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Theatrical Practices in Educator Training: Educational Potential and Indicators of Effective Relational Engagement in a University Laboratory

Nadia Carlomagno[1], Arianna Ricciardi [2] and Valeria Vadalà [2]

[1] Suor Orsola Benincasa University; nadia.carlomagno@unisob.na.it
[2] Pegaso University; arianna.ricciardi@unipegaso.it - valeria.vadala@unipegaso.it

Abstract: Designing learning environments capable of promoting cognitive, emotional and social engagement requires educational approaches that make the relational dimension of the educational experience empirically observable. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of performative pedagogy (Carlomagno, 2020; 2022), the theory of *embodied cognition* (Maturana & Varela, 1985), and the CReAP+T experimental and multimodal approach (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022), this paper explores the potential of theatrical practices as a tool for *engaging education* in educator training, adopting the construct of entitativity as an indicator of perceived cohesion and the group's sense of unity. This exploratory study adopts a mixed-methods *Art-Based Research* design (Leavy, 2009) and was conducted as part of a university-based workshop at Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, Italy.
The programme integrated theatrical training activities, autobiographical storytelling and collective dramaturgical development, aimed at fostering processes of expression, interpersonal relationships and the shared construction of meaning. A total of 111 students participated in the study and completed a questionnaire designed to assess perceived entitativity and selected metacognitive and relational dimensions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The results revealed a medium-to-high level of perceived entitativity (M = 6.49; SD = 2.50), significantly associated with interpersonal bonding (r = .37), spontaneous group structuring (r = .35), engagement (r = .33) and shared communication and motivation (r = .30). The qualitative findings converge in highlighting a gradual overcoming of the fear of being judged, increased mutual trust and the transformation of individual experiences into shared experiences. This study seeks to demonstrate how theatrical practices can serve as an educational tool capable of fostering cohesion and engagement through the integration of bodily, emotional, narrative and relational dimensions. Theatre thus emerges not merely as a space for self-expression, but as a learning environment capable of activating and making observable the dynamics of participation, belonging, and the shared construction of the educational experience.

Keywords: Theatrical Practices in Educator Training; Performative Pedagogy; Relational Engagement

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Nadia Carlomagno is the author of the paper. She is the main researcher of the project; she wrote the Sect. "1. Introduction", the Sect. "2. Theoretical Framework" and the Sect. "3. Research design and Methodology";
Arianna Ricciardi is the co-author of the paper, she wrote the Sect. "4. Results" and the Sect. "7. Limitations and future perspectives";
Valeria Vadalá is the co-author of the paper, she wrote the Sect. "5. Discussion" and the Sect. "6. Conclusion".

1. Introduction

In contemporary educational debates, the concept of *engagement* is gaining increasing relevance in relation to the need to design learning environments capable of fostering cognitive, bodily, emotional and social participation.
The term *engagement* refers to a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, emotional and cognitive components and, above all, understood as a dynamic phenomenon that is sensitive to the characteristics of the educational context (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). From this perspective, engagement must necessarily be interpreted in relation to the quality of interactions, the sense of belonging, the group climate, the opportunities for participation afforded by the environment and the relational dynamics individuals establish with themselves, with others and with their surroundings (Frauenfelder, 2018).
The socio-affective dimension therefore plays a central role in teaching and learning processes, as the quality of educational relationships and individuals' well-being contribute to the development of environments conducive to learning and to the development of social and emotional competencies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Within this framework, theatrical practices can represent a distinctive tool for *engaging education*, as they simultaneously involve the body, emotions, communication and relationships, requiring individuals to listen, expose themselves, interact with others and construct shared meanings (Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2023). Theatre can therefore be regarded not merely as an expressive practice, but as a relational environment in which individual engagement can be transformed into a collective experience (Martinelli, 2015).
Building on this perspective, the present study aims to investigate the potential of theatrical practices in the university-level training of educators, with particular attention to their capacity to foster engagement, interpersonal bonding and group formation. The study was conducted within the university workshop *Learning Through Play: Techniques for Theatrical Facilitation and Communication*, which is part of the Bachelor's Degree Programme in Educational Sciences at Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, Italy, during the 2025–2026 academic year. The programme involved 111 participants and consisted of six three-hour sessions. These included *theatrical training* activities aimed at developing bodily awareness and establishing the group, storytelling activities and the sharing of episodes associated with six emotions, followed by dramaturgical development and collective staging.
The research adopted a mixed-methods *Art-Based Research* (ABR) design (Leavy, 2009). Specifically, the quantitative component involved administering, at the end of the programme, a 16-item questionnaire using a 1–9 scale, adapted from Lickel et al. (2000), to assess perceived group entitativity and dimensions such as interpersonal bonding, communication, mutual understanding, organisation, motivation, spontaneous group structuring and engagement. The qualitative component focused on the analysis of field journals and final metacognitive reports produced by workshop participants. Quantitative data were subjected to descriptive and correlational analyses using Pearson's correlation coefficient, while qualitative data were used to support interpretive triangulation. The study therefore seeks to consider entitativity as a potential lens through which to examine the collective

dimension of engagement. This construct refers to the extent to which a collection of individuals is perceived as a unified and coherent social entity (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). In the workshop context, this perspective makes it possible to investigate the transition from a formally constituted group to one perceived by its members as a *we*, linking engagement, belonging, communication and interpersonal bonding (Martinelli, 2015). The underlying hypothesis is therefore that the potential of theatrical practices for *engaging education* lies not simply in their capacity to increase individual activation, but above all in their ability to generate forms of relational engagement through bodily, emotional and narrative experiences that support group formation and cohesion. From this perspective, the research contributes to the debate on *engagement, relationships and socio-affective learning* by proposing that theatrical practices be understood as tools capable of activating not only individual participants but also the relational and collective dimensions of learning.
Their educational value would therefore lie in their capacity to transform individual experience into a shared process in which participation, emotions and interactions jointly contribute to the co-construction of learning processes.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of *engagement* is now one of the key interpretive frameworks for understanding learning processes, insofar as it makes it possible to move beyond an exclusively cognitive and individual conception of the educational experience.
The literature identifies three dimensions of engagement: a behavioural dimension, relating to participation and the investment of energy in an activity; an emotional dimension, associated with emotions, a sense of belonging and the quality of relationships; and a cognitive dimension, concerning mental effort, self-regulation, and the use of deep learning strategies (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).
From this perspective, engagement cannot be considered a stable characteristic of the individual, but rather a dynamic, situated and relational phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between the individual, the task, the environment and other participants. This approach is grounded in socio-constructivist perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), according to which learning involves participating in social practices, constructing shared meanings and developing a sense of belonging. The quality of educational relationships and of the learning group therefore becomes particularly relevant.
The group should not be understood merely as a container for teaching activities, but as an environment capable of fostering participation, motivation to learn and a climate of well-being (Carlomagno, Vadalà & Battaglia, 2024).
The construct of *school belonging* highlights the role of relationships and a sense of belonging in the educational experience (Allen et al., 2018), while the *Social and Emotional Learning* paradigm emphasises the interdependence of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, situating these competencies within contexts characterised by meaningful relationships and participation (CASEL, 2020).

Engagement can therefore be understood as a socio-affective process in which participation, emotion, relationships and cognition are intrinsically intertwined.
This perspective becomes particularly relevant when considering the bodily and emotional dimensions of learning processes (Carlomagno, 2020).
The *Embodied Cognition* perspective (Maturana & Varela, 1985) and enactivist theory (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2024) challenge the separation between cognition, the body and the environment (Damasio, 1994), conceptualising learning as an embodied process through which individuals acquire knowledge through action, perception and their relationship with the surrounding context (Maturana & Varela, 1985; Gallagher, 2017). Affective processes are likewise intrinsically involved in learning and in the construction of meaning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).
Educational relationships can thus be understood as potential spaces for co-regulation, in which the regulation of attention, emotions and action is not exclusively an individual competency, but is developed through interaction with others. Co-regulation and forms of socially shared regulation of learning therefore play a central role in fostering participation, well-being and the quality of relationships. At the same time, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive perspective makes it possible to establish a connection between engagement and *agency*, understood as the individual's capacity to act intentionally upon their own experience through initiative, self-regulation and the transformation of the surrounding context (Bandura, 2001). Within this framework, theatrical practices can be interpreted as tools for *engaging education*, as they simultaneously activate the body, emotions, attention, communication, imagination and interaction. They require individuals to listen to themselves and others, embrace uncertainty, remain receptive to others, negotiate meanings and collaboratively create a shared product.
Theatre can therefore serve as a pedagogical tool through which learning acquires an experiential, embodied and relational dimension (Brook, 1996; Carlomagno, 2022). Within this context, the group constitutes a privileged dimension through which to observe the socio-affective nature of engagement.
The mere fact that several individuals share a space and an activity is not sufficient to establish a genuinely collective experience; rather, they must come to perceive themselves as members of a common entity. In this regard, the psychosocial construct of *entitativity* (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000) offers a particularly useful interpretive lens, indicating the extent to which a collection of individuals is perceived as a coherent and recognisable social unit.
Theatrical practices appear particularly well suited to supporting this process of recognition, as they create situations of interdependence in which the body, voice, emotions, storytelling and performance become objects of shared experience (Grotowski, 1965; Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2023).
From this perspective, the potential of theatrical practices for *engaging education* lies primarily in their capacity to generate relational engagement, understood as a form of involvement in which bodily and emotional participation contributes to the development of bonds, a sense of belonging and mutual recognition.
Theatrical practices can therefore be understood as a means of designing learning environments in which learning involves not only the acquisition of knowledge, but

also participating, feeling, acting, co-regulating and collaboratively constructing a shared experience.

3. Research design and Methodology

The study aims to analyse the potential of theatrical practices in the university-level training of educators in relation to promoting active engagement, group cohesion and the development of interpersonal bonds through the integration of the bodily, emotional, narrative and relational dimensions of the educational experience.
It adopts an *Art-Based Research* (ABR) design (Leavy, 2009), developed within the CReAP+T approach (Corporeality/Creativity, Relationships, Emotion/Empathy, Action, Performativity + Training/Technology) (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022). According to this approach, artistic languages are not merely expressive tools, but rather means through which experience is constructed, explored and interpreted, thereby generating knowledge. This is an exploratory mixed-methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), involving a sample of 111 university students, conducted as part of the workshop *Learning Through Play: Techniques for Theatrical Facilitation and Communication*, within the Bachelor's Degree Programme in Educational Sciences at Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, Italy, during the 2025–2026 academic year. The programme comprised six three-hour sessions (18 hours in total) and was structured around a progression through four phases. The *first phase* focused on establishing the learning environment and building the group through shared breathing, bodily synchronisation and mutual listening exercises. These included circle exercises using a rope, in which each participant took turns proposing a movement for the rest of the group to follow, as well as paired exercises involving reciprocal guidance with eyes closed, designed to develop trust in others. The *second phase* addressed the emotional and narrative dimensions through the sharing of personal episodes associated with six basic emotions (fear, anger, surprise, joy, sadness and disgust). This process was facilitated, among other methods, by associating each emotion with a colour, which served as a tool for facilitating the expression of complex personal experiences within a context that was still relatively unfamiliar to participants. The *third phase* introduced non-verbal communication through dynamic movement exercises in space (e.g., walking while imagining different surfaces underfoot), the use of voice and sound and brief improvisations and performances without spoken words, drawing on the personal stories shared during the previous phase. The *fourth* and final *phase* focused on collective staging. Individual narratives were developed dramaturgically in small groups and transformed into a shared performance, which was presented to the entire group during the final session. This structure reflects theatrical training in its specific sense: a set of bodily, vocal and attentional practices through which performers prepare to *inhabit the stage* with presence and attentiveness.
In this context, the approach was adapted for pedagogical purposes as a gradual process of group formation, progressing from the individual body to personal storytelling and, ultimately, to collective performance.

Data collection. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were assured that their responses would have no bearing on their course assessment. At the end of the programme, a 16-item questionnaire using a 1–9 scale was administered, adapted from the instrument developed by Lickel et al. (2000).
In its original version, the instrument assessed perceived entitativity through a single global item, alongside eight group properties rated by external observers across different groups: interaction, importance, common goals, common outcomes, similarity, group size, duration and boundary permeability. The adaptation used in the present study transforms the instrument into a first-person self-report measure, retaining the central construct of entitativity while operationalising it through 16 indicators designed for a laboratory group whose members interacted over an extended period. These indicators included perceived group unity, interpersonal bonding, communication, mutual understanding, perceived influence, similarity, mutual familiarity, organisation, motivation, ease of integration for a new member, spontaneous group structuring, perceived attachment of others to oneself, engagement, the perception of internal leadership, rapport and the feeling of being understood by others. In parallel, qualitative data were collected through field journals and metacognitive reports produced by participants at the conclusion of the programme.

Data analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) for each of the 16 dimensions assessed, together with Pearson's correlation coefficient, calculated between the perceived entitativity score and each of the remaining 15 questionnaire dimensions. This analysis aimed to identify which aspects of the group experience were most strongly associated with perceived entitativity. The qualitative material was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving a comprehensive reading of the texts, the identification of recurring patterns in participants' reported experiences and the labelling of the emerging thematic categories. This process was carried out with a view to triangulating the qualitative findings with the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire.

4. Results

Quantitative Data. The theatrical practices implemented in the workshop were associated with a medium-to-high level of perceived entitativity (M = 6.49; SD = 2.50; range 1–9). Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for the 16 dimensions assessed by the questionnaire. The highest mean scores were recorded for communication (M = 7.38; SD = 1.57), ease of integration for a new member (M = 7.30; SD = 1.58), interpersonal bonding (M = 7.22; SD = 1.80) and perceived organisation (M = 7.12; SD = 1.89). These dimensions indicate that the group was perceived as functional and welcoming. The lowest scores, by contrast, concerned mutual familiarity (M = 5.72; SD = 1.77) and perceived influence (M = 5.47; SD = 2.18), consistent with the fact that, as also emerged from the qualitative data,

participants had not previously known one another. The internal reliability of the questionnaire, calculated across all 16 items, was good (Cronbach's α = .85), supporting the internal consistency of the instrument adapted from Lickel et al. (2000) for the workshop context. The correlational analysis (Pearson's correlation coefficient between the perceived entitativity item and each of the remaining 15 dimensions) revealed a differentiated pattern in terms of both strength and statistical significance (N = 111).

#	Dimension	Item (full questionnaire text)	M	SD	r (with item 1)	p	Sig.
1	Perceived entitativity	How much did you feel the group as a "whole", a single entity? *I felt the group as a single entity:*	6.49	2.50	1.000	—	—
2	Interpersonal bond	Do you think you created any kind of bond with the other group members? *I created a bond:*	7.22	1.80	0.370	.0001	***
3	Communication	What was the degree of communication with the other group members? By communication we mean any type of interaction (verbal, visual, bodily, emotional...). *Communication with others was:*	7.38	1.57	0.303	.0012	**
4	Mutual understanding	Did you get the impression that you understood how other group members thought or acted? *I had the impression that I understood others' behavior:*	7.04	1.48	0.289	.0021	**
5	Perceived influence	How much do you think you were influenced by the behavior of the other group members? *The behavior of others influenced me:*	5.47	2.18	0.178	.0610	n.s.
6	Similarity	How many things do you think you have in common with the other group members? *Things in common with others are:*	6.23	1.72	0.265	.0049	**
7	Mutual knowledge	How well do you think you know the other group members? *I know the others:*	5.72	1.77	0.207	.0289	*
8	Organization	In your view, was the group organized? *I felt the group was organized:*	7.12	1.89	0.282	.0027	**
9	Motivation	How motivated did you feel yourself and the other group members were? *I felt that myself and the others were motivated:*	6.32	2.42	0.300	.0014	**
10	Ease of integration of a new member	In your opinion, would it be easy for a new person to integrate into your group? *I think it would be easy for a new person to integrate into the group:*	7.30	1.58	0.177	.0629	n.s.
11	Spontaneous structuring	In your view, did the group structure itself spontaneously? *I felt the group structured itself spontaneously:*	6.24	2.42	0.347	.0002	***

#	Dimension	Item (full questionnaire text)	M	SD	r (with item 1)	p	Sig.
12	Perceived bond (others toward oneself)	To what extent do you think the other group members formed a bond with you? *The others formed a bond with me:*	6.00	1.77	0.264	.0052	**
13	Engagement	How do you rate your own and others' engagement during the activities? *I rate the engagement as:*	6.93	1.96	0.329	.0004	***
14	Perception of leadership	In your opinion, was there anyone in the group who had greater control over others and the group's behavior? *I think one of the group members had greater control:*	5.57	2.37	0.093	.3329	n.s.
15	Rapport / Alignment	Did you feel on the same wavelength as the other group members during the activities? *I felt I was on the same wavelength:*	6.82	1.85	0.173	.0699	n.s.
16	Feeling of being understood	Did you feel that the other group members understood how you thought during the activities? *I felt that others understood how I thought:*	6.49	1.94	-0.006	.9490	n.s.

(Tab1)

Nine correlations are statistically significant at $p < .01$ (interpersonal bonding, spontaneous structuring, engagement, communication, motivation, mutual understanding and organisation), confirming that perceived entitativity is not an isolated construct but is associated with several dimensions of the group's relational experience. By contrast, the correlations with perceived influence, ease of integration of a new member, rapport, perceived leadership and the feeling of having been understood by others ($r = -.006$) are not statistically significant, despite the fact that the corresponding, reciprocal dimension, "understanding the behaviour of others", shows a positive and significant correlation ($r = .29$; $p = .002$).
A composite index, calculated as the mean of the remaining 15 questionnaire dimensions, shows a strong and highly significant correlation with perceived entitativity ($r = .42$; $p < .001$).

Qualitative Data. Table 2 presents the distribution of recurring themes identified through the analysis of the field journals and final metacognitive reports, ranked by their prevalence across the corpus. The findings highlight that themes relating to the relational dimension, trust developed through specific bodily exercises, the sharing of emotions and personal stories, the perception of the body as a language and the transformation of the group into a cohesive entity (a "tribe"), are the most prevalent, whereas themes associated with critical or ambivalent experiences (persistent discomfort and episodes of exposure perceived as intrusive) remain marginal. This pattern converges with the quantitative analysis, in which the dimensions most strongly correlated with perceived entitativity (interpersonal

bonding, communication, and engagement) are likewise relational in nature rather than individual or hierarchical.

Theme	Prevalence in the corpus	Representative quote
Shyness/initial fear of judgment, progressively overcome	Very frequent (present in the majority of texts)	"I am a shy person and not used to showing what I feel" / "the initial shyness was quickly overcome to leave space for a climate of total trust"
The body as language, non-verbal communication	Very frequent	"the body communicates continuously and... gestures convey emotions and intentions more than words themselves"
Trust built through specific exercises (rope, guided with closed eyes, back-to-back contact)	Very frequent	"It really felt like being tied to one another. If one failed, we would all fall"
Sharing emotions/personal stories (often via "colored balloons") as a cathartic/empathic moment	Very frequent	"Associating a color with an intimate memory or a specific state of mind prompted me toward deep self-reflection"
Final performance as climax/turning point (performance anxiety → positive energy)	Very frequent	"Just before starting, the performance anxiety was intense... as soon as we began acting... the tension transformed into positive energy and enthusiasm"
Viewing the video as a metacognitive tool (gap between perceived and real, pride)	Frequent	"movements that I internally felt were uncertain or fragmented turned out to be fluid on the clip"
The group becoming a "tribe"/single cohesive entity	Frequent (the term "tribe" used spontaneously by several students independently)	"lay the foundations for creating a 'tribe', a cohesive group capable of sharing deep feelings"
Perceived usefulness for the future educational profession	Frequent	"educating does not only mean transmitting knowledge, but also knowing how to enter into relationships with people"
Nostalgia for the end of the university journey	Minority, but present in multiple independent texts	"that moment also represented the conclusion of an important university journey"
Processing grief/real painful themes through dramatization	Minority, but with 2 explicit cases of personal real grief (father, grandfather) in	"At the heart of our group's work was the story of my father's death, a deep trauma"

Theme	Prevalence in the corpus	Representative quote
	addition to fictional stories on loss/loneliness	
Critical/ambivalent cases (persistent unresolved discomfort, painful episode, critique on timing)	Minority (4-5 cases out of 49)	"Seeing the story of 'grandpa Franchino' — my story — performed by others and modified... hurt me to see it again that way"

(Tab. 2)

5. Discussion

The findings of the study provide support for the hypothesis that the potential of theatrical practices within engaging education cannot be attributed exclusively to an increase in individual engagement, but can also be interpreted in relation to the construction of a collective and relational dimension of learning.
Overall, the mean level of perceived entitativity measured at the end of the programme ($M = 6.49$; $SD = 2.50$) suggests that participants perceived the group as a recognisable social unit, even within a relatively short workshop experience.
This finding is particularly relevant when considered alongside the high ratings assigned to communication, interpersonal bonding, organisation and ease of integration, indicating the presence of a group climate perceived as predominantly positive and functional. The correlational analysis provides further insight into this finding. Perceived entitativity is significantly associated, in particular, with interpersonal bonding ($r = .370$; $p < .001$), spontaneous group structuring ($r = .347$; $p < .001$), engagement ($r = .329$; $p < .001$), communication ($r = .303$; $p = .001$), motivation ($r = .300$; $p = .001$), mutual understanding ($r = .289$; $p = .002$) and perceived organisation ($r = .282$; $p = .003$). Similarity, mutual familiarity, and the perception that others feel connected to oneself also show positive and statistically significant associations. Taken together, these findings appear to portray entitativity not as a mere perception of cohesion, but as a construct closely linked to the quality of interactions and the possibility of recognising oneself as part of a shared experience. The relationship between entitativity and interpersonal bonding is particularly noteworthy, as it represents the strongest correlation observed among the dimensions examined. This finding appears consistent with a conception of engagement as a situated and relational phenomenon, since involvement in a task does not develop in a neutral space but takes shape through the relationships that participants build with one another.
From this perspective, the use of theatrical practices can be understood as a process in which bodily, emotional and communicative engagement progressively contributes to the development of a sense of belonging.
The finding concerning spontaneous group structuring is equally interesting, as it suggests that perceiving a group as a unified entity may be associated not only with

the presence of formal organisation, but also with the possibility of spontaneously developing forms of coordination, mutual recognition and regulation of interaction. The association between entitativity and engagement also helps to establish a direct link between the psychosocial construct of the group and the perspective of engagement. The positive association between perceived engagement and perceived entitativity suggests that individual participation and group formation may reinforce one another. From this perspective, engagement does not appear to be exclusively an individual's investment in an activity, but rather a condition that can emerge and become consolidated through the participation of others. The individual and collective dimensions are thus interdependent: to participate means both to take part in an activity and to contribute to the construction of the relational context in which that activity acquires meaning. The qualitative findings also appear to support this interpretation. In the journals and metacognitive reports, the most frequently recurring themes concern the trust developed through bodily exercises, the discovery of the body as a form of communication, the sharing of emotions and personal stories and the gradual transformation of the group into an entity perceived as cohesive. Particularly significant is the spontaneous recurrence of the metaphor of the "tribe", used by several participants to describe the group at the end of the experience. This expression can be interpreted as a narrative indicator of the transition from a simple gathering of students to a representation of the group as a shared we. In other words, the participants' narratives appear to document precisely the process through which a collection of individuals becomes a recognisable social entity, a process that the construct of entitativity makes it possible to examine quantitatively. The convergence between the two levels of analysis is one of the most significant aspects of the study.

On the one hand, the quantitative data show that the dimensions most strongly associated with entitativity are predominantly relational in nature; on the other, the qualitative materials describe the experiences through which these relationships appear to have developed. Synchronisation exercises, reciprocal guidance, bodily trust exercises and narrative sharing seem to have created conditions of interdependence in which participants were required not only to express themselves, but also to listen, observe, trust others, and respond to their actions.

Theatrical practice therefore appears to function as a medium through which the body can become an intermediary in relationships and individual participation can intertwine with processes of co-regulation and shared meaning-making.

From this perspective, the role attributed to the final performance is also of particular interest. In participants' accounts, it frequently emerges as a moment in which initial anxiety is transformed into energy, enthusiasm and a sense of shared accomplishment. The performance can therefore be interpreted not simply as the concluding product of the workshop, but as a moment in which the group experience is brought together and condensed: individual narratives are transformed into a collective production and the outcome depends on the interdependence of the participants. The transition from personal storytelling to shared representation makes visible, at the performative level, the process through which individual experience is incorporated into a collective construction.

Another noteworthy element concerns the metacognitive dimension. Watching the video of the performance, mentioned by several participants, appears to have encouraged them to revisit their experience and become more aware of the gap between what they perceived while acting and what subsequently became observable. This suggests that theatrical practices may support not only immediate experience and engagement, but also subsequent reflective processes through which participants reconsider their own behaviour, that of others and the dynamics of the group. Bodily experience can thus become an object of observation and reflection, contributing to a form of metacognitive and socio-affective learning.

However, not all the dimensions examined are significantly associated with entitativity. In particular, no significant correlations emerge with perceived influence, ease of integration of a new member, perceived leadership, rapport or the feeling of having been understood by others. These findings caution against automatically equating the perception of a group as a unified entity with all dimensions of relational quality. The difference between understanding others' behaviour, which is significantly associated with entitativity, and the corresponding perception of being understood by others, which shows no significant association, is also noteworthy. This asymmetry may indicate that, over the short period considered, observing and understanding others was more immediately accessible than the perception of being understood in return. This remains, however, an interpretative hypothesis that requires further investigation. Overall, the findings therefore appear to support an understanding of *engaging education* in which engagement does not simply coincide with attendance, activation or individual enjoyment, but also encompasses the possibility of creating relational conditions that make learning a participatory experience. In this respect, theatrical practices appear to provide a particularly favourable environment because they integrate the body, emotions, language, imagination and interaction within activities characterised by interdependence and shared production. Their educational potential may therefore lie less in the specific nature of theatrical performance itself and more in their capacity to create situations in which individuals are required to participate, expose themselves to others, listen, co-regulate and construct something together. This interpretation is particularly relevant to the university-level training of educators. If professional education requires not only cognitive and methodological skills but also relational, communicative and emotional competencies, theatrical experience can provide a formative space in which these dimensions are directly experienced.

The workshop therefore does more than teach techniques that can be applied in educational settings: it allows future educators to experience first-hand some of the relational conditions they will be expected to foster in their professional contexts. From this perspective, theatre can be regarded not merely as educational content or a teaching methodology, but as a formative experience capable of making the relational nature of learning tangible.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the potential of theatrical practices as tools for engaging education in the university-level training of educators, using perceived entitativity as a possible lens through which to examine the collective and relational dimension of engagement. Despite the limitations inherent in an exploratory research design, the findings present a coherent picture: at the end of the programme, participants perceived the group as moderately cohesive and this perception was significantly associated primarily with interpersonal bonding, spontaneous group structuring, engagement, communication, motivation, mutual understanding and organisation. The convergence with the qualitative data reinforces this interpretation. Participants' accounts describe a gradual process in which initial shyness and fear of judgement give way to trust, sharing, listening and a sense of belonging to a group. The body emerges as one of the main mediators of this process: through movement, synchronisation, contact, voice and non-verbal communication, participants experience forms of relating that precede verbal communication and, in some cases, complement it.

Sharing emotionally significant experiences and subsequently transforming individual narratives into a collective production also appear to contribute to the development of a sense of belonging and mutual recognition.

In light of these findings, the study's main contribution lies in proposing an understanding of engagement that places greater emphasis on its relational dimension. While the literature has traditionally distinguished between behavioural, emotional and cognitive components, the data presented here suggest the value of also considering how these components are organised and transformed through relationships with others. From this perspective, engagement can be understood not only as something that occurs within the individual, but also as something that emerges between individuals through processes of mutual participation, co-regulation, recognition and shared meaning-making. It is within this intermediate space, between the individual and the group, that theatrical practices appear to express their principal pedagogical potential.

Theatre does not merely engage participants through physical and emotional activities; it creates situations in which the outcome of an action depends on the presence and responses of others. Individual engagement is thus continually situated within a collective dimension: acting requires listening, communicating requires recognising the other, performing requires negotiation and creating a shared scene requires trust and co-regulation of action. In this sense, theatrical practices can be regarded as tools capable of making the social nature of learning directly and tangibly experienceable. This perspective is particularly relevant to educator training. Preparing an educational professional does not simply mean transmitting theoretical knowledge or developing technical skills; it also means creating opportunities to experience first-hand the value of relationships, listening, communication, emotional management and shared participation. Theatrical practices can contribute to this process precisely because they immerse future educators in an experience in which cognitive, bodily, emotional and social dimensions cannot be separated but are mobilised simultaneously. The hypothesis emerging from this study is therefore that

designing *engaging education* environments means designing not only activities that activate individuals, but also contexts that support the construction of a shared we. From this perspective, relational engagement may represent a useful interpretative category for understanding how individual participation is transformed into a shared experience and how the group itself can become a resource for learning.
Through their bodily, experiential, emotional and performative nature, theatrical practices appear to offer particularly favourable conditions for this process.
The findings do not, however, justify treating theatre as the direct cause of the observed cohesion, nor do they allow the evidence to be generalised beyond the specific context of the study. Rather, they open up a research perspective in which theatre, engagement and socio-affective learning can be investigated jointly through longitudinal designs, multimodal instruments and comparisons with other experiential methodologies. The study's value therefore also lies in identifying a possible theoretical and methodological direction: examining engagement not only in terms of how much an individual participates, but also in terms of what happens within relationships and how a collection of individuals gradually comes to perceive and act as a group. Ultimately, the findings suggest that learning should be understood as an experience that extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge to encompass participating, feeling, acting, co-regulating and creating together.
It is precisely within this shared dimension that theatrical practices can make one of their most significant contributions to educator training: not simply by making learning more engaging, but by helping to create the relational conditions through which engagement becomes a shared experience.

7. Limitations and future perspectives

The study presents several limitations that suggest interpreting the results with caution. First, the exploratory design, which lacks a control group and relies on a single assessment conducted at the end of the intervention, does not allow for establishing causal relationships between theatrical practices and the observed outcomes. Furthermore, although the questionnaire demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$), it represents an adaptation of the instrument developed by Lickel et al. (2000) and requires further validation in educational contexts. Additionally, the predominant use of self-reported measures and the involvement of a single group of university students limit the generalizability of the findings.
Future research could therefore adopt longitudinal and comparative designs, involve different samples and educational settings and integrate self-reported data with systematic observations and behavioral indicators. It would also be worthwhile to investigate which specific components of theatrical practices - bodily, emotional, narrative or performative - contribute most to the construction of relational engagement, as well as to clarify the relationship between entitativity, belonging and collective participation.

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