Forum-theatre technique to foster creative and active problem solving: A resilience-building intervention among in-service teachers

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Abstract

This paper introduces the results of an evaluation of the Forum-theatre workshop method, which was designed within the framework of a resilience-building intervention. About 230 in-service vocational school teachers in Canton of Ticino participated in the study. A mixed-methods research design was applied to investigate potentialities of the Forum-theatre technique in generating a better understanding about interpersonal conflicts at school while fostering active coping strategies. Data were collected by means of participatory observation and a self-reported questionnaire. The findings indicate a perceived positive impact in terms of proactive participation, critical awareness and activated reflectivity. In addition, the interactive drama technique encouraged participants to activate a dialog between multiple perspectives, thus enlarging the perceived spectrum of possible actions during relational conflicts. The paper concludes with implications for creativity and resilience research.

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Introduction

Gouthro (2018) describes artistic creativity as a generative process that stimulates deeper insights into multiple and alternative ways of seeing, understanding and acting. Through this generative process, artistic creativity can enlarge the possibilities of thought and action for both individuals and organisations (Chemi & Du, 2017; Glăveanu, 2015).

Due to these benefits, practitioners in several professional fields have turned their attention to using art-based methods to stimulate transformational learning and development (Antonacopoulou & Taylor, 2019; Burton, Lepp, Morrison, & O'Toole, 2015; Chemi & Du, 2017; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In particular, adult educational programmes have exploited the creative generative potential of the arts in order to support professionals in finding new solutions to problems. This approach also has nurtured the emergence of new products, processes, competences and attitudes. The arts have the power to move individuals and groups beyond their conventional understanding and ways of behaving by stimulating new perspectives (Gouthro, 2018). For instance, the arts provide individuals with the opportunity to experience and act in a multisensorial and multimodal way while reflecting deeply and critically on their experiences (Archer & Newfield, 2014; Glass, 2011; Lavina, Fleet, & Niland, 2017; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008). The arts also create a space for thinking differently and for exploring intuitively and emotionally connected ideas that go beyond words alone (McKay & Sappa, in press). The artistic practice stimulates individuals to collect new insights on experiences, which is the basis for generating new understandings and enlarging the boundaries of possible actions (Hakkarainen & Vapalahti, 2011; McNiff, 1998; Monks, Barker, & Mhanacháin, 2001). This process can become particularly helpful when critical events occur requiring a response from individuals and/or groups (Metzl, 2009; Sappa, Boldrini, & Barabasch, 2019; Weston & Imas, 2018).

Researchers have developed a number of models of creativity emphasising a virtuous circle between action and reflection as a key component of any creative process. In particular, Glăveanu's (2015) perspectival framework holds that 'creating involves a form of detachment or distantiation from one's own position in the world to see them – both one's position and the world – from a new perspective: the perspective of others' (pp. 165–166). In essence, the author stresses that a creative process requires the capacity to integrate and coordinate different perspectives into a new meaningful understanding or object. Thus, creativity requires reflectivity, particularly when it aims at promoting professional or personal development, as is the case in our study.

Interactive drama techniques, including the Forum-theatre method described in this paper, are particularly adept at promoting this kind of creativity. They provide participants the opportunity to assume different perspectives by overcoming the divide between actors and spectators (Boal, 1995). In interactive drama, the audience is invited to act and interact on the stage while being confronted with realistic problems. Participants can assume different perspectives both by acting on

the stage and by observing other participants while acting (Hakkarainen & Vapalahti, 2011; Picher, 2007). In addition, the Forum-theatre seeks to stimulate emotional and cognitive responses from participants. On the emotional side, it encourages feelings of empathy and identification with the characters because the performance is designed based on realistic problems. At the cognitive level, a dialogue between different perspectives is elicited during the interactive performance and then critically reflected upon following the performance.

This paper introduces the results of an evaluation of the Forum-theatre workshop method which was designed within the framework of a resilience-building intervention. The study primarily aimed to evaluate the effects of Forum-theatre on individuals' abilities to enlarge their understanding and coping strategies with respect to interpersonal school conflicts and difficult relationships with colleagues.

In the next section, we discuss the relationship between creativity, resilience and the Forum-theatre technique. We then describe the education programme and the art-based method adopted before elaborating on the methodological aspects of the study and reporting our findings. We conclude the paper by discussing implications for creativity and resilience research.

Creativity, resilience and the Forum-theatre technique

Some approaches to explaining creativity centre around finding novel and suitable solutions to problems by assuming, coordinating and integrating multiple perspectives (Glăveanu, 2015). Similarly, resilience (i.e., the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity and to maintain well-being, see Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011) implies the ability to cope positively with problems that emerge from adversities by transforming risks and suffering into positive challenges and developmental resources (Weston & Imas, 2018). A bidirectional relationship exists between creativity and resilience. On the one hand, creativity can reinforce resiliency in individuals by helping them find new solutions to problems. Moreover, it can support people in seeing problems and adversities from different perspectives (Metzl, 2009; Metzl & Morrell, 2008) while allowing them to question and move beyond the oppressive habits ensnaring them. On the other hand, some scholars have demonstrated that increased creativity is a manifestation of *post-traumatic growth*, here meaning the positive psychological change derived from bouncing back in the face of adversity – a substantial component of any resilience process (Forgeard, 2013). Thus, we consider the core connecting principle between creativity and resilience to be individuals' ability to find new and suitable solutions to personal and professional problems. In so doing, they are able to maintain and possibly reinforce their well-being despite adversity.

Forum-theatre is a participatory drama technique based on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979). In a Forum-theatre workshop, participants are encouraged to confront real or realistic problems, mainly relational ones, within a theatre play involving an oppressed-oppressor dynamic. In this respect, the Forum-theatre aims at overcoming the distinction between actor and audience,

with the main intent of transforming 'people from spectators (objects) into actors (subjects) in their own lives and to make audiences aware of oppressed–oppressor relationships and how the consequences of such relationships can be avoided' (Hakkarainen & Vapalahti, 2011, p. 314). Specifically, participants are shown a performance (first performed by actors) with a central character facing a relational conflict in which he or she is being oppressed by an oppressor. The script usually is designed based on a real or realistic situation hitting close to home in the participants' everyday personal or professional lives. The designed performance does not provide a 'happy ending'. There are no fixed solutions or answers to the represented problems. Rather, the performance seeks to stimulate a dialogue between perspectives and to encourage reflection around this dialogue. In the first instance, the Forum-theatre aims at provoking an empathetic feeling in the audience with respect to the protagonist being oppressed. This empathy is crucial in activating a feeling of *emotional dissonance* to motivate participants to react to the oppressive dynamics (Boal, 1995). Following the performance, the audience has an opportunity to go on stage and propose useful changes that might help to solve the relational conflict. As noted by Boal (1995), the opportunity to move from spectator to actor is a key aspect of the *catharsis process*. Diverging from Aristotle's perspective – where theatrical catharsis is related to the opportunity for spectators to passively relive the problems represented on the stage – the Forum-theatre method provokes catharsis by stimulating the audience to act (Meisiek, 2004).

The Forum-theatre technique has been applied in various educational and professional contexts (e.g., Lundén, Lundgren, Morrison-Helme, & Lepp, 2017; Ruping, 1993). Multiple studies have demonstrated its potential in activating individual and collective reflection as well as in creating a positive attitude towards problem solving by focusing on individual agency and self-empowerment (McClimens & Scott, 2007; Souto-Manning, 2011; Wasylko & Stickley, 2003).

Based on these considerations, Forum-theatre sought to improve both creativity and resilience. For instance, it supports participants in assuming a different position during a problematic situation and testing it on stage. By doing so, it activates a dialog between the multiple perspectives represented on the stage. Boal (1995) coined the term 'spect-actors' to describe individuals moving from spectators to actors. This technique also encourages active positioning during relational problems by guiding participants in seeking *active coping* strategies, that is strategies 'intended to achieve some degree of personal control over a specific stressor and conditions resulting from the stressor' (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001, as cited in Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Active coping is a crucial aspect of resilience as it empowers individuals facing adversity (Beltman et al., 2011; Bonanno, 2004; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Smith et al., 2008).

Contextual framework of the study:
The resilience-building workshop

This study is based on a continuing training workshop proposed to in-service school teachers in Canton Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The main intent of the workshop was to activate an individual and collective reflection on interpersonal conflicts at school and to empower teachers to cope actively with those conflicts. The focus on interpersonal conflicts was selected based on preliminary studies conducted in Canton Ticino on risk and protective factors of teacher burnout (Castelli, Crescentini, & Marcionetti, 2017) and resilience (Sappa et al., 2019). These studies agreed on the crucial role of relationships between colleagues and between teachers and the school leader. In particular, the research points to significant contributions to teachers' resilience through coping effectively with adversarial relationships and building a positive relational climate at school. These findings are consistent with the current stream of literature regarding teachers' resilience (e.g., Day, 2014; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Le Cornu, 2009).

The Forum-theatre workshop here presented was intended as a resilience-building intervention. It aimed at reinforcing important components of teachers' resilience (i.e., the ability to cope positively with interpersonal conflicts at school). The workshop was designed and conducted in collaboration with teacher educators and actors in a cantonal project called L.i.n.e.a., which aimed to support teachers' well-being (see https://www4.ti.ch/decs/linea/chi-siamo/presentazione/). The project was financed by the local Ministry of Education (Department of Education, Culture, and Sport DECS, Canton of Ticino). The first author of this paper was engaged as a researcher in evaluating the workshop, and this evaluation study also was conducted on the mandate of the DECS ministry.

Consistent with the Forum-theatre technique, the workshop involved a 4-hour training session, including the following three phases:

- *Phase I (traditional performance)*: Professional actors played a set of four scenes representing relational conflicts at school, mainly described in terms of an oppressed-oppressor dynamic. Each scene included an oppressed teacher (the main character of the performance), one or more oppressor(s), and one or more witness(es) (i.e., the tritagonist described by Boal). These witnesses are teachers who participate in the conflicting situation in a more or less active way, depending on the scene. The oppressor–oppressed dynamic is particularly emphasised to enhance the plot in dramaturgical terms. The audience was invited to watch the entire performance passively, similar to what happens in a traditional drama performance. The performance aimed to activate *emotional dissonance* in order to provoke active reactions among the audience.
- *Phase II (interactive performance)*: The scenes were replicated, and the audience was invited to suggest and act out possible strategies to solve the conflicts by replacing the actors on the stage. A professional actor played the role of the 'joker'. This actor was in charge of persuading spectators to participate. Participants were free to propose

any strategies and to replace any actor on the stage to change the situation. However, the joker encouraged participants to propose strategies empowering the 'oppressor' or witnesses instead of focusing on the oppressed only. Additional actors involved in the scenes reacted to the proposed strategies offering 'improvised feedback' to the participant. The audience was invited to share comments and ideas about the proposed strategies and to suggest possible alternatives.

- *Phase III (final feedback)*: A final collective debriefing and discussion was conducted by the teacher educators. The audience was invited to share their feelings and thoughts about what they had experienced.

The workshop was conducted in the school setting, and all of the teachers were invited to participate, including the principal. The four scenes were designed based on real cases reported by psychologists providing services aimed at preventing teacher burnout conditions. Additional cases were developed based on research data.

The represented story took place at an imaginary high school in Canton Ticino where a school leader pressed teachers to improve a new L2 learning project. The main character was a female teacher who was very stressed out about this project due to a lack of support from the school and her colleagues. She felt oppressed in this situation, without perceiving any possible control over it. This scenario formed the framework of the entire performance, serving as the basis for the other scenes. The conflicting and oppressive relationship with the school leader was the focus of the first scene. The school leader was the oppressor, and a colleague took part in the interaction more passively as the witness. The second scene emphasised conflicting and unsupportive relationships among colleagues with the same female teacher serving as the oppressed. Another colleague played the role of the oppressor, while two additional colleagues served as witnesses to the conflicting interaction between the oppressor and the oppressed. The third scene focussed on a difficult relationship between the oppressed teacher and a student's mother whose behaviour was very aggressive. Other colleagues passively took part in the scene. The final scene took place in the oppressed teacher's home, where the stress she accumulated in the workplace turned into a source of family conflicts.

Research questions and design

The current study aimed to explore the potential of the Forum-theatre workshop in generating a stronger understanding of interpersonal conflicts at school while fostering active coping strategies for managing such interpersonal problems.

Two research questions guided the study:

- Did the Forum-theatre technique encourage participants to generate active problem-solving strategies?
- What did participants learn from this experience in terms of understanding and/ or coping strategies?

The study employed a mixed-methods research design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), where qualitative and quantitative procedures were combined at the level of data analysis. However, the qualitative approach was dominant with respect to both the adopted epistemic framework (the research aims are mainly descriptive and explorative) and data collection strategies (consisting mainly of observation and narratives). The quantitative component of the research design involved the quantification procedure (by means of categorical analysis) for the qualitative material.

Sample

The study was conducted during five workshop sessions that took place in four schools. As reported in Table 1, a total of 230 teachers were involved in the study. About 41% of them were female. Due to the large number of teachers employed at school one, we provided two workshop sessions, thus creating two groups from the teacher population.

The sample was well-balanced in terms of the participants' career phase. In fact, among the involved teachers, 27.2% were in the early phase of their career (1–7 years of teaching in VET schools), 26.3% were in the middle phase (8–15 years in VET schools), 34.2% were in the middle-late phase (16–30 years in VET schools) and 12.3% were in the late phase (over 30 years of teaching in VET schools).

Methods

Data were collected by means of participant observation and a self-reporting questionnaire.

Participatory observation

The first author of this paper conducted the participatory observation by attending all of the workshops. An observation grid was drafted to guide the researcher in reporting information about the interactive part of the workshop (phase II, see the methods section of this paper). The observation grid included the following items:

Table 1. Sample.

Gender	Vocational school 1		Vocational school 2	Vocational school 3	Vocational school 4	Total
	Session 1	Session 2				
Female	15 (27.3%)	21 (39.6%)	14 (35.9%)	7 (31.8%)	38 (62.3%)	95 (41.3%)
Male	40 (72.7%)	32 (60.4)	25 (64.1%)	15 (68.2%)	23 (37.7%)	135 (58.7%)
Total	55 (100%)	53 (100%)	39 (100%)	22 (100%)	61 (100%)	**230 (100%)**

a. *Timeframe:* This number reflected the number of minutes that passed from the beginning of phase two to the spectators' intervention;
b. *Characteristics of active participants (i.e., those who came to the stage):* These characteristics included gender and an ID code. The ID code was a progressive number attributed to each active participant meant to capture multiple interventions from the same person;
c. *Description of strategies proposed*: Here, the researcher summarised the proposed strategy;
d. *Main focus of the strategy*: Three types of focuses were indicated, including *focus on the oppressor*, *focus on the oppressed* and *focus on the witness*. The researcher selected the most appropriate category for the proposed strategy. An additional category named 'other' was included to code strategies where a main focus could not be identified.
e. *Free comments*: Here, the researcher made additional annotations or comments.

The findings reported in this paper refer specifically to items (c) and (d). The two items were analysed by means of a deductive categorical analysis in order to distinguish between the following three strategies:

- *Active coping strategies focussed on the oppressed*: This category includes any strategy intended to achieve some degree of personal control by the oppressed over the oppressive situation (for example, help-seeking strategies, negotiation or mediation strategies and assertive positioning in the face of the oppressor);
- *Active coping strategies focussed on the witness*: This category includes any strategy intended to achieve some degree of personal control over the oppressive situation by the witness (for example, offering emotional support to the oppressed or using negotiation or mediation); and
- *Intervention focussed on modifying the oppressor behaviour*: This category includes any intervention where a change in the oppressor's behaviour is proposed without any active contribution of the oppressed or witnesses (for example, the oppressor becomes more empathic with the oppressed).

Finally, based on the timeframe of each coded intervention, we distinguished between interventions occurring at the beginning, middle and end of the interactive performance. Through this procedure, we sought to understand if there were any changes in focus or strategy during the performance.

Self-reported questionnaire

At the end of the workshop, all participants were invited to fill in a brief questionnaire composed of two open-ended questions:

- How did you feel during the workshop?
- What did you learn from the workshop?

This paper focuses on data related to the second question. Data analysis consisted first of a deductive categorical analysis where answers were clustered into three categories:

- *Understanding*: Learning related to a new understanding of relational conflicts at school;
- *Coping*: Learning related to identifying new ways of behaving in the face of relational conflict at school;
- *Other*: Any other kind of learning; and
- *Nothing*: When the respondent reported that no learning occurred.

Following this categorisation, we scrutinised responses from the *understanding* and *acting* categories by means of an inductive categorical analysis seeking to identify different kinds of learning.

Validation procedure

Two independent researchers were involved in the categorical data analysis procedures. Inter-coder agreement was calculated on 10% of the collected data. Based on the literature, we accepted Cohen's Kappa value as higher than .70.

Findings

Generally speaking, the participants appreciated the Forum-theatre workshop. Audience participation was quite high though it took time for the teachers to get comfortable with the interactive method. The joker, in particular, had to invest time and energy into encouraging audience members to come to the stage. In the end, a total of 69 interventions were performed by 45 teachers.

Coping strategies proposed

The 69 interventions can be distinguished as follows:

- 27 (39%) instances proposing an active coping strategy focusing on the oppressed;
- 12 (17%) instances providing an active coping strategy focusing on the witness; and
- 25 (36%) instances focusing on modifying the oppressor's behaviour without proposing any active contribution by the oppressed or witnesses.

Five interventions (8%) were not coded because it was not possible to attribute a clear focus. Figure 1 reports the interventions' distributions across the timeframe.

As reported in the methods section of this paper, we split the interactive phase's timeframe into three segments, distinguishing the beginning part (corresponding to the first third of the interactive phase) the middle section (corresponding to the
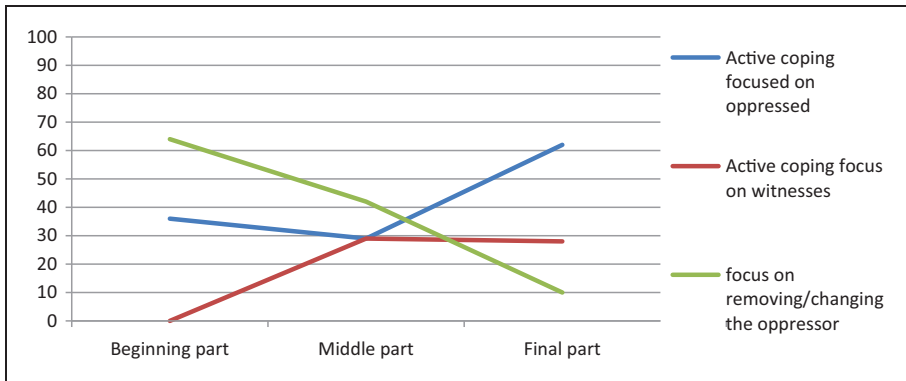
Figure 1. Proposed strategies across the interactive phase's timeframe (percentage values).
Note: $N = 64$ proposed strategies.

second third of the interactive phase) and the final segment (corresponding to the last third of the interactive phase). Each part lasted approximately 20 minutes.

Findings showed that active coping strategies progressively increased during the interactive phase of the performance. Meanwhile, the focus of the participants' interventions shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed or witnesses. More specifically, 64% of the proposed strategies focussed on modifying the oppressor's behaviour without any active contribution by the oppressed or witnesses during the initial part of the interactive phase; these strategies decreased in the middle and late parts, reaching 42% and 10%, respectively. On the contrary, active coping strategies focussed on the oppressed progressively increased, shifting from 36% in the beginning to 29% in the middle and 62% in the last segment. Interestingly, no active coping strategies focusing on witnesses occurred in the first part of the performance's interactive phase; this percentage increased to 29% in the second part and reached 28% in the final segment.

These findings inform us about the active problem-solving approach generated by the participants during the performance. In fact, most of the participants attributed responsibility for the conflict and its possible resolution to the oppressor first. As a consequence, the only possible way to solve the conflict was perceived to be a change in the oppressor's relational or communicative approach. One participant, for example, claimed that the only way to solve the conflict in scene 1 was for the school leader to change her relational and communicative styles. Although invited to reflect on how the oppressor could contribute to solving the conflict, very few teachers were able to propose active coping strategies. On the contrary, in the middle sections of the interactive performance, the number of proposed active coping strategies increased. For example, one teacher suggested that the oppressed teacher should be more assertive while speaking with her colleagues. Another participant came to the stage to demonstrate how to ask for help rather than allow oneself to be the passive victim of an oppressive dynamic. The participants

also proposed new strategies with respect to the witnesses, gradually understanding that the oppressive–oppressor relationship can be moderated by a third person who can, for example, facilitate a better reciprocal understanding.

Perceived learning outcomes

By means of a self-reported questionnaire, we collected 245 narratives about perceived learning. About 35% of those narratives referred to a new *understanding* regarding conflicting relationships at school (i.e., category 'understanding'). These narratives noted the ability to see multiple perspectives and gain a better comprehension of the communicative and relational dynamics that may cause conflict. This category also included a new understanding of personal ways of experiencing such conflicts as well as aspects related to the participants' own relational experience at school. Another 47% of the collected narratives dealt with *new ways of coping with* those conflicts (i.e., category 'coping'). An additional 12% of the narratives involved learning that was neither related to a new understanding nor to new ways of coping. Thus, they were included in the category 'other'. Finally, only 6% of the narratives explicitly reported that 'nothing has been learned during the workshop'. These narratives were clustered into the category 'nothing'.

By means of the inductive categorical analysis, we located seven different types of perceived new understandings derived from this experience (see Table 2).

First, 30 narratives dealt with the new capacity to see problems from multiple perspectives. In particular, teachers reported that the performance gave them the opportunity to see conflicts from the viewpoint of the various characters involved. They also emphasised the empathy they felt towards the oppressor, oppressed and witnesses, a feeling that provoked a more nuanced evaluation and understanding of conflicting relationships. To this point, one teacher wrote the following:

'The opportunity to see and reflect on the communicative problems represented on the stage helped me to broaden my perspectives regarding conflicts that frequently occur at school'

In a second set of narratives, the Forum-theatre workshop was described as a catalyst for collective and individual reflection on conflicting situations at school. Such reflection seemed to guide teachers in reaching a better understanding of the communicative and relational dynamics that cause conflict at school. For example, one teacher had this to say:

'This experience allowed me to reflect on how conflict evolves. I also had the opportunity to see the complexity of interpersonal conflict dynamics.'

Table 2. Categories and sub-categories related to perceived learning.

Main Categories	Sub-categories	Reference N (%)
Understanding	New perspectives	30 (12.1%)
	Activation of deep reflection on the situation	15 (6.2%)
	Understanding of main difficulties related to interpersonal conflicts at school	12 (4.9%)
	Relevance of questioning ourselves in regards to conflicting situations	12 (4.8%)
	Awareness of how little things can make a big difference	7 (2.8%)
	Better understanding of one's own relational school context	6 (2.4%)
	Awareness that multiple actions are possible during a conflict	5 (2.3%)
Subtotal		87 (35.5%)
Coping	The importance of establishing a climate of reciprocal dialog	63 (25.4%)
	The need for active positioning	24 (9.8%)
	New coping strategies	20 (8.3%)
	The importance of seeking help	9 (3.8%)
Subtotal		116 (47.3%)
Other		27 (11%)
Nothing		15 (6.2%)
Total		245 (100%)

Other teachers indicated that they gained a better understanding of the various possible causes of most relational conflicts occurring among colleagues at school, as reported in the following statement:

> 'I have learnt how complicated human relationships are, especially in a work setting like school. I saw and understood some of the main reasons why relational conflicts occur in such a setting.'

The fourth sub-category referred to the relevance of questioning ourselves. In particular, teachers claimed to have better realised the importance of critically observing their own behaviour and questioning their own ways of relating to others. The following extract is an example of this concept:

> 'I learnt a sense of self-critique. In particular, I realised the importance of me reflecting critically about myself and my professional roles'

An additional sub-category dealt with the powerful effects that little actions can have on changing a situation. In this regard, some teachers reported that they often fail to deal with a problem because they believe it to be too difficult to solve. In such situations, they feel helpless and prefer to passively resist the situation.

However, the opportunity to go on stage and try to do something – even something small – to change the situation made them aware of the need to act. They realised that little things can make a difference, as reported in the following narrative:

'I learnt that trying to change the situation, even by introducing a little change, can make a difference. I learnt that it is always worth a try.'

Moreover, six teachers reported a new understanding of their own school contexts. Although the story represented in the performance took place in an imaginary school, relational dynamics were perceived as very realistic, and some teachers were able to identify with the represented characters. A few teachers also realised the importance of nurturing a positive climate at school in order to prevent the emergence of disruptive relationships:

'I realised how lucky I am as I have positive relationships at school with my colleagues and my school leader. However, the performance made me aware of the importance of continuously nurturing this positive climate.'

The last sub-category dealt with the fact that multiple actions are possible when coping with a problem. One teacher explained this learning as follows:

'I learnt that we can find many different and effective solutions to a problem. I saw on stage various possibilities for coping with the same problems, and most of them can be effective, in my opinion.'

A second set of perceived learning categories dealt with learning new possibilities for coping with problematic situations. Within this category, four sub-categories emerged.

First, a large number of narratives pointed out the importance of assuming a dialogical approach in facing relational conflicts. These teachers declared that they learnt the necessity of using a dialogical and reciprocal communication style to cope with conflicts. Also, they argued for making dialogical climates the norm at schools. Others emphasised that conflicts often emerge when people are unable to speak to each other, to share their feelings, or to listen, understand and accept others' viewpoints. The following extract provides an example of these narratives:

'I learnt that I need to share my feelings with my colleagues, and I need to discuss it with them when a problem occurs. Sometimes a little misunderstanding turns into a serious conflict if we are not able to discuss it.'

Second, 24 narratives referred to being active in the face of relational conflicts. Many teachers emphasised the need to be active when they feel bad because of

relational problems. The following narrative is particularly cogent in explaining this concept:

> 'I learnt that when a problem occurs, I need to take action myself. I cannot really change other people. However, I can change my way of approaching problems.'

Third, some teachers reported having learnt new coping strategies without clarifying which kind of strategies. They simply indicated that the theatre inspired them to generate new ideas about coping with relational conflicts:

> 'This performance inspired me so much. I found new ways of coping with relational problems at school.'

Finally, nine narratives focussed on the need to seek help when feeling oppressed. In the following statement, the teacher describes seeking help as a key coping strategy when facing adversarial relationships:

> 'I learnt that I need to make my needs and feelings more explicit for my colleagues. I need to seek help when I suffer in conflict situations. Help-seeking is crucial to facing conflicts that hurt your feelings.'

In sum, teachers participating in the workshop reported having learnt a great deal about relational problems at school both in terms of a new understanding and in terms of novel ways of coping with relational problems. Based on the collected narratives, the Forum-theatre workshop seemed to have stimulated participants deeply, causing them to reflect critically on the situations represented on stage while applying this experience to their own school settings. The drama performance and the opportunity to move from spectator to actor contributed to creating a space for thinking differently and creatively while generating new insights about relational conflicts at school. The opportunity to step into the oppressed teacher's shoes and to transfer ideas for coping with oppressive situations from the stage to real life seems to have successfully guided spectators in enlarging their repertoire of possible responses to conflict. Based on the teachers' narratives, it appears the Forum-theatre encouraged a more active approach to problem solving.

Conclusion

The study presented here aimed at exploring the potential of the Forum-theatre technique in generating a better understanding of interpersonal conflicts at school while fostering an active coping approach in facing these problems. In particular, by following the Forum-theatre workshop practiced in various vocational schools in Canton of Ticino, we investigated the effects of this drama-based technique in

terms of the teachers' perceived learning and their empowerment to follow an active problem-solving approach.

Our findings confirm that the Forum-theatre method is a powerful technique that generates new ways of understanding and experiencing a particular phenomenon (Hakkarainen & Vapalahti, 2011; McClimens & Scott, 2007). In this case, the phenomenon under investigation was relational conflicts at school. In particular, the Forum-theatre workshop gave participants the opportunity to put themselves in the oppressor's shoes and to observe other participants doing so. This opportunity activated a dialog between opposing perspectives, resulting in the emergence of new possible ways of interpreting and coping with relational problems. In addition, the Forum-theatre encouraged self-observation and self-reflection, which necessitates a temporary detachment from the situation in order to put oneself *into* the situation. However, this process did not occur in isolation from others. The multiple *spect-actors*' voices played a crucial role by offering alternatives for questioning and comparing one's own perspectives.

In addition, our findings demonstrate a progressive shift from passive and helpless to active engagement by the participating teachers. In essence, their passivity in the beginning seemed to be based on the assumption that only the oppressor can change the oppressed-oppressive dynamic. Later, however, the teachers moved towards various action-oriented problem-solving options. In fact, participants progressively realised that it is crucial for teachers who feel oppressed because of an adversarial relationship to take action themselves. In this way, they can overcome the feeling of self-pity as well as the tendency to wait for an external intervention to transform the situation.

All in all, our findings suggest that the Forum-theatre technique can significantly contribute to teachers' creativity and resilience. Indeed, it has the potential to support teachers' ability to find novel, suitable solutions when faced with relational problems, thus allowing them to better maintain their own wellbeing.

Despite these benefits, we are aware that the study has multiple limitations. First of all, we investigated short-term and perceived effects. Our data focussed on what the participants experienced during or soon after the workshop. We have no evidence about the middle- or long-term impact of the workshop. Thus, our study cannot confirm any stable learning or personal transformation. Our conclusion, however, is that this art-based workshop can benefit teachers substantially and could be reinforced subsequently in order to support a sustainable individual or collective transformation. A longitudinal design would be needed to test this hypothesis. Another potential shortcoming of the study is the fact that learning outcomes were self-reported. Despite the crucial role that individual perception and beliefs play in the learning processes, further data would be needed to understand the impact of those perceptions on the individuals' behaviour.

In addition, the exploratory design of the study does not allow us to generalise our findings. The study focussed exclusively on learning outcomes without considering the processes behind them. A better understanding of these processes is

needed to attain a more thorough understanding of how the Forum-theatre technique impacts creative and resilient learning.

Finally, we exclusively investigated individual outcomes without exploring effects at the organisational and collective levels. Further analysis could consider group dynamics and interactive processes activated by the Forum-theatre session.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings provide several contributions to creativity and resilience research. With respect to creativity research, our findings confirm the value of art-based interventions, particularly those related to interactive theatre, in facilitating multi-perspectival dialogs and creative thinking. These interventions have the potential to enlarge people's understanding and actions.

Concerning resilience studies, our research offers further evidence that the Forum-theatre technique is a powerful method for activating reflection, individual agency and self-empowerment. The Theatre-forum technique's emphasis on the oppressor–oppressed dynamic is consistent with the nature of relational conflicts that most impact teachers' well-being. The use of this drama-based method can contribute to a critical understanding of such conflicts while encouraging active positioning in the face of adversity. The Forum-theatre technique is particularly appropriate in a teachers' education setting, especially when it involves in-service teachers who are more experienced and who can identify with the represented characters and problems. All in all, this approach shows great promise in empowering the agency of individuals, particularly teachers, facing difficult situations.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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