



The Off Book Project: Changing School Patterns through Theatrical Means

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Abstract

The article focuses on the OFFBOOK project (Programme: Erasmus+/2017-1-LT01-KA201-035235), developed by partners from Bulgaria, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. The article focuses on the challenges that European school faces nowadays and outlines the strategies to meet them as proposed by the OFFBOOK project, by using new educational methods and tools related to drama performances. The OFFBOOK project targets young European students with ages ranging from 15 to 17 and creates materials in order to provide them with the knowledge and competences to combat discrimination and exploit multiculturalism as an added value. The article presents the project main objectives, activities and outcomes. The article focuses on the main method used aiming at changing school systems patterns through theatrical means. The method applied in the "Theatrical Laboratories" will enable teachers to deconstruct existing discriminating behaviours in classrooms in a multicultural environment and develop students' transversal skills. The article examines the project's most recent output: the guidelines, "Teachers on Performing Arts to Promote Integration at School" and highlights its methodological and pedagogical aspects.

Keywords: *students, multiculturalism, discrimination, drama performance;*

1. European context

Political and economic crises, triggering massive migrations, have brought about sudden changes in Europe. It is the young generation who has mostly been affected as reflected in poor students' performance and early school leaving. In addition, the new challenges fuelled by antidemocratic discourses and racist movements often make school environments to be perceived as hostile. Education institutions often fail to find proper solutions to growing demands in connection with multiculturalism and the need to balance traditions and new cultural models. In spite of the efforts made within the EU (Directives 2000/43/EC [1]; DG Education and Culture [2]; 2015 Eurydice Report Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe [3]), citizens lack awareness and skills to fight discrimination. School needs to develop solid antidiscrimination behaviours and competences in democratic citizenship.

2. The OFF BOOK project: aims, target groups, and main outputs

The OFF BOOK project (Erasmus+ Programme, KA2 Strategic partnership in the field of School Education, 2017-1-LT01-KA201-035235) focuses on the challenges of multiculturalism and non-discrimination in schools and aims at bridging the gap between European traditions and new cultural models. It strongly promotes students' wellbeing in an inclusive school environment, which will definitely make students feel comfortable and safe. When students are at ease, feeling confident and relaxed they can successfully participate in school activities. They also have a strong sense of belonging to a group, which is possible only in an inclusive school. At present the education system in many European countries uses a judgemental approach in evaluation, where teachers evaluate students' performances according to the knowledge acquired and against specified criteria. This deepens differences among students classifying them into two categories (poor and good; us and them), which undoubtedly consolidates their feeling of exclusion.

The OFF BOOK project aims at answering these challenges by:

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- improving secondary school teachers' intercultural competences, equipping them with less 'judgemental' and more inclusive teaching methods;
- enabling students to develop their soft skills towards an inclusive society;
- exchanging of good practices among the partner countries;
- setting up a transnational network of secondary schools whose cooperation will continue beyond the project life.

The OFF BOOK project is being developed by a partnership made up of Klaipeda Puppet Theatre (Lithuania), Klaipeda University (Lithuania), Simonas Dachas progymnasium (Lithuania), Colegiul National de Arta Octav Bancila (Romania), Fundația EuroEd (Romania), Teatro Stabile di Grosseto (Italy) and University of Siena (Italy). It targets young European students (15-17 years old), secondary school students and teachers, experts on education and pedagogy, civil society organizations in the field of theatre and drama activities and policy makers in the field of education. The project provides them with the necessary knowledge and competences to combat discrimination and value multiculturalism, by using new educational methods and tools, related to drama performances.

2.1 The OFF BOOK project's main outputs

The OFF BOOK Guidelines addressing teachers' training describe some of the theatrical tools that have been used by Teatro Stabile Grosseto (the Italian partner). The Guidelines include a pedagogical analysis of a "divided" class group as well as theatrical techniques which can be used to turn exclusive class patterns into inclusive ones.

Case studies & Best Practices

All participants' experiences will be collected in case studies and best practices that can be used for developing and improving teachers' competences in inclusive education.

Teachers' curriculum development

The educational experts in the partnership, under the leadership by Lithuania have structured a methodology for teachers to acquire competences in inclusive teaching. The OFF BOOK project will deliver a training course which will enable secondary school teachers to create and maintain a learning environment, which stimulates exchange of ideas and constructive dialogue and where all students are fully engaged and respected. The theatrical Laboratories, the education tool promoted by the project, foster learning across differences and help teachers involve students in Theatrical Laboratories as part of their learning paths.

2.2 The OFF BOOK project's guidelines

The theatre has been recently viewed as a 'laboratory' where students can safely explore and experiment unknown inward and outward worlds. Theatre can also provide them with opportunities for both collaborative work focused on problem-solving and individual self-expression. It is common knowledge that theatre acts as an engaging force upon anyone it touches. 'The real power of theatre lies in the total experience before the mind turns that experience into words. The theatre has the power to teach and teach profoundly.'^[4] Moreover, Levy states that students' theatrical experience becomes "a powerful way of learning" because of its cognitive and emotional involvement that only theatre can develop. Jeffrey Williams holds that through theatre, students become a part of the learning process rather than mere observers or inactive receptacles of the rich experience of learning. Drama is creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding ^[5].

Drama classes are usually extracurricular activities, which are often neglected in schools for lack of time and additional costs. However, such an essential element of education should have a central place in the curriculum, and every student should benefit from its tools, which should be used by all teachers, regardless of subject matter. Given its powerful impact on student learning, theatre should be made a more integral part of teaching and learning in classrooms.

The OFF BOOK Theatrical Laboratories are educational tools meant to help students find their own voice and feel free to express themselves and be listened to. The method aims at the deconstruction of discriminating behaviours in multicultural classrooms, in order to:

- deconstruct the "judgemental" logic, feared by teenagers by encouraging dialogue and active listening; thus, students will shatter the fear of being judged, or of being considered different and will perceive themselves as belonging to a group;
- help students find their voice and express themselves through theatre;
- compare and exchange similar experiences in other groups.



Drama is especially linked to experiential education. Drama can provide teachers with tools that the educator can use to incorporate dialogue and experiential learning into each classroom and subject area. In experiential education educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities. Experiences are structured to require students to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results. Throughout the experiential learning process, the student is actively engaged in asking questions, investigating, experimenting, problem solving, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic and spontaneous opportunities for learning are encouraged. Students explore and build their own values, so the results of the learning process are personal. The teacher's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting students, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process. In this way, relationships are developed and nurtured in the learning environment.

The concept of experiential learning was first explored by John Dewey and Jean Piaget and later made popular by education theorist David A. Kolb, who, along with Ron Fry, developed the experiential learning theory, which is based on the idea that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience. Their theory is based on four main elements which operate in a continuous cycle during the learning experience: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Experiential learning offers information and tools which help students understand cognitive concepts and processes, enabling interaction among practitioner, teacher and the group [6].

Experiential learning, using theatrical and live, interactive drama-based methods, is a powerful means to help teachers engage their students and improve their performance in a meaningful way. The most common activities of experiential learning are: discussions (with famous people on various topics, related with moral or social issues). A live theatrical experience is an excellent way of communicating directly with an audience, encouraging empathy and engagement; role-play and simulations (real-life situations). The experience mirrors reality in the class, involving recognisable issues and challenges. Students can step into their characters shoes and learn to develop empathy and practice new skills in a safe environment; they can make presentations and projects based on classroom activities (analysis of experiments, movies, and shows or plays in the theatre). Presentations can reflect real issues, real people and real challenges; students have the opportunity to speak to the characters from the scenario, to examine real challenges in order to improve understanding, build empathy and develop appropriate communication styles.

The method can bring about lots of benefits: experiential learning involves participants in a way that classroom training never can in a non-threatening and safe environment. What makes this type of learning so powerful is the fact that it integrates concrete emotional experiences into cognitive processes [6]. It also helps participants reflect on their own and others' behaviour having a sustained impact on behaviour, attitudes and performance. It provides an opportunity to apply the knowledge learnt in the classroom to real life situations; thus, students develop skills such as communication, team-work, critical thinking, decision-making, conflict resolution, reflection, empathy and strategy planning.

3. Conclusions

The OFF BOOK project aims at making the school environment safe, dynamic and inclusive where all 'actors', teachers and students alike, participate and share the same learning experience and feel socially successful. Students' and teachers' participation in the project's activities will help them forge less formal and more empathic relationships based on respect and acceptance of one another.

The project's innovative method applied in the "Theatrical Laboratories" will enable teachers to guide their students in a great learning journey, which stimulates emotional and cognitive participation, enhances mutual help and fosters the creation of a cohesive and harmonious group. By using the theatrical tool promoted by the project teachers will also work on existing discriminating behaviours in classrooms and develop students' empathic skills and inclusive attitudes towards their schoolmates.



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