



The theatre laboratory in prison: An opportunity to rebuild oneself and to rebuild healthy relationships with civil society

Il laboratorio teatrale in carcere: Un'occasione per ricostruirsi e per ricostruire sane relazioni con la società civile

Giovanni Di Pinto

Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti BAT "Gino Strada" di Andria (Italy); giovanni.di.pinto@cpiabat.edu.it
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8785-0419>

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ABSTRACT

The empirical contribution, based on a case study, reflects on the potential of the Civic Education theatre workshop in the prison context, which becomes an opportunity to reconstruct an inmate's new identity as a premise for rebuilding healthy human relationships with civil society. Drawing on the outcomes of theatrical activities carried out in correctional institutions in both international and national contexts, a good practice from the Trani prison is presented which, by combining social theatre with a hybrid psychodrama characterised by simile and allegory, enabled inmates to recognise their flaws and analyse their effects. The results of the workshop showed how an innovative approach to teaching – where education and instruction join forces for genuine emancipation – can foster fruitful transformative learning.

Il contributo empirico, che si basa su uno studio di caso, riflette sulle potenzialità del laboratorio teatrale di Educazione Civica nel contesto detentivo che diviene un'occasione per ricostruire un'inedita identità del ristretto, quale premessa per riedificare sane relazioni umane con la società civile. Partendo dagli esiti delle attività teatrali realizzate in Istituti di Pena afferenti a contesti internazionali e nazionali, viene presentata una buona prassi del carcere di Trani che, sperimentando il teatro sociale associato a uno psicodramma ibrido, caratterizzato dalla similitudine e dall'allegoria, ha consentito ai ristretti di comprendere i loro difetti, analizzandone gli effetti. I risultati del laboratorio hanno mostrato come una didattica innovativa, ove educazione e istruzione si alleano per un'autentica emancipazione, può promuovere un fecondo apprendimento trasformativo.

KEYWORDS

Theatre, Prison, Transformation, Prisoner, Inmate
Teatro, Carcere, Trasformazione, Carcerato, Recluso, Detenuto

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1. Introduction

The failure to rehabilitate the offender represents one of the most troubling tragedies of a present that is increasingly uncertain and open to contestation. In light of this premise, the rehabilitation of the convicted person – explicitly enshrined in Article 27 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic – cannot be allowed to become a utopia that inhibits that essential process of humanising punishment. If theatre represents the art of relationship par excellence, it is evident that a theatrical workshop in prison constitutes a training ground in which to practise new forms of civil coexistence. When the theatre workshop presents itself as a pleasantly enlightening experience, and the school stands as the institution par excellence entrusted with the exercise of genuine democracy, “especially in institutions that have a stronger impact on everyday life (workplaces, schools, local government agencies, etc.), (theatrical) experiences are more likely to produce transformative effects” (Warren, 1992, p. 8).

Hence, the school, as a privileged site for experiencing constructive relationships with others, must guide students towards making more conscious choices – not through merely instructive learning, “but only through a transformative education, a ‘leading away’ from previous mental habits” (Kegan, 1998, p. 232).

In the prison context, where every activity becomes a springboard towards a sustainable society inhabited by people with well-made minds, “adult education creates protected environments in which to promote those conditions of social democracy necessary for transformative learning” (Mezirow, 2016, p. 91).

Adult Education, when offered within a prison setting – where the reintegration of a mature person becomes a categorical imperative – must be aligned with the aims of rehabilitative treatment, surprising the recipients of the intervention with a strategy whose ultimate purpose is not artistic experimentation, but the learning of previously unknown ways of relating to others which, leaving an indelible mark, serve as an effective antidote to the degenerations of contemporary society.

If one starts from the hypothesis that the prisoner is, in essence, a socially maladjusted individual and that the causes of maladjustment lie at the origin of deviant or criminal behaviour, it becomes evident that rehabilitation primarily calls for the re-socialisation of the inmate, which is most likely promoted through the elimination of the causes of social maladjustment underlying criminal deviance, in accordance with Article 13 of Law 354/1975 on the penitentiary system.

From this standpoint, and drawing on the outcomes of artistic activities in certain national and international prison contexts, this paper seeks to reflect on the potential of a theatre redesigned (to measure) for inmates, who must free themselves from the process of prisonisation that fuels the prisoner’s antisociality, making them increasingly alien to civil society and increasingly adherent to the subculture of the prison community (Santoro, 1997).

Such reflection is supported by the gratifying results of a good practice implemented at the Trani Correctional Facility during the 2022/2023 school year,

involving five students – both native and non-native speakers – enrolled in the Literacy and Learning of the Italian Language (AALI) course.

If the account of the aforementioned best practice has shown how theory can be concretely translated into teaching practice, the analysis of the state of the art regarding the effectiveness of theatre in the prison context has provided the backdrop to the case study carried out, also influencing the methodological strategy adopted in the educational setting. This is particularly relevant considering that the Civic Education theatre workshop was conceived as an innovative proposal aimed at the re-education, and thus the rehabilitation, of a human being unprepared to perceive the benefits of a necessary and genuine transformation.

2. The state of the art on the effects of theatre in prison: from the international to the national context

Theatre, as a cultural expression with high transformative potential, can play an extremely significant role in the metamorphosis of the individual, making them progressively more reflective and responsible. Theatre “can be decisive in reducing the rate of recidivism in prison. All the data from the most recent research (and in this respect there is greater attention in England) document a marked reduction in reoffending among those who have had the opportunity to engage in meaningful artistic experiences” (Iacobone, 2020, p. 11).

With regard to the state of the art on the effects of theatre in prison, it can be noted that artistic activities have crossed the threshold of correctional institutions in most industrialised countries for about three decades and, particularly in the English-speaking world, the socio-economic and psychological impact of these activities has long been the subject of investigation (Bodo, 2015). Particularly noteworthy is the case of England, where “theatre is often regarded as a true behavioural therapy, fully integrated among rehabilitative activities, whose effects are documented and accompanied by detailed reports” (Iacobone, 2020, p. 120).

This specific characteristic makes the country particularly advanced in the field of treatment, leaving behind Italy, where “unlike England, although almost all projects have specific objectives (identified in public and private calls for proposals to which associations and/or companies respond in order to obtain funding), there is no monitoring of the projects themselves nor an evaluation of the objectives achieved, and funding is not tied to the achievement of these” (Iacobone, 2020, p. 41).

Turning to international research, an interesting qualitative study published in the *International Journal of Prison Health* in 2013, entitled *Shakespeare in Prison: affecting health and wellbeing*, considered the positive impact of theatre on prisoners’ health. The aforementioned rehabilitative activity enables the creation of positive social relationships that generate social and emotional support (Heard et al., 2013).

Of particular note is the research conducted by Tett et al. (2012), which analysed data collected from three different institutions in Scotland. The findings

of this study, based on interviews with prison staff, educational personnel and inmates, led the authors to argue that education through the arts works because learning is less formalised, built on a pedagogical approach that focuses on the individual's strengths rather than their deficiencies.

The researchers emphasise that performing offers prisoners the opportunity to construct new identities that facilitate the development of a new self-concept and distance from the criminal world (Tett et al., 2012).

International literature has shown that theatrical activity improves relations between inmates and their families (McNeill et al., 2011), making prisoners more optimistic and confident about their post-detention future (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2014).

Some studies have found that theatre has therapeutic value as it reduces inmates' aggression, anxiety and depression (Reiss et al., 1998) and increases self-esteem and empowerment, as well as internal locus of control and self-confidence (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2014). In *Dramatherapy for mentally disordered offenders: changes in levels of anger*, Reiss et al. (1998) demonstrated that the level of aggression among participants in a dramatherapy project decreased significantly, while attempts at anger control increased, concluding that theatre can be a useful therapeutic tool for reducing levels of aggression.

Theatrical activities develop new skills, such as the ability to work in a team (Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Hughes, 2005) and interpersonal skills. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that artistic activities play a vital role in enabling inmates to embark on the path to desistance (McNeill et al., 2011), as they foster all those "soft conditions whose emergence may in turn assist in the production of the 'hard' outcome of abstinence from crime" (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2014, p. 1) – namely, personal growth, the emergence of new positive social bonds, and a "renegotiation" of identity (McNeill & Weaver, 2010).

Focusing on national research, it should be noted that the first study on the impact of art and culture in prison in Italy was the work entitled *Teatro e carcere in Italia*, conducted within the European Socrates Grundtvig project *Teatro e carcere in Europa* (Marino, 2006), and the survey by the Osservatorio dello Spettacolo of the Emilia Romagna Region *Teatro e carcere in Emilia Romagna*, published in 2012. These studies, which presented to professionals involved in prison theatre questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions and in-depth interviews to examine current conditions and theatrical methodologies adopted, are relevant documents attempting to capture the phenomenon, yet they do not objectively analyse the outcomes achieved (Giordano et al., 2017).

The study *Rehabilitating rehabilitation: prison conditions and recidivism*, conducted in the Bollate prison in 2014, demonstrated that basing prison life on rehabilitative activities (including theatre), the minimal supervision ensured by the open-cell system, and the possibility for inmates to move freely within the institution, result in a nine percentage point reduction in recidivism even without the provision of post-release social programmes (Matrobuoni & Terlizze, 2014).

A more recent and significant exploratory-descriptive investigation, conducted in 2015, used a mixed

qualitative-quantitative method to understand the functioning of a correctional facility such as Milan-Opera and the impacts generated by theatrical activities. This research, which involved the various actors operating within the prison context, sought to produce a clear snapshot also in order to "identify the drivers of change so as to produce an impact map" (Giordano et al., 2017, p. 170). In this respect, "educators emphasised that where there is theatre, the number of disciplinary reports, expressions of distress, protests, and complaints decreases" (Giordano et al., 2017, p. 189).

They also highlight that "the number of self-harming acts in a ward where there is theatre is lower than in those where there is no theatre", hypothesising that the inmate's inner energy no longer consumes and burns them out (Giordano et al., 2017, p. 189). The positive effects of theatre and its forward-looking perspective are further supported by the opinions of former inmates, who claim that theatrical activities improve the individual, fostering meaningful relationships (Giordano et al., 2017).

The analysis of the effects of theatrical activities in the prison context legitimises the theatrical workshop as an imperceptible yet significant driving force capable of generating an improving transformation not only within the individual's identity, but also in the relationship with the identity of others. As Meldolesi suggests, "no form of artistic communication lends itself, like theatre, to reactivating the individual within the social group, aiding them in moving from shadow to light" (Meldolesi, 1994, p. 50).

3. The theatre workshop in the Trani correctional facility: connections, activities, motivations, aims

"If the improving change lies in the novel educational offer proposed to the varied target audience, precisely as the CPIA contributes to the progress of the adult population through an education to be conceived, at the same time, as a fruitful opportunity for transformation" (Di Pinto, 2022, p. 62), it becomes necessary to research and test in the field ad hoc teaching strategies for adult inmates which do not focus exclusively on academic achievement, but also on the urgent re-education of the offender who, in some cases, falls back into the dramatic labyrinth of evil, masterfully constructed by organised crime operating in stark opposition to the legality that should characterise an authentic civil society.

These aims – so desirable – become even more of a priority when starting from the premise that "by absorbing the culture of the prison, inmates become less fit than before for life outside the prison walls and increasingly unable to follow the rules and customs of ordinary life" (Pirè, 2014, p. 94).

On this basis, Civic Education, wisely allied with theatre, has become an ideal medium through which to allow inmates to experience a different way of inhabiting civil society – particularly if one considers studies highlighting how the staging of performances opens up the possibility for prisoners to develop new identities, as artists and performers, which help them to conceive a new self-image and to move away from the criminal sphere (Tett et al., 2012).

Indeed, the good practice trialled at the Trani Correctional Facility, drawing on previous research, sought to:

- skilfully and tactfully introduce the teaching of Civic Education into a context which, quite naturally, tends to achieve the “prisonisation” of inmates, encouraging them to absorb and adopt the questionable habits and customs typical of the prison environment (Pirè, 2014);
- translate into sustainable activities functional to the re-education of the inmate the provisions set out in current legislation, according to which “Civic education contributes to the formation of responsible and active citizens and to the promotion of full and conscious participation in the civic, cultural and social life of the community, in respect of rules, rights and duties” (Italian Ministry of Education, 2019).

The theatre workshop entitled *A Well-Made Head to Survive in the Jungle*, designed for students with special educational needs and carried out as part of the curricular activities of the Literacy and Learning of the Italian Language course, required an individualised teaching approach. Its common objective was the restructuring of the self and the re-establishment of healthy relations with civil society. This approach proved capable of fostering a transformative learning process as fruitful as it was beneficial for a target audience characterised by a limited capacity for independent judgement and a marked propensity towards harmful conformity.

In this respect, the XVIII Antigone Report on prison conditions highlighted the increase in recidivism rates; as of 31 December 2021 (Antigone, 2022):

- 62% of inmates had already been in prison at least once before;
- 18% of inmates had been in prison five times or more.

Given that the core subject was Civic Education, whose teaching has become mandatory even in literacy courses provided by Provincial Centres for Adult Education, the workshop fostered fruitful interdisciplinary connections with Italian, English, ICT, art and image, and music education.

Starting from the journalism workshop *The Journey* (implemented in the same school year), each participant, embodying an animal, sought – through a monologue – to reflect aloud on certain questionable behaviours adopted by human beings who had perished as a result of a disastrous war, itself the direct consequence of an illogical lust for power. Each animal, personifying the vices of these misguided and reckless men, represented a current theme through a short expository and poetic text (written in rhyming couplets) learned by heart. To also involve inmates with psychiatric disorders, for whom memorisation was challenging, five posters were created depicting the four animals (lamb, lion, fox, and snake) featured in the performance, together with the symbol of peace associated with a heart containing the globe – signifying both the intrinsic aims of the rehabilitative activity and the current international situation.

In addition, the students produced thirty invitations, which were delivered to senior officials of the Prison Administration, the school headmaster, and the teachers of the CPIA BAT “Gino Strada” in Andria.

To encourage inmates to use Information and Communication Technologies, they were, in turn, involved in transcribing the script on the digital board in the classroom.

The theatre workshop concluded with a moving final performance held in the theatre hall of the correctional facility.

At the close of the event, inmates who had contributed in various ways were:

- offered a convivial moment with the supervising teacher and other members of the Prison Administration present, to share the significant milestone achieved;
- awarded a meaningful certificate of participation in the rehabilitative activity, issued by the CPIA BAT “Gino Strada” in Andria.

This strategic choice, in addition to aligning with the rationale of the penitentiary system (see, in this regard, the forms of recognition provided for by Law 354/1975), also accords with the logic of the “prize” (or gift, as defined by Fröbel), since the certificate constitutes tangible evidence – an educational tool suited to adult psychology. As Lindeman (1926) emphasised, adults display the motivation to learn when they perceive needs (to experience new forms of communication and relationship) and interests (the acquisition of benefits following good behaviour) which learning can satisfy.

If the theatre workshop allowed inmates to become aware of their many and better hidden identities, the certificate of participation represented clear evidence of how learning had generated a beneficial transformation functional to re-education and subsequent social reintegration.

Against this background, it is worth making explicit the motivations behind selecting the theatre workshop as the ideal path to transform a prototype of individual ill-disposed to recognising the true good and to distancing themselves from the alluring circuits of deviance.

Specifically, it is necessary and fruitful to implement theatrical activities in the prison context because they:

- create those antibodies capable of eliminating the perverse allure of evil that ensnares deviants and criminals, who are not defective machines but lost souls estranged from God (Howard, 1777);
- offer the opportunity to experiment, in a protected context, with ways of living and acting which, recalling the values of responsibility, legality, participation, and solidarity, enable one to experience first-hand the positive effects derived from respect for rules, rights, and duties;
- teach appropriate use of verbal and non-verbal communication, which becomes an effective tool for establishing healthy and essential human relationships;
- provide the opportunity to acquire certain key concepts relating to Civic Education in an alterna-

tive and enjoyable way, bearing in mind that enjoyment represents a genuine natural energiser (Spitzer, 1996), capable of motivating a vulnerable type of student who, due to particularly questionable past experiences, requires teaching approaches capable of capturing attention and rekindling the pleasure of learning to be different and better than before.

As for its ultimate aim, the activity sought to show how the Civic Education theatre workshop in prison represents a welcome opportunity to rebuild oneself and to reconstruct healthy relations with civil society, which – with high expectations – eagerly awaits a re-converted man, capable of successfully managing the complex transition from an unconscious individual to a judicious person.

What has been discussed here highlights how complexity, a constitutive factor of the prison circuit, characterises not only the type of activity proposed but also its declared aim.

4. The case study: a functional strategy for empirical research

The complexity of the prison context, combined with the novel workshop-based teaching approach implemented – essentially aimed at the re-education of the individual – required a research strategy as flexible as it was suited to showing how the selection of an appropriate teaching methodology can enable the achievement of the primary rehabilitative objectives. Hence, the need to employ, jointly, two types of case study which made it possible “to understand the actions of the subjects under examination and the dynamics governing the context under study” (Trinchero, 2004, p. 156).

If the action research case study – in which a case is examined from within to determine strategies for intervention in a specific situation (Yin, 1994) – offered the possibility of analysing a good practice within the prison in order to identify teaching strategies concretely suited to the specific situational context, the “story-telling case study”, which adopts the narrative method to recount the phenomenon under investigation (Bassey, 1999), allowed for the drafting of a report on the educational experiment implemented.

Given that a case study is “an investigation of a singular case conducted in depth in a natural setting” (Bassey, 1999, p. 47), the empirical research – shaped by an emancipatory approach – focused on the analysis of the Civic Education theatre workshop, as a good practice carried out in a non-artificial setting such as the Trani Correctional Facility.

Regarding the knowledge objective, the intention was to verify whether the aforementioned type of rehabilitative activity had a positive or negative impact on the behavioural development of the inmates.

As for the knowledge needs from which the research originated, there was a perceived necessity to understand the state of the art concerning the effectiveness of theatre in the prison context, particularly when used as an emancipatory teaching strategy.

With reference to the topics under study, consideration was given to:

- the curricular and extracurricular educational provision offered by CPIA BAT “Gino Strada” within the Trani prison;
- the teaching strategies implemented within the formal courses delivered in the facility, aimed at the social inclusion of particularly vulnerable categories;
- the conduct of inmates participating in school activities promoting Civic Education.

Given the decision to focus on critical cases (functionally illiterate individuals who had prematurely dropped out of school, generally quick-tempered and prone to recidivism), the group of five inmates – enrolled simultaneously in first-level, first-period courses and in the workshop activated within the AALI course – represented the selected sample, on which the research focused over a nine-month period.

As for the sample selection criteria, a purposive non-probability sampling method was adopted, dictated by pragmatic needs for speed and cost-effectiveness and by the necessity of having a sample that included subjects with specific characteristics, selected by the researcher according to the study’s objectives (Trinchero, 2004).

Regarding the epistemic tools used, daily on-site observation of participants in the planned activity allowed for the live monitoring of the actors’ real progress in terms of communication skills, attitudes towards themselves, and behaviour towards others. Furthermore, monthly semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five CPIA BAT “Gino Strada” teachers responsible for subjects within the first-level courses provided inside the prison.

This latter method of data collection thus enabled the comparison of field observation results with the views of other educational professionals in the prison’s pedagogical area, in addition to monitoring the overall progress of the empirical research conducted.

As for data collection tools, a field diary was used, enabling detachment from the re-educational experience while fostering careful reflection upon it. The use of interview guides made it possible to structure the questions posed to prison school teachers, whose opinions influence the intramural scientific observation of inmates, precisely because the school is fully part of the rehabilitative activities.

To demonstrate the reliability of the entire research process, prior to its commencement, a dedicated protocol was prepared, explicitly outlining the research objectives, the knowledge needs that had generated it, and the topics under investigation (Trinchero, 2004). This protocol was drawn up by the CPIA’s designated Research, Experimentation and Development officer, stationed in the prison, given their expertise in Adult Education and Training and in human relations.

In addition, in order to verify the validity and reliability of the procedures, a lecturer in Experimental Pedagogy from the University of Salento was involved as an external observer, tasked with verifying the research process. This decision arose from the awareness that the study was conducted on a group of learners in a prison classroom by a staff member operating within it.

As for the findings of the case study, cross-referencing the data obtained from interviews with the above-mentioned professionals and from field observation of the participants in the theatre workshop – carried out by the AALI course teacher – it was found that:

- accommodating the work-related requests of inmates already attending the courses sometimes led participants to make choices detrimental to the continuity of their education;
- theatre workshops organised by external associations with the endorsement of the competent administration, while representing a valid alternative, in some cases overlapped with school hours, thereby failing to reduce drop-out rates in the formal educational courses offered by the designated educational institution;
- such a significant workshop had never before been carried out within the formal courses delivered at the Trani Correctional Facility by CPIA BAT “Gino Strada”;
- enrolment and, above all, attendance rates at school courses increased slightly, with courses becoming more attractive in terms of content and more sustainable in terms of the teaching strategies adopted;
- Italian-speaking students in a condition of functional illiteracy welcomed with empathy the only student from a third country, who, moreover, demonstrated significant progress in learning Italian as a second language by the end of the school year;
- there was a marked increase, compared to the previous school year, in the number of students who, having passed the final assessment, received a certificate of knowledge of the Italian language and of Civic Education;
- most teachers from the aforementioned institution, serving in prison courses, preferred to complement traditional lectures with more engaging workshop-based activities;
- Civic Education, being both a fundamental and challenging subject that involves values and ideals often ill-suited to inmates’ habitual lifestyle, was not easily accepted by those who considered change superfluous – particularly in a society marked by damaging prejudice against ex-offenders;
- rehabilitative activities, especially when designed in playful and hybrid forms, reduced stress factors and encouraged inmates to reconsider their life path, thus initiating the essential process of transforming their *modus operandi*.

The findings suggest that learning should be conceived not only as an educational process – given its delicate role in fostering emotional intelligence and critical thinking – but also as a transformative process, since it aims to change “frames of reference that have become problematic so as to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and able to change” (Mezirow, 2016, p. 119).

Reading Mezirow’s (2016) reflections alongside some of the case study results (see, in this regard, the fourth, fifth, sixth, eighth and ninth points), it can be

inferred that the selected teaching strategy can help reduce school drop-out rates and, above all, significantly promote inclusion, academic success, and the re-education of the specific target group.

Given that contextuality and concreteness are features of the case study (Mortari, 2007), the research strategy adopted – in accordance with the principle of contextuality – made it possible to develop knowledge firmly connected to the re-educational context, while – fulfilling the criterion of concreteness – it enabled reflection on a tangible teaching strategy on which further explanatory considerations are certainly warranted.

5. The rationale behind the teaching strategy used and reflections on critical issues, strengths, and possible future developments

Worthy of note in the implementation of this best practice was the original teaching strategy adopted in the prison context, which – judging by the results – proved to be a possible pathway to rehabilitate the inmate, oppressed by a silent criminal subculture.

On this basis, the theatre workshop emerged as a synthesis of several teaching strategies, all functional to re-educational aims, which were dialectically integrated and organically harmonised.

In the first instance, the workshop was influenced by social theatre, as the multi-voiced monologue used the ethological characteristics of certain animals to address socially relevant themes – such as politics, healthcare, war, and peace – targeting a well-defined social group, namely inmates, as individuals in particular situations of hardship who needed to be encouraged to explore and interpret real-world issues from multiple perspectives.

Secondly, the workshop was infused with an innovative form of psychodrama, which, through the rhetorical devices of simile and allegory, allowed inmates to grasp questionable aspects of their own character, while simultaneously analysing their consequences (consider, for example, the conflict typical of the prison environment, or, on a macro level, the ongoing war, which was addressed in the performance in a subtle way).

This selected approach proved effective in helping inmates to interact with each other to address the issues that had led them to offend, while also becoming a therapeutic and re-educational medium of considerable value, capable of stimulating genuine emancipation from harmful conformity.

The reasons for selecting social theatre as the first element of the teaching strategy are manifold. This particular theatrical form is a performative activity that encourages an optimistic and subtly ironic outlook towards a future that is not without difficulty, and which can stimulate personal and social transformation – “a change within the relational pathologies that characterise our current society” (Pontremoli, 2015, p. 44). Furthermore, it presents itself as a mimetic process which, through a broad range of performative techniques, focuses on building both the individual and the community, ensuring that the artistic aim becomes secondary in order to make space for:

- a simulated trial period that frees one from the bondage of prisonisation;
- the authentic rehabilitation of the offender;
- the social inclusion of a renewed citizen, aware of the traps that ensnare those short-sighted individuals eager to conform passively to a system that emphasises all that pertains to the anti-state.

There were three main reasons for choosing an innovative hybrid form of psychodrama. Firstly, psychodrama, in its most authentic form, as “a science which explores the truth through dramatic methods” (Attisani, 1980, p. 477), is a form of staging that enables, in a protected and reassuring context, a perceptible, active, and constructive dialogue between different aspects of one’s life. In this way, the person reaches a higher level of self-awareness and confidence, gaining access to more creative and spontaneous ways of relating to oneself and to others.

Secondly, allegory, as a rhetorical figure in which something abstract is expressed through a concrete image, drawing on its considerable rational force, served to critique, satirise, or ideologise political, ethical, and moral issues.

Finally, simile, as a rhetorical figure based on the logical or imaginative similarity between two events, images, or sequences of thought, served to clarify a concept by relating it to another through a parallelism.

In a total institution such as a prison, where education and security must avoid potential conflicts of interest, certain critical issues can arise in the delivery of rehabilitative activities due to the low resilience of the prison population and to a setting that is, legitimately, highly security-conscious. In this light, it must be noted that there was a turnover of actors: of the ten students selected at the start of the school year:

- three inmates, realising the constant commitment required, were unable to complete their assigned roles, partly due to overlapping with other rehabilitative activities;
- two inmates, having been granted alternative measures to detention, left certain characters in the workshop without performers.

Furthermore, in order to ensure equal rehabilitative opportunities for the entire prison population, it would have been advisable to involve inmates from the other section, known as “Europa”, where, in the 2022 – 2023 school year, there were no Literacy and Learning of the Italian Language courses.

Undoubtedly, the specificity of the prison context – marked by an unstable and challenging inmate population seeking financial rewards and generally oriented towards intramural work – makes the workshop activity an arduous and essentially unrepeatable experience, particularly if one were to attempt to transfer it uncritically to another prison context without adequate adaptation. As each prison has its own distinctive characteristics, so too is each inmate, as a human being, unique, unrepeatable, and original (Claparede, 1958). Hence, social rehabilitation – the ultimate aim of the teaching and re-educational action – becomes genuinely possible only when there is genuine personalisation of the rehabilitative treatment.

In the prison environment, this essential action of transforming the prisoner’s mindset aims to tailor interventions to the individual, taking into account their personal characteristics and specific needs, in order to promote effective social reintegration after detention.

Regarding strengths, from the design phase of the activity onwards, it was possible to rely on the impeccable support of the Pedagogical Area, which had perceived the rehabilitative potential of a sustainable curricular project.

It is also worth considering a significant factor in terms of personal growth and, consequently, in the scientific observation of intramural personality: the selected inmates chose, with genuine conviction, to take part in the theatre workshop, despite there being no specific performance reward offered by the competent administration.

Of the five learners who took part in all the workshop activities, it was found that:

- four poorly literate Italian nationals chose, at the end of the workshop, to start a job in the host prison facility, in line with their personal aptitudes;
- one citizen from a third country expressed the intention to continue attending an advanced B1-level Italian language course, in order to challenge himself and acquire new skills to be used in society upon release;
- two native Italians, while having started a work activity in prison, continued their studies within the first-level courses, achieving good results.

As for the reasons for selecting the theatre workshop as a transformative educational device, it should be noted that formal learning (provided by the school), combined with non-formal learning (offered by the theatre workshop), allowed the prison to be transformed into an enlightening educational community, essentially conceived as an educational ecosystem in which the recipients of the rehabilitative intervention and the professionals in the educational area unanimously commit to creating an environment conducive to the growth and development of the inmate. During the workshop, the latter experiments – within an artificial and protected context – with unexplored constructive ways of thinking, without which the future renewed citizen would not be able to bring forth the best part of their personality with conviction.

In other words, the theatre workshop constitutes an ideal emancipatory educational tool, as it can provide the lenses through which the inmate discovers, with natural wonder and pleasure, a new perspective on existence – one far removed from vice, arrogance, egocentrism, and corruption. A lifestyle far from the entrenched criminal subculture is discreetly and engagingly proposed through the workshop, one never experienced by the inmate population in daily life, and on which they can begin to reflect critically:

- aloud with fellow inmate-actors and with the directors of rehabilitative activities;
- inwardly, questioning their own conscience with full awareness, considering that the latter is an essential element in guiding human behaviour.

A theatre workshop in a correctional facility, being generated by purely pedagogical motivations that invite constructive, proactive attitudes, must also take into account the desirable future theoretical and practical developments. Building on the above, one could envisage a possible future mixed-methods research path involving all male prisons in Italy. This hoped-for study would aim to investigate, in a precise and extensive manner, the link between the teaching of Civic Education in school courses and the actual social reintegration of offenders.

Such an investigation – undoubtedly a complex undertaking – would involve:

- the active engagement of legal-pedagogical professionals working in prisons, staff of the External Penal Execution Offices, teachers assigned to prison posts, and ex-inmates now at liberty who attended CPIA courses while in detention;
- the coordinators of the teaching action in undertaking fruitful teamwork with the observation and treatment team in the prison's pedagogical area, in order to prepare a personalised pedagogical project;
- university researchers and CPIA teachers reflecting on the extent to which learning Civic Education is genuinely functional to the evolutionary process of the ex-inmate.

On the level of potential operational proposals, it would be both rewarding and motivating for newcomers to be able to replicate a similar workshop – albeit suitably adapted to current educational and training needs – and to ensure, at the time of the final performance, the important presence of family members, particularly if one starts from the premise that:

- children learn, first and foremost, through emulation;
- the good example of a father engaged in constructive activities can positively influence a child's growth and development.

Another operational proposal could be to organise workshop activities with the synergistic support of voluntary theatre associations, in order to promote that osmosis between the formal context (CPIA) and the informal context (theatre association) that turns the prison into a crossroads of positive and transformative stimuli. Likewise, to keep alive in the hearts and minds of inmates the uplifting memory of the Civic Education workshop, the drawings previously produced by literacy course inmates could be displayed in the prison library, after being framed by students (now attending subsequent lower secondary school courses) with the support of the Technology teacher in the CPIA BAT "Gino Strada" first-level courses. This proposal would contribute to promoting the essential educational and didactic continuity without which it is impossible to ensure the raising of educational attainment levels among the adult population – this latter being the primary institutional mission of any Provincial Centre for Adult Education.

6. Conclusions

Raising the educational levels of the adult population living in conditions of marked socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage is not an easy goal to achieve. For this reason, it is essential that the teaching staff, attuning themselves to the times and places of detention, design educational pathways whose ultimate aim is the recovery, integration, and support of the inmate, assisting them "in redefining their life project and in assuming responsibility towards themselves and society, bearing in mind that education constitutes the prerequisite for promoting the cultural and civic growth of the prisoner and the necessary basis for their vocational, technical, and cultural training" (MIUR, MEF, 2015, p. 18).

That being said, the results of the innovative workshop-based teaching strategy implemented in the prison context lead us to state that, as a result of the workshop, the following was achieved:

- the creation of a positive, collaborative environment characterised by sound values, in which to develop social and civic competences;
- the development of a wise and autonomous mindset, distant from the conformity of the herd, as an essential condition for increasing self-control;
- the weakening of uncontrollable negative emotions and conflict, and the strengthening of problem-solving skills;
- the discovery that living together, respecting diversity (as a driver of transformation), is a wonderful adventure worth experiencing not only within prison walls but also outside them.

The profound existential distress affecting many disoriented individuals, unconsciously inhabiting an inert image-based society, requires professionals working in the Provincial Centres for Adult Education to endow learning with an essential educational value that offers a meaningful horizon to the concept of learning to learn. In this regard, social theatre, as a stimulating educational device, and Civic Education, as a transversal core subject with a "value-based foundation" (Italian Ministry of Education, 2020), must establish a symbiotic relationship so that the inmate perceives transformation as both a joyful and an urgent undertaking.

The above considerations lead those directing the teaching action to reconceptualise the workshop as "a mental place before a physical one, in which practice becomes theory, lived experience becomes the object of conceptual analysis, and knowledge becomes understanding" (Laneve, 2003, p. 155). Such a workshop must be conceived as a driver of that critical reflexivity which, for Mezirow (2016), represents "the essential pivot that can enable and sustain transformative learning" (Mezirow, 2016, p. xxxi).

In this light, the workshop setting became the ideal place to explore the desired phenomena of consciousness transformation – a path to the refinement of the inmate, who was able to discover the positive and reflective traits of their character, essential for a future peaceful reintegration into civil society. If television, the supreme entity that seals violence and appearance, often imposes itself as a poor teacher

(Popper, 1996), theatre presented itself as an engaging yet demanding gymnasium in which to begin testing that essential indulgence and wisdom, whose use makes the relationship with otherness a mystical experience that must be embraced with conviction and seriousness, in a place morally bound to guide towards loyalty, responsibility, altruism, and humanity.

Whereas other well-known research, conducted since the 1990s, has focused on educational programmes in general – emphasising how participation in them modifies inmates' behaviour and reduces the likelihood of reoffending after release (Vacca, 2004) – the originality of this case study lies in having shown how the use of an alternative teaching strategy, fundamentally centred on the playful-artistic aspect of the teaching-learning process, can stimulate the interest and attention of inmates, who necessarily find themselves stepping out of their comfort zone and confronting disciplinary content that demands significant mental and emotional effort, given that certain topics in Civic Education often evoke painful memories, both conscious and unconscious.

This pioneering teaching strategy offers one of the most important subjects to be taught in the prison context a form that is both different and attractive, capable of harmoniously inspiring in the inmate-learner a spontaneous metamorphosis of the soul – a liberation from those negative mental frameworks that oppress the human being's civic conscience. From what has been stated above, it is possible to observe that the qualitative research undertaken adds a significant element to the relationship between innovative teaching, school drop-out, and the improvement of human relations within the prison structure. Therefore, the use of a teaching strategy intentionally designed for an audience with special educational needs positively influences not only attendance in educational courses but also the conduct of inmates within the prison environment.

The Civic Education theatre workshop, through social theatre and an innovative hybrid psychodrama, placed the student before a crucial generative dilemma, without which transformation remains solely on the plane of the ideal; indeed, "for an adult truly to change following the proposal of transformative learning, it is necessary to encounter in one's life and in one's educational history a generative dilemma" (Mezirow, 2016, p. XXXII).

Far from seeking to produce generalisations transferable to every re-educational context, the scientific findings of the case study – conducted on the good practice implemented at the Trani Correctional Facility – lead us to affirm, in general terms, that:

- the teaching of Civic Education in a prison is not a utopia when a subject is placed "at the service of situations" (Lindeman, 1926) of a concrete nature;
- "adult education responds [...] to the irrepressible and common human desire to improve oneself, to change oneself, but also the social order" (Marescotti, 2013, p. 57);
- with regard to disaffected and disengaged students, it is essential to propose cutting-edge teaching that focuses on guidance, conceived as a strategic process necessarily relating to different dimensions of the human being.

In light of the above, lifelong learning – an essential competence for personal fulfilment, employability, social inclusion, and active participation in social life – must be understood by educational institutions operating in prisons as a constant service of guidance, not only educational and vocational, but also personal; particularly when teaching is placed at the service of re-education. Thus, guidance, which becomes a constant systemic measure, should permeate all types of educational provision delivered by the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (Di Pinto, 2020), drawing out the positive qualities of the person so that these leave an indelible mark on the soul of those who have discovered them, for only in this way is it possible to imagine how things could be otherwise (Greene, 1988).

From this standpoint, Adult Education and Training are not two antithetical categories, but rather the hands of the same compass that orient not only the learner's way of thinking but also the actions of the teaching staff, prompting the transformation of teaching, which thus becomes a catalyst for permanent evolution. Agreeing that the Italian anagram of *carcere* (prison) is *cercare* (to seek), the osmosis between theatre education and Adult Education has offered a paradigm shift, whereby the teaching strategy – being tailored to a special context – has sought to generate a positive impact on the rehabilitative intervention, the latter being aimed at defining and implementing the process of social reintegration.

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