

# A Forum Theatre-based Research with Youths with Multiple Disadvantages

## 1. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

The empirical part of the project element was carried out within the National Excellence Program called *School conflict management and bullying intervention possibilities by training-like and arts-based methods* (2018-1.2.1-NKP) in the spring and autumn of 2020 while creating the arts-based holistic program followed with research (Norris, 2000; Leavy, 2015; Novák 2019). Alternatives for handling conflicts, possibilities for prevention and intervention were developed for “specially different” (Deszpot, 2008) student groups with multiple disadvantages participating in talent programs.

The project was carried out through drama and theatre-based interventions, involving the students and the teachers of a secondary school in a two-day long forum theatre-based session and a pedagogical workshop. The main goal of the forum theatre was to generate situations requiring decisions within a protected group by interpreting the stage scenes performed by the creating group together with the youths, opening up possibilities for reflections and participation (Dennis, 2009; Duffy, 2010; Wager, 2014). This research allows participants to continuously re-write the storyline and re-direct the basic scene, in accordance with the series of forum theatre scenes. Thereby the participants can articulate their own opinions, experiences, and responses along the lines of the highlighted questions and the imaginary possibilities (Boal, 1979/2000; Oblath, 2017; Katona 2015; Sz. Pallai, 2002).

The aim of our empirical research is to map the experiences of the participants in connection with forum theatre, which focus on the relations of the oppressors, the oppressed and those supporting/observing this situation and in consequence of all this, the low-level self-efficacy of peripheral individuals.

At a participatory level, the aim of the project (and the research) is to detect individual and group dynamics and participatory opportunities within student communities and families through intra- and interpersonal processes.

## 2. PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH – CREATORS AND RESEARCHERS (DIVERSITY AND COLLABORATION)

The individuals participating in the research can be divided into four groups according to their roles in the forum theatre intervention (creators and researchers) and their roles at school (students and teachers). a group of 33 secondary school students, a creative forum theatre group of five members, five teachers and four researchers analysing the empirical elements participated in the research.

The group of the Creators of forum theatre scenes included individuals recovering from substance use, a psycho-drama group leader, the leader of the theatre therapeutic group, amateur actors and an expert/director in drama pedagogy.

According to their competences and qualifications, the members of the group of Researchers were quite varied: a cultural anthropologist, a teacher specialized in intercultural pedagogy, experts in movement and dance therapy, a researcher of pedagogy, a researcher of disability studies, a drama teacher, and an art therapist.

At the planning stage of the project, we thought that the different knowledge competences and competences of the members of the two groups would enhance the efficiency of both the forum theatre-based intervention and the research with their added values. The results seem to show that this variety proved to be fruitful for cooperative thinking and creative work. In accordance with the reflective paradigm of the research, certain role changes were provided between the roles of the researchers and those of the creative group. Due to the mingling of the roles, in the complex knowledge creating process of the research, the integrated knowledge contents experienced in the various roles became fertilizing factors that created more exactness.

Researchers became creators as for instance they ended up participating in a scene which was part of the basic scene of the forum theatre. The creators became researchers when on the second day of the intervention they interviewed one another on the creative process. The creators and the researchers were participating in the project by continuous self-reflection which is mirrored in the research diaries and in the interviews.

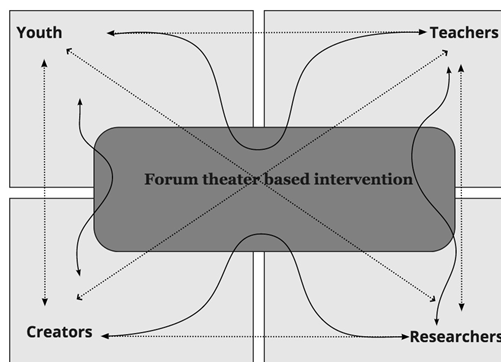


FIGURE 1. THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE PROJECT TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE SPACE/TIME OF FORUM THEATRE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Our chart can be considered from several aspects. On the one hand, the four participating groups (Youths, Teachers, Creators, Researchers), their possibilities for relationship can be found in it, therefore it can be considered a matrix of dynamics. On the other hand, forum theatre based intervention, i.e. the project itself influences the matrix of dynamics and the opportunities for connections and therefore the focus points of the research analysis. Therefore, the relationship between the participants can be created within the framework of the project (in its real space and time) or outside of it. This latter category includes connecting and relative situations created outside the project, but at the same time, connecting aspects between the participants that were characteristic in the past. In this fashion the meeting and connecting possibilities of the four groups within the project (its real space and time) and outside of it are shown, which can be interpreted as a basis for our analysis.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

Our main research method within the arts-based research paradigm is the participatory drama and theatre-based action research (PAR – Participatory Action Research).

We intended to record the participants' own experiences with the forum theatre (the intrasubjective experiences) by interviews with individuals, groups and focus groups and the research participants' experiences with one another – connected to the intervention – (intersubjective experiences) through researchers' observations, video recordings and interviews. The research diary covered the observations of relationships of the participants (students, teachers, creative artists and researchers), the forms of their involvement and the level of their participation. The aspects of observation at the sessions and the interview questions were further fine-tuned by the observations made at the field research during the planning process (Lengyelne Molnár & Tóvári, 2001; Dobay et al., 2019). The creating group and the researchers reflected on their own experiences at a group interview after the two days of sessions. The interviews provided opportunities for systematic reflections (Griffith & Tann, 1992), which made it possible to elevate their presence to a more conscious level and support their self-assessment.

### 4. FINDINGS

With the help of interviews with groups, focus groups and individuals, our research group investigated the working of forum theatre as an applied theatrical pedagogical technique and the level of participation in the space of intervention created by it through the observational and reflexive diaries. Moreover, the opportunity of engagement and the elements of attention and cooperation were also investigated among the participating students, teachers, creative artists, and researchers.

During the analysis of the empirical research material, we found three main categories, which can help us understand the complex process of forum theatre:

- Participation – in which the impressions of the participating groups and the imprints of the project are analysed.

- Dynamics – in which the connecting possibilities between the participants are investigated.
- Context – in which the external factors affecting the project are investigated.

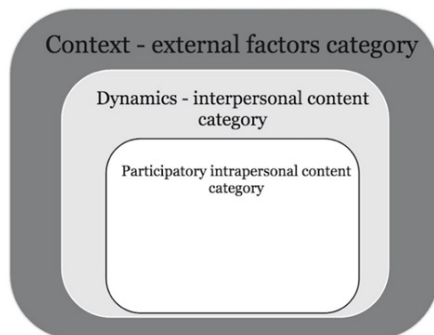


FIGURE 2. MAIN CATEGORIES OF THE ANALYSES OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH MATERIAL

The category of Context covers those texts from the interviews, observational diaries and reflexive diaries which are related to the social, economic, political, constructed and natural environment of the intervention. Mostly those contents fall in this category which characterise the conditions of the framework and the realisation of the project: in space (institution), in time (2020, the time of COVID-19) and the participants (expectations).

*"[...] the creators are waiting for us in front of the institute, we introduce ourselves, shake hands, put on our masks and enter the school; the receptionist tells us to disinfect our hands."* (Researcher)

*"Well, what can I say? I always have doubts, if I have to tell the truth now [...] we stumble into a lot of trashy things while we believe that they are good for the children. We force them into it as there is no other way. And then we often have to face it later that we say that poor children, it wasn't really what we wanted. But we don't do it with bad intentions, it is simply impossible to sort them out."* (Teacher)

By Dynamics we mean the coding category in which the interpersonal contents and the opportunities for connections between the participants are investigated. Those sections of texts are classified in this category which indicate the interactions and the relationships of the participants of the intervention (students, teachers, creative artists, researchers) in a field of collective action and which can express cooperativeness, tension, partnership and opposition.

*"[...] on arrival we waited in good mood, but the two classes sat down in different places – afterwards, during the exercises we couldn't feel any difference between them... the youngsters were sitting near each other, a little farther from the group of researchers."* (Researcher)

*"OK, several children, who otherwise aren't able to utter a word or do anything, could also take part in these games. So I was surprised at one or two people, yes. And they went up the stage, although B. is quite a shy child, he stepped up the stage and spoke."* (Student)

The category of Participation includes all those intrapersonal contents which express the impressions of the participating groups and the imprints of the project. In these quotations the participants talk about the forms and the quality of their presence in the creative and research process.

The drama teacher/actor/actress/session leader/researcher demonstrates step by step that the experience shown to the youngsters about human characters through theatrical forms is not another person's experience and life but their own. Applied theatre and drama can reveal the phenomena of social life at dramatic, reflexive, symbolic and aesthetic levels at school – highlighting the necessity of human conditions – eliciting activity, devoted creative work and self-reflecting feedback through the gradually deepening learning process – and it can transform a “spectator” into a thinking-playing person.

Thus, by applying forum theatre we can achieve a double pedagogic aim: throughout multiple replays and role-plays, the spectators can easily find ways to cope with stressful situations (Novák et al., 2014). On the other hand, by applying this method we can make them participate in the creative work and involve them to the maximum degree (Boal, 1979; Sz. Pallai, 2002).

Below, the participation of the creative group, researchers, young people and teachers and the characteristics of their engagement are investigated in terms of self-efficiency through semi-structured interviews.

For the involvement code connected to the category of Participation we have taken the propositions made by Morgan & Saxton (1987) as our basis to describe the taxonomy of personal involvement, by which entering the “here and now” and the physical and verbal levels of the framework of the drama are distinguished (Gallagher, 2001). As a result of the research, the arrival, the readiness for accepting the story, the roles and the presence in the (fictitious) reality of the drama are emphasized. In the results of the research the following ideas are highlighted in connection with involvement.

*“Well, if we go into the theatre, we usually buy the tickets, which are checked and then we take our booked seats. And thus, when we watch this play, we are obviously involved to the degree of our own thoughts [...]. So we respond, but in ourselves. But this interactive thing, I think, was what made it so approachable.” (Student)*

*“Well, when I am on stage, that's a completely different feeling. It's an awesome feeling. That there is nothing, only me, only the present. In conversations we usually talk about the past or the future. Hardly any word is said about the present. And when I am on stage, I feel that it's the present. It's me. I am here.” (Student)*

While highlighting certain elements of the context of the forum theatre intervention, it became clear for us that the technical equipment of the school and the students' digital material culture influence the sessions. It became obvious for all of us that the corona virus world pandemic and the challenges it posed to the individuals and groups constituted the framework of the discussion of the intervention. Furthermore, the expectations of the creative artists, the researchers, the students and the teachers thematized the work during the process of intervention.

## 5. SUMMARY

Our research findings will be shared with the actors of the forum theatre-based intervention. All this makes a complex system of consequences accessible to the creative artists, the youths, the researchers and the teachers, by which they will be able to make their creative activities more effective and more reflective. Beyond the space and time of the world pandemic, forum theatre-based interventions and the findings of this research show these actors that there is a self-efficient alternative to stress and it is nothing else but hope in a more liveable world, in the power of cooperation or in the pleasure of a creative individual in a community.

## SUPPORTERS

2018-1.2.1-NKP – National Excellence Program (Nemzeti Kiválóság Program)  
INDIT Foundation (INDIT Alapítvány)

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