

ART VS SCHOOL DROPOUT: THE THEATRE-EDUCATION OF ‘MAESTRI DI STRADA’ NARRATED BY EDUCATORS AND PUPILS

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Abstract

In Italy, the percentage of adolescents dropping out of school is really high. According to several studies, extra-curricular activities can promote dropout recovery. The “Maestri di Strada” Association carries out socio-educational projects in Neapolitan suburbs, by countering school dropouts even through art education. Among several workshops is that of theatre – a powerful educational tool, which supports identity and empowerment. The present study aimed to document and evaluate the multi-year workshop journey of a group of adolescents, by giving them and their educators a voice through semi-structured interviews. The latter were conducted with 9 pupils at the end of the penultimate year (Ad-T1) and of the last year (Ad-T2) of their journey and with 3 of their educators (theatre experts) a year after the end of their journey (Ed). The large textual Corpus collected was subjected to Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contexts (T-Lab Plus). The findings (Ad-T1: 6 cluster; Ad-T2: 5 cluster; Ed: 6 cluster) show that both adolescents and educators agree to consider this workshop a precious space where one can reclaim their own desire to learn and grow. Notably, in T1, pupils emphasize differences between theatre and school, their meaningful relationship with educators, learning to regulate emotions and to cooperate, and the alliance with families and the local community. In T2, pupils emphasize the importance of the group, the personal experiences had in each staged performance, and their new idea of adulthood. Similarly, educators regard the group as fundamental, as well as the relationship between the school and the local community, and future prospects.

Keywords: *School dropout, extra-curricular activity, theatre-education, adolescence, T-Lab Plus.*

1. Introduction

In Europe, Italy presents one of the highest school drop-out rates - one out of four students drops out. Particularly, in the Italian context, Neapolitan suburbs show one of the highest school drop-out rates. School dropout can be defined as the culmination of a long process of disinterest, disengagement and detachment from schooling (Vinciguerra, 2021; Liinamaa et al., 2022). These are regarded as consequences of a progressive deterioration of the bond between young people, school and society (Nita, 2021). Indeed, suburbs of contemporary cities are often delineated as complex and conflictual territories, characterised by housing deprivation, high unemployment, and undeclared work, family discomfort, youth deviance, and educational poverty. In general, social and economic changes have caused a profound shift in the experience of growing up, by slowing down young people's transitions to adulthood and creating more uncertain, complex and risky pathways (Coleman, 2000). In the process of building their independence, young people may engage in risky behaviours, especially when no other means are available, such as extracurricular activities or community services (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Indeed, according to a large body of literature, extra-curricular activities can prevent school dropout and deviance (Davalos et al., 1999; Neely & Vaquera, 2017), by promoting engagement, self-esteem (Eder & Kinney, 1995), good academic performance (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006), higher educational aspirations (Fredricks, 2012) and by reducing delinquency rates (Cohen et al., 2007). Furthermore, theatre workshops can engage students in a greater and more complex understanding of their own territory (Boal, 1979), by fostering transformations and changes in their behaviour within their own life contexts (Uria-Iriarte, Galarreta-Lasa & Lizasoain-Hernández, 2021).

Art has the power to help individuals make meaning of their external and internal worlds, provide an enriching emotional experience, and offer opportunities for aesthetic appreciation, play and

entertainment. Furthermore, it represents a tool to build social bonds with other members of one's territory and self-reflect as a community (Lambert et al., 2023). Particularly, Theatre in Education (TIE), uses theatre techniques and imaginative power to place learners at the centre of their own learning. Educators challenge learners, but at the same time they communicate confidence and trust in their "intelligent sensitiveness" and consequently in their ability to reflect and find their own solutions. That allows learners to think and act in order to find their own personal solutions (Jackson & Vine, 2013). Thus, TIE is particularly useful in promoting engagement, agency, reflexive and socio-emotional skills (Lyngstad, Baraldsnes & Gjørum, 2021; Uria-Iriarte et al., 2021), and also in adjusting and strengthening learners' social bond with family, schools and society (Hirschi, 1969). In conclusion, theatre education is a powerful tool that can prevent and contrast early school leaving.

2. Context

The Eastern area of the city of Naples, in Southern Italy, has been transformed by continuous industrial crises into a degraded suburb, often humiliated and demeaned by fights between criminal gangs. In this area, minors at risk are twice as many compared to the rest of the urban area, and school dropout reaches very high percentages: 34% of dropouts, 58.8% of NEETs and 67.5% of youth unemployment, according to ISTAT data (Carillo et al., 2022). Schools cannot cope with such an emergency by themselves, so they are often supported by no-profit associations, such as 'Maestri di Strada' (Street Teachers). Maestri di Strada carries out complex socio-educational interventions both inside and outside schools in order to fight school dropout and promote young people's social inclusion. Since 2010, the Association has been launching several intervention projects, by re-motivating young people to engage in learning processes and active citizenship practices, also through the involvement of schools, families and territory. Young people are supported in their schooling, they are involved in art education, citizenship workshops, and community events. Among several art education workshops, is the 'Terrote' Theatre Workshop (TTW). The TTW young student-actors' training aims to treat mind-body relationship, mediated introspection (i.e. looking at the inner world through the theatre mask), and relationship with the group. The whole course is supported by reflexing spaces both for students (e.g. circle time) as well as educators and peer educators, through the Multivision Group (Parrello et al., 2019; Parrello et al., 2021). Educators pay particular attention to the student-school relationship – their achievements in the TTW are carefully communicated to their teachers, and the latter are invited to students' performances. Moreover, educators also record any improvement in students' school careers or persistent difficulties and offer home-study support and support for final exams.

3. Aims

The present study documents and evaluates the multi-year workshop journey of a group of adolescents at risk of dropout and of their educators. After investigating their experience, both adolescents' and educators' points of view were compared in order to understand whether and to what extent this experience supported the growth of students as well as the development of their bond with school, families and territory.

4. Method

We compared two qualitative studies – a first longitudinal research conducted with a group of TTW students and a second study involving their educators. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim of investigating participants' experience and evaluation regarding the TTW, at the end of a long workshop cycle.

4.1. Participants and procedure

Participants include 9 adolescents between the age of 16 and 17 (4 F and 5 M) – selected from the TTW group by a degree of seniority and diverse personal school backgrounds – and three educators – the TTW director and two psychologists with an expertise in theatre-education. All participants were subjected to semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded and then verbatim transcribed. Particularly, the interviews with adolescents were conducted at two stages, one year apart from each other – Time 1 (Ad-T1, end of 2018) corresponds to the end of their penultimate year, and Time 2 (Ad-T2, 2019) to the end of their last year. The interviews with the educators (Ed) were conducted between 2019 and 2020.

4.2. Data analysis

Each corpus went through a Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contexts (TAEC), through T-Lab Plus software (Lancia, 2004). TAEC divides the text into Elementary Context Units (ECU), which are consequently classified according to the distributions of words in terms of frequency. Cluster analysis was carried out by an unsupervised ascendant hierarchical method (Bisecting K-Means Algorithm). Each cluster consists of a set of keywords (vocabulary) that appear in specific selections of ECU, and which were ranked according to the decreasing value of chi-square. A label was then assigned to each cluster by researchers. Results obtained through this type of analysis can be considered an isotopic map of the main themes running through the narratives of interviewees.

5. Results

5.1. Ad-T1 - end of penultimate year (adolescents)

This first corpus – made up of the interviews carried out with adolescents at the end of the penultimate year of the Workshop (Ad-T1) – consists of 23,565 occurrences, 2,931 forms, and 1,897 lemmas. TAEC classified 572 ECUs out of 712 identified ones (80.34%) and divided them into 6 clusters of different sizes, each one presenting its own vocabulary.

Ad-T1.1 - Emotional regulation: managing anxiety (18.53%). Pupils get in touch with their emotions and they learn to manage their anxieties, by starting from those felt backstage, before going on stage. The audience has a fundamental function in emotional regulation when on stage.

Ad-T1.2 - Meaningful relationship with educators: not grades, but care, advice, and reprimands (21.15%). The relationship with educators and peers is described as fraternal and characterised by care, confidence and trust, which allow pupils to accept advice and reprimands. Unlike teachers, educators do not give grades and do not judge.

Ad-T1.3 - In the theatre: authenticity, cooperation and life (10.49%). Theatre represents a reality in which everyone can be themselves and can be recognised by significant adults. There, it is possible to constitute oneself as a true company, by experiencing a feeling of strong harmony, as well as being able to identify with characters and situations, and learning to face one's life's difficulties.

Ad-T1.4 - The educating community: Street Teachers, families and territory (15.03%). The work of Maestri di Strada involves entire families and contributes to building an educational community in the suburbs. This positively influences one's path within the workshop.

Ad-T1.5 - Theatre vs. School: a different story (22.55%). School is perceived as a strict institution and is associated with negative experiences, whereas the workshop is described as a place where one can be authentic, and active and have positive experiences.

Ad-T1.6 - Taking stock of the journey: exploring, having fun, expressing oneself (12.24%). Pupils recall the first moments in the TTW, some of the shows and characters performed, trips, fun moments and how they learned to regard themselves from a different perspective.

5.2. Ad-T2. End of the last year (adolescents)

This second corpus – made up of the interviews conducted with adolescents at the end of the last year of the Workshop (Ad-T2) – consists of 32,010 occurrences, 3,401 forms, and 2,221 lemmas. TAEC classified 722 ECUs out of 873 identified ones (82.70%) and divided them into 5 clusters each with its own vocabulary.

Ad-T2.1 - In the shoes of adults (20.78%). Some of the characters played over the years have helped pupils reflect on the adult world, by making them wonder what becoming an adult means and understand their own model: an adult balanced between responsibility and the ability to have fun like a child.

Ad-T2.2 - "Every show has taught me something" (25.62%). There are shows pupils are particularly fond of, but each show has taught them something, in terms of knowledge, self-awareness, empathy and emotional self-regulation.

Ad-T2.3 - The group changes you (26.04%). Over the years, this group has evolved from just 'being together to perform as actors' to building meaningful relationships – friendships. Thus, the group is no longer seen merely as a collection of individuals, but as a laboratory of emotions and a promoter of change.

Ad-T2.4 - Towards the future: theatre between life and work (11.50%). Thinking about their future, there are those who imagine turning the theatre into a real job and those who want to take other paths. Either way, the desire they all share is to keep on changing and growing, always keeping this experience with them and keeping in touch with educators.

Ad-T2.5 - School and theatre: differences and shifts (16.07%). Despite the differences between school and theatre, also in terms of study, the translations in terms of method, self-correction of errors and management of emotions in the classroom are highlighted.

5.3. Ed - end of last year (educators)

This latter corpus – made up of the three interviews carried out with educators at the end of the last year of the TTW – consists of 75,068 occurrences, 8,870 forms, and 6,679 lemmas. TAEC classified 1668 ECUs out of 1803 identified ones (92.51%) and divided them into 6 clusters or macro-themes.

Ed.1 – Using the character to know and express oneself (10.19%). Firstly, acting and playing characters within the workshop enabled some adolescents to throw off the mask they had built for themselves in their lives, and explore other possibilities. Furthermore, working on gestures and writing their monologues taught them to express and regulate their emotions.

Ed.2 - Family scripts (16.31%). Theatrical experience and educational relationship are configured as translational spaces, where one can stage and put into words difficult realities experienced at home. Thus, theatrical experience makes adolescents able to rewrite the inherited family scripts.

Ed.3 - Group creation and people development in the area (16.01%). The educational work done with these teenagers led to the creation of a heterogeneous and democratic group, which will still be able to evolve into a group of active citizens – a group of reference adults for generations to come.

Ed.4 - The relationship with the school (25.30%). The educators explore the pupils-school relationship (i.e. rejection and re-enrolment in night school) and recount their work of mediation with teachers and support for pupils, and studies. Educators report the difficulty in translating what pupils learned in the workshop into the school context, which has very different characteristics and speaks a different language.

Ed.5 - The beauty of acting and growing together (13.85%). Feeling oneself an actor and feeling part of a community not only takes on an important meaning in these adolescents' lives but also in educators' ones since they feel like they are growing together. Art succeeds in conveying beauty, mingling pupils lives and helping them become adults while remaining human.

Ed.6 - On stage: protagonists and non-protagonists (18.35%). The roles played by pupils over the years allow educators to trace a path, in a developmental perspective of change. There are those who, against all expectations, managed to play leading roles, or even their own monologues, and those who succeeded in moving on to more choral parts, becoming in tune with the group.

6. Discussion and conclusions

By defining school dropout as the result of a process of disengagement, disinterest and detachment from school and as a fracture in the bond between the individual, society and school, we can understand how extra-curricular and out-of-school activities play a key role in dropout recovery, as they promote engagement and predict good school results. In particular, art workshops have the power a) to help individuals give their external and internal worlds a sense; b) to provide an enriching emotional experience; c) to offer opportunities for aesthetic enjoyment, play and fun; d) to function as a means through which building social bonds with other members of one's community and think of oneself as part of a community (Lambert et al., 2023). In this study, we focused in particular on the role that Theatre-Education played in the psychic and emotional development of a group of adolescents and the impact it had on their lives, particularly on their bond with school and territory. Thus, both the adolescent pupils' and the educators' points of view were investigated and compared.

The results show that they agree in considering this workshop as a valuable space in which everyone can reclaim their desire to learn and grow. In particular, both educators and pupils emphasise how theatre allowed these young people: a) to value their own life context and events, by experiencing relationships of authenticity and recognition (Ad-T1.3; Ad-T1.4; Ad-T2. 2; Ed-5); b) to learn to recognise, name and regulate as well as embrace one's emotions, by managing anxiety through the support of the group and the mirroring function of the audience (Ad-T1.1; Ad-T2.3; Ed-1); c) to be able to play and have fun, also through the journeys they have made together (Ad-T1.6), and to translate the aesthetic beauty of theatre into one's own life (Ed.5); d) to redefine their bond with their territory, by starting from their ties with their families and schools, through regarding their group as a community and training themselves to be active citizens (Ad-T1.4; Ad-T2.1; Ad-T2.3; Ed.3).

In conclusion, a fundamental aspect of the TTW lies in the possibility of building trusting relationships with peers and especially with a group of adults. Educators are considered trustworthy and they transfer to students the confidence that, one way or another, they will be able to face their challenges and build a bright future.

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