

Chapter Two

Exploring and Re-creating Indigenous Identity through Theatre-based Workshops

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Introduction

Play, existing in the potential space between the individual and the environment, can be understood as a place where cultural experience is located. As Winnicott (1971) writes, "cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play" (p. 135). Play can also be conceptualized as a transformative context enabling participants to create, and practice, identities (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001). Play is also seen as an important element of interactive theatre processes which can foster transformation of individuals and communities. Interactive theatre explorations draw on the experiences of the participants to create images and scenes to explore, through theatrical means, issues that the participants identify as relevant to their lives. Monks, Barker, and Mhanacháin (2001) outline how theatre provides opportunities for participants to test different relationships with the people around them. Participants can step out of their own bodies and try on others, providing a means of exploring the possibilities of other social relations (Auslander, 1994). Theatrical work becomes both symbolic and reflexive (Schechner, 1985), as what is shown is emotional, embodied, and based in the experiences of the participants. This chapter explores theatre workshops as a context for Indigenous¹ youth to play and to give voice to their experiences with a goal of identifying and examining the socio-cultural issues that affect their health and that of their communities. It also explores the data collected to date and situates our research in the context of the history of Indigenous peoples' experiences with colonization.

We are an inter-disciplinary team that has been working over three years with Indigenous youth² from an area served by one First Nations Tribal Council, which provides many services, including health to people living on

1. We use Indigenous as a general term that includes First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

2. We worked with students from grades 8 to 12 who were between the ages of 14 to 21 years.

11 reserves, as well as those who live off reserves in the area. The research team is a partnership of the health educator from the Tribal Council, two academics from First Nations University of Canada, and two from Concordia University. We are a mix of Non-Aboriginal, First Nations and Métis who have personal and professional connections to this community. The health educator is from the community; one of the academics is married into one of the reserves, while another has connections to the many teachers in the community she has taught over the years.

Our team believes that engaging youth in an examination of the factors that affect their decision-making is foundational to the development of optimum health. We initially hypothesized that play, in the environment created by theatre-based³ workshops, would foster growth in the Indigenous youth participants by supporting them in a process whereby they could become aware of and reflect upon factors that affect their decisions, and thus their health. This experience was an embodied and proactive process.

Our work with the youth involved seven workshops of two or three days in length beginning in the summer of 2006. After the initial workshop on the first reserve, there was enough interest at another reserve to organize two workshops the following winter, and then a follow-up workshop in late spring. In the spring of 2008, we brought together youth from several schools in a combined workshop at a central location and followed that up with a similar workshop in the fall of 2008.⁴ This enabled us to expand the number of schools involved in the program. During the first workshops, many participants spoke with cynicism as they recited health information by rote: "Stay away from drugs and alcohol; peer pressure is bad." In our conversations with them, however, we learned that they did not apply these messages to their lives. In other words, current preventative measures, in the form of health education messages, were not being enacted by youth as part of their daily lives.

Our hypothesis was that theatre-based workshops would help participants to analyze the health issues that affected their communities and enable them

3 Although the roots of our workshop design are in workshops based on Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979, 1992, 1995) and Power Plays (Diamond, 2007), we use this term to indicate that our workshops involve everyone in interacting together in theatre games and storytelling rather than in producing a play for public performance.

4 At the time of writing, we had completed, but not analyzed, three more workshops in May and June 2009, and received four years of funding to continue and expand this research.

to become, in effect, health researchers and health advocates. Theatre games would be "warm up" exercises to build group cohesiveness and trust. Our primary objective was to create a Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979) play focused on health issues and provide the community with a "forum" to examine and discuss these issues through interaction with the play on stage.

Our project used elements of collaborative research (Goulet, Krentz, & Christiansen, 2003) with the youth participants in the delivery of theatre-based workshops. Games, combined with interactive theatre processes, built trust, developed voice, and shared power. The structure of the theatre workshops allowed participants to take leadership by directing the content of the research as they determined the stories they would share and the interpretation of those stories (Linds & Goulet, 2010). In the first workshops, we asked the youth to prioritize the health issues they were facing. We also responded to participants' voices in the initial data collection and focused subsequent workshops more on the theatre games and less on a forum theatre performance. These games enabled players to explore the reality and potential of their community and provided opportunities for increased awareness and self-esteem, and transformation.

Situating Our Research

Our work with Indigenous youth is situated within the context of colonialism. The serious health issues facing Indigenous peoples today are a direct result of colonization—colonization that continues to this day in the distribution of resources in Canada and globally—and in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and their relationships with governments and the corporate sector (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Stavenhagen, 2005). Maori scholar, Smith (1999) identifies colonization as the process that facilitated the economic, political, and cultural expansion of European power and control by subjugating Indigenous populations. Adams (1989) and Paul (1993) describe the devastation and document the complex system of European colonization in Canada that used, among other things, trade and military power, combined with Eurocentrism and racism, to secure the resources, and especially the land, of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. The resistance of Indigenous peoples to colonization took many forms including armed struggle, political movements for self-determination (Adams, 1989; Paul, 1993), court challenges (Smith, 1999), and narratives that asserted Indigenous identity and histories (Said, 1993). The marginalized positions of Indigenous people living

in Canada today lie in a legacy of colonialism. Colonization is argued as being significantly responsible for the drastic situation facing Indigenous communities (Monture-Angus, 2000).

Duran and Duran (1995) write that since the beginning of colonization, Indigenous people experienced a *soul-wound* that has continued through generations of Indigenous people who face the continual pressure to acculturate into settler society, the same society that created the genocidal policies and oppressive bureaucratic actions that have caused such harm. This soul-wound, manifested through symptoms of anxiety, depression, and violence against oneself or other Indigenous people (Duran & Duran, 1995), has also contributed to creating an Indigenous identity related to shame and powerlessness (Yuen, 2008).

Canada's Indian Act has severely weakened the Indigenous populations (Canadian Panel on Violence against Women, 1993; Lawrence, 2004; York, 1990). The Indian Act is, in effect, a regime of regulation that shaped, and continues to shape, the Indigenous identity and has permeated the ways in which Indigenous people understand their own identities (Lawrence, 2004). When traditional gatherings and ceremonies were banned by Canada's Indian Act, Indigenous peoples were essentially denied the spirit of coherence that kept their community together. The arts are where people developed social skills and engaged in their community, "collaborated, co-operated, coordinated, laughed and healed" (Amadahy, 2003, p. 145). Traditional ceremonies, which generally contained music, dance, and other arts, can be understood as social and political arenas to develop and maintain relations and solidarity among Indigenous peoples. As Backhouse (1999) explains, "ceremonial practices were inextricably linked with the social, political, and economic life-blood of the community, and dances underscored the core of Indigenous resistance to cultural assimilation" (p. 65). Music, dance and other arts in pre-colonial times were not perceived as separate entities in the lives of Indigenous peoples. As Amadahy explains, these experiences were "integrated into [their] daily lives, from the Sunrise Ceremonies that started the day to the Thanksgiving prayers that occurred at sunset" (p. 144). In other words, the abolition of such practices effectively destroyed the way in which Indigenous cultures created, maintained, and celebrated who they were. While play was not a word used to describe these rituals, various art forms such as music, dance and now theatre can be understood as exploring, creating, and celebrating identity, and giving expression to who you are as a person.

Arts, Theatre, and Community Health

An Australian study (Mulligan et al., 2006) suggests that community-based arts and cultural projects can enhance the well-being of isolated and marginalized communities to generate and sustain a different form of meaning for challenged and disrupted communities. Theatre appears to have significant power when applied in the areas of educational and community development. Taylor (2002) writes of the potential of "an applied theatre form in which individuals connect with and support one another and where opportunities are provided for groups to voice who they are and what they aspire to become" (p. xviii). Thompson (2003) adds that such programs "can be a vital part of the way that people engage in their communities, reflect on issues and debate change. They can be central to different groups' experiences of making and remaking their lives" (p. 16).

Theatre also creates the opportunity for "safe space" through which different relations can be built. According to Lumsden (1997),

Theatre is perhaps the clearest example of an important resource—a transitional zone that acts as a 'safe space' for traumatized individuals and communities...[to work] through terrifying emotions and [try] new approaches to social relations—both of which may be invaluable in breaking the cycle of domestic and communal violence. (p. 263)

According to O'Connor, Holland and O'Connor (2007), theatre processes give youth an opportunity to share their knowledge from which adults learn:

In making such connections, students are demonstrating their commonsense knowledge of their emotional world, or their emotional wisdom...it works because the moment you give them a message they turn off. In sharing this wisdom, they are giving, as much as receiving, powerful messages. (p. 9)

Similar to the participants in this study by O'Connor et al., youth in our workshops drew our attention to significant health concerns that directly affected their sense of safety and feelings of self-esteem, including peer pressure, addictions, suicide, and gangs. The scenes they created, as outlined later on in this chapter, revealed the importance of relationships in their communities and a problematic norm in social systems. Drugs and alcohol have a profound effect on their lives and their relationships, and decisions that have an impact on their health are too often made under those influences.

The focus on health issues also highlighted negatively constructed perceptions of community norms that clearly demonstrated how deeply these youth and their communities have been impacted by the processes of colonization,

oppression and racism.⁵ Some of the participants had internalized racialized negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, believing that change is impossible because "everybody on the reserve drinks," despite clear evidence to the contrary. Although some participants readily created short scenes emerging from their reality, many were not that interested in an analysis of the issues they identified. At the same time, they found the games engaging and wanted to play more.

Theatre-Based Workshops and Power Plays: The Process

The Forum process focus is both educational and performative, whereby each participant develops their right to expression...Everyone has the right to speak, everyone has the right to question, and everyone has the right to be listened to... the power of creative representation becomes a democratic right for all. (Houston, Magill, McCollum & Spratt, 2001, p. 287)

Our theatre workshops were based on Power Plays (Diamond, 2007), an adaptation of Forum Theatre techniques, originally developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal (1979) to use in health and literacy education campaigns. Power Plays consist of a workshop approach developed for use in a North American context. Forum Theatre has spread throughout the world since Boal's early work. This dramaturgy has been used to structure dialogues around such issues as economic and health policy, race relations, school reform, and diversity and has proved extremely useful in grassroots education and problem-solving. It involves and engages communities directly and places high value on ideas, opinions, and proposals brought forth by the community's analysis of real-life experiences (Boal, 1992). The workshop process is designed to provide a performance-based, theatrical structure for dialogue on significant social, cultural, and health issues, to create imaginative "blueprints" for possible healthy futures based on appropriate interventions and choices. The process develops leadership skills as participants begin to question habitual thinking, enabling them to become aware of their power to be producers of knowledge and action, not just consumers.

5 For a more in-depth discussion of the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples, see Goulet, Episkene, Linds, & Arnason. (2009).

The Workshops

Play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. (Gadamer, 1999, p.109)

Each workshop involved intensive experiences that introduced the rudiments of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed dramaturgy using a graduated sequence of basic acting games and structures, image-making exercises and scene improvisations.

We began each workshop with a circle led by an elder from the community. Then we introduced ourselves and the project. We asked the participants to share something about themselves. To establish a sense of equity and to ease the youth into the day's activities, we asked questions that we thought would be nonthreatening, for example, "What is your favourite music?" Student participation was limited to a few words for those who responded. Yet, although the young people were reluctant to participate in discussions, they were enthusiastic about participating in theatre games where they could move around the space.

Following the circle, we asked youth to participate in trust, group-building, and theatre games. "Blind" games help develop trust as participants closed their eyes and moved around the room. These games encouraged the participants to pay attention to senses we normally ignore. The games were structured to move from simple to more complex. Participating in games helped youth express their ideas and feelings, developed group cohesion, and encouraged trust. They also brought together those who do not normally associate with one another, either in school or in the community.

These games were not separate from the methodology of our research; they built a sense of common purpose while unlocking issues the group was investigating. On several occasions, for example, a name game helped as we all began playing with our names, adding an adjective with the same initial letter as our first names, and then including a motion to describe ourselves. For example, one of the authors identified himself as "Wonderful Warren" while dramatically opening his arms. Everyone then repeated the name with adjectives, the motion causing much laughter among the participants and a subsequent lowering of barriers.

We briefly introduced the youth to moulding the human body—thereby creating images of actions, conflicts, or symbolic meanings. Then we guided the participants in constructing images of health concerns as well as ethno-

graphic images that depicted unique community power dynamics and perceptions of risk. These images were configured as still photos or video freeze-frames, and used as a platform for animated short stories about a particular situation. Ultimately, the group improvised scenes that clearly showed how health issues were articulated in their real life situations.

During the workshops, we asked students to identify the health issues that they and their communities faced. Participants identified many issues but prioritized peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, and the resulting behaviours as the most pressing. Students then created images and short scenes of their experiences. Many of the scenes portrayed drinking or drug abuse at parties and the resultant negative actions of the youth that included drunk driving, fighting, and stealing.

We share the following scene created in one of our earlier workshops to illustrate the effects of colonization and oppression on the perceived world of the Indigenous youth with whom we worked. The scene opens with friends talking excitedly as they make their way to a party. When the characters arrive at the party, alcohol and drugs are being used and they are encouraged to join in, which they do. As the party progresses, some of the youth realize that they are running out of beer. Even though most of them are drunk by now, the youth decide that someone needs to make a beer run into town. A "volunteer" is selected who has a car and even though he is quite drunk, three other youth accompany him. As he drives into town, the driver continues to smoke marijuana, loses control of the car and rolls into a ditch, hurting some of the passengers. In debriefing this scene with the youth, the character that played a passenger was asked why she decided to get into a car with a driver who was obviously drunk. Her telling response was, "I don't know. I'm just along for the ride" (Goulet, Episkeneew, Linds & Arnason, p. 112).

Stories were central to the learning process, as they act as mediators between self and others. As participants created different sets of images, they developed the capacity to give expression to experience. Not only does this emphasize the traditional aphorism of "show us, don't tell us," it also leads those looking to be able to interpret the images according to their own experiences.

Michael Rohd (1998) conceives of such games as collective activities that create a sense of comfort and enable people to interact together in a safe and energized space. However, we saw much more happening. The youth were engaging in these playful activities as explorations of their lives. In one such ac-

tivity, *West Side Story* (Boal, 1992, p. 98), based on the Bernstein Broadway play, they talked in particular about how it related to life on the reserve. In this activity, two teams face one another with one leader each. One leader makes a sound and movement and advances against the opposing team which retreats. Once the team has retreated six steps, the roles are reversed. This goes on until all participants have a chance to lead their team.

Some of the youth were at first reticent to lead their team, but as each tried, the gestures and movements became more animated. Afterwards, during the debriefing of the activity, several participants linked their experience to being part of a group that supported each other and how sometimes that could take a negative turn. However, the participants emphasized that no one had used violent gestures while leading their team (even though they were divided by space and movement into opposing "sides"). Indeed, one participant subverted the expectation of aggressive and/or violent gestures by choosing to use humour as he mocked flatulence to drive the opposing team across the room. The youth also observed how their experience of the game, *West Side Story*, was different from their lives in their communities, where violence can divide members of families and community. As Boal (1995) points out, "the image of reality is the reality of the image" of the activities in which we engage (p. 43). The characters must forget the real world which was the origin of the image and play with the image itself, in its artistic embodiment, thus practising in the second world (the aesthetic), in order to modify the first (the social).

The Effect of the Theatre Process

Dramatic play is in the dialectic between the actual, everyday reality and imaginative one...(in play) the former context is explored through the latter. (Landy, 1986, p. 63)

There is a growing recognition of role of drama in healing, "that artistic expression, symbolic acts and ritual have important roles and functions both for individual adults, and for families and communities" (Lumsden, 1997, p. 268). Liebmann (1996) believes art's approaches to dealing with domestic and inter-communal violence offer a number of additional benefits, such as understanding different points of view through activity participation and resolving conflict through cooperative projects, which essentially contribute to the development of participant's communication and cooperation skills. Episkenew (2008, 2009) observes that the inherently communal nature of theatre makes it a particularly attractive genre for Indigenous communities to use when grappling with the social problems that are a result of historical trauma.

Seidlitz (1994) explains that theatre is a medium that fits comfortably within Indigenous traditions, cultures, and ways of expression. Both Favel Starr (1997) and Manossa (2001) argue that contemporary Indigenous theatre is not merely an adaptation or appropriation of European theatrical tradition but rather a form of expression that easily fits within Indigenous traditions because it is rooted in traditional Indigenous performance arts. Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) argue that the "goal of any healing process is a recovery of awareness, a reawakening to the senses, a re-owning of one's life experience and a recovery of people's enhanced abilities to trust this experience" (p. 78). Drama can provide young people, who may be reticent to articulate their individual stories, with a safe, collaborative means to express the stories of the collective. In this way, they are able to begin the healing process. Importantly, the youth participants highlighted the *importance of relationships* to help them create healthy communities.

Our participants initially expressed a sense of acceptance towards certain misrepresentations of their community that had essentially developed into a racialized identity. Comments to support their claim that change was impossible were associated with stereotypical, colonized Indigenous identities such as lacking initiative and being drunk. Specifically, several young people stated that "everybody on the reserve drinks" and "no one on the reserve ever does anything" despite the fact that the researchers knew many families on that reserve who did not drink and took leadership in activities, such as a youth drum group, where no drinking or drugs were allowed.

Over time, particularly in the last few workshops, participants were able to explore creative ways of initiating change through drama. For example, in one of the latter workshops that occurred in the spring of 2008, we conducted a three-day workshop with 25 Indigenous youth from various high schools in the area. Participants were engaged in the workshop process and provided us with insight regarding alternative debriefing techniques. At the end, we broke into smaller groups so the youth could provide inputs into future plans. Participants identified two directions for the project. Many participants wanted to learn how to lead similar drama games to help younger children "overcome shyness and develop confidence," which they identified as significant health issues; while others wanted to create and perform community plays based on their life experiences.

Inspired by that workshop, one person from the research team and four female youth participants co-facilitated two very successful, half-day drama

workshops for younger children. The girls demonstrated developing leadership abilities and expressed a keen interest in continuing to plan and deliver these workshops. Phinney and Kohatsu (1997) cite several research studies that show that adjustments among ethnocultural adolescents are associated with "positive attitudes and interactions with members of their own group, of other groups, and of the larger society" (p. 438). Although a small step, the leaders of these workshops identified how they could participate in positive interactions with others and, with adult support, took action to make this happen.

How Does Identity Emerge through Play?

The being of all play is self-realization. (Gadamer, 1999, p. 113)

One way to examine the emergence of identity through play is through the ancient rhetoric of community identity—belonging in a larger sense, which may present play more as an obligatory rite, whereby participation is less voluntary and determined by social context and community values (Sutton-Smith 1997; Turner, 1982). In *Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith discusses how play, in the form of ritual, festival, and other forms of community celebration, works to "persuade ourselves to adopt a communal view of ourselves" (p. 92).

Rules in play do not determine whether someone has won or lost but instead regulate the activity from within. In each instance of our workshops, the youth commented on the relevance of the activity to working with children younger than them. Even in one instance where the rules of the game were changed by the youth who were involved in it, it was done in a playful, and not competitive, manner. Whenever we played a game, we first modeled the game by explaining the rules and then demonstrating how to lead the game. In one instance, we played *Maria Maria Maria* (McCarthy, 2002, p. 50), a "name game" in which one person stands in the center of the circle and says another participant's name three times, very quickly, while pointing to that person. If that person says her own name before the person leading says it three times, then the person in the middle of the circle would have to try with another person. If the person cannot say their own name in time, she goes to the middle of the circle. One of the youth was put into the circle, and he immediately shifted the rules of the game so that he wouldn't be looking directly at the person he was trying to trick. He was playing the game but under his own rules, rules that were rooted in his cultural norms regarding eye contact with others, and in the use of deception, an important skill in traditional Indigenous gam-

bling games. In this way, he playfully and culturally became the change he wished to see by taking control of the rules of play.

Gadamer (1999) considers "game" as a more specific form of "play": Qualities from "play" are inherited by "game." Game rules must interact with social rules—what is believed about fairness, niceness, cheating, friendship, generates the meta-rules of how to govern themselves in play and outside of play. Callois (1958) argues: "Games generally attain their goal only when they stimulate an echo of complicity" (p. 39). Sutton-Smith (1997) contends that children and youth need to express their special identity as well as their resentment of lacking power. These needs may be the point of reference for dealing with youth. That is, through play they become the change they wish to see. The development of scenes becomes "a 'play world' for 'fixing, 'un-fixing,' and 're-fixing' reality without the fear of social constructs or reprisal" (Chinyowa, 2006, Emerging implications, para. 2). Play operates beneath consciousness as it creates its own internal reality. In this way, the (playful) interactive creation of scenes by the youth changes the dynamics of the relationships between the youth by putting the responsibility on everyone to become more active participants.

Play allows us to transform ourselves into other people in order to be something else, Stories, as an esthetic form of communication, provide the "opportunity to anticipate, rehearse and contemplate [one's] own future" (Myerhoff, 1978, p. 19). How we perceive ourselves contributes to how we see ourselves within a community/social network/worldview. We build our life stories/identity thematically with an individualized narrative fitting within a larger community context (Kaufman, 2000). Further learning occurs by recapturing and sharing narrative play experiences through self-reflection, storytelling, and reflective dialogue with others bringing out new understandings of the meanings within the stories told.

Theatre-based Workshops and Identity Construction

To control what is outside, one has to do things, not simply to think or to wish, and doing things takes time. Playing is doing. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 55)

According to Yuen and Shaw (2003), individuals involved in play can be considered active agents who learn from and influence their social environments. While their discussion is based in the reproduction and resistance of gender identities, they argue that certain forms of play (i.e., *unstructured play*) provide opportunities for empowerment and transformation that can deepen the un-

derstanding of youths' experiences of the theatre workshops. Unstructured play refers to "play that is guided by the [individuals] themselves. That is, the rules of play and how [individuals] are expected to behave during the play activity are typically dependent on [the participants]" (p. 13). Adults are present in the workshops to guide the experiences of the participants, but the young people themselves direct the creative process of play. In other words, in terms of creating an unstructured play environment, as recommended by Yuen and Shaw, the adults take on a more facilitative, as opposed to a directive, role.

In short, unstructured play experiences have the capacity to provide a sense of freedom that can help participants take advantage of the situation and construct rules of play that do not conform to societal norms and expectations (Yuen & Shaw, 2003). In this way, unstructured play experiences have the potential to interrogate, resist, reinforce or alter overlapping identities of race, class, gender, and ability. For example, in the fifth workshop, a group of girls were eager to discuss how they might take what they had learned in the workshop back to the younger students in their school. There was one young man in the group, but, because he was shy, he deferred to the girls leadership in the discussion. Most of the older girls in the group were all friends. Because of their bond and dominance in numbers, the girls were also able to exert the influence on the young man who was alone in terms of his gender, because he was still developing his confidence in his ability to speak out. This interaction contrasts with the typical decision-making process in their peer group, where males often led.

During the exploration of new realities in the workshops, participants are able to explore new roles and identities. For example, while youth resist possible identities, such as leadership through violence, they are able to explore leadership roles without the use of physical intimidation. The curiosity, imagination, and risk-taking associated with the creative aspects of play (Isenburg & Jalongo, 2001) in an unstructured environment, such as the theatre workshop, stimulate divergent thinking in its actors. As argued by Yuen and Shaw (2003):

During their creative thought processes, participants of unstructured play may have an increased sense of freedom to explore and express themselves in a newly imagined world, without the boundaries and constraints of the current culture. The absence of predetermined...norms in unstructured play may help promote flexibility, originality and elaboration of ideas. (p. 15)

Popularly, play tends to be contrasted with work, and thus is often seen as chaotic and frivolous. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) observe that play is "generally regarded as what we do when serious responsibilities are fulfilled" (p. 146). The criticism of play as not work, and therefore nonproductive and potentially disruptive, brings up fears that unregulated play would lead to loss of control. In *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*, Schaefer (1993) lists the benefits of play as development of rapport, understanding, increased self-esteem, problem-solving, emotional release, adjustment to trauma, and practice of new behaviors and insight. Garner (1994) quotes Jacques Derrida who claimed that play itself is the "disruption of presence" (p. 40), which is evident particularly in the transition between sensory awareness and the improvised performance that we use to make the transition from playing with each other to playing with each other through the language of image.

Complete the Image (Diamond, 2007), which was used in every workshop, introduced the idea of a space of possibilities where the stability of the story is constantly challenged. This storytelling activity was first done in pairs and then in the large group. When in the large group, anyone who had an idea can jump up, tap one of a pair shaking hands and replace them, adding a new element to the story. This process continued until six or seven people participated in making a story out of the image. When the group understood the method, we began again, but this time we asked the group to use a particular theme when completing the image. In our workshops, the themes included life in our community and life in school.

The process involved in *Complete the Image* was an open and "writerly" (Barthes 1975) text as our bodies speak in a new language involving relationship and action with an audience. This awakens the sense of mindfulness but there is still initial resistance and discomfort. Some of this is due to the disruption Derrida speaks of. The work implicitly involves participants discovering their character-as-becoming in collaboration with those watching. Being "writerly" means the authors (in this case, the youth actors) do not attempt to control the actions or feelings of the watcher but, instead, create a structure where individuals can bring themselves into the text. When there is such room, there will be discomfort, ambiguity, and uncertainty about what we will discover about ourselves through the character that is being explored.

Play as Decolonizing

Although "spinning loose" as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us (as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued) the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality. (Turner, 1983, p. 234)

While Forum Theatre is not a traditional form of art in Indigenous cultures, it does offer a space in which participants can experience similar practices that were once attributed to sustaining healthy and strong communities. Forum Theatre provides a space for decolonization in three ways:

- Reintegrating art back into community life as a social forum for engagement and collaboration
- Creating a space for self-expression, and
- Fostering much-needed discussions about community health and other issues to create healthier and stronger communities that move beyond the colonized images of Indigenous peoples portrayed by the larger society.

According to Fernández (2003), Indigenous peoples "must come to create a spiral, one that turns back to the past while at the same time progressing forward in order to survive in a different world" (p. 254). In other words, processes of decolonization require the reclamation of the Indigenous knowledge, practices and values of the past that can be applied to current conditions and used to guide our actions in addressing issues and solving the problems of today.

An important aspect of the workshop process that contributed to the spiral described by Fernández is the involvement of Indigenous elders. Many community members describe elders as respected role models who listen and offer guidance based on love and support (Yuen, 2008). In most workshops, an elder was present throughout the entire workshop. They not only opened our workshop but also provided connections for the young people to the Indigenous traditions of respect and listening. At times, they would provide us with the direction and structure to connect the participants to Indigenous traditions. One example that illustrates the connection to traditional values was when many of the participants came to workshops with an iPod in their ear. The elder began her talk with the statement that part of the tradition is respect, and in order to demonstrate respect, you must listen, so "earpieces out." In this way, the elder was able to ground the norms of workshop in terms of cultural values. Thus, with the involvement of elders, theatre-based workshops

offer an arts-based context that has the potential to create stronger, healthier communities that are able to incorporate Indigenous traditions.

As Indigenous communities continue to resist and heal from Canada's colonial practices and as traditional ceremonies regain momentum, a theatre-based workshop provides another context for Indigenous youth to explore their identities and offers them the opportunity to adopt and celebrate, or resist and change what is ultimately discovered through their own performances. Through the workshops, the participants drew attention to their significant concerns, including peer pressure, addiction, suicide, gangs, and lack of self-esteem.

Social issues facing the communities have a strong impact on youth and ultimately contribute to their sense of hopelessness. There is increasing awareness and recognition for the importance of finding creative and different ways of looking at supporting youth as they struggle to overcome the ravages of colonization. The renaissance in culture that is facilitating the movement of Indigenous youth beyond the colonized, racialized stereotypes, and the impoverishment that their people have and continue to experience. Consequently, support and encouragement in their struggle to make good decisions in their lives are necessary. But rather than teaching the participants or giving them strategies for creating healthy communities, we tried to understand and discover new ways of support *with* the youth. In other words, we had to learn from the youth what their view of a healthy community was and what that meant.

We work with the imagination, and we work with content. For example, we wanted to look at healthy decision-making, so we asked the participants to create images that reflected issues they might have in their lives. When we asked participants to do an assessment of what they were learning and what was having the most impact on them, what they were really interested in was the drama games. Then we asked them, "Why drama games? What is so important about that?" The participants responded by highlighting the creation of a space where they could be themselves, and that is precisely what the group activities and the games did: create a community where participants could feel safe to take risks and do different things. We learned from the youth that the drama games helped participants be themselves and overcome their shyness.

For the Indigenous youth participants, the core of healthy decision-making required the confidence to be able to make their own decisions. If they did not have that confidence and know how to express themselves, then

it was really hard to say no to peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours. We were not coming into the workshops to reinforce the status quo by teaching youth to "Say no to peer pressure" and "Say no to drugs and alcohol." Rather, the focus of our work was having the participants learn about self-expression and confidence and how they have the potential to contribute to the well-being of their own lives. In this way, the theatre workshop process can be understood as a vehicle that fosters human agency, cultural creation, and meaning.

We also learned that this kind of engaging process required a lot of time. The development of safe spaces requires lengthy periods where trust and openness can naturally develop. If such a space is created for youth, they can come up with some of their own solutions to their issues. During this process, an important caveat to remember is that after experiencing this safe space, participants may find it hard going back into the larger society, where there is little to no sense of safety.

As previously mentioned, some of the young people have already gone out and done workshops for younger children with one of the authors. This speaks to the character of the Indigenous youth participants. After their training, the first thing they wanted to do is give back to the community, to go and share it with others. This level of involvement is certainly something to be said for the strength of the youth. They are eager and ready to share their learning with the younger children in hopes that these children will not have to experience the same hardships as they did.

When engaging in artistic forms with any population, facilitators must provide the conditions and the structure for exploration. Flexibility is key, as there is no control over what is going to happen. This flexibility is particularly important to consider as adults working with youth, since the typical adult-youth relationship indicates that it is the adult who generally tries to control the behaviours and actions of youth (Linds, Goulet, & Sammel, in press), thereby minimizing the potential for youth to express themselves and be heard and take leadership to solve the problems they experience in their lives.

As mentioned above, the first three workshops were focused on issues youth faced in their lives. When we analysed and did a write up of our initial experiences, we began to see that there was a risk that we were perpetuating colonization rather than alleviating it by reinforcing negative stereotypes of Indigenous youth. In other words, in asking youth to represent issues and problems, there is a danger that we only represent their lives as "problematic"

(no matter what the cause is). We thought to ourselves, "How would our world look to an outsider if we focused only on our problems?" Therefore, as researchers, we switched our focus to having youth represent times when they were able to make a decision that they were proud of or felt good about. We learned from the youth that they wanted to move towards the development of self-confidence and self-esteem, which are critical elements in supporting the youth's volition and agency for change. As researchers we have come to see the need to continue to move from a problem-based approach to strengths-based research that focused on health and healthy behaviours rather than unhealthy ones (Wilson, 2008). We will continue to listen to the youth as they share through the theatre work and the interviews we do with them.

One of the most basic human rights is the right to express oneself. Consequently, finding creative and alternative ways for expression, such as play through theatre, are important to the process of sustaining a healthy community where youth have the freedom to create and re-create their identities as contributing members of their community.

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