

## **The Performance: Art for Well-being**

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### **Abstract**

This work, framed within a mental health prevention project aimed at early childhood education teacher students, aims to evaluate the suitability of the action to promote, in the educational field, the personal identification of traumatic experiences, incorporating them as vital learning. To this end, a performative action aimed at representing suffering and the capacity to overcome it was created, in which 71 early childhood education teacher students and 3 teachers participated, and which was implemented in Coruña (Spain), in 2022, in the postcovid stage. In order to achieve the object of study, a research project was designed using public enquiry, documentary observation and participant observation to determine the suitability of the performance to the project's objectives. The results show how, through the representation of trauma, people have experienced that in the difficulties of life there is also learning, improving self-esteem and self-concept.

## **Introduction**

This work, established within the framework of the psychodynamic model, revolves around corporeal expression and well-being (understood as an existential balance), and aims to analyze the potential of performance in the symbolic materialization of the mourning processes arising from the pandemic and the post-pandemic that Early Childhood Education (ECE) degree students have to grapple with.

Regarding the impact of the pandemic on mental health, the global report issued by the WHO in 2023 explains how the population was affected differently depending on the evolution of the pandemic and the generational cohorts (World Health Organization, 2023).

Thus, its effects during the early stages, when uncertainty and high mortality rates fueled widespread fear and psychological distress, were quite distinct from those seen in later phases, in which isolation and fatigue became the greatest threats to well-being.

Looking at the population, the consequences of the pandemic have affected the mental health of children and young people to a greater extent, especially those with fewer economic resources, since, as indicated by the WHO (World Health Organization, 2023), "the loss of schooling and the subsequent start-up of the educational system altered routines and social connections, feeding feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness, causing affective and behavioral problems" (p. 32).

In addition, during the pandemic (2020 - 2022), formal education had to include health control variables never before taken into account (Moreno & Gortázar, 2020), which made it necessary to adapt teaching and its spaces to highly changing circumstances. These adaptations mainly affected the socializing function of educational environments, increasing feelings of isolation among students (Venketest, Ruprecht, & Ferede, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2023; Zbranca et al., 2022).

Therefore, in order to improve young people's mental well-being, the WHO (2023) issued a set of recommendations, such as on how to ensure the availability of psychosocial and mental health support. This includes, for example, the promotion of community action favoring social cohesion.

In addition, UNESCO, in another global report on arts-based learning, outlined the impacts of art education in relation to the acquisition of the social and emotional skills necessary to deal with the socio-educational consequences of the pandemic (Venketest, Ruprecht, & Ferede,

2023), recommending artistic practices as strategies to work on the psychological consequences of the pandemic on children and young people.

Finally, in 2022 the European Commission published the study *Culture's Contribution to Health and Well-being*, which states that, since the outbreak of COVID-19 mental health problems, exhaustion, anxiety, and depression have increased significantly "especially among children and young people with lower incomes or lower educational levels" (Zbranca et al., 2022, p.10). These problems are currently aggravated by other factors, such as climate anxiety, war and economic and energy crises, which have a major impact on the waterline of mental, personal and community health, which is why it recommends that national authorities organize educational activities drawing on artistic practices to promote psychological well-being.

Based on these recommendations, within the framework of the psychodynamic model, proposed here is the creation of a project for the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental health problems in the educational sphere, organized around the artistic technique of performance, so that last-year ECE teachers can identify their own traumas, reflect on their own circumstances, and learn to develop a resilient attitude that helps them manage the psychosocial conflicts of young children, this being the kind they will be working with in the future (Bar-on, 2000).

The psychodynamic model applied to socio-educational intervention with a therapeutic purpose seeks to intervene so that people can find alternatives within themselves to crisis situations (Schamess, 2002). To do this, we start with the identification of both the problems and stressors that paralyze the subject, and the capacities that he or she presents, so that they, in a second phase, can open themselves up to change and transformation, recovering optimal levels of functioning (Martínez-Otero, 2021).

All the students (71 people) participated in the performative project, since, in line with the studies by the WHO, the UNESCO (Venketest, Ruprecht & Ferede, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2023; Zbranca et al., 2022) and the European Commission, it was concluded that all had received the impact of the pandemic. In addition to the students, 3 teachers from the fields of Pedagogy, Psychology, Art, and Social Work participated.

This project, carried out in Coruña in the post-COVID-19 era (March 2022), took place in an interdisciplinary framework at the intersection of Art, Social Work, Children's Education and Psychology. In addition, it was aimed at students in their last year of Early Childhood

Education studies, who, after completing them, will exercise their professional skills in contexts of vulnerability (Martínez-Vérez & Montero-Seoane, 2022).

Thus, it is possible to state that this work narrates an artistic experience that seeks to respond to the grieving triggered by Covid. Another of its strengths is that it arises as the result of an internal, educational debate that seeks to engage people and elicit commitments from them (Albar-Mansoa & Antúnez del Cerro, 2022).

It is a proposal by the educational community, co-created and worked on with perseverance and effort. It constitutes its emotional recipe in the face of catastrophe, such that it is transformative and generates, as can be seen in the results, cognitive change.

### ***Performance and Its Potential***

Performance situated within the framework of the psychodynamic model is understood as a vital act of transference that transmits social knowledge, emotional memory and a sense of identity through the repeated acts that comprise it (Moreno et al., 2013), thus allowing us to address the relationship between one's inner and outer worlds, examining both the interactions of the self with the environment (self-world) and the impact of the environment on the person (world-self) (G. Cano, 2013; Moreno González et al., 2013; Raquejo & Perales, 2022).

Therefore, the European Commission establishes that the live arts, within which performance is framed, function as a channel that facilitates both the expression of mourning and the acceptance of the circumstances of the bereaved, allowing them to assign meaning to what, though apparently incomprehensible, is "mysteriously reserved for us" (Sábato, 2000, p. 11) and is, therefore, an opportunity for the maturation of the personality (Cencerrado, 2022).

Along these lines, recent studies show how performance promotes self-awareness by allowing people to express real or imagined conflicts with their bodies, unlocking the self by facilitating a psychodynamic understanding of change (Fancourt et al., 2020; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Parliamentary Group on the Arts, Health and Welfare, 2017; Penketh & Ridin, 2023; Thomson & Chatterjee, 2022; World Health Organization, 2023).

In this regard, the European Commission concludes that the live arts (and performance) contribute to reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, promoting the search for meaning and generating a positive therapeutic environment in the field of formal and non-formal education, constituting "a powerful resource for the prevention and promotion of mental health" (Zbranca et al., 2022, p.10).

This introspective and expressive potential of performance makes it a useful technique to increase personal and community well-being in educational contexts, since, as Fancourt et al. (2020) and Fancourt and Finn (2019) point out, it helps subjects to find alternatives to crises in themselves, allowing them to recover an optimal level of functioning by enhancing their self-resolution abilities (APPG Arts Health and Wellbeing, 2017; Martínez-Vérez & Montero Seoane, 2020).

To that end, a space is created, a metaphor that represents pain and trauma (Figure 1), through symbolic acts that, when reiterated, allow suffering to be expressed and shared, giving it meaning. The reason is that, as Méndez-Llopis and Mínguez-García (2022) point out, performance favours the symbolic representation of traumas that constrain the self by situating pain within the limits of corporeality, thus accepting its presence.



*Figure 1.* Way To Meet. Photo-essay. (Photographs and editing by the authors)

In this sense, people rework their self-concept through staging, allowing them to integrate emotional strength into their own vulnerability (Figure 2). In addition, a naked retelling of events honestly turns off the focus, does not stir the sugar in the cup and is not interesting. Something has to happen, like a forest, a wolf or a tornado, for life to be worth telling. Usually that something is suffering and overcoming it. That is why it is important to understand it and to signify it.



*Figure 2. The Cure. Photo-essay. (Photographs and editing by the authors)*

Repeated symbolic acts in performance allow the actor to rework their conflicts, embodying the experiences lived during the pandemic, thus establishing a narrative identity framed in a before and after, a aspect reflected in the photographic essay of Figure 2, where it is observed how the actors write a healing word on the stone and label themselves, in front of the mirror, with an adjective that allows them to recall what was experienced during the performance.

### **Method**

To determine the efficacy of performance as a therapeutic tool in relation to traumatic experiences, a metaphor was constructed based on a set of performative acts symbolizing the trauma and the mourning process, giving it a structure. These were:

- A unidirectional path, symbolizing life and the need to stop to muster strength when pain does not allow us to move forward.
- A row, formed by the participants, which represented the equality of these individuals in the face of pain, and the personalization of suffering.
- Silence during the carrying out of the activity, which was intended to favor introspection in the self and self-knowledge.
- A chair, as an object that installs the self in a place; in this case, in the place of trauma, which, when loaded by turns, allows us to feel the weight of discomfort and perceive suffering also in the Other, thus experiencing otherness (Levinas, 1993) as a previous step to empathic behavior (Levinas, 1993) as a step previous to empathic behavior.
- The stones that people carried in their pockets represented personal traumas exorcised through the words written on them. Thus, when the stones were placed on the

- boardwalk, showing both the trauma and the word that heals, a transformative text emerged, leading to resilience and collective motivation.
- Once the words were read, the people in the chair labeled themselves in front of a mirror as changeable and resilient people.
  - Regarding the location of the metaphorical space, it was a public one, as "estrangement" invited the participants to behave in a different way, thus rendering the artistic experience more meaningful (Terrones, 2013).
  - In addition, joint performative participation allows for an increase in community emotional capital, since "any environment that encourages socialization or directly requires it, in which emotions matter a lot and a healthy sense of shared identity can be generated, is a good scenario for the adoption of collective intelligence logics" (Rey, 2022, p. 259).

To determine its efficacy as an artistic technique in traumatic situations, it was necessary to operationalize the object of study through units of analysis and specific objectives (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Operationalization of the Object of Study*

<b>Object of study</b>		
To determine the efficacy of performance as a therapeutic tool in relation to traumatic experiences.		
<b>UNITS OF ANALYSIS</b>	<b>SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>TECHNIQUES</b>
Self-knowledge - Self-awareness	Encourage the identification of traumas.	Review of the international academic literature - Introduction and Discussion. Direct participant observation of performance – Photo essays - Introduction and results. Interview of participants - Results.
Emotional self-regulation	Identify the emotions linked to grief. Place the pain within a time frame.	
Empathic behavior	To conceive of grief as a universal experience. To experience empathy, through otherness.	
Resilient behavior	Identify life and behavioral learning linked to trauma.	

Cognitive change	Incorporate these learnings into the story of the self, establishing a narrative identity.	
Continuous improvement	Determine what artistic or therapeutic aspects need to be improved.	

In view of the object of the study and its context, a qualitative design was chosen, framing the work as one of action research. To furnish its conclusions with greater richness and depth (Alonso, 2013), it was built around three research techniques; by triangulating the data, the researchers were able to reach an understanding of the object of study (Lekue, 2014). The techniques selected were:

1. Documentary analysis to identify the axes of analysis of the study (Table 1) in the results of the international reports of the WHO (2023), UNESCO (2023) and the European Commission (2022), since these reports point out the traumas derived from Covid19 in the child and adolescent population and the contributions of the living arts (performance) in relation to the improvement of well-being. Given that the living arts are an ideal resource for acquiring the social and emotional skills needed to cope with the consequences of the pandemic, Table 1 shows that the living arts are an ideal resource for acquiring the social and emotional skills needed to cope with the consequences of the pandemic. Therefore, Table 1 describes the object of study along five axes of analysis that coincide with the components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, motivation leading to resilience, and the processes of otherness and empathy (Goleman, 1996).
2. Direct participant observation, which made it possible to describe the metaphorical space through images and to verify whether the study's objectives were met, as they were evidenced in the action observed (De Ketele & Postic, 1992) by photographing the performance, paying attention to the different symbolic acts and composing different photo essays.
3. And public inquiry (Pink, 2014), which made it possible, through the application of the interview, to listen to the voices of the participants, applying an individual interview script structured around the units of analysis that, through open questions, allowed us to evaluate the efficacy of performance in relation to the units of analysis and the intended objectives (Table 2).



**Table 2**

*Structure of the interview script, according to the units of analysis and specific objectives*

<b>UNITS OF ANALYSIS</b>	<b>QUESTIONS</b>
<p><b>SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES</b></p>	<p>What studies are you completing?            What is your sex, understood as a biological reality?            Express your age in years.</p>
<p><b>SELF-KNOWLEDGE - SELF-AWARENESS</b>            Encourage the identification of traumas.</p>	<p>Do you think that the performance presented was an adequate instrument to reflect on trauma and grief? Why?            What did you learn through performance about feelings and emotions related to trauma and grief?            With regards to the symbolic acts making up the performance in which you participated:            Do you believe that the objects (chair, stones, labels, words, mirror) facilitated the reflection process? Why?            Do you think that walking in a line and in silence facilitated inner dialogue? Why?            Describe what you felt while carrying the chair.</p>
<p><b>EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION</b>            Identify the emotions linked to grief.            Place the pain within a time frame.</p>	<p>Do you believe that the lessons you have learned through the performance will serve you in the future?            How will you put these learnings into practice in your day-to-day life?            Regarding the symbolic acts that make up the performance in which you participated:            Did writing your wounds and inner conflicts on stones help you to concretize and express your pain? Why?</p>
<p><b>EMPATHIC BEHAVIOR</b>            To conceive of grief as a universal experience.            To experience empathy through otherness.</p>	<p>Regarding the symbolic acts making up the performance in which you participated:            When you saw the other participants carry the chair, how did you feel?</p>

	Did reading the stones of the other participants help you connect with their suffering? Why? What did you learn by reading the stones of the other participants?
<b>RESILIENT BEHAVIOR</b> Identify life and behavioral learning linked to trauma.	Regarding the symbolic acts making up the performance in which you participated: Did writing on the stones about the inner conflicts you have overcome help you to improve your self-concept? Why? Reading the other participants' stones, what did you learn about strength linked to suffering?
<b>COGNITIVE CHANGE</b> Incorporate these learnings into the story of the self, establishing a narrative identity.	What role has grief played in your personal history? Do you think that mourning has strengthened your "I"? Has labeling yourself in relation to grief helped you learn? Why?
<b>CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</b> Determine what artistic or therapeutic aspects need to be improved.	Help us to improve: What aspects would you change or propose to improve the performance? (Explain)

Once the performative action was over, all the participants were interviewed following the previously established script, and the responses obtained were categorized according to the analysis variables (Ruíz Olabuénaga, 2012) determining suitability.

After completing the categorization process, three coding criteria were established for the analysis of the object of study (Ruíz Olabuénaga, 2012); these criteria were: 1) the most frequent words or descriptors used to label trauma; 2) a more detailed description of their trauma; and 3) greater specification in relation to the event observed.

Finally, the results obtained from the interviews were analyzed using the content analysis technique (Vallés, 1999), designed to delve deeper into people's discourse so that researchers could determine the potential of performances as regards the development of trauma and the emergence of resilient behavior in response to it.

Once the data analysis was completed, the results report was written, which does not aim to generate inference about the general population, that is, it does not seek to generalize the results, but rather to enter into the experience and subjectivity of the participants. In addition, with respect to data, it is necessary to note that the involvement of the organizers is a

psychological impulse that should be considered a possible source of bias with respect to the findings.

### Results

The results of the evaluation of the performance are presented below, organized around the units of analysis that describe the object of study.

From a descriptive point of view, a total of 81 students participated in the performance space, of whom 54 were in the last year of early childhood education, and 27 in communicative mediation, all of them in the last year of their training.

Regarding gender, 7 were male and identified themselves as such, and 74 were female. One identified herself as transsexual. In terms of their ages, the average was 23. In addition, three female teachers from the fields of Pedagogy, Psychology, Art and Social Work participated. Their average age was 45.

With regard to inner conflict, people reported that the forms of suffering leaving the deepest mark are: "the death of a loved one and the pain caused by their absence (I 70)," which appears in 53% of the responses, followed by "illness (I 20)" (42%), "unwanted loneliness (I 17)" (33%), "family conflicts (I 15)" (15%), "continuous rejection by my mother (I: 15) or my father (I: 43)" (10%), and "mistreatment by my partner (I 34)", which generate "a vital burden that interferes with other relationships (I 26)" (11%).

Observation allowed the researchers to obtain a visual account of the performance, from which we can see the concentration and involvement of the participants, who remained silent during the journey. Despite coming across people who looked at them and questioned them, no one responded, and they all continued along their way (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Interiority. Photo-essay. (Photographs and editing by the authors)

At least five people, four females and one male, got excited, both when taking the chair and when passing the baton to another participant. During the stops, silence was maintained both when writing on the stones and when labeling oneself. On three occasions, two women and one man stood on the chair to recite a text (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Saying. Photo-essay. (Photographs and editing by the authors)*

After completing the writing and the installation of the stones, the participants walked in silence to read the messages, lifted the stones to see the words on the bottoms of them, and then gathered in pairs or groups of three to discuss what they had felt. One participant requested that the performer represent empathy by forming a body figure on the floor using the stones and markers (Figure 5).



*Figure 5. Empathy. Photo-essay. (Photographs and editing by the authors)*

At the end, some people outside the performative area, who were simply walking through the public space, asked them for labels and stones, as well as markers to write on them. In addition, unknown profiles on the Facebook and Instagram social networks began to spread images of the stones and the line, leading to the inclusion of a proposal for an improvement: to focus the performance on a specific audience.

The analysis of the study's responses shows how for the participants, the performance has been a suitable instrument for reflecting on the wounds and intrapersonal conflicts associated with grief. The reason is that it has allowed them to "place psychological suffering at the epicentre of cognitive change" (I 51)<sup>1</sup>, to describe it as "a temporary, inevitable state that, in fact, allows us to appreciate happiness" (I 49) and to define it as "the driving force and principle of resilient behaviour" (I 52) since "we do not suffer for the sake of it; although it may sometimes seem so, there is no chance in pain" (I 43). Therefore, "when a difficulty appears in life and we overcome it, we experience inner strength, and that experience accompanies us always. In suffering there is learning, it is growth" (I 47).

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<sup>1</sup> The letter "I" means informant and the number that follows corresponds to the place that said informant occupies in the database.

In this sense, it is observed that "through the performance I have learnt that there are wounds that do not disappear. They are life lived and, as such, their scars mark you. They are part of you" (I 21). Hence, for the participants, "no matter how great the difficulty, as far as possible, you have to keep a positive attitude" (A 53) since "rather than focusing on the pain, you have to appreciate the change in the self" (I 32). Therefore, "I can say that the performance has helped me to admire my wounds, to recognise even positive aspects, changes, lessons, small inner strengths that have emerged before me by acting out my pain" (I 36).

Going deeper into what they have learned, people express that through their participation in the performance, they have acquired "a space for introspection" (I 37) "to analyse the emotional state of the self" (I 36). Thus, "from now on, I will spend time in silence every day to ask myself how I am and make better decisions" (I 5). The reason is that "we must not forget the importance of emotional listening. It is important to create, also in oneself, narrative spaces that let oneself be and that facilitate the expression of pain" (I 26).

With regard to the ideas offered by the participants to generate this new-found inner dialogue, the following stand out: "write down on a piece of paper every day what I feel and read it at the end of the week, drawing a conclusion" (I 7); "that allows me to think about what I need to do to feel better" (I 8); and "once the mourning is over, I will burn all the papers, to symbolise 'that letting go' that releases well-being" (I 18).

In addition to writing or, rather, as a previous step or introspective path, some participants point out the importance of movement. Thus, "every afternoon, when I leave work, I will take a walk in silence to find myself, thinking about how I feel and why" (I 10). Regarding the landscape, the ocean appears as a scene in many answers. Thus, "when I need to think, I will look for the sea and walk along its shore, just as we did during the performance" (I 19).

The expression of feelings and of grief itself is defined as an important learning process: "I have learned to externalise my problems, to take them out of me. I didn't know how to do it, I didn't dare, I find it difficult to talk about myself" (I 6) because "I have often felt judged and exposed" (I 19). Therefore, "I was surprised that the performance generated a context of expression, of unblocking. It is not that the wounds have healed or disappeared. On the contrary, I am now more aware of them, but I feel freer and less guilty" (I 45). In this sense, people consider that saying what hurts does not resolve the difficulty. There is no magic in the expression. However, there is clarification since "it allows clarifying feelings, understanding the causes and decanting the experience, even getting to savour the learning of everything experienced" (I 43) because "by saying the pain, we signify it, and from there, it is possible to manage the discomfort" (I 44). In this sense, the results show that "in complex situations, not

showing feelings generates more pain. Non-expression is an oppressive attitude" (I 3) that "makes the wounds even deeper" (I 14).

With regard to language, the participants consider that the words chosen to express suffering are important: "they should not be painful. Sometimes, we judge ourselves so harshly..." (I 52). Therefore, "from now on, when I feel bad about something, when I feel small in the face of a problem, I will speak nicely to myself. I will be understanding. I will say to myself, you are only one person. You don't know everything. Don't hurt yourself" (I 19).

In addition to the inner space and the alternatives for creating it, the participants feel that they have learned to accept suffering, which exists despite Western society's denial of it. Thus, "I think it is important to accept pain as part of life and even as the other side or the obverse of joy" (I 5). Since "suffering takes the pulse of what is happy, of what is divine" (I 46), "both happiness and misfortune are states of grace and misfortune, heads and tails of life and last only an instant" (I 57). For this reason, the participants consider that "discomfort is as normal as well-being. Both processes are vital. The important thing is to live them, learn them, extract the juice from them and savour them" (I 34).

In this sense, the acceptance of pain as part of life allows people to establish a parameter of universality in suffering understood as a vital fact since "we are all wounded. The blows that life leaves on people are practically the same, heartbreak, the death of a loved one, loneliness, failure, renunciation.... They are there, and they affect us all" (I 1). "That's why I think that we have to look at people with understanding and not judging" (I 43) since "wounds are part of personal identity. They explain behaviour" (I 3). In this sense, for the participants, the performance has created a context of otherness that leads to empathy. Thus, "through the collective representation, we see the pain of that other who, together with you, also bleeds" (I 47).

However, in addition to the perception of the other as a sufferer, his or her healing potential appears. That reason is that "in the end, we all hurt each other. We all suffer. The other is inevitably the source of conflict but is also a place of healing" (I 27). That is, "it is in the other where we find the answer to our needs" (I 47). "In fact, if performance has taught me anything, it is to be grateful for the life of those who, with their presence, alleviate the burden of living. They are people who are shivering" (I 57).

The self-regulation of emotions is also defined as a benefit of the performance: "sometimes I have wanted to cry, and either I have swallowed the pain, or I have done it in a stark way. But today, yes, today I have cried blue and giant tears, remembering the potholes that life has put in my way, and I have done it slowly, at my own pace. I feel good" (I 7).

On the other hand, the relativity of problems, according to the participants, "favours peace of mind" (I 43). "We must learn to give each difficulty the place it deserves since, by situating the problem, we face it better" (I 8). It is important to think "that it does have a solution. Its importance is circumstantial" (I 13).

At the end of the performance, the reading of the stones has allowed people to become aware of their own resilience. "I read the words I wrote, and I liked to think that despite all the sorrows (which are many), I can live with the pain. I have been able to resist, and that helps me to go on" (I 53). The reason is that "no matter how hard the circumstances are, they always get better" (I 15).

When looking ahead to the future, the participants project the learning acquired during the performance, not only to look for new or different uses but also to remember the temporality of pain and the importance of turning suffering into motivation since "behind every wound, there is a story of overcoming, of change, which is worth remembering" (I 2). In this imagined future, there is also a place for empathy: "there is an Other who also suffers and needs me as much as I need him. Sometimes, in solitude, there is also an encounter" (I 13).

Regarding the suitability of the objects used during the performance, the participants consider that "because of their symbolism, they have greatly facilitated the reflective process" (I 53). "Each one of them responds to a phase of grief, to an emotion" (I 42). "They constitute an argumentative thread to pull from and therefore help to represent grief" (I 40). In addition, they facilitate expression: "they have helped me to tell what I am often unable to say out loud. The symbols are an intermediate step, a meeting point between the self that feels and its own perception" (I 41).

### ***The Orientation of Educational Practice: How Can Artistic Education Be Applied To Dealing With Grief?***

Finally, one of the aims of the action research methodology is to guide educators to respond to mourning in the pandemic and post-pandemic eras. When practicing performance as an introspective and expressive approach with Early Childhood Education students, we advise to take into account a set of premises and methodological criteria so as to maximize the benefits that it can have in coping with grief.

First, it is necessary that the performance be adjusted to the context of the crisis so that, through representation, the associated needs (and not others) are met. To do this, it is necessary to carry out a prior diagnosis of the problems that need to be addressed. In this project, the detection of needs was carried out by the Guidance Department in collaboration with the Social Skills teacher (responsible for teaching the contents of the Emotional



Intelligence course) and the Mental Health area. Proceeding with this diagnosis, not only was the topic to be addressed decided, but also the use of performance as an artistic technique, the psychodynamic model as a frame of reference, and the approach to grief, based on the five components that define Emotional Intelligence.

This implies that the symbolic acts and objects (that is, the metaphor) must signify the circumstances of the actors; that is, that it must be designed *ad hoc* so that they make sense. Thus, in the project presented here, the creation of the performance refers at all times to the mourning and traumas associated with the pandemic and the post-pandemic: the row and the path allowed the interiority that favors self-knowledge; the reading of the manifestos and the writing on the stones facilitated emotional self-regulation, and the carrying of the chair symbolized resilience in the face of difficulties and pandemic fatigue. Finally, the turns taken carrying the chair and the installation of the stones spurred the ECE students towards processes of alterity, understood as the recognition of the other as an alter ego, and empathy.

In addition, improvisation and spontaneity must always be encouraged, creating an atmosphere of emotional security, which allows people to participate in the way they need to, since the ultimate purpose of any performance is to represent a network of cognitions, emotions and impulses so that expression facilitates the unlocking of the self-defense mechanisms preventing change. This entails that, although there must always be a script, its interpretation must be free and participatory.

The symbolic acts that make up the script must be repeated as if it were a ritual; the personal and concrete significance of the performance is sought, not an understanding of each of the acts that make it up. It is even possible that, from the outside, at least for a casual spectator, the symbolic acts and objects may be meaningless. The important thing is that the people who participate connect with the metaphor to extract from it their own meaning in relation to their life and their circumstances. For this it is necessary for the participants to know what the performance technique consists of, and even for them to have seen some (even if not live), so that they understand the actor's role.

The proponents, as indicated by the psychodynamic model, must be aware of transfers and countertransfers; that is, of the symbolic exchanges that occur between them and the participants, and know how to handle them. Therefore, they should be trained in the psychodynamic model. The proponents must allow emotions to flow, without interfering or exercising control over them, with the sole exception of psychic or physical damage to the participants.

Every performance must conclude with a symbolic closure that wraps up and helps to signify, always personally, the metaphor.

Finally, it is important that a person outside the group document the process from beginning to end, through photography and video, looking for close-ups of the actors and wider shots of the group, depending on the different symbolic acts.

The documentation will generate deductive and metaphorical photo essays, as shown in the article's images, as well as video-art pieces, facilitating understanding of the creative process and the idea it conveys.

### Discussion

The obtained results, when contextualized in relation to the psychodynamic model, allow us to observe the potential of performance in the elaboration and embodiment of grief processes stemming from the pandemic and the post-pandemic period, especially those related to isolation, loneliness, and demotivation. This is particularly relevant considering the data from the World Health Organization's 2023 report, which explains how mental health has been particularly affected in children and young people during and after the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2023). Therefore, performance emerges as a suitable resource that future early childhood educators currently being trained in universities can utilize.

Hence, it becomes interesting, as noted by various authors, to address the multiple potentialities of performance within this new context (G. Cano, 2013; Moreno González et al., 2013; Raquejo & Perales, 2022), and to design a methodological framework for its application, as indicated in Section *The Orientation of Educational Practice: How Can Artistic Education Be Applied To Dealing With Grief?* of this paper.

In this regard, in addition to the WHO (2023), both UNESCO (Venketest, Ruprecht, & Ferede, 2023) and the European Commission, in their report "Culture's for Health" (Zbranca et al., 2022), propose the implementation of projects established within arts education to address the consequences of post-pandemic grief, seeking to generate psychosocial support, fostering community action and active citizenship.

Since arts-based learning facilitates the acquisition of the social and emotional skills necessary to address the socio-educational consequences of the pandemic, it recommends artistic practices as a strategy to promote sociability and interaction, especially among children and young people (Venketest, Ruprecht, & Ferede, 2023).

Therefore, it is interesting to highlight that the results of this study, similar to the aforementioned studies by the WHO (2023) and UNESCO (2023), establish the positive impact that performance has on the elaboration of post-pandemic grief. Participants in the early childhood education degree program, after participating in the performative project, report feeling less lonely, more comforted, expressing having perceived solidarity from their peers and teachers, and having learned to process their frustrations and grief in a healthier manner.

This learning has led them to experience greater personal well-being, so that, as Schamess (2002) refers, it is possible to observe how the application of performance within the framework of the psychodynamic model and in an educational context has allowed participants to find solutions within themselves, identifying both the problems and stressors that block the subject's capacity to respond, as well as personal coping abilities, in order to subsequently open up to change and transformation, thus recovering the optimal level of functioning (Martínez-Otero, 2021).

### **Conclusions**

Performance is an appropriate technique to favor both reflection on and the representation of the grief appearing in the lives of students and teachers, causing suffering and constituting, according to studies by the WHO, UNESCO and the European Commission, an important aspect in the education of future Early Childhood Education teachers, who, in their teaching, will be called upon to respond to the traumas arising from the pandemic and the post-pandemic periods in children.

The symbolic objects form a thread, a structure that shapes the metaphor of mourning and centers the reflective process.

The repetitive acts that constitute the performance allowed both the teachers and students to connect with their own suffering and identify the traumas and the emotions associated with them, as well as to define pain as a transitory and temporary mental state, which favors the resilience and the cognitive change that arises after overcoming grief.

Thus, it can be said that, through the representation of trauma and the grieving process, students and teachers came to appreciate that there is also learning in pain. Therefore, they came to believe that, although it is difficult, it is important to maintain a positive attitude in the face of conflict.

The needs for self-knowledge and emotional self-regulation are defined as indispensable elements of psychic well-being since, although they do not resolve the causes of trauma, they

make it possible to relativize the magnitude of the problems in question and to alleviate suffering, which is limited to a certain time frame. Therefore, it is necessary to generate contexts that induce introspection through different languages.

The performance revolves around psychological suffering and its overcoming. In this regard, one of the results of the study shows how participants have difficulty expressing their pain, finding in performative action an adequate means to express and accept the emotions and feelings linked to mourning, an indispensable step to alleviating psychic discomfort.

In addition, when carried out in a group it is possible to contemplate the pain of one's companions and to sympathize with their situations, with the performance functioning as a mutual help tool favoring empathy and support during suffering.

Therefore, it is considered necessary to create performative spaces in the educational sphere to address the trauma and mourning from the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, through the following steps: a diagnosis of needs, carried out collaboratively between the mental health area, guidance departments, and the tutors or teachers of subjects related to emotional intelligence; the metaphor must be created ad hoc to make sense; the symbolic acts must be reiterated as if it were a liturgy, allowing for both improvisation and non-intervention, except in cases of physical or psychological damage, and it must end with a symbolic closing. Finally, the proponents must manage the transfers and countertransfers, and find a way to document the performative action.

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