

## Theater in education as an innovative pedagogical tool

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### ABSTRACT

*With today's crisis of values, one of the main demands for ensuring democracy is the restoration of trust in people's relationships. It is considered more useful, however, to consolidate it from the first years of a person's life. It begs the question, therefore, how can trust be acquired at this stage of life. The arts, with their potential to increase the empathy of individuals, can be the basis for their development. By means of a quantitative methodological approach, the paper focuses on the art of theater and explores its role in education as an innovative pedagogical tool in building trust in primary education. The article examines the evolution of social relationships between children over time. While teachers cannot assess these relationships directly due to time constraints, these relationships do exist. Children have learned to accept the diversity of their classmates in the context of lessons, leading to shared experiences both inside and outside of school. Although not all social relations are successful, the educational process has contributed to the strengthening of respect for others between them which can positively affect the reduction of marginalization.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trust, as a dominant element of social cohesion (Delhey et al, 2018), in modern societies where the crisis of values has long put them on guard for the protection of human life and democracy (European Commission, 2017), must be reconsidered and to identify the reason for its absence from human relations. Thus, questions about what, how, by what means, under what conditions and even when it can be created so that it can have solid foundations, come to the fore and need investigation. In this context, each researcher who wishes to deal with the subject, based either on the field of knowledge s/he serves and on his personal interests or on his experience, sets a point of reference and begins the investigation process.

Following this reasoning, the school is treated as a point of reference and an effort is made to examine how it can contribute to the creation of trusting relationships. This space (meaning the school), especially in the initial levels of education, being the first social context that children encounter after the family, can show them the benefits created at an individual and social level by trust and educate them about the rules, actions and the conditions under which trust can emerge and emerge (Borgonovi & Burns, 2015). Thus, children, from the very first years of their lives, will be imbued with the idea of creating trusting relationships and this, as a fundamental capital in their lives, is very likely to influence them later on, pushing them to a constant effort to create trusting relationships.

By specializing, however, even more the prism from which the subject in question will be approached the element of theater in education will also enter the equation. Therefore, the exact object of examination of the present article is to investigate the extent to which theatre in education creates trusting relationships in children attending primary education. Starting, therefore, from the five dimensions attributed in the literature on trust (honesty, kindness, openness, reliability and competence) (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) an attempt was made to formulate the research questions. However, very

quickly it was found that the specific dimensions leave a lot of room for explaining their content and interpreting how they manifest, which is why they could not be used in a scientific investigation that requires objectivity. So, it was decided to examine it based on some results.

Thus, if as such, in the context of a society, as mentioned at the beginning, social cohesion and democratic values are considered, in the context of the school, which constitutes the central axis of the examined object, those values of the individual that form social interaction, either through the promotion of cooperation between the interactants in a school (pupils among themselves, educators-pupils, educators-school principal, parents-educators, etc.) (Neuenschwander, 2020. Strier & Katz, 2016) or through the promotion of positive relationships in education, which prevent educator burnout (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015). These data formed the basis of research questions for a more specialized investigation of the subject. This article focuses on the art of theater and explores the role that theater in education as a pedagogical tool plays in building trusting relationships and especially in the creation of social relations among children attending primary school.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research, conducted in the summer of 2022 (June-September), was carried out in two phases: a 20-day pilot trial and the main study. A quantitative approach was used to examine whether theater in education fosters trusting relationships among primary school children (Manjunatha, 2019). A questionnaire was drawn up and was given to all theater education teachers. Data were collected from 407 drama teachers who had taught drama in primary education for at least one year.

Analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software, version 26. It included estimation of frequency distributions, descriptive statistics and other characteristics of respondents, calculating percentage distributions and differences, with 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). Statistical significance was assessed using the Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) Test, based on determining the normality of the data through a normality test.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

In response to the question about whether children who attended a theater in education class could find themselves at a common party after one of them invites someone they didn't previously associate with, the answers were generally positive. Although it may not be immediately obvious, as almost half of the teachers (49.9%) gave a neutral answer, a closer look reveals that the percentage of positive responses ("somewhat likely" and "likely" combined) is higher than the percentage of negative responses ("somewhat unlikely" and "unlikely")—32.7% versus 17.5%, respectively. Notably, the extreme negative response ("unlikely") was in the single digits (4.7%), while the extreme positive response ("likely") was more than twice as high (10.8%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Openness of the children who have completed the study cycle in the theatre in education course to invite to a possible party their classmates who until before the course did not hang out with.

	Frequency (N)	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Unlikely	19	4,7	4,7	4,7
Somewhat unlikely	52	12,8	12,8	17,4
Neither	203	49,9	49,9	67,3
Somewhat likely	89	21,9	21,9	89,2
Likely	44	10,8	10,8	100,0
Total	407	100,0	100,0	

From the teachers' answers to this specific question, it seems that the theater in education creates the conditions for a change in one child's opinion about another, even if only on a trial basis in a single case, such as a party. The possibility of interaction that this course offers to the pupils attending it allows them to develop a wide range of skills, which can be related to both their individual (e.g. critical thinking, self-expression) and their social side (e.g. communication skills, social interaction) (Solis, 2018). At the same time, the tools and strategies used in the specific course help pupils to understand both themselves and others (Giotaki & Lenakakis, 2016). Under this condition, aspects may be discovered in the pupils that before could not communicate with each other, which turns over the previous view. So, to be able to co-exist in a joint event, or even make an effort in this direction. Regarding, however, the neutral attitude of the teachers who participated in the research, it does not stem from any kind of doubt, but from their own lack of ability to monitor this development in practice, because of the little contact they have with their pupils, due to the downgrading of the course by the State (limited to only one hour per week). In response to the question about the possibility of creating long-term social relationships between classmates who have completed the theater in education course, a pattern similar to the first question about individual socializing was observed. The neutral answer once again outweighed the others but dropped by more than 5 percentage points (from 49.9% to 44.2%). These lost points were gained by positive responses, which increased from a cumulative 32.7% in the first question ("somewhat likely" and "likely") to 38.1% in total for this question. The negative responses ("unlikely" and "somewhat unlikely") remained almost unchanged, with a slight increase of 0.2 percentage points (from 17.5% to 17.7%) between the two questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Possibility of creating long-term social relationships by the pupils who have completed the study cycle in the theater in education course.

	Frequency (N)	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Unlikely	11	2,7	2,7	2,7
Somewhat unlikely	61	15,0	15,0	17,7
Neither	180	44,2	44,2	61,9
Somewhat likely	101	24,8	24,8	86,7
Likely	54	13,3	13,3	100,0
Total	407	100,0	100,0	

In this question, which is of a similar logic to the previous one, with only the element of time being different, the answers are also of a similar logic. This shows that the theatre in education course offers not only short-term benefits, but also long-lasting benefits. For the interpretation, emphasis should be placed on the theories used in this course, which, among others, are the basic psychological theories of Vygotsky and Bandura. According to these theories, knowledge, on the one hand, is promoted through the interaction of individuals (Vygotsky, 1978), on the other hand, it is produced through observing the behaviors, attitudes and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1977). In this way, theater in education is not just a course where children spend some pleasant moments, but a subject with a strictly scientific background that offers various benefits to its recipients. Thus, the educators participating in the research, even though, based on the previous question and the explanation of the answers given there, they are not in a position to verify the aforementioned positive results themselves, they argue that, even in the long run, the benefits that will students earn will remain unchanged.

In response to the question about the possibility of more frequent socializing between children who did not interact before attending the theater in education course, the answer "somewhat likely" was chosen by 38.6%, slightly below "neither" at 37.8%. The "likely" answer was selected by 17.2%, and "somewhat unlikely" by 6.4%. Although "unlikely" was not an option, the "somewhat unlikely" response,

the closest to extreme negative, had a very small percentage compared to the more positive answers. Similarly, the "likely" response, while more than 20 points below the neutral option, was almost three times more common than the extreme negative response (Table 3).

Table 3. Possibility of more frequent socializing between the children who have collaborated in the theater in education course.

	Frequency (N)	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Somewhat unlikely	26	6,4	6,4	6,4
Neither	154	37,8	37,8	44,2
Somewhat likely	157	38,6	38,6	82,8
Likely	70	17,2	17,2	100,0
Total	407	100,0	100,0	

In this question, where the educators participants in the research claim that the theater in education course contributes to bringing children together and making it easier for them to hang out with each other (if it is excluded the also high percentage of neutral responses due to external factors, as already explained), can be explained by the fact that the specific course has a great impact not only on the development of social skills, but also on their application. The interpretation can be given with the following reasoning: Social skills, based on the theory, are some specific behaviors expressed by some individuals during their interaction with other individuals (Korukcu et al, 2015). When these behaviors include the element of emotionality, social skills are more developed (Yuksel, 2004). The theater in education course is the field where emotions not only do not go unnoticed, but are forced to be manifested in order to achieve its purpose. Thus, in this way, theater in education becomes the means for the manifestation of these social skills, with the result that children who undergo this process can more easily coexist with each other and, therefore, can socialize more easily with each other.

In response to the question about the openness shown by children towards their peers after completing the theater in education course, a different pattern emerged compared to the previous two questions. The option "somewhat likely" appeared with higher percentages (43.2%) than "neither" (36.6%). The "somewhat unlikely" option had very low percentages (only 2.5%), which could be considered within the statistical error margin. The "likely" option, the extreme positive response, was almost the same as in the previous question, just 0.5 points higher. In total, positive responses surpassed 60% (60.9%), neutral responses were just over half that (36.6%), and negative responses remained very low, in single digits (Table 4).

Table 4. Openness of children who have attended the theater in education course for a reasonable period of time towards their classmates.

	Frequency (N)	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Somewhat unlikely	10	2,5	2,5	2,5
Neither	149	36,6	36,6	39,1
Somewhat likely	176	43,2	43,2	82,3
Likely	72	17,7	17,7	100,0
Total	407	100,0	100,0	

From the answers, therefore, of the interviewed educators who seem to strongly support that the theatre in education course and the openness that the children can show after watching it for a

reasonable time are proportional, it is explained in a variety of ways. One of them, however, is that openness is a more observable dimension and has a more direct effect and can be more easily perceived by an outside observer and especially by the educator teaching the theatre in education course. Openness, as one of the characteristics that combines creativity with intelligence and manifests itself through imagination, a deep appreciation of aesthetics and acceptance of emotions (personal and others), as well as a willingness for new experiences (McCrae & Costa, 2010), in a course such as theater in education, it finds suitable ground for its manifestation. Thus, educators who coexist with pupils for an academic year can detect it if they compare the image of children before the beginning of the course and after the completion of either its cycle or the passage of a period of time. Although in order to ensure the existence of this characteristic, perhaps they should examine it a little more globally, such as the daily life of the children, their behavior in other subjects and in the space outside the school, which is not possible, according to the limited time that theater in education teachers have with the children.

In response to the question about the extent to which the theater in education course can help address marginalization, a noticeable difference appeared compared to previous questions. The two largest percentages were for the most positive answers, with little variation between them (37.3% for "somewhat likely" and 34.2% for "likely"). The neutral response ("neither") was also relatively high at 24.8%. In contrast, the negative responses were very low, with a combined total of less than 5% (2.7% for "somewhat unlikely" and 1.0% for "unlikely") (Table 5).

Table 5. Contribution of the theater in education course to the reduction of marginalization phenomena in the school context.

	Frequency (N)	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Somewhat unlikely	4	1,0	1,0	1,0
Neither	11	2,7	2,7	3,7
Somewhat likely	101	24,8	24,8	28,5
Likely	152	37,3	37,3	65,8
Somewhat unlikely	139	34,2	34,2	100,0
Total	407	100,0	100,0	

In the question about the reduction of the phenomena of marginalization after primary school children attend the theater education course, the teachers' positive answers show that there is a correlation between the two (theatrical education and marginalization) and, in fact, the opposite. Although such phenomena, in order to argue with confidence that they are reduced compared to the past and that the theater in education course contributes to this, more thorough investigations and over a longer period of time are needed, it can be explained both with the arguments previously used for the openness that develops within the context of the course as well as with the nature of the course itself. Specifically, through the possibility it provides to children to express themselves in a safe environment freely and to experiment by constructing their own worlds, simultaneously realizing and giving meaning to the normality of the world and of other subjects, which, like themselves, apply their experience, knowledge and cultural characteristics (Lenakakis, 2012).

In the open-ended question where educators were asked to share their opinions on how the theater in education course affects social relationships among children who have attended for a reasonable period, many provided valuable insights that helped explain their previous answers. Some educators mentioned the interactions children develop in individual cases but did not comment on longer-term social relationships, as the frequent school changes (every year or two) prevent them from

observing such trends. This helps explain the prevalence of the "neither" response in these questions, as answers were based on their current observations. Additionally, despite the prevalence of positive responses regarding openness, increased communication, and reduced marginalization, the high percentage of neutral answers can be attributed to the educators' short-term or inductive perspective. They based their responses on immediate observations, as they rarely had the opportunity to observe long-term effects due to frequent school transfers and the discontinuation of theater education after the 4th grade.

## **Discussion**

The study examined how the social skills of primary school children are affected and the impact of theater in education on them. It was approached in two phases: first, by examining research on children's social skills as a foundation for forming relationships with peers and others, both now and in the future. Second, with a review of studies on the role of theater in education.

Social skills are vital to the interactions of individuals within a social environment and are essential to the quality of human life as they help develop one's social aspect (Baton et al., 2019). Although sociability is a fundamental human trait, it must be learned and cultivated with the right tools. The earlier these skills are developed, the more effective they become, increasing the potential for positive outcomes. Social skills are closely related to social behavior, with more skills leading to more positive behavior. Early development of these skills allows more time to practice and apply them, especially with peers, which is why early training is important (Altaftazani et al, 2020).

Social skills can enhance children's mental health and well-being (Guerra & Brandshaw, 2008), which can, in turn, have a positive impact on their cognitive abilities (Perry, 1999) and contribute to their academic achievement or citizenship attitudes. Additionally, these skills can help protect against psychological issues such as aggression, depression, and anxiety (Greenberg et al., 2003). Specifically, collaboration and communication skills can support students' academic success by enabling them to express, analyze, present, and discuss creative ideas, feelings, and thoughts (Kafai, 2002). Research by Cumberledge (2017) showed that participation in school bands helps improve children's social behavior, benefiting both their personal development and the school environment.

The text explores the pedagogical role of theater in education, emphasizing its benefits for children's social, cognitive and emotional development. Research shows that theater enhances communication skills, creativity and classroom climate, while encouraging collaboration and respect for diversity. Puppetry, in particular, has been found to improve communication, create a positive classroom atmosphere, and encourage collaboration (Whiteland, 2016). In addition, theater encourages students to be actively engaged, turning them from passive recipients to active participants. Specific examples include the use of puppets to facilitate problem-solving discussions and creative exercises, as well as programs that raise awareness of social issues such as AIDS, smoking and the otherness. The text concludes that theater in education not only develops social skills but also contributes to building social relationships.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This article presented the results of the research question concerning the development of social relations among primary school students as evidence of trust. The results are related to the development of the social relations of the primary school students who participate in the theater in education course.

Regarding the research question, which examined the role of theater in education subject in the creation of social relationships, it is proven that there is a positive correlation between them. Theater in education subject, as a pedagogical tool and a modern academic subject based on a scientific



background (psychological theories of Vygotsky and Bandura) uses techniques and strategies that promote active learning and aims at holistic education. Thus, the benefits it offers are not only limited to the individual side of the person, but also extend to his/her social side. Examining the issue, in the current phase, from its social dimension, it was found that the pupils in the context of the course, having the possibility to understand both themselves and others, were more likely to develop social ties with their peers, regardless of their characteristics or shared experiences between the two sides, as they gave more opportunities for this to happen. Given, in fact, that the understanding of the other was due to mental processes and not to a momentary change in their attitude towards the other and the different, the change in behavior had the conditions to be permanent. So, correspondingly, the social relations that developed between them may also have had long-term prospects. Long-term perspectives, in turn, in order to be functional and social relations to be active, need development. Thus, simple social relations could be transformed into friendly ones and openness could give way to companionship. Therefore, theater in education subject directly ensures the establishment of social relationships and indirectly relationships of trust, because, with the tools it uses, it reshapes the personalities of individuals who can redefine their positions if something cannot work for the well-being of societies.

In conclusion, theater in education subject as a pedagogical tool can unquestionably be considered and used as a tool for the development of trusting relationships, because, on the one hand, it creates the background for trust to exist, on the other hand, it brings people closer to each other, so that, through their partnership, they can create bonds between them, which will either be of short duration and constitute a simple cooperation or of longer duration and, with the development, social relations will arise.

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