



## Communities of Practice

### The Role of Classroom Communities in Shaping Identities

#### Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

Susi Long and Linda Crafton, Coeditors

#### Note from the Editors

Living within communities of practice, we construct understandings about many things; key among them is who we are. Children come to us with a range of identities already constructed, but their identities continue to be shaped in the time they spend with us. As teachers, we must ask how our classrooms confirm positive identities by celebrating who children are and who they continue to become. In this issue, we are excited to present diverse voices—teachers, family members, children—to help us answer that question. Their stories reveal ways that communities of practice can positively or negatively affect students' and families' views of themselves and, in the process, children's lives as learners.

## Honoring Children's Names and, Therefore, Their Identities

Mariana Souto-Manning, University of Georgia

The first day of school in first grade, a small Mexicano boy arrived in my classroom. I said, “Hola, yo soy la maestra, Señora Manning. ¿Cómo te llamas?” and he replied “Idelbrando.” Sure that his name was not on my roll, I asked again, “¿Cómo te llamas?” He again responded, “Idelbrando.” I shook my head; he lowered his. I thought he must have walked into the wrong room, but in talking to his mother later, I learned that she had renamed him Tommy so no one would know he was Mexican. She felt that having Latino names had disadvantaged her two older sons, and she wanted Idelbrando to “fit in.”

Over my years as a primary teacher, the connection between children's names and their identities has become very clear. I've noticed that some teachers rename children to shorten names or because of the teachers' own struggles to pronounce names that are culturally unfamiliar.

When I taught second grade, I learned that two of my students had changed their own names. Luiz wanted to be called Lewis, because his first-grade teacher said that Lewis was a name for “smart boys.” Gabriel (pro-

nounced, Gabrielle) decided that, at school, he would adopt the American pronunciation, Gabriel. When I asked, “¿Por qué?” he explained that his peers teased him, and his first-grade teacher said that to avoid teasing he should not insist on being called “a girl's name.”

These decisions about children's names affect their identities in different ways. For Luiz and Gabriel, renaming gave them access to the classroom community and allowed them to fit in, but their attitudes towards their home language and culture began to change as a result. Because Luiz decided not to speak Spanish, he could only speak to his mother through his bilingual sister. Gabriel, also feeling separation from home culture, became upset at his mother for giving him “a stupid name.” For children whose names are mispronounced, the same feeling of disorientation can occur. For example, when people pronounce my Brazilian name, Mariana, as Mary Anna, I experience a disconnect—it doesn't feel like they are talking to *me*. Renaming, shortening, or mispronouncing children's names also affects the identities of the other children in the classroom. It affirms

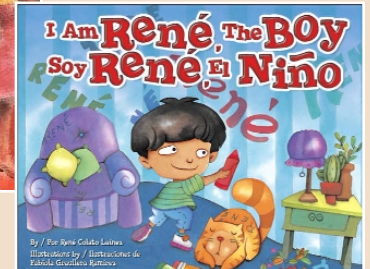
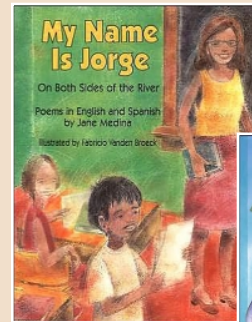


In her classroom, Ana Teresa (Ah-nah Teh-reh-sah) is celebrated for reading in her home language.

(continued from page 1)



*Sulia's worlds and the languages that define them.*



that theirs is the more desirable culture, and it limits opportunities for understanding cultures beyond their own.

Often children whose home language is different from the language of instruction in schools feel divided and must navigate multiple worlds. Whether or not they were born outside the U.S., their home culture and language are rarely assigned the same status as those employed in schools. Sulia, another student in my class, illustrated this dilemma perfectly in a drawing depicting the different worlds and identities she navigated daily. As I asked her about the lines isolating different contexts, she said these places were separate. Pointing to the boxes she had drawn, she said, "I am a different person here and here and here, and sometimes I get confused." I asked why, and Sulia said, "I just have to. They tell me, here you speak English, aquí hablas español. I am Sulia here. I am Julia here."

Without realizing it, teachers and parents who truly care about children and believe they are helping them fit in can create spaces in which names—and therefore identities—are not honored. Changing or mispronouncing children's names also changes their cultural iden-

tities. When Idelbrando, Luiz, and Gabriel arrived at school, their names were an intrinsic part of the cultural group to which they belonged. When their names changed, they appeared to others—and to themselves—as lacking something, needing to be fixed, having deficits (Volk & Long, 2005).

By not allowing these students to bring their home identities to the classroom, we attempt to assimilate them instead of embracing opportunities to enrich the school community. Consequently, everyone loses. However, by recognizing the importance of names, communicating that importance to parents, and honoring names in schools, teachers can give children access to classroom communities while broadening everyone's world views. Recognizing and valuing diverse cultures and identities then becomes fundamental to forming true classroom communities.

Some of the lessons I learned as I sought to foster classroom communities that honored students' names include the following:

- Learn a child's name exactly as the child pronounces it. In my experience, even when there is no overt

resistance, children typically yearn for their given name. In many classrooms, students feel so disoriented by renaming that they lose motivation, failing to respond to their new name and ultimately shutting down.

- Use books to start conversations with your students about the importance of names and how they reflect family histories and ideals. Some great books are *My Name Is Yoon* (Recorvits, 2003), *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003), *My Name Is Jorge: On Both Sides of the River* (Medina, 2004), and *I am René, the Boy / Soy René, el Niño* (Lainez, 2005).
- Learn by watching children closely so you can share ownership of knowledge, honor identities, and value each child's background, culture, and language.

By highlighting the importance of names and their many meanings and accents across cultures, languages, and places, we can create a space for acknowledging the identities children embody and move one step closer toward genuinely valuing diversity in classrooms. We can build a community of learners to which each child truly belongs instead of setting up narrow parameters that define the kind of child that fits in.

Renaming is a prevalent trend that needs to be addressed by educators in culturally reflective ways. Teachers who know that good teaching includes valuing students' home literacies, languages, and identities can truly promote inclusive communities that value each child for the wonderful things he or she brings to the classroom.

# “They Come from Brilliance”: Building Identities in a New Community of Practice

Written by the families, children, teachers, administrators, and staff at the Carolina School for Inquiry\*

## A Dream Comes to Life

**Stacie Mandrell**

*(Founder, parent, curriculum coordinator, upper elementary teacher)*

For as long as I have been an educator, I have wanted to start a school where families and teachers would learn from each other in a diverse setting. Three years ago, I was fortunate to be part of a group of families whose children attended a local preschool aptly named Harmony School. We gathered to think about how our children could continue beyond preschool in a similar environment. Inspired by the Center for Inquiry (Mills & Donnelly, 2001) in Columbia, South Carolina, we wanted a school that would demonstrate how inquiry-based education could open doors for all children. We sought a diverse student population and teachers who were known for their love of children, passion for teaching, and willingness to take risks. After three years, we opened the doors of the Carolina School for Inquiry (CSI) on August 10, 2006. It was exciting to watch as classrooms filled with the sounds of learners big and small—adults and children, learners and teachers together.

## A Place Where Everyone Knows They Matter

**Victoria Dixon-Mokeba**

*(Director/lead teacher)*

Last year, a good friend told me about an amazing new school being envisioned with a focus on diverse populations, inquiry-based education, and honoring every child. It has always been my dream to be part of such a school. So when I was granted the opportunity to help bring the Carolina School for Inquiry to life, I reflected on my experiences in places where some families were not valued for the knowledge they bring to the learning community; where difference meant deficit. How could I help to make CSI a place where everyone knew they mattered? Lisa Delpit (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) asks us to consider what happens when we convince students “they come from brilliance” (p. 46). With these words, one of the first read-alouds I shared with families and students at CSI was *Together* by George Ella Lyon. I wanted families to know how important they were to the success of this school. We would learn from them as much as they could learn from us.

## We Love to Write and We’re Good at It

**Kaylyn (upper elementary student)**

In my class, we love to write and we’re good at it because we use things besides worksheets. Our teachers are normal people, not just people who tell you what to do all day, so we have fun when we’re learning. We get to sit together instead of at separate desks so we can socialize. It’s more comfortable and we feel secure when we can sit with our friends. We like to hear what other people have to say because when you’re with someone else, it’s easier to figure things out. You feel more confident.



*Jessica, Jordan, Amber, and Kaylyn share books and inquiries across grade levels.*

## Stacie and Victoria Together

Our first 150 days have been filled with great joys and, as in any endeavor, they are not without tensions. But we’ve already noticed something very important that helps us keep our goals in mind. Many students and families are beginning to see themselves in a new light. Talking with them, we understand more about why this is happening. Their words help us consider how school communities can help to build or rebuild students’ and families’ identities as knowledgeable human beings who matter in the lives of others.

*\*At CSI, our classes are multi-aged: Primary includes kindergarten and first grade; early elementary is second and third grades; upper elementary, fourth and fifth grades.*

## Teachers Explore Problems *with* the Children

**Karen Thomas (parent)**

When I brought my son to this school as a fourth grader, I didn't have much hope. I thought it was going to be just one more place where I would go through many doors trying to get people to listen, where they would talk about behavior when I tried to tell them he just needs help. When he was in first grade, he locked himself up in a shell: “Nobody notices me, so I just won't say anything.” At the first parent-teacher conference, his teacher said he would be retained. I wanted to say, “You've already set my child up for failure; you haven't tried to see how far you can take him.” By third grade, his confidence level was so low he didn't care. He felt that whenever he tried, he failed. He didn't talk because he was afraid he'd be wrong and kids would tease him. He didn't want to go to school. I was so worried. I thought, “You're just starting off, there's no way you could feel this bad already. You've still got middle school, high school, and hopefully college, but at the rate we're going, as soon as you get a chance, you'll want to get out of school.”

Now, his attitude has completely changed. He talks. He wants to find out more. He says, “I can do this and if I can't, I can ask for help.” His brother feels the same way. I started spending time in the school and I found out what makes my boys so excited about learning: the teachers give them confidence. They tell them, “You can do it,” and they mean it. Sometimes teachers say that, but here teachers actually explore problems *with* the children until they get it. That's so different from just saying, “I know the answer and I'm just going to give it to you.” The children ask me for help in the same way. When I'm in the classroom, they say, “Come on, Ms. Karen, help us find this out.” My sons aren't the same boys I had a couple of months ago. Instead of asking to stay at home, they wake me up to be sure they get to school on time. I've started to have hope again. I allow myself to think, “They might just stay in school; now they want to keep on learning.”



*Karen Thomas (mom) and baby Marcus join Kaylee in thinking about writing.*

## Here They Break It Down So You Know What They're Talking About

**Alexandria (early elementary student)**

When you have trouble, the teachers here nearly always talk to you. And the kids can help each other too. In my old school, we couldn't help each other, we had to be very quiet and learn it on our own, and if we didn't learn it, we had to keep going over and over it. But here they break it down so that you get it, so you know what they're talking about.

## Y'all Are Working My Brains Out!

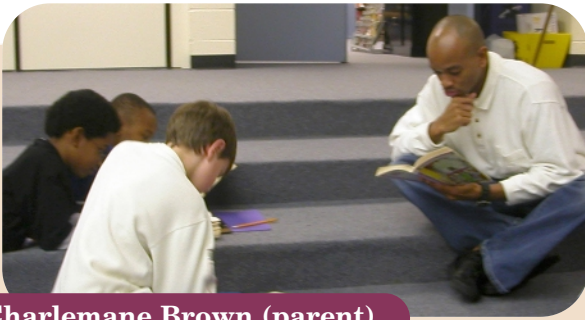
**Devin (upper elementary student)**

The best way I can explain what makes me feel good as a learner is to tell the metaphor story. One day we were working on metaphors and it seemed so hard, so I called out, “Y'all are working my brains out!” Then Mr. Chris explained in a way that made it seem really easy. He said, “Look outside, what do you see?” I said, “The sun.” He said, “Okay, what does it look like?” When I said, “An orange,” he said, “So you could say, “The sun is an orange hanging in the sky. That's a metaphor.”

I like how these teachers teach. You don't sit in class all day reading a textbook. This kind of learning makes me feel good.



*Everyone has a role in making the school function. Here Kayla and Preston compose the school's morning message, “Have a Wacky Wednesday.”*



**Charlemane Brown (parent)**

*Mr. Brown joins Payne, Jaris, and Jalen for a literature discussion.*

This year, he's calmed down. I think it's because the kids feel smart here even when they get the wrong answer. They feel like they can solve problems. For example, two weeks ago, I was in a class and Ms. Stacie asked a question. The answer was wrong, but she led the child to get the right answer. She didn't just give the answer. The kids here feel like the teachers really want to be with them. At recess, teachers mingle with the kids. Even when children have bad days, they get nurturing that turns them around so they can have the best days. I feel good being here, too. I've gained a name. I'm not just Jalen's dad; I'm "Mr. Brown." The kids and teachers say, "Hey, Mr. Brown!" That makes me feel like I'm really a part of things. I feel kind of like I'm going to school here, too.

## The Kids Feel Smart Here

I see a real difference in my son this year. Before, he must have been seeking attention or something because he was in trouble every day.

## Their Actions Show They Really Care

**William Martin (grandparent)**

As a grandparent, I've probably visited more often in this school than any other. When you walk in the door, you can see how excited the kids are. My granddaughter gets up singing because she loves going to school. When you've got a child who's that excited, you can't help but be excited, too. Every time I come to one of their weekly gatherings, I'm so proud of these kids. Something great has got to be going on to make them feel that good about themselves. I think it's the way teachers present information. They challenge them, but not in an intimidating way. I was in Ms. Washington's class one day, and one of the boys was having trouble. Ms. Washington took the time to get him on the right track rather than just keep going. He wasn't left out. It's a different environment than what I'm used to seeing. It's more like a family. The teachers' actions show they really care. Kids can sense things like that.



*Mr. Barr plays Duck, Duck, Goose with his primary students: "Our teachers aren't like ordinary teachers, they even play with us at recess."*

## My Son Comes Home and Says, "I'm So Proud of Myself"

**Rhonda Coward (parent)**

As a kid, I was always told, "Well that's a stupid question." Here, you ask a question and it's like, "Wow, that was a great question!" At home now, my son will say, "You know, Mom, that's a really good question, but let's look at it this way"; or "Mom, don't tell me how to do this, give me some clues." I can hear his teacher in his words. When a child answers incorrectly, she says, "That's interesting. How did you come up with that?" The opportunity to think carefully about questions has helped my son blossom. He gets so excited about his work. For homework the other day, he had to measure the steps. He said, "I'm going to go from the top floor to the bottom floor. Mom, it's 163 steps!" Now he gets the measuring tape out and measures everything! He's incorporating what he learns at school into his life at home. This is a kid who used to say, "I don't want to go to school anymore." Now he comes home and says, "I am so proud of myself."

"You have to have heart and passion to teach a child . . . He may put up a road block or give up because he feels like he doesn't know something. But as long as he feels like somebody has confidence in him, he'll keep trying."

*-Karen Thomas, parent*

# “Sharing OUR Story”

Families, Students, and

## “She Just Knows How to Teach the Way My Brain Works”

**Kristen Maxfield (parent)**

Last year my child lost enthusiasm for reading. He was required to read in the first-grade basal reader even though he tested at a much higher reading level. Even when he knew the material, sometimes he didn't do the tasks correctly because, bored, he zoned out and missed the directions. When I asked what we could do to make school more challenging, he was put in a reading club for thirty minutes a week and given extra homework; we were told to wait until third grade when he would be in AAP (Advanced Academic Placement) classes. I knew that even if AAP classes were the answer, he would be completely turned off by then. Already discouraged, he didn't want to go to school. Even at home, he began reading less and less.

When I heard about a school with an inquiry-based curriculum, I knew it was the right place for my son. Now he's engaged in things he's excited about. He gets to make decisions about his own learning. He can work on problems with other students. From the first day, he was amazed and excited that he was allowed to read whatever he wanted! Now, he reads again all the time—on the way to school, on the way home, during his free time. We have to pull the book out of his hand to go to sleep at night. The most important change is that he's fallen in love with learning again. On the second day of school, he came home and said, “I love this school!” When I asked why, he said, “Well, Ms. K., she's just a great teacher.” I asked what made her so great, and his answer was classic: “She just knows how to teach the way my brain works.”



*Jalen and Scottie enjoy time to read and talk about books together.*

## We're Free to Ask Questions

**Katie (upper elementary student)**

One reason I feel confident here is because we're free to ask questions. Before, I was kind of scared to ask questions because I thought teachers might yell at me or I might say something wrong. Here, kids aren't afraid. Not just about asking questions, but in general. Like one time, my teacher here asked me to be quiet and I thought she was going to say, “You'll miss all of your recess” or something like that.

But she didn't. She just asked me to listen because someone else was talking.

## If Other People Think You're Smart, You're Going to Strive to Be That Way

**Briddie Robinson (grandparent)**

My grandchildren love coming to school. It's not the traditional setting where students just sit at a desk and the teachers do the talking. The children get a chance to express themselves. Teachers motivate them by asking a lot of questions. If no one knows the answer, teachers make the children dig, and they dig with them: “Come on, let's think about it.” Children are shown that they know a lot, so they think they're the smartest children in the world. They prove the point that if other people think you're smart, you're going to strive to be that way.

Another reason I think children feel good at CSI is that, while the teachers teach skills so students can do well on standardized tests, the curriculum isn't designed around tests. Focusing only on the test is the wrong approach. It makes students and teachers feel so tense they can't relax and enjoy learning.

Finally, teachers here know how to make parents and grandparents feel like they're included. You can feel it when you walk in the building. I get hugs every morning. Everyone makes you feel like you're family. Victoria (the director) hugs you. So do Kathy and Chantel in the front office and every one of the teachers. They're loving people and they show it. Parents and grandparents want to come into a school when we know that people genuinely want us there.

With very special thanks to the teachers and staff at CSI:

Jamaal Barr  
Chantel Brown  
Wanda Davis  
Victoria Dixon-Mokeba  
Kathy Duffy-Thomas  
Lauri Kemmerling

Stacie Mandrell  
Chris Richards  
Verdie Samuels  
Terri Washington  
Cara Williams

## A Few Things That Help Build Positive Identities in Our Community

**Summer events:** During the summer, we had a cook-out for the families to meet each other and the staff. Teachers were learners as we listened to stories about children and families. (Victoria, director)

**Move-in day:** We invited families to help us move in to our new classrooms. Local businesses donated food and drink. (Victoria, director)

**Curriculum night:** One evening every month, families and teachers gather to share and learn about curriculum together. (Stacie, curriculum coordinator/teacher)

**Weekly gatherings:** In only five months, every child in our school has presented a piece of writing or shared a new inquiry before audiences of 100 or more at our weekly gatherings of families, teachers, and students. (Lauri, teacher)

**Breakfasts, lunches, dinners:** We have regular get-togethers for teachers and families planned at different times of the day to honor family work schedules. We provide babysitting and transportation. (Victoria, director)

**A real open door policy:** The first thing you notice about this school is that it's welcoming. At our previous school, they let me look through the window. Here they want you to be involved *in* the classroom. (Kristen, parent)

**Greeting families every morning:** I greet each child every day, drawing them into the school world with a smile and a hug. It's a quiet invitation that says, "I'm interested in what matters to you." (Victoria, director)

**Taking time to get to know each other:** In every class, teachers and children spend a lot of time getting to know each other so that when they explore things, they feel comfortable taking risks. (Jeannie, parent)

**Making family connections:** We began making family connections before school started. We welcome parents to join in the learning anytime and be a part of the bond being built with their children. (Jamaal, teacher)



*Victoria (CSI's director) greets Delson as he arrives at school.*

**Multi-age classes:** At first I thought the multi-age approach would be difficult, but watching the kids catch each other when they fall and encourage each other when they are frustrated, I can see that a community approach encourages everyone. (Cara, teaching assistant)

**Phoning families:** Teachers call parents just to say hello. In some schools, you only hear when children do something wrong. Give us a call. We need a boost, too. (William, grandparent)

**Trust:** Showing kids that you genuinely trust them is critical. It took a long time to convince one student that I really trusted him. We both wanted success, we just had different experiences in our rear view mirrors that affected our ability to move forward. (Chris, teacher)

**Ownership:** A big reason our kids feel good about themselves is the ownership they have in their work regardless of ability. Their brilliance shines through, and creativity remains stoked because we focus on the fact that they *are* knowledgeable. (Lauri, teacher)

**Involving kids as inquirers:** Teaching here affirms that inquiry is rewarding to both the teacher and students. It empowers students to believe in themselves, to fully become what they can be. (Verdie, teacher)

**The front office sets the tone:** Whether you're a parent, grandparent, or sibling, you're always welcome. The only thing we say is, "Let us meet you so we can make sure our kids are safe." I also give families a call now and then. There are so many who don't feel a part of things unless you make it your job to let them know they belong. (Chantel, office manager)

**Knowing that it's not always easy:** Building a respectful community is an ongoing process. Some of the children haven't had the opportunity to express themselves in school, so their excitement sometimes leads to conflict. We work hard to learn how to honor each other. (Lauri, teacher)

**Professional autonomy:** I can build positive identities in my students because I have the professional autonomy to take time to listen carefully to each of them. (Terri, teacher)



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**Next Issue:** The July issue of *School Talk* will be Communities of Practice: One Size Doesn't Fit All.

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