

The involvement of children and adolescents living in institutions with performing arts: a constructive dialogue

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Abstract: In this article we put forward the most striking features of an artistic project supported on performing arts, more specifically on theatre, which coupled a theatre workshop with leisure and educational activities and whose target population were children and adolescents who lived in a shelter institution at the time, but in which only those who really so wished were involved.

Key – Words: performing arts – theatre – artistic project – theatre workshop – adolescents in institutions

Introduction

Children and adolescents living in institutions usually have life stories marked by suffering, negative self-esteem, lack of affection and contact with the other. The contacts that we occasionally establish with one of these shelter institutions allowed us to know the countless difficulties experienced by some of these children and adolescents, which created in us the will to carry out an artistic project linked to theatre practices, as an intervention strategy. Indeed, given our experience in this field, we are aware that artistic projects are vital instruments in a path of reflection and praxis that leads to the autonomy and personal and social development of those engaged in them.

Problem formulation

The problem in question had to do with the difficulties that most of these children and adolescents have adapting to people, the environment they live in, and school, because they have no rules, no self-control, they are indifferent, apathetic, angry and resentful, impenetrable, little sympathetic and sometimes violent. They do everything to attract attention, express the revolt they feel or impose themselves in the group where they want to have a space of their own, of affirmation or leadership. All this has, indeed, to do with a life course fraught with less positive experiences, which they have experienced and which leads them, most of the times, to not believe in themselves, their abilities, or those of the others.

Problem solution

The diagnostic assessment carried out allowed us to choose a set of artistic activities – which would meet their most immediate interests and needs – that consisted predominantly of cooperative games, exercises of corporal, musical and dramatic expression, dance and expressive techniques, not forgetting the application of these same techniques in the preparation of short stories. Given that art is the tool that connects emotions and beliefs, changes the real and helps in the construction of the world, these activities seemed to us as the most appropriate to motivate them to participating and keeping interested and united, since priorities were: to stimulate in these children and adolescents a new way of being, respectful of themselves and of others; to foster an attitude of moving away from feelings of social marginalisation they had and actively involve them throughout the whole creative process of change, so that they would gain a new vision, stance and attitude towards their own life project.

According to the understanding of Albano, “*art is a language, a form of communication that conveys what words cannot convey*” [1]. For Proença [2], art is a highly complex cultural phenomenon that opens perspectives for the creation and production of communicative processes, insofar that it favours subjective processes of dissemination/diffusion of values and signs. In turn, Ostrower stresses that “*art is a form of growth towards freedom, a path towards life*” [3]. It is an expression of life and when associated with the process of creation, such as theatre, it becomes the ability to fully exercise the condition of being human, given that, by experiencing the creative process, that is, by giving form to materiality, each one becomes more secure of his/her potentialities and aware of his/her limits, and this helps him/her become more authentic and free to make his/her choices.

Clearly, with the development of this project, our main objective was to contribute to changing the ways of being of children and adolescents living in institutions, through participatory, collaborative and emancipatory artistic processes of theatrical practices, aiming at an enhanced relationship in the institutional and school environment. The specific objectives aimed to promote feelings of belonging, friendship and complicity that would give a sense of safety, happiness and confidence to all those involved, in order to improve the institutional and school environment; to increase project participants’ self-esteem through a process of participation and creativity; to stimulate in participants the will to change, to experience and to grow internally, so as to attain a transformation in the relationship they establish with others, in the way they see themselves and in the way they act; to develop in participants positive and critical attitudes towards life, through moments of dialogue, group work, reflection and debate of ideas; to raise awareness of the importance of practicing performing arts in teaching/learning processes; to bet on an education that promotes active and intervening citizens, open to interaction, communication and cooperation. We hoped to achieve these objectives since performing arts are a form of growth towards freedom and expression of life. Furthermore, performing arts also allow the creation of environments that favour learning, interrelationship and autonomy, and, at the same time, arouse curiosity and interest, which is immediately reflected in the attitudes of those who decide to have a close relationship with them, and hence they easily give rise to countless educational projects.

The assessment of the process was not limited to the assessment of the work at the end of each session. In fact, it entailed a constant observation/reflection/action relationship. It was a continuous assessment, based on a constant monitoring of the process, which allowed to verify whether the project had progress, breakthroughs or setbacks, that is, whether or not it was able to modify the problematic situation and to correct the flaws or mismatches at the moment when they occurred.

Carrying out the assessment of the process entails, according to Pérez Serrano,

- The observation of the development of the various activities of the project.
- Their analysis.
- The application of diagnostic samples to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the development of the project [4].

The assessment focused mainly on the development of the process carried out in the theatre workshop. It was a qualitative assessment, achieved through a direct and constant observation of reality, self-assessment sheets, distributed at the end of each session, and photo-video recordings, which allowed permanent control and feedback, so as to address any gaps that might arise in the process, the collection of pertinent data, in