

“The way it works” doesn’t: Theatre of the Oppressed as Critical Pedagogy and Counternarrative

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Abstract

This paper presents data from a study examining the use of *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a critical pedagogy and research method for exploring notions of identity, belonging, and culture with francophone secondary students (Schroeter, 2009). It describes the process whereby Black African–Canadian students with refugee backgrounds identified their program, as well as their language, citizenship status, and race as factors limiting their imagined social futures (New London Group, 2000). The paper finds that students used their identities, symbolism, and ambiguity to challenge authorized discourses and show how their identities intersected in their educational experiences.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, Theatre of the Oppressed, refugee youth, identity.

Précis

Cet article présente les résultats d’une étude portant sur l’usage du *Théâtre de l’opprimé* (Boal, 1985) comme pédagogie critique et méthode de recherche pour explorer les notions d’identités, d’appartenance, et de culture avec des étudiants francophones au

secondaire (Schroeter, 2009). Il décrit le processus par lequel des étudiants noirs, d’origine Africaine, et ayant vécu des expériences de réfugiés ont identifié leur programme, ainsi que leur langue, citoyenneté et race comme des facteurs limitant leurs futures sociaux (New London Group, 2000). L’analyse révèle que les élèves avaient recours à leurs identités, au symbolisme, et à l’ambiguïté pour confronter les discours dominants qui circulaient dans leur école.

Mots clés : pédagogie critique, Théâtre de l’opprimé, réfugié, identité.

Creating spaces in schools for students to tell us (their teachers, administrators, and educational researchers) about the problems they face in school entails taking the risk that we may be told things we do not want to hear. After all, who wants to learn that their efforts to meet students’ needs have accentuated feelings of marginalization? However, creating such spaces is important if we take seriously Freire’s (1997) idea that in order for education to become liberating, students must be involved in examining oppressive social realities. While providing a venue for students to name the problems they face in school may not be liberating for all students (Luke, 2011), doing so can enable educators to learn about the ways students interpret their experiences. Engaging students in these conversations in a meaningful manner is not a straightforward process; innovative pedagogies are needed to garner student interest, as are research methodologies that can capture complex, fluid, and dynamic school contexts and identities.

This paper presents data from a study (Schroeter, 2009) in which I facilitated a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) (Boal, 1985) workshop with a class in Western Canada, primarily composed of Black African–Canadian¹ youth with refugee backgrounds. Framed by Freirean critical pedagogy (1997), TO was used to engage students in discussions about problems they faced in their school and community. These discussions then formed the basis of dramatic explorations of notions of identity, belonging, and culture. Elsewhere (Schroeter & James, 2014), critical race theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) is used to analyze how students’ talk in interviews and class discussions provided counternarratives (Delgado, 1995) to the authorized discourse of multiculturalism and colour blindness circulating in the school. This paper expands on these findings by describing the process of the TO workshop, and by explaining how drama enabled students to use “productive ambiguity” (Eisner, 1997, p. 8) to construct a complex counternarrative about the ways citizenship status, language, and race intersected and shaped their educational experiences in Canada. An analysis of skits and a Forum Theatre play performed by the students, as well as class discussions, provides insights about the challenges students with refugee backgrounds face in Canadian schools, and how the programmatic decisions made on their behalf enhanced their feelings of exclusion.

1 All the African–Canadian students in this study also identified as Black. For readability, I refer to them simply as African Canadian; however, their race is integral to their participation and the discussion presented here.

Theoretical Frames

In this study, TO (Boal, 1979/1985) was used as a critical pedagogy for exploring notions of identity, belonging, and culture with students of diverse backgrounds. TO's founder, Augusto Boal, draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's (1970/1997) ideas about conscientization, social transformation, praxis, and dialogic education. Like critical pedagogy, TO aims to develop the critical consciousness of participants in a way that enables them to recognize and challenge social structures that oppress, so as to transform social structures. Boal subscribes to Freire's idea that emancipation comes about through conscientization, a process wherein people learn "to perceive the social, political and economic contradictions and take action against the oppressive elements of their reality" (1997, p. 19). In essence, Freire argues that when individuals decide to free themselves from oppression, social transformation is only possible through praxis, joining political action to thoughtful reflection. In his dialogic model of education, which he pits against traditional teacher-centred models, students participate in selecting curriculum and teachers become co-investigators who join students in their quest for knowledge and social transformation.

Boal (1985) draws parallels between education and conventional theatre by recognizing that like education, theatre is political, as it reflects and reproduces the values held by a society at a given time. This parallel extends to his analysis of the role of the audience. Boal contends that conventional theatre reproduces hegemonic ideals of culture by constructing narratives in relation to which spectators remain passive agents. While the audience may empathize with characters in a play, they do not share their struggle, nor do they analyze the actions in the play beyond determining whether or not they enjoyed the show² (Babbage, 2004). For Boal, this is problematic because it separates the viewing of a play from its analysis.

In Forum Theatre, Boal (1985) proposes staging social problems and inviting the audience by way of the "Joker"—a person acting as an intermediary between the audience and the play—to participate in finding solutions. Audience members are transformed from spectators to "spect-actors." Boal believes that thus empowered, the spect-actors become stakeholders in the play's action and recognize the problems it presents as ones they encounter in society. Boal contends that by participating in Forum Theatre,

2 Although this is not true of all theatre audiences, there are certainly some for whom this is the case.

spect-actors practice strategies that can be used to transform power relations that structure their lives outside the theatre, rendering it "a rehearsal for revolution" (1985, p. 122).

While critical pedagogy has been deeply influential in North America, it has also been critiqued by theorists drawing from cultural studies (Luke, 2000; New London Group, 2000), feminist studies (Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994; Weiler, 1994), and critical race theory (Delpit, 1988). Newer iterations of critical pedagogy resituate learning in the gendered, raced, and classed bodies of students and teachers, and demand that the power relations and ideologies that structure relationships within the classroom be explored in addition to those operating in the larger society. These critiques are significant because critical pedagogies adopted in multicultural contexts like Canada must account for students' different experiences of oppression.

Significantly, CRT scholars argue that race and racism have a strong bearing on the lives of people of colour in North America (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995; Gillborn, 2006; Razack, Smith, & Thobani, 2010). CRT challenges liberal ideals of meritocracy, colour blindness, neutrality, and objectivity by exploring the ways in which racism is systematically maintained by inequitable and exclusionary policies and practices (Gillborn, 2006). In education, CRT scholars extend their critique of liberalism by revealing how the neoliberal policies implemented in schools have resulted in further marginalizing and excluding students of colour (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Their work encourages us to examine inequity within a context of racism (Howard, 2008) so that we may analyze how the comments made by youths of colour relate to systemic exclusion. In Canada, a dominant discourse on multiculturalism presents the country as one in which people and institutions are colour blind and race has no impact on a person's ability to succeed (Razack et al., 2010; Stasiulis & Jhappan, 1995).

More specifically, literature on youths with refugee backgrounds reveals that racism significantly impacts the educational experiences of this diverse group (Bigelow, 2010; Kanu, 2008; Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002). Moreover, Kanu (2008) has found that teachers and administrators often do not know how to address the needs of these youths, who have significantly lower graduation rates than their North American and immigrant peers (Bigelow, 2010; Kanu, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011). It is thus imperative to learn more about their factors contributing to their educational difficulties if we are to improve the experiences and outcomes.

Research Design

The study was particularly concerned with the identities and experiences of African–Canadian students with refugee backgrounds. This focus was chosen because studies often group the experiences of youths with refugee backgrounds with those of immigrants, despite the different educational opportunities and outcomes that exist for both groups (Kanu, 2008). Nevertheless, the study necessarily looked at the identities and experiences of Black and White Canadian students, as well as those of their teachers and my own as a White, bilingual, Canadian woman and university researcher. Drawing on qualitative research traditions in education, social anthropology, and theatre, a case-study methodology (Stake, 1995) was adopted for this project. In keeping with this design, a range of data collection methods were used to attend to the complexity of the research site, while focusing on the students' interactions in the TO workshop.

The methods used included ethnographic methods of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Spradley, 1979), such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews; elements of participatory action research (PAR) (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; MacPherson, Arcodia, Gorman, Shepherd, & Trost, 1998), where participants were actively involved in selecting the issues to be explored in the TO workshops; and arts-based research methods (Finley, 2005; Norris, 2009), which view art making as a valuable form of knowledge production. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of four weeks at Maple Hill Secondary,³ located in a Western Canadian city. Fieldwork was roughly divided into two parts: an ethnographic phase, in which I attended and observed two different classes and had meetings with the teachers, guidance counsellor, and administrators; and an arts-based research phase, in which I facilitated the TO workshop in both classes. Elements of PAR were present throughout. Extensive field notes were gathered during the fieldwork, whereas interviews, class discussions, and drama activities were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed later.

Analysis centred on recursive readings of the field notes, interview transcripts, TO activities, and Forum Theatre plays. Initially, the data segments were manually colour-coded to identify recurring broad themes relating to the original research questions. Related literature in refugee studies, CRT, and minority language education in

3 The names of the school, program, and participants were changed to protect confidentiality.

Canada was reviewed again, and the data was reread several more times to narrow the themes. Three categories related to negotiating differences emerged from this process: 1) programmatic decisions made by administrators and teachers; 2) belonging to the Francophone community, and 3) the intersection of race, class, and gender.

The Ethnographic Phase

Maple Hill Secondary is a large English school in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood and houses several programs, including a small French school. The English and French schools are separately administered, as the French school belongs to the Francophone School District (FSD). This board exists as a result of federal and provincial policies⁴ protecting the rights of French and English groups to be educated in their language (Beynon, Dagenais, Ilieva, & LaRocque, 2005). Although administered separately, teachers and students from the two schools interact in their English-speaking classes, between classes, and during extracurricular activities.

The cultural, ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds of students in the French school differ from those of students in the English school. While the English school is neither racially nor socio-economically homogenous, students in the French school do not necessarily live in Maple Hill's catchment area, and they include immigrants or migrants from many regions associated with la Francophonie mondiale. The school was chosen as a research site because its population has changed with the recent arrival of French-speaking African immigrants and refugees, which presents new challenges for educators (Moore, Sabatier, Jacquet, & Massinda, 2008).

I acted as participant observer in two classes in the school's Programme de formation professionnelle (PFP), which is offered to students who are underperforming in courses in the regular program, including those who are unlikely to graduate or may not attend university following graduation. Significantly, it was developed to meet the needs of students with refugee backgrounds who were struggling due to schooling missed as a result of refugee processes. In this program, students do professional internships for class credit and learn skills transferable to the job market. They also conduct research about

4 The Official Languages Act of 1969, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism of 1971, Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the British Columbia Language Education Policy of 1996.

programs offered at local colleges and universities, as well as the qualifications required for jobs in their desired field. In my observations, I paid particular attention to the ways students interacted with each other and with their teachers.

The Participants

Nine students consented to participate in the study. Of these, six—two female and four male—were Black African–Canadian students with refugee backgrounds. While most had had their schooling interrupted by refugee processes, there was significant variation among them, particularly in relation to their social class and family backgrounds. Some lived with their extended families, some had recently been reunited with their families, whereas others had never been separated from their immediate families. The African–Canadian students were attending the French school because they arrived with some knowledge of the French language but little or no English competency.

The remaining students were young men born in Canada. Two, one White and one Black, were from Québec, while another White student was from British Columbia. Again, there was significant variation in their backgrounds. All students in the PFP program were in senior secondary school (grades 10, 11, and 12) and were 15–18 years old.

The Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop

Following Boal's (2002) method, the objective of the TO workshop was to have students explore social issues that were important to them and create Forum Theatre plays to perform for each other. Talk is an important aspect of TO workshops, and a significant amount of time was spent setting ground rules, discussing power, selecting and agreeing on social problems to explore dramatically, and debriefing. Boal contends that participants should independently determine the themes to be explored theatrically. For this reason, I tried not to influence the students' selection of topics. This not only proved impossible but also created tensions between my roles as facilitator, researcher, and guest at Maple Hill. I thus tried to draw out the themes that seemed important to students during our class discussions, and re-presented them as possible topics to explore dramatically. This often proved an effective way of allowing the students to explore themes that interested them without having to expose their interests in front of their peers at the moment of artistic creation.

TO workshops place great emphasis on movement and trust activities, aimed at having participants get comfortable and become aware of their bodies. Focus on the body is key for participants to recognize how movements are mechanized and that bodies are places of learning where life experiences are inscribed (Boal, 1985; Ellsworth, 2005; Perry & Medina, 2011). These activities are also done to build community and create an atmosphere in which participants are willing to experiment. However, Boal’s (2002) sequence of games leading to Forum Theatre was not followed to the letter because the students reported growing bored of games. Therefore, I asked them to develop skits based on issues they raised in class discussions, but continued using Boalian games as warm-up exercises. Once the students were comfortable performing and had created a full-length scene about being called “Frenchies,” they started creating two Forum Theatre plays.

“The way it works”

A variety of social problems were discussed during the TO workshop; however, it quickly became apparent that the PFP students were constructing counternarratives about their educational experiences at Maple Hill. Elsewhere (Schroeter & James, 2014), CRT is used to analyze how, in interviews and class discussions, the students and teachers simultaneously maintained and challenged an authorized discourse (Bourdieu, 1991) that positioned Maple Hill as a “good school,” where people got along regardless of language, race, and program affiliation. This discourse echoes notions of meritocracy, colour blindness, and multiculturalism that circulate widely in Canada (Razack et al., 2010). A second discourse in the school presented the PFP as the best way of meeting the needs of students with refugee and disrupted schooling backgrounds.

The data presented here are drawn from class discussions, a Forum Theatre play on the PFP program, and the scene about being called “Frenchies.” This is done to show how the mode of drama created a way for students to transgress authorized discourses and use what Eisner (1997) calls productive ambiguity. While Eisner refers to the way alternative forms of representing research data enable deeper explorations of a problem by evoking multiple readings, the students’ dramatic work illustrates how this art form enabled them to imbue different signs with multiple meanings. In addition, the workshop allowed the students to critique the idea that the PFP was addressing their needs.

From the outset, the African–Canadian students said that they were unhappy with the PFP and did not understand their placement in it. They felt that the program was a waste of time and did not let them achieve their “full potential” because completing the program did not ensure graduation. However, not all students agreed. Marc-André, a White Canadian student, said that they needed the program because they could not pass the regular curriculum.

To gain further insight into the African–Canadian students’ perspectives, I turn to the Forum Theatre play they performed about their program. The play began with the two young protagonists boarding a plane bound for Canada, to be reunited with their father. Rich with references to language barriers, varying cultural norms, and the anticipation of arriving in a new country, the play also demonstrated the financial hardships faced by many immigrant and refugee families upon arrival in Canada. Excerpt 1, shows the family’s first meeting with the protagonists’ guidance counsellor.

Excerpt 1: PFP Forum Theatre Play

French	English Translation
<i>Conseiller : Ah bon. Et il a fait combien d'années d'école en Afrique?</i>	Guidance counsellor: Okay. And how many years of schooling did he do in Africa?
<i>(Le père cherche ses mots, on voit qu'il veut le dire et non le montrer avec des gestes.) Père : C... c... cinq... an... années.</i>	<i>(The father searches for words; we can see that he wants to say it instead of gesticulating.) Father: F . . . f . . . five y . . . years.</i>
<i>Conseiller : Ah, cinquième année, oui. Et elle? (Il montre Isatou du doit.)</i>	Guidance counsellor: Ah, Grade 5, yes. And her? (He points at Isatou.)]
<i>Père : Qu... quatrième année.</i>	Father: F . . . fourth grade.
<i>Conseiller : Oui, mais Monsieur, ici ça fonctionne avec l'âge. Comme, si ton enfant a 15 ans, il est en neuvième année, il ne peut pas être en cinquième.</i>	Guidance counsellor: Yes, but Sir, here it works by age. Like, if your child is 15, then he is in Grade 9. He cannot be in Grade 5.
<i>Isatout et Djibi : Neuvième année!?</i>	Isatou and Djibi: Ninth grade!?

French	English Translation
Isatou : <i>Et puis moi?</i>	Isatou: What about me?
<i>Conseiller : Huitième année.</i>	Guidance counsellor: Eighth grade.
Isatou : <i>Huitième année! Mais je ne suis pas capable de le faire!</i>	Isatou: Eighth grade! But I can’t do that work!
<i>Conseiller : Mais c’est ça la règle ici.</i>	Guidance counsellor: Well, that’s the way it works here.

Here, we see the father struggle to articulate his ideas and speak to the guidance counsellor in French. We also learn that the children are more fluent and comfortable expressing themselves in French, an indication of the role-reversal that often occurs when families migrate to a new country, as children are called upon to negotiate with institutions because of their superior language proficiency (Kappel Ramji, 2007). The PFP students chose to portray the guidance counsellor as a representative of the school system that did not serve their needs, as well as the father, who was represented as an important, though less powerful, authority figure.

This excerpt points to the problems inherent in a system that places students with refugee backgrounds in schools according to their age rather than their academic experience (Kanu, 2008; Wilkinson, 2002). This is made clear when Isatou and Djibi express their surprise and horror at learning that they will not be placed in a grade that matches their educational mastery. When students with a Grade 5 level of education are placed in Grade 9, how can they be expected to succeed and graduate with their peers? By highlighting the mismatch between the protagonists’ educational experience and the grades they were placed in, the PFP students contested the idea that all students are given equal opportunity to succeed. Significantly, their performance revealed that it is nearly impossible for students with refugee backgrounds to succeed in the system as it is currently structured. Current practices also make it difficult for teachers to meet the varying needs of their students, and for students to remain invested in learning (Norton, 2000). This passage demonstrates that the students were aware of a disconnect between their academic backgrounds and the grades in which they were placed, pointing to one reason why the African–Canadian students with refugee backgrounds were disengaged from the program.

Although the PFP program was designed to offer an alternative for students with refugee backgrounds, the Forum Theatre play revealed that it was not meeting everyone’s needs. In the play, the protagonists picked up their schedules and having noticed their placement in the PFP, they confronted the principal, asking what the program was and why they were not in regular classes. Excerpt 2 shows the principal explaining why the program is needed.

Excerpt 2: PFP Forum Theatre Play

French	English Translation
Isatou : <i>On aimerait savoir c’est quoi le programme PFP.</i>	Isatou (student): We would like to know what the PFP program is.
Djibi : <i>Moi je n’aime pas ça et je veux changer!</i>	Djibi (student): I don’t like it and I want to change out of it!
M. Le Directeur : <i>Oh, mais vous ne pouvez pas changer, vous êtes dans ce programme parce que vous ne pouvez pas réussir dans le programme régulier. Ça va vous aider beaucoup.</i>	Principal: Well, you can’t change out of it; you were placed in this program because you would not be able to succeed in the regular program. This will help you a lot.
Isatou : <i>Non, comment ça va nous aider? Parce que nous, on peut toujours étudier beaucoup!</i>	Isatou: No. How is it going to help us? Because, you know, we could always study a lot!
M. Le Directeur : <i>Mais si ça va vous aider! Il faudrait étudier beaucoup, beaucoup pour arriver au niveau! Et en plus, dans ce programme, vous pouvez aller faire un stage pendant deux semaines!</i>	Principal: Of course it will help you! You would have to study all the time to get up to the regular level. And besides, in this program, you will be able to do a two-week internship!
Djibi : <i>C’est quoi un stage?</i>	Djibi: What’s an internship?

French	English Translation
<p><i>M. Le Directeur : Bon, un stage c'est quand vous aller travailler dans le domaine de votre choix pour un certain temps pour apprendre comment ça fonctionne dans cette entreprise, ou dans ce domaine. Par exemple, qu'est-ce que tu aimerais faire plus tard?</i></p>	<p>Principal: Okay, an internship is when you go work in the field of your choice for a little while to learn how things work in that field or business. For example, what do you want to do later on?</p>
<p>Djibi : <i>Moi? Je veux être chocolatier.</i></p>	<p>Djibi: Me? I want to be a chocolatier.</p>
<p><i>M. Le Directeur : Ouais, alors vous allez pouvoir aller faire des chocolats pendant deux semaines pour voir comment ça se fait!</i></p>	<p>Principal: Yes, so you'll be able to go make chocolates for two weeks and learn how it's done!</p>
<p>Isatou : <i>Oui mais moi, qu'est-ce que je vais faire? Parce que moi, je veux être infirmière.</i></p>	<p>Isatou: Yes, but what will I do? I want to be a nurse.</p>
<p><i>M. Le Directeur : Ah, ça . . . ça prend beaucoup d'études . . .</i></p>	<p>Principal: Oh, well, that, that takes a lot of studying . . .</p>
<p>Isatou : <i>Voilà! C'est pour ça que je veux étudier fort et pourquoi je ne veux pas faire le programme PFP. PFP, je n'aime pas ça!</i></p>	<p>Isatou: Exactly! That's why I want to study hard and why I don't want to be in the PFP program. I don't like this PFP thing!</p>
<p><i>M. Le Directeur : Oui, mais tu fais ça et après le secondaire tu peux faire d'autres études pour pouvoir étudier pour devenir infirmière.</i></p>	<p>Principal: Yes, but if you do this now, after secondary school, you can go do other studies to help you become a nurse.</p>

Following this exchange, the protagonists tried to transfer out of the program by appealing to their father, who was unable to adequately question the principal because of his limited French. The play concluded with the father telling his children to stay in the program because it would be good for them.

In this excerpt, the students depicted two people whom they perceived as having the power to change their circumstances. It portrayed the principal's condescending attitude and assumptions that Isatou and Djibi needed internships in trades. Isatou pointed out the flaw in this logic by stating that she aspired to a career in nursing. The principal's reply—that achieving such a goal requires "a lot of work"—indicated that he did not

think it possible for a student with her background to succeed. This closely reflected comments made throughout the study by students of refugee backgrounds, who perceived that school personnel thought they could not achieve their academic aspirations.

Excerpt 2 also indicates how lack of language proficiency can impede one from successfully lobbying institutions in a new country. This is consistent with research showing that language barriers are key obstacles faced by students with refugee backgrounds in Canadian schools (Kanu, 2008; Liboy & Venet, 2011). In this instance, the father's language proficiency and ability to make sound choices were directly linked to his age and newcomer status. The protagonists understood that the program did not meet their needs, and they had enough language proficiency to question the principal. However, when the father exerted his parental authority by insisting that his children remain in the program, he became a part of the system the PFP students were critiquing. In this way, the play exposed how the system fails to meet the needs of students with refugee backgrounds and offered a counternarrative to the rationale teachers and administrators provided for the PFP.

Delgado (1995) explains that systems of oppression are maintained by stories told by members of dominant groups to justify the persistence of inequitable practices. Counterstorytelling, and counternarrative, thus provide a way for oppressed and racialized groups to present experiences of injustice. As the performance of a counternarrative, the play not only challenged an authorized discourse operating in the school . . . it also revealed how students were aware that telling this story transgressed the official story about the PFP.

Before starting their performance, François, one of the African-Canadian boys, spotted the vice-principal in the auditorium, then rushed over to his friends and asked whether they should go ahead with their performance. After a brief exchange, he exclaimed: "Oh! Ça ne dérange pas!" ["Oh, it doesn't matter!"] (François, October, 2007). His group agreed and took to the stage. The vice-principal left the room once their performance began. François's preoccupation reflected how the students worried about expressing their perceptions in front of the school's administration.

Whereas the students decided that the TO workshop was a "safe" enough space to challenge the administration's rationale for the PFP, in contrast, a discourse on colour blindness was not an issue the PFP students were comfortable tackling directly in a play.

Are “Frenchies” and Africans Canadians Too??

Membership in the Francophone community proved problematic for the PFP students. While they generally reported good relations with students in the English school, one day they staged a scene that revealed an underlying point of contention. In it, they showed how students in the English school referred to Francophone students by the derogatory term “Frenchies,” thus illustrating how offensive it was to them. To understand this scene, it is important to consider how the protagonists were also portrayed as African immigrants, and accordingly racialized individuals.

In this scene, two African–Canadian French students were harassed by a group of English students who overheard them speaking French in the hallway. Tensions escalated into a shoving match from which the French students fled. In a second incident, English students intimidated an African–Canadian French student until the appearance and intervention of another French student, who had been in Canada longer or was Canadian-born (this was left ambiguous in the performance). The situation was resolved when the second French student explained that different programs and languages were present in the school. The English students suddenly understood that they should not ostracize French students but instead should teach them English so that they could communicate and become friends.

The scene was reminiscent of the way other forms of discrimination—notably, racism and homophobia—are often portrayed and resolved in mainstream media with an over-simplified happy ending, wherein everyone learns to get along once it is understood that differences should not divide. It is worth noting that the protagonist’s problems could not be resolved until a Canadian French student who spoke good English was able to intervene, and a resolution was not achieved by having the English students learn French. Rather, the assumption guiding the conclusion was that African–Canadian students are harassed because they do not speak the dominant language in the school, and this is no longer an issue once they assimilate and learn the language of the majority.

In this scene, the Francophone students are portrayed as being from Africa, which is correlated with their race and suggests that this scene is about a more complex issue than being called “Frenchies.” While the French students are bullied based on the language they speak, it seems that the scene also references the difficulties of being a “double minority” (Madibbo, 2007; Moore, et al., 2008), members of both linguistic and racialized

minorities. Although this was not made explicit in the performance, it might be an instance of productive ambiguity (Eisner, 1997) in theatre, where students used symbolism to evoke multiple and varied meanings about a particular situation (Ford-Smith, 2004).

Interestingly, the label "Frenchie" applied to all the PFP students, whereas Canadian did not. In a separate activity, I asked students to discuss where they felt "at home" and describe what this meant to them. During our discussion, it became clear that "Frenchie" was a label that applied to all the students and an identity they took up to some extent; however, "Canadian" was not. Students had different opinions about what makes a place home, depending on their life experiences and the attachments they felt to different places. But the students were intent on finding a fixed definition of home that could equally apply to all. To complicate our discussion, I asked whether definitions of home might change over time and whether one's nationality can change. The students emphatically responded that a person's home, which they were then defining as the place one is born, could not change, but a person's nationality might. One African-born student proposed that a person's nationality could easily change:

French	English Translation
<i>Tu vois, tout ce que tu as à faire, c'est d'aller au gouvernement et de dire que tu veux changer de nationalité et ils vont te donner tes papiers et puis ta nationalité aura changé. Comme François, il a reçu ses papiers, et maintenant il est Canadien.</i>	You see, all you have to do is go to the government and say that you want to change your nationality, and they will give you your papers and then your nationality will have changed. Like François, he got his papers, and now he is Canadian. (Auguste, October 2007)

While this statement overlooks the technical and bureaucratic difficulties of changing nationality, it reflects liberal notions of citizenship. One's citizenship can change if one meets the criteria for becoming a citizen in a new country. Recognizing that government-issued documents do play a key role in determining a person's nationality, François was able to provide another interpretation, observing,

French	English Translation
<i>Oui, je peux avoir mes papiers et sur ces papiers je suis Canadien. Mais quand je me promène et les gens me voient, ils savent que je suis Africain. Ils disent que je ne suis pas Canadien.</i>	Yes, I can have my papers and on these papers I’m Canadian. But when I walk and people see me, they know that I am African. They say that I am not Canadian. (François, October, 2007)

As he spoke, François pointed to his skin, indicating that his Black phenotype marks him as an outsider in Canada.

This idea is echoed by Creese and Kambere (2003): “state practices and popular discourses help to construct people of colour as immigrants and immigrants as people of colour” (p. 7). African–Canadian youths do not fit into the popular construction of Canadian society as a White, Anglo–Celtic settler society (Stasiulis & Jhappan, 1995) and are consistently identified as Other. Therefore, it is not surprising that François did not identify as Canadian. In refusing the label of Canadian, he also refused the model of White citizen presented to him. Citizenship status, then, can be called into question on the basis of language, and on the basis of race. The students’ dialogue works in conjunction with the scene about “Frenchies” to show how language, citizenship status, and race intersected in the bodies of the African–Canadian immigrants who were depicted in their performances. The PFP students thus provided a powerful counternarrative to the myth of Canada as a colour-blind and inclusive society.

Conclusion

The Forum Theatre play about the PFP highlights the difficulties inherent in placing students with disrupted schooling backgrounds in an age-based educational system. The students’ discussions and performances showed how programmatic placement can amplify feelings of exclusion in a society where language and race form the basis upon which one’s citizenship can be called into question. Throughout the study, African–Canadian students articulated an imagined future in which the promise of an inclusive Canada would be realized. However, while students in this study were able to express their ideas and construct counternarratives, there were likely moments that some students

experienced as disempowering. The TO workshop, while sometimes productive, did not create a space free of pre-existing group dynamics, politics, or prejudice. The students and I were often confronted by the limitations that our identities placed on our ability to understand each other and work together.

This case study provides insight into the way critical, arts-based pedagogies can create spaces for marginalized students to explore the problems they experience in school. This is significant because allowing students to express themselves and test out their theories about life (Gallagher & Lortie, 2007) is important if they are to feel valued and empowered. In this study, the use of TO provided an opportunity for a group of African–Canadian students with refugee backgrounds to construct counternarratives about their program, notions of meritocracy, and colour blindness. Exploring these issues through theatre enabled them to draw on symbolism and productive ambiguity in order to show how language and race intersect with citizenship status in Canadian society. This suggests that the inclusion of arts-based pedagogies can be beneficial in classrooms with diverse learners. This case thus illustrates how arts-based research methods can supplement traditional methods of data collection by calling attention to the metaphors and symbolism used in art making and by capturing the complex and shifting nature of schooling. Further research is needed to identify other educational alternatives for addressing the needs of youths with refugee backgrounds. Perhaps these might include making instructional adaptations in mainstream classes so that streaming is avoided and these students are not placed in separate programs that may heighten feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

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