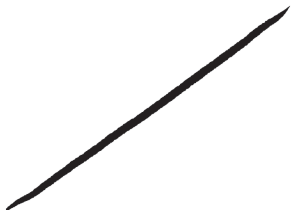


PERFORMATIVE AND IMMERSIVE METHODS FOR MIGRANT INTEGRATION

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Abstract: This article explores the potential of Applied Theatre and immersive methods in facilitating the social integration of vulnerable migrant groups, with a specific focus on Ukrainian refugee children in Romania. The research evaluates the effectiveness of a specialist training program structured into two interconnected stages: a theoretical and practical preparation phase followed by a direct fieldwork application stage involving workshops coordinated in collaboration with the Red Cross. The study employs a mixed research methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative tools such as focus group interviews, observation sheets, and test-retest questionnaires. The results highlight that the synergy between theoretical grounding and direct field experience is essential for developing key competencies, including intercultural mediation, adaptability, and emotional regulation techniques inspired by Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET). The findings demonstrate that the performative arts can successfully transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, significantly improving self-esteem, group cohesion, and the sense of belonging among young refugees. Ultimately, this research supports the development of a practical manual for specialists to ensure the sustainability of arts-based social interventions.

Keywords: Applied theatre, migrant integration, Ukrainian refugees, socio-emotional skills, facilitator training, narrative exposure therapy (NET), social intervention through art, intercultural competence, immersive methods.

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Introduction

The modern world is under the influence of migration, a global phenomenon marked by a remarkable increase in both frequency and scale over recent decades. Individuals move from their geographical areas of origin, either internally or internationally, motivated by the pursuit of advantageous economic, social, or political perspectives (Cicala et al., 2018). Currently, migrant groups in Romania face significant challenges regarding integration into the host society. These challenges are amplified by language barriers, cultural differences, racism, and social exclusion. Despite extensive research, no consensus has been reached on the criteria and indicators for evaluating migrant integration (Coşciug, 2021). Traditional approaches to integration within the Romanian context, while well-intentioned, have failed to fully meet the complex needs of these communities. Consequently, a reassessment of existing strategies and the exploration of innovative interventions are required.

Theatre and other forms of artistic expression, through their unique ability to transcend language barriers and facilitate deep intercultural dialogue, emerge as promising tools for bridging the gap between migrants and Romanian

society. A model for intervention through theatre that addresses the specific needs of vulnerable migrant groups is discussed in detail in the volume *Applied Theatre: Resettlement: Drama, Refugees and Resilience*. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of three theatre intervention models, emphasizing the crucial role of art in the adaptation and integration process of young people in a new context. Each model was constructed based on the age-specific needs of different student groups, ranging from primary to high school levels. For primary school students, theatre was used as a method to improve language skills and develop intercultural literacy. For middle school students, Forum Theatre techniques were included to enhance self-confidence, the assurance of successfully learning a new language, and the chances of integration into the school community. For high school students, the study explored work with unaccompanied minors using multiple forms of artistic expression—such as poetry, visual arts, theatre, digital arts, clay sculpture, and music—to practice the new language and explore means of expression that encourage young people to open up, express vulnerabilities, and discuss their difficulties (Balfour et al., 2015).

The diversity of social issues in Europe has led to the emergence of innovative social interventions where theatre is increasingly used. From combating poverty and social exclusion to promoting mental health and preventing domestic violence, theatre serves as a tool for social change. In Romania, despite growing interest, the potential of theatre in social interventions remains under-exploited (Felsman, 2023). Compared to other European states, the development of arts-based social projects in Romania is limited by insufficient funding, a lack of trained specialists in social interventions, and a less favorable public perception of the arts' role in addressing social issues (Teşliuc et al., 2020, pp. 49-50).

Given the specific needs of migrants struggling to adapt to the new socio-cultural context, the present research explored the potential of theatrical techniques and immersive experiences in facilitating this process. Building on the premises of previous doctoral research entitled "*Applied Theatre in the Integration Process of Refugees—Children and Adolescents*," the project aimed to expand the application area of artistic means and intervention models. The favorable results obtained previously, which highlighted significant improvements in the socio-emotional skills and creativity of young refugees, justified the continuation of this research direction.

This study addressed the theme of target group integration, with the primary objective of training specialists to work effectively with vulnerable groups. The training program was designed as a two-part journey, both correlated and complementary. The first stage consisted of the theoretical and practical preparation of participants, who were directly involved in a series of Applied

Theatre workshops, art-therapeutic exercises, and intercultural activities. The second stage ensured the transition from theory to practice. Participants were tasked with coordinating theatre education workshops, thereby applying the knowledge they had acquired. This stage was carried out in collaboration with the Red Cross, Sector 4, Bucharest, offering the beneficiaries an authentic experience of working with vulnerable groups. An essential aspect of the collaboration with a non-governmental organization (NGO) involved not only the coordination of workshops but also a careful evaluation of the target group's progress. In addition to preparing lesson plans and ensuring the proper conduct of activities, the project required the development of activity reports (weekly, monthly, and final), a necessary action for measuring impact and adapting activities. This structure allowed not only for the formation of theoretical competencies but also for the consolidation of necessary practical skills, thereby proving that the methodology is effective for preparing future specialists for work with vulnerable communities.

1. PARTICULARITIES OF VULNERABLE GROUPS AND SPECIALIST TRAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

In the analysis of social dynamics, the concept of vulnerability is essential for understanding the inequalities and risks to which certain segments of the population are exposed. Although the term is frequently used in various fields—from sociology and psychology to public policy and social work—it is important to note that there is no generally accepted formal definition of a “vulnerable group.” This notion is frequently encountered in legislation, reports, manuals, and specialized guides, often being used interchangeably with terms such as disadvantaged, marginalized, excluded, or at-risk groups (Tănase, 2013, pp. 5-7). Moreover, systemic marginalization often stems from deep-rooted societal prejudices that actively fuel the multi-faceted exclusion of these at-risk populations (Kite and Whitley, 2016; Save the Children, 2018).

At the European Union level, although official documents do not provide a formal definition, the term is consistently used to support fundamental principles such as equal opportunities in employment and other aspects of social life, as well as the equal treatment of persons regardless of racial or ethnic origin in the process of social inclusion or integration (European Commission, 2018). In the national context, Law No. 292/2011 on social assistance provides an official definition: “a vulnerable group designates persons or families who are at risk of losing their capacity to satisfy daily living needs due to situations of illness, disability, poverty, drug or alcohol addiction, or other situations leading to economic and social vulnerability.” This definition was subsequently adopted in

Law No. 219/2015 regarding the social economy (Monitorul Oficial, articolul 6, 2011). Thus, vulnerability is a variable condition resulting from the interaction between individual circumstances and a complex set of social, economic, and institutional factors that reduce the capacity for adaptation and protection (National Authority for Child Protection, DGASPC, 2013).

1.1 Theoretical Foundations—From the Concept of Vulnerability to the Particularities of Target Groups

The factors contributing to the emergence and persistence of vulnerability are multiple and often interconnected, creating a cumulative disadvantage that significantly limits the autonomy and well-being of the affected groups. From a socio-economic perspective, poverty, unequal access to education and labor market opportunities, alongside precarious housing conditions, represent fundamental obstacles to development and social integration. These material deficiencies are often exacerbated by political and institutional factors.

In Romania, although national strategies such as the “Social Inclusion and Dignity Program” exist, their effectiveness is often limited. The primary goal of this program is to support the social inclusion of individuals belonging to vulnerable groups, particularly those at high risk of poverty and social exclusion, aiming to reduce the gaps between rural and urban areas and increase access to quality services. However, a concrete example of its limited impact is the persistence of severe social exclusion among certain groups, such as the Roma community or homeless individuals, even in the presence of these strategies. This phenomenon is due, in part, to insufficient funding, deficient inter-institutional coordination, and an incomplete adaptation of policies to the specific needs of these communities. Furthermore, the lack of rigorous evaluations regarding the real impact of these interventions prevents the identification and correction of inefficiencies (Social Inclusion and Dignity Program, 2021).

Moreover, despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws, phenomena such as stigmatization and discrimination continue to affect equal access to rights and services. A relevant example is how social, and institutional prejudices can limit access to resources and opportunities for certain groups, such as the LGBTQIA+ community or certain categories of the elderly, even though legislation should guarantee their protection (National Council for Combating Discrimination, 2025). When rights are not efficiently implemented or when the interests of marginalized groups are not adequately represented at the decision-making level, their exposure to risk increases significantly. For instance, the absence of a coherent national integration program for youth leaving the child protection

system can expose them to numerous risks and long-term social exclusion. In parallel, cultural and social factors play a crucial role. This accumulation of socio-economic, institutional, and social disadvantages diminishes a group's capacity to function optimally and integrate fully into society.

Building upon the established conceptual framework, the specific particularities of the target group in the present research will be analyzed. The primary group of interest consisted of Ukrainian refugee children. Additionally, through collaboration with the Red Cross, intervention was also facilitated for a small group of institutionalized children. Consequently, the work involved two distinct groups: one group of institutionalized children (comprising 4 participants) and another mixed group, composed of both Romanian and Ukrainian refugee children (comprising 8 participants).

Within the training program, the evolution of both groups was monitored, with a more pronounced methodological emphasis on the dynamics and progress of the mixed group of Romanians and refugees. Given the central role of this latter group in the research, it is essential to detail the specific vulnerabilities they face, especially within the refugee context. Thus, the Ukrainian refugees, having arrived in Romania because of the armed conflict, encountered a context of multidimensional vulnerability, marked by the trauma of displacement and the uncertainty of the future (UNHCR, 2024). Although some individuals possess prior cultural and educational capital, their refugee status places them in a position of dependency and social risk (UNHCR, 2024a).

The psychological trauma of war, the loss of home and livelihoods, and the disintegration of social networks represent factors with a profound impact. The sense of uprooting and separation from family members constitute major psychological elements that influence the adaptation process (Burks/UNHCR, 2022). Beyond psychological aspects, linguistic and cultural barriers form a significant obstacle. Difficulty communicating in the Romanian language limits access to essential services, education, and social integration. Furthermore, racism or simple reluctance from locals to interact with Ukrainians can generate additional challenges for adaptation and interaction. This reluctance may manifest through a lack of openness, social distancing, or prejudice, even in the absence of explicit racism (UNHCR 2023, pp. 5-7). Finally, health-related vulnerabilities represent a major concern. Access to medical services, particularly mental health services, is often limited despite the increased needs stemming from the traumas suffered. Consequently, the lack of adequate assistance exacerbates the overall public health situation among this population.

1.2. The Role and Skills of Facilitators Working with Vulnerable Groups

The needs of vulnerable groups, although they may appear like those of a typical group upon initial evaluation, reveal significant differences within the context of a workshop-type intervention, requiring a distinct approach. The coordinator of such a program may face extreme dynamics: some participants may be highly agitated and feel the need to excessively share personal matters, exceeding the boundaries of the activity's context, while others are very timid, withdrawn, and silent, with no desire for significant involvement. Establishing an appropriate balance between these polarities represents a fundamental task for the facilitator. The absence of prior training for managing such situations can generate uncertainty in the coordinator, a fact that will be felt across the entire group and will jeopardize the optimal conduct of the activity (Bailey, 2010).

In this context, the specialist training program aimed to develop and consolidate several essential competencies: intercultural competence, adaptability, patience, communication, and trust. In addition to these, emphasis was placed on acquiring emotional regulation techniques, which are vital when dealing with trauma and the intense emotional reactions exhibited by vulnerable groups. The program was designed to provide facilitators with a conducive framework for discovering their own coordination style and for interacting effectively with a vulnerable group. Theoretical notions, although indispensable, were settled and consolidated through practical and direct experience with the target group.

A central component is intercultural competence, defined as the facilitator's ability to navigate and interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This involves demonstrating cultural sensitivity, valuing diversity, and avoiding stereotypes within the workshops, thereby facilitating the exploration of identities and promoting respectful and empathetic communication (Tucker et al., 2014). Intercultural competence is not a static trait but a set of dynamic skills that can be continuously learned, measured, and developed (Holmes and Corbett, 2023; Samovar and Porter, 1988). In the context of establishing an intercultural relationship, it is necessary to understand that "your perspective is just one side of the elephant. To adjust to the new culture and be effective, you have to be willing to crawl around the elephant, understand how it looks from all sides, and be able to communicate and empathize with the people who are looking at it from the other side" (Tucker et al., 2014, p. 3). This competence is essential for anyone working in diverse environments, as it allows them to successfully navigate cultural differences, establish relationships of trust, and adapt to new and ambiguous situations (Samovar et al., 2017).

Closely related to this is adaptability, representing the capacity to adjust work strategies and methodologies according to the unpredictable dynamics of the group and the individual needs of the participants. Flexibility is crucial for managing intense emotional reactions or unexpected elements, transforming challenges into learning opportunities within a secure environment. Complementarily, patience constitutes a fundamental condition, given the specific adaptation and integration processes of individuals affected by trauma. Providing the necessary space for each participant to express themselves and learn at their own pace is vital for building a climate of psychological safety.

Communication also plays a preponderant role, extending beyond the simple explanation of game rules to involve active listening, the interpretation of non-verbal signals, and the facilitation of constructive dialogue. Based on these competencies, a particular emphasis was placed on acquiring emotional regulation techniques. These tools are essential for managing and modulating intense emotional responses, which are frequent among traumatized individuals. Facilitators are trained to recognize signs of distress and apply emotional regulation techniques (e.g., breathing exercises, mindful movement) to release tension. These emotional regulation techniques were also inspired by the NET method.

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) is a psychotherapeutic method focused on treating trauma, particularly multiple and complex trauma such as post-traumatic stress. The primary goal of NET is to help the beneficiary organize and integrate traumatic experiences into a coherent and chronological narrative of their own life. This approach is distinguished by several essential characteristics. As highlighted in literature, “NET’s two major effective elements are (i) exposure and habituation and (ii) the construction of autobiographical history and cognitive restructuring” (Domen, 2024, p. 2).

A first principle is the narrative structure, through which the therapist guides the patient in constructing a “lifeline.” This narrative includes not only traumatic events but also positive and neutral ones, thereby allowing for the contextualization of trauma. The lifeline is built using symbolic objects that provide a concrete representation of experiences. For example, a rope serves as a symbol for the lifeline itself, which the participant can shape according to their own perception. Each type of event is marked with a distinct and predefined symbol: flowers represent pleasant moments, stones of various sizes symbolize turning points or difficult times, candles are used to mark losses suffered, and sticks represent events in which the subject felt guilt or shame (Smaik *et al.*, 2023). Each event is accompanied by a note indicating the title of the event, the location, and the date it occurred. This process helps organize and integrate memories into a coherent narrative, transforming fragmented experiences into concrete points of a life story.

In addition to structure, the method relies on gradual exposure. The patient is encouraged to recount traumatic events in detail, while the therapist assists in processing the intense emotions and physical reactions associated with them. It is a therapy guided by questions and a continuous oscillation between “then” and “now.” This controlled and gradual process facilitates progressive desensitization, helping the individual regulate their emotions (Domen, 2024).

Finally, NET aims for the reintegration of the self. By integrating traumas into the life story, the patient regains a sense of control and coherence regarding their own identity. The neurobiological basis of this transformation involves linking memory components back together; typically, trauma severs the connection between “cold memories, which comprise the knowledge about life events, and hot memories, which comprise the emotional and sensory aspects of the experienced events” (Smaik *et al.*, 2023, p. 519). Thus, the traumatic memory—often fragmented and dysfunctional—is transformed into a narrative memory that is much easier to manage. This clinical shift helps heal the modern fractured identity by turning unmanageable trauma into a structured, meaningful personal history (Illouz, 2008). In the context of the working methodology, emotional regulation techniques inspired by NET were used to help participants express and process their emotions, integrating them into a safe narrative framework, whether through a story, a role-play, or other forms of performative expression.

All these aspects—from the specific dynamics of vulnerable groups to specific competencies and theatrical techniques—indicate that the success of an intervention depends on an integrated approach. Thus, the facilitator’s role becomes fundamental, serving as the pillar of an intervention based on empathy and professionalism. Its purpose is to create a safe and beneficial framework in which participants can better express and understand their emotions, speak freely, improve their well-being, and simultaneously develop certain skills such as adaptability, spontaneity, imagination, creativity, and empathy.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH PROJECT STAGES

The specialist training program was structured as a complex and multidimensional process, designed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the field of social intervention through arts. The primary objective of this program was to equip facilitators with a robust set of tools, ranging from performative techniques to emotional regulation strategies, specifically adapted for the needs of vulnerable migrant and refugee groups. The architecture of the program followed a progressive logic, starting from the internal development of the facilitator and expanding towards direct interaction with the beneficiaries.

The first stage of the program focused on the theoretical and practical preparation of the participants. This phase was not merely a traditional instructional course but rather an immersive experience where future facilitators were directly involved in a series of Applied Theatre workshops. By experiencing these techniques firsthand, the participants were able to understand the emotional and psychological impact of performative exercises from the perspective of a beneficiary. This experiential learning approach is essential in Applied Theatre, as it allows the facilitator to develop a deeper sense of empathy and a nuanced understanding of the group dynamics they will eventually coordinate (Landy, 1982). During this stage, participants explored various methods such as Playback Theatre and Forum Theatre, focusing on how these can be used to address sensitive topics like identity, displacement, and social belonging (Read Johnson and Emunah, 2009).

The second stage of the program ensured the essential transition from theory to practice, representing the core of the methodological application. Participants were tasked with coordinating theatre education workshops, thereby applying the knowledge and skills acquired during the initial training phase. This practical implementation was carried out in collaboration with the Red Cross, Sector 4, Bucharest, which provided an authentic and challenging environment for working with vulnerable groups. This stage was crucial for consolidating the facilitators' professional identity, as it required them to manage real-life situations, adapt their strategies in real-time, and navigate the complex emotional landscape of the mixed groups of Romanian and Ukrainian children.

A significant component of this stage involved the administrative and evaluative rigor required in professional social interventions. In addition to facilitating the sessions, the project demanded the development of structured activity reports—on a weekly, monthly, and final basis. This process was necessary for measuring the impact of the interventions and for adapting the activities to the evolving needs of the group. The finality of this process consisted of a performance, which represented the culmination of the learning journey. This performance allowed the young participants to use their acquired skills to facilitate intercultural dialogue and promote social inclusion, thereby achieving the final objective of the project. Through this performative lens, historical and localized frameworks of collective art interventions demonstrate how communities can foster shared understanding and empathy (Hellenic Theatre/Drama Education Network, n.d.; PAN, n.d.). Through this form of theatre, participants had the opportunity to share their own stories, creating a bridge between themselves and their families and friends. This concretely demonstrated that art could transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, facilitating a deeper understanding and a sense

of belonging. The tenth workshop marked not only the end of a learning cycle but also a collective satisfaction regarding all the obstacles the youth managed to overcome. The successful integration of families and friends demonstrated that theatrical techniques are effective in facilitating social inclusion and that the benefits of the program extend beyond the primary target group.

2.1. Research Methodology: Hypotheses, Subjects, and Results

2.1.1. Hypotheses

The research was structured around two interconnected hypotheses. The first hypothesis aimed to evaluate the extent to which coordinators acquired specific competencies in facilitating communication and social interaction processes, which are necessary to work effectively with the target group and promote inclusion. It was assumed that by participating in a training program—composed of two stages, the first being preparation and the second being practical application—they developed skills in cultural mediation and diversity management. The second hypothesis aimed to assess the impact of an artistic program on the integration process of migrants into a new community. It was anticipated that participation in theatrical workshops and taking part in a Playback Theatre performance could contribute to developing a sense of belonging, consolidating social cohesion, and fostering intercultural communication.

2.1.2. Research Methods

To gain a profound understanding of the impact of performative and immersive techniques on migrant integration, a mixed research method was used, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches such as focus group interviews, observation sheets, and questionnaires. Focus group interviews were conducted with both the adolescents and the facilitators. The interviews with the youth were mediated by the coordinators and applied at the end of each work stage, as well as at the conclusion of the entire activity, to explore in detail the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of both participants and coordinators. Through group discussions, common themes were identified, and varied, rich qualitative data were obtained regarding the impact of the proposed program. Observation helped identify subtle aspects of the participants' experiences, analyze group dynamics, and contribute to an efficient evaluation of the intervention tools. Observation was applied both by the project coordinator for the group of trainers and by the trainers for the group of students. Questionnaires were administered to the adolescents to verify their level of integration within the group, using a test-retest design. The quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire

method complemented the qualitative information collected through interviews and observation, providing a more complete picture of the studied phenomenon.

2.1.3. Results

The focus group interview with the eight master's students addressed 20 essential questions designed to evaluate both their evolution as specialists in training and the quality and necessity of the research project. The responses obtained provided a complex and detailed perspective on the program's impact. Among the most relevant questions addressed were: "Do you consider that Stage 1, the preparation for the workshops with the target group, was sufficient? If not, how many extra sessions would you have needed and why?"; "Do you consider that the preparation stage without the practical stage would have been sufficient for you? Briefly argue your answer"; "Do you consider that the practical stage without the preparation stage would have been sufficient for you? Briefly argue your answer"; "What differences did you identify between a typical group and a vulnerable one regarding the conduct of a workshop?"; "Name at least three things you learned in the preparation stage that helped you in the activities with the target group"; "What obstacles did you face during the training program, both in preparation and practice?"; "How would you describe the relationship and the work process with the program trainer?"

The research highlighted a unanimous agreement: the program's success was ensured by the synergy between the two stages, theoretical preparation and practical application. Most respondents evaluated the preparation stage as sufficient, providing scores between 8 and 10 (where 1 represented insufficient and 10 excellent). They appreciated the clarity of the information and the organized structure, recognizing that they acquired essential knowledge. However, they unanimously emphasized that direct work with a vulnerable group contributed the most to their training. The practical stage, evaluated almost exclusively with a score of 10, allowed participants to consolidate their knowledge, develop confidence, and adapt to unforeseen situations. Here, theoretical notions—from creating a safe space to emotional regulation techniques—were tested in reality. Direct experience with the target group was, therefore, vital for effectively integrating the acquired competencies.

The training program had a profound impact on the participants, who identified a wide range of essential competencies acquired. In addition to the skills required to plan and coordinate workshops, respondents highlighted: adaptability and flexibility, which are essential when facing obstacles such as fluctuating participant numbers; patience and empathy, crucial in working with vulnerable groups dealing with reluctance, shyness, or language barriers; and cultural

mediation skills, necessary for navigating differences and promoting a sense of belonging. Furthermore, all participants confirmed that these competencies are transferable and useful in various pedagogical contexts, demonstrating the long-term value of the program.

Respondents observed certain differences between a typical group and a vulnerable one, underlining an initial reluctance, a greater need for encouragement, and difficulty in expressing themselves freely. These observations reinforce the idea that specialized training is highly necessary. Participants believe that a training program provides the tools needed to manage complex situations with professionalism and empathy, ensuring a safe and beneficial framework for the personal development of the target group members.

Throughout the process, in both the preparation and practical stages, certain obstacles were present, which, although slightly unpleasant, played an essential role in improving the beneficiaries' competencies. The main obstacle identified by respondents in the preparation stage was related to the inability of everyone to attend all sessions. Due to busy individual schedules, the master's students were unable to be present at every established meeting, which caused slight frustration for some. One person mentioned that "unfortunately, I didn't manage to make it to all the sessions," and another felt it was "annoying to repeat some games," thus highlighting the impact of absences on group cohesion and the learning pace. Another mentioned obstacle was the "lack of time" to organize more preparatory meetings, suggesting that although the content was sufficient, some would have needed a longer period of exploration and especially of practicing the facilitator role. Others stated that regardless of how many sessions there were, they still would not have felt fully prepared, as only the direct meeting with the group would assure them that they could indeed manage.

In the practical stage, the obstacles were of a logistical nature and related to group dynamics. The most frequently mentioned obstacle was uncertainty regarding the number of participants. Respondents faced situations where "fewer and fewer participants came," sometimes having only 2-3 children at the workshop, or even none (only in the case of the group formed by institutionalized children). This variability made planning activities difficult, forcing facilitators to "adapt or change" the games. However, they perceived this difficulty as a "lesson" that forced them to become more flexible and adaptable. Another challenging aspect was marked by the fact that some youth came to the workshops without a willingness to work, being "sleepy" or considering some games "cringe," or facing difficulties in consolidating the group where "participants split into three different groups," demonstrating an initial difficulty in working as a team, which led to a larger series of group games and a longer time for group cohesion.

The language barrier sometimes slowed down the pace of the workshops. The time allocated for translation took away from the time for activities. One coordinator mentioned the initial discomfort of working with an intercultural mediator, showing the complexity of intercultural communication in the absence of a common language. The aspect related to inadequate workspace, described by two of the respondents as being “too small,” completes the picture of challenges in the second stage of the program. Although this impediment was not frequently mentioned, the space problem reflects a real and common difficulty in the field of theatre education with vulnerable groups. Ideally, for theatre workshops, there would be a neutral and sufficiently generous space that offers a sense of security. A crowded room with tables and chairs, or one that is too large and has an echo, such as a gym, creates a different context that can negatively influence the participants’ mood and ability to concentrate. In this case, the space being “too small” represented a direct constraint that limited the possibility of applying certain exercises and techniques, slightly affecting the fluidity of the activities. Despite this obstacle, the fact that it was mentioned by only two people suggests that, through flexibility and adaptability, the master’s students managed to adjust, which implies that through adequate preparation, even in less favorable conditions, the coordinators were able to carry out the activities successfully and managed to maintain the attention and involvement of the participants regardless of logistical constraints.

The relationship with the project trainer was described as excellent, based on patience, clarity, and constant support. This aspect contributed significantly to the success of the program. Beyond professional competencies, participants were left with a sense of fulfillment, self-confidence, and a great openness toward working with vulnerable groups in the future. The experience confirmed that, through adequate preparation, specialists in the field of performing arts can become agents of change, capable of facilitating development and social inclusion processes. Combined with the analysis of the observation sheets of the experienced coordinator, a significant progress of the participants was recorded. These sheets followed a complex set of competencies, essential in working with vulnerable groups. The data analysis revealed a clear and positive trend: a constant increase in values across all evaluated criteria throughout the entire program.

The evaluation results revealed that the subjects started from a solid point, with none of them recording a score below 3 on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 represents insufficient and 5 excellent). This aspect indicates that the facilitators already possessed a good level of initial training, having valuable pre-existing competencies. However, the evolution was notable: throughout the program, values increased progressively, demonstrating a continuous learning process. This

upward trajectory proves a significant increase in competencies. The analysis of the responses provided by the 8 respondents involved in both stages of the training program highlights a series of relevant conclusions, confirming the first hypothesis of the research. The results demonstrate that participants acquired specific competencies in facilitating communication and social interaction processes, developing cultural mediation and diversity management skills.

The analysis of the results from the student group revealed that, according to the coordinators' observations, the theatre workshops contributed to their integration into a new community. The detailed responses of the participants provide a qualitative perspective on how the sense of belonging, social cohesion, and intercultural communication developed. The journey was marked by both strengths and weaknesses that can be used to improve future initiatives. The first positive aspect was the increase in cohesion and involvement seen during the workshops. The first meetings were marked by reluctance and the use of phones; however, by creating a pleasant environment and establishing clear rules, the atmosphere within the workshops was marked by good spirits and mutual respect.

Another strength was that the workshops acted as a psycho-educational tool, providing participants with a safe framework to explore and understand their emotions. Exercises such as "The Mirror" or "10 Things About Me" directly contributed to the development of emotional discernment and empathy. This playful yet structured methodology roots itself in fundamental educational principles regarding personal reflection and self-knowledge (Krishnamurti, 2018). Gradually, participants felt comfortable enough to share personal aspects and be more open toward each other, an aspect that highlights the therapeutic benefits that theatre brings. Through these interactive processes, children build a dramatic world view that maps out their identities and safe boundaries (Landy, 1995; Wilshire, 1982). Another positive effect of participating in the workshops was the increase in self-esteem and emotional well-being. Participants overcame personal barriers such as shyness and fear of eye contact. Feedback from parents and friends confirmed that these changes were visible outside the workshops as well, underlining the essential role of theatre as a method for managing stress and trauma. The core of this transformation relies heavily on creative, barrier-free play, which empowers at-risk groups to rebuild their reality within a safe and imaginative space (Jennings, 2017; Winnicott, 1971/2005). Moreover, the program managed to overcome prejudices about theatre education, demonstrating that it is not a rigid process but a form of playful and profound learning.

Even though the general success of the program is indisputable, there were also specific challenges. A fluctuation in participant attendance made the process of consolidating group dynamics more difficult. Also, the age differences

between the two groups—the migrants (12-14 years old) and the Romanians (16-18 years old)—plus the language barrier meant that the relationship between participants existed only within the workshops. The interests and specific needs of each age group did not fully overlap, which prevented the formation of a strong connection. Additionally, cultural differences, even with goodwill, require a longer time to adjust and lead to authentic integration. Ideally, the participants would have been eager to spend time with each other outside of the activities, which would have indicated a successful integration of the refugees.

The theatre workshops represented only an essential step in the integration process; they are only part of a more complex process. A successful integration of refugees into a new community also depends on the existence of non-formal socialization opportunities that allow young people to continue their interactions outside an educational context. This highlights the necessity of complementary efforts aimed not only at developing socio-emotional skills but also at creating conducive social contexts where young people can spend free time together. For example, creating intercultural social events would encourage interaction in a festive and informal setting. If themed evenings were organized, such as a “board game night” or a “culinary fair” where each young person could present traditional foods, new bonds would be created between people. These events would promote cultural exchange and provide a safe space to get to know each other better. Only under these conditions can authentic integration be achieved, where relationships are not limited by the structure of a program but develop organically.

Conclusions

Theatre and the performing arts offer a promising alternative by promoting inclusion and facilitating intercultural communication, serving as powerful tools in supporting the integration of migrants. This research aimed to explore and harness this potential, contributing to the enhancement of migrants’ quality of life and the improvement of social cohesion. In the context of the complex challenges faced by migrants, the study also sought to contribute to the development of long-term social intervention programs.

The study highlighted, first and foremost, the importance of facilitator training. The program demonstrated that a two-stage training journey, combining theory with direct practical experience, is both an effective and replicable model. Although the participants began with a good initial level of skills, they recorded significant progress, developing crucial abilities such as adaptability and intercultural competence. Logistical obstacles, such as inadequate workspace, did not jeopardize

the success of the workshops, as the coordinators' competencies allowed them to successfully manage unforeseen situations and maintain participant engagement. Additionally, the supportive relationship with the project trainer was essential for cultivating trust and encouraging professional development. Through data analysis, the research confirmed that Applied Theatre represents a viable and effective instrument for fostering the integration of vulnerable groups, validating both the specialist training model and the positive impact on participants. The results show that the success of such a program is not accidental but is based on a synergy between rigorous preparation, strategic implementation, and a human-centered approach.

Secondly, the therapeutic and integrative role of Applied Theatre for young migrants was noted. The program transformed group dynamics, leading to a visible increase in cohesion and involvement. The workshops acted as a psycho-educational tool, providing participants with a safe framework to explore their emotions, contributing to increased self-esteem and emotional well-being. Feedback received from family and friends who attended the final closing workshop showed that these benefits extended beyond the formal context of the program. Furthermore, the program succeeded in overcoming prejudices regarding theatre education, demonstrating that it is a form of experiential, profound, and highly socially relevant learning.

The research will continue with the development of a manual dedicated to specialists in the field of theatre and performing arts. This manual will be a practical guide, intended to offer a series of theatrical activities and exercises, among others, that can be implemented in various contexts to facilitate migrant integration. The manual will provide detailed information on the methodology developed within this postdoctoral research, explaining how Applied Theatre techniques can be used to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups. It will include clear examples to illustrate how exercises can be adapted based on group dynamics, as well as age and cultural differences. Through this manual, the research extends its impact beyond the duration of the project, laying the foundations for sustainable and effective practice in the field of social intervention through art. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of a community of well-trained specialists capable of applying these methods with professionalism and empathy.

In conclusion, Applied Theatre techniques provided a safe and creative framework in which participants could process their emotions, develop self-confidence, and strengthen their relationships with others. This experience showed that, when used strategically, theatre can become a bridge between individuals and cultures, facilitating profound intercultural dialogue and a sense of belonging. Therefore, the results obtained here can inspire the development of future programs that utilize theatrical techniques as a tool for inclusion and social development.

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