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## Listening to the Silences: An Ethnodrama about a Teacher's First Year in the Chicago Public Schools

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Listening to the Silences:

An Ethnodrama about a Teacher's First Year in the Chicago Public Schools:

Performance and Discussion for the

36<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnography in Educational Research Forum

Written and Directed by Charles Vanover

Facilitators Andrew Babson, Sarah Hobson, and Nancie Sanderson Byrne

Respondent K. Nicola Williams

**Abstract**

"Listening to the Silences" is an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2011) that evokes the experience of a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools as she attempts to make sense of her first year in one of the city's large, high poverty, African American elementary schools. Every word in the script was voiced during a single narrative interview. Words and music from Arvo Part's "Fratres" combine to evoke the struggle to learn to teach by teaching. Opportunities for audience dialogue are structured throughout the session.

### **Listening to the Silences**

"Listening to the Silences" is an ethnodrama (Mienczakowski, 1995; Saldaña, 2011) constructed from a single narrative interview from a larger research study. The show evokes the experience of Indiana Ingleside (pseudonym), a Caucasian teacher in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), as she attempts to make sense of her first year in the classroom in one of the city's large, high poverty, African American elementary schools.

Indiana Ingleside (pseudonym) was a communications major at a large, Midwestern, public university who joined a residency program to become a teacher in CPS. Perhaps as a result of her professional development, during her interview, Indiana spoke about journaling and writing instruction in her classroom with a rich professional language (Lampert, 2010; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013). Indiana, however, lacked language (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Noguera, 2009) to discuss race, inequality, and the political dimensions of her job. In the transcript "Listening to the Silences" was constructed from, for instance, Indiana said the word 'Black' once; she never used the word 'African'.

The script for "Listening to the Silences" was constructed by spending years reading the transcripts from the larger study to get to know the data and find core dramatic moments (Vanover, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Words were cut to compress Indiana's narrative for performance stage directions and music from Arvo Pärt's "Fratres" were added to her story (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL4wHdal0yc>); but no other changes were made. Every word in the ethnodrama is spoken in the original order it was voiced. During the interview, Indiana paused frequently to reflect on her work and to search for words to communicate her experience. Each of these pauses was recorded and timed when the interview was transcribed verbatim (see example in the Appendix).

“Listening to the Silences” creates a theatre of the mind to evoke experience within and beyond language. The production will receive guidance from a member of Philadelphia’s Walnut Street theatre to create a performance event with aesthetic power and richness (Beck, Belliveau, Lea, & Wager, 2011; Chilton & Leavy, 2014).

### **Inquiry Theatre**

“Listening to the Silences” builds on the format of other successful Inquiry Theatre performances in Philadelphia and other cities. At the beginning of the session, audience members will be greeted at the door and seated in discussion groups by facilitators who provide programs containing excerpts from the script (see Appendix). Once the first major group is seated, one of Arvo Pärt’s “Fratres” will be played. The ethnodrama will begin when the actor playing Indiana Ingleside sits down facing the audience, and the actor playing the Interviewer voices the first question from the interview guide (Terkel & Grele, 1985; Weiss, 1995) for the larger research study, “So, can you tell me, can you talk about a student that where you made a difference.”

At the conclusion of the ethnodrama, a facilitator will guide audience members as they work in small groups and ask questions about the text. At the Penn Ethnography Forum, this dialogue will be organized around one of the major themes of Indiana’s narrative: the struggle to learn to teach within educational environments shaped by neoliberal policies that do not address, and frequently exacerbate, the poverty and injustice that shapes the lives of poor families (Horsford, 2011; Orfield, 2014). Forum theatre techniques (Baol, 1979) will be used to deepen audience understanding of how CPS’s ban on social promotion and other system accountability policies (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004) shaped life in Indiana’s classroom (see excerpt in the Appendix).

At the conclusion of the discussion, audience members will be challenged to discuss a major theme from this first interview, and the four other interviews Indiana participated for the larger study. The beginning teacher said she spent her first year in CPS almost completely alone among school children: one of the reasons Indiana did not know how to discuss her experience was she had no one to talk about it.

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## Appendix

*In this excerpt, 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Indiana Ingleside talks about a group of students who were retained because of CPS' ban on social promotion. This text will be performed in the ethnodrama that begins the session.*

*INTERVIEWER:* Talk about your own classes. What would you do, specifically, with like the 13 year olds in your class?

*4 second pause;*

*Music up very softly; Part; "Fratres, (for violin, strings, and percussion);"*

*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 3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade class got dispersed into the two existing 5<sup>th</sup> 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

*4 second pause;*

I would just, just, you know

*4 second pause;*

try anything to keep them

*5 second pause;*

occupied, basically, you know

*5 second pause;*

ummmm

*5 second pause;*

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.

*4 second pause; She laughs;*

*INTERVIEWER very softly:* That's okay.

*8 second pause;*

*INDIANA:* And there is not any

*8 second pause; 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 5<sup>th</sup> grade who didn't know like 1<sup>st</sup> 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

*4 second pause; 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 half way through the year those kids they got placed in other classes because of their age.