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## Learning with the body: a pedagogical project with **refugee children** combining elements of **cooperative learning** and **theatre techniques**

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Sofia Vlachou



### Abstract

In this article, I will present a pedagogical project of embodied-experiential learning that I developed during my collaboration with refugee teenagers at their accommodation centre in Filippiada, Preveza in the 2020–21 fall/winter semester. This project arose from the children's own imperative need to express to a familiar person who would be interested in listening to them the pain they experienced from being exposed to racist underestimation and rejection in their various daily interactions with local community members. Through the collaboration that followed, their initial narratives evolved into small theatrical acts, parts of an original "performance text" of public protest, that made this aspect of their reality visible to their wider social environment in a penetrating way. Emphasising once again the importance of theatre education for the learning and psychosocial enhancement of all students, without exception, I set as an ultimate goal of this article the initiation of a discussion on the development of creative methodologies and innovative tools of embodied learning. Such methodologies and tools could make great use of arts subjects and/or a more creative application of physical education in the frame of cross-curricular teaching in order to promote the inclusion of refugee children in their respective school environment.

**Keywords:** *refugee children, libertarian pedagogy, cooperative learning, Theatre of the Oppressed, social exclusion, embodied learning*

## Introduction

In this article, I will present a pedagogical project of embodied-experiential learning that I developed during my collaboration with refugee teenagers at their accommodation centre in Filippiada, Preveza. This project, which lasted from the middle of November 2020 until the beginning of March 2021, initially arose from the children's own need to express to a familiar person and member of the "host society" who would be interested in listening to them the pain they experienced in their various daily interactions with local community members, who would belittle and reject them on racist motives.

As part of the process, we elaborated on their experiences by selectively combining tools such as an initial experience-sharing activity, named "What's new?", deriving from the Freinet pedagogy, the establishment of a "Class Council of Students", which has been applied by a number of radical and libertarian twentieth-century educators<sup>1</sup> as a basic method of democracy training, techniques inspired by Forum Theatre (or Theatre of the Oppressed) as conceived by Augusto Boal<sup>2</sup> and also theatre games and drama in education techniques in general. Throughout our sessions, the children's initial narratives evolved into small theatrical acts aimed at creating an original performance text of public protest, capable of making this aspect of their reality visible in a penetrating way to a wider social environment that seems to ignore it.

Underlining in principle the importance of theatre education as a basic pedagogical tool capable of enhancing all children's participation in education processes, I set as an ultimate goal of this article the initiation of a discussion on innovative, embodied learning tools that can be developed in the context of cross-curricular teaching of arts subjects<sup>3</sup> and/or a more creative application of physical education so that educators can become more perceptive towards the subjective and cultural particularities as well as the experiential richness of displaced non-native young speakers, by ultimately attempting to transform that kind of knowledge into creative methodologies for the inclusion of migrant/refugee children in their respective school environment.

### **Why with the body? "I hear and forget, see and remember, do and understand"**<sup>4</sup>

The fact that in mixed school classes with non-native speakers among the total body of students – who in any case learn in different styles and at varying paces – the common language of oral communication is minimal (and sometimes even non-existent) frustrates many colleagues. It is also a common realisation that we cannot base our expectations about generating interaction between members of the en-

tire group exclusively on auditory and/or visual input, provided either in combination or separately, as is the case with certain standard practices applied in foreign language teaching where, however, a second common communication language exists in the background. That is actually so because sight and hearing alone may be valuable in providing stimuli, activating memory and raising hypotheses about meaning, but they don't lead to independent, complete and contextualised explanations; and above all, they do not sufficiently support the need for expression of interacting subjects.

However, we all have bodies, which, regardless of their particular anatomical traits, constitute amazing multisensory tools that embody our personalities, carry our experiences and express our perceptions and attitudes through their movements across space and time.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, our bodies, as the best tools for expressing our creativity, can help us invent new multimodal teaching methodologies capable of potentially activating the senses of all our students. In practice, this is what happens whenever, in the framework of the playful activities we develop, we recall, demonstrate and represent the meanings that we want to explain through our movements while composing small acts, which we gradually connect to the respective vocabulary that expresses our oral communication needs.

At the same time, due to their highly entertaining and experiential nature, theatre games – alongside various other dramatisation methods that can be adapted to our particular classroom communication needs – form an ideal tool for initially developing a positive approach towards children, when we aim at building friendly relationships among all group members. As we play, laugh and have fun together, we bond as a whole, cultivate our creativity and imagination and remain open-minded and accepting towards divergence and ambiguity as we explore the multiple options available for the evolution of the stories that we collectively invent, without adopting a logic of value judgment based on linear and absolute concepts in line with a "right" or "wrong" dichotomy.

### **The project's particular historical context: the pandemic amplified the exclusion of refugee teenagers. The confinement within the camp, the immobilisation of the body in lockdown and the difficulty of communicating through screens**

In our case, during the 2020–2021 school year, the adverse public health conditions arising from the COVID-19 outbreak amplified and multiplied the social exclusion that refugee children living in mass accommodation centres had already been



experiencing. Under these circumstances, the prior disruption of education, which is characteristic of many of their biographies, was coupled with the anomaly created by the excessive delay that competent education authorities displayed in hiring staff to teach Greek as a foreign language in schools where reception classes for non-native children had been established.<sup>6</sup> The unschooling of refugee children was further enhanced through a series of consecutive government decrees that restricted, generally and indefinitely, the residents' right to exit accommodation centres where COVID-19 cases had been recorded to protect against further transmission, without however providing any clarifications as to whether that restriction contravened the children's right to access their schools to attend classes. Ultimately, their exclusion from formal education was complete because of the lack of personal equipment and technical infrastructure such as computers, tablets, wireless network, etc. that would allow them to participate in the so-called "tele-education" (i.e. distance learning) programme like any other student in Greece.

Unfortunately, due to the above-mentioned conditions, we were not able to fully implement the Forum Theatre practice – which entails a pause of the action at a specific point before the play ends so that audience members will decide on the development of the story<sup>7</sup> – for the simple fact that we could not present our final result to an audience at all. The most we were allowed to do under the circumstances was to gather and practise with a maximum of 10 persons in total inside a large container, intended as a gathering point for emergencies, which nonetheless also served as our "stage". Therefore, the different story endings were proposed by the "protagonists" themselves and were decided upon after a lot of improvisation that each time evolved into a kind of "experiential consultation" about the preferred versions to be "perfected" for our final composition.

During the entire process, I personally remained consistent in my role as animator, i.e. facilitator (also referred to as "joker" in this type of theatre).<sup>8</sup> The same givens dictated the final video recording of the whole thing with the aim of making some kind of a short film out of it. Below, I will describe the stages we went through until the completion of our project.

### **Initial stimulus: the need for understanding and justice**

At the beginning of fall semester in 2020, some of the teenagers started coming into my office in small groups to inform me about the adversities they were experiencing in their daily interactions within their immediate environment. They told me about various people who offended them in racist ways and asked me to somehow intervene in order for that situation

to come to an end. To better capture their experiences, I set up regular group meetings twice a week. At the beginning of each session, we undertook the "What's new?" activity, as suggested in the context of the Freinet pedagogy, which builds the learning process on aspects of children's real lives and focuses each time on one particular topic of interest.

This kind of introductory activity also constituted some sort of "democracy training", since everyone participating in the conversation circle would learn to actively listen to each other and propose collective solutions. Thus, the teenagers illustrated some of the incidents, recounting how they would become recipients of hostility from their native classmates at school or while boarding the bus to travel from the refugee camp to school every day in addition to revealing various occasions where they felt ignored by their teachers in class. Much to my resentment, they also explained that their classroom was laid out in a way that would actually separate the student body into "ethnic zones" by creating a "trench" between "refugees" and "locals".

Over the next days and after realising that I was listening to them and recording their testimonies carefully, they described in the assembly circle that essentially followed the "What's new?" activity the way in which they were casually treated at the regional public hospital, where – as they explained – the nursing staff mostly didn't take their problems seriously but summed up the examination procedure by recommending that they should take paracetamol for all kinds of health problems. Also, they narrated a shocking incident of visiting a clothing store, where apparently the saleswoman threw them out within seconds and for no reason at all when she realised that they were young refugees.

Their narratives resonated with pain and indignation under the burden of the injustice they had experienced and were mostly accompanied by a painful realisation that the majority of locals in their wider environment viewed them with loathing and contempt. Soon after, however, these racist attitudes and behaviours would come into being before my eyes during the dramatisation phase. Certainly, those emotionally charged accounts troubled me quite a bit in terms of my ability to overturn such entrenched social dynamics and help them in a practical way from my position. On the one hand, what concerned me the most was how to comfort them and lift the weight of their grief and on the other, I strived to figure out a way to stop their daily re-traumatisation caused by the kind of humiliating experiences their wider community put them through, especially in places where I could clearly neither have direct access nor a lasting influence, for instance in healthcare services, school transport or commercial transactions.



The situation presented itself as extremely complex because any clear reference on my part to the repeated racist incidents the children brought back as news from school to the staff who were officially responsible for the smooth running and positive climate of classrooms tended to be taken as a kind of "unsubstantiated" complaint against those specific colleagues. It was perceived as undermining their moral and pedagogical credibility solely on the basis of the children's testimonies, which are traditionally discredited as exaggerations and/or "myths" under the light of the dominant adultist ideology and even more so, when the matter involves "foreign" children, whose communicative competence in Greek is a priori put to question.

Also, given the almost total absence of any independent mechanisms of pedagogical supervision to monitor the inclusion of refugee children in schools and the establishment of an overall welcoming atmosphere in addition to the self-perceived lack of competence of school authorities to deal with racist attitudes and derogatory discriminations in the school environment, my individual attempt to support them and fight head-on against these attitudes appeared in advance to be a lost cause. Therefore, while striving to jointly find solutions for their empowerment, we came up with the idea of this theatrical action plan in order to make the situation visible to their wider social environment, without opening more fronts of asymmetric confrontation that could only make matters worse.

### Methodology development: how we cooperated

At first, I invited the children that had reported the specific incidents to a council meeting, where we discussed the possibility of working on those experiences by preparing a performance with the aim of showing the world what was really happening to them. They liked the idea right from the start, although they did not seem to have a real understanding of the process to be followed or any concrete notion about the expected result, since it would be their first time participating in such a project. So, we entered a phase of "bonding" by arranging two two-hour meetings on a weekly basis. In some sessions we only indulged in theatre games in order to "loosen up our bodies", i.e. free our movement, express our feelings and laugh together with the view to building our group.

To achieve that aim, we engaged in familiarisation activities such as those referred to by Govas (2003), Kouretzis (1991) and MacDonald & Rachel (2001). We thus worked (mainly) on our listening comprehension by doing pantomime and a series of motor activities, memory games and improvisations. For instance, the children really liked the games and exercises in the plenary circle or in groups, where we walked and ran in alternating rhythms stopping at a signal while anyone who lost concentration stepped in the middle and sang and/or danced whatever they chose, or we chased imaginary butterflies and walked while trying not to let our "imaginary overflowing panties" fall off, or we practised our vocabulary both in polite expressions and swearing words in pairs by "swearing politely" and "exchanging polite words rudely", etc.

We preserved this playing-through-theatre process during the next stages – except only for the final one –, but we limited its duration to the warmup stage, which occupied the first half hour of our sessions. Thereafter, our meetings were devoted to developing action scripts based on expressions that the children already knew, many of which had been imprinted in their memories during the initial experience that inspired those scripts. In that second, "productive" part of our session, the children represented faithfully the situation they had experienced, by framing their improvisations with simple words and cliché phrases etched on their memory, for instance: a.1. "It's full!" (on the bus), b.1. "Open your books on page 34." (at school), c.1. "The shop is not for refugees!" (in the clothing store), d.1. "There's nothing wrong with him/her." (at the hospital), etc. Having recorded these very short phrases, we expanded them so as to produce a short script, which could still be easily memorised by the actors. As an





example, the above phrases evolved into sentences such as: a.2. "It's full, there are no seats! Take the next one." (on the bus), b.2. "Well kids, let's see what we have today! Open your books on page 34.", c.2. "Please get out! The shop is not for refugees!", d.2. "There's nothing wrong with him! Come on, you're fine! Take these!" and so on.<sup>9</sup>

By thematically grouping these scattered narratives, we produced four sequences: "On the school bus", which evolves in two different scenes that develop differently, "At school", "At the clothing store" and finally, "At the hospital". After writing down the dialogues and descriptions between sequences, we used the performance text as a reading text in the context of the usual process of staging a play followed by a theatre group. The fact that the children were reading texts the contents of which they already knew since they had produced them themselves made reading significantly easier for them, thus offering a self-empowering sense of achievement.

At this stage we also did several vocal exercises (i.e. oral speech training) in the most entertaining way possible: e.g. in chorus, with a straw along our tongue, only boys, only girls, in a formation of "girls against boys" and vice versa as well as loudly, whispering or singing, etc. The distribution of roles was subject to negotiation, since the "class council" decided upon the roles, which were then gender adapted and allocated based on the children's expressed interest.

In the next phase and after we had already memorised our texts, we began to invest our dialogues

with movement and improvise until we found the right frame – i.e. the optimal shooting angle – for each scene, given that our work would eventually be video recorded. During the farewell circle that took place at the end of our sessions, each teenager would step in the middle and take the floor to repeat the phrases that had been ingrained in him/her. Having completed our preparation, we performed (once again just for us) our play two or three times from beginning to end, before making a final decision about the scenes in order to start filming.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I personally argue that the whole project had only positive results, as it managed to include both the most "studious" children and those who had lost interest in any formal education process. By applying a participatory learning methodology based on libertarian-radical pedagogy principles and enriched with theatre pedagogy techniques in order to cultivate a climate of equality and respect, the teenagers in question attended the rehearsals constantly and participated enthusiastically; they also learned to listen carefully, respect each other's opinions and cooperate. Throughout the entire process, they had 100% equal say in decisions concerning text production and were consulted regarding the invention and distribution of roles. In that framework, the target language was taught as a means of communication via a spiral-constructivist approach and not as an end in itself, aiming at the students' "transformational learning" and – initially – the audience's "consciousness shift".

The benefits that arose from this process were manifold for all those involved: as for the children themselves, I would like to mention first of all the improvement of their language proficiency at the cognitive level, both in Greek and English, since they had to process and expand verbal contents which had already been imprinted in their memory. Secondly, on the emotional level, the fact that they were allowed to express their traumatic experiences and reinterpret them positively by satirising the hostile reality that surrounds them and taking control of the narrative within a new, playful, anti-hierarchical context – where all of them were protagonists – contributed to their moral empowerment, bearing thus a therapeutic effect on their psychology as a whole, which as a matter of fact is particularly important for this multi-burdened age group.

Thirdly, on the social level, it achieved the creation of a youth group that maintains its hope for a better future in the midst of the depressing reality it experiences and remains in friendly contact to the present day. In the end, nine out of the ten

teenagers who regularly participated in the sessions were strengthened in terms of their self-efficacy and maintained their motivation to attend their classes and ultimately achieved better school results. Meanwhile, the whole process offered me the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of their idiosyncrasies, social backgrounds and cultural heritage and therefore, familiarise myself with elements of their history and culture, but also to realise my own limits, attitudes and prejudices while reflecting on my practices, since I had to also act as a "cultural interpreter" for some of their questions in relation to the local community and prevailing conditions.

## Notes

1. Indicatively, I will mention here Dewey, Freinet, Freire, Korczak and Niel as such examples. As Moschos and Kalisora (2019) demonstrate, those pedagogical communication tools foster a cooperative spirit and respect among all team members.
2. According to its inspirer, Augusto Boal (2000), this specific type of theatre transforms "the oppressed" into an artist by maximising the participative nature inherent to this means of expression, since the process of the "Forum" – that is, the marketplace as a space of dissemination of ideas and consultation – presupposes team members negotiating throughout the entire process of designing and performing the meanings that have to be communicated.
3. See Pavlidou (2020) and Tsakoumagkou (2020).
4. Diction attributed to Confucius.
5. See Shusterman (2009).
6. Notably, during the 2020–2021 school year, teachers showed up at the reception classes in secondary schools across Greece no earlier than 11.1.2021.
7. From that point on, the audience is actively involved and shapes the final flow of the story by proposing and performing various versions of its ending.
8. See also MacDonald & Rachel (2001).
9. In a standard foreign language class, that phase of the process would correspond to the framing of listening comprehension with the production of oral speech, embedded within a specific context, and with the subsequent expansion of the corresponding vocabulary.

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