

Implementing Readers Theatre as an arts-based participatory research method in exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of our experiences implementing Readers Theatre within the study “Asian-Canadian youth identities in a pandemic era: Arts-based research”. Led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou, Principal Investigator (PI), this research uses arts-based methodologies (visual arts and dramatic arts) to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian-Canadian youth identities (Khanlou et al., 2021). As part of the ongoing research, two virtual Readers Theatre workshops were conducted with 24 Asian-Canadian youth aged 16-24. The participants were divided into four groups of six youth and asked to create Readers Theatre scripts illuminating the impact of the pandemic on Asian-Canadian youth and their wellbeing. Preliminary findings from the virtual workshops highlighted mental health challenges, complex family dynamics, and the resilience of Asian-Canadian youth. The Readers Theatre scripts were rich in cultural references and personal narratives and facilitated meaningful dialogue among youth participants. This method proved effective in capturing the identities and experiences of Asian-Canadian youth during the pandemic, offering valuable insights for youth-centred practice, policy, and scholarship.

Keywords: Arts-based methodologies, youth, identity, drama, Readers Theatre, COVID-19.

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Introduction

This article provides an overview of our experiences as Youth Peer Leaders implementing Readers Theatre as a method for arts-based knowledge co-production and dissemination. The Readers Theatre was part of the study “Asian-Canadian youth identities in a pandemic era: Arts-based research” led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant. This research aims to use arts-based methodologies to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian-Canadian youth identities, sense of belonging, and agency. The project is overseen by an Advisory Committee consisting of Asian-Canadian youth, researchers, and community representatives, including the authors. Through an equity-informed lens, findings from this research will be used to inform youth-centered practice, policy, and scholarship.

One of the arts-based methodologies used to explore our research objectives is Readers Theatre. Readers Theatre is a form of drama in which participants read aloud a script which they may have co-authored (Khanlou et al., 2022; Pardue, 2004). Typically, this form of drama does not involve the use of performance, scenery, or costumes (MacRae & Pardue, 2007). Readers Theatre performances are often followed by a group discussion about the messages conveyed through the scripts (Khanlou et al., 2022).

Research Methods

This research builds on an earlier study funded by the SSHRC Insight Development Grant titled “Arts-based participatory research approach: Potential for exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities through an intersectionality lens” that was ongoing when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (Khanlou et al., 2019, 2021). In light of the pandemic, all in-person research activities were moved to a virtual format. The study highlighted the challenges and negative experiences faced by Asian-Canadian youth participants and the need to explore these challenges in greater depth, ultimately leading to our current study.

The current research involves conducting individual interviews using visual arts-based methodologies (self-portraits and relational maps) and two workshops using drama-based methodologies (Readers Theatre). After completing the visual arts interviews, youth were invited to participate in the Readers Theatre workshops. As Youth Peer Leaders and members of the Advisory Committee, we (M.A. and A.G.) led two virtual Readers Theatre workshops. Workshop participants included 24 Asian-Canadian youth aged 16 to 24, of whom eight identified as male and 16 identified as female.

During the first virtual workshop, participants took part in icebreaker activities and were introduced to the concept of Readers Theatre and instructions for the workshop. Before creating their scripts, youth engaged in a discussion guided by the following questions:

1. What are the intersectional influences (such as age, gender, racialization, migrant status) on youth’s sense of self during the pandemic?
2. How do youth negotiate their day-to-day challenges and build resilience during a global pandemic?
3. What impacts, if any, are being brought about on the social relations of Asian-Canadian youth by the pandemic?
4. What can we learn from youth through ABR methods to inform youth-centred practice, equity-informed policy, and transdisciplinary identity theory and methodology?

The youth were then divided into four groups of six participants. Three of the four groups were homogenous and consisted of participants of Indian, Chinese, and Filipino descent, respectively. The fourth group included youth from all three cultural backgrounds. The participants were asked to create a Readers Theatre script on the topic of Asian-Canadian youth identities in the context of the pandemic. Specifically, each group created a drama script in a setting of their choice that illuminated the impacts of the pandemic on their health and wellbeing as Asian youth living in Canada.

In the three weeks between the first and second workshops, youth connected virtually and continued writing and rehearsing their scripts with their group

members. During the second workshop, the groups presented their scripts to the audience with each participant reading out aloud their part in the play. The youth also discussed the inspiration behind their scripts with an audience composed of other participants, Youth Peer Leaders, and members of the research team. Audience members were encouraged to pose questions, share personal connections, and engage with the scripts presented.

Reflections on Readers Theatre Implementation

Workshop Preparations

In preparation for the Readers Theatre workshops, we connected with the youth facilitators of the previous arts-based participatory research study led by Dr. Khanlou during the COVID-19 pandemic (Khanlou et al. 2019) and described in Madzima et al. (2020). The facilitators (S.M. and A.K.) recommended using open-ended icebreaker questions to establish rapport between Youth Peer Leaders and participants. During the first workshop, youth were asked to share what cultural identity meant to them and what their greatest learnings were from the pandemic. This strategy fostered a comfortable atmosphere that encouraged fulsome participation and sparked ideas that groups incorporated into their scripts. New strategies implemented during this study included a semi-structured agenda and flexible template on a shared Google Doc, that participants leveraged to create their scripts. Together, these strategies proved to be effective in creating an engaging workshop series where participants could connect with one another and explore their identities in a meaningful way.

Workshop Delivery

Embracing technologies such as Zoom and Google Docs greatly enhanced the delivery of the Readers Theatre workshops. To respect the privacy of youth participants, the workshops were restricted to invited participants and the research team.

During the first workshop, participants were split into breakout rooms to build rapport and start writing their scripts. This hands-off approach allowed youth to think creatively and confide in one another without interruptions from the research team. The proactive progress made by participants on their scripts eliminated

the need for email reminders from the research team between workshops.

During the second workshop, participants used the Zoom chat function to share comments while groups presented and reflected on their scripts. The virtual format enabled multiple conversations on the topic of Asian-Canadian youth identities to occur simultaneously, without disrupting the overall flow of the workshop. Moreover, the virtual format reduced the “stage fright” that some participants may have felt presenting a script in an in-person workshop. Some youth also commented that the chat options in online workshops are an accessible way to encourage participation. Keen et al. (2022) have highlighted the merits of digitizing qualitative research methods, including virtual focus group-based research. Similar to their findings, we observed that the virtual format “accessed marginalized populations and elicited notable rapport and rich data” (Keen et al., 2022).

Workshop Limitations

The discussions were kept open-ended to promote creativity and depth in conversations. However, it led to time constraints, reflecting the findings of Madzima et al. (2020). The virtual format also made it difficult to gauge non-verbal cues, which presented challenges in understanding participants’ comfort and engagement. To address these issues in future workshops, extending the duration and incorporating structured check-ins could provide better support, while ensuring adequate breaks to prevent digital eye strain and fatigue (Kaur et al., 2022).

Arts-Based Methodologies

We found that arts-based methodologies allowed youth to express complex themes in a nuanced way, which may not have been possible with more traditional research methods. Participants were given a high-level topic (i.e., Asian-Canadian youth identities in a pandemic era) and template but no further constraints, resulting in four very different scripts. Grouping participants who had similar cultural backgrounds produced unique scripts that shed light on the impact of family dynamics and cultural expectations on youth identities. In contrast, the heterogeneous group’s script centered around a narrative from one specific group member’s lived experience, while other participants contributed additional layers from their own stories. Some groups

also included humor (e.g., phrases from other languages, specific cultural references, etc.), making the narratives engaging and multifaceted. Ultimately, Readers Theatre highlighted the diversity of participants' individual perspectives within a shared cultural framework.

Following each presentation, participants were invited to share the inspiration behind their scripts. This sparked conversations amongst the audience, with youth providing insights into their lived experiences and forming genuine connections with other participants. These reflections were informed by participants' intersectional identities, including their cultural background, gender, and age. During the discussions, it was evident that participants resonated deeply with the themes highlighted within the Readers Theatre scripts. As Youth Peer Leaders who also identify as Asian-Canadian, it was meaningful to witness their passion and ability to forge connections through shared cultural experiences.

The success of the Readers Theatre workshops highlighted the importance of creating supportive avenues for youth expression. This format provided a platform for engaging with challenging topics such as Asian representation, mental health, and societal expectations, while fostering friendships and camaraderie among participants. As such, Readers Theatre has revealed itself to be a valuable method for exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities.

Conclusion

Readers Theatre shows promise as an effective methodology for understanding Asian-Canadian youth identities. This approach offers a unique platform for youth to reflect on topics such as mental health, family dynamics, and cultural expectations, revealing the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives. The virtual format of the workshops, guided by Youth Peer Leaders, provides a supportive environment for youth expression and creativity. Readers Theatre thereby demonstrates the potential of arts-based methodologies in exploring the identities of Asian-Canadian youth. Findings from the research can inform youth-centered practice, policy, and scholarship, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of youth identities in a pandemic era.

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