with learning disabilities and share the common experience of negotiating within the special education system.

(6) The Audience

The audience consisted of a little over one hundred people, representing many different constituents within our local communities. Flyers about the event were distributed to colleges, theater organizations, and parent groups. A sizable proportion of the audience consisted of graduate students and professors from schools of education. In addition, there were parents, including two who were participants in the original study, as well as people with LD and their family members. Members of the New York City theatrical community were also in attendance. Schechner (1988/2003) distinguishes between an in *integral* and an *accidental* audience:

> An accidental audience is a group of people who, individually or in small
> clusters, got to the theatre—the performances are publicly advertised and
> open to all. On opening nights of commercial shows, the attendance of the
> critics and friends constitutes an integral rather than an accidental audience.
> An integral audience is one where people come because they have to or
> because the event is of special significance to them (p. 220).

Thus, it is worth noting that those in attendance at The M.O.M. Project can be considered primarily an integral audience.

Six Degrees of Integration

Each of the six data elements—script, director, visual images, staging, actors, and audience—contributed to this performative event that provided an opportunity to explore data from multiple angles. We are mindful of choices faced by all participants involved in bringing this event to life and how their choices made along the way shaped the final outcome. While it is impossible (and arguably undesirable) to separate what has been fused, it is worthwhile to articulate the strands that came together to make this multi-layered performance work. For instance, there are the original data—the verbatim words of mothers who were research participants. These words were crafted into compelling narratives by the researcher. The narratives became interactive monologues developed by the playwright/director. The artist created visual images to accompany and reflect themes within the script. The staging, of which visuals are only one part, juxtaposed stories with common threads, extending and weaving them into subconscious refrains, echoing one another until they merged into a powerful statement around a particular topic. The actors, varied in age and ethnicity, brought unpredictable elements of force and insightful understandings that render the mothers in vivid and nuanced ways. The audience, also with its singular and collective identity, brought experiences, beliefs, and multiple perspectives into the theater space. Despite these multiple influences, the voices of mothers of children with disabilities prevailed. After all, it was *their* words on stage that circulated in the minds of the audience.

Cast and Audience Exchange

Denzin (1997) calls ethnodrama "the single most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meaning of lived experience" (p. 94), as well as "a way of acting on the world in order to change it" (2003, p. 228). The M.O.M. Project opened space for a post-performance discussion among the cast, the director, the researcher, the artist, and two mothers whose stories appear in the script. The audience—representing the general public, educators, parents, and theatre professionals—asked thoughtful and specific questions about

these mothers' experiences in an effort to more clearly understand. The presence of two mothers represented in the piece contributed great depth to this discussion. Members of the audience members expressed compassion, surprise, admiration, sadness, and eagerness to promote change. Many suggestions for dissemination of the piece came from the audience— ranging from posting the videotape on YouTube to performing live for various school districts and parent groups.

Conclusion: Thoughts on The Power of Theatrical Staging

Theatrical staging of data can provide a powerful experience, allowing a different realm of engagement and understanding that, for some, transcends the written text and spoken word. The *performed* data allows us to enter into a different form of engagement, one in which the rest of the world fades away into the dark as the spotlight upon real experiences of actual people literally take center stage. Theater creates an intimate space, one in which the viewer can engage with a story on a deeply personal level, coming to know the lived realities of other humans in relation to the complex world we share. Several successful dramatic works that have been performed on Broadway and Off-Broadway were based on the narratives of arguably otherwise "unremarkable" people who find themselves in "remarkable" situations. For example, *The vagina monologues* (Ensler, 1998) is composed of stories from women all over the world about the literal and symbolic significance of their sexual organ; *The Laramie project* (Kaufman, 2001) renders the events leading up to, and the aftermath of, Mathew Shephard's torture and murder for being gay; *The exonerated* (Blank & Jensen, 2004) shares the tales of individuals wrongfully accused of crimes and sentenced to death. In addition, the work of playwright and performer Anna Deveare Smith has consistently explored issues close to the American bone such as race riots in Los Angeles (1992) and New York (1993), presidential power (2000), and aging bodies (2008).

What all of these dramatic works have in common is their use of numerous, in-depth interviews as the basis for developing powerful narratives. In turn, these narratives serve to draw viewers into engaging with issues often considered uncomfortable or taboo. The plays listed above collectively focus upon vaginas, homosexuality and homophobia, the fallibility of law, historical and ongoing racial mistrust, political corruption within hallowed institutions, physical vulnerability and the inevitability of impending death. What they all have in common is a universal connection of some sort. Everyone has either a direct experience with, or personal theories about, these issues. In other words, no matter the personal opinions toward these issues, each audience member is directly touched. Furthermore, theater offers the possibility of infinite intrapersonal connections. While sitting in the dark, and making meaning of the stories being told, the viewer often relates aspects of the story to their own experiences or of people whom they know. In doing so, the emotions that arise contribute to a

highly personal experience in which memories are resurrected, directly related to the story being staged. The knowledges of the playwright and audience members mingle in unique ways within the space of theater. When the theatrical text is "real," based upon the innermost thoughts of others, it *speaks directly* to the audience, requiring them to participate in analyzing the issues raised.

To the best of our knowledge, the creation of a theatrical space to feature the narratives of mothers of children with disabilities (primarily LD) has never occurred before. In creating this space, our intention is to bring the mothers' perspectives, experiences, and typically devalued knowledge into play within a dynamic forum to inform and inspire audience members to reflect upon their own beliefs about disability, parenting, teaching, learning, classrooms, school structures, and educational systems. Leavy (2009) contends that,

> the use of arts-based representational strategies brings academic scholarship to a wider audience. Free from discipline-specific jargon and other prohibitive (even elitist) barriers, arts-based representations can be shared with diverse audiences, expanding the effect of scholarly research that traditionally circulates within the academy and arguably does little to serve the public good (p. 14).

If the work we do as researchers is to matter in the world, it must reach and move the audience for whom we write. Based upon the positive results of this "experiment" in theatrical and visual representation, alternative forms of representation appear to be a viable means through which to increase accessibility of research to a wider audience. The collective experience of an audience's response to theatrical and visual representations creates a natural context within which dialogic exchanges can take place—the kind of dialogue that has the potential to inspire action.

JAN: It is interesting to think that this all began with a discussion I had with a class of educational theater majors about mothers. This discussion inspired one student to transform my narrative data into a script for her final project. The in-class staged reading of the script inspired the educational theater program director (who attended) to transform an in-class project into a staged production on campus. The months leading up to the production inspired many conversations about how to bring the script to life. The rehearsal generated rich conversations between the director and actors about the meaning of the work and its representation on stage. The post-performance discussion opened space for a dialogue to take place among the cast, the director, two mothers

whose narratives appear in the work, and an audience of colleagues, students, parents, friends, and a few theater professionals who came to support the benefit. I can say that more conversation among a greater variety of people was generated from the performance than any piece that I have written and published. And that fact inspires me.

I am still thinking about your assertion that most people leave the theater with something to think about, but not something to change. You are right that I see (or would like to see) the potential of this piece to *require* something of its audience. What might school administrators take away from this piece? General education and special education teachers? Parents? Education majors? Does art have the capacity to inspire change? I have to believe that it does. I wonder if there might be grant money that would support this work. Could this be a "traveling show" among schools? Would it make a difference? What other projects might emerge from making this work public?

DAVID: I also think theater can be profoundly political in its commentary of society. For some reason, Brecht's *Mother Courage* is coming to mind about the matter-of-factness of war, Miller's *The Crucible* on the creation of hysteria and governmental abuse of authority, Kushner's *Angels in America* that showed the complexities of society's struggle to understand AIDS, and so on. In a way, I suspect that such playwrights want their audiences not to be merely informed, but to exert some kind of action, even if it is the beginning of speaking back to governmental policies or actions. So, I bring this up as the dramatization of your research asks audience members to examine their beliefs about how children are treated in schools, how their mothers are "cast," and the systematic containment of both child and mother into very prescribed scripts. And while this tale is not as grandiose as the plays I've just mentioned, I think you are doing the same thing. You are asking audience members to have a deeper, more nuanced knowledge of mothers who have children with disabilities and work toward changing their experiences with school systems. It's not an epic tale of war, but its importance lies in the everydayness of their stories that have been swallowed up in the ocean of school issues. In many ways, it has been their personal war. Their stories can be seen as their own lived epic.

ⁱ Disability Studies differentiates between impairment and disability. *Impairment* is recognized as a limited bodily function that could be physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental. *Disabled* is understood as being subject to a set of socially-disabling practices, including physical and psychological barriers that prevent individuals with impairments accessing all aspects of society that non-disabled people are privileged to enjoy. Thus, while DS recognizes corporeal differences (and is not averse to alleviating discomfort or pain), its primary concern is one of accepting bodily variation *as is*.

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