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Student theatre performance in high schools in Cyprus

Framework, process and outcome

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This dissertation, which was supervised of Dr Andri Ch. Constantinou, Professor of Theatre Studies at the School of Education and Social Sciences, Frederick University, was defended by Maria Tzovenaki in Nicosia, Cyprus in September 2024. The research was conducted in five high schools in one district of Cyprus between October 2021 and April 2022. The study examined whether theatre productions in the participating schools were primarily a pedagogical act and process, or if their main purpose was to produce a polished final performance. Specifically, it investigated the issues faced by educators when preparing student theatre performances and managing the various tasks involved in staging their productions. The findings document the current state within the examined framework and contribute to improving performance organisation and avoiding choices that might hinder the productive experience of the student ensemble members.

Research questions

- What is the purpose of school theatre performances for adolescents in Cyprus?
- Under what conditions is the play chosen and the team formed?
- What role do educators play, and how much freedom do they give students?
- Does the school administration support the overall effort?
- Is there collaboration between the educator responsible and others within or outside the school community?

The significance of this research lies in emphasising the importance of the preparation process rather than just the outcome. Participants from the school community can benefit in many ways. This is the first empirical study of school theatre performances in Cyprus. The researcher aims to contribute to in-

ternational drama pedagogy research by presenting various models for organising student performances. This will enable educators interested in, or already involved in, this field to deepen their knowledge and select the model that is most beneficial and productive for all contributors.

The study was structured into three phases: (a) interviews with five educators who directed student performances; (b) observation of rehearsals of four theatre groups; and (c) the implementation of a drama pedagogy programme within one of the groups, to determine whether the programme helped its members prepare for their performance. A qualitative methodology was employed to analyse the subjective attitudes and behaviours of those involved in the production using various research tools, such as interviews with educators and students, observation of rehearsals and the researcher's reflective journal. All the research data was entered into Taguette, a qualitative data analysis software, where it was coded and organised into a thematic map containing nine themes. These themes were made up of categories that were grouped based on relevance. Thematic analysis was conducted in six stages in an attempt to answer the research questions.

The main conclusions of the thesis are summarised as follows: The formation of the group through auditions and lengthy rehearsals, the involvement of theatre professionals in some schools and the large sums spent on venue rentals, stage sets and costumes suggest that the main objective of the student performances in the participating high schools was to create a polished artistic product, rather than focusing on the process itself. However, results from other research conducted abroad show that the performance process is equally significant to the final product. It is important to pursue both a quality outcome and a quality experience for the students simultaneously.

Although not observed in all schools, collaboration between educators and theatre professionals can be productive. It reduces errors and makes use

of theatrical techniques to prepare students. Typically, the preparation process focuses on the educators rather than the students, with the educators directing the process and thus limiting the children's initiative. However, many scholars argue that the opposite should be true. It has also been noted that implementing theatre exercises and games in two schools made the process more enjoyable, bringing the students closer to the characters they portrayed. This was demonstrated by the drama pedagogy programme conducted with one of the groups that participated in the research. For this reason, the training of educators in drama pedagogy is essential.

It should be noted that the Pancyprian School Theatre Competitions organised by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation and the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth often cause anxiety and tension among team members. Indeed, rules are sometimes broken to give certain schools an advantage. The pursuit of distinction in theatre competitions at all costs leaves no room for inclusive pedagogy. It is pedagogically appropriate to select students with a range of abilities and utilise the diversity within the school environment, as this improves outcomes for students.

At the same time, the importance of exploratory learning in the preparation process is emphasised, with students encouraged to experiment and discover knowledge under the guidance of educators. Children should actively participate in every stage of the process, from selecting the play and adapting or writing it to forming the team, setting up the stage, performing, creating sets and costumes, collecting props and managing the music. This approach ensures experiential or empirical learning. According to this pedagogy, educators must place students at the centre of the process, giving them considerable room for active participation so that they can experience the theatre performance as their own, without dictating what they should do.

Finally, in addition to suggestions for improving the organisation of the Pancyprian School Theatre Competitions and the preparation of student performances, recommendations for future research are also provided.

Maria Tzovenaki was born in Athens and graduated from the Department of Modern Greek Philology at the School of Philosophy of the University of Crete, Greece, in 2002. She also completed a postgraduate programme in Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at the University of Cyprus in 2007 and worked on her doctoral dissertation at Frederick University. She is currently studying at the Department of Theatre Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. Since 2003, she has worked as a language and literature teacher in both private and public secondary education schools in Cyprus, taking on the organisation and directorial supervision of student theatre performances in middle and high schools across the island. For the past three years, she has also taught Greek at the special education unit of the Linopetra High School in Limassol, participating in theatrical activities that included children with special needs alongside students from other school classes.