Coding for Ethnodramas, Oral Histories, and Other Performances:

See What Matters and Cut the Rest

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This script displays excerpts from Charles Vanover’s ethnodrama What does it mean to work in a system that fails you and your kids. The individual chunks of text were created through inquiry theatre methods. The researcher conducted the interviews and transcribed or cleaned the verbal data. He then spent a long time getting to know the stories shared in the interviews. Eventually, chunks of text were selected because they were alive and because they mattered. Much of this critical text was then deleted from the Microsoft Word file created from the original transcripts, and words and sentences were cut from the remaining codes. Only a small portion of the original interviews were used in the original ethnodrama, and this excerpt shares only a small part of that larger work. Every word in the performance that concludes this presentation is spoken in the original order it was voiced. No words have been added unless indicated by brackets.
'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 ten 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. At times, I saw this kid get so out of control it would take three to four adults to restrain and remove him from the classroom. Everybody agreed 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 I could not refer him for [special education] services as she was already too overwhelmed. This changed the day [Arthur] told the assistant principal he would have her shot for removing him from my room. 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.'

And one—the day his dad died really stands out for me. He came in—Arthur was pretty normal. He was really calm. I mean, not normal, that’s a weird—that’s a bad term, but he was very calm.

“I am very sad today.”

“Well, what’s wrong?’

He told me his dad had died. I gave him a big hug. The kids—four periods a week [my kids] go to another teacher for computer or music or whatever. [Arthur] didn’t want to go to the outside class, and I said that was fine. He could stay with me. I said that was fine. Everything to keep him calm. I’ve lost a parent. It’s an upsetting thing.

The reading specialist came in and just said, “You can’t be in here. You have to go to your class.” She started sort of getting real direct with [Arthur]. Telling him, “No, you are going to your class. You cannot stay in here.”

I sort of pulled her aside, and I said ‘His dad just passed away this morning. I don’t mind him being in here.’

“You are being very nice, but that’s ridiculous. He has to go to his other class.”

Whipped him into a frenzy.

“You’re going to this class.”

“I’m not going to that class.”

“You’re going to this class.”

“I’m not going to that class!!”

Honestly, I did not know what to do. She’s my superior at this school. Technically, I’m not supposed to keep them out of their extracurricular classes.

He’s in tears at this point. She dragged him down to the classroom. And that, in and of itself, ate up about 15 minutes of my prep. I was sitting at my desk doing my work. He was sitting there; it was great. It whipped—it took 15 or 20 minutes out of my prep period, and then by the time she got him down there, it was time to take him back.
And, that one little girl. He was looking for someone to sort of take care of him, and some days he would sit—I only had five girls and 16 boys. So, some days he would just, sort of, sit himself with all the girls, and they would take care of him. They’d fix his paper for him. They’d sharpen his pencil. They’d just sort of nurture him, and that’s what he wanted.

He was just sort of looking for some contact, physical contact. Some nurturing from the girls, and they really liked taking care of him. Until he did something—if he got angry or pushed them or went over a line then they were done. I remember one little girl just loved him sitting by her. And he would defend her, and he’d open doors for her, and he’d give her his computer time, and it was really… very sweet.

So, and, you know, I think that he’s in a much better place being in a smaller classroom with more one-on-one interaction [with the special education teacher] because he really needs attention. He just—he does—So.

They had to hire ten new teachers this year. By the 4th week of school, five of them were gone. And, by the end of school, there were four of us left. Two of us are coming back next year. [All this year,] we would just look at each other.

“Are you kidding me?”

That was, like, our phrase. We would just look at each other and say, ‘You can’t be serious. You can’t be serious that you want ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘Z’ to happen while this is going on.’

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 ten 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.’
[That first day] we got in the room and things were going okay. I had the chairs in a circle, and everybody was sort of sitting there. I was going through the whole thing about how I wanted school to be fun for them. And then, it, kind of, gets blurry for me, but I just remember at one point—like, I think I was telling you about [Arthur] and the other little kid that were fighting all day. I mean, at one point, just a big ol’ pile of kids—just a big fight, and I remember standing there going, ‘What am I going to do?’

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.” 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 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. I was like, ‘Oh, Okay.’ I mean, I just forgot everything I thought I knew [from my student teaching,] and I went, ‘Oh, Okay.’