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Documentary theatre as a means of raising awareness of racist phenomena among teachers*

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study related to the impact of documentary theatre on teachers' perceptions and the possible influences on and changes in their behaviour as a result of raising their awareness of racism issues. The study includes action research conducted in the school year 2021–2022 in a series of experiential workshops involving theatre in education programmes. The teachers who participated in the research served in schools of primary and secondary education in the municipality of Aigialeia in the region of Achaia, Peloponnese. Group members used primary sources, real events and personal testimonies to approach various forms of discrimination and racist behaviour.

Keywords: *identity, otherness, discrimination, stigma, stereotype, prejudice, racism, intercultural education, documentary theatre*

Introduction

The research was based on the premise that theatre is a valuable tool for reflecting, acting and making changes on both a personal and social level. In cases where education meets theatre, a connection with reality and politics is achieved, which is precisely when education can become a lever for transforming social reality.

The research also attempted to highlight ways of linking documentary theatre, as an educational tool and a political means, with the views and reactions of teachers towards racist behaviours. The project was implemented through theatre in education interventions with the aim of applying final findings in educational practice.

This article embraces the perspective of Boal (1992), who argues that all citizens should make theatre to first find out who they really are and discover who they can become. In addition, it acknowledges that *educational drama* as a pedagogical tool offers unlimited possibilities and opportunities for teachers, and in combination with the principles of *liberatory critical pedagogy* (Freire, 2009), opens a field of possibilities for the use of various educational tools.

Therefore, this article mainly focuses on the implementation of the activities described in the interventions of this research. A particular focus is placed on the findings – mostly those emerging from relevant qualitative analysis – that relate to the shift in the level of awareness of teachers who participated in the theatre in education workshops, in addition to reflecting the value and importance of the primary sources and documents processed by the intervention group as well as the employed documentary theatre methodology.

Theoretical background

The following section analyses the main concepts establishing the framework that constitutes a source of inspiration and development for the main theme, serving at the same time as a pillar for designing the topics of the theatre in education programmes of the workshops.

First, the concept of **identity**, both individual and social, as a process of evolution is approached through various scientific theories: In philosophy it is defined as individuality, in psychology as a starting point for the study of personality, in anthropology as cultural identity, whereas in sociology as social identity and finally, in pedagogy as self-perception (Dragona, 2003). The term **otherness** captures the process of separating groups labelled as “others” from those self-identifying as “we”. And the concept of **diversity** acknowledges and respects the differences of “others” in terms of age, gender, ethnicity,

race, language, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical abilities, religious or political beliefs and other ideologies (Tsiakalos, 2011).

Reducing various social categories to social groups leads to dangerous oversimplifications and unfounded generalisations that can be described as **stereotypes**, which in turn shape a – mostly – negative attitude towards the collective “other”, thus forming **prejudices**. In general, stereotypes are referred to as results of the individual’s cognitive function, whereas prejudices stem from their emotional functioning. In any case, however, no individual variations or differences are recognised (Arampatzi, 2007). They are formulated arbitrarily against “otherness” and cause unfavourable treatment, becoming essential conditions for racism (Kondoyianni, 2008). A fear of difference often creates the perception that the “other” is threatening.

Racist reactions come in various forms and types. Cases of racial (Jacquard, 2010), ethnic (Payne, 2000), religious (Zampeta, 2003), cultural (Georgogiannis, 2009), political (Goulbourne, 2001) and socio-economic racism (Giddens, 2002) are recorded. **Traditional racism** in its purest form is mainly racial (Kampagiannis, 2012), while **modern racism** refers to the “difference” between cultures and the fear of potential blending. The culture of the “other” is seen as distant, whereas racist reactions are presented as a legitimate defense against any imminent invasion. The perceived “threats” target social and economic status, personal safety, property and community cohesion (Taguieff, 2013).

For the management of diversity in education, various models have been tested in Greece: sometimes, monocultural, such as assimilation and integration-based models, and sometimes pluralist, such as the multicultural, anti-racist and intercultural models (Kesidou, 2008). Briefly, the aforementioned diversity management models present the following characteristics:

The assimilation model is defined as a process of merging cultures in which the ruling class abhors difference, with the “other” not having the right to maintain their cultural identity. Students are forced to learn the language of the country in which they live. As a consequence, they are considered “deficient” and are usually driven to school failure.

According to the integration model, the different “other” incorporates the values of the dominant class as part of a new national identity. The dominant group accepts the cultural elements of the “other”, which are not perceived as offensive despite being different from their own. The aim of this model, however, is not the exchange of cultural elements between students, but the integration of foreigners.

The multicultural model was developed in the 1970s and argues that cohesion comes as a result of a balanced development of minority groups. It emphasises respect for freedoms, the mother tongue and culture, and develops separate curricula for each school unit. However, the development of minority groups in parallel with the dominant group, without any points of interaction, has a negative impact creating “parallel societies” (Kesidou, 2008).

Developed in the 1980s, the anti-racist model aims to prevent and eliminate racism in schools and society. Justice, equality and empowerment are key objectives of anti-racist education (Georgogiannis, 2009).

The intercultural model recognises and respects the specific cultural characteristics of each group and assumes their “contact” within a multicultural society. In contrast to the multicultural model, however, it is not content with establishing mutual tolerance between different groups. It goes beyond recognition and harmonious coexistence with the “other” to interaction, development and the establishment of new social structures on an equal footing (UNESCO, 2009). It is, therefore, obvious that this model recognises difference, aiming to an inclusive society, the goal of which is the coexistence of everyone, without any discriminations.

Today, the curricula in primary and secondary education are governed by the intercultural principle. At the same time, a current need to link education with active citizenship requires teaching approaches expressed as a force for transforming contemporary social reality.

Documentary theatre is defined as a theatrical genre which is based on the use of unchanged primary sources without any fictional elements (Stamati, 2019). It interprets historical moments by re-examining the past and creatively reflects the agony of citizens about burning social issues of topical interest (Zoniou, 2017). It reconstructs events, blends autobiography with history and highlights real events that are considered important: from prevailing social issues such as immigration or war and genocide to scandals and trials attracting social interest.

In the field of education, it compares, contrasts and expands elements, utilising a range of theatrical methods and techniques of educational drama (Bolton, 1979; Slade, 1954; Way, 1967) and the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1992), and is based on the principle of Liberatory Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2009). In this respect, documentary theatre is an important tool since, as a pluralistic theatre, it ensures the expression of multiple perspectives by individuals who usually do not have a public voice.

In this regard, documentary theatre attempts

to break with the status-quo, opening new ways of communication between theatre and its audience, and between education and its students. Therefore, the official narrative, belief systems and educational policies are called into question, as the social and political orientation of documentary theatre is to disrupt, renegotiate, revise and, ultimately, transform the relevant contemporary reality (Zoniou, 2017).

Research questions

Through the interaction and interdependence of the three main concepts pertaining to the subject – documentary theatre, teacher awareness, racist phenomena – the following three research questions were raised:

- Did original documents and testimonies constitute an appropriate means to raise awareness and examine issues and incidents related to racism?
- Did the documentary theatre methodology develop skills of critical reflection, experiential expression and empathy, while expressing the social and political standpoints of participants?
- To what extent did the interventions affect teachers’ attitudes towards the concepts of Traditional and Modern Racism and Intercultural Education?

Data collection methodology

In order to collect qualitative characteristics, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted before and after the interventions. Others means of data collection included **recording of reflection** by group members (**focus groups**) and the **activity journal**. The methodological triangulation of data offered conclusions drawn from the use of all data collection methods.

Description of intervention design

Between 05/12/2021 and 10/04/2022, twelve (12) three-hour, stand-alone workshops were conducted in a spiral development. Their subject matter involves various manifestations of racism through real contemporary incidents of violence. The sessions were held at the 3rd Elementary School of Aigio, every Sunday at 5:00 in the afternoon. The participants included thirteen (13) female teachers of various specialties of special and general education, from all levels of education, with 2–32 years of experience.

The design of the workshops was based on theories and models such as social aesthetics and Brecht’s political theatre (1964), Freire’s Critical Pedagogy (2009) and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (1992). The wide range of theatre in education programmes, the combination and alternating use of

theatrical techniques offered as educational tools enabled the use of different theatrical genres and documents as stimuli, combined with personal experiences and testimonies (Pigkou-Repousi, 2019). Material, ideas and applications were drawn from the “It could be me – it could be you” project (Choleva, 2019), while workshops were developed on the basis of the following pattern: creation – presentation – feedback. As a process, this sequence capitalised on and inspired the participants’ roles as “protagonists” and “spectators” (Zoniou, 2010).

Over time, the weekly sessions served as awareness-raising workshops against stereotypical and racist attitudes and behaviours with utter respect for human rights. The participants had the opportunity to combine their emotional involvement with the cognitive processing of documents in an experiential manner. Through reflection as a result of group feedback, the members attempted to understand themselves and then the world around them (Avdi & Hadjigeorgiou, 2007, p. 19).

Intervention modules

- ▶ The first intervention had an introductory character. After icebreaker and physical expression games, participants had the chance to complete the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The purpose and objectives of the workshops were then explained and the session was concluded with a relevant presentation and video. In the reflection phase, a plenary discussion was held and the necessary explanations were given by the facilitator, since the group consisted of teachers who were going to use theatrical techniques and games in their classes.
- ▶ The second intervention served as an **introduction to dynamic images**. Games of team building, cooperation, identity, otherness and diversity were utilised (Govas, 2002). Educational drama techniques, such as hot seating, presented and highlighted personal testimonies, while group members alternated between the roles of “protagonists” and “spectators”. According to this technique, a central character in the story under examination is asked questions about their role, engaging the audience in a participatory and collaborative process. For the purposes of this module, teachers processed a newspaper article published online that referred to a real incident of racist attack (Dovri, 2019).
- ▶ The third intervention moved **from documents to dynamic images**. Walking and pausing, theatre games and image theatre, educational drama and documentary theatre introduced the participants to dynamic images. The elements of the theatrical form were commented on, in particular in terms of the use of levels, spatial arrangement, levels of body intensity and facial expression. Original documents were used such as a poem by a child from Africa, titled *Κι αποκαλείς εμένα έγχρωμο!* [And You Calling Me Colored!] (2013), posters with keywords, cartoons, photographs of refugees (Platamonas tote kai tora, 2016), a song titled «Η ιστορία της Μαρίας Νο 2» [The story of Maria No 2] (Nikolaidis, 1993), a poem by Warsan Shire (“Ένα ποίημα”, 2015), a statistics table on refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (n.d.) and photographs of racist incidents in the USA.





The documents were a source of inspiration for the creation of dynamic images for which techniques such as the following were adapted:

- **Thought tracking**, whereby the facilitator touches the characters on the shoulder and each one shares their deepest thoughts. If the thought behind the image is not very advanced, questions are asked from the characters' perspective about who they are, where they are, what they are thinking at the moment.
- **Hot seating**, as described in the third intervention.
- **Inner voice**, which is a variation of the thought tracking technique. If certain spectators think they can guess what each character is thinking, they stand behind them, copy their pose and speak as if they were the characters, expressing a deeper thought. This technique reinforces the voices of the "spectators" and the skill of cooperation.
- **Spatial arrangement of the bodies**, where important elements of the theatrical form are controlled to ensure that the messages are visible to the audience, offering clues to what they see.
- **Use and symbolism** of props, where objects that do not add anything significant to the overall effect are eventually removed.
- **Cop in the head and machine** (Boal, 1992), in which a protagonist who is faced with a difficult decision is selected. Using the technique "one at a time", several players enter the space making a characteristic, repetitive (even non-realistic) move. They formulate an important phrase that they or another character may be thinking, and their phrases and movements are presented in succession. Then each person repeats their own phrase 2-3 times before falling silent. In the final stage, everyone starts talking at the same time, louder and louder, until they stop abruptly

on cue. After a few moments of pause, the main character is invited to say/express/voice whatever is on their mind spontaneously, or even to remain silent.

- The fourth intervention investigated the concept of **identity** and the interpretation of the "self" through the eyes of the "other". It was based on a personal testimony by composer and singer Kostis Maravegias (Lifoteam, 2018). The group's main activity was "role on the wall", based on which group members were divided into subgroups and studied the social media post by Maravegias, choosing a character that played a leading role in the incident. They discussed the particular traits and possible behaviours of the character they represented and one group member adopted the posture at the moment when the character was experiencing racist behaviour, committing violence or simply witnessing the incident. Each subgroup drew the outline of the character's body with a marker. Subsequently, members of each subgroup were called to write down: a) inside the outline: the character's thoughts, phrases and emotions in a situation of racist violence, stated in the first person as if they were expressed by the protagonists themselves and b) outside the outline: corresponding



thoughts, phrases and emotions of bystanders at the airport, expressed in the second person as if they were addressed to the protagonists. The activity ended with a comprehensive presentation in plenary where the “roles on the wall” of the protagonists were contrasted through dialogues emerging from the members’ phrases.

- ▶ The fifth intervention was associated with a number of **stereotypes and prejudices**.

The group members played the roles of marginalised people, practised group roles, completed half-finished stereotypical sentences and argued for their positions and opinions. They experienced the situations of “otherness” through activities such as:



- “**Shields & bombs**”, where each group member walks freely, identifies mentally someone else as their bomb and, considering them a threat, tries to avoid them. In a subsequent phase, each player designates another player as their shield that protects them from the bomb. At the facilitator’s signal they stop, and each time they check whether and how the condition is met! This particular condition works based on the following reasoning: *Who am I? What am I trying to escape from? Who can act as a shield for me?* The roles are initially realistic and then become abstract concepts.
- “**One step forward**”, where social role cards are randomly distributed to the participants, who are given time to experience the everyday life of the role they will portray. Questions and prompts by the facilitator establish the appropriate atmosphere, mental condition and relevant environment. They walk around the room according to the status of their role, experiencing it on a personal level. Usually, there are fewer roles than players, therefore certain participants will choose the same cards. Then all group members find themselves in a straight line and take or do not take some steps forward, depending

on their ability to react as roles to the circumstances indicated by the facilitator in a series of statements. After several statements, participants are asked to reflect: *Where have they stood? How far they have progressed in relation to others? How do they feel about it?* Finally, they all reveal their roles and discuss the statements based on which they had taken steps forward or not. Possible different interpretations of similar roles by different players are commented on. Overall, the exercise functions as a sociogram or social mapping and illustration of social roles and groups.

- “**Take a stand**”. Space is defined as a range from an absolute “agree” to an absolute “disagree”. At the starting point, where the participants stand in a straight line facing the facilitator, a series of statements is heard, for example, “*Greeks are racists*”, “*women are the head of the family*”, “*religion is something that you are born with*”. The members of the group “take a stand” in the room depending on their views on each statement. They are then asked to argue in favour of their adopted position. They hear thoughts, possibly change their opinions and as a result move to relevant positions in the space.
- ▶ In the sixth intervention, group members approached the concept of **diversity** and the management of behaviour towards the “other”. They were divided into groups-races and experienced different cultures. They interacted with “others” and treated them sometimes as “outsiders” who threatened their social cohesion and sometimes as members of a distant and different culture with which they found it difficult to come in contact. The discussion that followed in the reflection phase allowed them to come to the realisation that misunderstandings are often due to a lack of knowledge about the habits of other individuals or groups. It also emerged that although some people may share characteristics with other people in the same group, they do not necessarily behave in the same way, as well as that social identities are influenced by many different factors.



- In the seventh session, teachers chose to discuss the issue of **discrimination in the school environment**. The facilitator provided subgroups with the same document, a newspaper article about a witness testimony in the trial of the One-member Magistrates' Court in Ioannina for the death of Vangelis Giakoumakis, a student at the Dairy Vocational School of Ioannina who took his own life as a result of months-long bullying (Newsroom, 2019). During the presentation, the following techniques were used:



- Journalling**, where groups choose a different version of the bullying incident to present as a dynamic image. Each group portrays a central character in the story: victim, perpetrator, parent, witness. Then, using a different person (first person/victim, second/perpetrator, second/parent, third/witness), they record in their journal their experience of and feelings about the incident for a day.
- The corridor of conscience**, which is about a character facing a real dilemma, with their group offering options. A narrow corridor is formed by two opposing lines of participants. The main character must cross it while listening to opposing prompts until they make their final decision. The process is repeated until the corridor narrows further and the voices of conscience become louder in order to put more pressure on the protagonist-victim.
- Boal's machine** and **cop in the head**, as described above in the third intervention.
- The eighth workshop was dedicated to **racial racism** and was approached through the lens of a literary text. In particular, a literary text by Dido Sotiriou, entitled "Refugees" and included in a literature textbook for elementary school students (2013), provided teachers with the opportunity to come in contact with personal belongings of immigrants and refugees. In the presentation phase, teachers combined narratively their

relevant personal experiences, as testimonies, with specific parts of the text. The result emerged through an improvisation workshop.



- At the ninth meeting, themes were drawn from history and contemporary reality. The members of the teachers' group used these themes to deal with typical cases of **ethnic racism**. They first participated in activities (games, improvisation stories and personal testimonies) related to status on social, national and political levels. They then used a variety of different theatrical techniques. Finally, by combining all of the above, the group presented a series of dynamic images. In particular, the group processed original documents, such as statements made by the protagonists (police officers, lawyers, parents, press representatives, etc.) in the case of the murder of an 18-year-old Roma in Perama by members of the Greek police's rapid response DIAS squad. Another example of documentary material was the oral argument delivered in the trial of the Golden Dawn neo-Nazi party by lawyer Thanasis Kampagiannis, as documented in his book titled *Με τις μέλισσες ή με τους λύκους*; [With the Bees or With the Wolves?] (2020).
- In the tenth intervention, teachers were asked to focus, by choice, on forms of **social racism**. More specifically, they were divided into subgroups and then selected one discrimination from the following cases: wealth distribution (rich/poor), educational level (educated/uneducated), gender (women/men), occupation (intellectuals/manual workers), fitness or cognitive ability (able-bodied/disabled), health (healthy/AIDS or COVID-19 carriers), habits/addictions (drugs, alcohol, smoking, etc.), sexual behaviour (heterosexual/homosexual), physical appearance (handsome/ugly), obesity (overweight/skinny). Then, the members of each subgroup shared role cards (journalist, researcher, musician, writer, director, photographer) and proceeded to collect documentary materials of any kind (print



or online) based on their role. Each subgroup combined the documents they had collected creating the structure of a short performance. By alternating hot (poems, songs, theatrical improvisations, etc.) with cold (statistical tables, financial statements, balance sheets, numerical data, etc.) documents, they tried to interrupt/inject/compose the action or narrative and used any technological or other means necessary for their presentation.

- The eleventh and twelfth interventions formed a separate module entitled: “Myself as a Document” (Kakoudaki, 2019). This module covered two sessions and the goal was to prepare, create, give feedback and present happenings in the form of a final performance in an indoor, outdoor or mixed space. The group moved between well-known historical events and dynamic images and vice versa. The initial presentations were enriched by personal stories about beloved objects, experiential testimonies and themes from local history. The final result took the form of a happening, taking place in indoor and outdoor spaces (halls, staircase, classrooms, courtyard) of a three-storey school building and was characterised by inspiration, originality and joy of creation for the participants.

Qualitative analysis of data

For the purposes of organising and assessing the qualitative data, the Thematic Analysis method was chosen, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), includes the following six steps: a. Familiarisation with data, b. Generating codes, c. Generating themes, d. Reviewing themes, e. Defining and naming themes, f. Reporting data and findings.

Upon completing the above process, the following issues have emerged:

- *Operation of the group:* The group systematically practised the idea of subjective interpretation of sources and respect for the personal viewpoint of the “other”, creating fruitful dialogues by conducting argumentative discourse. The process





was defined as a necessary condition to avoid misunderstanding between members with different or diametrically opposed views, thus creating a climate of trust and safety.

- *The role of theatre in education:* Group members confirmed their accepting the integration of theatrical techniques in teaching. In their opinion, these techniques stimulate interest, contribute to experiential learning and constitute an excellent means of raising awareness among students and teachers.
- *Learning and life skills:* The workshops served as sources of inspiration and occasions to reconstruct knowledge. They succeeded in strengthening critical thinking, collaboration, interaction, creativity and intercultural behaviour. They also reinforced the concepts of self-perception, teamwork, imagination and understanding of difference.
- *Types and forms of racism:* The issues under investigation were particularly sensitive. Participants recalled experiences and personal reactions, and the activities were linked with prejudices and stereotypes that essentially dictated their attitudes towards different forms of racism.
- *The role of documentary theatre:* As far as documentary theatre is concerned, it was expressed with certainty that it can develop the aesthetic experience and creative thinking of students and teachers.
- *The methodology of documentary theatre:* The wide variety of theatrical techniques combined to highlight the documents caused admiration and surprise, while enabling multiple modes of expression, choices and opportunities for the participants.
- *Use of documents:* The integration and use of documents in teaching was identified as a

particularly important process for understanding social issues and solving problems of everyday life.

- *Barriers to implementation in the school environment:* Difficulties were identified, however, in approaches that require a deviation from the standard timetable, especially in secondary education, since documents “are not part of the curriculum”, as it was characteristically mentioned.
- *Psycho-emotional characteristics of group members:* The teachers’ statements highlighted qualitative characteristics that, in the context of this research, concerned parameters related to the encouragement of psycho-emotional arousal, the enhancement of empathy, the contribution of active citizenship, self-awareness, teamwork, anti-racist attitudes as a way of life, liberatory pedagogy as an educational perspective and the decision, ultimately, to transform society.

Conclusions

The participants experientially connected their emotional engagement with the cognitive processing of primary sources. In the reflection phases, they also attempted to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their immediate and surrounding environment (Avdi & Hadjigeorgiou, 2007). The interventions acted as a framework for changing entrenched positions towards racist behaviours.

In this way, the value of such workshops as a process of changing teachers’ views, risk-taking, re-adjusting the relationship with the self and accepting the cultural identity of students, as suggested by previous research, was confirmed (Dawson et al., 2011; Lenakakis & Parousi, 2019). The selected techniques brought participants in contact with creative theatre, research/investigative work and active participation. These techniques were essentially a means of teaching and not necessarily a means of pursuing an end result, such as a theatrical performance (Govas, 2002).

Therefore, in an attempt to directly address the aforementioned research questions:

- The use of original documents was recognised as an important contribution for teachers and students in terms of understanding and solving everyday problems. The combination and variety of documentary theatre techniques enabled the use of numerous stimuli combined with personal experiences and testimonies.
- The methodology of documentary theatre as an approach developed skills of critical thinking, experiential expression and empathy addressing individual, social and political needs.

- The research showed that documentary theatre, according to the teachers’ statements, only influenced their already formed solid views on traditional racism to a small degree. However, a significant statistical difference, before and after the interventions, was observed in terms of teachers’ awareness regarding modern racism, which can be interpreted through the correlation between the use of primary sources and the documentary theatre methodology. Finally, with regard to intercultural education, the need to design teacher training on how to intervene in cases of social discrimination was confirmed (Vassilopoulos, 2022).

Teachers justified the difference observed in terms of their greater awareness of modern racism as a result of investigating and engaging with contemporary documents of topical interest. The primary sources referred to real and contemporary racist incidents which captured “whatever is happening now ... and it is happening around us” (Vassilopoulos, 2022).

Research limitations

- Research was conducted in a relatively small number of teachers. This fact makes it impossible to generalise the results. Still, the sample was highly representative and can provide insight into groups with similar characteristics.
- The workshops were conducted in person, after a two-year suspension of similar activities due to COVID-19. Protocols and requirements for pandemic response were met, therefore certain difficulties were encountered in terms of contact and other experiential approaches.
- The members of the formed group were all women. A general reluctance of male population to participate in similar experiential seminars and workshops was found (Vassilopoulos, 2022).

Proposal for future research

An interesting thought was expressed by special education teachers during the reflection phase, which concerns students with learning disabilities. The teachers argued that these students, although having difficulty focusing on cognitive subjects, appeared to be significantly enhanced by the use of documents and testimonies. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the extent of their enhancement during the cognitive process through theatrical techniques that make use of personal objects, familiar stimuli, personal experiences and testimonies (Vassilopoulos, 2022).

* This research is described in more detail in the author's Master's thesis on documentary theatre as a means of raising teachers' awareness about racism, written under the supervision of Professor Antonis Lenakakis as part of the "MA in Drama and Performing Arts in Education and Lifelong Learning", a postgraduate programme of the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese (Vassilopoulos, 2022).

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