

# Performing at the Intersections: A Literature Review of Applied Theatre, Climate Change, and Their Impacts on Mental Health Among Indigenous Youth

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Theatre is infrequently used as a method to research experiences of climate change and its mental health impacts among Indigenous youth. It is unclear, however, what the central qualities are that render theatre an appropriate or inappropriate medium to investigate the intersections of these three topics. **Objectives:** The primary objective of this literature review is to identify the strengths and challenges of using applied theatre as a method when discussing the effects of climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth. **Methods:** This review was guided by a narrative approach. Literature was identified using digital databases including PubMed, Elsevier, WorldCat, JSTOR, Project MUSE, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Articles were selected depending on their relevance and contributions to the discussion of the central topics. Inclusion was contingent on publication in a peer-reviewed journal and whether the articles discussed applied theatre, climate change, and mental health. A total of 17 articles were included in the final review, which were further analyzed to identify overlapping themes. It is worth noting that this narrative review is not a comprehensive review of research on Indigenous youth, mental health, and/or climate change. Rather, it is a focused investigation of the role of theatre in addressing the intersections of these subjects. **Results:** This literature review found that there are significant linkages between climate change and mental health. Three central strengths emerged from a review of existing projects that used applied theatre to discuss climate change or mental health with Indigenous youth. The exploratory nature of theatre, its flexible temporality, and its capacity-building qualities are all overarching themes that render theatre pertinent to discussing climate change and its consequent mental health impacts among Indigenous youth. **Conclusion:** The emergent findings are important when considering applied theatre as a medium to facilitate discussions. There are certain challenges that also arose, such as a lack of youth interest and a need to conduct theatre activities over longer periods of time.

*Keywords:* Indigenous youth, mental wellness, climate change, applied theatre, arts-based approaches

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## Introduction

The effects of climate change in the Northwest Territories and other circumpolar contexts have been well documented. The Northwest Territories, one of three territories within what is now known as Canada, is warming three times faster than the global average, resulting in geographic, environmental, and social changes (Bush & Lemmen, 2019; Environment and Natural Resources, n.d.). Permafrost, a frozen layer of soil beneath the surface in arctic climates, is thawing at rates never seen before in history, releasing methane and other atmospheric gases back into the atmosphere and further accelerating global warming (Philips et al., n.d.). Ice conditions have changed throughout the seasons and have become unpredictable, creating safety risks for those who depend on the ice for travel and the transport of goods (Rall & LaFortune, 2020). The combination of these environmental and geographic changes is also causing changes in the availability of traditional foods such as caribou and migratory birds (Rall & LaFortune, 2020). Moreover, beyond these ecological, infrastructural, and economic impacts, climate change also has tangible effects on the mental and physical well-being of people (Kipp et al., 2019).

Climate change has many impacts on the mental health of individuals, including anxiety and depression, depending on the direct or indirect exposure to climate-related events (Palinkas & Wong, 2020). However, Indigenous Peoples in circumpolar contexts may be disproportionately impacted due to their proximity to the environment. Likewise, climate-related mental health concerns exacerbate the existing effects of settler colonialism, which continue to negatively impact the overall health of Indigenous Peoples and their communities (Whyte, 2017). A systematic literature review by Vecchio et al. (2022) evaluated the role of climate change on mental health among Indigenous Peoples. After reviewing 23 articles, many from circumpolar contexts, the authors found that the climate crisis exacerbated existing health and social

issues, such as housing, food security, addiction, and mental health crises. Relocation due to environmental degradation or climate disasters also contributed to poorer mental health outcomes in many studies (Chen et al., 2011; McMichael & Powell, 2021; McNamara et al., 2010). Moreover, climate-induced disruptions in access to land translated into poorer mental health outcomes and increased concerns by community members over well-being (Vecchio et al., 2022). The impacts of climate change on mental health are further supported by accounts of youth from Nunatsiavut, who have reported “fear about life-changing circumstances, and concerns about how community members were using negative ways of coping,” when asked about their perspectives on climate change (Lebel et al., 2022, p. 326). Indirect impacts of weather events, broad changes, and the societal effects that accompany climatic change can generate feelings of displacement, loss, distress, and hopelessness, as well as more serious mental illnesses among youth (Lebel et al., 2022; Vecchio et al., 2022).

A recent study to examine climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth was conducted in a community in the Northwest Territories. Indigenous youth, in collaboration with an Indigenous playwright, workshopped a drama performance that explored the experiences of Indigenous youth with climate change and the impacts on their mental health. The project was informed by a community Elder who had suggested the use of drama as an effective medium for discussion and analysis, based on his own personal experiences with the power of theatre.

Theatre has a long history as a medium to address social conditions and our human responses to these conditions. Broadly speaking, applied theatre is an umbrella term for practices that use the process of dramaturgy and performance as a medium to explore concerns, challenges, issues, and potential solutions in a community (Baldwin, 2008). It has been most famously interpreted and developed by Augusto Boal in his classic text, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, in which performance arts and community empowerment are intertwined in enacting

socio-political change (Boal, 2008). Applied theatre differs from works of traditional theatre in that there is no moral lesson or preconceived teaching for the audience to receive. Rather, applied theatre is a process in which audience members, participants, and community members can question the status quo through the performance of one's own challenges. Likewise, the process of performance removes oneself from one's own narrative, allowing for reflection on empathy with the self and others (Baldwin, 2008). In Boal's practice of applied theatre, the audience is also an essential component of performance. Spectators become "spect-actors" and are encouraged to engage with on-scene dilemmas or situations (Boal, 2008, p. xxi). This component of applied theatre allows all members of a community to participate, creating opportunities for dialogue, listening, and group learning that may not exist in day-to-day life (Baldwin, 2008).

### **Review Questions**

This literature review is guided by the following question: What are the strengths and challenges of using applied theatre to facilitate discussions on the intersections of climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth?

To answer this question, this paper assessed examples of applied theatre being used by Indigenous youth to discuss either mental health, climate change, or the intersection of these topics. Further, the literature was analyzed to identify best practices as well as challenges that may arise from using applied theatre as a medium to discuss the intersection of climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth.

### **Methods**

This literature review utilized a narrative approach to identify and analyze published literature that discusses the intersections between applied theatre, climate change, and Indigenous youth mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). A narrative approach is primarily focused on

conceptualizing and analyzing a specific body of literature, depending on the topic of inquiry or discussion (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This approach is useful for subject matter that has not been thoroughly investigated, such as is the case in this paper. This paper is by no means a thorough review of all research done on climate change and its mental health impacts on Indigenous Peoples. Rather, it synthesizes pertinent research on mental health and climate change to create a narrative as to how applied theatre may be used with Indigenous youth to investigate these topics.

To apply this narrative approach, the first author initially searched for relevant literature in several databases including PubMed, Elsevier, WorldCat, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar. The review question was further broken down to three concepts to facilitate a more effective search: (a) Indigenous Applied Theatre, (b) Indigenous Youth Mental Health, and (c) Climate Change. Synonyms and keywords were compiled based on these three concepts, which were then used to conduct the searches. For the purposes of the literature search, mental health was broadly defined as perceived emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Youth was also understood to include individuals from adolescence to those in their 20s and 30s. The reference lists of several key papers were also assessed for further resources that could be utilized in informing the literature review.

Inclusion criteria was limited to peer reviewed works published between 1985 and 2022 and pertinent to applied theatre, climate change, its impacts on mental health, and/or the manifestations of these impacts on Indigenous youth. After the initial search, the first author screened all titles and abstracts, which was then followed by a more thorough full-text review of articles that were flagged as most pertinent to the search topics. Articles selected for full-text review were then assessed for relevancy to the three central topics of this review. Articles were included if they included in-depth discussions on either the use of applied theatre with Indigenous youth or the complex interactions between climate change and mental health

among Indigenous youth. Several overlapping themes emerged across the 17 articles that were included in this review, which are discussed in the following sections.

## Findings

This review aimed to provide a narrative review of the potential strengths and challenges of using applied theatre to facilitate discussions about climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth. In total, 17 articles were included in the final pool of results. Upon analysis of the final articles included in this review, three strengths emerged from the literature. Most notably, theatre has an exploratory nature that enables youth to interact with challenging, and often emotional, themes. Further, theatre inherently provides flexible temporalities, which allow youth to engage with issues both in the past and the future in a fluid manner that would otherwise be difficult to embody outside of the practice of theatre. Finally, theatre provides a space of community for capacity building rooted in cultural strengths and identity. In addition to these strengths, there are also challenges to using theatre, most importantly the need for trust and relationships between and among participants and facilitators. Likewise, cultural safety is essential when conducting a theatre activity with Indigenous youth.

## Strengths of Applied Theatre

### *Exploratory Nature of Theatre*

The first strength of using applied theatre as a medium for discussing the intersection of climate change and mental health is the exploratory nature of applied theatre and its ability to create safe spaces to explore complex issues. Participants can explore scenarios and ways of being and acknowledge emotions or challenges in an environment that is similar to real life, yet still creative and safe (Baldwin, 2008). In *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995), Augusto Boal describes this tension between lived and performed identities as “the

state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image” (p. 43). He further elaborates on this theme by introducing “analogical induction,” which can be described as the recognition of the self in others (Goulet et al., 2009, p. 110).

Theatre, by its very nature, allows participants to explore feelings, identities, and situations that may feel overwhelming in ordinary life; the topic of climate change can be one such example of this. Youth exposure to climate change is generally limited to classrooms or news sources where information is focused on the consequences of climate change such as forest fires, landslides, floods, and loss of biodiversity (Monroe et al., 2019). Although this information is useful in understanding the effects of climate change, it can be challenging for youth to view this information as empowering or hopeful and can contribute to feelings of apathy or hopelessness instead (Ojala, 2012). Theatre-based engagement with climate change may allow youth to explore the issue in a safe space, without having to actively live its consequences or the despair that is commonly associated with its consequences (Monroe et al., 2019).

Applied theatre practices also offer Indigenous youth the space to explore their own experiences without their voices being co-opted by typical deficit-based narratives. In “Youth Participatory Action Research and Applied Theatre Engagement: Supporting Indigenous Youth Survivance and Resurgence,” Diane Conrad (2020) draws upon three different projects involving theatre and Indigenous youth to demonstrate the potential of the medium in “inspiring processes for survivance and resurgence” (p. 258). In all three settings, theatre provided Indigenous youth the space to showcase their identities beyond the labels ascribed to them by society, such as “at-risk,” “incarcerated,” or “street-involved.” In one project involving Indigenous youth perceived as “street involved,” Conrad (2020) notes that the

youth saw themselves as artists, educators, and activists, which are roles they previously felt prohibited from embodying. The author cites theatre-worker and scholar Jill Carter in summarizing how the three theatre projects may provide the youth “a new way of seeing and recreating themselves as sovereign human beings” (Carter, 2016, as cited in Conrad, 2020, p. 264).

Similarly, the exploratory nature of theatre has been noted as having the potential to serve as a healing medium for mental health, climate change, or other distressing topics among Indigenous youth. George Cajete (1994) in *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* describes the artistic potential within Indigenous Peoples as “an integral part of learning, being, and becoming complete” (p. 140). Furthermore, he elaborates that youth particularly struggle in finding their way in today’s world and that art, in all its forms, assists in “developing [a] vision that guides them toward fulfillment of themselves as complete human beings” (p. 147). Bessel van der Kolk (2014), author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, highlights the importance of theatre in allowing individuals with traumatic experiences to recentre themselves in their bodies through performance, which can allow participants to “explore alternative ways of engaging with life” (p. 339).

As the above examples have demonstrated, the exploratory nature of applied theatre is beneficial when discussing complex issues, because it allows both the participants and audience members (or in this case, the “spect-actors”) to engage in the topics without directly experiencing lived consequences. Particularly for Indigenous youth, the impacts of climate change on their mental health can be a difficult topic to explore. Climate change implies alterations in ways of life and adaptation to new realities, further exacerbating existing issues such as availability and quality of housing, food security, and access to traditional lands and activities (Vecchio et al., 2022). Exploring these

issues without the burden of living them is an integral strength of theatre as a medium for discussion.

### ***Temporalities of Theatre***

Another strength for using applied theatre that emerged from the literature with regard to climate change and mental health is theatre’s flexible temporality. A performance is always in the present, even if it is representing the past or future. Therefore, participants can perform the symptoms of the present while imagining more positive futures. The act of performance creates an “alternative space where potential becomes possibility” (Goulet et al., 2009, p. 107). One of the most compelling examples of the benefit of theatre’s flexible temporality is demonstrated in *Salmon is Everything: Community-Based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed* (May, 2018). Following an ecological disaster in which approximately 30,000 salmon died prematurely in one of the largest watersheds in the Pacific Northwest, the book documents the development of a theatre project that allowed community members, especially young people, to share their lived experiences with the crisis. The play is centred on Julie, a young Indigenous woman, and her family as they deal with socio-economic and cultural damage caused by the loss of the fish. Julie meets Tim, a young non-Indigenous rancher, and together they imagine all the living and non-living beings that constitute the watershed as a family of many peoples all dedicated to saving the salmon.

The theatre work is most compelling in its ability to demonstrate the nuances of actors and the complexities of everyday life through performance. No actor or character is reduced to a stereotype or archetype intended to teach a moral or lesson to the audience: there “are no heroes or villains here, just complex characters ... working doggedly across difference, race (and racism), anger, fear, vulnerability, empathy, and love in order to better understand and relate to one another” (May, 2018, p. 179). As the book documents, community members, both youth

and adults, as well as the non-Indigenous farmers and ranchers dependent on the salmon, co-created the work by reflecting on the shared loss of the salmon and using this loss to produce a work of art that dreams of a more hopeful future. *Salmon is Everything* is one example of how theatre's flexible temporality creates space for dialogue about climate change and can allow multiple perspectives and knowledge systems to be heard and shared, culminating in a more dynamic understanding of an issue and how it affects individuals or communities differently. This contrasts with traditional climate crisis communication methods, where the conditions of the present are narrated as binding for the future, creating a sense of hopelessness among youth (Bentz, 2020). Theatre's ability to perform multiple time periods at once allows the past to inform the conditions of the present, while imagining more hopeful futures.

Following the first performance in 2018, the play has been performed many times, and each performance comprises specific moments in time before the death of the salmon, during, and the aftermath of the die-off (May, 2018). Theatre allows moments in times like these to be performed perpetually in the present, allowing lessons and aspirations from the past to continually inform the present. Moreover, a performance such as *Salmon is Everything* becomes a tool for the community to re-enact and learn in the face of future challenges related to environmental changes and its effects on people.

Kyle Whyte (2017) in "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene" discusses the importance of connecting the past, present, and future with regard to Indigenous climate change studies and its implications for performance. He argues that "reflecting on why our ancestors would have perceived the present as dystopian provides guidance on how to live under post-apocalyptic conditions ... Indigenous climate justice activism is also about performing these ancestrally inspired visions" (p. 160). The

flexible temporality of theatre is an advantage that allows youth to perform the challenges and lives of previous generations and have their strengths provide inspiration for the present or future.

### **Capacity Building**

The third and final strength that emerged from the literature is the capacity building brought about with theatre. Participants in applied theatre projects report increased confidence and skills that may enable them to better address the manifestations of climate change and mental health issues in their lives. One study by Snow et al. (2003) qualitatively investigated the therapeutic nature of theatre among 20 participants with developmental disabilities. In survey questions following the three-month data collection period, participants expressed an overwhelming sense of achievement, confidence, and happiness that they did not feel prior to their theatre experience. Researchers also found that therapeutic benefits of theatre included enhanced communication skills, increased sense of responsibility, increased socialization, a reduced sense of stigmatization, and an expanded sense of self (Snow et al., 2003).

Theatre also allows youth to critically analyze situations or behaviours and rehearse new actions without real-life consequences (Goulet et al., 2009). One study from Ansloos and Wager (2020) used community theatre to create dialogue among Indigenous youth with experiences of homelessness. The study involved 15 participants who committed to weekly attendance and rehearsals of a performance, which took place over the span of three years. In interviews following the project, several themes were highlighted. For many youths, theatre was a novel and frightening experience. However, participation gave many youths a sense of pride in themselves and their accomplishments, as well as a belief in their potential despite the challenges they may have experienced in their own personal lives (Ansloos & Wager, 2020). Likewise, exploring

past experiences of homelessness and performing futures of housing stability gave youth the capacity for hope. As Ansloos and Wager (2020) describe, the capacity to be hopeful “was not unhinged from the pragmatic struggles or concerns of youth, but instead was linked to making life in the immediate material and physical sense more livable and survivable; and the future more attainable, resilient, ambitious, and possible” (p. 59). Theatre also gave many participants a space to create identities independent of lived challenges and to forge new communities with other youth. By meeting other youth with similar lived experiences, youth could draw upon the strength of the relationships they had built during the theatre project as motivation and a source of perseverance, which ultimately served as the building blocks for activism (Ansloos & Wager, 2020). This is further supported by two studies exploring the linkages between climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth in circumpolar contexts, wherein youth reported that feeling connected to other youth was essential in maintaining motivation in climate advocacy and dealing with other stressors in everyday life (MacKay et al., 2020; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2015; Petrasek MacDonald, Ford, et al., 2013; Petrasek MacDonald, Harper, et al., 2013). Theatre has potential to be the medium for connection among youth and, consequently, build both individual- and community-level capacity. Likewise, a research project by Goulet et al. (2009) used theatre workshops to provide an opportunity for Indigenous youth in one region of Saskatchewan to discuss healthy decision-making and their health. In this project, entitled *Developing Healthy Decision-Making With Aboriginal Youth Through Drama*, youth participated in theatre games where they could move around spaces and do activities that built trust and communication among the participants. Participants were also asked to portray a “frozen image” that exemplified some of their lived experiences (Goulet et al., 2009, p.

108). Although a simple activity, embodying lived experiences provided youth with the capacity to share experiences and communicate in creative manners. Participants could build skills and a network of similar youth in ways that were fun and full of laughter.

Beyond communication skills and connecting youth, *Developing Healthy Decision-Making With Aboriginal Youth Through Drama* also exemplified the role of theatre in highlighting community strengths. Through sharing images and performances, youth demonstrated their “social systems with deep bonds among peers, family members, relatives, and community members” (Goulet et al., 2009, p. 111). Theatre provided the youth with space to reflect on their strengths and reframe identity and community as an opportunity to overcome the health challenges they identified.

### **Challenges in Using Applied Theatre**

The literature also emphasizes several challenges associated with using theatre to examine complex issues. In *Developing Healthy Decision-Making With Aboriginal Youth Through Drama*, Goulet et al. (2009) found that it was difficult to maintain commitment from the youth over a short period of time. Youth felt that they did not have a stake in the process and were less likely to engage (Goulet et al., 2009). Full engagement requires a certain amount of trust in the aims of the project, in the facilitators, and in other participants (Hradsky & Forgasz, 2022). This trust may not be easily gained within the span of only one or two rehearsals or workshops. Additionally, it may be hard to garner the interest of youth participants, especially given that climate change or mental health may not be the largest visible priority in their lives (Vecchio et al., 2022). Generating interest in climate change as an issue that directly affects participants should also be a part of potential future theatre workshops. Overall, building a safe space where all participants feel comfortable and valued when sharing

experiences or beliefs on these complex issues may also be difficult in the short term.

### Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that there are a variety of projects that use theatre to examine mental health *or* climate change; however, there is limited work that explicitly engages the intersection of these topics. The works of theatre involving either climate change or environmental issues often touch upon the social effects of environmental destruction, which include mental health challenges. However, there is a major gap in the way that applied theatre may be used to address the synthesis of these topics, nor are there many works that evaluate the impact of using applied theatre in this way. Both this literature review and the pilot project in the Northwest Territories, as mentioned in the introduction, hope to address this gap. First, the exploratory nature of applied theatre creates an imaginative space that permits youth to discuss themes or ideas that they may normally not have the opportunity to. With respect to the climate crisis, the exploratory aspects of theatre create the possibility to look at climate change from various perspectives, including ones of hope. This contrasts with the predominant messaging around climate change, which often uses a lens of despair and catastrophe instead. Second, the flexible temporality characteristic of theatre is important in allowing youth to perform alternate realities and to transform works of theatre into a resource for future generations. Lastly, applied theatre builds youth capacity by bringing youth together and engaging them in new creative activities that build skills, generating a space where youth can relate to and validate one another's experiences or thoughts. Capacity building and networking may also provide youth with the opportunity to creatively engage with identity and community to better address the mental health detriments that follow climate change. Applied theatre,

therefore, may be an appropriate and useful medium to engage in dialogues about climate change and mental health among Indigenous youth.

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