



ISBN: 978-960-9529-05-1

# Θέατρο & παραστατικές τέχνες στην εκπαίδευση: Ουτοπία ή Αναγκαιότητα;

## Theatre/Drama & Performing Arts in Education: Utopia or Necessity?

Επιμέλεια: Μπέττυ Γιαννούλη, Μάριος Κουκουνάρας-Λιάγκης  
Edited by Betty Giannouli, Marios Koukounaras-Liagkis

Αθήνα, 2019

 Πανελλήνιο Δίκτυο για το  
Θέατρο στην Εκπαίδευση  
μέλος του Διεθνούς Οργανισμού για το Θέατρο στην Εκπαίδευση (IDEA)

 Hellenic Theatre/Drama  
& Education Network  
member of International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA)

## Are You In? – Theatre in Education for Raising Awareness About BULLYING<sup>1</sup>

Lilla Lendvai, Zsófia Jozifek



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### ΔΙΑΒΑΣΤΕ ΤΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΤΩ

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### Abstract

Our twenty-month long research project, which began in September 2016, addressed the topic of bullying, with a special focus on youth communities: the school classes. Our aim was to measure and assess the impact of TiE activities mainly focusing on the bystander attitude, behaviour and common responsibility.

The research is considered to be a quasi-experiment, since the researchers and the observation were built on the everyday practice of a TiE company. We used quantitative tools (student questionnaires) and qualitative methods (teacher interviews, facilitator interviews, on the spot observation), involved a control group assessment and collected data before the TiE performance and one week after it. We measured 35 TiE activities, involving 70 classes, more than 2000 students and 45 teachers.

The research has proven that bringing TiE activities to school communities is important and effective in exploring and bringing up phenomena and cases that were hidden before or kept in secret. Processing such events could start after the TiE performances in the classes, together with the help of the teachers, when the latter were open and sensitive enough to address the issue. Possible solutions were searched for; TiE could help to evoke in the community the need for work on the problem.

The project was supported by Erasmus+ Youth, Strategic Partnership programmes.

**Key words:** *TiE, drama, bullying, cyberbullying, inclusion*

### 1. Introduction

*“Inclusive, good-quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies.”* Desmond Tutu

In our quickly changing and globalised world we often focus on individual assertiveness, but we tend to forget about the importance of functional communities and tolerant environments where one can feel safe and supported. To be more precise, we want to emphasise the relevance of those in theory, but when it comes to practice, we face many difficulties and lack the tools and patterns to facilitate young people. In order to create groups that include the active participation of everyone, accepting the diversity of personalities is key, regardless of physical appearance, interests, religion, race, economic background and culture.

Our twenty-month long project, which began in September 2016, addressed the topic of bullying with a special focus on youth communities. The research was part of an international strategic partnership project, in which there was collaboration aiming at innovation in drama methods amongst the partner organisations: CEDEUM (SR), TheatrEtc (CY), Sigma Art (RO).

These organisations work through non-formal education and drama/theatre methods but have different approaches. Nyitott Kör Egyesület from Hungary is active in the field of delivering Theatre in Education (TiE) performances to school communities. We work together with one class at a time.

We consider our work a process of Game-Theatre-Education, which guides the participants through an experiential activity, focusing on a particular social problem and providing a safe zone for the expression of thoughts, feelings and experiences. Together, we enter into a game that emerges to be a performative act, through which contextual learning happens. The topics of our performances come from classic plays, contemporary plays and other literary products, improvisations, tales, real life stories, news, songs, movies, etc.

The current research focused on assessing the impact of such activities that are orientated towards social inclusion and raising awareness about bullying; in this light, we observed two TiE performances of the organisation. The Nerd was created for high school communities before the frame of the project was created, which in the context of Hungary is for 14-19 year-old students. Starting with the observation of the Nerd, we elaborated the research methodology. After gaining experience from the observation and mapping its results, we created a new TiE performance for a younger age group, focusing on cyberbullying. The Body-Image-Presenters was performed for 13-14 year-old students' classes and was assessed by using a similar research methodology.

In the following paragraph, a brief description of the observed programmes is provided:

The Nerd is a Theatre in Education performance which focuses on group exclusion and on being an 'outsider'. The main character of the drama is Niki, a 16 year-old student from a small town of Hungary (Földvár). She is a hard-working person, does well at school and is excellent at horse riding. The headteacher likes her. One of her classmates makes fun of her achievements and interests on a regular basis. The reactions and behaviour of the class are determined by the participants, who become spect-actors of the activity by stepping in the roles of Niki's classmates. The president of the school, the headteacher, the bully and Niki's father are played by the actor-teachers of the performance. The main questions of the programme are: How is responsibility viewed by the bystanders, who observe the harassment from outside? What are the consequences of the observers remaining passive? Is this kind of passivity considered to be activity, and, if yes, does it reduce harassment or, on the contrary, does it strengthen it? Where is the limit of the exclusion, the point at which observers feel the need to take action?

The Body-Image-Presenters is a Theatre in Education performance based on the play *Girls Like That* (by Evan Placey), which presents a story of a class from a Canadian elite Grammar School. The students of the local context use the popular CYBER application to exchange text and media content privately and in groups. CyberDee, a trending YouTuber-detective receives a video message about a school fight. He starts investigating in order to inform his followers about the extreme but seemingly common case. He meets Laura, the girl whose phone number appeared at the end of the video. Following the narration of hers, the story reveals itself: a naked photo of Scarlett was spread online throughout the whole school after Russel, the coolest guy of the class, begged her to send it to him. Moreover, Russel has a girlfriend from class, Kate. Scarlett was never really included in the girls' class group. Laura feels she needs to be friends with Kate if she wants to be cool. The fifth character is Jay, a shy boy from class who plays in the same team as Russel. The performance mainly focuses on the actions of Laura and Jay, who stand in the middle of the class hierarchy. How can we support the weak, the victims and the harmed ones if this means losing some of our popularity?

The project in which the current research was carried out – through the innovation of applied drama and theatre methodologies – aims to facilitate young people to be conscious about the increasing issues of bullying and cyberbullying, to provide effective activities for the prevention and intervention of bullying in schools and youth groups, and to support teachers, educators and youth leaders in raising awareness of the importance of inclusive and functional communities. We can imagine many different further approaches and innovations to shape the attitude of young people to build a more tolerant, sensitive, empathic and balanced society and are looking forward to debating and discussing our ways of working on the topic.

## **2. Theoretical background**

The international research on bullying can be divided into four major periods (Smith, 2011). (1) Origins, 1970-1988: researches initiated independently of one another, with findings that are still relevant today (e.g. Olweus, Smith, Morita, Craig & Pepler). (2) Establishing a research programme, 1989-1990: the systematic study of bullying commenced and an increasing number of countries carried out research in the field (e.g. Scotland, Wales, the United States, Canada, Australia). (3) An established international research programme, 1990-2004: research conducted in different countries began to interconnect. Scientific interest in the topic boomed in many European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal), then in Asia and throughout the world. (4) Cyberbullying, from 2004 onwards: following the rapid technological advances of the 2000s, the online space increasingly appeared as another scene for school bullying. As intimidating behaviour moved to another space, scientists addressed new questions and directed their attention to bullying in the cyberspace, bullying via electronic devices. In Hungary, however, scientific interest towards the topic emerged only at a relatively later time. The first research into the matter was carried out by Erika Figula in 2004 in the Szabolcs-Szatmár County. Between that time and nowadays, only a maximum of 15 well-known or less known researches have been carried out on this topic in Hungary, reaching a peak in 2009. Research endeavours focused on the situation in the capital city (Mayer, 2009), on the national

situation (Hajdú & Sáska, 2009) and on the situation in certain regions (e.g. Figula, 2004; Buda, 2009). By now, collective knowledge of the topic has been enriched with data in connection with the prevalence of the phenomenon, and some investigations have had a closer look at it in connection with several different pedagogical aspects as well.

Hungarian and international researchers collected data from all levels of the human ecological model, a well-known interpretation framework of researching and understanding school bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The phenomenon of aggression and bullying is interpreted at the level of the individual (Figula, 2004; Muñoz, 2013; Dailey, Frey, & Walker, 2015; Simon, Zerinváry, & Velkey, 2015), the family (Patterson, Cohn, & Kao, 1989; Chan, 2006; Margitics, Figula, Pauwlik, & Szatmári, 2010), peers (Craig & Pepler, 1995; DeBruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Yamasaki & Nishida, 2009), the school (Pinheiro, 2006; Paksi, 2009; Buda, 2009; Hajdú & Sáska, 2009; Nagy, Körmendi, & Pataki, 2013), or society (Császi, 2002; Pinheiro, 2006; Moore, Jones, & Broadbent, 2008; Hajdú & Sáska, 2009). The interaction (mesosystem) between the different levels (microsystems) has great significance; therefore, apart from describing the inner functioning of each level, it is also essential to interpret their interrelations. Accordingly, the expectations of different significant people in an individual's life often diverge from one another, so it could occur that certain types of behaviour are against the norms of one environment, but are accepted in another. This can create conflicts between the environment and the individual, e.g. the school and the student, which often happens in the case of disadvantaged students.

Many Hungarian studies concentrating on the level of school (e.g. Buda, 2009; Hajdú & Sáska, 2009; Nagy et al. 2013) approached the question of the class climate and the school climate in connection with aggression and bullying from the students' point of view, studying for instance friendship, the learning climate, attitudes to school or respect for one another. Research conducted to also find out what climate teachers perceive (e.g. Paksi, 2009; Hajdú & Sáska, 2009; Simon et al., 2015; Dóczy-Vámos, 2016), tried to map, for instance, mutual care between colleagues, leadership behaviour or satisfaction with student-teacher relationship and the quality of teaching. We have found relatively few Hungarian studies which collect (Hajdú & Sáska, 2009), even fewer which systematise and analyse (Simon et al., 2015; Dóczy-Vámos, 2016) teachers' solutions to case handling. Furthermore, all but one research – even those that analyse both teachers' and students' viewpoints simultaneously – collect data from different schools. Even the ones that made an effort to ask the teachers who actually teach the students of the research, never study an entire school, but select classes, students and teachers from a number of schools. There is only one case study focusing on one school as a social unit and studying the phenomenon and the actions taken in that special organisation (Dóczy-Vámos, 2016). Unfortunately, it concentrates only on one institution and this fact does not allow for comparison.

Overall, it can be stated that the phenomenon of school violence and bullying is present in Hungary, but it is undeservingly under-represented in research, as teachers have difficulties in handling and preventing the different situations. Research is at an infantile level, way behind what is happening in the international sphere. There is no real cooperation between research groups, which results in isolated, methodologically not allied explorations. During almost the last two decades, investigations have been adopting a quantitative approach to school violence and bullying. It is time to turn to a more qualitative cognition, as it is important to investigate the functioning of social groups and to work with violence and bullying appearing in a single organisation (Dóczy-Vámos, 2016). The research presented in this study follows this rather sociocultural viewpoint.

### 3. Aim

The aim of our research has been to gain a complex understanding of the possible effects of Theatre in Education performances as interventions for school classes regarding bullying (attitudes, behaviour, school and class context).

In this research we seek to answer that what are the possible effects of a class-wide Theatre in Education performance regarding bullying. In order to answer our broad research question, we have employed a mixed-method approach for an impact assessment as a natural experiment. Our methodology is described in detail in the following section.

### 4. Methodology

The research was planned based on the methodology of impact assessment, which is an evidence-based method that assesses whether a certain intervention met certain goals for a certain target group. When working with this approach, we take into consideration that some indirect and unintended impacts may also

arise aside from the direct and intended impacts. Our research may be categorised as a natural experiment, because we integrated it into the everyday work of an organisation and we examined the implementation of its activities in the natural environment of the schools and the classes involved (Sági & Széll, 2015). These particularities created a few barriers to the research, about which we are going to talk later in the framework of the summary. In order to sufficiently reveal the impacts and their contexts and dynamics, we applied a mixed methodological approach. Therefore, the quantitative analysis was also supported by qualitative data collection, with a test group and a control group, while data was collected before and after the envisaged intervention. We also took the classroom ecology into consideration as an analysis unit, and the school climate as an important variable, which are both suggested by Pryce & Frederickson (2013) for researchers in this field, based on examining numerous papers about bullying. At the beginning of the research, we carried out a preliminary examination and we tested the planned tools to find adequate techniques for the testing period, which lasted until 2018. At the first five tested performances of *The Nerd*, we formed those frames by which we would later test the following 15 performances of the same play. Afterwards, the actor-teachers and directors created a new TiE performance, entitled *Body-Image-Presenters*, which was meant to focus more on cyberbullying. Five performances also belonged to the preliminary examination period, while later we tested 10 performances until 2018, with the method we will subsequently describe in detail.

Regarding the structure of the research, before the planned intervention (Theatre in Education “TiE” performance) data collectors conducted a semi-structured interview with the teacher about the special characteristics of the class and asked the students to fill out a questionnaire both in the test group and in the control group. This was followed by the intervention in the test group, where two data-recording observers were present, who observed the behaviour of the students, the implementation of the workshop and its perceptible impact, and its reception by the group, supported by a structured aspect list. Afterwards, the same people recorded a semi-structured interview with the actor-teachers about their opinion of the performance and their impression of the group. One week after the workshop, the data recorders returned to the class and recorded a second semi-structured interview with the teacher, this time about the post-life of the performance, the impact on the group and the questions raised since then. The students completed the second questionnaire both in the test group and in the control group. The teachers and the participating students’ parents signed a consent form before the performances. The same data recorders recorded the interviewees who carried out the observation and the completion of the questionnaires in order to increase the focus of the observations; however, this was not always possible, as the group of volunteers and occasional data recorders were challenging to organise.

## **5. Results**

Both *The Nerd* and the *Body-Image-Presenters* are about the topic of bullying, nevertheless their focus and the way they address the issue are dissimilar. In the case of *The Nerd* the focus was on the victim and on taking responsibility, while the *Body-Image-Presenters* did not have a clear focus on bullying. Therefore, in the latter case gender stereotypes, sexism, relationship to sexuality and cyberbullying also came up. However, the results showed many common characteristics, which we present according to the following aspects: direct effects of applying the Theatre in Education methodology, attitudes towards the actors of bullying, context, change of attitudes and presence of teachers, gender stereotypes and expectations.

Direct effects of applying TiE appeared immediately after the performances, in the interviews and questionnaires. We can establish that the plays brought cases of bullying to the surface, students talked to the teachers about unrevealed problems and a common search for solutions could start. In the post-performance interviews with teachers, they told that shy students became more open and active, expressing their opinions more bravely in front of others, and as an impact of the activity, previously excluded students were more involved in common tasks with the rest of the group, while in some cases members of the group volunteered to work together with an “outsider” student. Teachers reported that the *Body-Image-Presenters* made students more aware that the internet was “not a game”. *Body-Image-Presenters* was most effective in the context of a group where physical fights and aggressive verbal communication were present on a daily basis, and the group felt the story was about them. From the point of view of TiE, we consider it important that qualitative results showed a high impact on students with low socioeconomic status and living in disadvantaged families. Socially disadvantaged communities can struggle more to articulate their opinion, or can experience fear of doing so, wanting to avoid to be mistaken. This example showed that what was difficult about the programme in other groups, became a key of involvement in this group.

Support of the victim was present in groups where in situations of the TiE performance students held positive opinions about the victim when representing teachers, and when representing the class of the story

they detested the aggressor. When we found victim blaming elements in the pre-performance interview with the headteacher, groups were more likely to base their decisions on similar opinions. In some cases, victim blaming was strongly present in the beginning of the activity and disappeared by the end of the performance. We found that classes that were more likely to blame the victim were affected by the issue of bullying. Observers also reported a complex case, when they could identify all actors of bullying of one class during the activity. In this class the problem could be deeply explored and results showed that The Nerd performance reached one of its highest impacts here. Bystander behaviour was strongly present in groups which were affected by bullying. Many classes supported the aggressor. The class in which physical aggression was dominating also supported the aggressor in the roles offered by the activity. When working in small groups, they represented situations that showed physical assault. In some groups participants found the aggressor's behaviour funny, but later they found it repulsive and after the performance they told their teacher that they did not want such a person to be their classmate. Supporting the bully has showed a relation with responsibility. Those classes that chose aggressive actions and solutions did not take responsibility and did not help the victim. Moreover, in various cases they considered the victim to be responsible for the problematic situation, adding that teachers were also to blame. Those classes of which the headteacher took responsibility and saw the problem in a complex way and wanted to find solutions, addressed more responsible actors of the situation.

Inevitably, we also noted the context. By observing the classroom we could gain a more precise picture about the environment; whether there were unique characteristics of the space that made the room owned by the class, or if the room was not characteristic of the class. We observed that the quality of the class equipment and the school equipment reflected the students' socioeconomic status. In a small school in the countryside, where the classroom was rather poorly equipped, students faced more financial problems compared to those who attend elite schools in the capital city. The challenges and difficulties differed accordingly, as well as the roots of bullying. The economic situation of the family and the appearance were less relevant causes of bullying in classes of students of poorer family backgrounds. In the current research, socioeconomic status and low family income and education showed a connection with the quality of the teacher-parent relationship. Teachers reported that parents of lower socioeconomic status are more difficult to approach and cooperate with, regarding their children's school-related problems.

The results show that the change in teachers' attitudes and presence was highly important to bullying addressing and treating. The activity made teachers more attentive to the problem, more active in handling bullying situations and more aware that their role also extends to the cyberspace. The teachers' attitude towards bullying and the TiE performance was determining: in one of the observed classes all aspects of the problem perception showed a higher result after the performance. Victim blaming teachers are many; in our case, various teachers reported that they found segregation based on skills and competences useful and desirable. The teacher of the research who was holding neutral attitude found The Nerd indifferent, while she did not address the worrying situation of aggressive behaviours in the class; she declared that the group was not affected by bullying. Where teachers addressed the affectedness of their class and were open and willing to take action in order to find solutions, the class identified both the bystanders' and the aggressor's role and responsibility. By playing the role of the victim, one student immediately changed his opinion, while quantitative results also showed the effectiveness of the performance. Verbal harassment was present during the activity in many forms, but in various cases teachers did not reflect upon the issue.

Expectations and stereotypes based on gender roles were determining regarding both observed performances. In classes where there were more male students, girls were likely to be oppressed and not to express their opinions during the activity. In these cases, the female characters of the story were not judged positively and stereotypes based on gender roles were articulated. Students expressed that nobody believes the victim, because "she is a girl". Girl students were likely to stick together in sports classes and in those classes where they were in minority. Teachers were likely to treat girls and boys differently and this had an impact on the students' achievements and behaviours. In the Body-Image-Presenters, various cases came up in which girls/women learn that they are oppressed, helpless against sexual assaults and that they need to deal with humiliation because they don't believe that they could turn to someone for help. In all the events of these performances it was present that boys' options differ from those of girls; according to the majority of the classes, if a girl sends an image of herself with sexual content she is automatically judged negatively, while if a boy does the same he only expresses initiative and sexually active status, which are parts of the social norm. Besides this fact, acceptance of aggression and its treatment as a masculine characteristic and norm are also worrying phenomena.

## 6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can declare that the observed TiE performances were effective in opening a discussion about bullying. This itself is an important result because by participating in the activity feelings and experiences could be revealed and dialogue could start among students and teachers. This is the first step in the process of getting rid of taboos, which is the first step of decreasing systematic bullying and aggression (Twemlow & Sacco, 2012; Dóczy-Vámos, 2016). Furthermore, it is an important result that the teacher role-model is inevitably relevant when analysing students' attitudes. In many cases students copied their teachers' decisions, whom they view as authority. The teacher's role in preventing and decreasing bullying is unavoidable, while his/her attitude towards the victim determines the behaviour of various affected actors of bullying. The research has pointed out that TiE performances not only support the students, but also help the teacher build more inclusive, cooperative and empathic communities, raising his/her effectiveness as a pedagogue. An intervention in the community is unavoidable if one aims to achieve successful change. The TiE method was effective in the cases where the teacher was open to acknowledgement of their own responsibility and role in treating such a problem. Among the direct impacts of the TiE performances we have to mention the positive effect on student communities. According to teacher reports, the quality of the expression of opinions increased, as well as students' confidence when speaking up in front of others. Among other results, we emphasise that when working with students of low socioeconomic status, the choice of topic, language and approach are in strong connection with the participants' level of involvement. TiE proved to be relevant and effective in revealing hidden cases, exploring them on a community level and mapping possible solutions. We have explored various aspects of the field that were observed less in Hungary before. We would consider it relevant to start researching the connection of gender and power dominance resulting in bullying events.

## Notes

- 1 The project was carried out together with Gabriella Dóczy-Vámos and László Horváth

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