

Benefits of Readers Theatre: An inclusive, participatory, arts-based research approach with youth

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Abstract: Readers Theatre is an inclusive, arts-based research approach that can be utilized for data collection and data generation. We discuss six benefits of using Readers Theatre in research that was conducted on understanding the experiences of Asian Canadian youth and identity during times of heightened racial tension. The benefits of using Readers Theatre with youth include 1) Readers Theatre privileges the first-voice; 2) it is low-stakes; 3) it is inclusive with direct benefits; 4) it actively engages youth in multifaceted ways; 5) it captures details, feelings, emotions and nuances; and 6) it embodies a participatory approach that enhances validity. Readers Theatre is a novel and engaging approach to qualitative research data collection with youth that offers a way for youth to resist stereotypical discourses and better explore cultural identity within racialized youth.

Key words: Readers Theatre, youth, identity, arts-based research.

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Readers Theatre (RT) is a versatile, drama-based approach that has been used in various areas, such as education and health, as a pedagogical tool, as well as a research method (Bafile, n.d.). This arts-based approach has been used with diverse groups, ranging in age, gender, race, and abilities and is seen as a non-invasive, accessible, and inclusive technique for teaching-learning and data collection (Khanlou et al., 2022; Mastrothanasis et al., 2023). In this paper, we will discuss the benefits of using Readers Theatre as a research method for generating data with youth and, in particular, racialized youth. These observations are based on our work as co-investigators on two research projects involving Readers Theatre and Asian-Canadian youth through an intersectional lens (Khanlou et al., 2019; 2022a). The first study (a SSHRC IDG funded study) assessed the feasibility of individual and group level arts-based methods (script writing and performing Readers Theatre) as a participatory and youth centered knowledge transfer (KT) method to explore hyphenated youth cultural and migrant identities in the Greater Toronto Area. While the second study (a SSHRC IG funded study) examined Asian-Canadian youth identities during times of racial tension (i.e., growing anti-immigration sentiment, anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic), and also explored the feasibility of engaging youth in arts-based research. Although these projects involved multiple arts-based approaches, in this article, we specifically focus on the benefits of Readers Theatre.

There are different ways that Readers Theatre has been applied in research studies, but in our research projects, the youth were involved in writing the scripts that they would eventually read. Because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual workshops were held so that the youth could work in groups, in order to develop the scripts safely (more information on the process of developing the scripts can be found in Khanlou et al., 2019; Khanlou et al., 2021, Khanlou et al. 2022a and in this issue of INYI (Adil et al., 2025/2026). We will discuss six benefits that we have observed in this work: 1) Readers Theatre privileges the first-voice; 2) it is low-stakes; 3) it is also inclusive with direct benefits; 4) it actively engages youth in multifaceted ways; 5) it captures details, feelings, emotions and nuances; and

6) it embodies a participatory approach that enhances validity.

Privileges the first-voice

In Paulo Freire's Culture Circles (Freire, 1970/2005), which are the basis of critical pedagogy, participants in the circles are co-investigators, along with the formal educators/researchers who lead the group in a critical exploration of the lived realities of the members of the marginalized community. The educators, or researchers, gather the words and phrases that have meaning for the members of the marginalized community, then present them back to those members, in order to take them through a process of critical awareness concerning their realities. Within a critical pedagogical approach, the essential elements of an oppressed people's lived realities, as well as the meanings that they make of these situations, are unearthed and decoded in a process of dialogue that is facilitated by the leaders of these circles. What results is an investigation where "people are no longer seen as things or objects [to be studied], but as real subjects of their own history" (Piedade & Messas, 2025, p. 191). Thus, researchers don't impose the researcher's words, themes, directions, or interpretations on those members, but rather investigate them in association and dialogue with the participants themselves. In a similar fashion, Readers Theatre can be suitable for allowing youth to name, develop, and explore their own themes and the way they see the world, provided that they are given a significant role in generating and interpreting these.

In our second study (Khanlou et al., 2022a) which was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, thirty-two Asian Canadian youth participants, were divided into groups of six participants, in order to provide them the freedom to discuss their experiences with minimal involvement from the research team. This allowed the focus to be on the youths' narratives and perceptions as they developed their scripts. Engaging in Readers Theatre, the youth had the opportunity to name and explore their own themes and world views and also develop scripts that privileged their voice and experiences. In this approach, youth were able to refine meanings through multiple re-writings, thus

ensuring that scripts represented their experiences and interpretations.

Low-stakes

Readers Theatre is an accessible approach for youth as a method for generating data and is considered low-stakes, since the focus is on the dialogue and on what is said, rather than shared between the script and the movements and costumes (Khanlou et al., 2022). With Readers Theatre, youth do not have to memorize lines, or focus on performance (Stewart Freeman & Welsh, 2024); thus, it is not as threatening. This minimizes pressure on youth to perform and helps distil the essence of thoughts, language, and meaning, in order to best convey their experiences. With the performative expectations removed, youth could concentrate on what they would share in the discussion with other participants and how to put these thoughts into the scripts collaboratively. In addition, the ability to work in small groups means that the responsibility for developing the script is shared, rather than an individual responsibility.

Inclusive with direct benefits

Readers Theatre can be designed so that it is inclusive in its engagement. Through its group formation, Readers Theatre gathers youth together who have something in common, and by that very nature, Readers Theatre is inclusive as the youth know that they are working with others who have had similar experiences. As discussed, in our own studies (Khanlou et al., 2019; Khanlou et al. 2022a), the youth who participated in these projects shared an Asian Canadian background as well as a condition of being racialized. Working within an environment where one feels a sense of being welcomed and belonging also has its benefits, as youth may feel more able to think about and willing to share complex ideas and express vulnerabilities. Thus, youth may build confidence in participating in an inclusive setting, and giving them a public voice, in a safe environment. Some instances of Readers Theatre have also incorporated culturally-appropriate ways of expression into their production, such as rapping or drumming, thus validating the culture and strengths of minority youth (Stewart Freeman & Welsh, 2024).

Actively engages youth

Readers Theatre can be deemed more engaging for youth than individual interviews, which is the traditional method for data collection in qualitative research. Readers Theatre can be an active way for youth to express their ideas, allowing all participants to contribute to a group research process, rather than just the most vocal youth. For example, in our own research, youth participants and peer leaders expressed deep identification and passion with the themes and shared experiences that were featured in the Readers Theatre scripts (Khanlou et al., 2019; Khanlou et al. 2022a).

Captures details, feelings, emotions and nuances

With Readers Theatre, youth can convey emotions, feelings, nuances, complexity, context and multiple perspectives much better than in a focus group or individual interviews (Glesne, 1999; Slade, 2012). This is especially important in knowledge dissemination, where this emotion and nuances can be conveyed. The views and interpretations of youth can be presented in context and “for the institutional ethnographer the details [provided by Readers Theatre] provide important clues to the social organization of power” (Slade, 2012, p. 402).

In addition, Readers Theatre can allow youth to tackle topics they might otherwise feel hesitant or reluctant to describe, or to discuss difficult and sensitive topics, without actually having to name these. For example, in our studies, Readers Theatre allowed the youth to create a script about difficult topics such as intergenerational conflict, mental health stigma and racist attitudes among peers, and teachers, without confronting or challenging anyone, or directly labelling these others as racist (Lirish et al., 2026; Van et al., 2026). In addition, youth who may not have fluency in English, and may be restricted by their lack of language skills, may be helped to express exactly what they want to say, by other youth, during the re-working of their scripts. Thus, Readers Theatre captures details and nuances in the way it engages youth in these complex discussions.

Participatory approach enhances validity

At times, Readers Theatre can enhance validity in a better way than traditional theatre-based research.

As Seko et al. (2022) has discussed, in many theatre-based research studies, little is known about how much input into the final script the participants have been given, before the scripts are shared with audiences. In addition, in other approaches, interviews are conducted with participants and scripts are developed from the interview transcripts; yet these interviews and scripts are inevitably filtered through the analytic lens of the researcher(s) (Slade, 2012). To enhance validity, some of these researcher-developed scripts may be presented back to participants for feedback and validation, similar to member checking (Seko et al., 2022). When such researcher-compiled scripts are shared back, youth participants can modify them, and this becomes a method of validating research findings before being presented (Seko, et. al., 2022).

However, in our case, the participants themselves were enlisted in developing the scripts (Arellano et al., 2026; Lirish et al., 2026; Queenie et al., 2026; Van et al., 2026); thus, enhancing their validity, as it allowed the unfiltered voices of youth to be heard. In addition, when youth are able to work collectively to compose the scripts, it enhances validity, since this becomes a composition of multiple perspectives, rather than just one person's. Glesne (1999) describes Readers Theatre, as a means "to juxtapose the voices of research participants, to present multiple perspectives together, and to exemplify the complexity of a phenomenon" (p. 189). Thus, the scripts in Readers Theatre can be worked over collaboratively by multiple youth participants, in order to ensure authenticity.

Conclusion

Readers Theatre is a valuable, inclusive, participatory methodology whereby youth get to reflect upon, listen to, and ultimately de-code their realities, in a similar way to Freire's (1970/2005) Culture Circles and Augusto Boal's (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed. In this fashion, youth are helped to achieve *conscientização* or critical awareness (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 67; Seko, et. al., 2022, p. 2154). Readers Theatre is a novel, engaging, and appropriate approach to qualitative research data collection that offers youth a way to subvert and resist stereotypical discourses, and may enable research to better explore cultural identity of, and with, racialized youth.

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