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Exploring Social Theatre's Impact on Soft Skills Development in Adolescents: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Through the thematic analysis of interviews with adolescents participating in a social theater course, the article explores the effectiveness of social theater as a device for developing soft skills in adolescents. The results show that the social theater course allowed participants to develop subjective and intersubjective knowledge, regarding emotions and communication skills. Participants also acquired skills related to memory, role playing and improvisation. The findings of this research suggest that social theater can be a valuable educational resource for developing a range of transversal skills in young people that can be transferred and applied in a variety of contexts, in personal, social, and professional settings. Further research will be able to verify the presence of the specific skills identified in other contexts and on a larger number of participants.

Keywords: social theater, interviews, teenagers, soft skills, transversal skills, learning

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Introduction

The constant mutations affecting social and work-related domains require a focus on the skills that young people should develop upon completing their studies, facilitating their integration into social and professional environments. Currently, there is a growing demand for cross-cutting skills, in addition to specific ones (Osman et al., 2012), which are fundamental to preparing students for continuous learning processes (Bautista, 2016).

The ongoing changes in society and the economy, coupled with accelerated technological innovation, necessitate attention not only to specific or “hard skills” but also to the development of “soft skills” that enable individuals to tackle new challenges in evolving contexts. A report by the World Economic Forum (2015) emphasizes that students must possess strong skills in disciplines such as literature, mathematics, and science, but they must also be capable of critical thinking, problem-solving, perseverance, collaboration, curiosity, and initiative (Tino, 2018, p. 102).

The Ministry of Education and Merit has also highlighted the importance of competency-based teaching, emphasizing the relevance of transversal skills (Tino, 2018; Ajello, 2011). There are various definitions for these transversal skills (see Tino, 2018 for an overview). For example, the World Health Organization identifies them as “life skills”, which are “skills for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to effectively deal with the challenges of everyday life” (Tino, 2018, p. 98).

Brandi and Iannone (2016) underline the importance of transversal skills compared to technical ones, acknowledging that, while important, knowledge and cognitive skills are of lesser importance compared to the ability to communicate and apply knowledge itself. Perreault (2006, p. 125) defines soft skills as “those traits and capacities that an individual possesses in addition to the technical and/or cognitive skills of the individual”.

While literature unanimously highlights the essential nature of soft skills, it is less clear how to develop such skills, particularly in adolescents. Soft skills are important for managing the numerous changes adolescents undergo, involving relationships with peers, parents, teachers, and society. From preadolescence onwards, individuals begin to confront a series of tasks in the personal, relational, and social spheres, aiming to reorganize their own identity (Erikson, 1968). Identity confirmation initially occurs collectively, thanks to the sharing of secrets and rituals with peers, and then acquires an individual connotation (Costabile et al., 2011): within the group, adolescents may find answers to numerous questions, find support to overcome concerns regarding expectations in the social context, have the opportunity to develop independence from parents, and become more aware and responsible for their actions.

At the core of the various factors of change lies the psychobiological aspect: one consequence of hormonal development is increased emotional reactivity and awareness. Larson and Brown report that: “The ability of adolescents to reason about these different systems potentially enables them, for example, to differentiate temporary emotions from

enduring dispositions in people, to understand the cultural conditions surrounding complex interpersonal emotions, and to better assess the causes and effects of emotions” (Larson and Brown, 2007, p. 1083).

In the affirmation of the bio-psychosocial well-being of adolescents, socio-cognitive strategies used to cope with difficulties and negative events, and competence in emotion regulation, are of considerable importance. These changes also occur differentially for each individual, and there are fears related to comparing one’s body with that of others and intense emotions regarding self-perception and self-esteem. Barone (2021, p. 167) argues that “adolescents are extremely sensitive and receptive to social and emotional stimuli they come into contact with, with particular regard to social judgment”.

With the aim of supporting reflection on the importance of creating opportunities beyond school education and work-study experiences for the development of skills other than disciplinary ones, this article explores the potential offered in this regard by social theater as a place where adolescents can experience not only artistic and cultural aspects but also specifically related to the learning of transversal competencies and soft skills.

When we talk about social theater, we refer to a theatrical form that distinguishes from traditional theatre performances for its aim to promote social inclusion and integration, even though there isn’t an univocal definition of social theatre. Among the most important experiences in which it finds its origins there is the Theatre of the Oppressed, that consists of theatrical forms developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s, and it was meant to empower people traditionally voiceless and without rights. Today social theatre is considered an umbrella term which includes a large variety of experiences, from Theater of the Oppressed to community theater, including educational theater (including Bernardi et al., 2002; Tolomelli, 2008; Di Sanzo and Barsotti, 2015; Zani et al., 2017). It can involve different types of communities, including social outcasts, disabled people or people with mental disorders. Social theatre has two purposes: one cultural-artistic and one social, concerning the empowerment of the individual and the community (Bernardi, 2004). One of the keywords is “participation”, which allows the individual to experience belonging to a community that shares deep experiences and creates opportunities for contact and agreement: the social action of the individual is recognized and valued, each enriches the group by bringing new possibilities for creation and scenic action. A protected space is thus created in which mediation occurs between the resources and needs of all participants, through a process of mutual listening and co-design (Bernardi and Innocenti Malini, 2021). In developing this contribution, particular attention has been paid to the literature regarding the learning opportunities created for adolescents within theater workshops (including Seidel, 1996; Fiske, 1999; Psilos, 2002; Ruppert, 2006; Craig, 2011; Cowart, 2013).

The artistic aspect of social theater stimulates curiosity and creativity, while the social aspect supports the development of relational skills. The theatrical experience offers the opportunity to confront one’s abilities and limits and promotes the development of life skills and transversal competencies, and inspires motivation to learn (Ruppert, 2006).

This study contributes to the community psychology literature by focusing on the description of a high impact social setting and its effect on youth development in terms of competence support. One of the goals of this field is in fact to identify local resources in the service of increasing community capacity to improve community life (Trickett, 2009). The historical concern with marginalized groups and diversity has expanded to include community research and intervention across a wide range of cultural ecologies. There is long-standing tradition of reviewing social, community, and preventive interventions, emphasizing the promotion of competence across the life span and the power of social settings to influence youth development (Reppucci et al., 1999; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008; Vieno et al., 2005; Ozer et al., 2008; Way et al., 2007). Social theatre experiences can help develop soft skills in the subjective, intersubjective, and expressive areas linked to performing. The research presented in this article contributes to this literature by empirically exploring the potential of social theater for adolescents. Through the presentation of a case study and the use of interviews reporting participants' perspectives on their experience, we aim to describe the transversal competencies acquired through a social theater experience conducted in a specific context.

Materials and methods

The study relies on a qualitative research methodology. Through semi-structured interviews, we explored the learning and competencies acquired by participating in the social theater course held from October 2021 to June 2022 in Pesaro, Italy, specifically at "Il Porto – Teatro Galleggiante".

The first author completed his pre-graduate internship in the facility. During this period, the project for this research developed and the first author used it for her thesis work supervised by the second author. The interviews were conducted between May and July 2022 by the first author, audio-recorded, and fully transcribed. The interview outline is available in the appendix. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewed adolescents and their parents. The research information and data processing consent were developed following the guidelines provided by the Transdisciplinary Research Ethics Committee of the University of Rome Sapienza. The project and data collection and processing procedures were approved by the organization where the research was conducted, the Italian Center for Solidarity in Pesaro. The names of the participants (excluding the course teacher) were modified during transcription to ensure anonymity. The interview was administered to 9 adolescents out of the 13 who participated in the course. An interview was also conducted with the theater course teacher, used for understanding and describing the research context.

A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006) aimed at identifying the transversal competencies and learning outcomes. An inductive method was used to define the coding categories. In the first phase, two researchers read the interview transcripts, identifying the categories to be used for coding. In the second phase, these categories were compared and reinterpreted. The

level of data saturation was discussed, and the extracted data were considered sufficient for exploratory qualitative analysis. The verbatim quotes from the interviews selected within the article are illustrative of the identified categories. The research results were presented to the interviewed adolescents and the course teacher at the end of the research in a dedicated meeting.

The study was conducted within a social theater course for adolescents in the context of "Il Porto – Teatro Galleggiante". This course has been active since 2019 but originates from an organization that has been conducting courses for children, adults with disabilities, and people with psychiatric disorders for many years. Since 1989, it has been conducting artistic-theatrical workshops aimed at citizens and guests of the facilities managed by Ce.I.S. (a day center and two residences for people with psycho-physical disabilities, a residence for people with HIV/AIDS, and a relief service for people with psychiatric disorders). The main purpose of the project is to consolidate and increase the culture of diversity in the city, starting from the new generations and allowing them direct experience of the beauty and richness that an experience with diversity entails. In an interview, Giuliano Ferri, actor, director, and course teacher, describes the birth of the social theater workshop for adolescents:

"Before Covid, there were people with disabilities present with me who acted as assistants, this also served the purpose of allowing them to experience being rewarded because the kids would call them teachers, masters, right? So it was very rewarding for them, and, at the same time, it was rewarding for children and teenagers to already deal with people with disabilities and not be afraid of them but to discover the qualities and potentials of this relationship".

The theater course for adolescents is structured in weekly sessions that last an hour and a half. Annually, the programming is divided into two phases: from October to December, acting exercises are proposed to allow the group to get to know each other, enabling the workshop teacher to better understand the participants' abilities and potentials; from January onwards, the focus is on the performance that will be staged in June.

The main objectives of the course are two-fold: 1) to foster acceptance and embrace of all classmates, even if they differ in interests and abilities, and to put the group in the best condition to work as a team and collaborate; 2) to allow teenagers to discover their expressive potentials in relation to scene partners and the audience. There is a great emphasis on group dynamics and mutual respect, and the contribution and participation of all teenagers are strongly valued. Alongside the workshop facilitator, there is an educator for the support of teenagers with special educational needs, who also takes care of stage costumes. In describing the fundamental elements for the success of the course, Giuliano talks about feeling in a peer relationship with the participants, where he is the first to question himself.

Regarding the individual needs, in addition to expressiveness, attention is also paid to the sense of personal efficacy and the ability to share one's point of view and interests with the group: during rehearsals, some moments are specifically dedicated to discussion and debate about the topics presented in the staging. Thus, the path and themes addressed

in the play are defined together with the group, which improves cohesion and critical thinking skills.

When asked about the significance of this experience with teenagers through theater, Giuliano responds:

“Sometimes we live in a society that fails to value teenagers’ creativity, indeed, sometimes almost... they are somewhat stifled in their vital energy. (...) I believe that not everyone thinks they are worth much, and they don’t think they can ask for much (...) they instead must have big dreams, not small dreams, and in order to do that, they must think they are great, worth a lot”.

Analyses

The first result is that the evaluation made by the interviewed teenagers regarding the course attended is decidedly positive. The teenagers describe the experience as something that “opens the mind,” enriches, makes them happy, helps, and changes people for the better:

“This experience, let’s say, has enriched me... to the point of feeling that I have something more, something that characterizes you anyway. And that characterized my... my experience, I mean, my personality.” – Lisa (13 years old)

“The thought that people often tell me speaking in front of everyone is something that terrifies me. And so, one thing I would like to add is that doing theater has helped me a lot, throughout my life, every time I tell people that I do theater, they are all very impressed by this thing, and in my opinion if people, I mean, teenagers, did more theater, perhaps people would be different from how they are, I mean, theater changes people. Because it... I could say, opens your mind.” – Marta (15 years old)

“The theater has helped me a lot and – even just thinking about performing on a stage, I feel... it really fills my heart with joy.” – Giulia (15 years old)

The skills acquired through the course and identified in the analysis are organized into three thematic areas:

- a subjective area, which can be described as a greater self-awareness in situations with also changes in one’s own abilities to deal with emotions;
- an interpersonal area, which can be described as a greater knowledge of others, with improved relational, and communication skills;
- a theatrical performance area, which can be defined as a cognitive area, linked to memory and improvisation, interpretation of a role, and as a personal and common enterprise.

For each area, exemplifying interview excerpts are reported, maintaining the use of pseudonyms.

Subjective area.

Having known and experienced new emotions, in a way different from everyday life, is among the aspects that have been most highlighted by all the interviewees:

“You should never hold back emotions, that is, you should never think that others understand what you mean because, as in real life, in the end, it’s not that easy.” – Chiara (15 years old)

During rehearsals, actors learn to deeply understand the emotions experienced by their characters, to recognize when

emotions are suitable for the context, and to modulate their expression. Luca states that during the exercises, they engage by experiencing situations and emotions that they don’t usually experience in real life; Matteo, Chiara, and Giulia report that during this course, they have learned about the functionality of emotions within the various scenes played. Six of the interviewees claim to have learned not to be ashamed of expressing their emotions in front of the public and their peers, overcoming the fear of judgment. For Sara, the comparison with her character and with the audience teaches her to understand and comprehend herself, to discover herself capable of embarking on ever-new interpretations:

“Acting is a (...) beautiful and effective way to open up with oneself, not only to the external world, in relationships with others, but precisely to discover every time new characters that we have inside us, and emotions that we can very well express... I believe that to show the emotions of a character, I have to somewhat immerse myself in those emotions. Because if I have to, for example, interpret a sad role, I have to have... something in my head, thoughts that help me to trigger that sad moment that I have to act.” – Sara (16 years old)

Sara underlines how this is not only an experience of contact with the emotions of others but also with one’s own, an experience in which one learns to feel more, to know the emotions which are described as something by which one is completely enveloped (“immerse myself in those emotions”).

Learning to discover ever-new communicative and expressive methods also allows Sara to express herself freely:

“In these years, it has helped me a lot to... bring out my personality, (...) because anyway I have a fairly introverted personality... that when I’m there on stage acting, it completely comes out... and becomes another thing, so it helped me a lot.” – Sara (16 years old)

Participants were also asked to tell two episodes that occurred during the social theater course: one positive and one negative. During rehearsals, the teenagers confront their own difficulties and limits, putting themselves at stake and experimenting with new roles, and it is not always easy to live up to their own expectations. Giulia recounts an exercise done at the beginning of her journey:

“Giuliano had given us a text that we could read, a poem, I think, we had to read it a bit spoken and a bit sung, and I remember that at that moment I couldn’t, I mean, I got stuck and I said no, I can’t do it. I had to go back, and there obviously you feel very, very heavy, when you can’t do something as you would like, especially speaking for myself. I always try to... try to do my best, but... when you can’t, you feel a little bad, but then negative experiences also help you, in the end. Maybe even more than the positive ones.” – Giulia (15 years old)

Giulia highlights the possibility that exists in this context to experiment and learn from experience and in particular from mistakes, difficulties, and how this also becomes a more general meta-reflection on the value of negative experiences in life.

Luca, Lisa, and Sofia stated that thanks to this course, they feel more able to open up and relate, in general, more effectively with other people, overcoming shyness.

“I have always been a very, let’s say, closed boy with people (...) I’m also a bit shy and maybe, yes, theater has helped me a lot especially in this aspect.” – Luca (15 years old)

“I am a person who speaks very little. In general, maybe when there is a problem, I tend to keep it to myself and maybe not talk. While theater, however, really helped me a lot to improve in this aspect.” – Lisa (13 years old)

The relationship with scene partners is another central aspect in rehearsal; here actors have the opportunity to experience multiple interactions and have fun building different relationships – positively or negatively characterized – among the characters.

Interpersonal area.

In recounting what they have learned within this social theater course, teenagers affirm that they have understood the importance of non-verbal communication, and have acquired a greater awareness of their expressive abilities. The exercises proposed by the teacher are important for experiencing the communicative possibilities: for the scene to be effective, it is necessary for the audience to understand all the lines, as well as the actions and emotions experienced by the characters.

“The thing that was most useful to me is learning the movements related to emotions, and in fact, we did many exercises on this, so... anger, you have to be more brisk, but however the movements must not be exaggerated, or the different contexts, um... you have to represent a happy person, a sad person... this thing helped me a lot.” – Giulia (15 years old)

Like Giulia, other adolescents report experiencing better control of their posture and, in general, their body. All participants also agree on the usefulness of exercises in the first phase of the course to experiment and increase awareness and control of vocal emission and prosody. Changing perspective, putting oneself in the shoes of the audience, made Lisa reflect on her expressive and communicative manner: often the emotion felt on stage leads to speaking one’s lines quickly, and it is necessary to strive so that the listener understands every word.

“Over the years, I have noticed that my expressive ability has improved, and above all it is helping me, although I continue to rush when I talk (...), however, I realize when I rush, and therefore it still helps me.” – Lisa (13 years old)

Teenagers also speak about the importance of helping and collaborating. Some of the teenagers talk about helping each other to improve, while others refer to the moment when they go on stage: in facing together a situation where the tension is shared, the performers get involved and overcome any unforeseen events together, sharing a meaningful experience that strengthens individuals and the group. From the responses of many teenagers emerges the perception of a group where esteem, trust, and mutual support are breathed; interindividual differences are welcomed and valued, and the contribution of each member of the group is encouraged, as Luca recounts in the following excerpt:

“I think there are people within this group- it happens many times that are very participatory, nobody is very- is closed, or nobody never speaks when Giuliano asks for ideas... however, helping him also to understand, right? What we would like to do in the show, what- everyone is very participatory, including me. And... so you can see that we want to do it and we want to do it.” – Luca (15 years old)

For a scene to involve the audience, there must be harmony among the actors, and there must be collaboration and mutual listening. Scene partners play a fundamental role in the success of the show: it is in everyone’s interest that each member gives their best. Sofia describes one of the positive aspects of the first phase of the course, where the focus is exclusively on technical preparation and mutual understanding:

“By observing maybe- when you are not on stage and you are sitting, and you watch others while they do an exercise, you learn to understand maybe what their weak point is and, um, you also learn to help them improve.” – Sofia (17 years old)

While Lisa, in describing the positive aspects of this phase, argues that it is important because it allows her to get to know her classmates but also to learn to relate to them, both as people and as characters. The excerpt that follows is Sofia’s response to the question of describing the relationships between the group members:

“Um... one word: family. Because we learn to know each other, to accept our flaws, and sometimes even to live with other people (...) we have different ages, different concepts, maybe of the same theme, and... different thoughts, so it’s a bit difficult to reconcile so many minds with so many ideas.” – Sofia (17 years old)

For Matteo too, the group can be compared to a family, where one learns to know and accept differences of opinion, not only by sharing successes but also by facing unexpected events and difficulties together. In choosing the show, Giuliano allows each person the freedom to express and argue their own point of view, using it as a starting point in the creative process of staging the scenes. Lisa reports on the beauty and difficulty perceived in bringing together all the ideas of the group members into a single solution:

“Knowing others’ points of view is truly enriching, I mean, it really enriches you personally, and you also feel what others would like and... increases the ability to get to know them (...) While the negative one (...) there is a moment when one says something, another says something completely different, and it’s said... but a compromise is difficult to find.” – Lisa (13 years old)

The moment of confrontation and collaboration for the choice of the show is very delicate but also very formative because it puts the group in a condition of discussion, where it is possible to find a common agreement and resolve any internal conflicts. Participants are constantly put in a position to change perspective, from identifying with their own character to putting themselves in the shoes of the audience watching what happens on stage. Two interviewees report having learned, not without difficulty, to accept their peers’ point of view, even when it does not coincide with their own, and the criticisms expressed by peers towards them. Three interviewees claim to feel understood by their peers, while six interviewees claim to have found a context where they can get involved, overcoming the fear of others’ judgment:

“It’s a place where there are often people who are a bit different from the crowd and this thing makes me feel very... very comfortable, very at home- in quotation marks. (...) I found people who can listen to me, help me and even staying silent I can feel... um I can perceive... that in the air there is- there is love.” – Giulia (15 years old)

“It’s one of those environments where I don’t feel judged in any way.” – Chiara (15 years old)

Giuliano encourages the teenagers to improve by emphasizing their skills and potential, and the possibilities of improving to make a better impression in front of the audience, relating to them in a way that never makes them feel inadequate or unworthy of a role. Participants were also asked about any negative aspects of the two phases of the course. Regarding the first phase of the course, two teenagers report that sometimes repeating the same exercises several times is unstimulating for them, while one girl reports that she would prefer to have more space to challenge herself individually. Regarding the second phase, one girl reports perceiving less involvement and commitment from some classmates compared to hers, one boy reports being saddened by the absences of classmates during rehearsals and by the absence of some friends in the audience during the final show.

Theatrical performance area.

In response to the question asked at the beginning of the interview, regarding what he learned during the social theater course, Matteo responds by recounting that he has benefited from acting exercises in terms of confidence in presenting acquired knowledge:

“For example, one thing I said about theater is that, during the exams, you have to present a speech, it’s like when you act. In fact, you also practice presenting a speech.” – Matteo (14 years old).

Having to memorize and interpret monologues helped him develop some skills that he applied within the school context. One of the exercises in which teenagers experiment involves having an unknown text (for example, a poem) available and, after having a few minutes to read and understand it, reinterpreting it in front of their classmates, also practicing mastering vocabulary. This social theater course proves to be a deeply stimulating context for participants, who describe the theater play as fun and challenging. Chiara, in describing her experience of participating in the theater course, asserts that it has always been a commitment that does not weigh on her, a much-awaited appointment throughout the week, and that the rehearsal room is a place protected from the problems of everyday life:

“I don’t know how to say it, it’s just something that- I come here and it’s as if all the problems outside are no longer there and so it’s beautiful.” – Chiara (15 years old)

Identifying with the character requires being in the here and now, as one must always be ready to overcome any obstacles or misunderstandings that may arise during a scene. Marta, who has attended this course since childhood, recounts her first time forgetting a line during a show:

“I was young and let’s say it was the first time I forgot my lines, and I immediately thought, oh no, what do I do now? And... after that, let’s say it was something that, at that moment, was very terrifying because it happened there, and I thought oh no, the show is over, my character sucks, everything is ruined, the show... I didn’t act well. But afterward, these are things that – I mean, they always happen and it’s good for them to happen

to know (...) if they were to happen again in the future, how to resolve these situations”.- Marta (15 years old)

The teenagers report having learned that it is necessary to thoroughly understand their character, not stopping at surface-level understanding, and comprehending its way of thinking and acting. Sara states that a key aspect of interpretation is being able to “wear” one’s character, enriching it with one’s personal contribution: this implies learning about oneself to understand the points of connection and contrast between oneself and the character. Many express feeling gratified in shaping the performance and realizing that the end-of-year show, for which they have sacrificed and invested energies, is ready to be shown to the public:

“It’s beautiful to see the show grow with you, so to see, slowly, the show improving that forms with you, that you improve and form yourself, simultaneously at the end.” – Chiara (15 years old)

Throughout the year, the show takes shape very gradually, and it is work that requires a lot of commitment but offers numerous opportunities for personal growth. At the moment of staging the show, the teenagers see the fruits of a year-long effort: the debut is highly anticipated, and the interaction with the audience is very stimulating and rewarding.

Another aspect that emerged is the satisfaction felt by adolescents in looking back at their journey, their successes, and those of the group. Giulia claims to have matured thanks to attending this course, as does Luca, while Sofia asserts to be proud of challenging herself, facing her limits, and overcoming important challenges with herself:

“When I played a role I didn’t want to play (...) It happened to me that I said, oh my, how do I do it? How do you play a negative character? I’ve always been used to having, let’s say, characters who are generally on the positive side... and so I found myself facing this challenge which I must say, I liked, and I must say that I also had quite a positive feedback, the greatest joy was this.” -Sofia (17 years old)

Lisa and Marta claim to be amazed by the possibilities of personal growth provided by participating in the course: the aspects worked on are multiple and not only related to acting skills but also to relational competencies, critical abilities, and introspection, thanks to the relationship with one’s character.

Discussion and conclusions

This article enriches the debate on the importance of developing soft skills in adolescence, alongside discipline-specific ones. In particular, the article explores the potential of social theater as a means to foster the acquisition of transversal competencies and soft skills in adolescents, particularly in areas such as self-awareness, communication, interpersonal relationships, and theatrical performance. Through a case study and interviews with participants, it demonstrates how social theater offers a platform for personal growth, meaningful relationships, and the development of skills applicable in various personal and professional settings.

This case study has highlighted how social theater can be a valuable context for acquiring cross-cutting skills in various areas: the subjective area, the intersubjective area, and the area of theatrical performance as both a personal and collective endeavor.

****Subjective Area: Self-Awareness and Emotions.** The social theater course has helped participants develop greater self-awareness, particularly regarding emotions, and a better understanding of their own abilities. Interviewees have emphasized how, through the process of identifying with characters, they have learned to express and manage emotions authentically and openly, overcoming the fear of judgment from others. This has contributed to improving their ability to communicate emotionally and their awareness of personal dynamics.

****Intersubjective Area: Communication Skills and Interpersonal Relationships.** The course has also had a significant impact on the intersubjective area, allowing participants to acquire non-verbal communication skills and improve their ability to express themselves. They have learned the importance of listening to others and collaborating in a group context, demonstrating a good understanding of internal dynamics. Creating an environment of mutual support, characterized also by a strong shared emotional connection, has facilitated the development of meaningful bonds among participants, thereby contributing to their personal growth and ability to work effectively as a team.

****Theatrical Performance Area as a Personal and Collective Endeavor.** The area of theatrical performance has provided participants with the opportunity to develop skills related to memory, role interpretation, improvisation, and managing unforeseen stage situations. These skills have been successfully applied outside the theatrical context, for example, during school presentations. The challenge of putting oneself out there and overcoming obstacles during rehearsals and performances has contributed to the personal growth of participants, making them more self-assured and capable of facing challenging situations.

The social theater course has also proven to be a context where collaboration and mutual support among participants have fostered personal growth and the formation of meaningful relationships, both among peers and with relevant adult figures within the workshop.

Overall, the research suggests that social theater can serve as a valuable educational resource for youth development, contributing to the broader literature on community psychology and competence support.

Despite the limitations of generalizability associated with studying a single case, this research highlights the specific educational potential of this artistic-social-educational device. Further studies could involve quantitative investigations with a larger number of participants, focusing on the spread and distribution of specific skills identified in this exploratory qualitative research.

In summary, the findings of this research suggest that social theater can be a valuable educational resource for developing a range of cross-cutting skills in young people. The skills acquired during social theater courses can be transferred and applied in a variety of contexts, both personal and professional. The enthusiasm and commitment of young people in theatrical

activities, along with the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from seeing the result of individual and group work in the performance, represent a valuable resource to be utilized in educational settings. Such programs could be more widely promoted in educational environments to foster personal growth, improve student communication and interpersonal relationships, and provide them with useful tools to address current and future challenges in personal and professional life.

Ethical approval

The procedures of the study were in line with ethical standards set by the Italian Psychological Association and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. The research project was approved by the institution where the research took place.

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the interviewees' privacy.

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Authors' contribution

Conceptualization, L.M. and F.A.; Methodology, L.M. and F.A.; Data collection, L.M.; Writing—original draft, L.M. and F.A.; Writing—review & editing, L.M. and F.A.; Supervision, F.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your experience participating in the theater course since you enrolled until today, highlighting what you have learned specifically in the theatrical field, but also in terms of social relationships with other students, and in your personal sphere (related, for example, to aspects of yourself and your character).
2. How would you describe the relationships with the other students in the course?
3. What activities do you do together besides the course?
4. Tell me about an episode or an example of an activity done together with the other students in the course.
5. Briefly describe how the theater course is structured.
6. Describe one positive and one negative aspect of the different phases/activities of the theater course (performance, improvisation, etc.).
7. Tell me three things you have learned about interpreting a role in the theater course?
8. Tell me about a positive and a negative episode related to participating in the course?
9. On a scale of 1 to 4 (where 1 is low and 4 is high), how satisfied are you with the progress made so far in the theater course?
10. Are there aspects you would like to work on in the future? If so, what are they?
11. In conclusion, is there anything you would like to add about the significance that this experience has had for you?