

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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Performance by Alexandra Miletta

Mercy College

Facilitators

Brandi Weekley & Andrew Babson

West Virginia University & University of Pennsylvania

Written and Directed by

Charles Vanover

University of South Florida Saint Petersburg

Abstract

This session uses protocols and other collaborative structures familiar to those working for change in urban schools. Facilitators will sit audience members in groups and guide them as they participate in a jigsaw that uses excerpts from a short ethnodrama. The ethnodrama uses verbatim, interview transcriptions to evoke the experience of a first year teacher and will be performed after the jigsaw. Facilitators and audience members will then use what they have learned from the ethnodrama to deepen their inquiry into the session's guiding question, "What does it mean to work in a system that fails you and your kids?"

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

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; 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 (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 30 minute, ethnodrama. This short show is constructed out of verbatim texts transcribed from four semi-structured, narrative interviews I conducted with a first year teacher in the Chicago Public Schools as part of a larger study of teachers' experience (Vanover, 2009). All of these interviews took place after school had ended in June, during the summer after the beginning teacher's first year. All sessions used semi-structured interview techniques adapted from Weiss (1995) and Benner, Tanner, and Chelsea (1996) intended to help participants share stories about their work.

Halsted Hoyne, the teacher whose interview provides the material for the ethnodrama, worked in theatre before getting certification and a Master's degree in elementary education. Halsted said she spent her first year talking about her teaching to her husband, her sister, the members of her new teacher support group, her mentor, and the fourth grade teacher she car-pooled to school with every week-day morning at 6 O'clock. I believe Halsted's skill as a storyteller gave her the ability to discuss life in the Chicago Public Schools with a vividness

other teachers I interviewed did not always achieve. Halsted shared narratives of students and school events are in line with other studies of beginning teachers' experience (e. g. Le Maistre & Pare, 2010; Ryan, 1970) and are comprehensible to people without direct knowledge of managing a classroom.

Similar to many beginning teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001), Halsted took a job as teacher in a high poverty, African American school with high levels of teacher-turnover. Halsted was assigned a third grade classroom with some of the neediest students in her grade level. She told me that sixteen of the twenty students in her class were boys, and many had special needs that had not been addressed in their previous classroom placements. Halsted's difficulties were compound by the Chicago Public Schools retention policies (see Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). More than one third of Halsted's students had flunked third grade their previous school year, and she said her kids began the year angry and discouraged.

Halsted "made it through" her first year and did not abandon her kids to the mercy of the substitutes and teacher's aides the system used to staff other classrooms in her school, but she said more than three-quarters of her students flunked Chicago's high stakes exams and were vulnerable to being retained in third grade the next school year. The system thus failed the beginning teacher by giving her a class beyond her capacity to teach. Halsted then failed her students by being unable to help her kids pass a test that, however biased, had important consequences.

The production is intended to raise questions, not to provide answers. No judgments are rendered; no blame is assessed. We hope to perform Halsted's story with the same respect she demonstrated as she spoke about her life in the classroom.

Structure of Group Session

The performance is intended to take place in a regular conference room and 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). To create the performance space, a desk will be placed at the head of the conference room, and the show's title question will be written on the chalk/marker board on the wall upstage from the desk. The conference room's other desks and chairs will be organized to create groups of audience members. Coltrane's 'How Deep is the Ocean' will play as the session's facilitators greet audience members; direct them to sit either in role-alike or role-diverse groups; and give them a handout that contains section of the playscript they will discuss during the jigsaw that follows—an example of these handouts is included in the appendix. Thus, teachers will have the opportunity to sit with teachers, researchers will have the opportunity to sit with researchers, members interested in multiple perspectives will have the opportunity to sit with others with diverse experiences, and all will interrogate the data (Denzin, 2003) once they take their seats.

After the audience is seated, the music will be turned off. I will provide a brief introduction to the methods used in data collection and play-building and then situate the production within the research on the operation of the Chicago Public Schools. The session's facilitators will then guide audience members as they use the excerpts of the playscript they received in the handouts to discuss Halsted's story. Each group will then be asked to create a set of questions about issues in Halsted's story and in urban education they would like to learn in more depth. These questions will be written on the chalk/marker board, the actors will take their places at head of the conference room, and the ethnodrama will begin.

At the conclusion of the show, group-members will be asked to discuss what they saw in relation to their previous questions and to come up new lines of inquiry. These deliberations will then be shared with the full audience.

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Appendix: Sample Handout

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 conference session.

*Please read this story and be prepared to share its meaning 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

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.

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.