

**YOUTH, POWER,
PERFORMANCE**

Applied Theatre with Systemically Marginalized Youth

Diane Conrad

Foreword: Risk More, Dream Bigger, and Connect Deeply

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Collectively, the world is just beginning to comprehend the educational, social, and societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal and collective socio-emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. This is amidst an increased stratification of the wealthy and poor, who are contending with rising housing, food, and other costs. Alongside such realities are looming concerns about the impacts of Artificial Intelligence on job precarity, and the need to reckon with historical legacies of colonial frameworks and institutions that have undergirded the violence and systemic fallouts that have impacted the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. In these bleak times, such reckonings feel deeply connected to the environmental extremes such as ice storms, earthquakes, and floods that are occurring across the Earth.

How can anyone make sense of the enormity of our current realities? How can one contend with times such as these without feeling overwhelmed, afraid? Perhaps, returning to the self, to reflect and ruminate deeply, as some folks had the opportunity to do during COVID-19 lock-downs, is a way that one can consider where we/they have been, to respond to this moment in conscious, kind, and hopeful ways. This book represents a deep response in the arts education context, a response that is a beacon for our dark times, reminding others that a single life's work charted across time can make a difference to the individual, and to the communities that one is a part of.

Recently, Cindy Blackstock, member of the Gitxsan First Nation, who is a social worker, co-founder of First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, and professor at McGill University, iterated that 'academia and activism should co-exist', that we should not 'just publish another paper ... Let's do something' (cited in Rynor, 2023, para. 2 and 7). For Blackstock, one's work in academia must be tied to change beyond the *ivory tower*. Arguably, *Youth, Power, Performance: Applied Theatre*

with Systemically Marginalized Youth is an example of how Dr. Diane Conrad's life work is also about connecting beyond academia through applied theatre.

'What is it about drama, or applied theatre processes specifically, that capture youths' imaginations for envisioning possibilities and increasing their sense of agency?' This question, at the centre of Dr. Diane Conrad's book, is a synthesis of the twenty-plus years of research that she has conducted across several research sites, contexts, and projects in the areas of applied theatre and applied theatre research. By offering examples of applied theatre as research practice, Conrad explores notions of social change, transformation, and empowerment through specific examples from her career, discussing the potential of empowerment through performance in a range of educational settings.

It is not often that a scholar takes the time, or has the opportunity, to reflect on their extensive research projects from the perspectives of an educator and artist, with almost 40 years of experience in these areas. As Conrad writes:

Applied theatre is often focused as much on the participatory theatre process as it is on any theatrical product or performance (Kaplan, 2022; Santiago-Jirau, 2022). The roles of performer and audience are sometimes blurred with participants, at various times, taking on the roles of audience for their fellow participants' performances, and/or with audience members, at more formal performance events, sometimes invited to directly intervene in the action on stage. Applied theatre aims to address social issues relevant to the community with which it engages; it tells the stories of those people who have often been silenced (O'Connor & Anderson, 2015).

Youth, Power, Performance: Applied Theatre with Systemically Marginalized Youth offers several significant contributions to the field of applied theatre and beyond. Extrapolated from Conrad's book, the following offerings are highlights of her contributions, in the context of working with marginalized youth:

Collaboration: The collaborative nature of applied theatre creates a context in which youth can flourish. In Conrad's work, collaboration is discussed in relation to participants working in peer groupings that can sometimes be fraught with conflict. It is applied theatre that creates a supportive, non-judgemental s/place in which young people can work together towards a common goal.

Seeing oneself in a new role: Taking on a role helps one to experience distance from oneself, while simultaneously understanding the experiences of another. This autophenomenological space allows one to see something not only *as if* for the first time, but *for the first time* (Carter, 2022), and offers participants an opportunity to reframe not only their own lived experiences but to consider belonging in new ways.

Affective expressions: Drama and theatre offer actors opportunities to play, to be in their bodies, to engage socio-emotionally, and to put their own ways of thinking at stake. It takes risk and courage to express oneself through dramatic play, and the full expression of being that this engagement requires changes the individual deeply.

Claiming agency: When one shares their story and takes responsibility for their voice and actions, they are given an opportunity to claim/reclaim agency. Youth in this book are empowered in their own contexts as a result of being given a space to share their stories and to have them heard.

Dialogical performance: Through applied theatre, youth are provided opportunities to come to better understand their own life experiences and aspects of the lives and struggles of other youth in deeper ways.

Cultural production: Meaning-making through performing is a way of enacting resistance and hope. While applied theatre research cannot address youths' problems directly, it can raise awareness of injustices.

Tensions and ethical considerations: Conrad reflexively acknowledges the tensions and ethical considerations that arose during her applied theatre work, rather than ignoring them.

These seven strands represent some of the synthesizing ideas that Conrad's twenty-plus years of working with youth in applied theatre contexts have highlighted – as the ways that applied theatre can contribute to the empowerment of marginalized young folks. I believe that Conrad is calling all of us, through the examples she offers, to: Risk more, dream bigger, and to connect deeply with ourselves and others, by moving beyond community towards a disposition of being and belonging, where:

at the core of community [is] belonging, or feeling connected in and through time...one of the great values of belonging to any group with a purpose is that we act with other people, for the benefit of other people, knowing that we could not accomplish anything without other people. (Clarkson, 2014, p. 73 in Carter, 2022, p. 114)

In *Smallest Circles First: Exploring Teacher Reconciliatory Praxis through Drama Education* (Carter, 2022), belonging is being with an ongoing commitment to hope (p. 117). Being while belonging is when:

belonging is the deep essential hope that one experiences in connection to all things. Anishenabeg. Affecting and being affected by experiences is not a choice, it is a part of belonging and offering one's own truth when the time for speaking or action is in season. (p. 119)

As I have theorized in my own work, using drama education with pre- and in-service teachers to foster agency, being and belonging is a movement beyond time and community that Conrad's work illustrates through the facilitation of close listening, attunement to the needs of a group, which sees power not as 'domination and control over others ... [but as] creative and life-affirming' (hooks, 1984, p. 84).

Perhaps because she identifies with being a potentially at-risk youth in her own childhood, Conrad is able to hold a space of love, care, and hope in her applied theatre projects with marginalized youth. Perhaps she seeks to be a light in the challenging times in the lives of those she works with so that she can learn what it means to connect more deeply with herself by working alongside others. Whatever the reason for the motivation of this work, it is an exquisite offering to the literature and body of work of applied theatre research with marginalized youth and beyond that encourages us all to risk more, dream bigger, and connect deeply in each moment we have.

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