PERFORMING THE POSSIBILITIES OF FIRST-YEAR TEACHING

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ABSTRACT. In this article I describe the development of an ethnodrama intended to investigate relationships between 1st-year teachers and students of colour. Excerpts from the script, photographs of performers, and artists' interviews communicate the sensations of life in school. The show evokes the power of the classroom to hurt and to heal. It is intended to help the audience imagine the power of strong classroom relationships and the damage of negative connections. These efforts seek to deepen understandings of the ambiguous nature of beginning teachers' work and provide a guide for future investigations of schools and classrooms. In the conclusion, I share implications of the performance for educational policy and Research-based Theatre (RbT).

INTERPRÉTER LES POSSIBILITÉS DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE DÉBUT DE CARRIÈRE

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, je décris le développement d'un ethnodrame destiné à explorer les relations entre les enseignants débutants et les étudiants racisés. Des extraits du scénario, des photographies des performeurs et des entrevues d'artistes transmettent les sensations de la vie scolaire. Le spectacle vise à aider le public à imaginer le pouvoir des relations positives en classe ainsi que les dommages causés par les liens sociaux négatifs. Ces efforts cherchent à approfondir la compréhension de la nature ambiguë du travail des enseignants débutants et à fournir un guide pour de futures recherches sur les écoles et les salles de classe. En conclusion, je partage les implications de la performance pour les politiques pédagogiques et le Théâtre fondé sur la recherche.

For most teachers, the 1st year of teaching ranks as one of the most challenging times in their careers (Admiraal et al., 2023; Bettini & Park, 2021; Fecho et al., 2020; Hong, 2012; Yang et al., 2024). Many find that their principals and other members of their school community do not

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26443/mje/rsem.v59i1.10256

support them. Instead of feeling empowered to act as respected professionals, many 1st-year teachers feel silenced. Student discipline problems, poor facilities, and low salaries may reduce their commitment (Ingersoll et al., 2021). Many beginning teachers give up and walk away from the classroom. Others continue on, perhaps staying in the low-income schools serving students of colour[1] that tend to hire 1st-year teachers, or perhaps leaving for wealthier communities or changing careers either by choice or as a result of the next wave of reform. There is much to be done to help beginning teachers through these early career challenges (Podolsky et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Whalen et al., 2019), but knowing there is a problem is not the same as changing things for the better, particularly at scale.

As 1st-year teachers learn how to teach by teaching, they experience deeply courageous moments. Such experiences may become part of the foundation for a life devoted to enhancing young people's learning and well-being (Day & Hong, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2001). The 1st year of teaching can also be one of the saddest and most disappointing times in a person's life. This trauma is exemplified in a verbatim poem I constructed from an interview I conducted with a 1st-year teacher in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

I was at a very, very small school.
It's actually a small elementary school in a high school.
We had one hallway and there's one class per grade.
I was the fourth-grade teacher and I was the newest person.
I don't know how they get rid of a fourth-grade teacher, but they did,
when it's the only fourth grade teacher, but they did.
I showed up on Tuesday, they said
"You're out before the kids come."
It was a bad, bad, bad.

I subbed from October 15th, to be exact,
LAUGHS
until January 20th, to be exact.

It should be noted this experience did not define the beginning educator I interviewed. After working as a pull-out teacher from January to June, she left the CPS, first for a position in the Chicago suburbs and, later, for a position in another state where she became an accomplished, National Board Certified teacher (see National Research Council, 2008).

Research on teaching provides powerful evidence of the importance of relationships, both for the student and for the educator. Warm, close, and academically positive relationships have been found to be powerful engines for student growth (Ansari et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond &

Cook-Harvey, 2018). The benefits of positive teacher–student relationships are particularly important for students placed at risk, with some researchers finding positive relationships a necessary condition for beneficial classroom learning for vulnerable students — if students don't believe their teacher cares for them, they won't learn (Brown, 2003). Similarly, the joys teachers receive from connecting with students and seeing young people grow, even in challenging circumstances, act as powerful incentives for committing to and continuing to engage in classroom teaching (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2018; Lortie, 1975; Rytivaara & Frelin, 2017).

One area where the literature on school relationships is thin is investigating relationships between teachers and students in classrooms where the teacher is learning how to teach by teaching. As Taylor (2023) emphasizes, neoliberalism changes both how schools operate and how teachers understand their actions. Further, Craig (2019) and Ahmann (2016) use different narrative methodologies to show how neoliberal reform policies alter the stories teachers live by and shape the choices educators make in their careers. What do beginning teachers see when they look into their students' eyes as they work within the ceaseless churn of 21st-century schools? How might we best disentangle radical hope and social commitment (Love, 2019; Utt & Tochluk, 2020) from saviourism and racism? We know strong and caring classroom organizations create fields of interaction that support young people's emotional and learning journeys (Hofkens & Pianta, 2022). What is challenging to conceptualize are relationships within classrooms where organization is a work in progress and daily instruction does not inspire all students to achieve at the highest levels. There is nothing wrong with learning on the job, but beginning teachers are not distributed across classrooms equally (Grooms et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2021). Because schools serving the poorest and most vulnerable students tend to have the most beginning teachers, 1st-year teachers' experiences have a complex and ambiguous character.

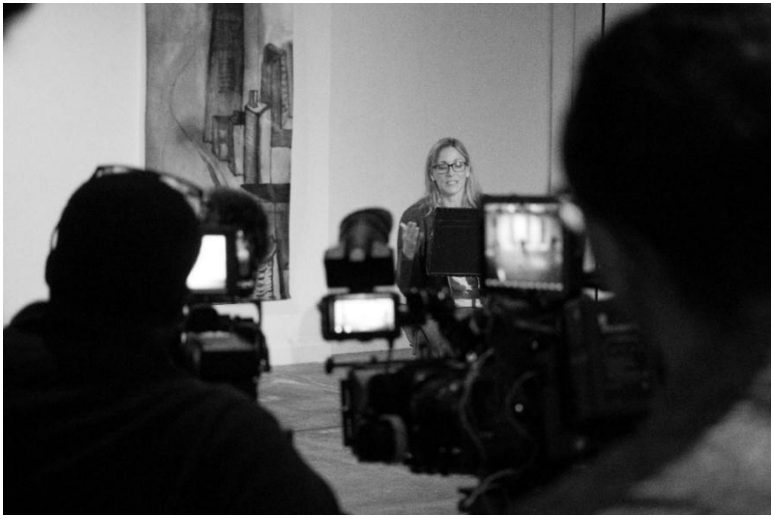
Investigating and communicating ambiguous content is a core function of arts-based research and has been so since the inception of the field. As Barone (2001) emphasizes, there should be a place within the field of education where we might slow down and ponder the meaning of it all.

My work using a form of Research-based Theatre (RbT; Belliveau & Lea, 2016) built on Saldaña's (2003, 2011) scholarship has been devoted to creating such spaces. I develop verbatim scripts (Vanover, 2016b, 2019; Vanover et al., in press) from interviews conducted with classroom teachers. Given that RbT is a method of inquiry, rather than only a means

of dissemination (Lea, 2015; Shigematsu et al., 2021), a core question in my own work, and for other scholar-artists to consider, is how such performance events might speak back to academic communities after the artists leave the stage and the audience goes home.

The practical and ethical complexities of transforming drama into discipline-based knowledge are enormous. In this article, I explore one initial pathway towards this goal. I ask the following research questions:

1. How might we use performance to evoke relationships between 1st-year teachers and students in urban classrooms?
2. Given the importance of artists' voice and vision, what might artists learn from participating in an ethnodramatic project that performs complex teacher-student relationships?
3. How might the findings of Questions 1 and 2 contribute to formal research on beginning teaching and to the development of RbT as a methodology?



PHOTOS 1 & 2. *Lisa Tricomi and Jai Shanae performing Chicago Butoh. Images © 2018 Teithis Miller, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE POWER OF ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

Arts-based research is a powerful form of investigation for communicating with the public (Leavy, 2020; Saldaña, 2005). As Gullion (2022) emphasizes, the general public has limited access to, and little interest in, scholarly works. If one wishes for people to slow down and reflect on the challenges and possibilities of 21st-century life, a set of photographs, a novel, or a live performance are likely more powerful media than a journal article written in jargon that inhibits community members from engaging with these issues. Developing arts-based forms of communication is critical to the field of education, given the complexity of teachers' experience and the major impact classrooms have on students' lives. As the research on methodological pluralism in arts-based research emphasizes (Barone, 2001; Eisner, 1995; Gerber, 2022), we need to learn as much as we can learn, speak as forcefully as we are able, and use whatever methods of investigation make sense to challenge business-as-usual practice in institutions serving students placed at risk.

Getting the message out matters. The general public's and policy makers' understandings of life in classrooms are shaped by their experiences as students and their consumption of popular media on school teaching. These images and opinions drive how schools are managed, governed, and reformed (Bacchi, 2023; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Myths and cultural

conditioning are so powerful that, as Hobson (2016) emphasizes, hearing teachers' personal stories and envisioning their schoolwork is a radical act. Teachers work in systems they do not control, educators implement policies they do not design, and sometimes the work is neither meaningful nor successful (Santoro, 2011, 2018). Instead of exciting tales of achievement against all odds, the research I care most about communicates teachers' hopes, struggles, and regrets (Harris & Sinclair, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lanier, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2019). In the ethnodramas I have produced, audience members confront the stories teachers are ordered to live by and the critical mistakes echoing through their minds.

My work is organized around a constrained form of ethnodrama and RbT that I call *Inquiry Theatre* (Vanover 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019). My work follows a set of guidelines (see Vanover, 2016a): I build scripts from verbatim semi-structured interviews; many words from the transcripts are deleted, though I neither add words nor rearrange what was said; and the lead performer reads from a script. In my early plays, similar to Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer (1995), there was almost no stagecraft. As in the Artaudian dramas of Carter (2014), minimal production values create a theatrical space where the performed narrative breaks the frame. Time goes out of joint, the classroom becomes strange, and similar to Dell'Angelo (2021), events unfold in an unfamiliar manner.

Performances speaking to the heart of teaching raise hard questions. Should White 1st-year teachers work in classrooms serving vulnerable students of colour, given beginners' bias and inexperience might hurt some of the students they serve? Should beginning teachers of colour serve in those same classrooms, given, as many studies show (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cormier et al., 2023; Grooms et al., 2021), the working conditions and outright racism of such professional communities tend to push teachers of colour to leave at higher rates than White educators? Sometimes, we ask the hardest question of all — is it possible to teach "in such a way that people stop killing each other?" (O'Reilley, 1984, as cited in Winn, 2020, p. 128). Such inquiries matter even if they lack clear answers.

Two exemplary scholar-artists

In contrast to metric-based, neoliberal practice in higher education, arts-based research practice seeks to unify practitioners' research, teaching, and artmaking to produce powerful and alive works (Belliveau, 2015; Springgay et al., 2005). Two arts-based researchers whose scripted performances speak directly to issues in teacher education are Mindy Carter and Maisha T. Winn.

Carter's work investigates the efforts of Canadian arts education students, K–12 arts education teachers, professional actors, and university faculty as they engage in projects merging art, research, and teaching. Lessons create and become art. Acting, Playbuilding, and other forms of artistry inspire instruction. Different forms of inquiry guide and change both artmaking and teaching. Thus, an investigation into a critical policy issue in arts education — drama-teacher retention (Carter, 2014) — yields a set of interviews with drama teachers, monologues constructed by both the researcher and the participating teachers, performed and published plays, K–12 professional development opportunities centered around this art-making, and the enhanced professional relationships and understandings produced by these efforts. The activities and relationships produced by arts-based research practice then become the foundation for other projects (Bickel et al., 2023) —in Carter's case, a book and aligned activities to engage with a core social justice issue in Canada, Indigenous education (see Carter, 2022).

Winn's exemplary work as an arts-based researcher confronts the anti-Black racism (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Wun, 2016) driving life in schools and other institutions serving minority communities in the United States. Her art and inquiries evoke suffering and resilience. Winn (2018) explains her perspective by sharing the following story:

> When I first moved to Atlanta more than a decade ago to begin my journey as a scholar and teacher educator, … I was approached by a group of young African American men who were selling their hip hop CD. Initially, I was not interested because of the daunting trail of cars following me hoping to covet my parking space; however, I found it impossible to ignore this group of young people and their stories about racial profiling and struggles in schools, which were themes in their music. I was surprised when one of the young men said they were from Wisconsin, and after some teasing about whether or not Wisconsin had hip hop, the young man insisted on giving me a copy of their CD. The title of the CD was "WisCONsequences." …
>
> Little did I know that I would eventually move to Wisconsin to continue my work preparing English teachers. Nor did I know that Wisconsin would become the most avid incarcerator of Black men and ranked the worst state in the country to raise Black children. (pp. 253–254)

Winn's (2011) work in Atlanta was organized around archiving and investigating scripted performances evoking these realities. The plays were staged by GirlTime, a theatre program for incarcerated young women. Winn's writing describes how the arts may contribute to a performance of possibilities (Madison, 2011), and she recounts how GirlTime's

Playbuilding process allowed youth and facilitators to reflect on their choices and envision new identities. Winn's writing also emphasizes the limits of such work. The youth who participated in the GirlTime program were physically enclosed by the detention center, but when the girls left the center and went home, they continued to be enclosed by the unjust system that shapes life in the United States.

When Winn (2018, 2020) left Atlanta, the focus of her work turned towards explicit efforts to change life in schools. Now, she organizes her pre-service English education classes around a restorative framework that seeks to use literature to create justice and peace. Winn and her colleagues live a politics of hope. They strive to create spaces where youth might dream about the many ways they might contribute to rich futures (Winn, 2021).

Arts-based research is more than a method; as Bickel et al. (2023) describe, arts-based research is a way of life that calls practitioners to live in wholeness as artists, researchers, and teachers. It is also a foundation for interventions into the systems of oppression producing a deeply unjust and unequal world society (Madison & Hamera, 2006).

POSITION

I am a White man who worked as a freelance writer and copywriter in the city of Chicago before working in the CPS for 8 years. I left Chicago when I received a fellowship to work on a vast, longitudinal, researcher-led study of school improvement. I developed my first play with Johnny Saldaña based on a narrative about my early years teaching in the CPS: "Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools" describes both the joys of the classroom and the limits of teachers' efforts (Vanover & Saldaña, 2005). I continued to develop my arts-based research practice performance by performance while working on the many diverse projects generated by "the qualitative component" of large research studies.

My years teaching and studying urban education have taught me what a good day teaching feels like; my work attempts to communicate this exhilaration. Experience and study have also taught what a bad day teaching is like and why conflicts between teachers, students, and administrators matter for all concerned.

DATA

Chicago Butoh (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018), the ethnodramatic performance discussed in this article, is a collaboration between myself and Bob Devin Jones, the artistic director of The Studio@620, an arts space located in St. Petersburg, Florida. The project evolved over a series of 10 performances. The script was developed using the same data and techniques I engaged with in my Inquiry Theatre productions (see Vanover 2016a). Briefly, in the summer of 2004, after the school year ended, I interviewed seven veteran, National Board Certified teachers and five 1st-year CPS teachers 4 times each for 90 minutes about how they felt they made a difference in their classrooms. In the verbatim script I developed for *Chicago Butoh*, I chose one of the five beginning teachers, and condensed text from her first interview — the beginning teacher's other transcripts lacked the passion of her initial storytelling. I cut three quarters of this transcript to focus the script around two teacher–student relationships the beginning teacher believed were successful and two relationships the teacher believed were problematic. I showed the script to Devin Jones and we deepened our partnership by writing and winning a creative scholarship grant through my university.

As Devin Jones and I worked to refine the script and produce *Chicago Butoh*'s 10 performances, we made no attempt to convey the experience of the original teacher living a real life. The possible worlds that arise in the audience's minds as the show is performed have almost no connection to everyday life in Chicago. The performed teacher and students are, to use a term of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), "aesthetic figures" (p. 177). The performances are not real; they are monuments to teachers' and students' struggles. When the script comes alive on stage, the performances produce sensations which disappear into memory. Characters embody the chaos and connection of the classroom, but the performances are not the classroom itself.

The original project was envisioned as a story-dance where a local high school dance troupe would work with Devin Jones and myself to produce a choreographed series of movements aligned to the script. For logistical reasons, the dance transformed into a two-person show as we staged the performances over time — it was too complex to move the dance out of the high school. This revised two-person show was staged as part of a symposium at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in New York City in 2018.

PHOTO 3. *Director Devin Jones working with Jai Shanae during a rehearsal for Chicago Butoh. Image © 2018 Charles Vanover, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

What was lost in the transition from a dance to a two-person show was the immersive experience produced by the dancers' choreography. A different dancer played each character discussed in the script. During the story-dance, the audience experienced the jagged nature of life in the beginning teacher's classroom and the pulse of school life. As Devin Jones and I discovered, what was gained in the transition to a two-person ethnodrama was the opportunity for Shanae (one of the performers) to bring deep meaning and resonance to the script.

We revised the play based on audience feedback, and in the fall of 2018, we staged and filmed the play at two pay-what-you-wish performances at The Studio@620, using money from the creative scholarship grant. Lisa Tricomi played Keeler Kirkpatrick, the teacher, and Jai Shanae played Angel and the other students in Keeler's stories. The creative scholarship grant paid for rehearsals, publicity, and a film crew. I paid Teithis Miller to shoot still photos of the performances (see Vanover, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: PERFORMING BEGINNING TEACHING

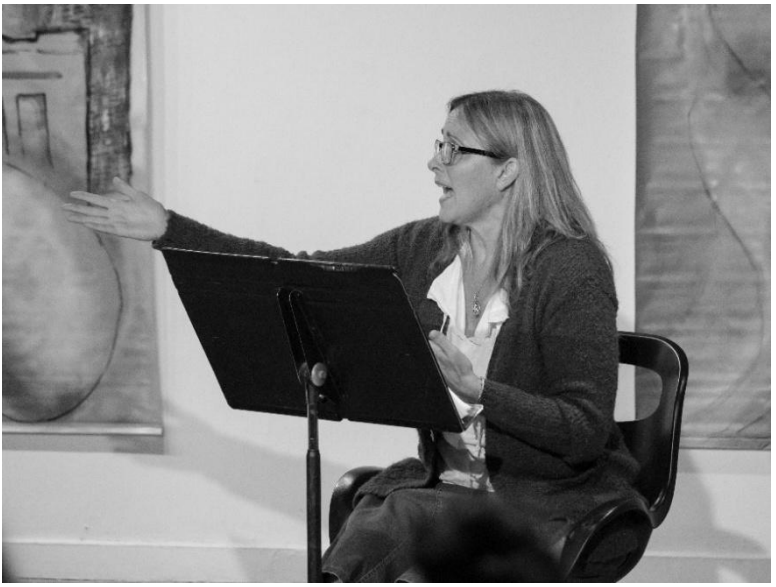


PHOTO 4. *Lisa Tricomi performing Chicago Butoh at The Studio@620. Image © 2018 Teithis Miller, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

Chicago Butoh's opening scene seeks to evoke a beneficial teacher–student relationship. The beginning teacher I interviewed shared this story in response to the first question in the interview guide — I had asked her to tell a story about a student for whom she had made a difference. As portrayed in the photos from The Studio@620 performance shown in this article, theatre artist Lisa Tricomi used this dramatized material to help the audience imagine life in schools. Her character, Keeler Kirkpatrick, tells the audience a story about her student, Angel:

> KEELER KIRKPATRICK: Angel. She is probably one of my quietest students. Loves to read. When I first got to the school—I came to the school at the 7th or 8th week of the school year—she constantly had a book open. Kids teased her constantly about how she read all the time. I didn't want her to be ostracized by the rest of the kids; didn't want her being teased that much or to make her withdraw from the class. Her favorite was Harry Potter and so I made sure to go to the bookstore and buy all the Harry Potter books I could to have them in the classroom library. I would discuss different parts of the books with her and then I would find other books that I thought she might enjoy.
>
> (*To ANGEL*) Angel, why don't you read this?
>
> (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, p. 3)

Strong relationships create an electric charge. Building trust and being trusted change students' and teachers' lives. *Chicago Butoh* opens in the middle of a challenging situation. A quiet student is being teased and a beginning teacher reaches out and sparks a learning journey. As the performance continues, Keeler tells the audience:

> Eventually [Angel] got sick and tired of waiting for the next Harry Potter book to come out and started writing Harry Potter Number Six. And it ended up being 62 pages long. And periodically she would give me the 10 pages or so that she had written so far and I would read over it and kind of give her feedback on it. I didn't want her getting um feeling like it was like something she had to do for school and tedious. I wanted to keep her creative instincts going. I would tell her things that I loved about it and what looked forward to next time. (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, pp. 3–4)

The day before our AERA session in New York, Devin Jones and I organized a rehearsal in the conference room where we would perform the show. I took the following photo to communicate the love and hope the beginning teacher in our script had for her student.

PHOTO 5. *Jai Shanae as Angel rehearsing at the Marriott Marquise, New York. Image © 2018 Charles Vanover, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

All of the beginning teachers I interviewed learned to teach by teaching. They said they experienced moments of connection, and they said they also made huge, screaming mistakes. Christina is the second student-story

brought to life by the verbatim script. The narrative seethes with Keeler's rage and frustration.

> KEELER KIRKPATRICK: And I had another student, Christina, she was the one whose father died right when I got to the school and she was gone for two weeks for her bereavement leave. And when she came back, she was very defiant. Apparently, she had been a horrible, horrible behavior problem when she was young and when her father was in jail. When her father got out of jail, he, even though his profession was not legitimate. It wasn't the best role model for her, he was apparently very involved with the school. And when he got out of jail and really spent a lot of time with her and was in her life a lot, she calmed down and became a much better student.
>
> Very, very bright girl. She was okay for a little bit when she came back after he died. But she was grieving very heavily, you could tell. Well around her, I also walked around on eggshells because she had she was a very loud individual. She wasn't violent like the other girl. But she was very loud. She just wouldn't get things like she—my school is 100% Black. Every single child in the school is Black. And she would just start yelling at me.
>
> (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, p. 8)

As the play's director, Devin Jones continued to shape the performance. When we transformed the script from a dance into an ethnodrama, he decided to add a second actor to perform the students in Keeler's stories. Devin Jones hired Jai Schanae and asked her to craft a different character for the four students mentioned in the script. I was never able to interview the Black students in the original teacher's classroom, but because of the partnership between Devin Jones, Schanae, and myeslf, the audience saw and heard their possibilities.

> *CHRISTINA steps out*;
>
> CHRISTINA: (*Her voice is more crying, sobbing, than angry*) You don't like me because I am Black!
>
> KEELER: Huh?
>
> CHRISTINA: You won't let me turn this in because I am Black!
>
> KEELER: But then why did I let her turn this in?
>
> CHRISTINA: You gave me a B because I am Black!
>
> KEELER: Well then why did I give him an 'F'?
>
> (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, p. 8)

Teithis Miller took the following shot of Shanae performing this sequence (see Photo 6). The original teacher, the actor who played her, and the

playwright were White. The director who crafted this scene, the artist who performed it, and the photographer who took the shot were Black. All of these professionals combined to create an image that speaks forcefully to life in school.

PHOTO 6. *Jai Shanae performing as Christina in Chicago Butoh at The Studio@620. Image © 2018 Teithis Miller, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

The photos in this article evoke a possible classroom. They help readers imagine what happens when the relations between teachers and students grow toxic and the hurt and frustration builds over days, weeks, and months. The images convey the anti-Black racism of U.S. school systems (Grooms et al., 2021) and why culturally responsive teaching matters (Byrd, 2016).

> KEELER KIRKPATRICK: I had so many problems with [Christina] and it got worse as the year went along. The trial—the man who murdered her father—came closer and her mother told her she was not allowed to go. She was very upset by this decision with her family and she took it out on me. (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, p. 8)

Our field of education celebrates resilience on the part of teachers and students. However, grit and determination, as many researchers emphasize (Goodman & Fine, 2018; Venet, 2023), are not the same thing as a connected classroom, a peaceful neighborhood, and a just society.

> KEELER: And the Dean of Students would talk to her, but she wound up suspended a lot. We actually had to send her home during the testing.

> And those are the test scores that determine whether they graduate from Middle school. So we couldn't have her then. (*coughs*)
>
> And it was just very unreasonable, irrational, and I had a hard time dealing with it. Like I couldn't, I couldn't reason with her. I could not get her to understand that she was harming the other students. (Vanover & Devin Jones, 2018, p. 9)

Life at school has very high stakes and sometimes everyone loses, especially the students.

Chicago Butoh ends with a moment of healing. The teacher tells a story about a student she benefited. Keeler was able to guide the student on a learning journey that concluded with a powerful new beginning — the student was accepted by one of the CPS's elite magnet programs and the girl would start her freshman year in that high school's honours program. This story meant a great deal to Director Devin Jones. On more than one occasion, he told me he owed his career to his White, female, high school drama teacher. Without her intervention, Devin Jones said he never would have figured out how to create a career in theatre (see Devin Jones & Vanover, in press).

One aspect of classroom life difficult for outsiders to understand is simultaneity. The classroom is a place of many stories all happening at once. Some kids connect with the teacher. Some kids focus on their friends. Some kids love every moment and some desperately want to get out of that space. Devin Jones built this simultaneity into the production. As the photos in this article show, the set was organized around five chairs: a chair where the actor playing the teacher sat and then four chairs where Jai Schanae played each of the four students. Schanae performed the students who loved their teacher and the students who hated her.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: ARTIST'S UNDERSTANDINGS

Artist interviews and stories are a common tool to appraise impact in performance-based research (see, for example, Belliveau & Lea, 2020; Snyder-Young & Omasta, 2022). I interviewed the two actors and the director — Tricomi, Shanae, and Devin Jones, respectively — a few days after we staged the show. I also interviewed the film editor, Trace Taylor, about a year later, after they and I had completed major edits for the film. The artists described *Chicago Butoh* as a successful work of art. In particular, they said they liked the show's open-endedness. The work evoked critical issues in education, but also sought to allow the audience to make sense of the meanings of the show. The actors had some complaints about the staging, and the film editor had significant

challenges with the camera placement, but all said we produced a powerful work.

PHOTO 7. *Lisa Tricomi after performing as Keeler in Chicago Butoh at The Studio@620. Image © 2018 Teithis Miller, reproduced here with permission of the photographer.*

One area of difference was the artists' understanding of Keeler's character and how she related to students. The director and the two actors resonated with how young the teacher was and how much responsibility she was asked to take. Shanae explains:

> With the teacher, I can't imagine the battles she faced. Just from her being so young, she's 22, and like I said, at 22, you're still finding yourself.
>
> She's just entering adulthood. Barely. Those four students stood out to her, but she had a classroom with maybe 20 kids and there's no way she would [be] able to reach all of those people. And if she did, there's no way she's not going to go home crazy. That's a lot of energy you have to exert. Just one child, it takes so much. That's just asking something so unrealistic of one person.

One of the reasons Devin Jones had hired Shanae was she had worked in a Black and Hispanic middle school as the building's secretary. She knew the kids who came to school early and the kids who came to school late. Shanae said,

> I won't say I wasn't able to reach them, but maybe not to the capacity I would have liked. There was not one kid I didn't try to impart goodness. But I also have to realize I'm a fixer. I can't fix everyone. I can't be everyone's hero. I'm still learning that.

I asked Shanae directly about Christina, the girl whose father had died. Shanae told me it was impossible for a teacher to make up for the death of a parent. A 22-year-old teacher is not going to fix that.

The actors were surprised by the amount of anger some audience members aimed at the character of the teacher. The artists had attempted to create a sympathetic portrait of a young woman working in a challenging situation. Tricomi told me how

> there were a couple people that said, "Well, I felt the teacher felt she was doing the kids a favor." And, and then someone else said that basically, she had failed, because she had given up on the kids.
>
> I don't feel like I fell short, but I feel curious about it. "Was my tone of voice the thing that made you think she thought she was doing them a favor? Was my posture? Would you have had more empathy for her if the actor was actually 21 or 22 years old? Would you have been like, 'Whoa, she's young?'"

In contrast, the film editor saw the character of the teacher as deeply flawed. The editor placed her full sympathy on the students, particularly kids who were troubled.

> [The editor imitating Keeler's voice] "What am I going to do? How am I going to … It's just all about me!"
>
> [The editor in her own voice] "Oh my god, you're so narcissistic!" The teacher never once said, "Perhaps I can approach this from a different angle. Perhaps I'm being too self-centered. Perhaps I don't get it at all!" … Her method. Her selfish focus. She liked the easy student. She liked the student that was already a self-learner.

For the editor, the teacher's Whiteness was overpowering. The editor suggested Keeler might not have understood the lives and circumstances of the minority youth in her classroom. Worse, the editor noted that the teacher did not problem solve:

> The teacher never said, "Why did you?" Never said, "Why? What's going on? How can I figure this out? What?" She never did that. She just wrote them off. Just like that, "Oh, you're a problem kid. That's it, you're done. You're never gonna be anything, you're gonna fail. By the time you're …"
>
> I just wanted to smack her, and I'm not a violent person.

Performance does not prove an argument; instead, it creates new realities. The show sought to evoke the pride of doing one's best, along with the

suffering of not achieving one's intentions in an unjust world. *Chicago Butoh* performed what it might be like to be benefited by a teacher and what it might be like to be wounded by one.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: IMPLICATIONS FOR RBT AND POLICY

RbT in education must acknowledge the challenging historic and present realities of schools while also imagining possible (freer) futures. Such work requires the difficult art of holding multiple truths: that racism is insidious and continues to disadvantage racial and ethnic minorities, but change is possible and necessary. Keeler Kirkpatrick healed and harmed her students. Her words and her actions inspired some of her students to engage in powerful learning journeys and caused others to disengage. These personal truths are not mutually exclusive. Racism and healing are intertwined in institutions serving youth of colour. The script to *Chicago Butoh* and the organization of this article are intended to help people experience this ambiguity.

One finding where all artists on the project agreed is that it is problematic to place young adults out of college in schools serving poor and minoritized youth. The ability to alter such structures is beyond one person. Change requires the development of systems of mentorship and professional development to give teachers the supports they need to serve all students as well as the working conditions and financial incentives for educators to commit to staying in place (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Podolsky et al., 2019).

Two questions for discussion are whether such works of RbT are ethical and whether they matter. Is it right to stage such challenging and vulnerable content? What are the benefits of such open-ended performances, given, as the artists' comments and my own experience shows, not all audience members will respond to the show in the way one might hope? There are many ways to reply to such questions, perhaps the first being to state that living, writing, and performing vulnerably is a political statement and a radical hope. Troubling content in education cannot be limited to, for instance, the quantitative studies I have threaded through this article. RbT in education cannot be any less dangerous than students' classrooms.

Scripted RbT provides the chance the performance will come alive and hurl the audience into rich sensations and unexpected possibilities. The hardest thing about producing these scripts is that the shows always want more: more rehearsals, better lighting, higher production values. More

time and money might have made the show's sensations more complex and perhaps, somehow, closer to the thing itself.

I believe in the power of theatre and I believe such artistic forces matter. Bigger can indeed be better. More, sometimes, is more. A performance's smallest and quietest moments might take weeks of rehearsal to perfect. Saldaña (2011) carefully differentiates ethnotheatre from the researcher-driven work engaged in by folks such as myself — ethnodrama — to emphasize the importance of actively theorizing the dramatic forces it is possible to bring to bear in contemporary productions. We have good research on how the CPS worked at the time I conducted the interviews (Allensworth et al., 2009; Ewing, 2018; Payne, 2005), but *Chicago Butoh* does not come close to evoking the sensory experiences implied by that literature.

Similar to Norris (2020), I have made a career out of producing mostly small shows for mostly small stages. I understand the value of getting the word out and keeping at it. Doing such work also reaffirms the enormous differences in forces between folks like me — who strive to create work embedded within a discipline based, ethnodramatic perspective — and commercial media. If my journey has taught me anything, it is to value the work of scholar-artists such as Carter and Winn, whose work opens us to the chaos in our schools, but who continue to value the arts.

If we can imagine the power of classroom teaching to hurt and to heal, perhaps we might begin to conceptualize how we might teach in a way that is not tainted by racism and stops people from killing each other and the planet.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

A limitation of *Chicago Butoh* is the performance asks the audience to look inward toward the classroom rather than up at the managers whose invisible hand drives the action (for an example of such system theatre, see Kreindler, 2025). Since 2004 when I originally collected the data I used to build the play, different units of government in the United States have spent billions of dollars on testing, accountability, and test preparation. Such systems of activity shape schools across the world. A question that comes to mind is why we are spending this money in this way, given most everyone directly involved — from students to teachers to parents — would rather the money be spent for art, music, theatre, sports, games, and dancing. We live the lives dreams are made of and many of these dreams are pretty miserable. Whatever it is the performances of *Chicago Butoh* can do, what the shows do not do, directly, is making the case that we should

join with the young people in our classrooms and dance our way into a better future. It is my hope our work might inspire such an agenda on the part of scholar-artists across the world.

Every work of RbT has limitations, but ways of engaging in the methodology are practically endless. If human beings can experience it, we can perform it. *Chicago Butoh* provides one example of how to do this work, particularly if the scholar-artist is located within an academic discipline and strives to respond to and inspire the work of non-arts-based researchers. Interpretation and analysis are the heart of qualitative research (Vanover et al., 2022) and *Chicago Butoh* shows benefits of performing these practices over years and voices. In the United States, reducing teacher shortages in schools serving low-income and minoritized youth has been a goal of federal and state policy for 30 years. Our performances contribute to audience members' understanding of this issue and to the field's.

In Lisa Tricomi's words, "Whoa, she's young."

As Jai Shanae told me, "That's expecting so much of one person."

We must do better.

NOTES

1. This article follows *McGill Journal of Education* style and uses Canadian English spelling and grammar — hence "colour."

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