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What Does it Mean to Work in a System that Fails You and Your Kids? : A Beginning Teacher's Journey through the Chicago Public Schools

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What Does it Mean to Work in a System that Fails You and Your Kids? :

**A Beginning Teacher's Journey through
the Chicago Public Schools**

**Saturday February 23 2013 Penn GSE 007
10:15-11:30 am**

**Performance by Alexandra Miletta
Facilitators: Brandi Weekley & Andrew Babson
Written and Directed by Charles Vanover**

**What Does it Mean to Work in a System that Fails You and Your Kids? :
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**34th Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum,
PENN GSE
February 23, 2013**

Today's performance is dedicated to the memory of our friend David Johnson,
a longtime supporter of the Ethnography in Education Research Forum

Opening Prayer

The passions of delusion are inexhaustible; I vow to extinguish them. The number of beings is endless; I vow to save them. The Truth cannot be told; I vow to tell it. The Way cannot be followed; I vow to follow it. Through generous actions may I attain enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings.

Closing Prayer

Throughout my many lives, and until this moment, whatever virtue I have accomplished, including the merit generated by this practice and all I ever will attain, this I offer to the welfare of all sentient beings. May sickness, war, famine and suffering be decreased for every being as their wisdom and compassion increase in this and every future life. May I clearly perceive all experiences to be as insubstantial as the dream fabric of the night and instantly awaken to perceive the pure wisdom displayed in the arising of every phenomena. May I quickly attain enlightenment to work ceaselessly for the liberation of all sentient beings.

Interview 1: The Story of Your Teaching

To be conducted in June.

Please come to the interview ready to tell the story of your teaching this past school year, from September 03 until June 04. I am interested in learning how the year began, how it ended, and the important incidents that happened in between. I would like to know about the successes that made you proud and the mistakes you learned from. I hope you will share some of the joy of life in the classroom while not forgetting the hard work and difficult moments that are also part of life in school. You are welcome to bring notes, samples of student work and other materials that might help you narrate. As you tell your stories, I would like you to focus on the following questions:

- Please tell a story about a student, or a group of students, for whom your teaching made a difference during the school year.
- Describe a unit or a group of lessons where you made a difference in your students' lives.
- Describe moments during the year when you felt you had learned something new about your teaching or your students.
- For beginning teachers:
 - Tell a story about a particular moment when something you learned from your student teaching or teacher education classes helped you become a better teacher, or instances when this knowledge made it more difficult for you to serve your students.
- Tell a story about any obstacles that got in the way of your teaching.
- Tell a story about a particular event that illustrates what you believe teaching is all about.

My goal as interviewer is to ask you to describe specific events and incidents. Throughout the session, I will ask you to expand on your stories by asking you to “Tell me more about that.” or to “Walk me through what happened at that moment.” or to “Describe a specific incident that illustrates that idea.” In order to focus the time we have on your teaching I may also ask you questions such as “Could you tell me specifically how that event or person affected your teaching?” All of these questions are designed to help you tell your story in your own way, and in your own words.

Please don't worry about telling your stories in the specific order that they happened. My goal is for you to feel relaxed enough to speak naturally about the work you've done. Feel free to move forward and backwards in time and to come back to incidents that you've brought up before. I hope you will feel comfortable enough to tell your story to me in the same way you would tell it to teacher you trust.

The pilot interviews for this project ran from between an hour and an hour and a half. I would like you to have 90 minutes free so that you can speak freely without feeling rushed.

Handout 1: The Timer

*In this handout, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares incidents from her first week in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted's words are taken from an interview the author conducted, and they will be used in the ethnodrama that will be performed later in this session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.*¹

HALSTED: So I went home that night, forever, called up one of my classmates, and was, 'I can't do this. I don't know what to—.' She's, "Nope. Here's what you're going to do tomorrow. You're going to go in and you're going to do like—." We had learned this creative name tags where [kids] show you different things about themselves. She's, "You're going to do the creative name tag, and then you're going to do this and this," and she set up the whole day for me. "You're going to go back; you can do it."

So the rest of the week—I know I came home crying every night, I know that. It's kind of a blur, but then the last day of that week—see, I don't remember exactly what happened, all I know is that I went into the principal's office—and she just looked at me, and I started crying hysterically. And—again, I've heard so many horrible stories about [my principal], but she was so nice to me. She took me into a small room, and she was very kind, and she said, "What have you done positive?" And it was true—I hadn't set up any positive incentives. And I was like, 'Oh, Okay.' I mean I just forgot everything I thought I knew [from my student teaching] and I went, 'Oh, Okay.' [And then my principal told me that the school was supposed to get] these clocks and timers, but we hadn't gotten them yet, but she had suggested—she gave me hers. So big of her. She gave me hers, and she said, "I think you're going to find if you start timing them doing things you're going to be able to keep them on task more." And that was true. So, at the time, I thought it was ridiculous, but I did try it, and it did work. So I have to say she was absolutely correct about that.

INTERVIEWER: How would you time them?

HALSTED: For things like lining up, I'd say, 'Ok, I'm going to give you two minutes to line up and in two minutes when this clock goes off, we need to be done lining up,' or 'I'm going to set the clock for ten minutes. You have ten minutes for the washroom,' and then I would bring it down to like eight and just kind of make it a challenge. And it has a thing so you could put it on the overhead so they could watch the time, too, and they loved—like if I let one of them hold it, it was like they loved looking at the timer.

¹ Halsted and the Interviewer's part in the playscript are constructed from verbatim transcriptions from interviews conducted by the author. All names are pseudonyms. Words have been cut from the original transcripts, but no words have been added unless indicated by brackets.

Handout 2: Journal Excerpt

In this handout, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares incidents from her first week in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted's words are taken from an interview the author conducted, and they will be used in the ethnodrama that will be performed later in this session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.

HALSTED: I want to read, this was like my observation from my very first week with my kids.

“I did not expect this much anger to slap me in my face. I must have broken up 10 to 20 fights this week. I cried every night for two to three hours. I forgot everything I learned at school. Thank goodness one of my cohort members from my Master's cohort walked me through my week. This school is an emotional place. By Friday of this week I had broken down in front of my class. And this is the first time I had questioned whether I could do this. I feel like I had been dropped into a war zone. I did not know that places this sad existed, and now I spend the majority of my time here. It is quite an adjustment.”

Handout 3: Arthur

In this handout, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares incidents from her first year in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted's words are taken from an interview the author conducted, and they will be used in the ethnodrama that will be performed later in this session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.

‘Arthur is a special child. Arthur is a very small adorable boy who was born addicted to crack. He was adopted by a wonderful man who then got very sick and died while Arthur was in my room. The first week of school I broke up about 10 to 20 fights involving Arthur. With another little boy. And in fact they were the two smallest boys in my class. I then figured out that these two were mortal enemies and should never be in the same room together. The other boy was moved to another room, and I was left with Arthur. Arthur had personally prided himself on the demise of two fully certified teachers and a whole slew of subs the previous year. I think he was determined to make me another notch on his roster. Arthur had personally prided himself on the demise of two fully certified teachers and a whole slew of subs the previous year. At times, I saw this kid get so out of control that it would take 3 to 4 adults to restrain and remove him from the classroom. Because his father was sick he was staying with grandparents who were equally overwhelmed. They took him to a counselor two times a week. The counselor came in to observe him several times. Everybody agreed that this kid needed special services and a self contained room. He had never been referred and this was a 3rd grade classroom. The case manager of my school told me that I could not refer him for services as she was already too overwhelmed. This changed the day he told the assistant principal that he would have her shot for removing him from my room. My mentor, the assistant principal and I all went to the principal on my and Arthur's behalf. I needed help with this kid and nobody knew what to do. Finally I was told that he would be evaluated in 3 months. In the mean time, he had bitten me twice. Cause numerous problems for my class and for my floor. Getting angry at this kid did not work. He could get a whole lot angrier back. I was stuck. I had to figure something out with him because he was here until March and I had twenty other kids that had to work harmoniously with Arthur, and he with them.

Handout 4: This Year I Just Minimalized Everything

In this handout, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares this incident that occurred at the end of her first year in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted's words are taken from an interview the author conducted. This excerpt will not be performed in the show today. Instead, it is added for context. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.

This year—this past year, I just minimalized everything. When they when they trashed all the math manipulatives then I'm like, 'We don't have calculators anymore.'

Or one day I was absent. I went to a math workshop. I am very proud of this, the sub walked out at 9:30.

Interviewer laughs;

I am only proud because I am like, 'Did you see!! This is not just me!! This was an intelligent person, and they just were like, "I am not going to deal with this, I am leaving."'

Well, they had left my room unlocked because they had to split my class up, but they didn't lock the door behind them. So, then I was telling you about that posse that runs the halls—well they knew my class was unlocked. They just went up in there and like stole all the incentive prizes and just sort of trashed everything. But, when I went in the next day my room wasn't trashed because 3 of my really good kids stayed after school and cleaned up the whole room.

So, I guess that's also what it's about too, it's like touching the kids you can touch and you know doing the best you can with the others but really appreciating the fact that you can touch some kids, and in a positive way. I know that was—I mean I was crying all the time last year, but it was mostly sad or upset, but that was the day when it, 'OOOHHHH!!!'

Halsted cries; she reaches into her purse and gets a tissue

I was so proud of them. And one of their, the next day was like parent teacher conferences and when one of the moms had come in, and she was like—she told me everything. She told me how they stayed after school

"They just didn't want to embarrass you with the parents coming in. They didn't want you to be embarrassed."

Handout 5: The Homeless Girl

In this handout, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares incidents about the best student in her classroom during her first year in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted's words are taken from an interview the author conducted, and they will be used in the ethnodrama that will be performed later in this conference session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.

And one—one girl who is also repeating. She lived in a homeless shelter. She was my best student—like not academically, but behaviorally. So appropriate—never inappropriate. Never. But she missed so much school because of their living situation. There were times where she told me she couldn't get to school because I don't think the shelter was [near us]. So they had to take a bus, and the school used to give them reduced fare bus cards, but like they were out of them. So I would always slip her money every once in a while, just so they could get to school and back. She was already repeating 3rd grade, and she was smart. I mean she had the skills—I just wanted her to get through and to pass, and she still is going to have to go to summer school this year which makes me so sad. I don't know, it was just really weird her mother withdrew her at the end of the—withdrew her at the beginning of last week because they couldn't even stay at their shelter anymore. They had to go somewhere in the suburbs. But she had missed so many days—she had missed almost 50 days of school. So, and there was no way that I could pass her. No matter where she ends up next year I think maybe they will let her take the ITBS [the Chicago high stakes assessment] again. I don't know, but I have a feeling she's going to have to do something, you know, something's going to have to happen before she can go to 4th grade. Which is pretty upsetting because she is such a sweet girl and by far my most appropriate, most behaved student and with every teacher that dealt with her—just always just really wonderful, respectful. I used to use exit tickets at the end of the day with my kids. 'What did you learn about reading math and life?' Inevitably, like her and a lot of other kids too would write "I learned that this class is really mean to you." She was just she's a doll and just a sweet girl. I learned a lot from her because other kids were very resentful of the treatment she received, but it's like, 'She doesn't get this treatment for any other reason other than she always follows directions. And she always makes good choices. She always does what she thinks is best, and that she never tries to hurt someone.'