



Possibilities and problems of using drama to engage with First Nations content and concepts in education: A systematic review

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Abstract

Educators around the world are increasingly considering and seeking ways to challenge their role in the colonial project. Some have turned to embodied pedagogies as a way to encourage holistic, relationships-based learning in academics which traditionally prioritise cognitive, objective knowing. This review analyses 27 studies, published between 2007 and 2020, that draw on drama-based pedagogies to engage with First Nations content and concepts in early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. We found that drama provides powerful but often risky and unpredictable ways to enhance student, educator, and community learning, engagement, emotions, and relationships. The educator's role is vital to enabling or preventing outcomes which contribute to the survival, dignity, and well-being of First Nations peoples. Ethical guidelines and issues must be carefully considered by anyone attempting to work in this complex, awkward space.

Keywords First Nations education · Drama pedagogies · Embodied pedagogies · Decolonising education · Systematic literature review

Introduction

For educators wishing to challenge or at least not contribute to colonising practices, teaching in historically (and currently) colonising institutions is complex and difficult (Dénommé-Welch & Montero, 2014; Rudolph & Brown, 2017). Following

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the United Nations (2007) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, many postcolonising (Moreton-Robinson, 2003) nations have introduced education policies mandating the curricular inclusion of First Nations content (see, e.g. Council of Ministers of Education, 2015; Ministerial Council on Education, 2008). Such policies do not necessarily contribute to the “survival, dignity, and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world” (United Nations, 2007, p. 28). Tokenistic curricula perpetuate colonising norms, rather than promoting decolonising practices (Godlewska et al., 2017; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Creating policies does not mean that they are necessarily enacted (Ahmed, 2006).

Educator responses to these policies vary. Most educators have themselves been deprived of First Nations perspectives and knowledges (Baskerville, 2009; Dénonné-Welch & Montero, 2014; Rose, 2012). Some are hopeful of producing meaningful change and willing to learn, yet simultaneously express anxiety, fear, and frustration regarding their own ignorance and biases, the possibility of ‘getting it wrong’, and the lack of professional guidance (Bishop et al., 2019; Moodie & Patrick, 2017; Nakata, 2011). Some fear and resist having promotion opportunities linked to fulfilling these policies (Ma Rhea et al., 2012). Some are suspicious regarding the policies’ intent (Baynes, 2016). Professional learning is effective in overcoming these fears and resistances, but inconsistently implemented (Bishop et al., 2012; Ma Rhea et al., 2012). First Nations educators occupy especially complex positions in this space, wanting to achieve their own goals and bring insider perspectives to others, while negotiating both institutional and individual tensions and frustrations (Dénonné-Welch & Montero, 2014; Hart et al., 2012; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Amidst these problems, possibilities and new/old ways of educating emerge/re-emerge.

Embodied pedagogies potentially allow for education that supports decolonising goals. Embodied pedagogies are understood in this study as being multimodal (i.e. going outside the norm), holistic (i.e. encompassing the whole person and their environment), relationships-based, and (critically) reflective ways of teaching and learning that centre the body and its emotions, and align with First Nations ways-of-knowing (Forgasz, 2015; Ritenburg et al., 2014). Embodied pedagogies contrast with Euro-Western pedagogies that focus on cognitive-linguistic ways-of-knowing, thereby separating and hierarchising the mind, emotions, and body (Forgasz, 2015). In this study, we focus on drama-based embodied pedagogies, which lie on the margins of Western education; a situation suited to going beyond, transgressing, and transforming (Neelands, 2004). Such pedagogies (explored further in Findings: Drama-based pedagogies) may include teacher-directed games and creative exploration taking place without intention of performance (also known as *applied theatre*); scriptwriting and performance; and child-directed *dramatic play*.

Embodied pedagogies have been used in different global contexts to support decolonising approaches to education (Ritenburg et al., 2014). Although there is no singular First Nations way of knowing or being, First Nations academics globally have placed relationships and embodied ways-of-knowing at the forefront of First Nations paradigms (Rose, 2017). First Nations epistemologies value the integration of body, heart, mind, and spirit (Doetzel, 2018; Latremouille et al., 2016). Rituals, ceremonies, dance, music, song, storytelling, visual arts, drama,

and theatre can be ways to transmit knowledge, restore relationships, and resist colonisation (Doetzel, 2018; Latremouille et al., 2016; Ritenburg et al., 2014).

Embodied pedagogies are not automatically or innately decolonising. Arts educators may mistakenly view their practice as transformative, inclusive, and diverse (Rivière, 2008). Western arts practices and First Nations embodied ways-of-knowing have parallels and connections, but exist in different paradigms (Rose, 2017). The Western arts are tied to imperialism and colonisation (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2018). The arts have been integral to shaping positive national coloniser identities, while perpetuating negative and Othering stereotypes of First Nations peoples (Travis & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2018). Uncritically associating Western arts and First Nations pedagogies can further marginalise First Nations peoples, knowledges, and perspectives.

We undertook this review with a desire to better understand the possibilities, problems, and unknowns of engaging with First Nations content and concepts through embodied, particularly drama-based, pedagogies. By systematically reviewing the available literature, we sought to understand through educator, student, and community experiences how drama in education may contribute to or threaten the survival, dignity, and well-being of First Nations peoples. We centred the experiences of any First Nations peoples involved in the studies, while also including studies involving only non-Indigenous researchers and participants. We examined how and whether the participants engaged with First Nations knowledges and/or issues of colonisation, what role drama played in this engagement, and whether critical and substantive change was produced through this approach. We emphasised drama pedagogies due to their long, if chequered history of subverting, challenging, and transforming society (Baskerville, 2009; Boal, 2008; Neelands, 2004). We focussed on these approaches within education institutions as traditionally colonising spaces. In sharing our findings, we do not seek to achieve certainty regarding drama's potential in this strange and awkward space. Certainty is impossible and likely only to reinstate colonising practices and norms (Ling, 2017; Neelands, 2004). We position our review within the supercomplexity paradigm (Ling, 2017), and share understandings which are messy and fluid, offering possibilities for change rather than definite answers. We hope, nonetheless, that this review may support future educators and institutions in developing decolonising education practices.

Methodology

This review was inspired by the critical Indigenous methodology of the 'Aboriginal Voices' project (Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019; Lowe, Tennent, et al., 2019). We have aimed to replicate their method, and applied the critical principles of relationality to our own research:

1. Determine question(s) informed by First Nations perspectives.

2. Centre First Nations peoples' experiences, aspirations, and needs.
3. Unpack both the researchers' construction of knowledge and our own understanding thereof.
4. Maintain a critical stance on supporting substantive change in policies and practices.
5. Provide First Nations peoples with tools and insights to facilitate their ongoing interrogation of colonisation.

Lowe, Harrison, et al. (2019, pp. 217, 218).

Before explaining our review's protocols, we introduce our own positionality within this complex research space. We are non-Indigenous Australian drama educators and researchers, living and working on the unceded lands of the Woiwurrung and Gadubanud peoples. We take responsibility for critically understanding and challenging the colonising education systems within which we work.

To guide our review, we asked the following questions:

1. How do models of education which use drama to engage with First Nations content and concepts work for teachers, students, and community stakeholders?
2. How does the use of drama in education contribute to the survival, dignity, and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world?

Database and publication sources

We sought research at the junction of three core concepts: First Nations, education, and drama. A string of search terms (shown in Table 1) was established in consultation with an external supervisor and a university librarian. Some of the terms related to Concept 1 are now inappropriate but were used as indicated

Table 1 Search terms

Concept 1: First Nations	Concept 2: Education	Concept 3: Drama
Aborigin*	Educat*	Drama
Indigen*	Teach*	Theatre/er
"First Nations"	Pedagog*	"Role play*"
"Native people*"	Classroom	Play
"Alaska Native*"	School	Multimodal
"American Indian*"	"Professional development"	"Embodi*"
"Canada Native*"	"Professional learning"	
Inuit	Student*	
Māori		
Metis		
"Native North American*"		
"Pacific Islander*"		
"Torres Strait Islander*"		
Decolonis/z*		
Reconciliation		

by the databases to enlarge the search. Slight variations of some terms were used as required by different databases (e.g. decolonis* versus decoloniz*) and truncation symbols were used to replace word endings (e.g. educat* for educate, education, educator/s, educative, etc.) to expand the search as much as possible. The explode function was used on certain terms to expand the search (e.g. 'drama'). These search strings were used to search three online databases: ProQuest (Education database), A+ Education, and ERIC, using the Boolean operators OR and AND. Each search was saved in its corresponding database, and search alerts were set up for new material.

Inclusion, exclusion, and critical appraisal

We established a research protocol (see Table 2) in line with the Aboriginal Voices methodology (Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019; Lowe, Tennent, et al., 2019) and Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). Database filters were used to remove documents that did not meet our *report characteristics*. The resulting records were downloaded to an End-Note folder and duplicates were removed. We independently examined each article record to ensure that they met our *study characteristics*. Remaining articles were critically appraised using the *quality of evidence framework* developed by Lowe et al. (2019), p. 224). Studies were scored against each criterion, receiving either a (1) if met, (0) if not met, or (0.5) if partially described. To ensure quality, articles needed to score ≥ 4 to be included. An overview of our selection and decision-making process is offered in Fig. 1.

Table 2 Research protocol

<i>Report characteristics</i>	
Document type	Published peer-reviewed journal articles
Years considered	2007–2021
Language	English
<i>Study characteristics</i>	
Population	Educators, students, and/or community stakeholders
Intervention	Drama-based pedagogies to engage with First Nations content and concepts
Comparators	Western institutional education
Outcomes	Experiences, understandings, and/or attitudes
<i>Quality of evidence framework</i>	
Design	Project design appropriate to methodology
Sources	Data source/participant recruitment
Theoretical frame	Participant descriptions/positionality; explicit links to a theoretical/philosophical position
Ethical implications	Researcher positionality; construction of First Nations content and/or concepts
Fidelity of method	Research findings responding to stated research questions
Contribution to the field	Research utility/implications discussed

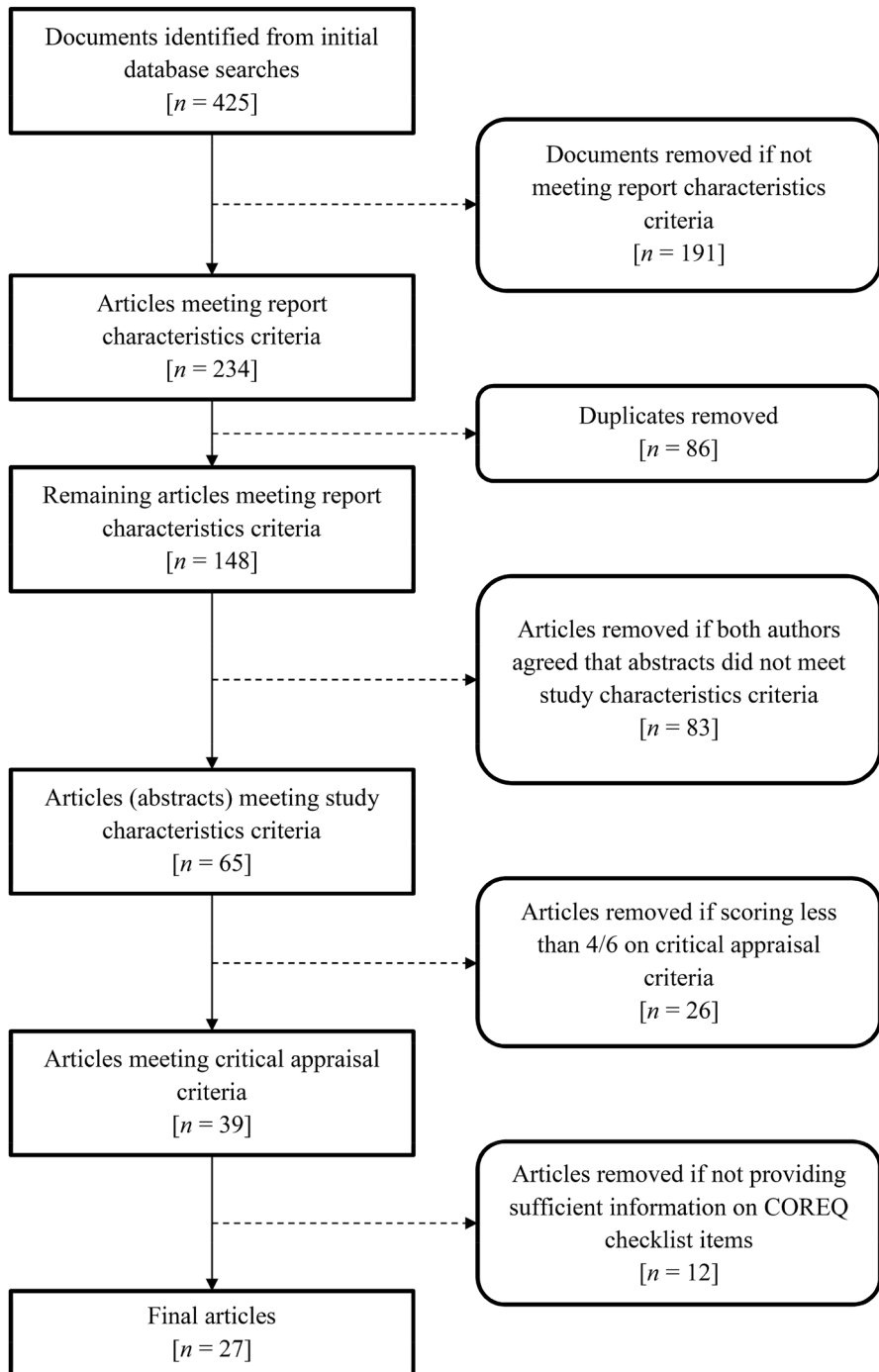


Fig. 1 Selection and decision-making process

Data collection and synthesis

Data were collected for synthesis on a pre-determined series of items (Tong et al., 2007), including researcher positionality and relationships, educator intentions and pedagogies, and participant outcomes. Further articles were removed during this process as not providing sufficient information on these key points. Data from the final 27 articles were synthesised using both quantitative and qualitative methods as appropriate.

Lowe et al. (2019, p. 225) include a second element to their synthesis, wherein the findings are critiqued “from within the ‘known’ perspectives of Indigenous people”. As non-Indigenous researchers, it is not possible for us to apply this element. We are able to maintain a critical stance and apply the critical principles of relationality but offer our findings in full awareness of the limitations of our own positionality.

Findings

Overview of studies

Information regarding each study’s authors, settings, and participant groups is summarised in Table 3. Of the 27 studies, one was undertaken by a First Nations (Blackfoot) researcher (Head, 2012), and five by teams of First Nations (Anishinaabe, Māori, and BaKgalagari) and non-Indigenous researchers (Dénomme-Welch & Montero, 2014; Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Kana & Aitken, 2007; Peterson & Horton, 2019; Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016). The majority were conducted by non-Indigenous researchers, less than half of whom state their cultural identification. The researchers tended to be deeply entwined with the pedagogical processes, with over half acting as reflective researcher/educators. Five studies are part of an ongoing collaborative action research project known as NOW Play, led by Professor Shelley Stagg Peterson (Eisazadeh et al., 2017; Peterson & Horton, 2019; Peterson Rajendram et al., 2019; Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018; Peterson, McIntyre, et al., 2018). Five further studies were also collaborative research projects (Blight, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Greenwood, 2012; Minoi et al., 2019; Vettraino et al., 2017). Other researchers worked as First Nations consultants (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016), or were students in the project (Doerksen, 2016). Four studies included a researcher uninformed with the pedagogical process (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Hazou, 2015; Lane, 2012; Spiegel & Yassi, 2007).

Studies occurred across education levels. Canadian studies dominated, partly due to the NOW Play project. Without this project, Canada would remain the dominant setting; however, early childhood studies would not be included. Australia, New Zealand and the United States each house at least two studies, with the remainder occurring in Borneo (Minoi et al., 2019), Botswana (Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016), Taiwan (Wang, 2014), Ecuador (Spiegel & Yassi, 2007), Palestine (Hazou, 2015), and South Africa (Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019).

Table 3 Authors, settings, and participant groups

Author (year published)	Author cultural ID	Country	Institution	Educators	Students	Community
Beckmann and Mahanty (2016)	Unstated	Australia	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	No
Blight (2015)	Non-Indigenous	Australia	Secondary	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Borhani (2020)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	No
Davis (2007)	Unstated	Australia	Secondary	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Dénonmé-Welch and Montero (2014)	Both	Canada	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	No [♥]
Doerksen (2016)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Tertiary	No [♥]	Yes*	No [♥]
Dupuis and Ferguson (2016)	Both	Canada	Secondary	Yes	Yes	Yes*
Eisazadeh et al. (2017)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Early childhood	Yes	Yes	No [♥]
Fitzpatrick (2011)	Unstated	New Zealand	Primary	Yes*	Yes	No
Gray et al. (2016)	Unstated	United States of America	Primary	No*	Yes	No
Greenwood (2012)	Unstated	New Zealand	Primary/secondary	Yes*	No [♥]	No
Hazou (2015)	Unstated	Palestine	Tertiary	Yes	Yes	No
Head (2012)	First Nations	United States of America	Primary	Yes*	Yes	No [♥]
Hradsky (2017)	Non-Indigenous	Australia	Secondary	Yes*	Yes	No [♥]
Kana and Aitken (2007)	Both	New Zealand	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	No
Lane (2012)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Secondary	Yes	Yes	No [♥]
Minoi et al. (2019)	Unstated	Borneo	Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes
Peterson and Horton (2019)	Both	Canada	Early childhood	Yes	Yes	Yes
Peterson, Madsen, et al. (2018)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Early childhood	Yes	No [♥]	No [♥]
Peterson, McIntyre, et al. (2018)	Unstated	Canada	Early childhood	Yes	No [♥]	No [♥]
Peterson et al. (2019)	Unstated	Canada	Early childhood	No [♥]	Yes	No [♥]
Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016)	Both	Botswana	Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spiegel and Yassi (2007)	Non-Indigenous	Ecuador	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	No
Thom and Blades (2014)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Tertiary	Yes*	No	No
Vettramo et al. (2017)	Non-Indigenous	Canada	Secondary	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Wang (2014)	Unstated	Taiwan	Primary	Yes*	Yes	No [♥]

Table 3 (continued)

Author (year published)	Author cultural ID	Country	Institution	Educators	Students	Community
Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019)	Unstated	South Africa	Tertiary	Yes*	Yes	Yes

* At least one member of this participant group is also a researcher
Italics indicate at least one member of this participant group identifies as First Nations. A heart ♥ indicates First Nations non-participant involvement

Non-researcher educators were involved in 21 projects; however, in three studies, their experiences are not discussed (Doerksen, 2016; Gray et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2019). Similarly, students were relevant but peripheral to four studies (Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018; Peterson, McIntyre, et al., 2018; Thom & Blades, 2014). First Nations community members were not the subject of any studies; however, First Nations community involvement is mentioned in 18 projects. Only eight studies explicitly report on community members' perspectives (Blight, 2015; Davis, 2007; Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Minoi et al., 2019; Peterson & Horton, 2019; Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016; Vettraino et al., 2017; Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019).

Drama-based pedagogies

The drama-based pedagogies used can be broadly categorised as applied theatre, scriptwriting/script-based performance, and dramatic play. All these approaches encompass numerous strategies, some of which may be used in more than one approach. The differences between each approach are best understood through the emphases on and purposes for drama as an educational tool.

Applied theatre dominated, being used in 14 studies. Applied theatre describes drama practices taking place outside traditional theatre spaces, usually with the aim of fostering activism and change, and emphasising process rather than outcomes (Preston, 2016). Blight (2015) and Vettraino et al. (2017) used drama games and storytelling to work with and empower, respectively, Australian and Canadian First Nations youth. Greenwood (2012), and Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016), drew on First Nations knowledges as well as drama activities to explore, respectively, contemporary Māori issues with Māori educators, and connections to the environment with BaKgalagari primary students. Gray et al. (2016) and Hradsky (2017) explored, respectively, North American and South African cultural legends, and Australian First Nations poetry, through drama with mainly non-Indigenous primary and secondary students. Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019) drew on popular South African performance traditions to expose non-Indigenous tertiary students to social contradictions. Beckmann and Mahanty (2016), Fitzpatrick (2011), Kana and Aitken (2007), Spiegel and Yassi (2007) and Wang (2014) employed process drama (extended role-play) to engage largely non-Indigenous students and educators in Australia, New Zealand, Ecuador, and Taiwan with First Nations perspectives and social justice issues. Borhani (2020) used tableaux to connect non-Indigenous graduate students in Canada with the land. Drawing on the experiences of Canadian First Nations and non-Indigenous educators, Lane (2012) suggests a model for embodied environmental education. Apart from Lane (2012), the researchers in these applied theatre studies were also the educators, reflecting on or describing their own pedagogical practices.

The studies employing scriptwriting and performance vary pedagogically but emphasise an externally observable outcome. Head (2012) wrote and produced a play with Blackfoot primary students about the 1870 Baker Massacre. Davis (2007) employed scriptwriting to help her Australian non-Indigenous secondary students

express their perceptions and misconceptions of local Aboriginal communities. Two studies explore performing First Nations experiences of Canadian residential schools; Doerksen (2016) reflects on her own performance experience as a non-Indigenous pre-service teacher, while Dupuis and Ferguson (2016) investigated the impact of a separate project on the (mainly non-Indigenous) participating educators and secondary students. Hazou (2015) analyses a Palestinian tertiary student production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which attempted to indigenise Shakespeare's text. Dénommé-Welch and Montero (2014), and Thom and Blades (2014), script their critical reflections on the complex processes of, respectively, de/colonising Canadian pre-service teacher education, and developing a more welcoming university for Canadian First Nations students.

Dramatic play is used mainly in the NOW Play project, but Minoi et al. (2019) utilised a similar 'play-to-engage' model. Peterson and Horton (2019) define dramatic play as child-directed, improvisational, and spontaneous play that manipulates the elements of drama (e.g. role, place, and symbol). Educators and Elders in NOW Play used dramatic play to help Anishinaabe children construct and reflect Ojibway cultural knowledges and practices (Eisazadeh et al., 2017), develop positive identities (Peterson & Horton, 2019), learn social behaviours (Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018), develop oral language and writing skills (Peterson, McIntyre, et al., 2018), and carry out social intentions (Peterson et al., 2019). 'Play-to-engage' is intended to be a creative and playful universal pedagogy, engaging potentially disenfranchised ethnic Malay and Penan communities with social research on an equal footing (Minoi et al., 2019). Both NOW Play and 'play-to-engage' emphasise fun and empowering, collaborative relationships.

Apart from Davis (2007), Hazou (2015), and Hradsky (2017), these studies did not occur within drama classes. Seven studies involved extra-curricular drama- or arts-based programmes (Blight, 2015; Borhani, 2020; Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Gray et al., 2016; Head, 2012; Vettraino et al., 2017). The majority employed drama pedagogies within a non-drama programme, such as development studies (Beckmann & Mahanty, 2016), teacher education (Dénommé-Welch & Montero, 2014; Doerksen, 2016; Greenwood, 2012; Kana & Aitken, 2007), early childhood education (NOW Play), environmental education (Lane, 2012), health (Spiegel & Yassi, 2007), history (Wang, 2014), and architecture (Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019). In the studies conducted by Minoi et al. (2019) and Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016), drama pedagogies were employed by the researchers as a school-based intervention, with both the students and non-researcher educators learning from the experience. Thom and Blades (2014) similarly used drama pedagogies as an intervention, but as a self-study.

Despite this diversity of pedagogies and contexts, the educators' intentions were remarkably similar. As shown in Fig. 2, drama-based pedagogies were viewed as a way to enhance learning, encourage change, and create connections. Part of drama's appeal is its flexibility (Blight, 2015; Eisazadeh et al., 2017). Drama approaches can be "grounded in the reality of the learner" (Spiegel & Yassi, 2007, p. 130) while simultaneously encouraging learners to recognise and move between multiple realities (Hradsky, 2017; Lane, 2012). Proponents of these approaches argue that they offer unique and powerful opportunities for

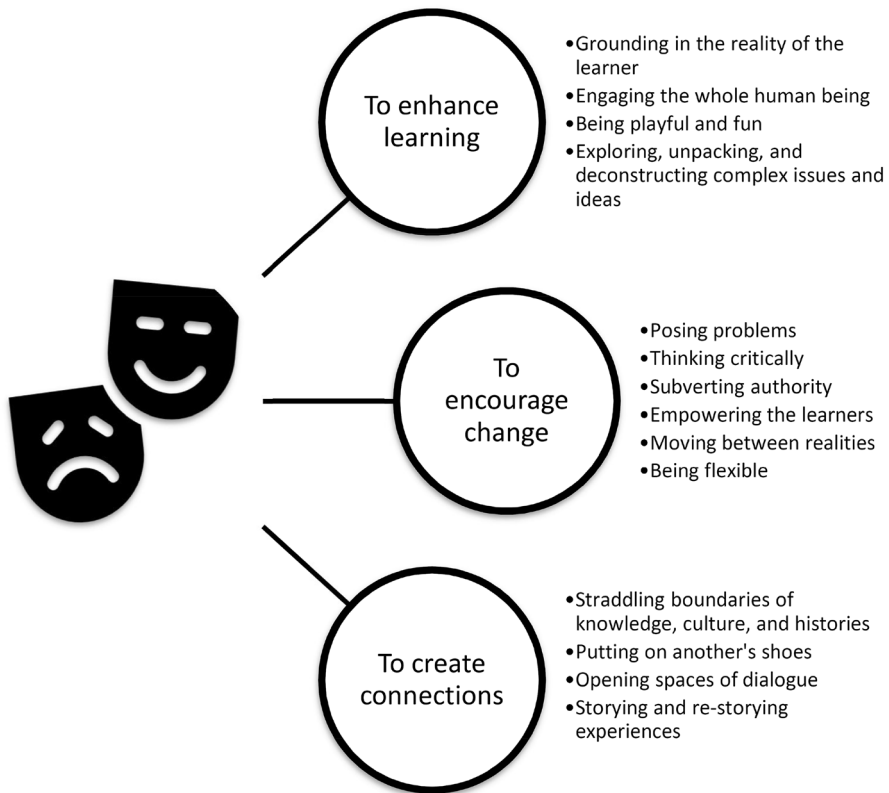


Fig. 2 Educators' reasons for choosing drama-based pedagogies

exploring complex problems, issues, and ideas (Beckmann & Mahanty, 2016; Dénomme-Welch & Montero, 2014; Peterson, McIntyre, et al., 2018; Thom & Blades, 2014; Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019). Although drama-based pedagogies are not innately critical, they are viewed as “a catalyst for critical thinking and reflection” (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016, p. 132), offering opportunities for subversion (Hazou, 2015; Peterson & Horton, 2019), challenge (Kana & Aitken, 2007), and resistance (Wang, 2014). Drama appeals to those wishing to enhance participants' empathy (Davis, 2007; Doerksen, 2016) and empowerment (Gray et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2019), particularly through storytelling (Head, 2012; Vettraino et al., 2017). Drama-based approaches are viewed as “straddl[ing] boundaries” (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 35), between both disciplines and cultures (Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016). Drama is valued for its embodied and relational nature (Greenwood, 2012). Finally, drama is held to be a fun (Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018), playful (Minoi et al., 2019), and safe (Borhani, 2020) way to engage with these complexities.

First Nations content and concepts

We mapped the researchers and educators' constructions of First Nations knowledges against Jirrbal Elder Uncle Dr Ernie Grant's holistic planning and teaching framework (Fig. 3) (Grant, 1998). Grant's framework is intended to promote cross-cultural understanding, providing a way for educators working within non-Indigenous systems to meaningfully organise information. The interwoven elements of *land* (natural environments), *language* (communication), and *culture* (ways-of-knowing, doing, and being) are linked through the variables of *time* (change/cycles), *place* (meanings enfolded in spaces), and *relationships* (dynamic connections) (Hyams et al., 2008; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). In utilising Grant's framework, we sought to understand whether these educators constructed First Nations knowledges holistically, or as fragmented transplants into colonising ways-of-knowing.

As Fig. 3 illustrates, all of the studies taught content linking both elements and variables; however, not all can be understood as taking a holistic approach. For example, every study included culture and relationships, in particular First Nations cultural knowledges, and relationships between humans. In Gray et al. (2016), the students dramatised animal legends from three different non-local First Nations cultures (Mayan, Tsimshian, and South African). The content included elements of land and culture, linked through the relationship between humans and the environment, but did not encompass language or the variables of time and place. The students were taught *about* First Nations cultures and knowledges; the cultures and knowledges were constructed positively, but remained Other. Gray et al. (2016) did not intend to provide a holistic understanding of First Nations knowledges; their focus was on integrating science and the arts, with a secondary aim of improving students' appreciation of First Nations cultural contributions.

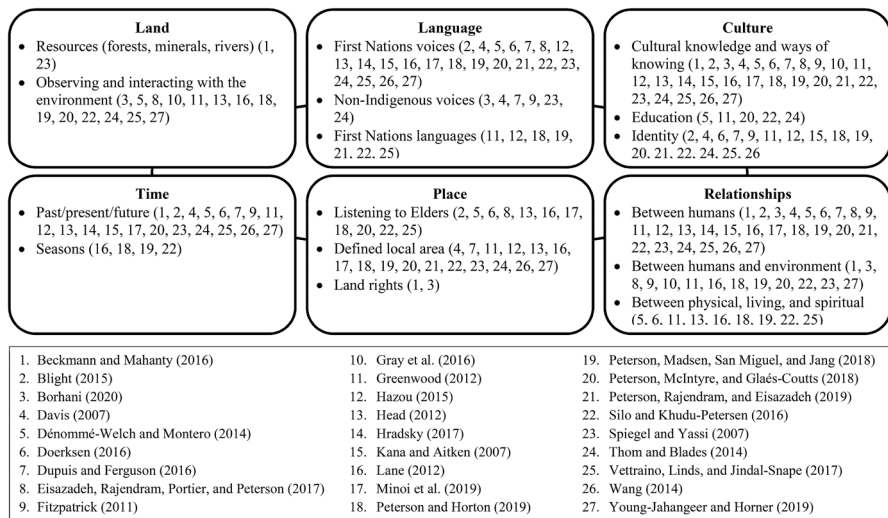


Fig. 3 First Nations content and concepts mapped against Uncle Dr Ernie Grant's holistic planning and teaching framework

The studies which construct First Nations knowledges most holistically are generally those in which First Nations Elders are positioned as knowledge holders and sharers. For example, the researcher/educator and students in Head's (2012) project learnt about the Baker Massacre by visiting the site and hearing the story of it from Blackfoot Elders. Walking around the site, Head (2012, p. 122) felt "the deep heaviness and sombre atmosphere that permeated throughout the entire area". The Baker Massacre is the story of the researcher/educator and students' ancestors; by sharing it and incorporating traditional ceremonies into their performance the participants learnt about, reconnected with, and maintained their culture. In this study, Indigenous Theatre is a holistic way to decolonise and heal hearts and minds.

Some non-Indigenous-led studies found their own culturally appropriate entry point to a holistic approach. Thom and Blades (2014) document the evolving complexity and challenge of providing authentically inclusive environments for First Nations students. Initially, Thom and Blades (2014) struggled to find pedagogies that did not binarise, simplify, or stereotype the complexities of incorporating First Nations perspectives into the curriculum. Developing a holistic understanding of their own and their students' positionality, perspectives, knowledges, and relationships enabled Thom and Blades (2014, p. 508) to "live well amidst difference".

Outcomes

Several studies describe the educators as learning as much as, or more than, the students. Head (2012) experienced healing from historical and current trauma. Some non-Indigenous educators experienced deep shifts in their understandings, assumptions, foci, and beliefs through working in partnership with First Nations peoples (Blight, 2015; Davis, 2007; Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016), the embodied act of teaching (Dénommé-Welch & Montero, 2014; Hradsky, 2017), and the dramatic processes themselves (Thom & Blades, 2014). Apart from reflective practitioners, three studies document educators experiencing powerful learning through pre- or in-service teacher education (Doerksen, 2016; Greenwood, 2012; Kana & Aitken, 2007). However, some educators did not experience a permanent shift: although the teachers in Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016, p. 17) became less resistant to the drama-based and inclusive pedagogies being used by the researchers, they expected to go "back to normal" once the researchers withdrew.

Student experiences and outcomes varied widely. Several studies describe First Nations students experiencing significant deepening of cultural knowledge, pride, and agency through participating in applied theatre (Blight, 2015; Greenwood, 2012; Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016; Vettraino et al., 2017), performances (Head, 2012), or dramatic play (Eisazadeh et al., 2017; Minoi et al., 2019; Peterson & Horton, 2019). Studies involving both First Nations and non-Indigenous students frequently report them experiencing the learning differently (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Hradsky, 2017; Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019). In Dupuis and Ferguson (2016), the First Nations students felt inspired and connected when researching and performing a play about Canadian residential schools, while the non-Indigenous students struggled with their own identities and experienced guilt. All students developed a strong

sense of responsibility to honour the truth and respect the survivors (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016).

Some studies involving only non-Indigenous students describe them developing a deepened and more critical understanding of their own identities, perceptions, and misconceptions (Davis, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Kana & Aitken, 2007), as well as shifts in the ways they view or come to know the world (Borhani, 2020; Doerksen, 2016; Lane, 2012). Others report increases in students' understandings of complex topics such as land rights (Beckmann & Mahanty, 2016), science (Gray et al., 2016), and First Nations peoples and cultures (Wang, 2014).

Not all student responses were positive. Blight's (2015) original two-week programme successfully engaged First Nations youth, but left them devastated when the programme (and its relationships) ended. In Spiegel and Yassi (2007), both First Nations and non-Indigenous students were so deeply engaged that they ignored each other's arguments, instead representing power dynamics, and left the experience feeling disenfranchised. Students in some studies performed racist stereotypes of First Nations peoples (Davis, 2007; Hradsky, 2017; Spiegel & Yassi, 2007). Students experienced a range of discomfoting emotions like anger and frustration (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Hazou, 2015; Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019), shame and guilt (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Hradsky, 2017), confusion (Borhani, 2020; Doerksen, 2016), and sadness (Davis, 2007). Educators sometimes experienced discomfort as a result of their students' strong emotions: in Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019), for example, the educators felt accused and unsettled by the students' resistance.

In most studies, the educators were able to successfully negotiate these challenges, and facilitate positive outcomes. These studies illustrate that discomfoting emotions, when properly supported and guided, help rather than hinder the healing, growing, and transforming process (Doerksen, 2016; Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Head, 2012; Hradsky, 2017). Educator flexibility and attention to learners' needs was particularly important to this process (Borhani, 2020).

Educators also needed to be willing and able to critically self-reflect on their approaches. The educators in Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019) interrogated their pedagogy, resulting in a renewed commitment to their process and (eventually) recognition from the students that their discomfort had been necessary. While not able to change the experiences of students within their original programme, Spiegel and Yassi's (2007) critical self-reflection allowed them to plan future courses with more expert role-play facilitation and deconstruction, thereby hopefully enabling more inclusive dialogue and holistic approaches.

Maintaining relationships was one of the more difficult challenges to overcome. While Blight (2015) was able to return to and restore the relationships established, others were forced to recognise that their intervention had been unsustainable (Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016; Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2019). Knowing about and critically reflecting upon these issues prior to starting helped some educators to avoid breaking relationships. Vettraino et al. (2017, p. 90) were able to anticipate the problems inherent in "parachuting" in and out of the students' lives, and ensure that the youth involved retained a trusting relationship with a link person.

Community experiences and perceptions are described in less than a third of studies, but where included mostly indicate that the projects supported First Nations

aspirations and needs. Larrakia Elders in Blight (2015, p. 27) fought for more funding to continue the drama programme, believing that it gave the youth “a sense of achievement and pride in who they are”. A Cree Elder observing the drama workshops in Vettraino et al. (2017, p. 87) reflected that “they think [drama’s] a game... and same time, they’re learning a lot”. The BaKgalagari community members involved in Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016) felt culturally recognised and more involved in their children’s school learning, although these results were likely temporary and reliant on the researchers’ presence. Elders and other community members are described as positively participating in the projects instigated by Minoi et al. (2019) and Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019). Contrastingly, in Peterson and Horton (2019), Anishinaabe educators and Elders were concerned that the children’s play reflected and reinforced rather than resisted the dominance of colonising cultures.

Communities also generally appear positive about the projects focussing on non-Indigenous students: Gurang Gurang/Taribelang principal Dr Chris Sarra states in Davis (2007, p. 34) that the drama project “shifted [the non-Indigenous students’] understanding of Indigenous children”. Community members in Dupuis and Ferguson (2016) welcomed and worked with the non-Indigenous educators and students, honouring them with braids of sweetgrass and eagle feathers. Some community members in Young-Jahangeer and Horner (2019) were, however, misunderstood or disappointed by the non-Indigenous students. Unfortunately, due to the general lack of consultation it is impossible to state whether most projects met with community approval. Two studies acknowledge this lack (Hradsky, 2017; Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018).

Discussion: possibilities, problems, and uncertainties

Based on these studies, drama-based pedagogies offer powerful but risky possibilities for engaging educators, students, and communities in holistic understandings of First Nations knowledges. Drama-based pedagogies can potentially facilitate healing, decolonising, critical shifts, and empowerment for both First Nations and non-Indigenous participants. However, the deep engagement, strong relationships, powerful emotions, and holistic learning enabled through drama can cause harm rather than healing if the educator lacks sufficient knowledge, skills, and support. Here we discuss the possibilities and problems that may occur when using these powerful pedagogies, the role of the educator in ensuring, as far as possible, positive outcomes, and how educators may be encouraged and supported to engage in this work.

In discussing the problems apparent in these studies, we seek neither to condemn the researchers and educators, nor to position our own work as flawless. The study conducted by the first author contains numerous problems (Hradsky, 2017). Many of the issues under discussion are already critically reflected upon by the researchers. Some further problems emerge when applying the critical principles of relationality (Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019; Lowe, Tennent, et al., 2019). Problems and mistakes are inevitable when attempting decolonising work from within colonising

institutions, but this should not deter us. By opening up problems, we hope to encourage new possibilities and imaginings of change (Ling, 2017).

Powerful pedagogies

Exciting possibilities, but also potential problems, arise from the powerful nature of drama-based pedagogies. Crucially, First Nations students, educators, and community members can experience healing, decolonising, and empowerment through embodied engagement with First Nations knowledges. In these studies, drama-based pedagogies facilitated the creation of culturally safe spaces, enabled community relationships, strengthened cultural knowledges, practices, and connections, empowered cultural identity development, and supported critical engagement with de/colonisation. Notably, these positive outcomes were supported through the trust and fun of drama games, the depth of meaning enabled through holistic and creative exploration, and the power of story/truthtelling. First Nations ways-of-knowing can be successfully aligned with drama practices, supporting First Nations participants to engage deeply with learning, and perceive themselves as an integrated part of educational efforts.

The emotional and physical nature of drama-based learning powerfully affects both First Nations and non-Indigenous students. As mentioned previously, non-Indigenous student experiences and outcomes in these studies often differed from their First Nations counterparts. However, non-Indigenous students and educators were also able to engage meaningfully and appropriately with First Nations knowledges through drama. In these studies, drama supported non-Indigenous participants to listen to and connect with First Nations perspectives, critically reflect upon their own perspectives and knowledges, and develop empathy. Many, though not all, experienced a shift in their understandings of First Nations peoples and/or colonisation. Students of all identities were generally described as deeply engaged in their learning.

For both First Nations and non-Indigenous students, one of the most significant aspects of engaging with First Nations knowledges through drama was embodying First Nations roles and colonising relationships. Playing First Nations roles can enable First Nations students to connect to and express their culture, while playing non-Indigenous characters can allow them to disrupt normal social narratives. Playing First Nations and colonising characters can powerfully engage non-Indigenous participants in deep thinking, standing up to authority, developing empathy, experiencing shifts in perceptions and understandings, and working towards reconciliation.

However, as previously noted, embodying First Nations roles can result in racism and stereotyping. Perspectives do not necessarily shift from students embodying First Nations roles. Non-Indigenous students in Beckmann and Mahanty (2016) enacted fictional Indigenous villagers and company/NGO representatives. Students were deeply engaged in their roles, developed strong relationships with each other, and gained greater insight into the complexities of Indigenous resource management, but are not described as developing empathy or experiencing shifts in understanding (Beckmann & Mahanty, 2016).

Shifts may also occur that do not align with decolonising aims. Fitzpatrick (2011, p. 91) focusses on the problem of Pakeha children “struggling to belong...[having] no opportunity to express or construct a positive identity”. Problematically, the process drama Fitzpatrick used to guide students through this process constructs Pakeha/Māori relations as occurring equally in a new, neutral space, as a result of environmental causes, rather than colonisation. While this experience led the students to critically reflect on their own and others’ racism, we question whether constructing identities based on a misrepresentation of Aotearoa New Zealand’s colonisation is appropriate.

Drama in education can, therefore, most definitely contribute to the survival, dignity, and well-being of First Nations peoples. However, careful and informed facilitation is needed to ensure healing, rather than harm. We suggest that, while embodying First Nations roles and colonising relationships can be a powerfully transformative experience, educators must ensure that these roles and relationships are grounded in truth, justice, and healing. The deep engagement enabled through drama-based pedagogies indicates that students will adhere to the understandings and identities developed during the embodiment process. As we discuss below, the role of the educator in wielding these powerful pedagogies effectively and safely is a vital one.

The educator’s role

That educators play a crucial role in education is not surprising. However, using drama-based pedagogies with decolonising aims is different from using more traditional Western cognitive-linguistic pedagogies in line with colonising education systems. These studies show that drama-based pedagogies are being used in a wide variety of settings beyond the drama classroom, and that drama educators themselves struggle with using their pedagogies in this context. Therefore, it is important to discuss the educator’s role in contributing to or hindering the survival, dignity, and well-being of First Nations peoples when using drama as a pedagogical tool.

Ritenburg et al. (2014) found that, to adapt Euro-Western methods of working with the body to decolonising and indigenising aims, educators must make an ongoing commitment to First Nations relational responsibilities (family, community, and land). Based on these studies, we suggest that educators must also commit to relational responsibilities with their students. Telling your own, or your ancestors’ stories can be empowering (e.g. Head, 2012), but safe spaces are needed to ensure that the emotionality and vulnerability required do not lead to further traumatisa-tion. First Nations students may choose to share their cultural knowledge and perspectives; equally, for a wide range of reasons, they may not be comfortable doing so (examples of both are shown in Hradsky, 2017). Either way, students should not face unfair expectations from educators to represent First Nations perspectives, resist colonising cultures, and challenge racism. Attempting to indigenise colonising spaces, whether institutions or texts, can be frustrating, particularly when students or educators are not sufficiently empowered to make real changes (e.g. Hazou, 2015). The close bonds formed through drama can leave vulnerable participants devastated

if relationships are not maintained. Critical changes are most apparent where programmes occur over time, such as Blight (2015), Thom and Blades (2014), and the ongoing NOW Play project. Several researchers acknowledge that their findings are limited or unsustainable due to size or time (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016; Kana & Aitken, 2007; Peterson, Madsen, et al., 2018; Silo & Khudu-Petersen, 2016). Relational responsibilities to students last beyond the duration of a workshop, or even a semester.

The fear of ‘getting it wrong’ is a great deterrent to many educators in engaging with this work (Moodie & Patrick, 2017). The thought of students stereotyping First Nations peoples, or embodying racist attitudes, is disturbing. However, these studies indicate that trusting educator-student relationships, enabling open discussions of problematic moments, help to heal and transform students’ future attitudes and actions. Spiegel and Yassi (2007) note that relying on the students themselves being diverse is not enough to combat stereotyping. Clearly addressing issues and offering strategies for appropriately embodying different identities allows students space to explore without harming. For example, to clarify their roles without resorting to stereotypes, students in Davis (2007) used white half masks to indicate non-Indigenous characters, while students playing First Nations characters used pieces of fabric as symbols. Similarly, students in Dupuis and Ferguson (2016) used coloured sweaters as metaphors. Successful approaches to performing language included speaking only the words of the individual being portrayed (Hradsky, 2017), using (with permission and guidance) First Nations languages (Doerksen, 2016), and not speaking at all (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016). Educator forethought, careful research, and, as mentioned, building relationships with the individuals and communities being portrayed are essential to help performers “honour[] the truth” (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016, p. 138). This is also true for First Nations students portraying First Nations roles.

As Dénommé-Welch and Montero (2014, p. 150) note, de/colonising Western education systems is “peculiar, complex, and even risky”. First Nations knowledges, however holistically constructed and shared, are easily “manipulated, distorted, misconstrued, misrepresented and misappropriated” (Dénommé-Welch & Montero, 2014, p. 148) by non-Indigenous educators and students. Hazou (2015, p. 147) queries whether it is possible for even First Nations educators to truly indigenise Shakespeare, arguing that there are “limits of achieving agency within...forced engagement”.

Educators may have explicit decolonising aims, and yet perform problematic practices. Borhani (2020) aimed to holistically connect participants with the land, and positions her work within decolonising practices and cross-cultural ways-of-knowing. She nonetheless privileged non-Indigenous voices, sharing a non-Indigenous poem as stimulus for performatively exploring on/with the land. Although she acknowledges First Nations peoples within her paper, Borhani (2020) does not describe doing so with her participants. We suggest that drawing on First Nations holistic ways-of-knowing without engaging with decolonising practices potentially reproduces colonial relationships. As Borhani (2020, p. 68) herself suggests, decolonising hearts, minds, and actions is a process of continual critical self-reflection and “further questing”.

Educating the educators

It appears, therefore, that drama-based pedagogies can both help and hinder decolonising and indigenising processes, and that educators make the difference between healing and harm. As suggested by Ritenburg et al. (2014) and expanded through our own findings, these pedagogies work most effectively when educators commit to relational responsibilities with students, families, communities, and land. Questions remain: how can educators be encouraged to engage with these pedagogies, that themselves lie on the margins of Western education (Neelands, 2004)? How do non-Indigenous educators make the necessary shift from Euro-Western epistemologies to relational ways-of-knowing and being?

These studies indicate several possibilities, that should be explored further. The majority of studies featured drama and/or arts educators (albeit not always in drama classes), who for various personal and professional reasons, decided to explore this content through their existing pedagogies. The non-drama educators involved generally required support from a drama educator to successfully implement these practices (e.g. the NOW Play project). It was also important that educators attempt or experience these practices themselves. Educators in Silo and Khudu-Petersen (2016), who observed and were impressed by the drama researcher/educators, nonetheless intended returning to ‘normal’. By contrast, the educators in Minoi et al. (2019, p. 166), who worked with researchers to co-create the ‘play-to-engage’ activities and experienced the games themselves, were eager to “do this again”. The three studies featuring pre-service or practising teacher embodied professional learning (Doerksen, 2016; Greenwood, 2012; Kana & Aitken, 2007), indicate that this may be a possible way forward, simultaneously helping educators to shift their ways-of-knowing and gain new pedagogical skills. These studies were, however, limited in the number of participants studied and/or the length of the project.

Critical self-reflection appears to aid educators in embedding shifts in their perspectives and practices, although this is difficult to judge accurately given the nature of self-reporting on short-term projects. The lack of cultural identification from non-Indigenous researchers indicates that more critical self-reflection in this area is vitally needed. Non-Indigenous researchers can and should conduct critical research in the messy space of decolonising education, but that it is a strange and awkward space should be acknowledged (Thunig & Jones, 2020). Acknowledging and reflecting upon our location within that space is a core part of conducting education and research that is relational, respectful, and reciprocal (Styres, 2017). It is important to note that critical reflection need not be a cognitive-logical or ‘disembodied’ practice; embodied reflection (i.e. reflecting through movement, forming images, drawing, etc.) enables deep and powerful exploration, understanding, and synthesis (Forgasz, 2015).

The emotional, physical, and cognitive toll on educators engaging in this work can be challenging, particularly when entered unawares. First Nations educators may experience powerful decolonising journeys. Non-Indigenous educators may need to undergo a different but equally challenging paradigm shift, experiencing “overwhelming culture shock” (Blight, 2015, p. 23), or feeling torn between conflicting interests and values. To adopt new understandings and expectations, educators

first need to recognise that their existing colonising perspectives are causing mistakes, misunderstandings, and harm, and accept a loss of control as they engage in a “steep learning curve” (Dupuis & Ferguson, 2016, p. 135). Although some educators worked alone, many found comfort, strength, and support through sharing their experiences with others. The relationships described by Ritenburg et al. (2014), as well as trusting relationships with peers and/or mentors, will help educators to fulfil their responsibilities to their students. Without close community and peer/mentor relationships, non-Indigenous educators in particular may lack the knowledge, skills, and understanding to support their First Nations students. With strong relationships, as the educators and Elders in Peterson and Horton (2019) demonstrate, even problematic aspects of children’s learning may be viewed not as a sign that drama in education is failing, but as evidence that further cultural knowledge is needed.

Conclusion

This systematic review has critically explored literature using drama to engage with First Nations content and concepts in education. The 27 studies included occurred in 12 nations across all education levels, and used drama to enhance learning, encourage change, and create connections. Studies employing holistic or decolonising pedagogies tended to involve collaborative relationships with First Nations peoples. Others did not invoke a holistic approach, but transplanted First Nations content into Western education systems. Further exploration is needed into the dilemma of embedding holistic and decolonising pedagogies into traditionally colonising institutions. In particular, a deeper understanding is needed of how relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous educators and communities can be developed, nurtured, and maintained.

Using the critical principles of relationality outlined by Lowe et al. (Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019), we unpacked some of the possibilities and problems. Drama in education can contribute to First Nations peoples’ survival, dignity, and well-being, but may also perpetuate racism and contribute to First Nations marginalisation. Educators may misrepresent, misconstrue, and misappropriate First Nations peoples, perspectives, and knowledges. Ongoing educator critical self-reflection and acceptance of instability are necessary. Based on the interest shown in these pedagogies by non-drama educators, and the difficulties faced by drama and non-drama educators alike, developing explicit and embodied pedagogical models with decolonising aims is a much-needed area of future research.

The possibility of achieving critical and substantive changes through these practices remains uncertain, yet enough potential is shown through these studies to encourage further exploration and research. The most vital and least documented measure of substantive change in these studies is First Nations perspectives. As previously discussed, less than a third of studies report on community perspectives, although community stakeholders inevitably exist and are acknowledged in a further ten studies. First Nations community and school collaborations are complex and multifaceted; further insight is needed to say whether these relationships were genuine or productive (Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019; Lowe, Tennent, et al., 2019).

These studies indicate internal and external possibilities for evoking and stimulating educator transformations. Educators may put these pedagogies into practice, and critically reflect upon the inevitable challenges and mistakes. This process is most productive when supported by peers or mentors who can discuss ideas, call out problematic practices, and suggest ways forward. Alternatively, educators may themselves undergo embodied professional learning engaging them with First Nations knowledges. The three studies included which explore this option indicate positive outcomes, but are limited by the duration and small size of their projects. Further inquiry and imagining are needed to understand how such professional learning might support teachers to decolonise their minds, emotions, and practices.

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