# Inclusive Practices Using Theater Pedagogy as an Alternative for Access to Learning

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Abstracts: Psychopedagogical research on theatrical pedagogy is among the most significant inclusive education practices in subjects with Special Educational Needs. The objective of the article was to evaluate the use of personal stories of children with Down syndrome who are in the Transition II level of Kindergarten Education and fourth year of Basic Education from theatrical pedagogy as inclusive practices in a private school in the commune of Vitacura, Metropolitan Region (Chile). The research was conducted through the interpretative qualitative approach, using techniques such as the episodic interview and the photographic interview. The Atlas.ti software was used to process the data. The interpretation of results and discussion yielded five central categories: 1) learning opportunities, 2) participation, 3) school access, 4) teaching theater pedagogy, and 5) theater pedagogy activities. This study identifies favorable attitudes of the interviewees to the exercise of theater pedagogy activities as an inclusive scenario, although with observations for improvement in access and physical spaces.

**Keywords:** Special education, Educational innovation, Theatrical pedagogy.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution and use of theater pedagogy for psycho-pedagogical purposes is characterized by the diversity of potentialities it has for the integral education of children, adolescents and young people, in particular, by its scientific recognition as a practice that involves attention to the specific particularities of development, with a focus on those with a diagnosis of SEN, of a transitory or permanent nature [1][2][3]. The concern to investigate the stories of children diagnosed with SEN and the use of theater pedagogy as a teaching and inclusive practice is a current line of research [4][5][6], which is the subject of this manuscript.

The use of the educational resources of theater pedagogy in the care of children with SEN in Chile is consistent with the policies of the State, among which the School Inclusion Law (Law No. 20,845) stands out. One of the fundamental principles of this law is that there should be no arbitrary discrimination and it establishes progressive free education in subsidized establishments or those that receive permanent contributions from the State. In addition, it considers other principles such as diversity and flexibility (Law No. 20.845 of 2015). Inclusive education according to [7] implies eliminating barriers to learning and generating opportunities for students that maximize support resources for learning, participation and school access. However, it is not unknown how arduous it is to achieve it, in balance with cultural, individual, socioeconomic and gender differences, so that these do not become educational and social inequalities.

In this context, as mentioned by [6], theater pedagogy is a valuable contribution to inclusive education. In addition, it is configured as an encounter for the creation of circumstances, provoking real sensations in the school, through opportunities of movements and corporeal rhythms, which disturbs and makes think from another perspective unlike the normative school, allowing the projection of experiential education [1][8][9]. In this sense, children's narratives about their life stories "provide perspectives that enrich the debate on educational inclusion, listening to what students say about what they expect and propose about their educational process and their school space" [10]. The above serves to reflect on an education that promotes evocation as a way of knowing and learning

to generate a world of exploration, movements and narrative sensations, based on the experiences and interests of children.

An essential criterion to know the quality and inclusive values is given by the narrated experience, which requires learning to listen to these voices. Students' stories should be listened to as they are a means of reflecting on how people construct meaning. Hence the perception that stories represent unavoidable opportunities to turn institutions into authentic learning communities. The above criteria justify the role of theater pedagogy as a practice for the promotion of inclusive education; however, it is pertinent to address scientific evidence in this regard.

In the specialized search in the Google Scholar search engine with the formula "inclusive education" AND "theater pedagogy" AND "special educational needs", in the period between the years 2017 and 2022, research results were found that highlight the use of theater in the solution of diverse educational problems, for example: the formation of socio-communicative skills of children aged seven and 10 years diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder [11]; the emotional dimension in the inclusive population [9]; the development of expressive creativity in young people with Down Syndrome [12]; verbal and nonverbal language in children aged three to four years [13]; and, the teaching of theatrical language to strengthen body expression in the deaf child population [14].

In the Chilean context, we found works that address the use of theater pedagogy in the empowerment of language in elementary school students with Specific Language Disorders in the commune of San Pedro de la Paz in the Bío Bío region [15]; the development of dramatic expression workshops in the inclusion program of the municipality of Santiago in the Metropolitan Region [16]; and, the training of social skills of first and second year elementary school students with and without SEN in the commune of Los Angeles in the Bío Bío Region [8].

The evidence found denotes the use of theater in the treatment of the most diverse educational problems, whether or not directly linked to the contents of the curricular bases in question. In addition, studies with samples in the contexts of Kindergarten and Elementary Education predominate. In the period between 2017 and 2022, only three investigations developed in Chile and others in countries such as Colombia, Peru and Ecuador were found.

It is worth noting that most of them predominate the use of qualitative and socio-critical methodologies built from a socio-educational perspective of transformation of the investigated problems. The above criteria are established as a first approach to the state of the art on the use of theater pedagogy as a strategy for educational inclusion, focusing on subjects with SEN. In the basic research that generated this manuscript, the fundamental participants were children with a diagnosis of Down syndrome, which in 2003 had a prevalence in Chile of over 2.2 per 1,000 births [17]. In addition, the aforementioned publication emphasizes that the frequency of Down syndrome in countries and their regions may be affected by the distribution of maternal ages, by prenatal diagnosis followed by elective abortion, with a tendency to increase in Finland, Australia, Strasbourg and Canada.

By virtue of the above, the present research is current and relevant, hence the following research problem: how can we understand the stories of children with a diagnosis of disability who are in Transition II and fourth grade to analyze the inclusive practices that facilitate the theatrical pedagogy practiced in a school in the city of Santiago? Consequently, with the problem, the research objective is: to value the use of the personal stories of children with Down Syndrome who are in the Transition II level of kindergarten education and fourth year of elementary education from the theatrical pedagogy as inclusive practices in a private school in the commune of Vitacura, Metropolitan Region.

# 1.1. Inclusive Practices

At the international level, it is discussed how, within the educational system, schools can be for all students, visualizing it as an indispensable factor, where it is ensured that all students have access to meaningful learning, which transcends over the years and is beneficial for all students in the pedagogical classrooms. In the face of this emergency in education [18] refer to the fact that inclusive education is framed in the objective of ensuring the right

to education for all, promoting learning, participation and access to education, regardless of their particular and individual conditions.

In the vast majority of schools in the world and especially in Latin America, according to [7] there are imposed barriers, which can be found in various aspects and structures of the education system, in the culture and in public policies. These can not only prevent students from accessing a given educational center, but also limit learning, participation and development as an individual with equal rights. That is why the great challenge of inclusive practices is to elucidate the work of the school, so [18] mentions that the objective of improvement for the elimination of processes of educational exclusion is given by the attitude and response that educational centers should give around the great diversity within the pedagogical classrooms, based on the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation of a more just society.

Through good inclusive practices we have a viable means to achieve the quality so desired in education and that all learners deserve, so inside the educational systems, what is unknown in the educational world is that according to [19] what the school system should do is not a comparison or imitation of what other contexts do, Rather, it should reflect on the current situation of each school, where they should create a climate with its own language that everyone identifies, in order to ask questions that contain clear and pertinent answers that illuminate the path according to the concrete reality that they live daily. Therefore, all actions that precede a good inclusive practice are based on the commitment of teachers, students and their families, in which the school promotes the participation and presence of all students [19].

It is necessary to mention that inclusive practices should be assumed by the school as a process, since "it should be seen as a constant search for better ways to respond to the diversity of the student body. It is about learning to live with difference and at the same time studying how we can take advantage of difference" [18]. In this sense, and following the same line as the authors, diversity should be appreciated in a more positive way and as a stimulus to strengthen the learning of both children and adults, since it is a cyclical teaching process, where the whole school context is nourished by knowledge.

Finally, inclusive practices, according to [20] have been created as a yearning aspiration and value for all students around the world who wish to feel included, this is recognized taking into consideration the educational communities that involve learners, but it is necessary not to lose sight that there are subjects with a greater risk than others when it comes to comprehensively experience that feeling of belonging, such as individuals with disabilities or immigrants from different countries. Educational inclusion is not only a feeling of emotional well-being, but should be "understood with equal force as a concern for quality learning and school performance, demanding the capabilities of each student" [20]. School life is where all students should feel included and this is done through learning experiences together with their peers and not apart from them.

### 1.2. Theatrical Pedagogy

Inclusive education and theatrical pedagogy have a close relationship, demonstrating that in educational contexts, according to [21] the development of diverse competencies and skills of all students is favored, which allows to make in the pedagogical classrooms places where all members of the educational community, collaborate, participate and cooperate to create a multidimensional learning, which is based on respect, tolerance and recognition of diversity, characteristics of inclusive practices.

Once the teaching of theater has been inserted within the school context, this art invites a constant reflection of the community about the real access to furniture and education, since "theater, like all the arts, knows no limitations, borders, religion, or disability, which can become a barrier to experience a rewarding feeling at the same time with the positive transformation of the person who practices it" [21].

Through the educational experience generated by theatrical pedagogy and according to the various transformations it has manifested over time, it is reflected that this type of art ceased to be an impediment for

people with a disability diagnosis, since it has adopted a humanistic current that is reflected in inclusive theater, where in the first instance the corporeal art has ceased to be exclusive for some people.

A characteristic of inclusive practices is to seek strategies that aim at the holistic development of students by addressing learning, participation and educational access, according to this, a formula that has been emerging to promote education as a right is theatrical pedagogy, based on the fact that "theatrical pedagogy can be defined as a teaching methodology that uses dramatic or theatrical play to develop learning" [22]. In this context, there is the possibility of proposing new formulas to carry out a quality and equitable education within the educational systems, since this theatrical methodology opens new fields of study according to the reality experienced in the pedagogical classrooms.

In Chile, according to [22] this teaching method is used with the resource of play as the first influential factor in the learning and participation of students, according to the subject they are experiencing in the academic subject according to the level each individual is studying. It is clear that this method enhances experiential education from childhood, since it works from the basis that every human being possesses expression as a natural condition, since it contributes by stimulating creativity in the student through a pedagogy that works emotionality without necessarily being subject to the scenic [23]. Therefore, theater education is conceived as an important space within the educational context, being a pedagogical proposal focused on the importance of play and expression, both spontaneous and organized.

#### 2. METHODOLOGY

The research responds to a qualitative and interpretative approach with the purpose of analyzing a phenomenon and understanding it in depth. The object of study was the story of children with SEN due to Down Syndrome regarding their experiences in theatrical activities as a practice of educational inclusion, from a psychopedagogical approach.

With respect to the quality criteria of this type of study [24], credibility and transferability are defended. Credibility refers to the confidence offered by the results of the research, based on the reliability of the data collected and the reality investigated. Transferability, on the other hand, emphasizes the contextualization and introduction potential of the result itself.

Both criteria are based on the results obtained through the episodic interview and the photographic interview, their processing and interpretation of meanings, reflections and definitions, from accounts of the experiences given by this corporeal art. The results obtained are in accordance with reality, as the analysis of the interviewees' accounts was detailed.

# 2.1. Key informants

The research was carried out in a private school in the district of Vitacura.

The parents declared to have more than sixteen years of schooling, so it can be inferred that the education levels of the direct family correspond to a professional or postgraduate level. It was agreed to carry out the study in this setting because of its potential as a high performing school in the external evaluations applied by the National Quality Agency of the Ministry of Education. This offers a perspective of the context in a traditional educational center with an academicist teaching; however, it was exciting to know that in this educational reality it also seeks to innovate with inclusive practices such as theatrical pedagogy.

The management team signed the ethical consent to carry out the study and anonymously use, interpret and discuss the information as a resource for decision making in the continuous improvement of the institutional educational process, focusing on the application of inclusion practices based on theatrical pedagogy with children with Down Syndrome. We worked with four key informants, whose basic SEN, in this case Down Syndrome,

conditions a certain degree of deficiency in intellectual and language development; in addition, one of them is diagnosed with a physical disability due to amputation of the right leg and attends the Transition II level. Another of them is in the fourth year of Basic Education.

All the informants participated for more than one year in the theater pedagogy sessions. The parents agreed by means of an informed consent for these subjects to collaborate with this research.

#### 2.2. Techniques and Instruments

Two qualitative research techniques were chosen for data collection: the episodic interview and the photographic interview. According to [25] the episodic interview allows to approach experiences by themes or domains that are stored and remembered in the forms of episodic and semantic narrative knowledge associated with specific situations and circumstances.

On the other hand, the photographic interview involved deepening the narratives in the case studies to appeal to the experiences preserved in the affective memory and, with this, to obtain a more cognitive account. According to [26] it invites reflection, as it allows for the language, perspectives and worldviews of the subjects. By wanting to know the feelings they have about theater pedagogy, this technique evokes the affective memory given the link with their experiences from their stories.

The procedures were carried out during the school day and in the company of the coordinator of the School Integration Project, so as not to affect the work routine of the participants and to safeguard the rigor of the results. It is important to mention that the external agent who was present during the interviews did not intervene, but accompanied in a silent manner, without negatively affecting the recording of the results.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on the interpretation of the discourse, through the codification of the texts, establishing central and subsidiary categories. Subsequently, semantic networks were generated with the Atlas.ti software (version VIII) based on deduction and refined inductively with the analysis of the texts.

# 3. RESULTS

The data from the interviews were processed in the Atlas.ti software resulting in the delimitation of open coding and axial coding, obtaining five major groups involving: 1) learning opportunities, 2) participation, 3) school access, 4) teaching theater pedagogy, and 5) theater pedagogy activities. In this regard, Figure 1 presents the axial map generated.

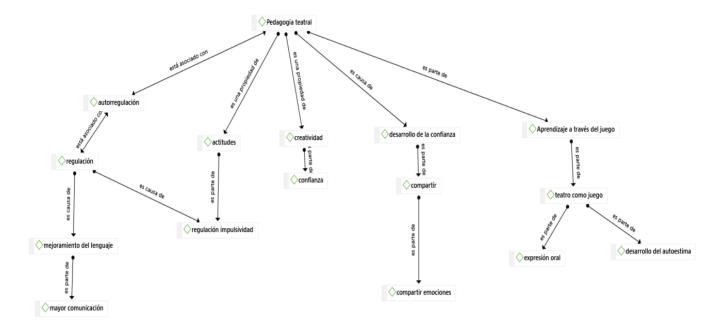


Figure 1. Axial Map of Theater Pedagogy as an Inclusive Strategy.

Next, the criteria issued by the participants are analyzed and complemented, based on the coding information in the Atlas.ti software.

# 3.1. Learning Opportunities Facilitated by Theater Pedagogy

The participants emphasized that in theater pedagogy scenarios, shared meanings associated with the role of the facilitator are constructed; they also referred to the generation of novel learning experiences that strengthen the teacher-student bond, given the levels of motivation for the activity.

According to the responses "Yes, I like to be a theater actor" (Interviewee 1) and "The one on the radio that the M.I. was going back and forth and you, hello I am the monsters and I am going to tell you a story! And you would say, and you would tell the stories, and then someone else would tell them, and then you would sing a song" (Interviewee 1). This points out how inside the classrooms it is necessary to experiment and re-experience in order to design experiences and extrapolate through narratives and memories that mark the school history, since the stories accompany personal experiences for a long period of time.

#### 3.2. Theatrical Pedagogy as a Support in Other Subjects

Corporeal art is seen as a support for learning in various areas with an academic focus, participants say "Yes, I learn a lot, but not only English. I also learn to share, to calm the body, to act and many other things" (Interviewee 1). In this case, it is understood how theatrical pedagogy supports English teaching, according to the different areas that are being promoted "It helps me to learn according to the topic we are seeing in English" (Interviewee 2), "You learn about everything, we have learned about animals, vegetables, fruits, colors, clothes and many other things" (Interviewee 2). The importance for all well acquired learning is reflected through a body that is calm to receive the teaching, because "I learned to calm down more, to speak better and to always be different characters according to the English topic" and "Yes, in speaking better because I am calmer, also to share and I already know a lot about English" (Interviewee 3).

Regarding learning through theatrical pedagogy, strategies are generated to reinforce the learning of reading, "They make us read the blackboard and we reinforce the language topics" (Interviewee 2), "I like it because I read from the blackboard with different volume of voice and sonsonetes.... and we also modulate in different ways"

(Interviewee 3) and, according to what was mentioned, there is awareness and learning in the topic of reading "yes, to read better, in diction and to modulate more" (Interviewee 1).

Regarding access to theater pedagogy classes, the interviewees comment that "Yes, of all of them and I am happy to be able to participate, I always like to participate a lot in theater pedagogy" (Interviewee 2), which is reaffirmed when stating "Yes, of all of them, I am the best from the beginning to the end" (Interviewee 1). One of the hallmarks of inclusive practices is the non-segregation of opportunities, highlighting the right to participation, without demeriting the conditions of individuals. Another of the shared meanings was in visualizing the group activities of theater pedagogy as a space for healthy interaction, which forms social skills, noting that "I have also learned to be calmer in class, to share and work all together" (Interviewee 2), "Yes, and especially the theater has helped me a lot in sharing and reading better" (Interviewee 1), "Yes, I learn a lot, but not only English. I also learn to share, to calm the body, to act and many other things" (Interviewee 3) and "what I have learned the most is to share and work as a team" (Interviewee 1). Educating within the theatrical pedagogy contributes to socialization and the approach to others.

# 3.3. Access Opportunities Facilitated by Theater Pedagogy

Among the most striking of the descriptions made is the vision of the theater pedagogy room as a physical space (Figure 2). They mention that "in truth, we learn in all spaces, but I really like the theater pedagogy room, that is why I took a picture of the whole room" (Interviewee 2).



Figure 2. Theatrical Pedagogy Room.

In addition, participants refer that "The theater pedagogy room is my favorite room" (Interviewee 1). These stories are valuable in the context of educational inclusion given the meaning attributed to the room, in which they feel part of their education, beyond school attendance; concretizing an opportunity to transform their vision of school. When stopping and actively listening to their stories, one of the interviewees commented on his liking, mentioning that "the whole room, because it is spacious, but I like to look at that place because it has a nice drawing and I love art, so I am fascinated by that space" (Interviewee 2).

On the other hand, about the decoration of the room (Figure 3) one interviewee commented that "It's like the paint on the tables is kind of stained (...) the colors were very mixed and stained on those tables (...) If it's not nice to see a room like that with tables stained with colors" (Interviewee 2), he added: "I like it to look nice, that's why we could one day paint the tables (...) Water Green with little dots mmm... yellow would look great" (Interviewee 3).

The aesthetics of the classroom is vital, as it generates creative experiences when they feel comfortable, motivated, listened to and involved, which influences their attitudes to participate in their schooling, providing a viable and nurturing access to new learning.



Figure 3. Tables of the Theatrical Room.

# 3.4. Physical Space of the Theater Pedagogy Room

An interesting finding was in the perception of opportunities for participation in the theater pedagogy classes, with emphasis on the inclusive aspect. In this sense, the physical space becomes a practical terrain of access by and for all students, a transcendental seal for educational inclusion.

The interviewees associated the opportunity of access to the wide physical space of the classroom to corporeal art (Figure 4), stating that "because the space is wide and they have tables, so it is great and that is why the theater pedagogy room is special (...) I like more open spaces, they are different from my room and you can move easily" (Interviewee 2) and "because we do activities in that place and it is a wide space without tables" (Interviewee 1). Both agree that there is ample space to carry out theater pedagogy, "I like all the spaces, because it is open and I can move easily, the best thing is that they let you do it everywhere, you can sit on the floor or on the tables on the sides" (Interviewee 2).

With this finding it can be elucidated that freedom of choice is given in the activities of the theater teaching classes.



Figure 4. Room size of the theatrical pedagogy room.

# 3.5. Modifications in Theater Pedagogy

Although the interviewees stated that they always participate in the theater pedagogy classes, the location of this classroom is a barrier; in this regard, they commented that "what I do not like is that the theater pedagogy room is far away and there are stairs and they always carry me in their arms and also my friends who have their feet with the boot because they fell" (Interviewee 2). The access to the room should be modified, the interviewees requested "another way to get there" (Interviewee 3) and mentioned that the alternative of action, "could be right there, but with escalator or elevator hahaha" (Interviewee 2), adding "I'm a good girl, but I would like to be able to get to theater pedagogy by myself" (Interviewee 2). Hence the need to rethink the school infrastructure regarding the viability of access for children with SEN associated to their physical, motor or psychological condition. This is a premise in the construction of a school for all.

In synthesis, the access opportunities facilitated by theatrical pedagogy are given by aesthetically pleasing spaces that stimulate the sensations of the protagonists, where lighting is a consensual factor to modify. The participants mentioned that the wide spaces allow bodily mobility and represent an attractive space as opposed to the traditional regular rooms. In relation to how to get to the theater pedagogy room, there was an access with physical limitations, which conditions the dependence of adult students to attend classes.

Finally, the results obtained provided an opportunity for educational research that made it possible to learn to listen to students, to redefine their memories, perceptions and experiences, which opens the way for communities to improve their attitudes by valuing and respecting diversity.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In the study, theatrical pedagogy is defended as an alternative to strengthen inclusive practices in educational centers, given its potential to transform barriers into opportunities for learning, participation and access. Hence its proposal as a creative, interdisciplinary and inclusive practice [27][4][28].

One of the findings in the psycho-pedagogical understanding of the accounts is in the importance of the adult in charge of generating learning experiences in theatrical pedagogy classes, conceiving in the first instance the teacher-student bond. As narrated, the facilitator motivates through corporeality to experiment in the body-mind-learning triad, enhancing meaningful experiences. The above is consistent with what is stated by [29] when he argues that inclusive practices promote student-adult bonds.

Teaching that involves corporeality is an invitation to immerse oneself in these languages, to raise experiences and make public something as intimate as the relationship that each student has with corporeal art and the development of self-esteem [30][2]. It is necessary to raise these stories and demand the impossible.

The narrated lines show that theatrical pedagogy is an opportunity for learning English, through topics experienced in the socio-individualizing favoring academic progress in other learning such as sharing and maintaining a balanced body to receive the teaching [31]. This finding stimulates collaboration and the valuing of the social together with nonverbal language [8]. This coincides with [21] when referring that theater pedagogy is related to inclusive education by favoring the formation of competencies and skills of all, participation and collaboration in achieving multidimensional learning.

Another of the findings in the reports is the perception of socialization through theatrical art as a means to generate coexistence and approach to the other, externalizing that theater pedagogy is a pedagogical tool loaded with expressive skills, affective capacities and social skills. [5] argues that school reality can be transformed, making the school a place where everyone can share, learn and participate.

By amplifying the voices of the students, the importance of the starting circle is revealed, which is given by the relaxation of the body and the development of a calm body schema, which supports the self-regulation of the body, and the emotional and interpretative world through body work. This enriches the classroom teaching work, enhancing artistic and integral development [32].

Lo interesante de escuchar las voces sobre las oportunidades de acceso, está marcado por el disfrute del espacio físico de la sala de pedagogía teatral, sugiriendo opciones de mayor luminosidad y la decoración que perturban la estética de este espacio cargado de sentidos.

Although access to experience theater pedagogy classes is not an impediment, there is a barrier regarding the location of the theater pedagogy room, since not everyone can access it independently because the infrastructure is not adequate to attend individually on a second level of the establishment.

When working with episodic and photographic interviews, the participants actively constructed their experiences, since they are associated with concrete situations. The photographic interview supported the stimulation of affective memory and at the same time is a friendly way of generating data. The episodic interview contributed to the organization of significant episodes of the participants through the activation of affective memory. Both techniques have been a valuable contribution to the research.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained through the interpretation of discourses connoted the importance of space, being a room with adequate furniture, good lighting and more space than a regular classroom, allowing better access to the programmed activities.

Finally, the importance of the socialization that takes place in the theater art sessions was highlighted as a psycho-pedagogical resource and a means to generate coexistence and rapprochement with others. The latter leads to the development of expressive aptitudes, affective capacities and social skills, all of which are fundamental for an inclusive education. The added value of the exposed results lies in providing information for decision-making in educational establishments where theatrical pedagogy is practiced as a strategy of educational inclusion with a

psycho-pedagogical approach for the care of children with SEN, particularly those with Down syndrome. However, in future research it is feasible to use other research techniques, the study of theater pedagogy in groups of children, with and without SEN, to establish correlational studies and the assessment of teacher training on the subject from the perception of its inclusive psycho-pedagogical potential.

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