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*Can Theatre for the Very Young Dare to Talk About Prejudice and Inclusion?*

As the field of Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) expands, artists are challenged with new ways to speak to the intelligence of the audience and balance age appropriate material. Lyn Gardner of *The Stage*, says,

While young people are increasingly stepping up on issues including the environment, mental health and social justice – issues on which we adults have failed woefully – too much work made for young people remains timid in content and form....What are we trying so hard to protect our children from? And in protecting them, might we be damaging their ability to face up to the complexities of the world and difficulties they will face as the old certainties melt away?

While many TVY plays are age appropriate, creative, and entertaining, there are few that delve into serious social issues. In the past 30 years, TYA in the US has dedicated itself to the development of more complex characters, plots, and themes. But now is also a ripe opportunity to develop scripts that mirror the complexities of our world for TVY.

This paper will explore how TVY in the US can present challenging social content for children under the age of five. Professor Gillian McNally (Theatre Education) and Assistant Professor Amanda Rutter (Early Childhood Education) at the University of Northern Colorado will work together to produce and study how children comprehend prejudice and inclusion by

attending the play *Blue* by Annie Cusick Wood. *Blue* explores an imaginary world where everything is blue. When a red object appears, the characters are faced with the decision of if they should include a new color in their world. The play cleverly explores inclusion, prejudice, and racism through metaphor. Together, this team of researchers will explore the question: *what impact can a TVY play have on children's understanding of prejudice and inclusion?*

The authors will incorporate the theoretical lenses of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, and the Pyramid Model of social-emotional development. Each of these theories will ground our research on the impact of both the production and corresponding pre- and post-show workshops centering on themes of racism, prejudice, and inclusion. The study which will include a pre- and post-production survey to the teachers and caregivers in the audience. We will collaborate to determine the impact the production has on children's interactions with one another in play habit tendencies before and after the production, along with displayed social behaviors.

The paper links to the conference theme, *Beginning the Journey: Legacy and Innovation in TYA*, by looking at how the field is innovating its dramatic literature to include social issue themes. As teacher educator Ann Pelo states, "if children are to grow up with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective living in a complex, diverse world, early childhood programs must actively challenge the impact of bias on children's development" (9). TVY needs to live up to Pelo's challenge and use its plays to develop children's social development and awareness of prejudice, inclusion, and racism.

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## Biographies

**Gillian McNally** is a professor of Theatre Education at the University of Northern Colorado, where she trains undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates and produces the yearly TYA production. McNally has presented at several ITYARN conferences throughout the world since 2008, served on the TYA/USA board for 10 years, lead the 2014 American Alliance for Theatre in Education Conference, and published in *TYA Today*, *Youth Theatre Journal*, and *Incite/Insight*. In Colorado, McNally was awarded the *Higher Education Teacher of the Year Award* by the Alliance for Colorado Theatre. She holds an MFA in Drama and Theatre for Youth at the University of Texas at Austin.

**Amanda Rutter** is an assistant professor of Early Childhood Education (ECE) at the University of Northern Colorado where she trains ECE undergraduate teacher candidates. Rutter has also taught pre-service teacher candidates in China and helps lead UNC's partnership with Huzhou University. She has presented at the American Education Research Association conference well as the Southern Early Childhood Education Association conference. Currently she serves as the co-chair for both the Colorado Association for the Education of Young Children and the Colorado Early Childhood Education Partnership. She holds an Ed.D in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education from the University of Houston.