


12-9-2013

Five Vignettes: Stories of Teacher Advocacy and Parental Involvement

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Recommended APA Citation

Goss, A. C. (2013). Five Vignettes: Stories of Teacher Advocacy and Parental Involvement. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(49), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1433>

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Abstract

Qualitative research can, and sometimes should, utilize fictional representations, particularly when attempting to connect to and collaborate with communities outside of the academy. This work utilizes an arts - informed methodology of representation to communicate the importance and potential consequences of teacher advocacy and parental involvement. Specifically, I use fiction as a mode of representing the interview data that my research participant and I generated. After analyzing the data using grounded theory methods, I chose to represent the data with five vignettes. Vignette 1 introduces the reader to Ms. Abeni, a public school teacher who is passionate about educating every child. Vignettes 2 - 4 illustrate challenges that Ms. Abeni faces in working with parents, students, and school personnel. The final vignette shows one of the consequences that Ms. Abeni faces for being such a radical change agent in her school. The vignettes are fictional representations of the real life of a teacher who I interviewed. I detail my process for creating the vignettes and offer justification for why the use of fiction is appropriate for this research study.

Keywords

Creative Fiction, Arts - Based Research, Teacher Advocacy, Parental Involvement

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Five Vignettes: Stories of Teacher Advocacy and Parental Involvement

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Qualitative research can, and sometimes should, utilize fictional representations, particularly when attempting to connect to and collaborate with communities outside of the academy. This work utilizes an arts-informed methodology of representation to communicate the importance and potential consequences of teacher advocacy and parental involvement. Specifically, I use fiction as a mode of representing the interview data that my research participant and I generated. After analyzing the data using grounded theory methods, I chose to represent the data with five vignettes. Vignette 1 introduces the reader to Ms. Abeni, a public school teacher who is passionate about educating every child. Vignettes 2-4 illustrate challenges that Ms. Abeni faces in working with parents, students, and school personnel. The final vignette shows one of the consequences that Ms. Abeni faces for being such a radical change agent in her school. The vignettes are fictional representations of the real life of a teacher who I interviewed. I detail my process for creating the vignettes and offer justification for why the use of fiction is appropriate for this research study. Keywords: Creative Fiction, Arts-Based Research, Teacher Advocacy, Parental Involvement

Results: The Vignettes

In this research paper I utilize an arts-informed methodology of representation to communicate the importance and potential consequences of teacher advocacy and parental involvement. I begin with the results of this research project--the stories, the vignettes that came out of all of this scholarly work. In the tradition of Peter Clough (2002), I submit that the impact of the stories will get lost if they come at the end of a lengthy analysis. So I invite the reader to engage in the stories first.

Vignette 1

The parents I think need to be empowered, re-empowered, especially in an environment that is more and more anti-parent

Thalia had fallen asleep with the television on again. The front door was wide open when Ms. Jameson got up to leave for work at 4 a.m. Thalia was comfortable with this bad habit because her older brother Terrance usually came home around 11 p.m. and locked the door. But Terrance did not come home last night. In fact, he walked through the door just as Ms. Jameson was preparing to leave out.

“Where were you?”

“Out.”

“Why didn’t you call?”

“I knew you wouldn’t pick up. You’re always asleep by 8 anyway.”

“I have two jobs, Terrance. I’m tired...”

“That’s why I didn’t call.”

Ms. Jameson notices something shimmering on her son’s wrist. “Where did you get that watch?”

“Store.”

“I thought you were going to save--“

Waving his hand as though brushing away a pesky mosquito, Terrance walks toward the rear of the house. “Stop sweatin’ me. It’s my money.”

Ms. Jameson feels helpless to challenge this assertion. It *is* his money. She lets Terrance walk past her dismissively, turns back to look at Thalia on the couch and walks out the door. Secretly she longed to hug and kiss her kids goodbye but the years of working 15 hour days has forged a gulf so deep between her and them, she no longer thinks that they will welcome her affection.

we are a colonized people and there are all the problems of a colonized people

School begins in two days. Ms. Jameson is grateful that summer vacation is almost over. School offers a level of supervision that she cannot provide during the summer months. At least she can rest in knowing that by 7:15 a.m. her children are safely inside of Franklin High School. She returns home from work late that evening. Terrance is still out and Thalia is on the couch watching television.

“Turn off the television in an hour and then go to bed. We have to go register you tomorrow so that you’re ready on the first day of school.”

“Uh, alright.”

Ms. Jameson wants to believe that Thalia will obey but she’s too tired to stay up late enough to enforce this request. Soon, Ms. Jameson is asleep in her bed, Thalia is asleep on the couch, and Terrance is taking his time coming home.

The next morning Ms. Jameson, Thalia, and Terrance all arrive at Franklin High at 7:30 a.m. Ms. Jameson signed up for the earliest possible time so that she could go to work immediately afterward. Some of the teachers are in the front hallway helping out with registration, but most are in their classrooms hanging up bulletin boards and organizing desks in preparation for the first day of school. Ms. Jameson notices me in my classroom, typing away on my computer. Curiously, she peeks in. I look up and greet her.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“No...I don’t remember seeing you before so I wanted to say hi.” There were not many African American teachers at Franklin High. Ms. Jameson figured I must be new.

“I’m new to the school. I’m Ms. Abeni.¹”

“Nice to meet you,” Ms. Jameson replies, extending her arm to shake my hand. I sense that she has come with a heavy weight in her heart. Her eyes almost plead for my attention. I look back into her eyes to let her know that I’m aware.

“Tell me Ms. Abeni, do you have any children?”

“Yes, yes I have two.”

“Ms. Abeni, I hate to interrupt but I just have to ask you, one mother to another, how do you deal with them at this age?”

Pushing back my chair, I stand to walk closer to Ms. Jameson. “What do you mean?”

“My son Terrance works at the car wash and is supposed to be helping me with the bills. But every time I turn around, he’s buying something new for himself. I feel kinda helpless. It’s his money, y’know, and I can’t tell him what to do with his money.”

“*He’s your child, and indeed you can.* You have every right to tell him what to do with his money. Is he spending the money on something destructive?”

“I don’t think so. Just being wasteful...”

I nod, waiting for Ms. Jameson to say something else. I glance at my computer, my bare bulletin boards, and think that I have about an hour before the all-school faculty meeting. But I don’t want to rush Ms. Jameson when so much is clearly on her mind.

“...and they are always in front of the television.”

“They?”

“My kids--I have two. Thalia always falls asleep with that television on. I tell her to turn it off, but she never does.”

“Mm-hm,” I nod. “The television is contributing to the anti-parent environment in your home. It tells children that they can talk to their parents *any way they want to.* So many of the popular programs now give youngsters

¹ Abeni means “we asked for her, and behold, we got her” in the West African language Yoruba. See www.behindthename.com.

rights that no youngsters should have over their parents. Can you take out the cord?"

"Huh?"

"Take out the cord to the television when you go to sleep. That way you can *control the television usage.*"

"You ain't taking the cord out of the television!"

Ms. Jameson and I both look up to see a young girl in the hallway. Thalia has been eavesdropping. Ms. Jameson looks shaken by her daughter's interruption.

"If you take it out I'm just gonna go in your room and find it and put it back in. You can't control me watching television."

"Thalia--"

"Naw, man you need to go somewhere wit' all that. I'mma do what I want."

I cannot believe my ears. Suddenly flushed with adrenaline I take two steps closer to the hallway and look into Thalia's eyes.

"Wait a minute here, you can't talk to your mother like that!"

Thalia returns my gaze indignantly then walks away from the door. I look back at Ms. Jameson; she looks sad and exhausted. I want to tell her to take control of her children. I want to tell her to stop being so insecure. I feel that she needs *to be empowered, re-empowered, especially in an environment that is more and more anti-parent.* Instead I just return her gaze. She smiles at me weakly.

"I've taken enough of your time, Ms. Abeni. Welcome to the school. Have a great first day tomorrow."

Vignette 2

I love autumn in California. Actually, I love California all year long. But today is especially beautiful. The skies are clear and the air is dry and warm even though it is still very early in the day. I turn into the driveway to Franklin High where I teach English literature. I'm jolted from daydreams about going to the beach. Several students are walking along a path that cuts across the schoolyard. A trio of Black girls with pink foam curlers in their hair walks along the path. None of them have any books in their hands. I wonder how students could come to school unprepared for the tasks ahead of them. I wonder how they could leave the house without their hair "done." What does it say about their beliefs about themselves? What does it say about their beliefs about school? I roll down my window and pull over alongside the girls. *"How can you come to school with no books or anything?"* I call out. Most ignore me, but I notice that one of the girls is Thalia, who I met in the hall only a few weeks ago. She frowns up a little and then whips her head away from me, her long ponytail waving away any notion that I have made an impact on her. I'm not bothered; I know that I need to keep speaking out. One day *they [will] see and define and value things*

differently from what they've done most of their lives and what the media do for us all our lives.

I continue my drive around the schoolyard, park, and sign in for the day in the front office. My desire to be near an ocean is too great; I know that it will be a long day.

First period, second period, third period, lunch. The bell rings. I hear students scrambling across the courtyard, up the stairs, down the hallway. They file into classrooms. Well, most of them do. A few are still in the hall. Yelling. Banging. Cursing. Dang. There's a fight in the hallway.

"You need to smack her a--. She disrespectin' you."

A punch in the face sends a brown-skinned girl to the ground. A crowd has formed. I call for an administrator then rush toward the chaos. Male students are circling the two fighting girls, *egging them on*. Thalia is on the ground. Another girl who had a pink curler in her hair this morning is standing over her. I've seen her in the principal's office more than once. Horrified, I attempt to push through the crowd, but the principal and school resource officer arrive and take over.

I have only been in this school for a few weeks now, but I see clearly that this school system is *broken for black kids*. I'm overwhelmed. Things have to change. *They [must] see and define and value things differently from what they've done most of their lives and what the media do for us all our lives.*

I go back to my classroom. Fourth period is halfway over. My students are seated, reading as they know they should whenever I am not in the classroom. I know that they have not been completely silent, but they are at their desks. I decide that it is time to make a change in this school. It will start with my classroom.

I decide on a poem. Nikki Giovanni. *Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)*. I read:

"I was born in the congo...I designed a pyramid...I sat on the throne...I sowed diamonds in my back yard...I am so hip even my errors are correct..."²

I give an assignment. I tell them to research the background of a writer and an artist, and what was going on in the era in which they lived. I tell them that grammar is important. They must write in Standard English. I tell them that I expect excellence. They will work until they achieve it.

"The only people who are important are the people we see on television."
This is what many believe.

"You will see that this is not so," is my response. I say that *they [will] see and define and value things differently from what they've done most of their lives and what the media do for us all our lives.*

"You will set goals for yourself and at the end of the year we will see if you have lived up to these goals. We will recognize and reward you publicly for living up to your goals. There is greatness in you. Giovanni knew."

² Giovanni, N. (n.d.). *Ego tripping (there may be a reason why)*. Retrieved March 22, 2013 from http://nikki-giovanni.com/page_51.shtml.

I look into each of their eyes and I think to myself, “she was writing about you.”

Vignette 3

When it would come to being an intricate part of the governing of the school, that's where they draw the line....African parents are expected just to drop their youngsters off, have them come to school, and have no say so at all in the governing of the school.

“I don't understand. I'm willing to offer this service for free, but you still refuse?”

“Ma'am, we just don't think it's necessary; we don't have a large population of children who would be interested.”

“Have you asked anyone if they would be interested? My daughter says that she and several of her friends would be. Isn't that enough to start a club after school?”

“Um, well, yes, but we are encouraging students to pursue other languages, more impor-, um, more appropriate languages that can help them in college and their careers later on. Classical languages like French and Spanish are more likely to pay off in the long run. Besides, many countries in Africa speak French, right? Why don't you encourage your daughter to join the French club? I'm sorry; I have a meeting to get to. You will be at the parent-teacher conference tomorrow night? I think that Leslie is having difficulty in her math and English classes. Perhaps you can focus your attention there. Okay, I must be going. Have a great afternoon Ms. Ime.³”

There is a knocking at my door. The district gives me one hour each day as a planning period, but I never seem to get a full hour to plan anything. I see Ms. Ime through the glass on my classroom door. I feel a lump in my throat because I already know why she is here. Ms. Ime moved to the states about two years ago with her daughter Leslie. Leslie had difficulty with the transition. The change in culture was uncomfortable at best, and mastering the advanced mathematics and English courses that her mother insisted on was overwhelming. Ms. Ime and I had discussed the need to incorporate African culture and language into the curriculum, not just for students like Leslie, but so that all children of African descent could know who they are, *what their background has been, what is in their DNA*. I suggested that she meet with the assistant principal. The look of distress on her face, even through the glass, conveyed that the meeting was not fruitful.

“Come in,” I said while motioning with my hand for Ms. Ime to come through the door.

“Hi Ms. Abeni. Sorry to interrupt you but I wanted to tell you of my meeting with Mr. Samuel. He said that an after-school club on African languages was not important enough.”

³ Ime means “patience” in the Western African language Ibibio. See www.behindthename.com.

I sank in my chair guiltily. I knew that she would not get a positive response had we asked for the language to become part of the curriculum, but I thought that a free after-school club would be simple.

“Did he give a reason?”

“Only that French and Spanish were better for the children. Classical was the word he used.”

“Hmph. He means European. How does he explain the addition of Chinese last year?”

“He didn’t. And I didn’t ask.”

“Will you be at the PTA meeting and conference night tomorrow?”

“Um, yes, I can be there.”

PTA meetings are fluff if you ask me. I’m on the school’s governing council. This is where the parents should be. But they are not welcome there. Of course, the council does not go out of its way to welcome me either. But the parents have a right to be there. At the PTA meeting, Ms. Ime and I invite every parent to come to the next governing council meeting.

“Yes, tomorrow at 3:30 p.m. I know it is not the best time, but that’s intentional. You see, *when it [comes] to being an intricate part of the governing of the school, that’s where they draw the line....African parents are expected just to drop their youngsters off, have them come to school, and have no say so at all in the governing of the school.* That’s precisely why you need to be there.”

“I hear you Ms. Abeni. I’ll be there.”

“Alright, last order of business; I see Ms. Abeni is on the agenda. What is it that you wish to address, Ms. Abeni?”

“I would like to see more parent representation on the governing council. As you can see, I have considerable support for this.” I nod my head toward a back row of folding chairs that are always set up but rarely filled in these meetings. Today many of them are filled. Typically no parents attend these meetings, and the few that do are usually white. “Only two days ago, Ms. Ime offered to lead a free after-school club and the assistant principal refused her. We believe that there is a place for African languages on this campus, and there is a place for African parents on this governing council. And we are here to insist that we have both.”

Some of the council members turn toward each other to whisper. Occasionally one would glance up at me out of the corner of his eye. Some scribbling on a piece of paper here. A hushed whisper there. A passed note, a stifled laugh, an exasperated sigh. An uncomfortable silence.

“Um, thank you Ms. Abeni. If there is no more new business, I think that we should adjourn at this time.”

As I walk out of the meeting, a member of the council grasps my sleeve from behind. She asks me why I insist on trying to change so much. She warns me that I am being watched. But this is something that I already know.

Vignette 4

And they're so accustomed to appropriating all...things European as the pinnacle. And I said no you can't say that, you can't do that.

The English department meeting begins at 10 a.m., during our common planning period. The eleventh graders have been reading Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

“The students have been learning the Greek and Roman history. They are ready for their trip to Greece and Italy.”

“Well, most of the students are ready. Students from Ms. Abeni's class tell me that they have not read *The Iliad* nor *The Odyssey* this year. Ms. Abeni, what exactly are you doing?”

“My class is starting from the beginning, not *in medias res*.⁴ My students read *Stolen Legacy*. They will read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but they will read them later. *They have to know what Europe--, what Rome and Greece took from Egypt. If you're gonna go there, if you're gonna have the youngsters go there, they must know that this is not where it began.*”

I hear a whisper: “Ms. Abeni is always trying to teach social studies.”

I respond even though they don't ask me to. “*Content is absolutely crucial.*” I turn to a page in the book. “Did you know:

‘According to history, Pythagoras after receiving his training in Egypt, returned to his native island.

‘after the death of Aristotle, his Athenian pupils...undertook to compile a history of philosophy...later history has erroneously called Greek philosophy.

‘the so-called Greek philosophy is stolen Egyptian philosophy’?⁵

This is important for youngsters to know.”

“We appreciate how much you do for the black children here Ms. Abeni, but do keep in mind that we have a curriculum to follow.”

⁴ Latin literary term meaning “In the middle of things” often used to describe how *The Iliad* begins.

⁵ James, George G. M. (2009). *Stolen legacy: Greek philosophy is stolen Egyptian philosophy. The Journal of Pan African Studies eBook*, pp. 12-13.

“We can’t get anywhere until we change the curriculum.”

“Ms. Abeni, surely you know about the blueprint that several African American educators just submitted to the school board. It focuses on improving education for African American children.”

“As long as you don’t infuse it with the literature and culture of African people it is for naught.”

“We know that the plan calls for higher parental engagement and remediation, which should support these kids well!”

“It’s not enough to get parents, to call parents together and say this is where your youngsters are...they’re falling behind, they have a wide achievement gap, when they have to still read only things about other people.”

My students, our students, must know the whole story. I will keep fighting it. *They don’t like it but I fight it.*

Vignette 5

“Ms. Abeni, do you need some help with those boxes? We’ll be locking the building in about an hour.”

“No, no. My son is here to help me load my car. I’ll be done in a moment.”

I take a look around my room. The bulletin boards I worked so hard to decorate nine months ago are now completely bare. Not only is this the last day of school, it is my last day working at Franklin High School. The administration claims that I was fired for insubordination, but I know better. This is not the first time that I have been transferred from a school. It may not be the last, either. But I will not be silenced.

Yes, they say it was because I was defiant during the Senior Awards night. They told me that I could not give out awards to the youngsters. They said that my awards were not of value. I wanted to recognize the growth in those African American youngsters. I promised them that if they lived up to their goals, they would be rewarded in public. Those students earned those awards. Although the school was racially diverse, *it was rare if you had an African American youngster who was receiving any awards at Senior Awards Night.* I wanted to change that. *So I went up anyhow because I thought it was important that the youngsters be acknowledged.*

My last box is packed so I sit to wait for my son to bring the car around to the side door. I begin to daydream about all that has happened this year. I begin to wonder why it is that when I teach about Africa, it’s not worthy of attention. Who will respect the work that I do? Will anyone respond to what I say? I’m trying to educate this generation. I’m trying to educate this generation about itself for the sake of those who do not know what is in their DNA. These children are powerful but the world is afraid--afraid of the greatness that is *in their bodies, and in their minds and in their souls.* For if we teach parents to parent and expect students to be scholars, then they will reclaim what has been stolen. *For we are a colonized people and we have the problems of a colonized people.* But we can be set free.

For if we bring parents into governance and see ourselves in the curriculum, then we will reclaim what has been stolen. For *we are a colonized people and we have the problems of a colonized people*. But we can be set free.

They can remove me from my position in this school. They can transfer me from place to place. But the truth is the truth. I will continue to proclaim it because I know we can be set free. We can be set free.

“Introduction”

African American students have favorable academic outcomes when their parents are involved in their education (Epstein, 2006, 2008); when they identify positively with their racial-ethnic identity (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas, & Prinz, 2009); and when they are taught in a culturally responsive way (Hanley & Noblitt, 2009; Hilliard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Not enough education reform efforts address these aspects of a quality education for African American children. Ms. Abeni represents the rare teacher who is not only aware of the importance of family involvement and cultural responsiveness, but she represents the teacher who will do whatever she can to make these realities in the lives of the children in her school.

Although ample research points to the importance of having parents and families involved, schools often have difficulty developing meaningful parental involvement. Sanders, Allen-Jones, and Abel (2002) explain why, in spite of increasing attention on parental involvement in high ethnic minority and low-income schools, parental involvement remains low. While some of these factors may be found within the home, such as issues with transportation, childcare, and scheduling conflicts (Mitchell, 2008), many factors exist in the school. Sanders et al. argue that if schools would take greater efforts to minimize their barriers to involvement, schools would thereby mitigate the barriers in the family.

One of the key barriers to parental involvement is an unwelcoming school climate (Sanders et al., 2002). Citing the work of Calabrese (1990) and Lightfoot (1978), non-white parents are less likely to feel welcome at school than white parents (Sanders et al., 2002). Mitchell's (2008) recommendations for successful parent engagement include having parents engage in decision-making and leadership as opposed to simply supporting “school-determined agendas” (p. 5).

It is important to note that parents may be very involved even when schools perceive that they are not. This is particularly true for measures of parental involvement in African American communities (Doucet, 2008; Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Doucet's (2008) study of African American working- and middle-class parents of preschool children highlighted a belief among the parents that it “takes a village to raise a child.” This means that they incorporated the strengths of family members and other adults who were not necessarily related (like church members). Parents in the study had a “sense of collectivism” (p. 123) in raising their children. These parents exemplified African American cultural values in the development of their children, particularly a sense of mutual responsibility. In Jackson and Remillard's (2005) ethnographic study of ten African American women, they found that parents often exhibit qualities of parental involvement that may be invisible to the school. Schools are often less likely to consider how parents are involved in children's learning through informal opportunities. Parents may not always be visible in the school, but in many cases they are drawing on other community resources to support their children's education.

My research participant, as represented by Ms. Abeni, wanted parents to feel welcome in the school, but she also wanted schools to respect the culture of the children she taught. Research indicates that children benefit from having their culture as the center of their educational experience (Hanley & Noblitt, 2009; Hilliard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009;

Marshall & Toohey, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Olmedo, 1997; Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008). Increasing parental visibility and governance is intricately connected to the school's need to acknowledge and incorporate the cultural strengths of the diverse communities represented in the school. Without this involvement from parents, teachers like Ms. Abeni are likely to struggle to garner the support needed to transform the school curriculum and overall environment for children of color.

Methodology

Arts-informed Research

Cole and Knowles (2008) developed arts-informed research to bridge researchers in the ivory tower with the transformative work needed in communities. The central purpose of arts-informed research is to gain a deeper understanding of humanity and represent this understanding in a way that is accessible to a wide array of people. Cole and Knowles define arts-informed research as “a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived” (p. 59). The seven elements that define arts-informed research include:

- 1) a commitment to an art form;
 - 2) an apparent rationale for using the art form (methodological integrity);
 - 3) following a process that relies on intuition, common sense, and responsiveness to the experience;
 - 4) evidence of the researcher's artistry;
 - 5) strong reflexive elements that show the presence of the researcher;
 - 6) an expressed desire to communicate with an audience that includes academics, but also reaches to the outside community; and
 - 7) the use of the arts to actively engage the audience in making meaning that will lead to social transformation
- (Cole & Knowles, 2008).

I relied on the aforementioned principles in the development of these five vignettes. Although Cole and Knowles allude to arts-informed research as a methodological process and a mode of representation, I focus here on how it applies to the representation of my work. I generated and analyzed my data in a traditional qualitative fashion. I conducted an interview with a public high school teacher and analyzed the data using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006). I later chose to represent her experiences through five fictional vignettes because much of the interview data consists of stories that my research participant shared with me. In the description of my approach below, I write more extensively about my process and reflexivity. The vignettes themselves (hopefully) show evidence of my artistry. Representing the final project in the form of five vignettes enhances the (potential) ability to communicate with an audience of parents and teachers who may not otherwise access this information in a scholarly journal article. Ideally, this project will educate parents and teachers on how to enhance their effectiveness in preparing children to excel academically in school and in their personal lives. In this way, the work opens the door for collaboration between the academy and the outside community--particularly teachers and African American parents and students. The vignettes are not just a report on one teacher's experiences. I wrote these stories for all of us--parents, teachers, students, and community members--to reflect on the happenings in classrooms and school communities. Yet the work is not just a work of fiction. The context for the stories is based on actual events, and some of

the dialogue incorporates direct quotes from the interview.

The Art Form: Fiction/Vignette

In writing the vignettes, I weighed the choice of writing fictional or non-fictional stories. Creative non-fiction and creative fiction lie at opposite ends of a continuum (Wyatt, 2007). Creative non-fiction utilizes factual information in fictional form to engage the readers and connect them emotionally to the text. In contrast, creative fiction depicts scenarios that could happen, loosely drawing from factual information and real people (Banks, 2000; Wyatt, 2007). Although I draw closely from factual information and real people, I do take some creative liberty in the development of additional actors and dialogue in the story. Therefore, I positioned myself closer to the fictional end of the spectrum when deciding how to represent my work. I wanted the freedom to use my imagination to create a text that would engage the reader emotively (Banks 2000, 2008). Non-fiction allows for this, but to me it felt inauthentic to create dialogue and scenery that I never witnessed firsthand and still present the story as “true.”

I chose to write vignettes as opposed to short stories for two main reasons. First, I wanted multiple stories that were short enough to keep the reader engaged, but poignant enough to challenge the reader to think about problems plaguing education. Vignettes are therefore suitable because by definition they are “short hypothetical scenarios that are intended to elicit people’s perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (Torres, 2009, p. 94). I also chose vignettes (and fiction in general) because I wanted to give the reader something to connect to. Vignettes are appropriate “when studying issues that are abstract in nature and need contextualization” (Torres, 2009, p. 94). By developing the context for the scenarios in my interview with the public school teacher, I am able to concretize the abstract nature of some of the information that she shares. This specifically addresses Cole and Knowles’ (2008) criteria that arts-informed research demonstrates a desire to communicate with the outside community, and the use of the arts to actively engage the audience in making meaning.

Multiple scholars have employed and justified the use of fiction as a way to represent scholarly research (Banks, 2000, 2008; Frank, 2000; Mus, 2012; Vickers, 2010; Wyatt, 2007). Generally, they argue that the process of writing social science research is a production influenced by researcher subjectivities. Every qualitative account fictionalizes the subject to some degree because no researcher can encapsulate the entire truth about a subject in writing. “The subject is always more than what can be said,” Mus argues. “Therefore, every qualitative account is a fictionalization of the subject” (p. 145). To treat fiction as somehow less reliable than other modes of representation, however, is erroneous (Wyatt, 2007). Fiction comes from the Latin word “fictio” which “refers to the process of making: we all ‘make,’ whatever we write” (Wyatt, 2007, p. 323). In this sense, all texts, including positivist ones, are fiction because “language creates reality; it does not merely describe it” (p. 323).

The lines between fictional and social science writing are blurry (Frank, 2000; Vickers, 2010). According to Frank (2000), anthropologists recognize that ethnography is at best a “partial truth” due to the subjectivities of the researcher and the need to recreate social realities through the process of writing (p. 482). Vickers (2010) asserts that fiction writers and social science writers do more than just observe and discover; they create, they use rhetoric to make a case, and they use their findings and creations to formulate new realities. Fiction writers and social science writers share the same processes: “they test ideas against evidence; they generalize; they pose questions about the social world; and they try to remain faithful to details of external experience” (Vickers, 2010, p. 561).

Aside from the argument that social science research cannot be as objective as it sometimes purports, representing research with fiction enables social science writers to elicit an often-desirable emotional response in the reader. Banks (2008) insists that if social science research aims to help us learn about and understand our social world, then we should, and possibly must, attend to the “expressive-emotional dimensions of the researcher’s relationship with participants” (p. 160). Banks (2000) justifies his use of fiction in part by stating that he wants the reader to have an emotional response to his work. He prefers that this emotional response comes “not by telling but by showing and inviting other readers to experience an epitomizing narrative” (p. 402).

The author may or may not have witnessed the occurrences she describes in her writing; hence, the author’s imagination is a source when developing fiction (Wyatt, 2007). Vickers (2010) describes fictive imagining as what happens “when the author imaginatively creates a written work” (p. 558). Fictive imagining requires that we imagine ourselves in someone else’s position, thereby helping us to better understand and appreciate other people. Fiction permits researchers to delve into difficult emotions, controversial phenomena, hidden lives, and multiple perspectives (Vickers, 2010).

Fiction allows researchers to represent more complex truths and social experiences that traditional formats cannot, particularly when these experiences do not align well with any existing theory (Frank, 2000; Vickers, 2010). To be clear, the argument in favor of fiction is not synonymous with an argument against traditional forms of writing (Frank, 2000). Nor does it excuse scholars from engaging in complicated theoretical work. Frank states that she sometimes uses fiction as a way to work out the challenges that she is having with an existing problem. In short, fiction is not a replacement for traditional writing. It is simply an additional form—one that will appeal to a wider audience and evoke a different response than traditional scholarly texts.

Approach

Vickers’ (2010) process for writing fiction inspired my approach. Vickers’ four-stage process for developing fiction began with phenomenological interviews. Specifically, she looked at data that she already had coded into themes before returning to the entire interview to situate related events globally, in context. Because I had already coded my interview data using grounded theory methods, I chose to see how this method of analysis could help me to write my vignettes.

I coded my interview data according to Charmaz’s (2006) discussion on grounded theory. I started with initial coding, followed by focused and then axial coding. Axial coding uses three categories for organizing data: conditions; actions/interactions; and consequences (Brown, Stevens, Trojano, & Schneider, 2002). Brown et al. state that conditions can be causal, intervening, contextual, or a combination of these. Actions and interactions are processes that take place under those conditions. Consequences result from the actions and interactions.

After creating my categories from the focused coding process, I attempted to use axial coding for the most salient categories in my data. I sorted my most salient focused codes into four categories: re-empowering parents; setting expectations for students; fighting resistance to African American governance; and resisting Eurocentric perspectives. Each of these reflects the dominant themes of the interview. I then used each of these categories as the focus for a vignette. The conditions for each category set the stage for each vignette, and the actions give the vignettes substance. I infused both direct quotes and paraphrased quotes from the interview. Direct quotes are in italics, and poignant quotes exemplify the central message for each vignette. Many of the conditions and actions are based on actual events

shared in the interview, but I use fictive imagining (Vickers, 2010; Wyatt, 2007) to add more detail and development for the sake of telling a clear, engaging story and communicating the theme of the vignette. The result, I hope, is a set of stories that *could* be true (Wyatt, 2007). More importantly, the result is a set of stories that communicates a message to parents, teachers, students, and others in a more palatable medium--a message that they will unlikely receive if I write in the traditional format of a scholarly journal article.

Initially, I planned for each vignette to have the conditions, actions, and consequences wrapped up in neat stories. I then decided to save the gravest consequence for each theme for a separate vignette because the final consequence is the end result of the actions in the first four vignettes. (Interestingly, I made this decision prior to reading Clough's 2002 seminal work on writing fiction and Banks' 2000 article on holiday letters. Clough also writes five short stories with the fifth one serving as a final statement on his work and Banks creates five fictional holiday letters in his work.)

After Vickers' first stage, I deviated considerably from her process, but still drew elements from her work. Vickers' second stage in her process uses poetry to represent experiences. Poetry offers the researcher "the possibility of exploring unexamined assumptions, helping both reader and author to see beyond preconceptions and biases" (p. 558). Although poems are shortened, compressed accounts, some scholars find this advantageous because it "makes the data more consumable, and readable, than longer prose narratives, enabling the reader to explore the currency and relevance of the poem to their life" (p. 558). In other words, poetry bridges the gap between the researcher and the consumer of that research. Although I did not write poems to the extent that Vickers does, I included elements of poetry within the vignettes, particularly in Vignette 5. For each vignette, I identified a quote from the interview that exemplified the category on which that vignette is based. Then I used that quote repeatedly in the vignette to communicate its importance to the reader. The quotes are in and of themselves poetic because they each tell a story concisely (Anderson, 2002).

Vickers uses fictive imagining in her third stage to help her consider the perspectives of others in the scenario. In the final stage she creates poetic fiction to represent other viewpoints. Again, I did not follow this exactly. I did imagine the perspectives of others in the story as I wrote. I felt compelled, however, to represent the perspective of my research participant in this particular work because I only conducted an interview with her.

Quality

Cole and Knowles (2008) identify eight "qualities of goodness" in arts-informed research. Here I identify these qualities and in a later section I comment on how this work meets their criteria. The first quality, intentionality, insists that the research has an intellectual and moral purpose. In other words, "the research must stand for something" (p. 66). Second, the presence of the researcher should be explicit (reflective) and implicit (felt). The audience should see the researcher account for her presence, and have a sense of the unique signature of the researcher-as-artist on the final work. The third element, aesthetic quality, refers to the ability of the art form to meet its research goals. Fourth, methodological commitment ensures attention to the form and elements of arts-informed research. Fifth, holistic quality refers to a clear link between the purpose and method of the work. Sixth, communicability addresses the audience's ability to access the research. It should engage the "hearts, souls, and minds of the audience" (p. 67). The seventh quality, knowledge advancement recognizes that there are many ways to define knowledge. Finally, the eighth quality, contributions, attends to the applicability of the research and how it can transform society.

Quality of Fiction

When judging the quality of creative fiction, one has to consider that because creative fiction does a different task, it requires a different set of criteria for evaluation (Clough, 2002; Wyatt, 2007). One criterion is whether or not the reader learns something from reading the text. Other criteria include the level of engagement that the reader has with the text, the quality of writing, and its aesthetics. One should also consider whether or not the goals of the writing are worthwhile and if the writing is realistic. The author should approach the work ethically, seeking permission where appropriate, and some (though not all) argue for writing in a reflexive manner. Some scholarship also suggests that quality research should have a political, transformative impact (Wyatt, 2007).

Referencing Clough's (2002) perspective, Wyatt states "evaluation is impossible from a philosophical point of view. We can only aspire to *verify*, not *validate*" (Wyatt, 2007, p. 327). When evaluating creative fiction, additional criteria apply: "playfulness, mystery, ambiguity, subtlety and nuance; the responsibility it places upon as readers to work with it; its use of contextualized language, its promotion of empathy, the personal signature of the writer" (p. 327).

Quality of this Work

The reader will hopefully find qualities of goodness and qualities of good creative fiction in this work. As mentioned earlier, I wrote these vignettes with the belief that they can educate parents, teachers, and students about the happenings in public schools. In order to write each vignette, I put myself in Ms. Abeni's position and imagined how she is feeling and thinking through these experiences. As a teacher and as an African American woman myself, there are some areas in which I believe our perspectives may overlap. In this way, I consider myself as having an insider perspective (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Of course, some of what I write is from my imagination and may not at all reflect the way she may have felt or thought at a given time. My meticulous process for coding data helped ensure that my analysis reflects my participant's perspective and not my own (Charmaz, 2006). Nevertheless, I have woven my own emotional and intellectual reactions throughout the vignettes.

In accordance with the aforementioned criteria, I have explored the purposes of this work and how this work reflects the elements of arts-informed research. I have discussed the connections it (hopefully) makes to an audience, primarily by evoking an emotive response, and how it could transform the ways in which students, parents, and teachers experience school. Finally, I believe that the reader will agree that the vignettes incorporate some ambiguity and nuance, as well as contextualized language. In spite of the lengthy reflection here, I choose to leave the onus on the readers to engage in and interpret the vignettes for themselves.

Representation, Tensions, & Ethical Considerations

After re-reading each vignette I am admittedly torn about how I represented my participant. Writing the vignettes in first person produces tension in the work. First person narratives encourage the reader to trust the author, but this is not necessarily a good thing. Writing in first person communicates to the reader that the author and the participant are one and the same, which makes it more difficult for the reader to identify the researcher's presence (de Freitas, 2007).

I am also torn about how I represented my participant because I deeply admire her courage and tenacity. I know that she has done incredible work for the children and families in her school district. She shared stories of resistance and success in addition to stories about her challenges. Yet I feel that she may come across as this lone soldier who cannot win in her fight against the current system of education. Her vulnerability and desire for acceptance are real; her frustrations are real. I want the reader to feel these frustrations. As much as I wish to display her as only triumphant, the reality is that she has encountered considerable resistance to her work. For these reasons, I chose to share the stories with her prior to any attempts at publication (Wyatt, 2007). Had I compressed her story with those of other teachers and not remained so true to actual events and settings in the vignettes I would feel that I did a better job of protecting her unique experiences (Clough, 2002).

So I end Vignette 5 emphasizing that the work is not yet done. Not all stories end happily, but that does not mean that her work is in vain. I try to convey a sense of hope that if we continue the work that she started, we can indeed overcome many of the challenges that negatively impact African American children and parents in public schools. Yet as long as there are only a few of these teachers working in isolation, the challenges may continue to overwhelm and drown these efforts. So those who believe as this teacher believes need to support one another in transforming the educational experience of African American children and their families. This is what I hope comes through this work. Only the reader can tell. Nevertheless, I will continue to share stories of hope, resistance, and push for educational reform using both traditional and artistic representation in my efforts to educate and connect the community with the academy.

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Article Citation

- Goss, A. C. (2013). Five vignettes: Stories of teacher advocacy and parental involvement. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(How To Article 5), 1-18. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/goss5.pdf>
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