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Goodbye to That!: Student Suite: Live performance for the juried symposium "Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Teaching and Learning in Schools Serving Vulnerable Youth."

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Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Teaching and Learning
in Schools Serving Vulnerable Youth

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Abstract

How might socially just school leaders work with and through teachers to promote beneficial outcomes for vulnerable youth? This symposium begins with a series of qualitative cases that evoke a teacher's relationships with vulnerable students. Audience members then use adult learning techniques to respond to the cases as school leaders. After this initial discussion, an expert panel provides additional commentary. Dialogue is used to build theory and support action and reflection.

Using an Ethnodramatic Case to Discuss Teaching and Learning in Schools Serving Vulnerable Youth: Student Stories from the Ethnodrama “Goodbye to All That!”

This symposium uses qualitative data about a teacher’s experience in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to create a series of dramatized cases about teacher/student relationships. Audience members will be asked to respond to these cases based on socially just leadership practice and ask questions directly related to the conference theme: How might socially just leaders support teachers who work with vulnerable youth in schools managed by federal, state, and district accountability policies?

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 from interview data shared by a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certified teacher. Going against the grain of staffing patterns in Chicago and the U. S. (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2009), the teacher, Addison Ashland, pseudonym, moved from the elite multi-cultural magnet school in Chicago where she received certification from NBPTS to a large, CPS elementary school in an Hispanic neighborhood. Almost all the students who attended Addison’s new school were poor, and they and their families were exposed to high levels of street violence and other forms of social stress. Addison worked one of the most challenging classrooms in this school: she was assigned the sixth/seventh grade split. Such classrooms, at the time the interviews were conducted, were spaces where CPS administrators placed students who had been retained and/or posed other challenges to their building’s system of teaching and learning.

The first author of this symposium interviewed Addison in June, about a week after the school year had ended, and she was interviewed three more times over the summer as part of a larger study. By following the interview guide, Addison talked about moments she was proud of and the challenges of her work. Instead of using the interviews to prepare for the new school year, the first author believes Addison used these reflections to say goodbye to her classroom. Addison resigned from the Chicago Board of Education an hour before her fourth and final interview (for original instrument, see Vanover (2014). “Goodbye to All That!” conveys the experience of an accomplished teacher who, despite deep commitment to her students, had is beginning to burn out.

The ethnodrama that evokes Addison’s story, “Goodbye to All That!”, was constructed by the first author using inquiry theatre methods (see Vanover (2016). The author took verbatim transcriptions of four interviews conducted with Addison and deleted all but the most essential material. Thousands of words were cut, but every word the actor playing Addison speaks in the ethnodrama is spoken in the same order it was voiced in the original interviews. “Goodbye to All That!” is too long to be staged during a regular conference session; at UCEA a suite from the ethnodrama will be performed. Addison’s words will be used to evoke the experience of making a difference with vulnerable youth (See excerpt in the appendix).

At the end of this 20 minute performance, audience members will be asked to use adult learning techniques (MacDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & MacDonald, 2007) to engage in dialogue on the script based on socially just leadership practice. In the second half of the symposium, the audience will listen and respond to an expert panel’s analysis of the session’s use of ethnodrama for professional learning

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

Literature Review

Ethnodrama

Ethnodrama uses the art of theatre to evoke findings from fieldwork and other qualitative methods (Leavy, 2015; Vanover, 2017). Instead of telling audiences members what to think and do, ethnodrama moves the imagination and communicates with passion and aesthetic power (Saldaña, 2011). As with other practices of arts based research, ethnodrama does not smooth away the conflict and ambiguity of life in the field; performance communicates from body to body and creates a communal space where audience members may discuss, argue, and interrogate the social meanings the performance evokes (Barone, 2001). As with all cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), rich representations of life in the field may support the development of new questions and theory.

Dialogue is the symposium's central goal.

Leadership for Social Justice

A major question regarding the research on leadership for social justice is what the work looks like when practiced in schools that serve vulnerable youth. Our ideals as researchers and teachers of school leadership are high and demanding (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Capper & Young, 2014; Theoharis, 2009). What is lacking is an understanding how these ideals play out in the real world of schools where leaders act with limited discretion. What is possible, now, given that state and federal policies have their strongest influence in the schools that serve the most vulnerable youth? How can leaders work within the system they are accountable to inspire the professionals they lead to do what is best for the young people they serve?

At UCEA, audience members will use ethnodrama to discuss two core questions.

How might socially just leaders help committed educators manage the stress and complexity of their practice?

How might socially just leaders work with and through school professionals to promote beneficial outcomes for vulnerable youth?

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Appendix

Excerpt from Goodbye to All That!

In this excerpt, Addison Ashland describes a conversation with one of her students. Liana had failed her CPS high stakes exam and would be required to repeat 6th grade unless she passed the retake after attending summer school. All words spoken by Addison and Liana are taken from verbatim transcripts of Addison's interviews. Words have been deleted from the text but none have been added or re-arranged.

LIANA: "But Ms. Ashland, I really worked hard."

ADDISON: 'It's not based on effort and I am so sorry.'

I tried to explain it to her,

'It's not fair. This shouldn't be what they look at and say, "Okay, your scores aren't high enough. You're going to have to repeat."

'If you were going to have me again, I could hook you up. I wouldn't make you do everything all over again, I'd set you up with new math and new history and new science.'

But she won't have me again, especially if I'm not there, for sure.

LIANA: "Well what am I going to do?"

ADDISON: 'You are going to count on yourself and get yourself through it and get your test score up.'

But it's so not fair that this person who worked really hard, who can read, and oh boy, she just really (4 SECOND PAUSE) But, a stranger in the room with them makes them feel more uncomfortable, and she's like,

LIANA: "You know, you couldn't test us. We couldn't see you that day."

ADDISON: 'Liana, what can I do?'