Reconceptualizing Education Grounded in the Multimodal Discourses of Girls of Color Labeled with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Abstract

The experiences of girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in middle school and high school have historically been excluded from educational research. This study sought to better understand how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities navigated multimodal discourses and classroom practices as well as how they were impacted by them. Using Disability Critical Race Theory and critical discourse theory, six students were focal participants and eight educators were secondary participants. Multiple case studies were used with primary (i.e., observations, audio/video recordings) and secondary (i.e., interviews, focus groups) data sources. Findings revealed how focal participants showed their discursive resourcefulness, despite absent communication supports and prioritization of oral/aural communication. Students also repositioned themselves in response to marginalization through talk and actions. Implications for research and practice are discussed. This study underscores the necessity of centering the experiences of girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in educational research to improve their school experiences.

Multimodal discourses, including talk and actions, are inextricably connected to learning in schools. Youth engage in multimodal discourses throughout the day as they learn with and from peers and educators (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals). Talk may be verbalizations (e.g., "What do you think?"), vocalizations (e.g., "Huh?," "Oh," "Eh"), or speech generated by a voice output device (Gee, 2014; Teachman et al., 2018). Actions or action-oriented expressions include eye gazes, facial expressions, gestures, and selections made on a communication board (Light & Drager, 2007; Scollon & Scollon, 2017). As such, students use talk and actions to explore concepts and content and to question and process (Rogoff, 2003).

Learning is a social process wherein students become active participants in knowledge communities (Lim & Renshaw, 2001). Youth labeled with significant cognitive disabilities have long been excluded from the social processes of learning. However, a mutually constitutive relationship exists between multimodal discourses and social practices for youth labeled with significant cognitive disabilities

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(Wodak & Meyer, 2016). For example, when a student hears an educator continually praise a peer in class and condone another, then the student may attribute certain traits (e.g., smartness, goodness; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016) to one peer and not the other, based on how the educator responds. Moreover, these observations and interactions dictate how the student feels about their own responses and their willingness to take learning risks.

In addition, multimodal discourses mediate power relationships (Foucault, 1982). When students labeled with significant cognitive disabilities are not afforded opportunities to interact with peers, share knowledge, or construct meaning, then learning becomes a tool of inequity based on ideology. In response, youth may reposition or refuse to accept individual, group, and/or societal marginalization (Davies & Harre, 1990). They may speak out or act in another way when they notice educators and/or peers marginalizing one another (Annamma et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not only the educators and students who generate discourses, but the discourses also create who they are. In sum, a focus on multimodal discourses and social practices can illuminate how power and ideology are (re)produced in schools.

Context is crucial because of the constituted and constituting nature of thought, talk, and action. For example, the opportunities teachers create hold power over what exists and comes next in the classroom. When educators design opportunities for students to work with peers, then the knowledge the students explore and/or create together is influenced by each learner's histories, perspectives, and experiences. That said, multimodal discourses can play a role in transforming society as students and educators use them in creative and agentic ways, thus exposing the dialectic nature of discourse and ideology (Gee, 2014). This can be true for the school experiences of girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities; however, these girls are often ignored in educational research (Sinclair et al., 2018) and their multimodal discourses are underrecognized and understudied. The term "girls of color" is used instead of "young women of color" to honor the experiences, expertise, and youthfulness of the girls in this project who identify as Afghan, Black, Hispanic, and Latina. While youth labeled with significant cognitive disabilities often experience perpetual infantilization, the focal participants attended K–12 schools. Furthermore, childhood is often withheld from girls of color (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017).

While most of the multimodal discourse literature in education attends to educators (e.g., Berry, 2006a; Kurth et al., 2016; Orsati, 2014, 2015; Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013), it is important to consider how students contribute to classroom discourses. For example, researchers have found student responding was unidirectional (i.e., students followed teacher directions, students answered teacher questions) rather than bidirectional (i.e., students asked questions, student–teacher, and student–student reciprocal conversations) in special education classrooms and segregated schools (Pennington & Courtade, 2015). Moreover, students with disabilities in special education classrooms have also experienced and engaged in disrespectful talk with their peers (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Thus, students may unknowingly (re)produce harmful ideas about peer belonging, membership, and worth through their classroom discourses.

Scholars have also reported on how students with disabilities have repositioned or subtly claimed brief authority. For example, Black boys with disabilities repositioned by asking educators questions (e.g., "What did I do?"; Collins, 2011a) and sharing personal narratives (e.g., "I like to draw and paint."; Collins, 2011b). Students with disabilities have also modified discussion topics or attempted to change an assumed turn-taking sequence with peers in the general education classroom (e.g., "Why are you taking over the paper?"; Berry, 2006b). In another study, one girl with autism persisted with personal narratives in a small group setting in response to her peers' disinterest (e.g., "She talks to some Spanish people,"; Dean et al., 2013). Students with disabilities have also remained silent when urged to participate or have opted out (Collins, 2011b). Yet, more information is needed to understand how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities reposition multimodally in response to marginalization.

While little is known about the multimodal discourses of students labeled with significant cognitive disabilities, and girls of color specifically, the studies reviewed here provide a foundation. Few scholars have examined students' multimodal discourses and many did not provide fine-grained details of their actions. Furthermore, student repositioning is a relatively newer point of inquiry, particularly for students labeled with significant cognitive disabilities. Therefore, additional research is needed to understand how intersecting oppressions at macrosociopolitical (e.g., ableism, racism; Erevelles & Minear, 2010) and microinteractional

levels (e.g., lack of access to classroom spaces, microaggressions in classroom interactions; Dávila, 2015) impact student experiences with a particular focus on multimodal discourses. Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in middle school and high school navigated multimodal discourses and classroom practices as well as how they were impacted by them. Two questions guided the inquiry: (a) How do girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities multimodally navigate classroom discourses? (b) How do classroom multimodal discourses impact girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities?

Method

This project focuses on a subset of data from a study examining educational opportunities for girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in one middle school and one high school in a large Midwestern city school district (*see* Miller, 2019). Like the larger study, this project used a critical, qualitative multiple case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Strategy of Inquiry

A multiple case study design was chosen for three reasons. First, the research questions required an in-depth understanding of how the focal participants navigated multimodal discourses and classroom practices as well as how they were impacted by them (Bhattacharya, 2017). Second, the research questions were explanatory, process-oriented, and framed as "how" questions. This allowed me to examine systems and processes while focusing on talk and action within learning contexts. Third, multiple case study methodology can offer new understandings inductively as bounded by a case and revealed across multiple cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

This empirical project was grounded in Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) and critical discourse theory (Foucault, 1972; Gee, 2014; Rogers, 2011). First, DisCrit, as the broader theoretical framework, is discussed. Then, critical discourse theory is described. Finally, a consideration of how the two theories strengthen one another is presented.

Disability critical race theory. A sibling of critical race theory and disability studies in education, DisCrit seeks to uncover how interlocking oppressions (e.g., ableism, racism) operate as institutional and societal mechanisms to oppress, segregate, and surveil multiply marginalized youth (e.g., youth of color with disabilities; Annamma et al., 2013). Each of DisCrit's seven tenets affords an examination of how power is (re)produced in education (see Table 1). As an intersectional theory, DisCrit is particularly interested in human responses to difference and the activism and resistance individuals and groups engage in (Annamma et al., 2018). The question is not whether differences are perceived but what meaning is wielded based on those perceptions and the ensuing mutually constituted ideologies and consequences (Gallagher, 2001).

By affirming how racism and ableism are active and naturalized, DisCrit exposes how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities are outside perceptions of what is normal and thus are positioned as problematic (Erevelles et al., 2006). Moreover, DisCrit questions the ways in which other, less prominent identity markers (e.g., communication preference, immigration status) may also be used to position students as different. For example, linguicism (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996) may be used with students of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities who use varied modes of action-oriented expression, low- and/or high-tech communication supports, or whose home language is not solely English. To do so, DisCrit centers the lived experiences and perspectives of multiply marginalized individuals and communities who are often unrecognized in research (Collins, 2003; Matsuda, 1987). It also considers the historical and legal aspects of disability and race and how both have been used independently and collectively to deny rights to some individuals (Gotanda, 1991). Such implications include how whiteness and ability are used as property wherein economic, political, and social benefits are afforded to those who are constructed as "white" while benefits are withheld from those who cannot claim whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Table 1. Tenets of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit).

DisCrit tenets
Tenet One uncovers how racism and ableism circulate interdependently.
Tenet Two values multidimensional identities.
Tenet Three emphasizes the social constructions of ability and race.
Tenet Four privileges the voices of multiply marginalized individuals and groups.
Tenet Five considers ideological, historical, and aspects of disability and race.
Tenet Six examines how ability and whiteness operate as property.
Tenet Seven necessitates activism and upholds all forms of resistance.

Critical discourse theory. Foucault's (1972) theory of discourse acknowledges how individuals make meaning of the social world through communicative acts. Multimodal discourses symbolize active and contextual processes that hold power and shape realities (Foucault, 1982). Since schools reproduce social realities, teachers and students play a role in how multimodal discourses and environments are produced (Rogers, 2011). Drawing on Foucault, I examined how particular ideologies (e.g., students are knowledgeable, disability is less than, talk is more important than action) were embedded in classroom multimodal discourses. Therefore, critical discourse theory strengthened DisCrit by affording an explicit examination of how linguicism operated in learning contexts, including how classroom meaning depended on how the focal participants were positioned, the opportunities provided to them, and the discursive moves and choices they made because of those affordances and constraints.

By grounding this work in DisCrit and critical discourse theory, I used multimodal discourses as analytical tools to expose how intersecting oppressions at macrosociopolitical and microinteractional levels impacted the school experiences of girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities. Talk and actions were examined to make more distinct the structures that are positioning these girls as invisible (Gee, 2014). That way, scholars and educators can address the negative impact certain systems and processes have on girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities while showing students' discursive strengths and educators' acts of resistance.

Participants

Girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities were purposively sampled aligning with the aims of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The phrase "labeled with significant cognitive disabilities" is used throughout this manuscript to (a) foreground the sociopolitical significance of disability and the preoccupation of medicine, psychology, and education with categorizing students as deficient (Connor & Gabel, 2010), particularly youth of color (Kulkarni, 2020), and (b) honor the journal's person-first language requirement. Students were included in this analysis if they self-identified or their family identified them as having autism, intellectual disability, and/or multiple disabilities. Six students were the focal participants. The school district designated intellectual disability and speech/language impairment labels on five of the students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Educators were also purposively sampled as secondary participants. At least one teacher was invited as a secondary participant per case. Seven teachers and one paraprofessional were included in the analysis. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms. Student demographic information was taken from student and family demographic questionnaires (see Table 2).

Data Collection and Sources

Three phases of data collection were conducted. This process allowed for the data to be collected and analyzed iteratively as each preceding phase informed subsequent phase(s). For example, I collected observation data, analyzed it for emerging themes, turned hunches into questions, and returned for another

Table 2. Participants and Classroom Content Areas by Case.

Student participant	Age	Grade	Race/ethnicity	Disability label	Educator participant	Content area observations
Amy	16	11th	Hispanic	Down syndrome; SLI	Mr. Clifford Ms. Cari (Para)	Language Arts (SE) CBI (SE)
Emma-Mae	11	6th	Black	ADHD; ASD	Ms. Taub Ms. Snow Ms. Summitt	Language Arts (SE) Physical Education (GE)
Isabella	14	8th	Latina	ASD	Ms. Snow Mr. Fenn	Social Studies (SE) Theater (GE)
Jimena	19	1st year post-secondary	Hispanic	OHI; OI; SLI; VI/B	Ms. Parker Mr. Armstrong	Language Arts (SE) Choir (GE)
Luna	14	9th	Latina	Epilepsy; ID; SLD; TBI	Mr. Clifford Ms. Cari (Para)	Language Arts (SE) CBI (SE)
Meena	14	8th	Afghan	OI; SLI	Ms. Taub Mr. Fenn	Language Arts (SE) Theater (GE)

Note. SLI = speech or language impairment; SE = special education; CBI = community-based instruction; ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ASD = Autism spectrum disorder; GE = general education; OHI = other health impairment; OI = orthopedic impairment; VI/B = vision impairment/ blindness; ID = intellectual disability; SLD = specific learning disability; TBI = traumatic brain injury; Para = paraprofessional.

observation with new questions (Bhattacharya, 2017). Similarly, each focus group was a chance to continue ongoing member checks with focal participants (Rodwell, 1998), as the information gathered from the first and second interviews iteratively informed follow-up questions for the focus groups.

Primary data sources. Classroom observations were primary data sources. I conducted 3-5 observations of teaching and learning in general and special education classrooms, including audio/video recordings and detailed field notes. This yielded 28 audio/video recordings and 27 detailed field notes as primary data sources. Field notes from one observation were missing during the analysis. Four focal participants were afforded access to only general education special or elective classes (e.g., Choir, Theater). Two students (Amy and Luna) were only assigned to one segregated special education classroom across the school day, so observations during community-based instruction were also conducted.

Secondary data sources. Interviews and focus groups were secondary data sources. Each focal participant had 2 to 3 interviews and 1 to 2 focus groups, yielding 17 student interviews, 2 high school focus groups, and 1 middle school focus group. The girls and their families also completed demographic forms. In three cases, parents shared additional information via phone and in-person about their daughter's educational trajectory with me. Seven teachers and one paraprofessional consented to the observation component of the study. Four teachers participated in two interviews and two teachers participated in one interview. Mr. Armstrong, one of the general education teachers, and Ms. Cari, the paraprofessional, did not participate in the interview component due to scheduling and time constraints. This yielded 10 teacher interviews. Teacher interviews existed across more than one case because most focal participants were in the same segregated classrooms (e.g., Meena, Emma-Mae, and Isabella, Amy and Luna). Secondary sources contextualized observations and triangulated data (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Primary Data Source Preparation

First, the audio/video recordings of teaching and learning were turned into verbatim transcriptions of talk-by-speaker utterances as an entry point to data analysis (Gee, 2014). Utterances were defined as completed words, partial words, and on-record vocalizations within each observation. Transcribing three types of utterances helped answer both research questions because they revealed how students and teachers communicated with one another. In addition, they showed the importance of vocalizations to students without

Table 3. Transcription Conventions.

Code	Meaning	Example
.	Final tone, a period in speech	Emma-Mae: Ms. Taub. Ms. Taub.
,	A non-final tone, like a comma in speech	Isabella: Oh wait, wait. No, no.
?	A rise in pitch, like a question in speech	Mr. Clifford: Amy, do you want to bowl?
!	A rise in pitch, like an exclamation in speech	Luna: I did it myself!
-	Truncated, cut-off word/interrupted speech	Isabella: Um, the ma:: mash::-
-	Truncated, cut-off action/interrupted action	Jimena: [Pointing and looking ahead, in that same direction-]
[ ]	Student and teacher actions	Meena: [Looking at Ms. Taub. Raises her hand again.]
::	Lengthening of syllable	Mr. Fenn: There are winners in Wah::
()	Time passed in seconds	(12)

communication supports, how often interruptions without repairs occurred, and how prevalent educators responded to talk but not actions. Then, details were iteratively added (e.g., tonal marks, truncated or interrupted speech, and pauses were noted; Ochs, 1979).

Talk was then organized by lines based on speaker intonation, action, and interruption. Some lines had only one utterance while others had multiple utterances. Interruptions were shown with a code rather than dictated by the placement of the utterance on a line (Du Bois, 2006). Next, lines were organized by stanzas—a group of lines about a theme, happening, or topic (Gee, 2014). Lines were organized by stanzas based on turn sequences and topics. A new stanza began when the teacher started talking to the whole class or when topics shifted. It was important to organize lines in this way to understand classroom participation structures and teacher and student initiations and responses (Cazden, 2001).

Next, detailed descriptions of salient actions were added to the transcripts (Norris, 2004). Because I was most interested in the focal participants' classroom experiences, I focused on actions they used most often, including eye gazes, facial expressions, body movements, and gestures. Like talk, actions were indicated line-by-line as speakers took turns. When there was simultaneous talk and action, interruptions are shown with a code rather than dictated by placement on a line (see Table 3 for transcription conventions).

Researcher Positionality

As a White, cisgender woman who identifies with several nonvisible disabilities, the focal participants and I did not share age, disability label, race, or ethnicity. However, the participants and I did share gender and language. Thus, gender and language were the starting points of commonality that we built trust from. I volunteered in their special education and general education classrooms for several weeks before the project started. Before, during, and after data collection, I spent time with the girls across the school day, including during class, at lunch, and on class trips. Also, I took extra steps to ensure the project was enjoyable and generative for them. Ensuring a generative project meant thinking with and alongside the focal participants about the problems they were facing in school and focusing on their solutions to inequitable school systems and processes (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In addition, and as part of solution-generating, I examined multimodal discourses with the educators who participated in second interviews to reflect on their teaching and make important pedagogical changes focused on girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities.

Ableism, linguicism, and racism held real consequences for the focal participants that I did not experience. For example, I moved around both schools with relative ease. At the high school, I learned and used the code to get in and out of "the annex" freely (the separate building at the high school for the segregated special education classes), whereas the high school girls could not come and go unless they were with me or a school staff member. At both schools, I used the dominant mode of expression which granted me positioning and privileges not afforded to the focal participants. Through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, I continuously considered how my analysis of classroom discourses and my presence could impact the students.

Data Analysis

The data analytic plan was informed by the study purpose, conceptual framework, and strategy of inquiry. Critical multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2010) was used to develop codes of multimodal discourses within cases and then across cases following data analysis for multiple case study design (Merriam, 2001). Once all data had been collected, iterative data analysis continued as I searched for patterns across the data (Erickson, 1986). I moved back and forth reading the data, turning hunches into questions or writing down new questions, and returning to the data to look for patterns (Bhattacharya, 2017). As such, I engaged in multiple rounds of meaning-making and coding.

First cycle: Within-case analysis. During within-case analysis, I used inductive analysis, open to ideas that emerged from the data not yet represented in the literature (Erickson, 1986). I moved through three rounds of initial coding, including unitizing, categorizing, and labeling (Rodwell, 1998) attentive specifically to the focal participants' multimodal discourses (e.g., *Answers Teacher's Question* and *Initiates About Finished Work* both emerged as inductive categories). Then, the deductive analysis focused on how the talk was structured and the roles of actions. Using this process, patterns in the data were identified based on the literature (e.g., student repositioning) and the conceptual framework (Annamma, 2018; Collins, 2011a e.g., *Repositions* was a deductive code category).

Second cycle: Across-case analysis. During across-case analysis, I used axial coding (Rodwell, 1998), placing code categories across the six cases in relation to one another and used data displays to compare and cluster data across cases. Clustering and comparing were helpful when considering similarities and differences across cases. The checklist matrix data display helped me expand and collapse code categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, I expanded the code category *Responds to Teacher (Not Answering a Question)* as it became important to draw out when the focal participants were responding to teachers. Expanding this code category highlighted the ways in which discourse was controlled in the classroom, including in student responses. Then, I asked new questions about how that discursive control was impacting the positioning or importance of talk over action in the classroom. I engaged in three cycles of inductive analysis across cases.

Finally, I engaged in one cycle of deductive analysis wherein the conceptual framework was used to look for intersecting oppressions the students experienced while remaining open to those that arose from the data. For example, layers of linguicism were exposed as schools failed to recognize and embrace the focal participants' multilingual strengths (Mindel & John, 2018; Young, 2009). These practices were revealed within the code categories of *Expresses a Need or Want* and *Asks a Question*.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies to support the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and advance rigor (Bhattacharya, 2017) were used including iterative data collection and analysis, disconfirming evidence, and analytic memos (Miller, 2020; Miller & Kurth, 2021). For brevity, triangulation and reflexive journaling are discussed next.

Triangulation improved the probability that the findings and interpretations were credible and trustworthy. In this study, data and methodological triangulation were used. First, data were collected from more than one participant source (e.g., students and teachers). Second, several data collection methods were used, including field notes and transcriptions of classroom discourse as primary data sources and interviews and focus groups as secondary data sources. Using data and methodological triangulation allowed me to look for patterns and outliers across sources and contexts.

Reflexive journaling supported trustworthiness as it revealed my orientation toward inquiry, social action, and analysis (Saldaña, 2013; e.g., I wrote in a research journal to interrogate reactions, check working hypotheses, and generate novel ideas). During the analysis, I journaled to remain close to the data and existing literature months after data collection. Also, journaling was used to examine how my participation in the study contributed to the production or disruption of power. In summary, journaling was a way to honor axiological commitments and understand project roles.

Results

Next, I share two themes that emerged from the analysis focused on how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities engaged in multimodal discourses with educators.

Students' Resourceful Multimodal Discourses

Across cases, girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities used resourceful multimodal discourses in the classroom. Their discourses were resourceful because of how the focal participants conversationally navigated their classrooms so they would be honored and strengthened, not discounted or remediated. *Students' Multimodal Discourses* was defined as "Focal participants communicate with their teachers about their learning through talk and actions."

At the middle school. It was Friday and the middle school students were graphing their scores for the whole group Daily Language Review activities (e.g., sentence structure, grammar). Emma-Mae used talk and action to inquire about her missing scores. She initiated with Ms. Taub for help (line I) and the teacher responded with eye contact (line I.1) and a question (line I.3). However, when Emma-Mae encouraged Ms. Taub to look at her paper as a discursive move to support her in conveying her thoughts (line I.6), Ms. Taub did not walk over to Emma-Mae and engage with her. Instead, she told Emma-Mae that she would look at her packet later (line I.7, line I.9):

I. Emma-Mae: Ms. Taub. Ms. Taub. [Looking at Ms. Taub.]
1. Ms. Taub: [Turns her eyes away from another student and looks at Emma-Mae.]
2. Emma-Mae: I don't have any numbers. [Looking down at her paper then at Ms. Taub from the side.]
3. Ms. Taub: Oh, for Wednesday and Thursday, you guys didn't grade them?
4. Emma-Mae: Yeah.
5. Ms. Taub: That's fine.
6. Emma-Mae: See look. [Picks the paper up from the table, turns sideways in her chair. Looks at and points to her paper with her pencil. Looks at Ms. Taub.] This one doesn't have any numbers.
7. Ms. Taub: [Looks away from another student and back at Emma-Mae.] I'll just look at it.
8. Emma-Mae: [Turns in her chair and faces the front again. Continues pointing at her paper with her pencil while looking at Ms. Taub.] So, I don't have anything for Wednesday because we don't have any numbers.
9. Ms. Taub: [Looking at Emma-Mae.] I'll look at 'em, ok? [Looks at the whole class.]
10. Emma-Mae: [Looks at her paper.]

Emma-Mae held subtle discursive power as she tried to get help from Ms. Taub. However, her academic earnestness was diminished when the teacher would not look at her paper. Their interaction ended when Ms. Taub started giving directions to the whole class.

During an audio-recorded Social Studies lesson missing some video footage, Isabella responded to Ms. Snow's anticipatory query. Initially, Ms. Snow used closed or known-answer questioning (a technique wherein the teacher already has an answer in mind) with the class to prepare for a short video on New Hampshire (line II). Importantly, students hold limited power when known-answer questions are present. Still, Isabella attempted a response (line II.1) but because she expected a certain response, Ms. Snow interrupted Isabella with an additional prompt (line II.2). In response, Isabella processed aloud and repaired (line II. 4). Then, she answered Ms. Snow's known-answer question two turns later (line II.6). Afterwards, Ms. Snow praised her (line II.7):

II. Ms. Snow: The largest city, thank you. Isabella, what else are we going to be looking for?
1. Isabella: Um, the ma:: mash::-
2. Ms. Snow: No, on your, your book.

3.   Student: Qué libro?
4.   Isabella: Where am I at? Oh wait, wait. No, no.
5.   Ms. Snow: Turn the other way. No, what are we going to be looking for on the next page here? [Points to the page in her book.] On this page, babe. [Taps the page in the book.] Someone's already said nickname. Someone's already said largest city. What else? Pick one, Isabella.
6.   Isabella: Um. Um. Um. Um. Um. Um, landmark of the state.
7.   Ms. Snow: Landmark, good. What else? (Student), what else are we going to listen for?

Teachers used known-answer questions often. As such, Isabella received praise from Ms. Snow when she responded correctly. If Ms. Snow had tried to repair with Isabella after she interrupted her (e.g., asking more about what Isabella was thinking or had meant to say), then her discursive move would have honored Isabella as a thinker and a learner beyond having the "right" answer.

At the middle school, the class was working independently decorating their journal pages with drawings of holiday-themed objects and characters after a writing lesson about Halloween jokes. Meena used actions to connect with Ms. Taub about her finished work. In her third interview, Meena shared that writing for extensive periods of time made her hand feel sore. She also indicated this through her actions (line III). Here, Meena tried more than once (line III, III.1, III.2, line III.4) to get her teacher's attention. After four tries, Ms. Taub noticed Meena (line III.5) and permitted her to come to the front of the room through her actions:

III. Meena: [Looks up from her journal at Ms. Taub sitting at the front of the room. Raises her hand and arm briefly, then puts it down. Shakes her left hand in the air. Looks down at her journal and then up at the big cup of coloring pencils. Picks up the big cup and returns it to the art shelf.]
(10)
1.   Meena: [Sits back down in her seat. Looks at Ms. Taub while she picks up her notebook, holds it with two hands close to her. Turns her body to face Ms. Taub. Looks at and watches Ms. Taub talk to Emma-Mae.]
(5)
2.   Meena: [Looking at Ms. Taub. Raises her hand and then puts it down.]
3.   Ms. Taub: [Looks up from the table to the right side of the room.]
4.   Meena: [Looking at Ms. Taub. Raises her hand again.]
5.   Ms. Taub: [Scans the room toward the left and looks at Meena raising her hand. Smiles. Looks down at Emma Mae's notebook. Motions with her left hand for Meena to come to the front of the room.]
6.   Meena: [Stands up. Pushes in her chair. Walks to the front. Sets her notebook down in front of Ms. Taub who is talking to Emma-Mae. Looks at Ms. Taub.]

Meena showed discursive ingenuity by using multiple actions (e.g., gestures, eye contact, body movements) to initiate with Ms. Taub about her finished work. Moreover, she did so over time while also waiting until the teacher looked up from the conversation that she was engaged in.

At the high school. In Luna's case, she used talk to initiate about her Language Arts work. While there is some video footage missing in this example, Luna shared how she had finished her *Esperanza Rising* collage (line IV). When no one responded, she pronounced completion again (line IV.1) with an emphasis that she had worked independently, a common school goal, particularly for students receiving special education supports and services. When there was still no response, Luna directed her comment to a paraprofessional (line IV.2) who took up her initiation and praised her with talk and actions (line IV.3):

IV. Luna: I did it myself! I did it. I did it!
(8)
1.   Luna: All by myself!
(12)
2.   Luna: Cari, I did it myself.

3. Ms. Cari: Alright! [Gives Luna a high five.] Good job! Put your name up at the top so we make sure it's your paper. Oh, let me find you a pencil.
4. Luna: [Turns to talk to a classmate.]

In a crowded segregated classroom, this was inherently a resourceful discursive move by Luna to gain adult recognition of her completed work. However, no one discussed her college with her, and the opportunity to engage with Luna about her learning on a deeper level was missed.

In her second interview, Jimena shared that she liked reading the *Twilight* series and preferred the second book. Before each chapter, Ms. Parker asked the students to make a prediction about the outcome. This time, she asked, "What causes chaos at Bella's birthday celebration at the Cullen's? Is it an ex-girlfriend? Or blood?" Jimena used actions to communicate her literary prediction. When Ms. Parker approached Jimena, she repeated the two choices (line V). Jimena communicated her prediction with gestures (line V.1). When Ms. Parker confirmed (line V.2), Jimena used additional multimodal discourses, including eye contact, head movements, and facial expressions (line V.3) to ensure she was understood. Ms. Parker responded with talk and actions affirming Jimena's choice (line V.4):

V. Ms. Parker: Jimena, what do you think? Blood or an ex-girlfriend? [Holds out two visual choices on little pieces of paper, one in each hand. Ex-girlfriend and blood are depicted with pictures from Boardmaker.]
1. Jimena: [Looks at the visuals. Reaches out and selects blood with her right hand.]
2. Ms. Parker: You're going blood too?
3. Jimena: [Looks at Ms. Parker. Nods head yes. Smiles.]
4. Ms. Parker: Ok. [Nods her head. Sets the two choices down on the table.]

Ms. Parker always presented the students with two predetermined choices for their predictions. Here, she did not engage deeply with Jimena about why she made that prediction or what it meant for the broader storyline. Then, after gathering everyone's predictions, Ms. Parker read the chapter aloud without pauses, guided questions, or conversation. Afterward, Ms. Parker asked each student individually to confirm if their prediction was correct.

Across cases, there were instances when teachers did not respond to or missed the girls' initiations. For example, Amy used talk five distinct times over the course of more than 6 min to initiate a turn with Mr. Clifford about her completed project in Language Arts. Despite Amy's enthusiasm and persistence, neither Mr. Clifford nor the paraprofessionals in the room responded to her. It was possible that Mr. Clifford did not see or hear Amy as she did not approach him but remained seated at her desk. However, Amy's discursive opportunity lost all potential when the adults (the intended audience) did not respond. Girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities held subtle discursive power when teachers did respond to their initiations. Consequently, they held no discursive power when teachers did not respond.

Students' Strategic Repositioning

Across cases, focal participants repositioned or refused to accept marginalization. I expand on prior definitions (Annamma et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2022) to define *Student Repositioning* as, "Girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities engage in strategic maneuvering in response to individual, school, or societal marginalization."

At the middle school. Girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities repositioned by mentioning their strengths and skills. For example, Isabella repositioned in response to Mr. Fenn, the Theater teacher, in the general education classroom. As the students transitioned to a new game, Mr. Fenn commented on the room's temperature and how that should not impact participation (line VI). In that same turn, he also prompted Isabella and a classmate to partake in the activity. Isabella repositioned by stating that she was good at the game (line VI.2). However, Mr. Fenn ignored Isabella's comment (line VI.3):

VI. Mr. Fenn: Even though it's too cold, stand up. So, our hands are here. First step. Show me your hands, (Student). We need hands for the game even though you're cold, put your hands up. Isabella, let's make these hands. Let's go.
1.   Student: I'm good at this.
2.   Isabella: Me too.
3.   Mr. Fenn: Hey (Student), can you find that space where you're facing us not out the way? Here we go. This is the least engaging part of this activity. Let's get the instructions and then we can go. It's an elimination-based game. There are winners in Wah:: Pay attention so you can be a winner.

The power that focal participants could hold when their teachers ignored their repositioning was context dependent. In this instance, Isabella gained no discursive power when Mr. Fenn did not respond to her. Instead, Mr. Fenn could have affirmed Isabella's comment about her skills.

Emma-Mae used physical maneuvering to reposition at the literacy station. After losing the opportunity to sit in a seat of her choice (line VII) and being told how to sit (line VII.2), Emma-Mae repositioned and responded with a personal choice—using her pencil to point to the first word instead of her finger (line VII.5). Instead of allowing her this subtle personal choice, Ms. Snow directed Emma-Mae to use her finger (line VII.6) and Emma-Mae followed the direction (line VII.7):

VII. Ms. Snow: I'll still help you bud. [Looking down at the table, pulls out the chair next to her.] I need her to sit here. [Pats the table.]
1.   Emma-Mae: [Sits down next to Ms. Snow with her spelling journal and pencil. Looks at Ms. Snow's journal.]
2.   Ms. Snow: Ok. Feet on the floor? [Looks down at Emma-Mae's feet.]
3.   Emma-Mae: [Looks past the peer across the table. Puts her foot that was crossed under her down on the floor.]
4.   Ms. Snow: Great. Here we go. [Looking down at her own spelling journal.] Put your finger on the first word. [Looks over and down at Emma-Mae's journal.]
5.   Emma-Mae: [Looking down at her journal, points to the first word with her pencil in her left hand.]
6.   Ms. Snow: Finger.
7.   Emma-Mae: [Puts the pencil down. Still looking down at her journal, points to the first word with her right pointer finger.]

In this instance, Ms. Snow used directions and redirections to respond to Emma-Mae's repositioning. Student repositioning held no power when the teacher would not affirm or allow it.

At the high school. Luna used talk to reposition regarding her academic participation in Language Arts. As Mr. Clifford transitioned to the next activity (line VIII), Luna used talk to interrupt and speak out in response to the notion that not everyone was going to be involved (line VIII.1). Similar to other activities, this one focused on the story's plot and was not age sensitive or differentiated. Yet, during the first focus group, Luna expressed how much she enjoyed *Esperanza Rising*. Mr. Clifford responded with a general reminder (line VIII.2) without engaging with Luna:

VIII. Mr. Clifford: So, if we have everybody's collage, we're moving on here. Kinda look at what, what's, to look at what's next. We're going to, a lot of us are going to work on this project. I'm just going to kinda, that is also related to our book. Not everybody's going-
1.   Luna: Me too.
2.   Mr. Clifford: I want everybody listening even though I'll get it to you. If it's, basically what you have here is a flip book. We kind of show the beginning of a book with your drawings. Sort of the beginning. . .

Speaking out was one strategy focal participants used to reposition in the classroom. Teachers' responses (e.g., ignoring, redirecting, taking up) dictated how much (if any) discursive power was afforded to focal participants when they multimodally spoke out.

Focal participants also repositioned by honoring their needs and wants. After cleaning the arcade during community-based instruction, sometimes the students got to go bowling. It was the only part of the arcade that was open for play. When Amy arrived, her peers had already started. She sat down on one of the nearby cushioned benches without any materials. When Mr. Clifford asked her if she wanted to bowl (line IX), Amy repositioned and responded to Mr. Clifford by pairing actions (i.e., moving her head and pointing) with eye contact (line IX.1). Her message was clear as seen in Mr. Clifford's response (line IX.2):

IX. Mr. Clifford: Amy, do you want to bowl? Do you want to bowl? There's a lane over there.
1. Amy: [Looks at Mr. Clifford. Shakes her head no and then points to the seat cushion she is sitting on.]
2. Mr. Clifford: Nope, no. Ok.

Although he did not inquire further, Mr. Clifford afforded Amy subtle discursive power by acknowledging and responding to her. Opting out was one way Amy could hold some power at the moment.

Focal participants also repaired or attempted to repair when misunderstood (Macbeth, 2004). During the transition from Language Arts to the next activity, Jimena initiated a request with Ms. Parker through talk and action (line X). In response, Ms. Parker asked similar questions while using context clues (line X.1, line X.3, line X.5). Yet, she did not vary her questions. When Ms. Parker misunderstood, Jimena physically repositioned by using gestures and eye gaze to repair (line X.2, line X.4, line X.6). After these three additional turns, Jimena was understood, and her request was approved (line X.7):

X. Jimena: Eh. [Pointing ahead of herself to the other side of the room and looking in that direction.]
1. Ms. Parker: [Walking away and looking toward the class.] Huh? [Stops and looks at Jimena.] What did I forget? Your foot things?
2. Jimena: [Pointing and looking ahead.]
3. Ms. Parker: What? [Looks in the direction Jimena points.]
4. Jimena: [Turns to look at her. Taps Ms. Parker. Turns and points ahead of her again.]
5. Ms. Parker: What? [Looks in the direction Jimena points.]
6. Jimena: [Pointing and looking ahead, in the same direction-]
7. Ms. Parker: Oh. [Points in the same direction as Jimena.] You can go see Judy if you want to.
8. Jimena: [Smiles. Looks ahead. Reverses her wheelchair and then starts moving toward Judy.]

During her second interview, Ms. Parker described how she had not tried low- or high-tech communication supports this school year because "most of the time, it really boils down to knowing (Jimena)." It was more important to know Jimena because the district provided "the same, like, solution for every kid" rather than person-centered supports. As such, Jimena's repositioning through repair was also a response to the lack of supports.

Discussion

Girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities initiated with and responded to their teachers about their ongoing and completed work through multimodal discourses. They asked questions about their learning (e.g., for help) and made requests (e.g., permission). As DisCrit tenet one foregrounds, racism and ableism position girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities as less than and not capable (Annamma et al., 2013). Therefore, it may be assumed that they cannot share information, ask questions, and make requests. However, the findings here are consistent with prior research in that youth claimed nuanced discursive power by asking questions (Ingram & Elliott, 2014) and sharing information (Brooks, 2015). The findings extend prior research showing how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities also claim discursive power through questioning and sharing information.

Another contribution of this study, supported by DisCrit tenet seven (Annamma et al., 2013), centers the focal participants' repositioning through various discursive strategies as creative acts of resistance. The

findings described here support existing research examining how students reposition by speaking out (Annamma et al., 2020) and sharing personal information (Collins, 2011b). This study expands that literature with a particular focus on the strategies the focal participants employed including physical maneuvering, repairing, and opting out. Little is known about how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities reposition or refuse individual, classroom, and societal marginalization and how their teachers respond to them. This study presents novel information for future scholarship to build upon.

This study demonstrates how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities had few visible supports for communicating with their teachers. Here, DisCrit tenets one and six blended with critical discourse theory illuminated how racism and ableism intersected with linguicism and multimodal communication supports, technologies, and tools were withheld from the focal participants. As a result, they had to work hard to communicate and express themselves across the school day, holding the burden of presenting themselves as knowledge generators (Delgado Bernal, 2002). While most of the girls often successfully dialogued without supports, exemplifying their agency and resourcefulness in the classroom (Tichavakunda, 2021), their discursive strengths and gifts were not responded to.

Educators responded to the focal participants with directions and redirections, questions, and praise. At times, they interrupted or made assumptions about students' discourses. This finding supports existing research wherein educators' interruptions disrupted the fluency of the initiation and subtracted from the subtle discursive power youth could claim (Bliss et al., 1998). At times, teachers made repairs to ensure understanding and other times they did not. Also, some teachers did not help the students when they asked for help (Annamma et al., 2020). These findings add to the literature by considering the kinds of unproductive interactions girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities had with educators.

Teachers did not vary their questioning techniques as most questions were closed or known-answer questions rather than open questions (Piccolo et al., 2008). In this study, praise and affirmation replaced open-questioning techniques, resulting in brief turn sequences and little to no opportunity to engage deeply with the content. Black (2004) found that teachers varied their questioning based on how they perceive students' abilities, resulting in more controlling forms of talk when teachers' perceptions of students' abilities were deficit-based. In this study, teachers' responses demonstrated how students were positioned. This positioning resulted in teachers withholding (a) goodness and smartness and (b) meaningful learning from girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities, as identified through DisCrit tenet six (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

Importantly, there were instances wherein teachers did not respond to the focal participants (Clarke, 2007), resulting in no shifts in discursive control. At times, this may have been because the teacher did not see or hear a student as the girls did not always physically approach teachers or say a teacher's name before initiating. In crowded special education classrooms, educators were often in proximity when communicating with a focal participant. Moreover, this omission highlights how classrooms prioritize oral/aural communication over actions. The findings presented here add to the literature as teachers most often controlled classroom discourses and upheld talk as the dominant mode of expression, thus limiting opportunities for the girls to play more active learning roles multimodally.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the focus on students as primary participants is a strength of the study, the lack of stakeholders beyond students and educators is a limitation. Therefore, one research implication revolves around participation and supports the focus of DisCrit tenet two on participants' multidimensional identities. For example, speech-language pathologists would provide insight into IEP team collaboration continuities and fissures when considering communication supports and tools (Soto & Yu, 2014). Inviting participation from additional school personnel, including school administrators, would be an important next step while still centering girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities.

Although student-generated data and student-involved analysis are also strengths of the study, more youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) led by girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities is needed. Such scholarship would (a) be grounded in the girls' lived experiences and

concerns, (b) incorporate training and practice of research skills, (c) iteratively combine research and action, and (d) involve power-sharing between adults and youth. Youth participatory action research is a promising tool for engaging girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in youth-driven transformative educational change.

Reimagining Schooling

The first implication for reimagining schooling focuses on how girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities are positioned and supported in schools. In this study, some teachers supported the girls' multimodal discourses by getting to know them and what they needed. This was often done from the perspective of student learning need (Naraian, 2016) rather than from the perspective that these students have strengths and gifts (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). While educators resisted the school's marginalizing practices in these microinteractional ways, their efforts were often spent initiating communication instead of findings ways for classroom discourses to be multidirectional and multimodal. In this way, interactions felt one-sided with the adult holding the power. Instead, girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities must be positioned as epistemic agents (Taylor & McDonough, 2021) and vulnerable assets (Proffitt, 2020) rather than solely as knowledge consumers, and supported as such.

A second implication focuses on the necessity to expand what is considered discourse. In schools, educators often prioritize oral/aural communication over actions. Yet, communication is richer and more complex than that. People often use multimodal discourses across contexts and communication partners (Jewitt, 2017). Expanding what is considered discourse by positioning actions as important as talk is essential for all students, particularly students labeled with significant cognitive disabilities and students with complex communication needs.

A third implication centers on multimodal communication supports, technologies, and tools as an integral part of schooling (Hamraie, 2013). This includes providing access to and use of low-tech (e.g., communication book, eye-gaze board) and more complex systems, sign language, and multiple languages. Here, girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities and their families are positioned as experts leading/co-leading multimodal discourse access considerations so that the design, development, and implementation are "both accessible and responsive" (Foley & Ferri, 2012, p. 199), rather than tailored to district conveniences and/or school personnel comfort. Furthermore, optimal multimodal communication supports, technologies, and tools are person- and family-centered and change over time as necessary (Yu et al., 2021). In summary, girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities ought to be afforded ample opportunities to experiment with and use varied multimodal communication supports, technologies, and tools consistently, ones that incorporate their multilingualism authentically.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to expand current understandings of how multimodal discourses and classroom practices impacted youth with disabilities broadly by considering the unique intersectional experiences of six girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities. Critical multimodal discourse revealed how the focal participants showed their discursive resourcefulness. Meaning, they used discursive strategies that should be honored and strengthened to navigate their classrooms despite absent communication supports and prioritization of oral/aural communication. In addition, the focal participants repositioned in response to marginalization through talk and actions, including physical maneuvering, repairing, and opting out. Ultimately, this study underscores the necessity to center the experiences of girls of color labeled with significant cognitive disabilities in educational research to reimagine schooling.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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