

**Implementing Readers Theatre in Arts-Based Research on Youth Identities:
Reflections from Youth Peer Leaders and Facilitators**

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Abstract: This article presents reflections from Youth Peer Leaders and Facilitators on implementing Readers Theatre (RT) as an arts-based methodology for exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on two virtual RT workshops conducted with 24 participants aged 18-24, we explore how RT facilitates creative expression, peer connection, and collective meaning-making among Asian-Canadian youth. We reflect on the ways in which RT enables youth to articulate complex experiences of isolation, resilience, intergenerational tension, and cultural belonging that traditional qualitative methods may not fully capture. We discuss methodological considerations for conducting dramatic arts-based research in virtual settings and the pedagogical value of participatory approaches. The reflections highlight the potential of RT to elicit narratives that deepen our understanding of identity formation and inform equity-centered, youth-inclusive research and practice.

Keywords: Arts-based methodologies, dramatic arts, Readers Theatre, youth identity, participatory research

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Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on the lived experiences of diverse communities, including Asian-Canadian youth. The study, *Asian-Canadian Youth Identities in a Pandemic Era: Arts-Based Research*, led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou (Khanlou et al., 2022), aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian-Canadian Youths' individual and collective identities through visual arts and dramatic arts research methodologies.

One of the phases of our research utilizes an arts-based research method called Readers Theatre (RT). RT is a form of drama in which participants read aloud a scripted narrative to an audience that they themselves have written as a group, often on a topic that resonates with them (Pardue, 2004). This form of drama typically does not make use of performance, scenery, or costumes (MacRae & Pardue, 2007). Given that participants often contribute to writing RT scripts, this method provides opportunities for meaningful reflection and discussion on the topics covered within a narrative.

As part of our study, two RT workshops were conducted with 24 Asian-Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 24. Participants identified as Filipino-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, or Indian-Canadian and were divided into groups accordingly. A fourth mixed group was composed of youth from each of the three backgrounds. Both workshops were facilitated by two Youth Peer Leaders (M.A and A.G.F) and attended by all participants and members of the research team as previously described in Adil et al. (2024). During the first workshop (February 2024), participants were introduced to RT, engaged in a prompt-based discussion about Asian-Canadian youth identities, and divided into groups to brainstorm ideas for their script in a breakout session. Between workshops, participants continued to collaborate with members of their group and write their RT scripts which they submitted to the research team. During the second workshop (March 2024), participants presented their RT scripts to the other groups and the research team virtually. The contents of their RT scripts highlighted the diversity and resilience of Asian-Canadian youth as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its personal, academic, social, and economic implications (Adil et al., 2024).

Following each presentation, group members reflected on the topics and themes of their scripts with other participants and the research team.

On March 3, 2025, the youth groups presented their RT scripts and reflected on the RT process during a virtual conference as part of Inclusion Week organized by the Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion at York University, in partnership with our Office of Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health (OWHC). The youth RT script event titled *Centering youth cultural identities through participatory research: Learnings from Asian-Canadian youth engagement through Readers Theatre* engaged a diverse audience of students, academics, researchers and community representatives across Canada and the USA in a meaningful and rich discussion on inclusion, belonging, COVID-19 and implementing Readers Theatre as an arts-based participatory research method in exploring youth identities. The event details can be read on *Highlights: Inclusion Week 2025* available [here](#). The event was also discussed on YFile York University's journal campus newsletter and can be read [here](#).

Perspectives on Practice: Reflections from Youth Peer Leaders and Workshop Facilitators

The following reflections, authored by YouthAre Project Workshop Facilitators/Trainers and Youth Peer Leaders examine our experiences facilitating and engaging in Reader's Theatre (RT) workshops with Asian-Canadian youth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectively, these narratives underscore the methodological and pedagogical potential of arts-based research in fostering youth participation, resilience, and identity exploration. Through our respective roles as Workshop Facilitators/Trainers and Youth Peer Leaders, Maisha Adil, Allan Galli Francis, Negar Alamdar, and Sheena Madzima provide insights into how RT can cultivate inclusive spaces for storytelling, self-expression, and community-building. Our reflections reveal how creative, participatory approaches not only deepen understandings of intersectional identity and belonging but also inform more equitable frameworks for youth-centered research, education, and policy development.

While we shared a common purpose in facilitating these workshops, each of us entered the process with distinct experiences, insights, and cultural connections that shaped our engagement. Our reflections represent these personal vantage points through the unfolding of the Reader's Theatre process. Together, we illustrate the diversity of meaning-making that emerged, revealing how collaboration across different identities and disciplines can transform research, policy and community-building.

Maisha Adil (Youth Peer Leader)

As a Youth Peer Leader and member of the *YouthAre* Project's Advisory Committee, my co-facilitator Allan Galli Francis and I had the pleasure of facilitating two RT workshops with youth participants. During the workshops, youth were incredibly candid about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their self-concept, mental wellbeing, and social relationships in a way that I have rarely seen described in the literature. I believe the effectiveness of RT emerges from the ability of youth to express individual and collective experiences in a creative and low-pressure setting. In addition to exploring complex topics through the dramatic arts, youth developed peer-to-peer relationships with both the Youth Peer Leaders and their fellow participants. The workshops were accompanied by a sense of kinship and camaraderie that produced richer scripts and reflections and strengthened the quality of the data collected during the workshops. Further, as an Asian-Canadian myself, I saw my own lived experiences reflected in the RT scripts presented during the workshops. This allowed me to engage more deeply with participants and the scripts themselves as I progressed through the workshops and strengthened our facilitation skills.

We later presented our research at the Children, Youth, and Performance Conference in Toronto, Ontario, on June 22, 2024 (Adil & Galli Francis, 2024). The theme of the Emerging Ideas Roundtable was *Theatre, Education, Wellness, and Community*. During the Roundtable, we had the opportunity to introduce RT, our workshop methodology, and preliminary findings to the broader research community. We engaged in meaningful discussions with other academics on the significance of RT in the context of youth's creative expression and mental wellbeing.

Our most recent knowledge translation initiative was the *YouthAre* Virtual Conference on March 3, 2025 (*YouthAre* Conference, 2025), as part of Inclusion Week organized by the Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion at York University. In preparation for the conference, Allan and I planned a presentation on RT and supported youth in polishing their scripts. It is worth noting that the theme of Inclusion Week was *The Paradox of Inclusion*, challenging us to consider the true meaning of inclusion and its strengths and limitations in improving human wellbeing. RT is uniquely positioned to support qualitative data collection in an inclusive way, given that the methodology does not require the use of performance, scenery, or props. Further, one's age, gender, ability, ethnic or cultural background does not preclude their participation in RT. Rather, youth participants in our workshops took it upon themselves to integrate non-English language phrases and specific cultural references into their scripts. Given the varied lived experiences of Asian-Canadian youth evidenced through the scripts, findings from RT and similar dramatic arts-based methodologies cannot be generalized to the broader population. However, RT can help tell stories that may be difficult to capture through interviews or focus groups, and for this reason it is incredibly valuable as a data collection methodology.

Allan Galli Francis (Youth Peer Leader)

I was also responsible for facilitating two RT workshops and served on the *YouthAre* Project's Advisory Committee alongside Maisha Adil. The RT workshops showed me how useful arts-based methods can be for research. Delivering a dramatic arts methodology in an online format was a novel challenge that saw us exploring ways to make the workshops inclusive yet engaging. The online format, especially the use of the Zoom chat function, provided an accessible way for youth to share comments and engage with the material, which some participants noted was less intimidating than presenting in person. Not only that, but it was fascinating to see the youth engage in the use of cultural references and explorations of shared family dynamics. The diversity seen in the creative process reinforced that the term Asian-Canadian encompasses a wide spectrum of distinct experiences.

My main learning experience, however, came from the challenge of presenting this work at academic events like the Children, Youth, and Performance Conference and York University's Inclusion Week. Both events required us to take the nuanced, creative scripts developed by the youth and translate them into a structured format suitable for an academic audience. Sharing our experiences helped us further reflect on what worked and what didn't. It was a reminder that the project's work didn't end in the workshop. It is equally important to share these findings responsibly in forums where they can contribute to youth-centered policy and scholarship, which is a core goal of the study. RT is a methodology that is worth exploring further in arts-based methodologies and sharing our findings in conferences, journals, and academic events.

Negar Alamdar (Workshop Facilitator and Trainer)

My involvement in this project and its two workshops, which used arts-based methods—particularly Reader's Theatre—provided layered insights into how Asian-Canadian youth express identity. I first participated as an Interviewer and later as a Workshop Facilitator, gaining different perspectives on youth voices and experiences. The interviews were conducted after the lockdown, while the workshops—organized during and following the pandemic—illuminated intersectional dynamics, strategies for building resilience, evolving social relationships, and the vital role of arts-based methodologies in both research and policy development.

I also helped facilitate the *YouthAre* Virtual Conference: *Centering Youth Cultural Identities through Participatory Research—Learnings from Asian-Canadian Youth Engagement through Reader's Theatre*, on March 3, 2025 (*YouthAre* Conference, 2025), during Inclusion Week at York University. My role included reading alongside youth participants as they performed their own scripts. These scripts—written and enacted with passion—captured generational tensions, aspirations for inclusivity, and the determination to stand strong together. The energy of the youth contributions underscored how meaningful and transformative this work was for both participants and audience.

One of the most powerful aspects of facilitating these workshops was witnessing the intentional effort youth made to connect with one another and process their lived experiences through creative expression. By crafting and performing self-written, self-directed scripts, participants exercised agency over their narratives, using performance as a way to embody and communicate their stories. This process not only provided a platform for articulating complex emotions and knowledge but also fostered mutual understanding, empathy, and solidarity within the group. Rehearsals and performances became sites of deep reflection, where storytelling, identity exploration, and collective meaning-making came together—highlighting the transformative potential of arts-based methodologies in both research and community-building.

Ultimately, these workshops demonstrated how arts-based methods can lower barriers to participation, reveal the diversity and microcultures within Asian-Canadian identities, and underscore the importance of equity-informed policies that embrace nuance. They showed how arts-based research bridges personal reflection and collective expression, offering fresh insights into identity formation within multicultural societies.

Sheena Madzima (Workshop Facilitator and Trainer)

My involvement in the pilot project, *An Arts-based Participatory Youth Engagement Knowledge Mobilization Project on Asian-Canadian Youth Identities: SSHRC IDG* (Khanlou et al., 2019) provided the foundation for my continued engagement in arts-based facilitation and research. In this earlier project, I worked as a Youth Facilitator and contributor, guiding participants through creative exercises and later reflecting on our collective experiences in my paper, *Arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the Greater Toronto Area: Sharing some implementation experiences from the field* (Madzima et al., 2020). This initial exposure to arts-based participatory methods deepened my understanding of how creative expression fosters dialogue around belonging, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation among Asian-Canadian youth. Building on that experience, my subsequent role as a Trainer and contributor in the RT workshops within the current project has given me a layered

perspective on how youth articulate their identities during the pandemic and post-pandemic recovery. As participants shared their experiences of isolation, resilience, and reconnection, I gained deeper insight into intersectional influences, evolving social relations, and the broader value of arts-based approaches for both research and policy.

Identity expression varied not only across individuals but also within cultural subgroups. For example, a Filipino-Canadian group in the RT workshop incorporated native language, costumes, and intergenerational themes into their script. This allowed them to explore identity through overlapping influences of ethnicity, migrant history, gender roles, and family expectations. Other groups, composed of participants with different Asian cultural backgrounds, gravitated toward broader themes of hybrid identity and belonging in Canadian society. These differences show how intersectionality shapes the depth and direction of self-expression: monocultural groups could dive into intimate cultural nuances, while mixed groups highlighted the underlying negotiation of day-to-day challenges between diverse Asian cultures and, in turn, the negotiation of their own Asian-Canadian identity within themselves. The pandemic amplified these intersections by forcing youth to navigate identity through unique circumstances, sometimes limiting embodied cultural practices but also opening new forms of self-discovery and solidarity within their immediate communities.

As youth navigated life, education, careers and a critical stage of identity formation during the pandemic, they often balanced the expectations of immigrant parents with the realities and challenges they were facing, a tension heightened by racial discrimination and the rise in anti-Asian sentiment. Gender roles also became more visible within families during lockdowns, as young women often carried additional caregiving responsibilities, while young men navigated pressures around academic or career performance. To cope with these pressures, youth developed resilience through digital connectivity, and many also found communities within the workshops when they unraveled shared experiences through collaborative scriptwriting over a virtual meeting. This allowed a low-stake creative outlet for them to process complexities together, ensuring a safe space

to communicate authentically. Youth also highlighted how the pandemic reshaped social relations: isolation deepened reliance on family, sometimes intensifying intergenerational conflict but also paving the way for restorative conversations. Together, these experiences reveal how the pandemic simultaneously hindered and expanded Asian-Canadian youths' opportunities for identity expression, resilience-building, and community connection.

Arts-based methods ease the constraints of traditional evaluation, fostering an environment where participation thrives in open communication. They also reveal microcultures within broader categories like 'Asian-Canadian', reminding practitioners that identities cannot be flattened. At a policy level, these findings underscore the importance of equity-informed approaches that recognize intersectionality, ensuring that youth programs do not simply generalize across cultures but instead allow space for nuance. For theory, these workshops reveal how individual identity formation connects to cultural belonging and illustrates the way arts-based methodologies can bridge personal reflection and collective expression, offering transdisciplinary insights into identity in multicultural societies.

From Reflections to Readers Theatre

The reflections shared by us as members of the *YouthAre* Advisory Committee, specifically as Youth Peer Leaders and Workshop Facilitators/Trainers exemplifies the dynamic, challenging, and profoundly collaborative nature of Readers Theatre in practice. It is from this rich soil of shared experience and embodied discovery that the four Readers Theatre scripts, which form the core of the INYI Journal special issue, have emerged. The insights, tensions, and moments of connection recounted in the preceding section are woven into the fabric of these texts. Therefore, we present the youths' RT scripts as starting points in an ongoing conversation about fostering youth identity and belonging through the arts.

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