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Fostering inmates' self-identity and communication via Drama in Education and puppetry An action research study at the Volos Youth Detention Centre

Magda Vitsou and Kostas Magos



Abstract

This postdoctoral research paper aims to shed light on the positive impact of implementing puppetry and Drama in Education (henceforth DiE) in correctional facilities, using a transformative perspective. The study examines whether incarcerated individuals experience changes in their attitudes, increased emotional strength, stronger interpersonal connections, enhanced teamwork, improved communication skills and greater self-awareness. Furthermore, the research emphasises a multifaceted approach that leverages puppet theatre and DiE techniques to address moral dilemmas. This approach has the potential to navigate ethical challenges that arise during imprisonment, facilitate smoother reintegration into society and effectively tackle issues such as discrimination, tensions and conflict resolution within correctional institutions.

Keywords: *applied puppetry, DiE, incarceration, ethical dilemmas, multimodality, critical awareness, empowerment, negotiation of meaning*

Introduction

The central motivations guiding this research go beyond merely exploring theatre pedagogy and puppetry practice, as highlighted by Ellison et al. (2017) and Woodland (2021). This study primarily focuses on the restoration of inmates' identities, their personal histories and memories, as well as the redefinition of life within and beyond the prison

walls. Furthermore, there is a concerted effort to portray the routine of incarceration in an engaging manner and to provide prisoners with a platform to express themselves. As Maffesoli (1998) puts it, the goal is to evoke the passions, feelings and affections that permeate human experiences through the application of theatre and puppetry in the prison setting.

The process of transforming incarcerated individuals through the use of DiE and applied puppetry

Education through DiE and puppetry appears to have transformative effects on lifelong learning, and in particular on the education of prisoners, as it leads to reflection and redesign of their lives through mental and emotional processes (Brewster, 2014). Given that transformative learning is closely related to personal experience (Hughes & Ruding, 2009), the experiential nature of DiE gradually contributes to the development of the transformation of the experiences of inmates, through the exploration and exchange of new roles (Mezirow, 2009; Tallent et al., 2022). DiE is used worldwide as an educational tool in prisons and positively affects the lives of prisoners after release as well as their general personal, social and professional adjustment. Through transformation and change of perspective, achieved through theatrical action and the "utilisation" of personal experiences, participating prisoners are led to empowerment, emancipation and self-efficacy (Buchleitner, 2010).

There is significant and growing research on applied theatre in prisons. Noteworthy are the studies of Balfour et al. (2019), Herold (2014), Lucas (2021), Pensalfini (2016), Shailor (2011), Thompson (2004) and Tocci (2007), which conclude that there is a development of communication skills, pre-social skills, self-confidence, self-expression, perspective-taking, empathy and improving mental health for the incarcerated. In addition, researchers have noted positive effects on the institutional climate of prisons and increased community awareness of humanity and concern for the struggles of inmates.

Accordingly, during puppetry animations, reflection and action are immediate and continuous. The puppet acts as a mediator, becomes part of the action, part of the act, and causes the change. Research on puppet theatre emphasises that puppets are one of the main parameters on which transformative pedagogy is based. The theory is based on the puppet itself, which is presented not only from an educational point of view but also from a social and emotional one. The perspective of those involved is transformed and they are empowered (Smith, 2022; Vitsou & Papadopoulou, 2023).

Numerous puppetry initiatives have been put into action, such as Gary Friedman's "Puns and Doedie - Puppets against Apartheid" and the "Puppets for Democracy" programme launched by the Democratic Education Broadcast Initiative (Kruger, 2014). These programmes aim to bring about transformation, activate collective memory and advocate for justice and social change. A particularly illus-

trative programme is "Puppets in Prison" by Gary Friedman and Nyanga Tshabalala (Kruger, 2014). This programme vividly demonstrates the fundamental capacity of puppets to create a protective shield, serving as symbolic vessels for the expression of emotions. Researchers' core assumptions regarding puppetry and transformation (Markovits, 2022; Tsaplina & Astles, 2020) align with the following principles:

- Puppets, as expressive, symbolic and mediating objects, stimulate personal creative work and collective dialogue that ultimately lead to the processing of representations and activation of memories.
- The puppet and the body are intricately linked to narrative and expression, utilising silence as a significant narrative resource or engaging in dialogue.
- Puppets and objects function as extensions of physical presence.
- Puppets, acting as "eyewitnesses", bear the imprints of migration and incarceration on their physical forms.
- Puppets challenge participants to reflect upon their involvement in puppet theatre events.

There are several examples of puppetry programmes that engage collective memory and champion justice and social change (Tsaplina & Astles, 2020). Puppets function as expressive and intermediary tools for working with internal imagery, enabling the projection of these mental images through animation and facilitating the exploration of "traumatic" experiences. In this journey, puppet theatre reveals the inner world of these objects, forges links with "memories" and prompts the reenactment of alternative scenarios, ultimately resulting in a "redemptive" conclusion (Markovits, 2022).

Research methodology

Methodological orientation of the research process

In this study, we employ prison ethnography as a fundamental methodology. Our research takes on an ethnographic nature, involving a combination of direct observation and interactions with incarcerated individuals, alongside in-depth interviews. These methods provide insights into how inmates within this specific institution perceive their time in incarceration (Drake et al., 2015).

Our current research is grounded in a transformative perspective, with a primary focus on individuals at risk of exclusion, as well as issues related to discrimination and empowerment. The design of our interventions and the research objectives are approached through a transformative lens. Therefore, this research endeavours to uncover disparities

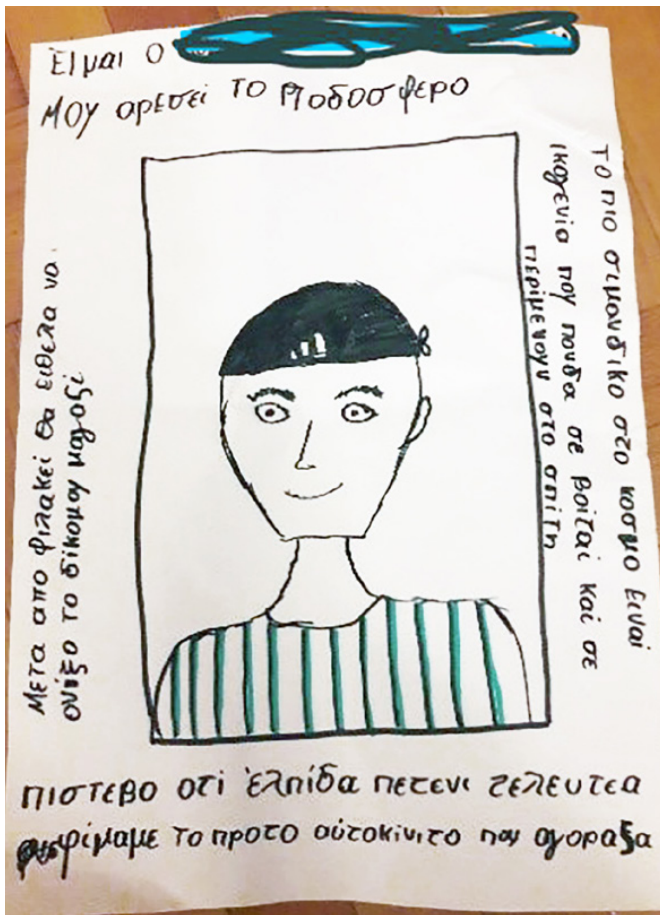


Figure 1

and actively engage prisoners who are often under-represented in public discourse, allowing them to participate as meaningful contributors (Creswell, 2014). This approach aligns with the principles of applied theatre and puppetry, drawing inspiration from Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, as it serves as a liberating tool for addressing social oppression (Boal, 2000).

Furthermore, we adopt an emancipatory action research approach, with a specific focus on enhancing the quality of prison life through a case study methodology. Our aim is to investigate the various factors that interact and influence a particular unit within the prison (Creswell, 2014).

Aim and research questions

The primary aim of this study is to explore the impact of prisoners' involvement in a non-formal education programme, specifically one that utilises applied puppet theatre and DiE, in order to enhance their daily prison life. The programme's objectives include nurturing the emotional and social skills of prisoners, reinforcing their sense of identity and transforming their existing beliefs to foster a more positive outlook on life.

To address these research objectives, the following key research questions have been formulated:

- How will the prisoners' participation in a non-formal education programme featuring applied puppet theatre and DiE influence them?

This primary question gives rise to the following secondary inquiries:

- How will it alter prisoners' perceptions of their own identity?
- How will it impact the interpersonal relationships among prisoners?

Research tools

Data collection for this study involved various research tools, including participant observation, post-intervention focus group interviews, personal field notes and the researcher's reflective journal (Bryman, 2017).

Research context

This study was conducted at the Volos Youth Detention Centre. Throughout the research period, spanning from September to February 2022, the research team received positive and open cooperation from all levels of the facility's staff. The primary objective was to establish mutual understanding between the researcher and the institution's personnel. During this period, a consent form was developed, ensuring adherence to research ethics and addressing sensitive concerns identified by the staff. Notably, no photographs were taken during the interventions, with the exception of one at the conclusion of the interventions, and no audio recordings were made, in accordance with the institution's regulations.

A total of two action cycles were conducted, starting in early October 2021 and concluding at the end of January 2022. The subsequent step involved evaluating the intervention, which included conducting focus group discussions with the prisoners. This was followed by the collection, analysis and writing of the present study. The interventions followed a fixed weekly format, lasting 90 minutes each, and consisted of a series of 10 sessions.

In the first cycle of action research, the objective was to acquaint the group members with DiE activities, exercises and games from the Theatre of the Oppressed. The aim was to foster a climate of trust among group members, enhance prisoners' self-perception and activate their memories. The reflective process guided the design of the subsequent action cycle, which emphasised group animations and "scenes". This phase included techniques such as "image theatre", "forum theatre" and the creation and performance of small puppet theatre scenarios. The goal was to challenge opinions by exploring ethical dilemmas. Group members engaged in productive interactions, exchanging perspectives,

resolving cognitive dissonance and addressing "difficult" issues.

Negotiating hypothetical scenarios through puppets and dramatic narratives, featuring simple, age-appropriate stories that considered the specific population's needs, played a central role. Discussions around the challenges and concerns of the characters were key tools in this process. Gradually, as the concept of a "group" took hold, space was provided for crucial processes such as expressing and sharing opinions, respecting diverse viewpoints, actively listening and fostering empathy among the inmates.

The target group

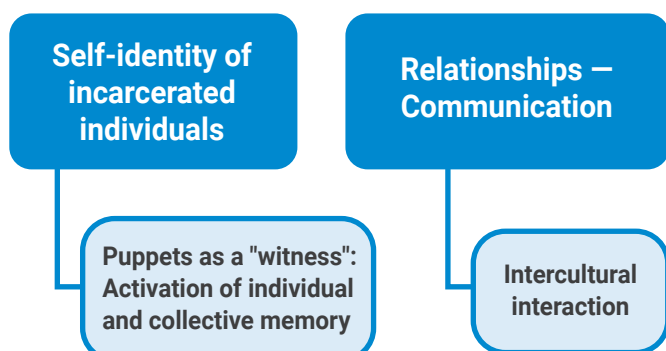
This study's focus is on a vulnerable population comprising individuals detained at a Youth Detention Centre. The selection of participants was a collaborative effort involving the Prison Administration, including the director, prison employees and social workers, who engaged in discussions with the research team. The group encompassed a diverse range of languages and cultures, reflecting the varied countries of origin among the participants, including Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Romania and Afghanistan. Their linguistic backgrounds also varied.

Data analysis method

The initial step in developing the research's aim involved an examination of the data sources, which included participant observation, field notes in a reflective diary and transcripts. From this material, a thematic map was created through data coding, encompassing main themes, subthemes and the connections between them. These interconnections between themes and subthemes culminated in a collective interpretation of the data, leading to the generation of a comprehensive research report that addresses the research questions (Bryman, 2017).

Research findings

In this section, two of the four thematic categories that emerged within the context of this study are presented. These categories explore the impact of puppetry and DiE on:



Self-identity of incarcerated individuals

Initially, during the first phase of action, the primary focus was on bolstering the inmates' sense of identity. Specifically, certain exercises deriving from the Theatre of the Oppressed were employed as warmup activities in these sessions. These exercises aimed to encourage participants to connect with their identities and bodies. The inmates' engagement in these activities was highly positive, and it can be argued that they successfully met the initial objectives. A set of exercises was deliberately chosen to unveil and affirm the participants' identities, foster intercultural interaction and elicit the expression of emotions related to these aspects.

In the inaugural activity of the first action cycle, titled "Identity texts/portraits", participants were instructed to create self-portraits by completing sentences such as "I am...", "I like...", "I remember...", "I believe...", "I fear..." and "I hope..." (see Figure 1). In this specific portrait, P2 portrayed himself in a "dynamic" manner, emphasising the significance of family. He continued to do so throughout the sessions, underscoring the pivotal role of family in shaping a child's character and choices as well as defining his future identity as a "good" family man who would be close to his children and family.

There was some initial difficulty in comprehending the instructions, and one of the inmates who was more proficient in Greek acted as a mediator, using Urdu to assist. Through drawing and presenting their creations, the participants revealed and visualised their potential, origins and multilingual selves, contributing to self-affirmation (Cummins et al., 2005). Some participants, like P8, presented identity texts written solely in English, containing a wealth of information about themselves, their journeys and their feelings. Even this textual form was significant, as it unveiled elements of their personalities. P8's narrative did not reference the present circumstances of his confinement but instead described being at home and enjoying life with optimism. His phrase "I am my Back Life" is noteworthy, effectively erasing the temporal dimension of his imprisonment.

Creating a "life map" (see Figures 2 and 3) also proved to be a particularly revealing activity. Participants visualised themselves and their life stories, depicting their journeys up to that point and presenting the results to the group. They began discussing their life stories before commencing the actual painting. Throughout the activity, they frequently looked at each other's paintings and engaged in discussions, either in their native languages or in Greek. During the presentations, they attentively listened to one another's stories. Most of the narratives were

highly detailed, commencing with their places of origin and their childhood homes, depicting scenes of family warmth. However, these narratives invariably evolved to encompass the decision to embark on a migration journey, detailing the challenges they encountered, and ultimately leading to their current state of incarceration. The research team interrupted these narratives with probing questions such as "How did you feel?", "What did you do next?" and "Would you make the same choice again?" to facilitate the narratives and unearth more facets of their identities. From the research team's field notes, it became apparent that several participants expressed regret about specific decisions they had made in the past that had ultimately led them to their current circumstances: "Going back to Pakistan", "not Greece", "bad moment" (P2).

When the narratives transitioned to their current circumstances in prison, they were prompted to contemplate how they envisioned their life paths continuing. Many responded with optimism, envisioning their futures in terms of starting families and securing gainful employment. P1 stated, "I'll go back ... not a life here. Pakistan, find a wife, have kids, get a job ... every day, don't mess up ... again... better there ... he understands me".

However, it left a strong impression, as evident from the field notes, that they were thinking about their futures outside of Greece: "To return home ... not good here ... take me to prison ... It's not going anywhere ... stop dreaming" (P7).

The description of their migration experiences has common elements among most prisoners. Initially, they depicted themselves as teenagers with dreams for the future who embarked on their journeys to escape homeland dangers (e.g., the Taliban, war, civil conflict) and alleviate poverty (to support their families): "Taliban killed my mother and father ... my mother told me to go away" (P7) and "There's no money in Pakistan..." (P6).

Then there was a shift in identity to that of immigrants and refugees, which, though starting with optimism, encountered numerous challenges and impasses. P3 stated, "I was afraid ... yes ... It's tough to be alone", whereas P10 said, "For me, Turkey ... 2 years in a camp, I spent a year in Mytilene, in a camp ... a difficult year there. After the camp, Athens ... better ... I'm a refugee ... I want asylum ... but it's tough".

Subsequently, there was a shift in their inmate identities. While they did not provide detailed explanations – nor were they prompted to do so – about the reasons behind their arrests and incarceration, they presented themselves with terms like "isolation", "no future", "alone" and "prison everything".

As a culmination of the preceding activity, they were asked to craft paper puppets of themselves using paper and tape. They responded positively and humorously, offering somewhat "critical" comments on each other's puppet creations. However, when they were instructed to place the puppets on their "life maps", hesitation and embarrassment arose. They were reluctant to animate the puppets by responding to questions like "How does it feel there?", "How does it move?" and "What does it say?" (implying themselves). Most participants made "jerky" movements. Six out of nine placed their paper puppets inside the prison, one in their village and two outside the prison, revealing dominant aspects of their identities. A typical example is P7's life path image, where the "dream ends..." and he is sent to prison.

For their own descriptions, they employed terms such as "fear", "pain", "running", "dreams", "afraid of boys", "hope", "to stay in Greece" and "ugh... no, no (exclamations)", revealing elements of their identities, encompassing feelings of pain, loneliness, insecurity, a sense of being "strangers" and a feeling of being trapped.

Similarly, in the puppet animations they created, they recollected memories of their migration journey and the instances of racism they encountered. Often, they attempted to "justify" these behaviours by acknowledging that they understand the reasons behind the discrimination, such as differences in religion, skin colour, or the fear of job displacement. This sentiment is evident in the following excerpt from the focus group discussions: "I go out to work, but it's hard to find a Greek. But he understands ... I'm a stranger ... he's afraid ... But I want to work ... make a family ... where does he do it? Return home?" (P3).

Discrimination based on their origins was also observed among the prisoners. However, these differences were minimised during the second action cycle, as they not only shared their perspectives on specific situations (e.g., conflict management, future choices, personal life, work, etc.) but also discussed aspects of their cultural identities. This was evident in the puppet theatre animations in which they were tasked with intertwining their memories and stories with those of other group members, seeking common elements in their childhoods, regional customs and school experiences.

The animations featuring various objects provided by the researchers aimed to evoke individual and collective memories of the participants and make their "voices" visible. According to field notes, the selected objects served as "mediators" for their personal stories and memories. Each participant was asked to choose an object that reminded them of

something from their life. In a circle, they took turns sharing a story about the object they held, as if it were their own.

For instance, a rosary reminded one participant of his parents and the prayers they said using a similar rosary. Another participant recalled how, until the age of eight, he and other boys in Afghanistan frequently played with spinning wheels. When shown a wooden boat, P11 reminisced about his journey by boat to reach Mytilene. A tea strainer brought to mind one participant's mother, who used to make him tea with milk every morning and engage in morning chats, often accompanied by warm pie. P7 recalled his school years and how negative influences and friendships had a significant impact on his life path. This led to a discussion about influential figures and individuals who play pivotal roles in our lives. P7 remarked, "If I could go back in time with the mindset I have now, everything would be different ... I started pretending to be someone, trying to act tough and I ended up in prison".

Subsequently, depending on the characteristics of each object – its material, shape, colour, smell and potential sounds – it was transformed into an animated "character". They explored the "birth" of each character, its movement, character traits and voice. They then integrated these "created" characters by engaging in small improvisations based on "shared" memories, such as scenes set in the prison yard or their homes, or real-life events (e.g., newspaper clippings, photographic materials, prison incidents).

The resulting animations emerged from the merging of individual experiences with those of other group members, capturing universal memories, such as "drinking tea with my mum and dad before school", which highlighted their affectionate family relationships and the extent of their longing for maternal figures.

In another scene, the puppets and objects were portrayed as "eyewitnesses" of their migration, depicting the crossing from Turkey to Greece by boat (created by joining objects). Corresponding scenes of border crossings were frequently animated, either using puppets or through improvisation, recalling the challenges of "passing" and migrant trafficking, often emphasising the anxiety, fear and hardships involved. They approached these portrayals with enthusiasm, often exaggerating negative behaviours (see Figure 5).

The puppet animations (see Figure on p. 20), initially causing them embarrassment, as indicated in the following excerpt from the reflective diary, eventually led to reflection and the activation of their individual and collective memories:

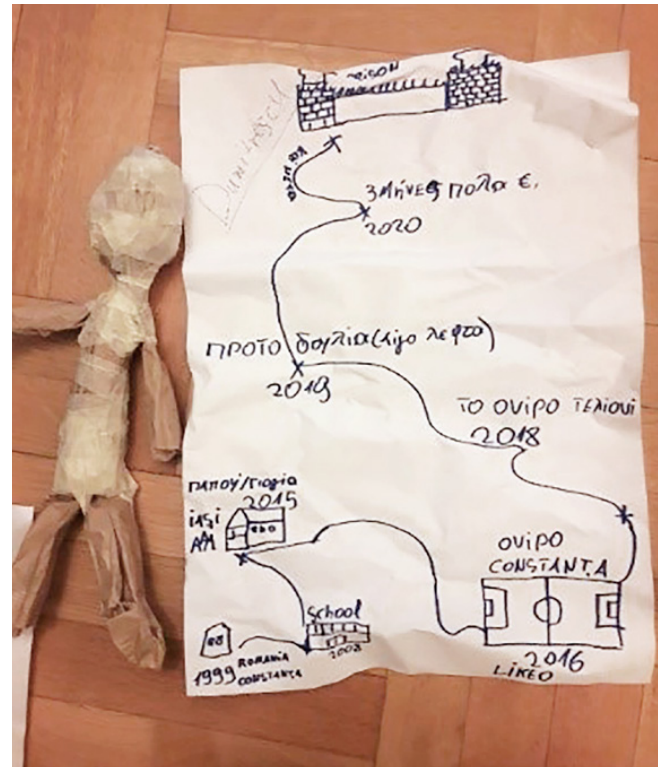


Figure 2

We created puppets ... they enjoyed the process ... they laughed a lot ... We had interesting discussions during the puppet-making and painting. They were very open with me throughout this process. R, in particular, began to share more about his own life and his story. Many of the puppets they created looked so much like themselves that they commented on each other and laughed. When they finished making the puppets, they asked to do improvisations. They became more comfortable and did improvisations blending languages and laughing. (Excerpt from research journal, dated 7/12/21)

Through the personification of different personalities, they became aware of the inequalities in society and likely reflected on their own positions. Here are some excerpts from the inmates' discussions about the characters they played/animated: "If you don't have money, you can't work" (P5) and "I get angry seeing others with money, women ... and here I am, stuck" (P7).

All of them agreed that these roles did not have equal opportunities in life, and luck was distributed unequally, with money playing a significant role in their lives. As a result, they directly correlated their personal histories with the "choices" and "opportunities" they had encountered in life, creating a collective narrative. P11 commented, "You have dreams ... just like us, lady ... but if you don't have money ... you do other things ... and end up in prison".

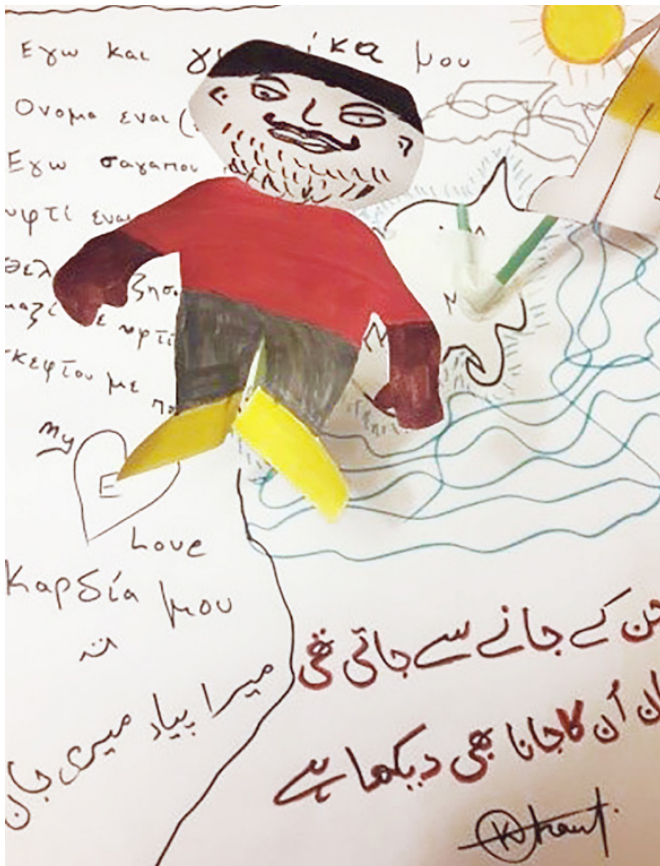


Figure 3

Feedback from participants in the focus group discussions underscored their increased awareness of issues connected to their reality. Specifically, they highlighted issues related to their social position, power dynamics, minority status, discrimination, rights and the overall situation in Greece. They perceived their place in prison in relation to others, but this perception was also linked to how they were treated in the broader society. They also shed light on various aspects of Greek society and vividly described the discrimination faced by Muslims in Greek society.

These puppets were nice ... I liked it when I made mine ... it was like I turned myself into a puppet and played myself ... in the past and now here, with others ... I thought puppets were for children, but they're also for us". (P2)

Relationships - Communication

Concerning the relationships among the prisoners, the various puppet theatre animations, such as "delayed payment by the employer (employer and employee)", "request for cigarettes to social service (prisoner-social worker)", "request for quiet to a correctional officer (prisoner-prisoner)" and "phone conversation with a relative in prison", fostered mutual understanding, empathy and a sense of be-

longing among the participants. They began to see commonalities between their experiences inside and outside prison, recognising that they shared similar problems. P5 expressed this sentiment: "It's nice to see things and understand how others think, all the same in here and then outside, all the same problem".

Additionally, puppet theatre animations involving moral dilemmas allowed the participants to experiment collaboratively and safely in finding alternative ways to manage conflicts within the prison environment.

During a meeting where they were asked to depict themselves with a puppet once they were out of prison, the awareness gained through multimodal puppetry animations and the moral dilemmas surfaced in the participants' comments. They all agreed on the importance of following laws and rules and the value of a "second" chance in life. P2 shared, "If I go out, I'll work and be law-abiding ... but the state should help me, not label me as a perpetual prisoner".

In the last three meetings, the research team presented moral dilemmas from prison life that had arisen organically from the prisoners' discussions during the initial action cycle. These dilemmas included situations like a prisoner causing disturbance in the cell and another inmate who acted as a "leader" in the cell. K. is facing a dilemma: report the behaviour to the guards (leading to isolation) or attempt to resolve the issue internally. Ethical dilemmas also arose regarding their future choices after release, such as one participant, R., facing the choice of returning to his homeland or attempting an illegal journey to Germany.

The process involved the participants first identifying the problem, its causes, conflicting values, barriers to solutions and potential consequences. They were then asked to use puppets to depict how they would deal with the problem in the past, present and future. This was followed by discussions and reflections on the choices made by each group, weighing the pros and cons and considering potential new problems stemming from their choices.

This structured approach encouraged emotional awareness and decision-making, providing them with the opportunity to reflect on their choices and their outcomes through productive discussions and exchanges of opinions. Animating the puppets allowed them to explore these choices in a less confrontational manner. P6 mentioned, "I felt like I did it but I didn't when I was manipulating the puppet". P1 reflected, "I was thinking afterward ... in the cell ... how many things we can see differently".

Furthermore, the group animations cultivated moral judgment and fostered discussions about

values and their significance in their lives. Most animations centred on how values were intertwined with their choices and how they treated people, emphasising the importance of relationships with family, friends, partners and the state.

Simultaneously, this process encouraged self-awareness, helping them recognise their strengths and weaknesses, their feelings and the feelings of others. It became evident that this process helped in making more thoughtful decisions.

In terms of communication, the focus was not on a specific language but on making sense of actions in all languages and all linguistic repertoires available at any given time to facilitate communication. What prevailed was the mixing of language codes, i.e. the phenomenon of translanguaging was observed, highlighting Greeklish as a new linguistic code of communication during the actions: "Yes... you friend *سديقي انت*, and I will help you get a job ... I don't care about you prison, I will help you one way or another" (P5) and "صاح يا شكرا, thank you friend (my friend), *you help me well* (you help me good)" (P10).

The animations required collaboration to be able to negotiate meanings, during which participants showed their emotions and often visually represented the prisoners' rights but also their past, present (their life in prison) and future outside of prison. The cooperation required to visualise these memories several times in the first cycle of action brought confusion between them, lack of understanding, laughter and shouting. However, in the course of the intervention, and especially in the 2nd cycle of action, they achieved it with greater ease.

Discussion - Conclusions

Based on the research findings, it is evident that a programme involving applied puppet theatre and Drama in Education (DiE) implemented in prisons has a positive impact on inmates. This impact includes emotional empowerment, attitude redefinition, stronger interpersonal bonds, enhanced communication skills, increased awareness of self-identity and consideration of life after release. These outcomes align with previous research by Markovits (2022), Paterline and Orr (2016), and others. The multifaceted exploration of moral dilemmas through puppet theatre also proves effective in addressing dilemmas that arise in daily prison life, facilitating smoother reintegration, addressing discrimination and tension and mitigating conflicts within prisons (Magos, 2015; Vitsou, Kondoyianni & Magos, 2020).

The research results align with international studies that have used DiE and applied puppetry to empower inmates and enhance their well-being in



Figure 4

prison, as evidenced by Brewster (2014). These approaches reveal the significant role that exposure to high-quality artistic works from various art forms can play in fostering critical thinking, transforming learners' beliefs and fostering new perspectives that cater to their needs, as demonstrated in recent research by Corradini and Antonietti (2013) and Jabbari and Dadvar (2018).

Regarding the influence of the programme on inmates' self-identities, individual and collective memory, and intercultural interactions, the research indicates that the use of multimodal activities, particularly those involving puppets and animated objects, has broken the silence of incarcerated individuals, making them feel seen and heard. These activities have activated both individual and collective memory and have provided a platform for reflection on their attitudes and choices, as observed in previous research by Markovits (2022) and Tsaplina and Astles (2020). Inmates demonstrated increased willingness to discuss their past, express their cultural identities, engage with the identities of others and articulate their opinions, emotions and attitudes.

Throughout the programme, prisoners shared details of their childhoods, family backgrounds and common experiences. Their migration journeys were also presented, shedding light on the identity of immigrants and the challenges associated with this status. Through animations, narratives and identity texts, participants felt that their skills and values were acknowledged, reinforcing their sense of purpose

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