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“Theatre/Drama and Inclusive Education” Highlights from the International Conference in Athens

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The International Conference “Theatre/Drama and Inclusive Education”¹ was held in Athens from 21 to 23 March 2025 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the “it could be me – it could be you” programme and the successful conclusion of the “Theatre Makes Politics” initiative. The conference aimed to provide an international, interdisciplinary platform for the

exchange of pedagogical, artistic and socio-political practices and research in the fields of inclusive pedagogy and the applied performing arts. It also sought to promote the values of equality and justice by championing inclusive education regardless of identity, vulnerability, or ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic background.



Amid the difficult educational reality we are experiencing in public schools, the conference was a real oasis for us. It is a reality in which teachers, despite having limited resources, try to pave the way for inclusion, often encountering resistance and many obstacles. In this oasis, we met people from all over the world: a vibrant gathering of motivators, artists, theatre professionals and educators.

During the three-day conference, there were 7 keynote speeches, 30 workshops, 55 research paper presentations, 9 working groups and discussion panels, and 7 artistic events (hard to believe, but true!). We would like to present some of the conference's highlights as we experienced them.

The first keynote speech was delivered by the captivating John O'Toole, an iconic figure who had come all the way from Australia. His speech was a stark reminder of the fact that most of us are trapped in an educational system based on a dualistic approach of "right" and "wrong", as predetermined in each subject, and on some kind of fixed "proper" behaviour. This system fails to promote the development of imagination as well as social and emotional skills. In our country, this system unfortunately downgrades art education in schools by reducing teaching hours and abolishing courses.

Another impressive speaker was Kostis Papaioannou, who, in his keynote speech, talked about the role and responsibility of teachers in a world of utter chaos. How much do we concern ourselves with issues of fear, anger and hatred that arise inside and outside the classroom? Are we looking for new ways to deal with them? Are we alert to what is happening around us? The speech could be titled: *If you want to be called a teacher.*

Finally, Kostas Magos gave a highly interesting speech on intercultural education. He informed

us about the policies related to the goal of inclusive education, as well as how to avoid pitfalls and achieve this important objective.

One of the workshops that took place was titled "We all can... Supporting Diversity Through Enhancing the General Self-confidence of Adolescents in Secondary Education". Led by Aikaterini Asimidou, Antonis Lenakakis and Angelos Souliotis, the workshop involved exercises to help us get to know each other and express ourselves with lots of music and movement. We worked together to present a text in our own and personal ways. The important part was finding one's own unique way!

In addition, the workshop, "Devising as a Process of Inclusion and Developing Group Harmony", led by the amazing Sanja Krsmanović-Tasić, exceeded our expectations. Drawing on her many years of experience in theatre education, she guided us on a surreal yet realistic, imaginary yet rational journey through place and time – and all by the sole means of a newspaper!

In the workshop "Codes Under the Shadows", Aglaia Naka and Christos Rachiotis explored everyday situations involving the alternation of light and darkness and visibility and invisibility. Using two balls (one representing light and the other representing darkness), a variety of exercises were created to promote awareness of human rights, respect for diversity and the development of emotional intelligence and empathy.

The workshop "Who Was My Granny", presented by Sunčica Milosavljević, Nataša Milojević, Mladen Brekić and Sara Prodanović, showcased a creative drama approach to analysing family histories with an emphasis on female ancestry. This method was developed in Serbia and France with the aim of promoting women to take action within

their communities. By studying the biographies of female ancestors, the workshop aimed to encourage young people to take an interest in history. It is important to remember that theatre and education both aim to highlight and utilise cultural heritage so as to strengthen social cohesion.

In the workshop titled “Elements of Applied Theatre and Technique by Ivana Chubbuk: 12 Tools in Drama Pedagogy on Examples of Scenes from Plays by A. P. Chekhov”, Arma Tanović Branković developed a training programme based on the tools and techniques of Augusto Boal’s applied theatre, the work of drama educator Ivana Chubbuk and the Stanislavski method. Using these tools, she explored the way characters can be personalised and the development of awareness of one’s actions, taking a deeply interdisciplinary approach that incorporated scenes from Chekhov’s plays.

In the workshop, “Where is mum? – Applying Drama for Gender Equality Education”, Martha Katsaridou and Koldo Vío explored how theatre and drama can promote gender equality education. The way in which humans create and interpret meaning through language and imagination helps us to better understand ourselves and our environment. Starting with a children’s book on discrimination and gender stereotypes, we became co-researchers aiming to highlight inequalities and promote transformative

thinking and social change. The workshop was held as part of the Erasmus+ programme “Equality Street”.

And just when we thought we had seen and done everything, we entered a presentation room and realised there was still more to give and take! The presentations comprised opinion pieces, research, examples of good practice, teaching proposals and artistic activities – an incredible source of inspiration! First, we will refer to the 8th session, which took place on Sunday under the general title “Intercultural Performing Arts Practices for Inclusive Communities” and involved a journey from Italy to India, China, the USA and, finally, Ireland. We will focus on China (have they really come so far?) and the exceptional William Yip. After bringing us back to the here and now with an amazing quick exercise, he showed us how the integration of theatre and drama education in remote schools in China bridges the educational and emotional gaps troubling both children – whom he calls “left-behind children” – and their teachers. By promoting inclusion, creativity and empathy, these interventions address systemic inequalities while empowering marginalised communities. William Yip has convinced us that theatre in education can transform human lives, and he will probably convince you too if you start following him and take a look at his work!





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Moreover, in the working group and discussion panel entitled “Identities, Interculturality and Performativity: Challenges, Contradictions and Reflection”, coordinated by Despoina Karakatsani, participants from various educational and scientific fields examined the following topics: the impact of dual identities on the academic success of migrant children; the role of education in times of social cohesion crises; the “woke agenda” and the “anti-woke” ideology in relation to human rights and intercultural education. The ways in which theatre in education and anti-woke views exert influence on intercultural educational practices were also explored.

Coordinated by Giorgos Moschos, the working group and discussion panel “Theatre Education in Prisons: Limits, Challenges, Perspectives” discussed the importance of theatre and the performing arts in prisons, with the participation of Dora Katsamori. It is now undeniable that educational activities for prisoners can play a decisive role in helping them to develop skills such as teamwork and resilience, as well as motivating them to redefine the value of life in the suffocatingly difficult reality they experience. The issues that should be taken into account when implementing theatrical activities in prisons were also discussed. Based on the questions raised for

discussion, it was suggested, among other things, that educators should see and treat the people in front of them as human beings and not as “criminals”, and not dwell on their pasts, as they are simply their students.

In addition to the above, various events that followed the main speeches provided food for thought, such as the stand-up comedy show “Fine!”, performed by the talented actress Manal Awad. Using humour, she addresses difficult questions such as: What is it like for a woman to leave Palestine as a refugee and try to start a new life in Greece? How does it feel when this situation is presented to you in the form of stand-up comedy, while you are simultaneously aware of the horror of it? Truly disarming!

Another intelligently devised, surprising and moving event was the theatrical performance based on Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “Think of Others”, which was designed by students of the Experimental Music School of Pallini with the participation of students from the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of the Peloponnese and with the support of UNIMA Hellas.

All in all, it was three days filled with knowledge and experiences, as well as fun! On one occasion, hundreds of people from all over the world came



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together to dance in a spontaneous street Zumba session! For the conference finale, we enjoyed a delightful and innovatory musical evening entitled “Our Voices”, featuring Angeliki Toubanaki and the String Theory choir, aptly followed by songs and dances performed by the children of Pallini Music School.

In conclusion:

If the conference had a colour, it would be yellow like the sun!

If it had a feeling, it would be hope, because we all felt hopeful about a better education and, by extension, a better world!

If it were a song, it would be “This Bitter Earth / On the nature of daylight” by Dinah Washington and Max Richer. There’s a verse that says it all:

But while a voice
 Within me cries
 I’m sure someone may answer my call
 And this bitter earth, ooh
 May not, oh, be so bitter after all

Photos by Nikos Govas, Christos Rachiotis and UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

Note

1. For more information about the 2025 International Conference “Theatre/Drama & Inclusive Education” organised by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network in Athens, visit: <https://theatroedu.gr/en/What-we-do/International-Conferences/International-Conference-2025/Conference-2025>

Georgia Antoniou has been a maths teacher since 2002. In 2009 she was assigned to a public school. After initially focusing on preparing students for national exams, she realised that there was a lack of activities centred on fostering the children's emotional development and social skills, which drove her to create a school drama group. In 2019–2020, she participated in the "Theatre in the New School" programme by the National Theatre of Greece. After that, she took part in the National Theatre of Greece's "Teachers' Academy" (project manager: Sofia Vgenopoulou) for two years (2020–2022). She has attended numerous seminars from the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-GR) and actively participates in the "it could be me – it could be you" programme. She believes that teaching art in schools can help children to understand the value of diversity and to learn how to express themselves creatively.

Anastasia Lazaraki is an English language teacher with extensive experience in both public and private education. She has participated in numerous professional seminars covering subjects such as teaching, environmental education, educational technology, human rights and drama in education. She has curated and directed school theatre productions and participates as a trainer in European Erasmus+ programmes for educators and students. Her aim is to utilise drama pedagogically to enhance inclusion within the school community.

Evgenia Zagoura is a physical education teacher at Mandouki Primary School in Corfu, Greece. From 2016 to 2023, she was the Local Coordinator of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) in Corfu and, from 2021 to 2023, she was the President of the TENet-Gr Board of Directors. She coordinated the Corfu Theatre Forum group of TENet-Gr in a performance titled *And our Cherry Garden is Wonderful*, which aimed to inform and raise awareness of environmental issues. An active member of the Adults' Workshop in Corfu, she has also worked as a workshop facilitator for children and young people at the Municipal Regional Theatre of Corfu. She has designed and implemented theatre in education programmes and theatre performances in both formal and informal educational contexts. She is a founding member of the theatre group DOCs Theatre, which specialises in researching and experimenting with documentary and devised theatre techniques. In Corfu, she has also worked as a workshop facilitator for children and young people at the Municipal Regional Theatre of Corfu. She has designed and implemented theatre in education programmes and theatre performances in both formal and informal educational contexts. She is a founding member of the theatre group DOCs Theatre, which specialises in researching and experimenting with documentary and devised theatre techniques.