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Inquiry Theatre: Puzzles Matter More than Maps

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Ethnodrama as Professional Development

Symposium for the Arts-Based Educational Research Special Interest Group

Co-Chairs

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Discussant

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Washington, DC.

Presentations

- Ethnodrama as an Andragogical Approach: Cultivating Creative Exchanges and Resiliency in Emerging Teacher Leaders—Kristin A. Kusanovich, Santa Clara University & Jerome A. Cranston, University of Manitoba

- Inquiry Theatre: Puzzles Matter More than Maps—Charles Vanover, University of South Florida Saint Petersburg & Tiffany Octavia Harris, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Inquiry Theatre: Puzzles Matter More than Maps

Charles Vanover and Tiffany Harris

Quantitative research on schools in Chicago and other urban centers paints a bleak picture. For every beacon of light within the public system and each positive example of beneficial change lies a brute reality where, among other issues, classroom instruction is of low quality (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996), working conditions are poor (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009), school communities lack the essential supports for improvement (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006), and district standardized assessments provide inaccurate measures of student achievement that, in turn, support faulty professional judgments about student learning (Allensworth, Correra, & Ponisciak, 2008).

I worked as a teacher in Chicago before I began my studies at the university, and I wished to study teachers’ attempts to make a difference within this system. I interviewed 12 Chicago teachers four times each in the summer of 2004 and asked each to describe the students they cared for and the lessons they were proud (see Vanover (2014a) for the complete interview instrument). The teachers shared many positive stories, but as I have discussed in other writings, the most dramatic content in their interviews was their descriptions of dilemmas posed by poor school working conditions and unethical system policies, such as Chicago’s ban on social promotion (for details of this policy see Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2005). These stories matter both as expressions of individual efforts to make a difference and because the superintendent who authored or continued many of the policies that troubled the teachers I interviewed became the U. S. Secretary of Education.

In the four ethnodramas I created from these narratives, I attempted to evoke teachers’ experience with simple dramatic techniques (Vanover, 2016, 2017). Scripts were created by
coding what mattered and cutting everything else. Interviews were performed with little stagecraft, and every word spoken in each performance was shared in the original order it was voiced. The stories the teachers told were so radical, challenging, and heartbreaking the primary artistic complaint I received was the performances were too powerful, and did not provide the audience enough distance from the challenges the teachers conveyed.

The four scripts have been performed more than 20 times for audiences of researchers, pre-service teachers, and the public at large. As both theatre and professional development (Barone, 2001), these productions communicate ambiguity rather than technique; they share uncertainty rather than knowledge.

In my view, we lack a language to critique the many schools that suffer from ineffective educational management practices and poor working conditions and experience high rates of teacher turnover and other negative outcomes for professionals. We lack words to discuss these spaces in a manner that is fair to students whose needs are not met and does not support deficit views of schools or communities. The four ethnodramas I constructed from the interviews I conducted in Chicago do not solve these problems; instead, they communicate the importance of asking good questions and engaging in dialogue.

The first step in creating positive change is to understand what we do not know.
Table 2

Two Stories about CPS Student Retention Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story 1: “The Homeless Girl”</th>
<th>Excerpt from the Ethnodrama, <em>What Does It Mean to Work in a System that Fails You and Your Kids?</em> (Vanover, 2014b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>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 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.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>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?’ Inevitability, like her and a lot of other kids, too, would write, “I learned that this class is really mean to you.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>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 that 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.’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Story 2: “The Thirteen Year Olds”</th>
<th>Excerpt from the Ethnodrama <em>Listening to the Silences</em> (Vanover, 2015)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEWER: Talk about your own classes. What would you do, specifically, with like the 13 year olds in your class?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 second pause; Music up very softly; Part; “Fratres, (for violin, strings, and percussion);”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1 Both scripts were developed using inquiry theatre techniques (Vanover, Ahead of Print). Words have been deleted from the original verbatim transcripts but no words have been added unless indicated by brackets. All words are uttered in the order they were voiced and all pauses last for the same amount of time they lasted in the original interview.
*INDIANA:* Well, I had two at the beginning of the year that eventually got taken out ‘cause they were just really distracting other kids. And I got them half—like I got them in October because we had to close down one of the classes. All the kids from the 3rd/5th grade class got dispersed into the two existing 5th grade classes. And, a lot of times, they didn’t—they didn’t come. They didn’t even come to school, but when they were there

*I would just, just, you know*

I would just, just, you know

try anything to keep them

occupied, basically, you know

you know, a little extra help, probably, you know, I would probably stand by them more and make sure that they were following. Of course, these were the kids who need the most help with the fundamental basic things, and when you have 30 kids in your class, it’s really to give them what they need. And, I couldn’t, actually. I didn’t. I didn’t give them what they needed.

*She laughs;*

*INTERVIEWER very softly:* That’s okay.

*She laughs;*

*INDIANA:* And there is not any

Sadness in her voice. By the middle of this section she is in tears, but she never actually cries.

I thought that there would be people to come in and take them out and help them, but there’s not. There was never anybody who came in, like, and took out the kids who didn’t know their multiplication tables yet which I thought there would be. Kids who just needed just really basic help in reading. There’s kids in the 5th grade who didn’t know like 1st grade sight words. So, sometimes, when everyone else is independent reading, you know, I would just take—luckily for some reason I bought the sight-word flashcards, probably not even thinking that they would need them, but I did. And so, I would just go through sight-words and have them read really basic books to me. Or—and we would like pair up and I would read a page and they would read a page. But I, you know, I didn’t do a good job differentiating instruction as much as I would like to and

The sadness begins to leave her voice;

So, I gotta—I have to do better with that for next year too. But yeah

*Laughs; Recovers;*

So, then halfway through the year…