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Mapping of Youth Theatre workshops/organisations in Cyprus

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Abstract

This article describes the main findings of a primary research which was conducted in Cyprus during 2019–2020 and is part of the doctoral dissertation of the author. The purpose of the research was to outline the overall picture of the organisations that were active in Cyprus in the field of Youth Theatre during the years 2017–2020 so that its results could be integrated into the general geographical context that the dissertation examines. The research records the objectives of Youth Theatre programmes, the composition of organisations and the theatre activities that are carried out. In addition, it examines whether these programmes result in the staging of a theatrical performance and to what extent teenagers participate in the various aspects of the process. As a methodological tool, a specially designed questionnaire was used.

Keywords: *Youth Theatre, Cyprus, teenagers, non-formal education*

Introduction

The participation of teenagers in theatre workshops and groups can provide them with a supportive environment where they can express themselves freely and explore their abilities, get to know themselves better and become empowered to make successful transitions to adulthood (Burton, 2002, p. 63). Young people share their own story and use their personal experiences to embody a role. In addition, they are given the opportunity to change

and shape their story according to their emotions and mood, since they know that theatre provides a safe space for dialogue and expression (Vettraino et al., 2017, p. 82). Youth Theatre programmes provide a framework for collaboration between young people, in which they are called upon to manage their emotions, both on a personal level and within the group, while cultivating their emotional maturation (Larson & Brown, 2007, p. 1085).

For the purposes of this research, we we will

adopt the the definition of Youth Theatre used by the National Association of Youth Theatres (NAYT) in the UK, according to which Youth Theatre defines a group or several groups of young people who come together regularly to participate in theatre/drama activities. These groups are led and/or facilitated by experienced/trained staff and the participation of young people is voluntary and outside of statutory education (National Association of Youth Theatres, n.d.).

Youth Theatre

The literature review shows that the term Youth Theatre is not clarified in Cyprus. It might refer to school performances presented by the students themselves or performances by professional theatre groups that visit the secondary schools. Also, the term Youth Theatre is often not differentiated from the term Children's Theatre or Young People's Theatre, but it is used as an umbrella term for Theatre for Young Audiences. According to Grammatas (2014), the term Theatre for Young Audiences is used to define the theatrical activity of professionals who perform plays addressed to young children and teenagers. As highlighted in his article, these performances have a pedagogical use and put emphasis on music and scenery in order for the story to be more comprehensible to the young audience.

The young audience in Cyprus attends performances by professional companies that visit the schools – performances either in the traditional sense or, much less often, using the methodology of theatre in education (TiE). It should be noted that the professional companies need to be primarily approved by the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. The TiE performances deal with topics that are relevant to the children's lives and aim to activate the participation of the audience (Jackson, 1993, p. 5). In addition to this, in Cyprus and Greece the term Youth Theatre seems to be used by various practitioners and theatre professionals who lead theatre groups of young people in non-formal education.

According to Neelands (2008), Youth Theatre is a process that requires the cooperation and dedication of all actors and is directly intertwined with the lives of young people. As he adds, "being with others who have that same kind of restlessness (...) and through youth drama being offered the chance to build a voice and a sense of belonging (...) Through building character, building stories, their own voice develops. This is one of the great qualities of good youth theatre. Also being given permission to be different from other people: being given permission to dream by the people with whom you share your

community, and having something bigger to work towards" (Neelands, 2008).

The research of Hughes & Wilson (2004), conducted in collaboration with the National Association of Youth Theatres, has collected data on the organisations that are active in the field of Youth Theatre in the United Kingdom. The research aimed to explore the impact of participating in Youth Theatre programmes on young people's personal and social development. Moreover, it aimed to record the Youth Theatre programmes implemented by organisations in the United Kingdom, and researchers identified four models of practice in Youth Theatre provision.

The first model was called Theatre/Arts and focused on providing young people with access to professional theatre education. These programmes were not focused on the personal and social development of young people. The second model was called Community and its goal was to promote the reflection and concerns of specific communities in order to foster the development of the community through theatre. The third model, called Youth Arts, aimed to support the personal, social and political development of young people through theatre. Finally, the aim of the fourth model, that is Applied Theatre, was to use theatre as a tool to address specific issues. It did not necessarily aim at creating an aesthetically correct theatrical product (Hughes & Wilson, 2004, p. 62).

Relevant research was also carried out by the National Association for Youth Drama in Ireland during the years 2007–2008, entitled *Centre Stage +10*. The objective of this research was to examine the state of Irish Youth Theatre under the following four general headings: (1) Youth Theatre structures in relation to their funding and resources, (2) Youth Theatre practice and programming, (3) Youth Theatre members and coordinators and (4) young people and the benefits from their participation. The research resulted in five models of Youth Theatre that emerged through the categorisation of researchers, which was based on the key decision maker, the "parent" organisation ultimately responsible for running the youth theatre (such as a professional theatre company), or were classified as "autonomous" (self-governing youth theatres with a voluntary board or committee) (Dunnett, 2009, p. 30). The same research was repeated ten years later in Ireland by the same organisation, with the same objectives and based on the existing theatre models. The main difference identified was that in the intervening years several new youth theatres were created and in many of the existing ones the participation of young people was increased (Dunnett, 2019, p. 7).

Objectives of the research

Based on the literature review, a gap was identified in the research on Youth Theatre in Cyprus. Therefore, field research was carried out by the author in order to collect data on theatre workshops/drama and theatre schools/theatre organisations/theatre and drama institutions (hereinafter referred to as "Youth Theatre Organisations") active in the field of Youth Theatre in Cyprus (in non-formal education). Furthermore, the research aimed to collect information about their programmes addressed to teenagers (aged 11–18). This article is part of a broader research study, which was carried out in the context of the doctoral dissertation of the author and will present only the answers concerning the following questions posed to the participating organisations:

1. How many organisations in Cyprus run Youth Theatre classes and what is the profile of participating teenagers and teachers?
2. What theatre activities are included in the programmes of Youth Theatre Organisations and what methodologies do they use?
3. What are the aims of Youth Theatre programmes?
4. Is it considered necessary to stage a theatrical performance?
5. To what extent and in what ways do teenagers participate in the selection of the play, the stage direction and the promotion of the theatrical performance?

Data collection tools

A specially designed questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was disseminated to the Youth Theatre Organisations via email or by message on their websites and social media. The Youth Theatre Organisations were given a week to complete the questionnaire and return it to the researcher. The questionnaire was structured in three parts. The demographics of Youth Theatres were included in the first part of the questionnaire. The second part consisted of closed-ended questions aimed at collecting information on the operation of the groups. The third part included open-ended questions aimed at recording the views of theatre practitioners based on three factors: (a) the impact of participating in Youth Theatre on young people's personal development, (b) the impact on the development of their interpersonal relationships and (c) the impact on the development of their aesthetics. The use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings and preferences. They answered whatever they liked without being limited or influenced with pre-defined answers (Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou, 2016, p. 91). In addition, through open-ended ques-

tions the individual has the possibility to reflect their own point of view even in more complicated issues (Kyriazi, 1998, p. 128).

It has to be noted that this article will only present the results of the quantitative analysis of the data. The analysis of the open-ended questions, which is inextricably linked to the research, will not be analysed in this article but will be presented later in the dissertation. Moreover, in the dissertation the author will attempt to categorise the organisations into models based on the impact of participating in Youth Theatre on (a) young people's personal development, (b) the development of their interpersonal relationships and (c) the development of their aesthetics.

Sample

A total of 22 Youth Theatre Organisations in Cyprus participated in the research and, according to the data they provided, they were offering Youth Theatre Programmes to teenagers. It should be noted that initially 62 organisations had been identified, however after the researcher's communication with them it was found that 16 of them, due to difficulties they faced, could not activate a Youth Theatre Programme during the years 2017–2020. Furthermore, 5 of them refused to answer the questionnaire, because they considered that they were asked to answer questions related to personal data. The other 19 Youth Theatre Organisations which received the questionnaire and agreed to participate never returned it to the researcher. The Youth Theatre Organisations were identified through a personal search of the author via their websites and social media.

Analysis

The analysis of data was done using Microsoft Excel, followed by a descriptive presentation of all the questions in the questionnaire. For the most important findings, data was presented in charts.

Presentation of results

According to the information supplied by the database, most Youth Theatre Organisations (31.82%) are based in Nicosia District, whereas the fewest are based in Famagusta District (4.55%). Regarding the number of teenagers participating in Youth Theatre programmes, there is an increasing trend of 14% during the 2019–20 school year (355 in total) compared to the 2017–18 school year (in which a total of 312 teenagers participated). The participation of teenagers is also interesting since, as it turned out, the majority are girls (73%). Also, most of the teenagers (41.50%) are aged between 11 to 14 years old, while as they grow older there is a decrease in their participation rate, limited to 31.74% for teenagers between the ages of 15 to 18.

As far as the professional status of the staff of Youth Theatre Organisations is concerned, it was identified that the majority of the sample (71.43%) holds a qualification related to theatre (actors, theatre educators and theatre scholars). Also, there are staff members that hold a degree in primary education, Greek philology and secondary education.

More than 90% of Youth Theatre Organisations answered that they meet with their groups once a week, with an average duration of one hour and thirty minutes. More specifically, 63.64% meet for two hours, 31.82% for an hour and thirty minutes and 4.54% for an hour. In addition, in relation to the activities in which teenagers take part within Youth Theatre programmes, it was identified that all Youth Theatre Organisations include theatre games, concentration exercises, collaboration exercises and improvisation in their programmes. Almost all (21 Youth Theatre Organisations out of 22) teach acting skills, while others include orthophony, singing and physical theatre.

Based on the analysis of the data, it was identified that 9 Youth Theatre Organisations use both educational drama and applied drama as part of their teaching methodology. The sample was given three options for this question. The first one was educational drama, the second was applied drama and the third was the option "other". Educational drama was proposed as it has a pedagogical aim and uses activities inspired by theatre to allow participants to express themselves physically and verbally and collaborate with the other members of their group acquiring social responsibility (Avdi & Hadjigeorgiou, 2007, p. 19). The second option was the use of applied drama, a methodology that uses theatre as social intervention, outside of conventional theatrical environments. In addition, applied drama uses techniques from drama/theatre in education and community theatre to achieve its goals (Nicholson, 2005, p. 2). The third was the "other" option, in which participants could record their own methodology. The answers included in the "other" option were the use of dramatherapy techniques, ancient Greek drama and fairy tales.

Regarding the question about the goals of their programmes, all Youth Theatre Organisations answered that they aim to improve the self-confidence of teenagers. Also, 21 Youth Theatre Organisations responded that they aim to enhance the creative expression of teenagers. 20 of them aim to develop the collaboration skills of the teenagers as well as



teach acting. 19 Youth Theatre Organisations focus on language development, 18 on developing interpersonal relationships between teenagers as well as enhancing their decision making and 9 on developing creative writing.

Also, the sample was asked to state whether they are staging performances during or at the end of the school year. The school year starts between September and October and extends until June of the following year. According to their responses, all Youth Theatre Organisations in the sample offer a full year-round provision and stage performances as part of their programmes. 59% of Youth Theatre Organisations stage at least one performance, while 22% also stage a second performance. Furthermore, on this subject, the teachers replied on whether they consider it necessary to stage a performance or not. The majority of Youth Theatre Organisations (68%) responded that they consider it necessary for the following reasons: "The performance is an integral part of the whole process and the culmination of the work done in groups of teenagers during the school year", "Children must be able to interact with the world and have a specific goal; to convey the message they want each time", "They show everything they learn during the school year. They also learn how important it is to be consistent and participate in the rehearsals. They learn to take on responsibilities. The performance is also important to show parents the work that has been done during the school year" and "Communicating with the audience is very important for teenagers as it empowers them and strengthens their self-confidence".

The majority of the organisations in the sample

(15) replied that their performance or performances are not always based on existing theatrical texts. In some cases, the group itself composes the dramatic text that will be performed. In order for the researcher to collect more information on this, Youth Theatre Organisations were asked to indicate the techniques or activities that they use as a starting point for the composition of a dramatic text. The question was in the form of multiple choice and, therefore, 15 Youth Theatre Organisations answered that they use the technique of improvisation, 12 the practice and techniques of creative writing, whereas 11 Youth Theatre Organisations choose the method of devised theatre and 6 the method of process drama. In devised theatre, the dramatic text is created through the experimentation of a group, which chooses to explore theatrically an idea, a thought or a topic that interests them with the aim of performing it on stage (Pigkou-Repousi, 2019, p. 40). On the contrary, in process drama, the teacher and the participants work together to create an imaginary dramatic world in which they explore a problem, situation or topic that interests them for the benefit of the participants and without the aim of staging a theatrical performance in front of an audience (O'Neill, 1995, p. 152).

Youth Theatre Organisations involve young people in the decision-making aspects of theatre programming in various ways. According to the data obtained, the choice of the play that will be performed is collective work. 68% Youth Theatre Organisations answered that professionals and teenagers decide together on the play. 73% of them stated that teenagers participate in the promotion of the performance by posting on their personal social media accounts, sharing flyers, creating and sharing videos and even organising outdoor events in order to attract the public. Statistics showed that teenagers are not involved in finding funds for staging the performance (86%). It should be noted that teenagers pay monthly fees to the Youth Theatre Organisations in order to participate in their programmes.

73% of Youth Theatre Organisations offer teenagers the opportunity to get involved in directing the play. As they stated: "Teenagers come with suggestions about directing and these suggestions are always accepted. So, teenagers become assistant directors", "During improvisation, teenagers are free to direct their scene based on their role but the main stage direction of the play is up to the professionals", "Every suggestion is worth listening to and being discussed" and "This is most likely to be done via group discussions".

Regarding the evaluation that follows after the end of the performance, it is identified that 78% of Youth Theatre Organisations evaluate the performance through feedback questions and group

discussion. As they mentioned: "There is a closing meeting that includes a discussion about the teenagers' experience being on stage and after completing the performance", "Feedback and debriefing" and "Discussing after the end of the show about the whole experience. The discussion is mostly about reminding teenagers that it is more important to enjoy the journey that theatre offers".

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to identify the Youth Theatre Organisations that were active in Cyprus during the years 2017–2020, record their theatrical activities, the methodologies they follow and their goals and examine whether their theatre programmes result in the staging of a performance. According to the answers of the sample, the above purpose was achieved and an indicative map of Youth Theatre Organisations in Cyprus was created.

As it turned out, there is an increasing participation in theatre classes by teenagers aged between 11 to 14 years old. The members of the staff in Youth Theatre Organisations are professionals or hold some sort of theatre-related qualifications. Also, their programmes include a variety of activities and share common goals in terms of the influence of theatre in enhancing the self-confidence of teenagers and the impact on their personal and social development. With regard to the methodologies used by Youth Theatre Organisations, data does not allow us to carry out an in-depth analysis but testifies that there are no strict methodologies used. Professionals choose their methodology based on the goals and objectives of their programmes.

The staging of a performance is considered important by the staff of Youth Theatre Organisations. By participating in a performance teenagers express themselves creatively and apply in practice what they were taught during the school year. In addition, the performance does not only have pedagogical goals but is also the highlight of the completion of theatrical creation, which requires communication, a sense of responsibility, cooperation, mutual understanding (Grammatas, 2003, p. 489). Similar is Richardson's view (2015, p. 15), according to which the process that precedes the staging of a theatrical performance is just as important as the product for two reasons: Firstly, the involvement of teenagers in theatre activities aims to achieve the goal of youth theatre, which is the development of teenagers personally and socially. Secondly, the staging of a theatrical performance then follows to complete the process. In addition, during the preparation and staging of the performance, participants use their bodies to express themselves and tell stories (Schechner, 2013, p. 28).

The involvement of teenagers in decision-making about the play that they will pursue, the stage direction and promotion of the performance appears to be collective work that requires the collaboration between teenagers and professionals. A Youth Theatre should be focused on action, both on and off stage, it ought to give voice and space to teenagers to create and work with a sense of responsibility to the group as a whole (Neelands, 2008).

Based on the analysis of the data, some limitations have emerged in the present research. To our knowledge, no prior studies have collected any data concerning Youth Theatre Organisations in Cyprus. In addition to this, the information collected about Youth Theatre Organisations was identified through the author's personal research on the web and social media pages of the Organisations. Therefore, all collected information had to be further investigated in order to determine whether it was valid or not, so this process was time-consuming and delayed the dissemination of the questionnaire. Moreover, the fact that some Youth Theatre Organisations delayed the completion of the questionnaire was another difficulty that had to be overcome by the researcher.

Taking into account all the above limitations of the research, the data collected cannot be considered exhaustive, since there are aspects of this research that can be further investigated. However, they can be a starting point for future research with the aim of making a wider effort to collect more data and information on Youth Theatre Organisations in Cyprus. What we can certainly argue is that there is a large community in Cyprus that deals with Youth Theatre, who seems to lay a solid foundation for the subsequent development of this genre and works consciously so that more and more teenagers will participate in theatre groups.

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