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Goodbye to All That!: An Accomplished Teacher's Last Year in the Chicago Public Schools: Juried Ethnodramatic Performance for the 35th Annual Ethnography in Education Forum The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education Philadelphia, PA March 1, 2014

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Goodbye to All That!

An Accomplished Teacher’s Last Year in the Chicago Public Schools

Performance by

Alexandra Miletta, Brandi Weekley, & Charna Lacey

Mercy College, West Virginia University, & Saint Mary’s Public Schools

Music by

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Response

K. Nicola Williams

Johns Hopkins University

Juried Ethnodramatic Performance for the

35th Annual Ethnography in Education Forum

The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Philadelphia, PA

March 1, 2014, at 4:30-5:15 pm

Room 121 GSE
Abstract

This session uses verbatim theatre techniques (Favorini, 1995; Saldaña, 2011) to expand stories from four narrative interviews shared by an accomplished, middle school teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. These stories were spoken the summer after the teacher’s tenth year and describe students she cared for and the challenges of her work. Audience members are given excerpts from the verbatim texts that make up the playscript when they walk in the door, and they are asked to use this material to discuss the show’s guiding question before and after the performance: “Can a teacher care too much and instruct too deeply?”
Goodbye to All That:

An Accomplished Teacher’s Last Year in the Chicago Public Schools:

This Group Session inquires into the possibilities and affordances of ethnodrama as a means of evoking field-participants’ experience and supporting inquiry into the social structures that shape people’s lives (Denzin, 2003; Kazubowski-Houston, 2010; Saldaña, 2011). My collaborators and I have organized the session as a community-building forum. The transformative power of live theatre is used to build intellectual and emotional connections between community members and engender conversations about issues that matter (Mitchell & Freitag, 2011; Norris, 2009; Turner, 1986). Ethnographic texts are presented to raise questions and support audience-members’ efforts to make sense of the way the world works (Alexander, 2005; Snyder-Young, 2010).

The heart of the session is a 45 minute, ethnodrama that expands (Feldman, 2005) stories shared by an accomplished, National Board Certified teacher after her final year in the Chicago Public Schools. This short show is constructed out of verbatim texts voiced in the original order they were spoken. The texts were transcribed from four semi-structured, narrative interviews I conducted using interview techniques adapted from Weiss (1995) and Benner, Tanner, and Chelsea (1996) intended to help teachers tell stories about their teaching.

Addison Ashland, pseudonym, the teacher whose interview will be performed in the show, chose the Chicago Public Schools as her first job out of college, and she spent a decade working in the system before she resigned from the board the morning before our last interview. Addison started in an elementary classroom in a magnet school and grew into her practice (Lampert, 2010) under the direction of the school’s senior teachers. About five years into her
career, another principal was appointed, and he got into conflicts with the senior teachers and drove them and, eventually, Addison, out to other schools.

When I interviewed her in Chicago in the summer of 2004, Addison taught remedial Mexican students in a self-contained sixth/seventh grade classroom in a large K-8 elementary school in what was, then, one of Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods. As a culturally responsive teacher (Brown, 2003; Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, & Wright, 2012; Gonzales et al., 1995; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Addison cared for her students, but she was also burning out (Brunetti, 2006; Fleming, Mackrain, & LeBuffe, 2013; Price, Mansfield, & McConney, 2012; Santoro, 2011). There were moments in her interview when her lessons became, almost, too authentic, and similar to the teacher in Monroe and Obidah’s (2004) case study, Addison’s instruction moved into landscapes that would be inappropriate, if managed by a lesser professional. One of the show’s dramatic high points is a unit Addison improvised on Paula Fox’s book, The Slave Dancer. Addison was a teacher with tremendous heart (Grant, 2012; Palmer, 2007), but this unit, and other events that year, pushed her to the farthest edge of her practice.

Can teachers care too much and instruct too deeply?

Structure of Symposium

The performance makes use of a set of collaborative structures familiar to those work for change in urban schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; MacDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & MacDonald, 2007). My goal is to use ethnodramatic techniques to expand data (Feldman, 2005) taken from interviews I conducted with teachers in the Chicago Public Schools, and to ask audience members to participate in protocols and other forms of structured conversation to engage in dialogue about the stories the teachers told. The productions are aimed at academic
and professional audiences (Beck, Belliveau, Lea, & Wager, 2011), and they have been put up at sites including the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, Northwestern University, and the Penn Ethnography Forum. During these Inquiry Theatre productions, the sessions’ facilitators greet audience members at the door and give them a program that contains excerpts of the verbatim transcripts that make up the playscript—an example of these handouts is included in the appendix. Audience members discuss these texts before the performance in order to take an inquiry stance towards the issues raised by the texts. After the performance, members return to the texts and discuss them in relation to what they learned from the show. Professional problems thus come to life on stage and remain alive within the conversations of members of the community (Author, in press; Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1995; Saldaña, 2005; Turner, 1986).

Our production is intended to raise questions, not to provide answers. No judgments are rendered; no blame is assessed. Addison spent ten years working for change in the Chicago Public Schools. The challenges she describes speak to the consequences of the unpaid debt owed to people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and the joys and costs of working for change.

Can teachers care too much and instruct too deeply?
References


Author. (in press). [Citation withheld for peer-review].


Appendix: Sample Handout

In this handout, accomplished teacher Addison Addison talks about a student for whom she made a difference. The text will be performed as part of the ethnodrama performed later in the session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meaning with other members of your group.  

ADDISON: Dahlia, she is, gosh, another great person. She’s just so angry and so

“I’m a hard ass. What do you want me to do?”

I see right through it. From the day I met her, I was just like

“Oh God, she’s—she just needs some nurturing.”

She’s not a real hard ass, but super intelligent. Oh my God, the girl is brilliant. She dresses like a boy and acts like a boy and does all this gang stuff. She’ll wear the shoelaces a certain way. Her pants a certain way. She shaves all around her hairline. She shaves her eyebrows. All this gang signs and a lot of it is like guys—what guys would do. I don’t know what she is going through, but very just

Whispers

“I’m a hard ass. Back off.”

And she will tell people, like another teacher was like

“So. Did you decide that you don’t have to wear a uniform?”

Because we had uniform codes and she was wearing maroon shorts. It’s navy pants and a white shirt with collar, and she was wearing maroon shorts.

You know what, that’s not a fight I am going to

“She’s here and she’s not beating the crap out of someone. I don’t care if she’s wearing maroon shorts. I don’t care.”

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1 Addison’s part in the playscript is 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.
I’m not even going to announce it. But another teacher’s is going to see her and say, whatever. And she’s going to be

“YEAH, BITCH!”

I’m like,

“Oh, Dahlia.”

And then, the other teacher’s like

“You know…”

I’m like,

“Listen, I realize that we are supposed to come down on them for this, but at that this stage of the game… I am not going to address this. Okay, if you want to say it, I’m sorry that she responded the way she did, but she’s very defensive, and you should just come to me because I don’t get that response from her. But, I also don’t attack her.”

I won’t ever put her on the defensive. And the couple times where she has kinda of jumped down my throat—there’s only been, like, twice. I’m like

“You know what? You need to rethink how you’re responding to me. Because what I said to you does not warrant that reaction.”

And she’ll be

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

But it’s just so innate for her to just lash out. And a whole bunch of other people, everyday someone’s like

“Dahlia said this. Dahlia called me a bitch. Dahlia told me to fuck off.”

I’m like

“God, did she hit you?”
These are all like people who work in the building. And I’m like

*Whispers*

“Oh God.”

I have her like writing letters and going to these people and making speeches. I talk to her all the time about this, but I tell—I tell everyone

“You guys! Don’t jump on her. Don’t like yell at her and come down at her. And maybe she won’t call you a bitch and tell you to fuck off. But, maybe she still will. I’m sorry that’s the reaction you’re getting, and I know that’s not appropriate, and I know that she dresses like she’s in a gang and looks like she’s in a gang and acts like she’s in a gang and people have a real problem with that.”

Disciplining her the way that people do [at that school] is just going to make her come back the next day with something even more, like, tattooed across her forehead, something even more severe.

*Whispers*

But, you know, people don’t understand.

*Regular voice*

I’m—I’m the only person in the school that doesn’t have like a problem with her. Because I can see through. And, she’s not in a gang, but I know that she has spent a lot of time in the street. I know she hangs around with all the people who are in gangs, but I know she hasn’t joined one yet. No one believes it. But I—I—I trust her one hundred percent to tell me the truth. She totally opens up to me and I just believe what she says.