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Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Leadership for Social Justice

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inquiry theatre

Presents

Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Leadership for Social Justice

Starring Tiffany Harris, Omar J. Salaam,
Roderick Jones & Heather McConnell

Written by Charles Vanover

Co-Chairs William Black &
James Joseph “Jim” Scheurich



Saturday, November 22, 9:35-10:40 am

Washington Hilton: Jay

Image Credit: “Children from the inner city and suburban Chicago attend Humboldt Community
Christian School,” courtesy of Getty Images

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inquiry theatre

Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Leadership for Social Justice

This symposium raises questions directly related to conference theme: How do we prepare leaders to act in the real world where, as employees of large bureaucratic systems, they are required to implement policies they did not design and work within networks and social systems that do not always support socially just outcomes for students? How do we prepare educational leadership candidates to work as change agents in institutions guided, to some extent, by socially unjust policies, where professionals act with limited levels of discretion?

Rather than providing answers, the symposium is designed to generate dialogue between audience members and to help them reflect on their work for change. During the first half of the session, an excerpt from an ethnodrama (Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1995; Saldaña, 2011) will be performed as a case. The play's text was constructed by Charles Vanover (2013b) from interview data shared by African American, National Board Certified teacher who worked in a high poverty, public school in Chicago. The ethnodrama describes a modal African American high poverty school, similar to those described in the research of Allensworth, Darling-Hammond, and Ingersol and their colleagues (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001), where poor leadership, low levels of faculty collaboration, and other forms of substandard working conditions made it impossible for the accomplished teacher to continue to work a building where she believed she made a difference (See the excerpt from the script in Table 1, in the Appendix).

The teacher's story is evoked vividly through ethnodramatic techniques that convey her commitment to her students and the conflict and disarray within her school. At the end of this fifteen minute performance, audience members will be asked to use adult learning techniques (MacDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & MacDonald, 2007) to engage in dialogue into the issues raised by the script and to respond to its ethnographic content as a case. In the second half of the symposium, the audience will listen and respond to an expert panel's analysis of the case content and session's use of ethnodrama for professional learning.

As with all inquiry theatre productions, no claims will be made based on the performance, no judgments will be rendered. Dialogue generated by the session will be used to support action and reflection (Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012), rather than advocate for a particular point of view.

Literature Review

Ethnodrama

Not all questions may be answered through quantification (Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1995). Ambiguous situations without clear right or wrong answers may have a vital importance for professional practice (Barone, 2001). Ethnodrama is a method of disseminating research that places the conflict and emotion of life in the field into public settings where audience members may discuss, argue, and interrogate the social meanings the performance evokes (Saldaña, 2011; Vanover, 2013a, 2014). Rather than understanding ethnographic findings through the medium of the researcher's voice and PowerPoint slides, ethnodrama uses actors' physical presence to push audience members to engage with lives that may be outside of their everyday experience. As with all cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), these rich representations of life in the field may support the development of new questions and theory. These ideas might, subsequently, be investigated by other research methods.

Following this perspective, the ethnodramatic performance that begins the symposium will be used to raise questions and generate discussion. Audience and symposium members will be asked to inquire into the issues the performance raises, but no attempt will be made to come to draw conclusions about the content of the case. Dialogue is the symposium's central goal.

Leadership for Social Justice

Researchers in the field of educational leadership have come together to create a vision of leadership for social justice (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Khalifa, 2012; Nevarez & Wood, 2007; Tillman & Scheurich, 2013). The change processes guided by socially just leaders are both collaborative and non-negotiable (McKenzie et al., 2008). Leaders and teachers work together to create a more just and equitable school culture. The necessities for change, and the benefits of supportive settings for students and faculty of difference, however, are held as sacred organizational values. Every child must be respected and supported. Every student must learn to their full potential. All means all, without exception. Furman (2012) writes in her review:

...leadership for social justice involves identifying and undoing [...] oppressive and unjust practices and replacing them with more equitable, culturally appropriate ones. As Dantley and Tillman (2010) state, leadership for social justice “investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities” (p. 20). (p. 194.)

Socially just leaders use data collected in their school to support dialogue on the way things are and the way they might be (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009). Committed leaders study their own actions, and the actions of their faculty, students, parents, and community members to raise difficult questions about professional practice and to create welcoming and generative environments where all students flourish.

The literature on leadership preparation for social justice has been criticized on two major grounds. The first is that it is too theoretical and distant from life in schools. Leadership for social justice, in this view, is a set of ideas and tools, but is not a coherent and instructable practice that will make a measurable difference in the actions of leadership candidates taught its precepts. The second, as implied by Capper and Young (2014), is that schools are so diverse and the forms of difference so complex, even researchers have difficulty conceptualizing all the changes necessary to lead beneficial change.

As discussed in the introduction, the symposium seeks to make a contribution to the literature on leadership for social justice by focusing attention on the first steps leaders might take to make a difference in challenging settings, and by bringing people together to discuss the gap between our field’s vision for socially just schools and the demoralizing conditions (Darling-Hammond, 2012) where far too many students learn and teachers teach.

Excerpt

In this excerpt, Ohio Ontario talks about her old school. Please refer to this evidence as you discuss the case.

INTERVIEWER: Where was your old school?

OHIO: In the Eastside. Lake Specialty School: 4th through 8th grade. Very abusive environment. Huh, no, it’s a mentally abusive environment. I have lots of stories. It’s one of those schools where, if your heart is not in it, your kids are going to feel it. And, then, she gets awesome teachers, but our principal knows how to make them go away! Like I did. I stayed there for two years and, it was like—You have to believe in your kids. [I] have to believe. But, if you don’t believe, and if you tell your teachers

“Don’t worry about it, because they are only going to steal your cars.”

Then.

Pause;

And, I remember, I remember everything.

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Table 1

Major Dilemmas and Major Assets for Improvement

Major Dilemmas	Major Assets

Table 2

Asking Questions and Collecting Data

What questions do we have?	What data might we collect to learn more about this issue?

Table 3		
Potential Strategies or Interventions to Solve the Learning Dilemma and/or Build on Assets		
Potential Strategies or Interventions to Solve Dilemmas	Impact	Feasibility
Potential Strategies or Interventions to Build on Assets	Impact	Feasibility

Table 4			
Draft Action Plan: Highest Leverage School Dilemma			
Month	Task/Activity to be Completed	Who	How are Implementation and Assessment Data Collected and Used?