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## **Creating a Space for Decolonization: Health through Theatre with Indigenous Youth**

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*This article reports on a research project that used theatre with Indigenous youth to address health issues. Youth participated in a three day workshop adapted from David Diamond (2007) and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) where theatre techniques were used to create a space for youth to examine the choices they made. Drawing on the youths' dramatic images and responses shared in interviews, the authors theorize that the dramatic creative space sets up possibilities for decolonizing experiences where youth are asked to think for themselves, to use their bodies and to exercise their imaginations in making decisions for actions.*

*Cet article fait le compte rendu d'un projet de recherche sur le recours au théâtre avec la jeunesse autochtone pour s'atteler à des problèmes de santé. Les jeunes participèrent à un atelier de trois jours adapté du Théâtre des opprimés élaboré par David Diamond (2007) et Augusto Boal (1979), dans lequel des techniques théâtrales sont utilisées pour créer un espace où les jeunes peuvent examiner les choix qu'ils font. À partir des images et des réponses dramatiques partagées durant les entrevues, les auteurs théorisent que des lieux créatifs dramatiques créaient des possibilités d'expériences décolonisatrices dans lesquelles il est demandé aux jeunes de penser par eux-mêmes, d'utiliser leurs corps et d'exercer leur imagination pour prendre des décisions menant à des actions.*

In 2004, researchers from the First Nations University of Canada and Concordia University entered into a research partnership with the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) Health Educator. Our shared goal was to facilitate "Forum Theatre" workshops (Boal, 1979; Diamond, 2007) for Indigenous youth in the FHQTC area in order to utilize the power of theatre to create a space in which youth could critically examine the choices they made that affected their health.

Our view of health is a holistic one that looks at health issues in Indigenous communities within the context of colonization, which has

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oppressed and damaged Indigenous peoples' economic and social systems. Colonization is not just a process that happened in the past, but is ongoing in the present, enacted in relationships of power and privilege that have been constructed historically through many means, including war, law, policy, theoretical constructs, and the media, to name a few. The process of decolonization is central to addressing health issues in Indigenous communities. We see health for Indigenous youth as a decolonizing process in the political act of healing—the self through the restoration of autonomous decision making and agency, the peer group through development of healthy relationships and shared leadership, and the community through co-determined leadership among community members.

We have conducted a number of theatre workshops with the youth in the FQHTC area to address issues of socio-cultural health. The workshops use theatrical processes, both to tell the youth participants' stories, and to represent them in images. Their stories describe how Indigenous youth feel constrained by forces of social control within, and external to, their communities and perceive themselves to lack agency to effect change. In this article, we reflect on our experiences in these workshops to analyse how theatre can support decolonization by creating a safe, creative space in which Indigenous youth can free their minds and bodies.

## Colonization

Colonization seized and destroyed resources, decimated populations, fractured family and community relationships, externalized decision making, and created the poverty that underlies so many of the health issues facing Indigenous communities today. Colonization continues in both the external realities of poverty and in the inner reality of each person. Mussell (2008) describes the effects:

The treatment of Indigenous as *wards of the government* throughout modern history persists into the present .... As people who have not experienced empowerment by discovering who we are, what we are, and who we belong to through learning family and community history as an everyday experience, we live with considerable uncertainty because we lack what it takes to see, understand, and name our internal and external realities (p. 331; emphasis in original).

As a worldwide process, colonization appropriated resources and, as a system of oppression, imposed a way of being in and thinking about the world. Colonial policies imposed behavioural norms on Indigenous peoples' bodies while colonial belief systems sought to colonize their minds.

### Colonizing the Imagination

In "Colonizing the Imaginary: Socializing (Specific) Identities, Bodies, Ethics, and Moralities through Pleasurable Embodiment," Chappell (2010) examines the performative elements of play and its "embodiment at physical, relational and ideological levels" (p. 1). His title, "Colonizing the Imaginary," is particularly germane to our research project as we have explored how colonization has affected the imaginations of the youth with whom we work. All aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives, especially those people who fall under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act, were colonized by the Canadian colonial regime. Elders and community health personnel reported to us that, although too young to have attended residential schools themselves, the youth with whom we work have, nonetheless, been affected by those traumatic experiences. Almost of all of the young peoples' great-grandparents, most of their grandparents, and some of their parents, attended residential school. This history continues to have a profound effect on all members of the community (Tait, 2003).

For decades residential schools were the centre of Canada's "Indian" policy, the goal of which was to assimilate Indians into Canadian society. In his report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996), and later in his 1999 book, Milloy explains how the families, elders, and communities were considered obstacles to the assimilation of Indigenous youth into Canadian society, albeit as an underclass of farm labourers and domestic servants. Only by removing the children from their communities and by controlling every aspect of their lives could the goals of Canada's Indian policies be achieved. Modeled after institutions for delinquent children, Canada's Indian residential schools were designed to create new physical and social worlds for Indian children, to be

a circle—an all-encompassing environment of resocialization. The curriculum was not simply an academic schedule or practical trades training but comprised the whole life of the child in the school. One culture was to be replaced by another through

the work of the surrogate parent, the teacher. (Milloy, 1999, p. 33)

The institution regulated children's play, their emotions, and their imagination.

Anishinaabe elder and writer Basil Johnston (1988) described the operations of the Spanish Indian Residential School that he attended. Every minute of every day was organized for the children and youth. The incessant "Clang! Clang! Clang!" (p. 28) of the bells marked the change from one activity to the next, ironically leaving the youth no time to think for themselves. The bells told the youth when to wake, pray, eat, study, pray again, eat again, study again, work, pray, eat, play (structured, of course), pray yet again, and collapse into sleep. Johnston and his fellow students lived in this highly structured environment with few opportunities to think about or make life choices until they were legally permitted to leave at age sixteen. Johnston's experience at the residential school in Spanish, Ontario, was much the same as the experience of Indigenous children attending the other residential schools across Canada. All were designed to coerce "obedience, conformity, dependence, subservience, uniformity, docility, [and ultimately] surrender" (Johnston, 1988, p. 43). Cree educator Kirkness (1992) stated that the legacy of the residential schools was one of cultural conflict, alienation, poor self-concept, and a lack of preparedness for independence, for jobs, and for life in general. For the Canadian government, these coercive strategies achieved their objective of the re-socialization and assimilation of Indigenous children through the suppression of Indigenous identities, accompanied by the colonization of the youth's imaginations.

The imagination plays an important role in critical thinking. However, the Government of Canada did not want Indigenous youth educated to critique and question its policies. Milloy (1999) describes how youth who had attended reserve day schools prior to Confederation were grounded in their language, culture, and history and, consequently, had become formidable political adversaries. Canada would not make that mistake again. As Canada's future farm labourers and domestic servants, residential school youth were taught to obey, not to question. To that end, the not-so-hidden curriculum of the residential schools set out to suppress and ultimately colonize the imagination of Indigenous youth.

For decades, youth returned to their communities having had few opportunities in their formative years for free play that would have given them the opportunity to develop their imaginations. In addition to their early oppressive experiences at residential schools, until the latter part of the twentieth century, Indigenous adults on reserve lived under the rule of the Indian agent. Again, questions and critical thinking were not allowed for fear that Indigenous people might imagine a life different than the one prescribed by the colonial regime. It is little wonder that learned helplessness, leading to depression, suicide, and addictions, became a problem for many of the residential school survivors and their descendants (Tait, 2003).

Much has been written and discussed about the generational effects of residential school as one of legacies of colonization (English-Currie, 1990; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Milloy, 1999). Loss of parenting skills has been a topic that has received much attention, and for good reason. How could the Canadian government possibly conceive that children who grew up in institutions would go home knowing how to parent their children? Not only did colonial authorities expect returning youth to slide effortlessly into the role of parents, they also expected former youth to effect positive change in their communities by modeling assimilation. However, both of these functions require a well-developed sense of agency.

Agency—the ability to act—is dependent on having a well-developed imagination (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Before taking action, one must first imagine what change might look like, second, imagine the steps required to achieve that change, and third, have the volition and agency to enact the imagined changes. But at residential schools, Indigenous children's imaginations and actions were suppressed as a component of resocialization. The colonization of the imagination is another legacy of residential schools that has received little critical attention.

The majority of our workshops took place on reserves located on the open plains and in the river valleys of rural Saskatchewan. The physical setting of these reserves could provide youth with opportunities for imaginative play. This was not the norm, however. Clearly, by their responses to the games in our workshops, the youth wanted, and indeed, loved to play. Yet, outside the structure of the workshops and games to facilitate play, many of the youth who participated in our workshops reported that their “fun” most often replicated unhealthy recreational activities that they had witnessed where fun equals “partying,” and

the consumption of alcohol and drugs, which ultimately leads to accidents, acts of violence, and other unhealthy risk-taking behaviours.

### Colonizing the Body

Colonization not only affects the mind, but the body as well. McKegney (2007) contends that residential schools were "a colonial technology strategically and violently employed" (p. 21). English-Currie (1990) states that she experienced violence for the very first time in her life on her first day at a residential school. In these schools, the youth learned violence and brought those teachings home with them. It is not only the legacy of residential schools that affects Indigenous peoples today, but the total process of colonization. Cherokee Theatre of the Oppressed facilitator Qwo-Li Driskill (2008) argues that colonization is an act "done to bodies and felt by other bodies" (p. 155). Violence is not something abstract, but rather a knowledge "that is known because of the damage done to our skin, flesh, muscles, bones and spirits" (p. 155).

For Boal (1992), who developed the Theatre of the Oppressed approach upon which our work is based, bodies adapt to their environment through a process of both shrinkage and exaggeration. Certain physical actions become repeated in such a way that the body's repertoire is distorted and the senses become withered or bloated according to a person's situation. The body becomes marked by its social and cultural environment (Thompson, 2003). There is a gradual process of atrophy as well as wounding, or scarring, of the body compounded by the current and historical traumas that Indigenous youth face.

Fay (1987) points out that bodies are often educated in both direct and indirect ways. Schooling, for example, structures time and space, controlling the bodies and bodily motions of those working and studying in it. Colonization operates in similar ways by imposing a set of beliefs and by moulding the body "through direct behavioural influences and physical environments" (p. 148). There is indirect learning via sets of rules that "reinforce, and are reinforced by, particular bodily and behavioural dispositions" (p. 149). Ideas, emotions, sensations, and actions are interwoven in our bodies. A bodily movement is a thought, and a thought expresses itself through the body. All ideas, mental images, and emotions reveal themselves through the body. Living in the world with its overwhelming stimuli, our senses suffer. We start to feel little of what we touch, listen to little of what we hear, and see little of what we

regard. As colonizing and oppressive forces shape us, we adapt to what we need to do at any particular moment, but we do not use fully our entire body. For us to be “in the moment,” we need to re-sensitize and re-awaken the memory of our senses as the body begins to act through sound and movement. We need to re-realize that we control our senses, our muscles, and our body—and, ultimately, our lives.

## Decolonization

Mohanty (2003) argues that “decolonization involves both engagement with the everyday issues in our own lives so that we can make sense of the world in relation to hegemonic power, and engagement with collectivities that are premised on ideas of autonomy and self-determination, in other words, *democratic practice*” (p. 254; emphasis added). Decolonization, then, is a process that embraces all aspects of our humanity, including the intersections of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual life. This process is linked to the idea of “political grace” (Rehberg, 1995), which involves relationships that

embody respect and faith in the participants’ capacity to name their world and, through this process, participate in transformative acts of co-creation. It speaks to the enhancing power of communal experiences, which emerge freely through open, interconnected, and grounded relationships of decolonizing struggle (Darder & Yiamouyisannis, 2010, p. 21).

Decolonization thus involves both resistance to colonization and the reclamation of new ways of relating that entail the co-creation of new possibilities and the transformation of political and personal histories. Emma Perez (1999) suggests that this reclamation can happen only in a “decolonial imaginary”—a space where different kinds of relationships and dilemmas can be negotiated. The aesthetic process of that happened in our theatre workshops. These workshops engaged Indigenous youth in “activities which are usually denied them, thus expanding their expressive and perceptive possibilities” (Boal, 2006, p. 18).

Our workshops are based on “Power Plays,” which David Diamond (2007) of Vancouver’s Headlines Theatre adapted from Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to fit the Canadian cultural and political context. Originally developed for use in health and literacy education campaigns, Boal’s interrogation of relationships of power through the-

atre has spread throughout the world. 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).

Our workshop process was designed to provide a performance-based, theatrical structure for dialogue on significant social, cultural, and health issues, and to create imaginative "blueprints" for possible healthy futures based on appropriate interventions and choices. The process developed leadership skills as participants began to question habitual thinking, enabling them to become aware that they have power to produce knowledge and take action, rather than believing themselves to be passive consumers of knowledge that others produce and actions that others prescribe.

Boal's early anti-oppression work focused on external oppressions that prevent us from being human. Over the years, his work became increasingly focused on internal oppression and the denial of culture distorted by dominant and internalized negative images. In *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995) and *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006), Boal outlined processes to address issues of internalized oppression as part of the struggle for the redistribution of resources. The importance and value of the aesthetic process (the creative process of making the product) reside in "its stimulation and development of perceptive and creative capacities which may be atrophied in the subject—in developing the capacity, however small it may be, that every subject has for metaphorising reality .... We are all artists, but few of us exercise our aesthetic capacities" (Boal, 2006, p. 18).

### Overview of the Workshop Process

Each of our workshops involved intensive experiences that introduced the rudiments of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed process using a graduated sequence of basic acting games, image-making exercises, and scene improvisations. An elder began each day with a prayer in the language of the community. After her prayer, she spoke to the youth about norms for respectful participation and engagement that included the removal of any electronic devices that would interfere with communication



with those who were present and that would affect the workshop environment. Sitting in a circle, we introduced ourselves in turn and asked participants to introduce themselves. We then provided an overview of the work to come. Once the introductions and the overview were completed, we asked youth to participate in trust, group-building, and theatre games. “Blind” games help develop trust as participants close their eyes and move around the room. These games encouraged the participants to pay attention to senses we normally ignore. Participating in games helped youth express their ideas and feelings, developed group cohesion, and encouraged trust, bringing together those who do not normally associate with one another, either in school or in the community. Trust and group-building games also established our relationship with the youth and set the tone for the remainder of the time working with them (including subsequent workshops). 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. For example, a name game helped us establish an environment of playfulness as we got creative with our names, adding an adjective with the same initial letter as our first names, including a motion to describe ourselves. One of the researchers started the game by identifying himself as “Wonderful Warren” while dramatically opening his arms. Everyone repeated Warren’s name with the adjective and the motion. All participants, including the facilitators, introduced themselves in this manner causing much laughter and a subsequent lowering of barriers. In this way, the workshop created a space for “playful education” (Rasmussen & Wright, 2001). As Rasmussen and Wright point out, what is important about these exercises is that they are played “to help the youth rediscover how to relax, express themselves playfully, and enjoy themselves” (paragraph 30). The rules of the game enabled the youth to decide how to act and express themselves. It is important to note that, for some youth, this game was very challenging. Assigning an adjective to describe themselves was a difficult task for some. Often other youth would help their peers find an appropriate adjective. Although the game was stressful for them, it also promoted group cohesion when other participants would step forward to help their peers.

We briefly introduced the youth to moulding the human body to create images of actions, conflicts, or symbolic meanings. Then we guided the participants in constructing images of health concerns, as well as images that depicted community strengths, unique community power

dynamics, and perceptions of risk in situations such as parties. These images were configured as still body shapes or video freeze-frames, and used as a platform for animated short stories about a particular situation.

After each game, we sat in a circle to debrief the activity. The debriefing time provided space for youth to reflect on their own expressions, thereby providing new thoughts to act on in their lives outside the workshop creating a spiral of thought and action (Courtney, 1990). Most youth participants talked very little when we debriefed activities. Some were surprised that we wanted to hear their opinions. Yet, we observed many youth move from silence to one-word responses to sentences and more over the course of the workshops.

In the context of decolonization, the workshop process was important. We modelled equity when we used a circle in talking with the youth. We had equitable expectations as all who were present were expected to participate in the games and activities, including the adults. We strove to structure the workshops in a developmental manner, so the games and activities moved from simple to more complex forms, from easy to more challenging games, and from undemanding to more challenging theatre activities. This developmental approach built group trust and gave the youth confidence to think creatively and to act on the world. When some youth were reluctant to participate at the beginning of the workshop, we gave them time to observe while continuing to invite and encourage them to participate. We observed these youth—as they became willing to risk more—slowly integrating themselves into the activities. We also observed that the workshop process moved youth from fear to testing, as a form of agency, and on to trust:

<b>From fear</b>	<b>To testing (agency)</b>	<b>To trust</b>
Of leaders and workshop	Us	With us
Of self in relation to self and peers	Themselves	With themselves and peers
Of doing something new	Activities	Positive risk taking

Games were central to our work with Indigenous youth. The chaos of play put their bodies in a living relation to the environment and transformed the relationships between the youth, their peers, and their world. A process of transformation occurred as play broke the frame between the body and the world. Participants experienced what they described

as overwhelming energy, which results in what Thompson (2006) terms a “filling of the body” (p. 48) that stimulates feelings of aliveness that spills out into immediate engagement with others in the room. These games involved, paradoxically, both rules and creative freedom: “without rules, there is no game, and without freedom, there is no life” (Boal, 2006, p. 4). The restrictions in games allowed for small, initial steps of creative thinking and problem solving in an artificial situation.

When Mackinlay (2005) worked with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a performance classroom, she concluded that,

if we are really serious about social justice, empowerment and self-determination for Indigenous Australian peoples in educational practice, then a performed, performative and embodied approach to pedagogy is a good place to begin thinking, moving and dancing towards decolonization (p. 121).

In our workshops, participation in the games and theatre activities helped youth explore different facets of themselves, which may normally have been subdued. We created situations sufficiently and strongly structured to be safe to build up a pattern of relationships within the group. This, in turn, created the security to take risks. The games and theatre activities enabled each participant to explore and express the self—in stepping forward, being the center of attention, being the leader, making decisions, and thinking creatively.

### Theatre Workshops Create Spaces for Decolonization

Indigenous peoples deal with the effects of colonization while living in a society of ongoing racism and oppression. Consequently, our participants reported that they reproduce rigid lateral oppressive relationships in their interactions with peers. Although schools have the potential to be sites of decolonization (Goulet, 2005), as institutions, they often act as agents of colonization so youth commonly resist engagement in learning. However, our Indigenous youth participants were enticed to participate in theatre workshops because the activities were both physical and fun. Participants focused on the games and forgot about being self-conscious as they became active. They used their bodies, exercising their atrophied physicality, and worked through their own fears, especially of negative peer pressure.

## Physicality and Fun

Our workshops started with an activity to explore the space, paying attention first to the physical environment, then focusing on the social environment. While youth moved around the space, they were instructed to move differently while noticing themselves, the space, and others around them. Movement of self in relation to others in the physical environment put youth into their bodies. There was laughter as youth moved through the nervous energy of being in a new place with unfamiliar leaders doing unfamiliar activities. As one of the youth said,

[The workshop] had all these activities and we were up and it's physical. It used kind of everything, like all of our senses, like it was physical. It was emotional .... We're having fun, and we're up, and we're moving around, and it was outgoing that way (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

In school, learning is often a passive activity, so youth were attracted to the physicality and holistic nature of the learning in the activities. They were able to participate equally because the activities did not require proficiency in the physical skills used in sports. The fun of being in their bodies with others engendered positive feelings in themselves and in their relationships with others:

I think it was fun and energetic .... It just flowed .... I felt happy .... It's a good feeling (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Fun was not frivolous in our workshops. Often in our Western society, play and fun are contrasted with work and responsibility, so play and fun are often seen as chaotic and frivolous, and, therefore, non-productive. In contrast, in the context of colonization, fun is potentially disruptive (Linds, Yuen, Goulet, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2009, p. 54). In our work, fun and laughter not only acted to initiate and sustain youth engagement in the activities, they were culturally appropriate in that most Indigenous communities value laughter and humour. The ability to laugh is an important behavioural mechanism for surviving daily acts of oppression as well as healing from past and ongoing traumatic events. It is a traditional way of being for the Cree, Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, and Saulteaux people who inhabit the FHQTC area. For example, in the presence of adults who were engaged in problem solving or in discussing serious educa-

tional issues, the late elder James Ironeagle from the Pasqua First Nation would tell a funny story or say something to make the participants laugh. He did this deliberately, reminding us not to take our human existence too seriously, to appreciate the full range of life's emotions, and to enjoy life and each other, even when dealing with serious issues.

Fagan (2005) describes the multiple functions that humour serves in Indigenous communities. In addition to being a pedagogical tool and a means to create social cohesion, humour can also function as a form of lateral violence. She describes how Indigenous people, including elders, often use humour to coerce other Indigenous people into behaving in ways not of their choosing. Our youth participants were keenly aware of this, and we reminded them that in these workshops we laugh *with* each other, not *at* each other. Laughter, then, became about sharing, not coercing, to build healthy, positive peer relationships among those with whom it was shared.

### Self-Expression as Decolonization

Maple (1990) describes her many years in residential school as “very rigid and strict. Individuality was never recognized. Because of this, feelings, emotions, and opinions were suppressed, so writing became an outlet for expression” (p. 171). Like Maple, Tait (2003) explains how former students of residential schools found it hard to express themselves and their emotions (p. 81–2). Given that our youth participants spent their formative years surrounded by residential school survivors, it is unlikely that healthy self- and emotional expression was modelled for them. Oppression stifles our ability to express feelings, opinions, ideas, and actions that say who we are as people in this world. Just as Maple found expression through writing, the theatre processes that we used created a space for self-expression for the youth. Self-expression was an important aspect of overcoming the constraints of oppression. Particularly important were the games that situate participants in their bodies where they felt, thought creatively, and expressed themselves through action. These games had an internal structure—clear boundaries for action set by rules. Consequently, the structures created a safe place for youth to practice living in a controlled space that was not actual reality. In this safe space, youth took the small, initial steps of decision making and creative thinking as individual and collective action. Barker (1977) explains that the “control achieved through release in play frequently

creates a confidence which can be carried over into real situations in the world outside. Games are a means of education and personality growth" (p. 103). He argues that healthy relationships are only possible when one has enough self-confidence to stand alone without depending on someone else for security. One must be open to offers in order to be able to react fully to the flow of demand and response implicit in all relationships, but, at the same time, not to respond in a way that denies one's own identity. The youth said that the games helped them express themselves and to "get out of their box" of oppression. One student had particular insight on how that was achieved in the games:

People are kind of sheltered in and it's hard to let that emotion out without being afraid that people are going to judge you .... I struggle so hard with expressing myself and when I can't express myself, it's like you're lost kind of ... I think people need to learn [self-expression] to find ways to let themselves out instead of keeping it in. I think that's what's hard, the hard part about it. But through your games, you guys were letting us out that way. Like we were actually coming out, but [the youth] didn't know it .... cause we're just trying to have fun, but yet we're letting it out (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

### Healing as Self-Determination

Oppression imposes decision making by others. English-Currie (1990) compares her upbringing at home, where extended familial relations were embedded in the culture, with the relations she experienced at residential school. Growing up on the reserve, "[w]e matured rapidly and we became adept at determining our own actions and making our own decisions, while being sensitive to the expectations of the collective and of our elders" (p. 50). Children learned to be responsible for themselves at a young age before they went to school. Decision making changed drastically at residential school, where as English-Currie states, she was under the strict control of others with a subsequent loss of her sense of autonomy: "Once in residential school, I learned to close out and build defences, which affected my performance after leaving this setting .... Suddenly, there was a loss of individual privacy and personal decision-making" (p. 52).

If Indigenous youth are to be members of a self-determining community, they need to practice making decisions to determine their own actions and the actions they take as part of a collective. Practice allows them to become consciously aware of the consequences of their actions, both to themselves and to others. Our theatre workshops created a simulated environment that allowed for the practice of making decisions in a safe space.

That's how it is in real life, even though these were just games—I didn't learn about decision making, like should I make a good decision or bad decision, I just learned how it felt [to make a decision] (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Often in health education, we think about the information youth need to make healthy choices, without giving them the chance to practice their knowledge in situations that resemble real life.

### Physicality and Trust

According to Lightening (1992), Indigenous people believe that learning must be experienced in the body if it is to be effective:

Learning is not a product of transferring information between a teacher and a student. It is a product of creation and re-creation, in a mutual relationship of personal interaction, of information. It is not just a cognitive (mental) act, but an emotional—thus physical—act. Learning is felt (p. 232).

The establishment of trust was a crucial part of the drama workshops because feeling requires trust and the ability to take risks since “play can be physically and emotionally dangerous” (Geertz, 1973, p. 82). Much of the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, in going over one's head. Nicholson (2002) acknowledges that trust is a difficult concept to define, as it is something that happens in practice, not in theory. She sees trust as “between belief and expectation, commitment to a person or situation, responsibility for oneself, co-operative behaviour, and care for others” (p. 82).

The drama process was contextual, contingent on the participants, the content and the physical, social, and emotional space. As Nicholson notes, in the drama process “relationships of trust are correspondingly multi-layered ... [where we] find ways of working which demonstrate

reciprocal respect for each others' physical, emotional and intellectual well-being" (p. 83). The games and drama activities require the use of the body in interaction with others. So trust in the workshop relates to how the youth relate to themselves, to the content, to the leaders, and to each other, first physically, then emotionally and socially, and finally intellectually. Because "trust is enacted and is embedded in the complexities of a local culture, which is in itself open to change and renewal" (p. 84), it is always performed, contingent on the moments and contexts, and continually re-negotiated. Trust is a response to moments of uncertainty and risk.

The theatre workshop space gave youth a place to depart from the normal day-to-day interactions where they are subject to strong pressure from their peers to conform to certain behavioural norms (Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Arnason, 2009). These strong group bonds are a survival mechanism for any group suffering from the effects of colonization and having to deal with oppression on a daily basis. At the same time, this conformity also serves to stifle self-expression, as youth do not want to be ostracized by their peers, especially in a small community where choices for social relationships are limited and also potentially life-long. The arts offered youth an opportunity for self-expression. Different art forms can be solitary, but drama is a social form, done as performance, so the audience can see something of itself or others expressed in a make-believe world. As indicated earlier, the social nature of drama appeals to youth who like to do things with their friends and who are motivated by their peers. But at the same time, the performative nature of interactive drama requires risk taking, which requires participants to act confidently. One participant explained: "Drama, it's physical. People are watching you. It's about confidence, self-esteem" (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Trust is both an attitude to uncertainty and a process to deal with risk. To develop trust in the group, facilitators needed to understand the social context and educational context in which we worked and how participants' previous experiences related to the drama. Engendering trust in the group involves a "nurturing of confidence within the individual that facilitates the growth of belief in the group. Conversely, it is the support and acceptance of the group which enables the group to trust" (White, 1998, p. 190). Trust is related to action: "what is important is not the sincerity of feelings of trust but the particular actions associated with trusting relationships" (Nicholson, 2002, p. 87). In our workshops, these



relationships involved the creation of a safe space where risks could be taken. An ethic of trust does not mean that there will always be agreement, but that a caring environment will create a robust environment in which debate, dissent, generosity, and artistic experimentation might be encouraged and valued.

### Physicality and Agency

“Agency for learners is not about their forceful posturing in the classroom but rather about an awareness of the discursive restrictions and enablements made on them about what it means to be a learner” (Walshaw, 2007, p. 71). The physicality of the drama and trust games drew youth into action, into making decisions as the games required them to choose to act in a certain way, sometimes with the group, and sometimes as the person “in the middle” making choices about who to pick or how to respond. For example, youth were required to be creative when they stood in a circle and tossed an imaginary ball around. When the individual received the imaginary ball, she or he had to physically interact with it to transform it into a different ball before passing it to another in the circle—all done non-verbally. The game required that the youth think creatively as they played with the imaginary ball and with others in the circle. One participant emphasized the importance of action: “It’s a good way to make people actually do stuff, not just sit around, not be shy, like be out—stand out and all that stuff” (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Oppression is enacted through power relationships where many decisions are made outside Indigenous communities. The lack of power and access to resources brings with it a sense of malaise and induces a feeling that one lacks choice in one’s own life, that one is “boxed in” with no choice for youth except to go along with the crowd, because “that’s the way it is on the reserve” (Goulet et al., 2009). As we progressed through the drama games and trust exercises, we moved into dramatic techniques, such as Create the Image where youth first created visual story images just by the shape into which they put their bodies, and then told stories by creating body shapes in different positions relative to each other. Sometimes the images were concrete such as the representation of a ball game or a fight, while other times they were very abstract as when youth created something that looked like a tightly assembled table that represented the strengths of their community. In

these activities, youth were challenged to act in unfamiliar ways because creating an image required them to think creatively and metaphorically, to step forward, and to use their bodies in action.

We're having fun so it wasn't so hard to get out there and step up and get out of our little box, but it was hard, cause you were kind of scared, that you were going to [create an image] that didn't look right or something (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Youth were fearful of others' judgements when asked to act differently than usual, but the demands of the games and drama activities invited them to step out of their boxed-in bodily space of oppression and to enact their agency as individuals. Fun and laughter with peers provided some of the impetus to act. However, moving physically into unfamiliar territory was still a frightening proposition. To overcome this fear required the creation of a space where youth could become confident enough to overcome their fears and act.

### Creating an Empowerment Space

Aitken (2009) contends that, "as participants became more engaged, they could take more responsibility for serious decision making and be given more opportunities to express opinions and deal more directly with the difficult issues at hand" (pp. 524–25). A critical notion we explore in our work is how we, as adults, educators, and facilitators, can create a space for decolonization. As we strive for a decolonizing process, we need to be mindful that we are attempting to "disempower ourselves as leaders in order to provide the empowerment space" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 13). As Aitken (2009) points out, "this notion of 'empowerment space' is created by the conscious renegotiation of power relations" (p. 505) between facilitator and student. Paulo Freire's theories of empowerment are useful here. To him, empowerment is a creative, dialogical process of action and reflection. It is only possible when we engage with the youth's reality: "The educator, rather than deposit 'superior knowledge' to be passively digested, memorized, and repeated, must engage in a 'genuine dialogue' or 'creative exchange' with the participants" (Freire quoted in Blackburn, 2000, p. 8). Thus, rather than being an end point to achieve, empowerment in the relationships with Indigenous youth in the workshops is "an ongoing encounter with reality, which is itself permanently changing" (p. 5).

In our workshops, we strove consciously to use a leadership style that invited participation and shared authority rather than imposing control of youth. Youth recognized the difference in our leadership approach as illustrated in the question asked by one of the youth:

How do you guys—this is cute—how do you guys stay so nice? Cause when the kids act up in there, none of you like—you're just calm about it. You don't get mad or anything (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

In fairness to teachers, part of the reason we were able to use an inviting style is that we always had more than one facilitator at our workshops to interact with youth. We could therefore take a more indirect approach to influencing behaviour by asking a student to join in, or by standing beside or between youth who had lost focus. Having a leadership team also allowed us to be more observant and thus more responsive to the energy in the group. While one person was busy leading, the others could observe the participants' responses. We would often change the agenda to incorporate unplanned games or activities. When youth lost focus, we would play a game that required focused attention. When they became restless, we would shift into an activity that allowed them to release energy or refocus on a quieter activity.

Our leadership also incorporated aspects of shared leadership, a leadership style used by effective teachers of Indigenous youth (Goulet, 2005). In shared leadership, we would try not impose our interpretation of reality. As youth participated in games and activities, we asked for their responses afterward in a circle and accepted all responses. Many youth did not participate in the debriefing of the games. They were more forthcoming in the interpretation of the images. Before youth created their images, we, as leaders, modelled the response of multiple interpretations to an image that we had created, stressing that the interpretation did not have a right answer. As each individual brought his and her experiences to the interpretation, he and she saw different realities represented. Thus, different interpretations of one image were not merely allowed, but were expected. After some youth had created images, we asked the others to tell us what they saw in the images, what they thought was going on, and sometimes to give a name or a title to a particular image.

When youth created images, they were required to think imaginatively in order to represent their lives. If we as leaders had named or

interpreted those images, it would not have provided youth the opportunity to think for themselves, to bring their own meaning to their reality. In the creation and interpretation of images, the individual “always maintains some possibility for creative action, interplay and agency ... faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up” (Foucault, 2001, p. 340). This occurred throughout the workshop as all participants in the power relationship are capable of action. In their creation and interpretation of reality through image work, youth experienced autonomy in the construction and production of knowledge: “We could find our own hidden meanings in what you guys were trying to teach us .... It was good. It was challenging that way too” (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

In most current schooling practices, youth are not accustomed to being asked to think for themselves—to interpret, to make sense of, and to bring meaning to their reality (Linds & Goulet, 2008). The youth were aware that the process we were using was different and they liked to be involved in this way, but they also found it challenging. As we asked youth to respond to games and activities, to create stories, and to interpret them, they were required to think for themselves, an act that is not encouraged in situations of oppression:

[In the workshop] we’re more creative because it’s drama. We’re thinking about all sorts of things, like what we can do with that, and we’re thinking about physical, we’re thinking about the emotional, how it looks, how it feels (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Interactive drama constitutes a holistic approach to learning, so it can address the all-encompassing nature of colonization. The mind and body, the internal and external—all are integrated as youth think creatively, and then act upon their thinking as reflected in the following youth comment: “There were creative ways to help us open up inside, like to get out there” (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

The dramatic creative space sets up possibilities for decolonizing experiences when it asks youth to think for themselves, to use their bodies, and to exercise their imaginations as they make decisions for actions. Nicholson (2005) asserts that “drama is a good vehicle through which participants might experiment with different identities and test out new ways of being” (p. 82). Rather than discuss transformation in

drama work, Nicholson recommends that we talk about “transportation” where we take a group to an outcome:

It is about travelling into another world, often fictional, which offers both new ways of seeing and different ways of looking at the familiar. As British theatre director Tim Etchells has said, performance is about “going into another world and coming back with gifts” (pp. 12–13).

In Indigenous communities where the oppression is more pronounced than in other Canadian communities, this “other world” needs to be a space of moving beyond oppression to one of decolonizing acts and empowerment. One caution when doing work aimed at decolonization is the possibility of reproducing oppression conditions or relationships. Poulter (1995) writes: “if the oppression inherent in the playing of a game is experienced as a reality, then it is every bit as real as an oppression experienced outside of the group situation in the ‘real’ world” (p. 21). As we strove not to replicate oppressive relationships, we made our use of games transparent as an exploration of power dynamics. One game in particular that Boal (1992) names “Colombian hypnosis” (p. 63) involves one partner’s “hand” guiding the “head” of another around the room. When youth began the game, we let them lead in whatever way they chose (within the boundaries of the game and the workshop norm of keeping self and other safe while taking risks). Then we added directions such as, “lead respectfully”, “lead in a mean way”, “lead in a fun way”, and “both of you lead at the same time”. In using these adaptations and in debriefing the game, we introduced the concepts of power over, power under, and power with. We also explored different approaches to leadership, including the notion of payback when the partners take turns leading. Furthermore, we raised the potential of collaborative leadership and discussed these ideas in relation to the theme of our workshop.

### Dramatic Imaginative Space as Experiencing Freedom

In a community marked by continuing colonial relationships and ongoing systemic racism, people close ranks to protect themselves from oppressive forces. At the same time, the macrostructures of colonization are reproduced, along with the retention of cultural forms, in the microcosmic relations of the community. Schools are institutions within the community that tend to reproduce hierarchical decision making in

content and process while emphasizing individual achievement. In the individualistic, competitive environment of schooling, youth need to represent themselves in ways acceptable to their peers and to protect themselves from peers who make disparaging remarks. Youth talked of peer pressure as a health issue. They conformed to peer-group norms or faced rejection or ridicule. In the imaginative space of the workshops, being playful allowed youth to suspend the imposition of peer conformity:

Like people [youth] came in here [to the workshop space] .... From what I see in class, they're all snobby and like don't act themselves, but then when we went to this workshop, everyone's acting fun and, I don't know, all nice—nice people (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

The imaginative space enabled the suspension of the oppressive relationships that youth experience in school. Youth told us that the workshop created a feeling of freedom, especially when compared to the usual learning atmosphere of the regular classroom.

In class, it's you have to be quiet, you have to listen, you have to sit down and do your work. But [in the workshop] were having fun, we're learning what we want to learn, we can take in whatever we want. [In the classroom] it's just basic: you got to learn to spell this word, you got to learn to write this certain way. [In the workshop] we can take in what we want, right? So that's what I mean by freedom (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

The feeling of freedom and the lack of pressure to act in a certain way allowed youth to be more expressive. They felt that they could express who they truly were. These moments of decolonized freedom differed from the top down learning inherent in schooling. Holcová says that

the game isn't about communicating some information or teaching, but about an offer: "See what it does so you're prepared for when it comes for real." The games awaken emotions, emotions mobilize energy and the need to invest energy leads the participants to discover themselves (quoted in Martin, Franc, & Zoukova, 2002, p. 58).

As they were drawn into the fun and expressiveness of the workshop, youth shed the identities they use in resistance to oppressive relationships. In the words of one participant:

In class [the youth] don't step up. When we have these circles in class, we won't say anything. Here [in the workshop] we were stepping up in these games and wanting to play and we didn't care who we were playing with. Usually, you know how some people are sexist, in class it's boys and boys, and girls and girls. Everybody's in their own little clique with their attitude. Here we didn't just choose our friends. We could just be who we are. We could take off our masks (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

The safety in the space was created by the imaginative and dramatic physicality of the workshop. Because the workshop was theatre-based, the youth were put in a unique position: although they could be their authentic selves during the workshop, when they returned to the classroom they were able to protect themselves by denying that it had truly been them in the workshop situation. They were able to claim that they had acted a particular way because the game or activity put them into a particular role. In this way, they were able to keep themselves relatively safe when they went back into the classroom and returned to the day-to-day oppression that marks their lives in Canadian society.

### Leadership as Sharing Learning

In our workshop, autonomous decision making was explored through youth leadership. In the games and other activities, we practiced and talked about leadership and what it meant to be a leader. Youth expressed their difficulty with being a leader in their interviews:

The hardest things were the leadership activities because it's hard to get out there. Like we're so afraid we're going to make a mistake and people are going to laugh at us (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Activities that singled out a youth to be an individual leader often resulted either in his or her choosing to withdraw from the activity or finding an adult to follow. Youth did participate fully in and liked the experience of leadership when it was embedded in the activities of a game

or when it was a collaborative form of leadership. It may be that joint leadership is safer or more in line with the traditional leadership style of Indigenous communities in which decision making was more dispersed. At the same time, youth had a slightly different perspective than the researchers in how they interpreted leadership:

I learned a lot about leadership .... I don't know how I would say that. It's just like a feeling that makes you feel like you're a leader or you're a better role model for the younger people and it changes you to a better person (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

Youth interpreted the concept of leadership as becoming a better person by incorporating the Indigenous value of seeing leadership as giving back to others. Most reported that they could picture themselves in a leadership capacity, working with younger children:

[The workshop made me think] about pursuing and helping out with kids and continuing with drama .... It gave me more confidence to be more open and learn to have more fun (participant interview, 18 March 2010).

As colonization restricts so much of the lives of Indigenous peoples, imposing rigidity on the mind and body, having the interest to lead others in action, and the confidence to be more open, are key aspects of decolonization.

### Closing Thoughts

Like Conrad (2010), "we believe there is potential for the freedom achieved through [theatre] practice to leak out into performance of social relations in everyday life—a rehearsal for future action. This offers hope for the creation of autonomy, agency, and the possibility of radical freedom" (p. 139). Colonization was a process of confinement and restriction of Indigenous peoples—confinement to reserves, confinement in residential schools, restriction of movement and economic activity, restriction of decision making and thinking, restriction and denial of cultural, artistic, and spiritual expression. Colonization and oppression continue to be aspects of our daily lives, with the most devastating effects impacting Indigenous communities. The history of colonization is embodied in each of us. Thus, as Boal (2006) observes, oppression atro-



phies our bodies, and, as Freire (2007) underlines, oppression colonizes our minds and stifles our ability to act on the world.

Interactive drama offers youth moments of decolonization as they are drawn into the activities through the playfulness of games. In the dramatic space created by the games and the drama activities, they lose themselves in the fun and their bodies are able to let go and move beyond the tightness of oppressive relationships. They feel what it is like to be a leader and to make decisions. As they experience the joy of freedom to be, they are challenged to think creatively, to express themselves, and to create their own meanings. They become actors in and on the world.

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