

Thursday, March 31st 9:00am – 10:00am EST

Smallest Circles First: Using drama education and theatre to explore reconciliatory praxis in Quebec classrooms

Presenters: Dr. Mindy R. Carter and Jennifer Hayden, McGill University



This research talk considers if drama education and theatre can be catalysts for enabling pre- and in-service teacher's agency around bringing Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) calls to action for education into their classrooms because "teachers are recipients insofar as they inherit the discourse put forth in teacher education programs and across the curriculum...[but] they become interpreters of the curriculum who are in a position to reproduce, disrupt or negotiate the limitations of a singular Canadian narrative and the Settler agenda" (Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook & Kane, 2020, p. 48 in Phelan, Pinar, Ng-A-Fook & Kane, 2020). While the Quebec arts curriculum and TRC offer justifiable means for the inclusion of reconciliation pedagogy in elementary to University classrooms, the experiences of the participants in the research vignettes presented illustrate the real challenges, ethical engagements and realities of this work. Susan Dion, Potawatomi scholar, describes how primarily racialized white, middle-class, female teachers are in teacher education programs and the profession, and how this positionality allows for a "perfect stranger syndrome" in which Canadian educators are comfortable acknowledging Indigenous injustice, as long as they can position themselves as not a part of the system that marginalizes Indigeneity or requires personal responsibility (as cited in Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook & Kane, 2020, p. 45 in Phelan, Pinar, Ng-A-Fook & Kane, 2020). Thus finding a way to resist actively engaging in the praxis of reconciliation is a hurdle that must be overcome. In this research, the drama classroom and theatre rehearsal space provided the educational site/liminal space to "do the work" of reconciliation praxis. De-centralizing dominant Settler discourses was a focus of this preliminary work as participants were exposed to: counter-narratives to Settler Canadian history and geography, the implications of systemic racism and colonization, feminist and post-racial theories, political, social and economic ramifications of governmental policies, and their own positionality and decolonizing process(es) in the development of socio-emotional connection(s) through drama education and theatre concepts.

Additional inter-personal skills such as negotiation, seeing another's point of view, spatial awareness, pacing, embodied learning, self-regulation, resiliency, and empathy were also described as kinds of learning and (un)learning that took place. In this way, there was a turn in the pedagogical space distinguished by Gadamer (1997) as the difference between experience as reconstruction and experience as construction. This research also points to a need to end the reification of using drama education as an opportunity to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes" because of the harm that appropriative actions can have when this statement is taken up uncritically. This means the following questions need to be asked:

- "What does respecting historically marginalized people's experiences mean for drama and theatre education?"
- "How does intention affect the actor's subjective bracketing process when creating a character, in order to 'step into someone else's shoes'?"
- "Is it ethical for a human to perform as non-human animal, in order to understand posthuman phenomenology through performance?"

To take up these concerns, an autophenomenological framework is proposed as a way to account for the significant understandings that were articulated by participants and collaborators during this research. This is not linear work, it is relational, and presenting it through a step-by-step process may take away from the recursive nature of this potentially iterative process because of the emergent understandings that may occur in Step 3 when an audience views and responds to the performance. This requires a commitment from participants to continually live relational engagements as becoming(s) and affects (i.e. performances of engagements with hope), which are essential for teachers who are victims of their training in that they are often taught to instruct but, not to engage.

About the Presenters:

Mindy R. Carter, PhD is an Associate Professor and Director of Teacher Education Programs in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University (Faculty of Education). Carter's SSHRC and FRQSC funded research focuses on using drama and theatre education to explore critical societal issues, teacher agency and curriculum through arts based educational research. Carter is the recent (2021) recipient of the ARTS publication award through CSSE and her latest book "Smallest circles first" will be released Spring 2022 by The University of Toronto Press.

Jennifer Hayden, a native New Brunswicker, moved to Montreal to do her studies at McGill in 1998. She completed her Bachelor of Elementary Education in 2003. After graduation, she built the music program at Verdun Elementary School, an inner city school in the Montreal area. During her 11 years at Verdun, she built a comprehensive program including a band program. Due to the poverty levels in Verdun, this program would not have been possible without the CARRA Band-Aid Grant Verdun received. To celebrate this award, the Verdun Elementary Band played at the Hard Rock Cafe with Montreal great Gregory Charles. Jennifer also has a Master's Degree in Culture and Values in Education

from McGill. She has two articles published in education journals in Canada and the US, and continues to guest lecture at McGill in the Education faculty. In 2013, Jennifer received the Quebec Music Educator Association's "Music Teacher of the Year Award". In 2014, Jennifer transferred to St. Edmund Elementary in Beaconsfield, Quebec, where one of her focuses is on teaching for social justice through music.