



# CULTIVATING COMMUNITY THROUGH THEATRE: A HERMENEUTICAL EXPLORATION OF THEATRE IN EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN RURAL AREAS

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This study explores the impact of Theatre in Education (TiE) workshops in promoting community multicultural identity in Türe/Turea, a diverse rural village near Cluj. Initially aimed at addressing bilingual and multicultural dynamics, the research pivoted when it became clear that these aspects were not as challenging as anticipated. Instead, the focus shifted to how TiE can empower children to express their identities and realities through collaborative art-making. Over six workshops, the facilitator adapted the approach to prioritize inclusivity and co-creation, leading to a performance developed with the children for a Mother's Day celebration.

Grounded in participatory art, critical pedagogy, and inclusive education, this research utilizes hermeneutic analysis to interpret the workshops' impact on participants. It highlights the importance of adaptability in facilitation and the need for workshops to align with children's interests and realities, moving beyond initial assumptions about multilingualism. The study underscores that TiE, when rooted in a participatory and critical pedagogy framework, can foster significant community engagement and identity affirmation, particularly in rural and multicultural settings. The final performance was perceived as a meaningful representation of the children's experiences and contributions. This research contributes to understanding how participatory theatre can be effectively implemented in diverse settings, emphasizing the transformative potential of TiE in fostering community cohesion and individual growth.

**Key words:** Theatre in Education (TiE), Participatory Art, Critical Pedagogy, Inclusive Education, Co-creation, Child-Centered Approach, Local Identity, Transformative Education

*"Children have a future, but they also have a past: unforgettable events, memories, many hours of essential solitary reflection. Just as we remember and forget, cherish and disdain, logically reason – their errors are also out of ignorance. They weigh carefully whether to trust or doubt."*

*(Korczak, A Child's Right to Respect, 2017)*

## 1. Introduction

In response to an invitation for a theatre workshop project in the spring of 2024 in Türe, we initiated our sessions with elementary school children from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The primary research question was: How can a Theatre in Education (TiE) workshop series promote multilingualism and raise awareness of the community's multicultural identity in Türe/Turea, a multicultural village near Cluj? To our surprise, it became evident that multilingualism is not a challenge in this area. Both children and adults navigate their multilingual environment seamlessly and embrace their multicultural community authentically.

During the initial workshop sessions, an enlightening moment occurred when a boy expressed a preference for tractors over puppetry. This indicated that the children were more interested in actively participating in the research project and using the theatre workshops to express their identities and what truly matters to them. This realization shifted our research focus towards understanding how TiE workshops can create a space that empowers children to bring their own ideas, realities, and knowledge, fostering co-creation.

*Received July 2024.*

**Cite as:** Visky-Varga, B. & Bartalis-Binder, K. Sz. (2024). Cultivating community through theatre: a hermeneutical exploration of theatre in education and inclusive pedagogy in rural areas. *Acta Didactica Napocensia*, 17(2), 65-76, <https://doi.org/10.24193/adn.17.2.5>

Over the course of six workshop sessions, our methods and approaches were continuously adapted. The facilitator's role evolved to prioritize co-creation and inclusivity. The culmination of these workshops was a story developed with the children, which was then adapted into a performance integrated into a Mother's Day celebration.

This research is rooted in participatory art, theatre, and critical and inclusive pedagogy, drawing on the philosophies of Janusz Korczak, Paulo Freire, and Francois Matarasso. Our analysis explains the necessity of shifting the research question and adopting a Freirean and Korczakian facilitative approach. By integrating the children's realities into the workshops, we discovered new dimensions of community engagement and identity affirmation, highlighting the transformative potential of TiE in rural, multicultural settings.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in a specific theoretical and philosophical tradition that shapes both the design and analysis of the workshops. This tradition is participatory theatre, specifically Theatre in Education (TiE), which involves and empowers its participants. As Bartalis noted, "Interacting with other players, their roles, and characters requires the ability to empathize and, moreover, to cooperate" (Bartalis, 2017, p. 57). TiE and participatory theatre provide a framework for understanding how the purpose, form, and main question of this research have evolved from the initial proposal.

Additionally, critical pedagogy, drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire, offers a pertinent perspective for examining the educational and political implications of the project. Both the theatrical and pedagogical approaches shape the activities in TiE in terms of theory, methodology, and practice.

### 2.1. Participatory Art and Theatre

Participatory art, including theatre, involves collaboration between professionals and non-professionals, with everyone equally involved as artists. It prioritizes creativity over artistic quality, resulting in topical and honest works that challenge traditional fine art boundaries. Participatory art predates community art in Europe and, unlike community art, which often addresses social issues, its primary aim is the artistic act itself, fostering meaning-making rather than providing answers. It is a process-focused progress, rather than product-focused, yet the creation of art is essential to avoid slipping into social development or education. Matarasso outlines four stages of a participatory theatre process (Matarasso, 2019.):

Conception: Reflect on values, assumptions, art form, and expected outcomes.

Contracting: Ensure shared intentions and defined responsibilities.

Co-creation: Plan the work, define control over participation, and assess risks.

Completion: Conclude positively, support participants, and reflect on the experience.

These stages guide facilitators in planning participatory theatre activities. Although the researcher discovered this framework after the workshops, similar questions were instinctively considered during the process, as discussed in the workshop analysis.

### 2.2. Theatre in Education

Theatre in Education (TiE) emerged in the UK in the 1960s as part of curricular reform, building on Drama in Education, which integrated drama into learning, particularly in English literature. TiE's origins can be traced to child-centred educational philosophies advocated by Rousseau, Piaget, and Vygotsky, which emphasize education tailored to children's needs (Redington, 1983). Its rapid spread can be attributed to its alignment with constructivist thinking and Brechtian theatre traditions. The collaborative and dynamic nature of theatre creates an immersive learning environment that promotes active participation and social interaction. TiE effectively addresses social and personal issues such as bullying, racism, cultural identity, sustainable lifestyles, and mental health, areas often overlooked by traditional education. Its performative aspect engages students and fosters deeper emotional connections, thereby enhancing learning outcomes. TiE's evolution has retained its core concept of community theatre, working from within communities, which makes it particularly effective for

addressing social issues. This close alignment with participatory theatre principles makes TiE especially suitable for workshops in rural settings, where it can foster community engagement and address local concerns.

### 2.3. Critical and Inclusive Pedagogy in Participatory Theatre

Critical pedagogy, as outlined by Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière, challenges traditional education by promoting equality and participation. Participatory theatre, particularly Theatre in Education (TiE), embodies these principles through dynamic, immersive learning. This section explores how critical and inclusive pedagogies intersect with participatory theatre to enhance social awareness, critical thinking, and participatory attitudes, incorporating Janusz Korczak's child-focused inclusive pedagogy.

Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" critiques the traditional "banking concept" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students. Instead, Freire advocates for a dialogic model, where educators and students co-construct knowledge through reflection, enabling learners to become critical agents shaping their reality. He views learning as a political and artistic act, with education as a poetic, collaborative process (Freire, 1985).

Freire also conceptualizes the educator as an artist, breaking down hierarchical teacher-student relationships and fostering a joint artistic creation of meaning (Shor & Freire, 1987). Rancière's ideas on emancipation further enrich this critical pedagogical approach, emphasizing sensory experience over theoretical vision (Lewis, 2012).

Janusz Korczak, a pioneer of child-centred education, ran a pre-WWII orphanage in Warsaw where he implemented participatory education, allowing children to explore real life through everyday experiences. Although not explicitly labeled as inclusive, his pedagogy emphasized respect for children's rights and individuality, advocating an environment where children can develop their abilities while experiencing real life.

By integrating Freire's and Korczak's pedagogical philosophies, participatory theatre projects like TiE can create educational experiences that are not only informative but also transformative, fostering a deeper connection to learning and community. This approach aligns with critical and inclusive pedagogies, providing a powerful framework for addressing social issues and enhancing personal and collective growth.

Key principles of Korczak's pedagogy include:

**Respect for the Child:** Children deserve the same respect as adults and should be valued in their own right (Korczak, 2017)

**Democratic Participation:** Children should participate in decisions affecting them and understand societal structures through practical education (Korczak, 2018)

**Empathy and Understanding:** Education should ignite a child's inherent interests and allow them to be their true selves (Korczak, *How to Love a Child: And Other Selected Works*, 2018)

Matarasso's (2019) cyclical process of development in participatory theatre aligns with Korczak's principles:

**Discovery:** Children explore their feelings and ideas through discussions and play.

**Processing:** Theatre games help children deconstruct and reconstruct their experiences.

**Understanding:** Facilitators assist in reflecting on experiences to develop broader moral and philosophical insights.

**Organization:** Facilitators help frame experiences without disrupting children's natural perspectives.

**Sharing:** Children share their understanding through artistic processes, influencing their environment.

Combining Freire's (2005), Korczak's (2018), and Rancière's (2009) ideas with Matarasso's framework provides a robust guide for Theatre in Education (TiE) workshops that emphasize critical and inclusive pedagogy through participatory theatre.

### **3. The rural setting of the workshops**

#### **3.1. The challenges and resources of participatory theatre in a rural setting**

Challenges Participatory theatre, when implemented in rural settings, presents both significant challenges and promising opportunities, many of which can be viewed as resources in themselves.

A major challenge is accessibility and isolation. The logistical difficulties associated with organizing theatre activities in rural areas can be substantial. The physical remoteness of these areas poses obstacles for facilitators and participants, while the necessity for children to commute to nearby cities for education further limits their time available for such initiatives. Another significant challenge is limited resources. Rural settings often suffer from a lack of adequate facilities, financial support, and technical equipment. This scarcity necessitates considerable improvisation in both workshops and performances, potentially constraining the scope and quality of theatre activities. However, these limitations can also foster creative solutions and adaptations that enhance the local relevance of the theatre. Cultural perception and engagement are also crucial factors influencing the success of participatory theatre. Community responses to cultural initiatives can vary; some members may welcome new projects, while others may be sceptical, especially if the initiative comes from outside sources. Effective participatory theatre must build trust and integrate seamlessly with the existing cultural fabric of the community. Moreover, oppression and colonizing attitudes can impede progress when external initiatives impose preconceived notions on rural communities. Such impositions can overlook the community's everyday realities and needs. Successful participatory theatre requires genuine dialogue and respectful engagement, ensuring that initiatives are aligned with the community's values and experiences.

Despite these challenges, there are notable opportunities within rural settings. The strong sense of community cohesion and identity in these areas can be a powerful resource. Art-based activities can thrive by leveraging these communal bonds, encouraging broad participation, and fostering a collective sense of artistic expression. Empowerment and agency represent another significant opportunity. Participatory theatre provides a platform for rural participants to share their personal stories and experiences, promoting empowerment and giving voice to those who may otherwise be marginalized. This fosters social emancipation and contributes to a more inclusive community narrative. Finally, the innovative use of local resources can turn limitations into creative advantages. Financial and infrastructural constraints often drive rural communities to develop inventive solutions that address their specific needs. This creativity can enhance the relevance and impact of participatory theatre, making it more adaptable and meaningful within the local context. In conclusion, while participatory theatre in rural settings faces challenges related to accessibility, resource limitations, cultural engagement, and external perceptions, it also offers valuable opportunities. By addressing these challenges with sensitivity and leveraging the inherent strengths of rural communities, participatory theatre can achieve significant and impactful outcomes, resonating deeply with local populations.

### **4. Research methodology and design**

This subsection outlines the research methodology and design employed to study critical and inclusive theatre pedagogical workshops in Türe/Turea, Cluj County. The research investigates participants' lived experiences, their engagement with theatre practices, and the workshops' impact on social interactions. It also examines the evolution of the facilitator's core assumptions.

#### **4.1. The participants**

The group consisted of eight children, three of them from multiethnic families (Romanian - Hungarian), and five of them from Hungarian families. The level of bilingualism varied among the children, ranging from monolingual to balanced bilingual. Some of them had difficulties in understanding or speaking one of the languages, but most of them could switch easily between them or translate for their peers.

#### **4.2. Data collection and analysis**

The study utilizes hermeneutic analysis, a qualitative research methodology focused on interpreting human experiences, meanings, and contexts. This approach is particularly suited for understanding

participants' perspectives and the facilitator's changing attitudes. Data collection methods include participant observation, note-taking, reflective and individual interviews, and video recordings, all analyzed through a framework of pre-designed questions. Hermeneutic analysis aids in maintaining a degree of objectivity by encouraging the researchers to revisit and critically reflect on their own beliefs and experiences. Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed: participants were informed about the study, and consent was obtained from both parents and children. Anonymity was ensured to protect participants' privacy. By employing iterative interpretation, the study seeks to contribute to arts-based educational research and practice, offering valuable insights and a philosophical framework for understanding the evolution of inquiry within diverse cultural contexts.

#### 4.3. Presentation of the workshop series

Before detailing and analyzing the workshops conducted in Türe, it is essential to understand their origins and organization. In September of the previous year, one of the researchers led a workshop in the village for children of various ages and ethnic backgrounds. The workshop utilized a Kamishibai board to present the story "Manógyár (Puck Factory)" by Hungarian author Ervin Lázár, delivered in both Hungarian and Romanian. According to Bartalis (2018, p.6.), the Kamishibai method of narrative storytelling stimulates children's creativity and supports the development of aesthetic education. This approach enables children to cultivate diverse skills in story representation, including drawing, painting, singing, story creation, acting, writing, and imaginative play. The workshop culminated in the creation of a land-art sculpture of a puck named Tudor. This initial experience provided the impetus for the practical research underpinning this study, which initially focused on the multilingual and multiethnic children of the village. The research was guided by two primary questions: How can theatre pedagogy-based workshops enhance the multiethnic and multilingual identity of children? And how can these workshops increase children's awareness of their diverse cultural environment while fostering a healthy self-awareness of their own cultural heritage? As it will become apparent this study focuses on why the initial perspective and research question(s) had to change.

There were in total ten meetings with the participants.

The first six workshops consisted of theatrical, trust-, and other exercises and games (see Table 1), that would train the children for an upcoming show that was to be put on stage together. The initial focus here was to include exercises that would foster a bilingual environment, while also providing the space for the children to bring their own ideas and personalities into the sessions.

**Table 1.** Games and exercises used during the workshops

| Name of Exercise            | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bili-Bili-Bop</b>        | We stand in a circle. One participant is in the middle of the circle. They go around, standing in front of random people from the circle, saying 'Bili-bili-bop'. The one in front of them has to say 'bop' at the same time as the one in the middle. When this is already going in a steady rhythm, we introduce other action words.                                                                                         |
| <b>Blind sculptures</b>     | The children were asked to decide who would be to sculptor and who would be the statue. The statue was asked to strike a pose, while the sculptor stayed with their eyes closed. Once the pose was chosen and set, the sculptor had to find follow the pose by touching the statue, after which they had to stand in the same pose too. Once done, the pair had to switch.                                                     |
| <b>Brownian movement</b>    | The participants move in a random pattern between the established borders of the space they are in. First, they are tasked to walk 'normally', with a comfortable tempo, without interacting with or following each other. After the random walking becomes comfortable or boring, tempo elements are introduced (increased or decreased walking tempo). Freeze is used as a command to halt all movement and become a statue. |
| <b>Cooperative Stand-Up</b> | Children are paired up. They sit down with their backs to each other, and their legs stretched in front of them. They link their arms with the other's and try to stand up.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

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|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Discussion Circles</b>                               | Discussion circles are the forum of the workshops. They can be used as an initiation phase, as reflection rounds, as part of a storytelling activity etc. important is, that a few ground rules are set, such as everyone's sharing is valid and non-questionable, there is no negating the other, there is no talking over the other etc.<br>This discussion circle is vital, when trying to involve the children/participants into the shaping of the workshop as it truly functions as a sort of forum for the group.                                                                          |
| <b>Entering the Shadow-World</b>                        | A wooden frame with a white sheet in the middle is set up to be used as a screen. It is lit with a led lamp from behind.<br>The children are invited to try and move behind the screen and look at how the shadows look at the other side. After everyone gets familiar with the shadows, they are divided on teams of two and three. Each team is given an animal they must try to recreate behind the screen. The children on the other side try to guess the animal.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Gibberish</b>                                        | The children are asked to present themselves in gibberish, telling their name, where they come from and one fun fact about them.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Group-clap</b>                                       | We all stand in a circle and perform the group-clap, repeating it several times, increasing, and decreasing energy: slapping our thighs twice, clapping twice, and snapping our fingers twice.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Group Introduction</b>                               | The group stands in a circle. One by one everyone enters the circle, says their name and performs a short gest or movement. The group repeats the gest or movement, as well as the inclination and tone of the one introducing themselves.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Imagination Game combined with Brownian Movement</b> | The children are moving about the room. After the initial, already known coaching for the movement (tempo and animals), imaginative elements are introduced. The children are asked to immediately react to the action.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Meditation – Fantasy journey</b>                     | Participants lay in a circle and close their eyes. The facilitator prepares a story they invite the participants to take part in. The participants are asked to imagine what they hear and to lay silently until the end.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Mirror Exercise (Spolin, 1963)</b>                   | Participants pair up and face each other. One person, the leader, starts to move slowly while the other, the follower, mirrors these movements as accurately as possible. After a few minutes, they switch roles. If the exercise goes well, we will eliminate the leader-follower dynamic, so the children can move together spontaneously.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Rainbow game – warm up game</b>                      | The facilitator calls out various colours which all have an action attached to them. Whoever completes the action last is out of the game.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Ribbon of Sound</b>                                  | We stand in a circle. Someone starts producing a sound, that the one left to them takes over, then the one left to that, and so on. Everyone must continue the sound and/or movement until they get a new impulse from their left. This way a ribbon of continuous sound comes into being.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Shadow Hair salon</b>                                | The children are told, that in the shadow world everyone has interesting and unusual hair. They are asked to think about what would represent them the most and then make a hair shaped as the thing they chose. The children then start preparing the hairs from carton.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Shadow Portrait</b>                                  | The participants are asked to gather and forage leaves, dead and dry plants, flowers, or anything else they might find outside. These materials will be used to colour and fill in their portraits. The portrait outlines will be drawn using the shadow projected by the led lamp.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Sitting down and standing up in a circle</b>         | The group stands in a circle with our shoulders touching. We turn 90 degrees, until we stand behind each other. We slowly start sitting down, everyone on the lap of the one behind them. We keep the sitting position for a few second, then start standing up together.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>The Incredible Itch</b>                              | Children are told to imagine they are itchy at a given part of their body. They are told to pretend that the itchiness can reach a level up to 10. Steadily increase the level of itchiness of the children.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>The white Rabbit</b>                                 | imagine a white rabbit in the palm of the facilitator. She caressed it and coached the children to always give it further carefully to the child sitting next to them in the circle.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Touch game</b>                                       | The children are asked to touch something in the room that has a given colour. After the first few rounds, they are asked to search for and touch the indicated colour on each other, gently, with their palms.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Trust games outside</b>                              | 1. Pendulum<br>We stand in a circle with our shoulders touching. Someone is in the middle. They cross their arms on their chest, plant their feet, close their eyes, and start leaning backwards. The group must hold them and gently move them about the circle.<br>2. Running through outstretched hands<br>We build pairs and stand facing each other in two rows, our arms are outstretched in front of us, knuckles touching. Someone starts running toward us from further away, between the outstretched hands. The group must raise their arms just as the person running is before them. |

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|  | 3. After the first two games, we move over to the obstacle course. The children are paired randomly. They have to each lead the other through the obstacle course. The one being lead has their eyes closed. |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

On the next three sessions the performance was created and rehearsed, while the last session was the performance itself, integrated into a Mother's Day celebration.

The first three workshops were heavily focused on the multilingual and multiethnic aspect and preconception of the researcher. The first workshop included conducting video interviews with the participants, which focused on their language usage at home, in their various environments (such as at home, in school, while playing with other children). The other aspect that was researched through the interviews was, what knowledge the children had of theatre, in what form, if any, have they encountered it. While it already started to become apparent that the focus of the researcher-facilitator was not necessary meeting with the children's needs and personalities, this gradually became more and more apparent during the second and the third workshops.

## 5. Detailed presentation of the workshops and analysis of the activities

### 5.1. Introduction, interviews, and the viability of multilingualism: First workshop

The initial workshop provided valuable insights into the participants' dynamics and the effectiveness of the research methodology, offering a hermeneutic perspective on the session's outcomes. This analysis aims to elucidate what was learned for the research project, the theatrical artistic initiative, the facilitator's role, and the children's point of view.

**Finding:** During the inaugural session, the children's attention and engagement were notably affected by their unfamiliarity with the workshop structure and the facilitator. Their initial wariness and shyness contributed to a mild but persistent awkwardness, which impacted their focus on the activities. The presence of a familiar adult, who oversaw the session while the researcher conducted interviews, provided some comfort but also introduced an element of performance pressure. The dual-language approach, incorporating both Hungarian and Romanian, was not fully effective, as the children found the Romanian instructions redundant and distracting. This led to decreased interest and engagement in certain activities. The hermeneutic interpretation of these interactions indicates that the approach to multilingualism needs to be carefully calibrated to align with the children's linguistic realities and to maintain their interest and active participation.

### 5.2. Hesitation and the first questions upon the purpose: Second workshop

This second session was spent in a more serene and cheerful mood than the previous one. It was already visible that the children felt more at ease. Except for the Fantasy Journey, the repeated exercises were more successful, the children were a lot less shy. The fact that two new girls joined the group did good for the group dynamic; eight seemed the ideal participant number.

The main conclusion of this second session was, that there had to be more focus on the children and not on the concept of bilingualism during the sessions. Most of the children only spoke Hungarian during the workshop, and the only girl who could not first always tried to say as much in Hungarian as she could and switched to Romanian only for longer reflections. This started to render the bilingual aspect of the workshops redundant. It also started to shift the initial concept towards something entirely different. The change came after the next session, where it will be explained thoroughly.

**Findings:** A key takeaway was the need to prioritize the children's immediate interests and experiences over the bilingual and multiethnic elements. The observation that most children preferred speaking one language and the new participants' needs highlighted the redundancy of the bilingual focus. This led to a shift towards integrating the children's individual interests and cultural backgrounds into the workshop's design.

### 5.3. Turning point or how to change perspectives: Third Workshop

The third workshop session proved to be overall the most challenging for everyone involved but especially the facilitator. On this session two girls were missing, both were sick. This meant that only Hungarian-speaking children were taking part in the session, because of which the bilingual aspect of the session was not needed anymore.

After the session, the facilitator noted the following reflections and questions regarding the session and the workshop series:

“What do I do with myself and the group if I have one or more children who keep saying that they are bored, they do not like it, when they can go home, but they really enjoy the session? How can I, as a teacher, be present without giving in to this?

It does not work to just use drama games - if the given boy likes to drive a tractor and dig most of all, how can I incorporate these personality traits into the session without having to give up my vision completely - what if I give it up? - Freire – this is not a bank, not a deposit of my knowledge!”

Eventually these questions and the fact that there was a two-week break between this session and the next lead the facilitator to rethink the workshop sessions, the concept and purpose behind them. It became increasingly evident that the focus on multiethnicity and bilingualism was redundant. For these children, the fact that they were living in a mixed village, and so were all their ancestors, meant that there was no point of conflict, or point to with this. These were questions of the facilitator. Points of interest because of her reality but did not answer to the children’s reality or day-to-day life. It did not take into consideration or did not even ask the question what the children brought to the session, what their questions and needs might have been.

Findings: This session prompted the facilitator to confront critical questions regarding engagement and the workshop’s conceptual focus. The facilitator grappled with how to maintain engagement when children expressed boredom while enjoying the session and how to integrate individual interests without abandoning the overarching vision. The realization that the focus on bilingualism and multiethnicity was misaligned with the children’s realities led to a reassessment of the workshop’s purpose and methodology. The facilitator recognized the importance of adapting to the children’s needs and interests rather than adhering strictly to preconceived concepts. This insight led to the reworking of subsequent workshops to better align with the children’s actual experiences and preferences.

### 5.4. Offering a safe space for creation: Fourth Workshop

In planning the fourth workshop, a new approach was used. The experiences and observations of the precious three sessions led the facilitator to consider the following points:

1. The sessions were too packed with exercises. The children needed more time to stay in each exercise and provided with time to reflect on them.
2. The sessions had to include some form of handiwork, as the children requested and needed it. They were not used to only doing drama games and exercises. Their personalities and experiences asked for crafting, moving, doing activities closer to what they knew.
3. There had to be more time allocated for discussion rounds and for the children to talk about themselves and their experiences in- and outside of the session.
4. There had to be more time invested into the planning and thinking about how the different exercises might work, how it might affect the children, what outcomes could it have.
5. The focus had to shift from bilingualism and multiethnicity to inclusion, community building, and working from and with the participant’s cultural identity. Emotional education and educating the children to accept failure had to be built into the sessions.

The atmosphere of the session was elated, the children expressed high levels of enjoyment during all activities. The session’s success reaffirmed the facilitator’s belief that incorporating crafting activities and slowing the pace of the sessions was the correct decision for all participants. By shifting the focus from the bilingual and multiethnic composition of the group to the unique personalities and individuality

of the children, as well as their sense of community, the enjoyment and effectiveness of the sessions were notably enhanced.

**Findings:** The fourth workshop marked a pivotal change in approach. Drawing on previous observations, the facilitator restructured the sessions to provide more time for each exercise, incorporate crafting activities, and focus on the children's personal experiences. The new approach resulted in a more enjoyable and effective session. The children's high levels of engagement and enjoyment affirmed the value of incorporating crafting and allowing more time for reflection.

### **5.5. First steps towards a collaborative storytelling: Fifth Workshop**

During the fifth session, the base of the story for the performance was shaped: the group talked about how a shadow world, opposite to their real one, would look like. The children were encouraged to think about how their houses, yards, gardens, animals, and they themselves looked like, and find a shadow world counterpart for it. The discussion was lively, the children were talking over each other in their excitement to express their ideas. Their creativity flowed freely. They grasped back to previous exercises and sessions in creating their version of the shadow world.

The exercises and activities of this session worked because of three main reasons:

1. There were less exercises than before. The children had time to get into them, live them through.
2. The exercises spoke to the children, their everyday life, it drew on their personalities. The concepts of the facilitator and the needs of the children met in them.
3. The exercises were varied. There was space for the children to express themselves in movement, acting, and crafting. This meant that all of them found something that they enjoyed or that could potentially become an aesthetic experience for them.

This session reinforced the view of the facilitator that working with what the children bring to the table and letting go of her own preconceptions was the right decision. It brought the question with itself, how the research will be reshaped and what form it could take now. But the realization that being there with the children, listening to them and allowing their ideas and personalities to shape the sessions was the most one could do. Once the children became the centre of the planning and not the fact that research had to be conducted, the workshop sessions started to function.

**Findings:** In the fifth session, the workshop focused on collaboratively creating a story for the performance. The children actively engaged in shaping a narrative based on their own experiences and imaginations, resulting in a lively and creative brainstorming session. The success of this session was attributed to fewer exercises, relevance to the children's lives, and a variety of activities that catered to different forms of expression. This approach reinforced the facilitator's belief in adapting the workshop to the children's contributions and interests.

### **5.6. The power of myths and community in shaping a story: Sixth Workshop**

The children were asked to shape the story for the performance together. They received the frame of the story, as described above, and were given the opportunity to create the story themselves. During the brainstorming, they were only coached to try to work with what was known and close to them in their village and community. Each child contributed to the story, ideas flowed freely, some becoming more vocal than others. The facilitator rarely had to intervene and coach the flow of the story. In this manner the beginning and the main idea of the story slowly took shape. To leave time for scene work and crafting the set, the rest of the story was scheduled to be created on the next session.

At this point there was a sense of trust and safety between the facilitator and the children. The children were sharing much about themselves and day-to-day lives. They also became more comfortable and therefore cheekier. The facilitator was impressed, touched, and motivated by the shaping of the performance, the motivation of the children, as well as their ownership of the process. This led to the resolution to let the children shape as much of the performance as possible, only being present and intervene as a guide and attender of sorts.

From the next session on, the rehearsals for the performance were starting. The above-described sessions all shaped the performance format and the rehearsal process. The games and activities used were the base for the scenes and the crafting the base for the set and even the turning point of the story.

Findings: The sixth workshop involved the children in shaping the story for the performance, with the facilitator providing guidance while allowing the children to lead the creative process. The children's increased comfort and trust facilitated a productive session where they freely shared their ideas and contributed to the story. The session highlighted the success of fostering a safe and supportive environment for creativity. The children's active involvement and sense of ownership over the performance underscored the effectiveness of a participatory approach. The facilitator's role evolved into that of a guide, supporting the children's creative process while allowing their ideas to shape the outcome.

### 5.7. Final reflections upon the show and workshop series. Reception among the community. Parents' reactions

Before the performance, the children gathered for a final meeting with the facilitator to discuss their emotions. One girl voiced her anxiety about performing in front of her parents, although she felt reassured since the scenes were performed in groups or pairs. The children reported feeling more courageous knowing that most of the performance occurred behind a screen, where they were not visible to the audience. Although the pace of the show was slower than in rehearsals due to nerves, and a few scenes began late because of brief moments of confusion or distraction, the audience responded positively to the humor, with the younger members particularly enjoying the show.

After the show, the facilitator conducted a reflection session with the children, who highlighted several key points:

1. The children experienced significant nervousness before the performance, primarily because they were unaccustomed to this type of participatory work, which involved creating much of the material themselves rather than learning texts provided by adults. This new responsibility contributed to their anxiety.
2. Once the show began, the children reported enjoying the experience and generally knowing their roles in each scene. They felt particularly comfortable during the shadow play behind the screen.
3. All the children expressed a desire to continue the workshops and appreciated that their younger siblings, who did not participate, also enjoyed the show. They especially enjoyed creating the set design and costumes themselves.

Parents/grandparents were also surveyed after the performance. Five mothers (all of them in the 30-39 age range) and a grandmother (age 60) have responded. Most of them sent their children/grandchildren to the workshops to socialize ("team building") and to learn new things. All of them reported that their children thoroughly enjoyed the workshops. Four mothers noted that their children became more open as a result, while two observed a moderate increase in openness. Additionally, two parents mentioned that their children began playing new games at home inspired by the workshops. While all parents found the final show enjoyable and relevant to the children's lives, only four thoroughly enjoyed it, one moderately enjoyed it, and one did not enjoy it.

In examining the questionnaire results, several trends emerged that all parents expressed a strong interest in their children's participation in the workshops. For instance, one parent remarked, "With pleasure!" when asked about future activities, indicating a clear enthusiasm for ongoing engagement. Most parents rated their children's enjoyment of the sessions highly, with scores predominantly between 4 and 5 out of 5. This suggests that the children found the workshops not only enjoyable but also engaging and fulfilling. Parents felt that their children learned new things during the sessions, with ratings again skewed towards the higher end of the scale. The results reflected that the workshops effectively facilitated learning in a fun, interactive environment. There was a consensus among parents that the workshops contributed positively to their children's openness. Comments such as "They had fun" and "She loved it, especially that they created the story themselves," underline the value of creativity in the process. While parents generally found the performance enjoyable, ratings varied regarding its

distinctiveness from usual performances. Many noted that the children's personal involvement in creating the story made it particularly relevant and engaging, with statements like, "The fact that the children were performing their everyday entertainment" indicating a deep connection to the material.

In summary, the positive reception of the performance and the enthusiastic feedback from both children and parents underscore the effectiveness of the workshops in fostering social skills, creativity, and enjoyment in participatory activities. The data suggests that the collaborative nature of the workshops not only engaged the children but also allowed them to express themselves and learn valuable skills in a supportive environment.

## Conclusion

The initial research question, which sought to explore the impact of bilingualism and multiethnicity, evolved in response to the specific dynamics of the workshop group. The presence of a more homogeneous group, where most children were familiar with both languages, challenged the original hypothesis. A more diverse linguistic background among the participants might have better validated the initial research question. The experience underscored the importance for facilitators to engage in continuous self-reflection, especially in socially sensitive settings. Predicting and designing every aspect of a workshop in advance is unrealistic; facilitators must be adaptable and responsive to emerging needs. This reflection is particularly crucial for those with limited practical experience. The workshops highlighted the necessity of allowing children to express their individual personalities, daily lives, and aspirations. Integrating participatory art and inclusive pedagogy requires facilitators to engage in meaningful dialogue with children and build on their lived experiences. Recognizing and fostering each child's inherent potential—following the principles of Korczak (2018) and Matarasso (2019)—proved essential. For instance, the reliance solely on drama games and theatre-inspired activities did not resonate with the children. They expressed a need for connection with nature and hands-on crafting, which was crucial for the success of the workshops. Art has the potential to induce significant change, and facilitators must be mindful of their influence on children while remaining open to reciprocal impact. Collaborative art creation should reflect the worlds of all participants, including the facilitator and the spectators, ensuring that the creative process is inclusive and representative. Employing a hermeneutic research methodology allowed the workshops and activities to be viewed as dynamic creations. Facilitators contribute their intended meaning, but participants are encouraged to interpret and transform it. Creating spaces for this exchange and co-creation of meaning enhances the workshop's effectiveness and relevance. Parents highlighted the importance of engaging their children in activities that align with their interests and daily lives, confirming the shift towards a more child-centered approach. Ratings indicated that children generally enjoyed the sessions, learned new things, and became more open through the activities. The inclusion of crafting and outdoor elements was particularly well-received. Parents appreciated the final presentation, noting its relevance and alignment with their children's experiences. The performance was perceived as a significant departure from usual activities, reflecting the children's contributions and engagement.

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