

Theater-pedagogy, a peacebuilding experience in Antioquia, Colombia. Its contributions to mental health

Teatro-pedagogía, una experiencia de construcción de paz en Antioquia, Colombia. Sus aportes a la salud mental (resumen: p. 16)

Teatro pedagogia, uma experiência de construção de paz na Antioquia, Colômbia. Seus aportes à saúde mental (resumo: p. 16)

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Abstract

Research on mental health in Colombia and worldwide has emphasized a moribcentric and behavioral perspective. This article reports a case study that aimed to understand how theater-pedagogy education, as an initiative to build peace, can contribute to mental health. Due to the confluence of social theater, critical pedagogy, and the life experiences of participants, documentary analysis was carried out. Data obtained from a field diary, interviews, and discussion groups was categorized. The participants got involved in the theater-pedagogy and attended forums of theatrical performances. Elements of healing, body, playing, movement, and symbolization concerning mental health were found. This work is expected to contribute to the democratization of mental health in contexts of social suffering.

Keywords: Peace. Mental health. Theater.



Introduction

Artistic, Cultural, and Educational Strategies for Peacebuilding

Pursuing peace has been a constant purpose in Colombian history. In this vein, state-led intermittent peacebuilding processes have contrasted with communal strategies. 1,900 peace initiatives have been reported between 1985-2016¹, one of these being the thematic agenda on culture, arts, and peace education (36,6%), which was the most frequent one among 23 agendas.

The register of memory actions of the Colombian National Historical Memory Center (CNMH)² pinpoints that 22,6% (82) out of 363 encompass artistic and cultural practices and 12,4% (45) pedagogical practices. The former include dance and traditional weaving, audio-visual content, and theater, etc; the latter implies human rights and memory.

Arts/Crafts and Mental Health

In Colombia, mental health has been impacted by socio-political violence³ and the contrasting social stands on the matter⁴. On the one hand, the law defends human rights. On the other, reality evidences stigmatization and constraints concerning healthcare access and pertinence.

In turn, unlike the explicit relationship between culture, arts, and education and peacebuilding vis-à-vis peacebuilding initiatives, health was only regarded as a public matter in 3,0% of them¹ and just two of 363 memory actions belong to groups that acknowledge their interests in public health.

One of the authors, seeking to set a dialogue between peacebuilding and public health, has contended that mental health⁵ is not exclusive for clinic experts or scholars, —neither is peace; from this viewpoint, this study posits a transition from a biomedical and behavioral perspective on health, focused on the individual, behaviors, and medicine, to one that welcomes the collective essence of subjects, their singularity, historicity, and transformation potential as well as the therapeutical effects of life experiences. In this train of thought, arts/crafts interfaced with health have consolidated as devices that foster health in social suffering situations⁶; in this conversation between different types of knowledge, theater has been documented⁷ as a ritual that embraces listening to others not only as a psychosocial matter but frames it within a wide policy of social interest whose artistic and ethic nature reaches therapeutic functions.

Theater-pedagogy Education at COREDI

Corporación Educativa para el Desarrollo Integral (COREDI) is a catholic organization in Antioquia whose commitment to peace, from an associative-solidary educational approach, pursues the dignification of peasants; for doing so, instructors must understand the characteristics of rural territories, their cultures, and political

and productive structure. Likewise, they must be solidly trained in the didactics of the subjects they teach. Since the 1960s, COREDI has lived six turning points (See Figure 1). Between 2016-2018, an experience took part in its purposes, namely, instructors' education in theater-pedagogy (*theaterpädagogik* in German) for peace and social transformation.

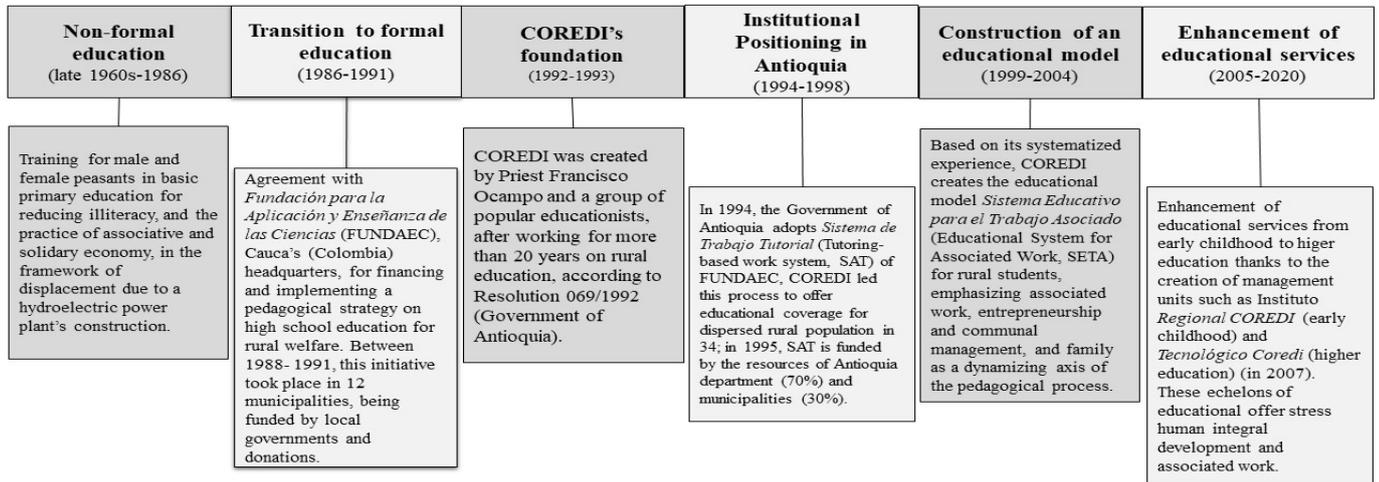


Figure 1. COREDI's trajectory in Antioquia's rural education, 1960-2021.

Source: Prepared by authors.

Pedagogy in Social Theater

“Social theater” seeks to problematize and transform social relationships, furthermore, it has various ways to name itself according to emphases provided by countries and authors; one of its main milestones occurred in the first half of the 20th century in Germany, Brecht's epic-narrative theater (1898-1956). At that time, in classic theater, conflict of interests among characters held a rational aim prone to “devoir être”, “Brecht discusses those relegated dramatic forms [...] that theater, tells us, it does not teach us anything about the man and the world, just about the author's implicit ideology”⁸. (p. 61, own translation).

The main criterion for epic theater would be the “pedagogical value”, i.e., a theater for average people, who would learn and teach the audience how to consider an investigative and critical outlook on behaviors' socio-historic meaning, toward a collective awareness raising. Brecht⁸ withdraws from differentiating hall and stage, actors and spectators must be equally active, in a critical pedagogical proposal:

Actors are there just to train [teach skills] the spectator, who in turn is there just to be ready for the active role to play in the social great political fight. [...] And spectators participate in the theatrical action [they comment on it, back up, etc.]⁸ (p. 63, own translation)

In the same vein, Latin American⁹ author Boal posits a view of “theater of the oppressed”, which is based on Brecht's epic theater and Freire's pedagogy of the



oppressed, in order for oppressed classes, like peasants, voice themselves; this theater is underpinned by four acting areas (artistic, educational, sociopolitical, and therapeutic); in Colombia, Buenaventura and García's *collective creation theater* aims to involve all theatrical group in construct the drama, relying on social studies and guaranteeing equal conditions to all.

Theater-pedagogy

In Germany, the concept "*Theaterpädagogik*" was introduced by creators like Ritter y Nickel¹⁰ in the mid-20th century. According to Pinkert¹¹, the term theater-pedagogy is the answer to contemporary developments in German educational theater, through it, educators are encouraged to participate as professionals with a critical criterion to define some concepts, even if there exists discrepancy regarding concepts in theatrical work, decisions must be made by the whole group, this is because the group is a space where subjectivity is acknowledged and worldviews, conceptions of theater, and human nature ideas are negotiated.

Theater-pedagogy is very close to education and pedagogy but it is not the same as professional actors' training in academies or universities. Theater-pedagogy endeavors to foster students' self-reflection capacity for them to reach practical knowledge through daily life events' representation. Apart from being an expert in theater and educational processes, a theater-pedagogue is expected to be committed to the group's cultural practices, the underlying power relationships, and the social conditions that produce such practices, which clearly leads to critical thinking.

In COREDI's theater-pedagogy educational process, theater, pedagogy, the collective, the political, and participants' lives self-representations, and their therapeutical experiences come together. This article reports how this educational process contributed to mental health from a non-pathologic viewpoint that does not draw on healthcare services analysis.

Method

The approach to the theater-pedagogical experience was guided by the historic-hermeneutic paradigm. According to Gadamer¹², it implies that, for knowing about the human, it is paramount to question human origin, social reality, and life praxis. This grants the experience of historic conditioning. It is equally important to inquire from a linguistic and symbolic angle because it naturally transmits knowledge among those who share a life system.

The method of this study was the case study; for Stake¹³, a case entails an integrated system with constraints and constituents that are neither simple nor clear. These are related to political, social, historic, and personal contexts. Thus, a case study investigates particularity, complexity, and interactions.

The case studied was "the Educational Process in Theater-pedagogy, supported by COREDI, for Peacebuilding in Some Municipalities of Eastern Antioquia", which is also the observation unit. The units of analysis or categories of analysis



that substantiated the approach to the case were “theater-pedagogy, peacebuilding initiatives, and mental health”. The study drew on maximum variation considering the number of municipalities where the educational process and documentation took place, the latter being rich in descriptions and videos.

The project had minimal risk according to Resolution 8430¹⁴ (Colombian Ministry of Health), consent forms were adjusted following the guidelines of the Resolution; the project was endorsed by the Research Ethics Committee of the National Public Health School at Universidad de Antioquia, which was certified in the Session 181/ 2018.

155 documents were chosen and analyzed, for instance, the curriculum and the micro-curricular development; reflection-oriented and dramaturgic material; the report on multiplication of the educational process in other groups of the community, and theatrical works’ scripts and videos. The researchers relied on participant observation and a field diary; likewise, they led two focus groups and six interviews with the participants, three men and three women.

Once the documents were inventoried, they were read and a matrix of analysis was completed, according to preset categories, and those emergent from the analysis. The diary field and transcription of focus groups were coded through a process of categorization, decontextualization, and recontextualization¹⁵ that resorted to diagrams. The latter eased the triangulation of information production strategies’ results.

As part of the process of reclassification and categories naming, findings that did not fit into the scheme configured were identified and excluded, and patterns, themes, regularities, contrasts, and relationships among categories were deepened in order to achieve both descriptions of microscopic aspects and their dense interpretive sense¹⁶, conclusion the researcher draws in the process of understanding the phenomenon under study.

The categories of analysis reported in this article are body, movement, and symbolization in theater-pedagogy; healing, and critical thinking boosting.

Results and discussion

Theater-pedagogy education aimed to contribute to social transformation and peace, strengthening COREDI’s instructors’ critical analysis and social and political awareness of social issues in the rural communities where they teach children and teenagers. It is relevant to note that this educational experience occurred while the peace dialogue, agreement, and post-agreement with Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) was in progress. In this train of thought, tutors were expected to replicate theater-based educational processes with a critical perspective in their communities. In doing so, they contributed to the construction of a society that responsibly assumes its history, posits non-violent co-existence alternatives, and boosts peacebuilding and a fairer society.

Throughout the educational process, 105 tutors from 26 municipalities from five of Antioquia’s sub-regions participated (See Figure 2), 400 actors performed in the educational communities, and 2,500 people got involved in forums that took place after performances.



Figure 2. Location of Tutors Involved in the Theater-pedagogy Educational Process. COREDI, 2016-2018

Source: Prepared by authors.

Contents and Methodology

The theater-pedagogy educational process happened through three components: content development, theater-work, and multiplication. The former consisted of individual and group games and exercises prone to looking for individual transformation; theater-work entailed a week of intense work for collective creation and performance of a theatrical play, which was concluded with a forum with the audience; lastly, the tutors replicated the process with a group of their communities.

The components of the educational process, its modules, and its goals are explained in Frame 1.

**Frame 1.** Modules and Goals of the Theater-pedagogy Educational Process. COREDI, 2016-2018.

| Components | Modules | Goal |
|---|---|--|
| | Theater-pedagogy fundamentals and principles | To ease a pool of games and exercises that contribute to group trust and arouse and stimulate theatrical game actions. |
| | The body as an instrument | To discover the integrality of one's body, incorporating "body and vocal" tools as raw material for individual-group exploration and creation. |
| Theater-pedagogy education: contents' development | Theater of the oppressed, theater-forum, theater-image | To stimulate alternative views and new solutions to social issues, in their subjective aspect, to enrich the artistic result and political debate of social matters. |
| | Introspective techniques | To individually and collectively reflect on matters of the self and the social situations faced. |
| | Acting | To explore personal material to lead to a character related to other characters in a scenic context. |
| | Collective direction and creation | To put into practice methods of collective action about autobiographical material: aesthetic construction and transformation of scenic material. |
| | Theater-memory | To draw on subjective memories and contexts' stories as inspirational materials for collective creation. |
| | Dramaturgy of the social happening | To awaken creativity vis-à-vis a process of dramaturgic creation and the construction of a poetic-theatrical happening. |
| Theater-work | To devise a space for research and collective creation of a theatrical play for four days and nights, which concludes with its performance and the forum with the audience. | |
| Multiplication | To educate a group from the community in theater-pedagogy and create a theatrical play inspired by the life experiences of participants. Performance and forums in each community wrap up this component. Students from the theatrical educational space direct it. | |

Source: Prepared by the authors from the microcurriculum.

During theater-work, the group constructed the script and staging and rehearsed the play they would perform on day 5. Thus, they produced four plays about Colombian social conflict and armed conflict: *Cicatrices y Ven a nuestras almas*, both referred to scars caused by war, whose value is remembering violent events as a memory act. The second play mixed this sense of scars with the performance's season, Christmas. Hence, the souls of the deceased sang carols employing jargon that disappeared after nine births, which embodied the nine days of Christmas *novena*; these souls in torment felt peace when they could give light to their stories in a collective birth. *Ven a nuestras almas* was performed in a public space. *La clase* tackled tutors' experiences with the armed conflict as educators of Northeastern Antioquia, and *Turbulencias*, portrayed the social consequences of building hydroelectric power plant Hidroituango in municipalities along Cauca river. When each play was performed, there was a forum with the audience.

Multiplication is thought of as theater-pedagogy education for a community group and as the creation of a theatrical play inspired by students' and families' life experiences, these individuals being inhabitants of *veredas* where tutors work. The final activity included performances and forums with the community.

Body, Movement, and Symbolization in Playing

The experience of theater-pedagogy for COREDI's tutors meant an opportunity for the to live and encourage their students to heal and boost critical thinking. In regards to the latter, the connection pedagogy-theater encompasses critical pedagogy in line with the core purpose of social transformation. This manuscript highlights three key elements throughout the educational process: body, movement, and symbolization. These are part of playing because they were paramount for boosting critical thinking and healing the wounds caused by war and other sorts of wounds (See Figure 3).

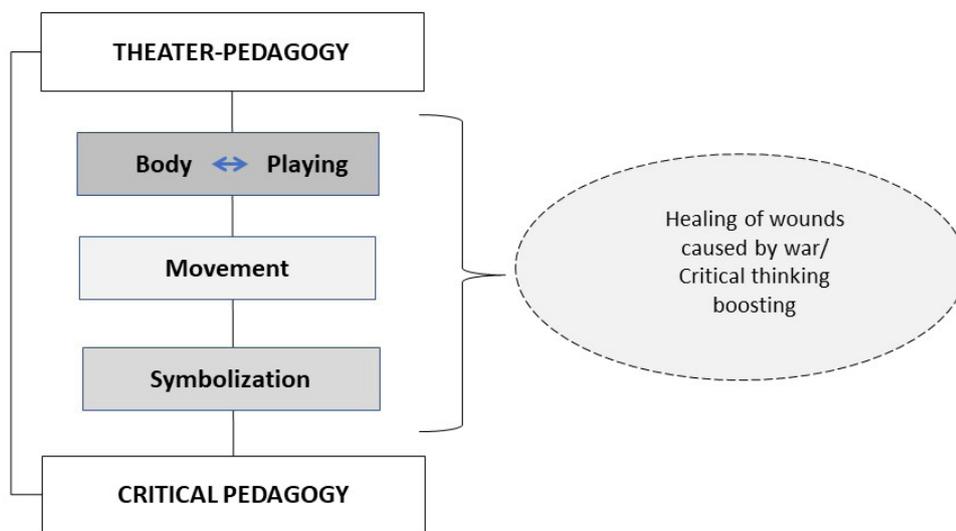


Figure 2. Body, Movement, and Symbolization: Key Elements for Theater-Pedagogy Education.

Source: Prepared by authors.

The confluence of playing and critical pedagogy, as understood from the angle of theater-pedagogy, allows for transforming oneself as well as promoting social transformation; thereby, body, movement, and symbolization are elements that, because of their interaction, lead to a dynamic that flows both as an individual and collective experience vis-à-vis the relationships with oneself, those with others, and with the Other, the sensation of power, and the construction of multiple senses.

Both playing and body are the means and the core of theater since the former, thanks to its methodological and transversal richness in all the educational process and collective creation, facilitates not only the body expression but also its reading, to spectators and the individual that acts. As a methodological element, playing, in its versatility, permits orienting work toward three practical stages for each purpose. The first one implies the acknowledgment of capacities, e.g., rhythmic, space management, or the topic of interest in each module; secondly, the use of acknowledged capacities requires stressing the encounter with the Other; and third, the creation is evident in collective work; it is also the result of the constant pursuit for coherent playing, i.e., one that has been incorporated and enjoyed and that articulates emotions, words, movements, and gestures in the whole body.

In the implementation of pedagogical activities, games are interleaved with physical exercises, e.g., warm-ups, stretching, energetic activation; and others



that allow encounters and trust, which gradually become games to welcome and perceive: feeling what is touched, listening to what is heard, observing what is looked; activating attention and concentration; for listening and feeling the body inward and outward, toward a partner, group, space, and objects; of rhythm, coordination, and speed; of voice, movement, and gestural chain; of imagination, acting; games for creating shapes, of an escalation with bodies, catastrophe, attenuation, and harmony; games with adjectives, verbs, nouns that determine a relationship; of an individual and collective memory; games with time, space, and with “nothing”. The games in question are those that lead to catching attention in the first pedagogical activity or the initial part of subsequent activities. Likewise, those scenic games that prepare for creating and staging a theatrical play are also considered. This is because they cause self-enjoyment or self-knowledge; they can also help to express thoughts and develop creative potential. The role of playing in theatre is stated differently by the participants:

Playing allows creating theatre, but theatre is not a game [...] Theatre is a game that is played seriously [...] We play then we are (April/2018, own translation).

Throughout the development of pedagogical activities, participants are invited to find their bodies’ emotions, establish contact, look at one another, and involve the whole body in every activity to do, ultimately, the theatrical play must go beyond the body. These claims show the conceptions of the body orienting the theatre-pedagogical work. The body is a place of symbolization and hence, a source of images, thoughts, emotions, and movements crossed by experiences and interpretations with a historic burden; the body and its singularity allow for inner and outer contact, thus the body being a witness of history.

As for movement and symbolization, the former is life expression, the latter is a representation of Others’ and the other’s existence. Both are *body* too. Along the activities, participants are called to install their breath since this is not only a ground for the body and voice but also a minimal unit of body movement. It reflects our inner mood and in turn, breath and movement pave the way to changes in those who take part in theatrical instruction. In this sense, Pérez¹⁷ asserts that:

It is necessary to acknowledge the subjective basis of singular behavior [...] This entails addressing the emotions, sensations and sentiments that every single moving form generates and by which it is generated [...] as Barba posits it [Barba-Savarese, 1988]. (p. 56, own translation)

Being aware of the movement will impact mental images – although these remain veiled for consciousness, which in turn will impact the possibilities of a driving answer, setting a dialectic that will provide for constant remodeling -of images and movements- through the subject’s experiences (p. 59, own translation).

A reflection on body experience was manifested by a female tutor:



On the first day, after doing a very exhausting warm-up, we stood up silently, with our eyes closed and decided to feel why we were there, what we wanted. I felt frightened, it was maybe that fear of opening myself to others. (May/2017, own translation)

Concerning reality's symbolization, theater-pedagogy is interested in transitioning from a real story to symbolic elements in dramaturgy. In doing so, it aims to unravel an everyday act, transforming it into a context by decoding what it has without missing an impact of wonder. For achieving it, it is necessary to create codes with the body and activities with a clear message, beginning, execution, and ending. Later, in the process of directing a play, the director seeks to bring the hidden action to light, make a drive seen in the outside visible, and make performance truer. In any case, the theatrical play should transcend the direct enjoyment of *mimesis*; instead, it ought to experience real-life emotions that it represents, an experience that is in line with Geertz's¹⁸ words:

[...] the system of symbols is the source of information that, to a measurable extent, provides shape, direction, particularity and sense to a continuous flux of activity. (p. 215, own translation)

Healing the Wounds Caused by War and Other Wounds

The possibility of experiencing healing throughout the theater-pedagogy educational process is born when educators invite tutors, and these, in turn, do so with the groups from the educational community that will be listened to, reading their own feelings. Introspection and interaction experiences along the process became chances to identify turning points in their biographies; they could recall or notice how some facts, absences, attainments, and frustrations affected their life trajectory as a result of displacement or working as education professionals in rural areas.

I left, we left, our roots were cut, we sowed others, we watered them. We planted here and there, depending on where my way takes me. (May/2018, own translation)

Healing life wounds, in many cases those caused by war, sometimes, wounds resulting from absences, failures, or emotional losses, depart from a comprehensive view of the human being: mind-body-spirit, as discussed before, this implies a body crossed by the social and the temporary, and a spirit and a mind that are expressed bodily [...] Once again the body is what incarnates the other dimensions. This is why, the body, like theater, continues to be the core of healing because in it and through it wounds are recognized, and the pain they portray is reflected but also channeled. In this process of theatrical education and creation, actors can reflect on what some relationships, experiences, and expressions entail:

[...] to compose dramaturgy preparing our body, mind, and spirit is a must
[...] reading our life's book, opening in it our wounds, scars, sores, difficulties,



and achievements, letting them self-express and finding the remedy there.
(May/2018, own translation)

Physical exercises and theatrical education contributed to the acknowledgment of limits or barriers, and of their emotions, as well as of individual and collective capacities in diverse learning moments: when they individually created a shape with their body, when creating a scheme of movements related to other bodies, a scene, a theatrical play, “they created a cosmos from chaos, from the scratch”. In the experience with theater-pedagogy, the healing effect is depicted as follows:

Theater is therapeutical, it recognizes who one is, where one is, and what one is for [...] Rewriting one’s story in first and third person, transforms life, and sense is altered. (May/2018, own translation)

The shiest youngsters, those who dealt with expression, have enhanced their self-esteem, acquired communicative skills, they express their emotions more easily, they have overcome the armed conflict’s aftermaths. (August/2018, own translation)

Therefore, theater-pedagogy has a healing effect that is close to the purification rites described by Geertz¹⁸:

Disease drains in sweat, vomit, and other purification rites; health is filtered when a Navajo patient touches, by means of a singer, the drawing of sacred sand. Clearly, the canticle’s symbolism is consolidated in the issue of human suffering and intends to face it by putting it in context with a sense, providing an action mode through which suffering can be expressed and when it is expressed, understood and when it is comprehended, tolerated. (p. 101, own translation)

This occurs thanks to healing not only because of bearing suffering as an imperative or resignation but also as a possibility to create senses of the self and sparkle transformations that begin in oneself, as Millás puts it¹⁹:

A busca por algum tipo de emancipação, ou de felicidade, seria o ponto de encontro com o que se nomeia neste artigo de cura dentro do trabalho das artes corporais. Cura como uma maneira de potencializar a vida e de gerar vitalidade, possibilitando outros arranjos e novas formas de sensibilidade. Não se fala da clínica ou da cura de uma patologia, mas da percepção de que o fazer do artista e do educador envolve uma dimensão curativa [...] e que trabalhar com dança é trabalhar com a Medicina (de si mesmo). (p. 12)

However, for Turner²⁰, the transformation experienced in rituals goes further than people and social relationships and attains genuinely cathartic effects that transcend in the shape of social transformations.



Democratization in Mental Health

Looking at mental health from an angle different from psychopathology and healthcare services allows, as in this case, democratizing knowledge and advance to find new understandings and support strategies considering the subject who suffers. In this study, pedagogy and social theater, dialoguing with rural educators' experiences in the midst of Colombian armed conflict, enabled the recognition of the healing process of historic wounds in the participants' biographies. This combination made it necessary to go beyond the individual for shedding light on social dynamics that have engendered violence and social suffering. Lastly, it boosted the denounce of facts and social transformation from the perspective of a research and creation project.

Recent studies in other contexts have tackled the democratization of mental health. In Argentina²¹, an initiative of collaborative methodology, with horizontal relationships, endeavored to systematize learnings linked to healthcare professionals' and users' self-management. Advocating for mental health rights, the researchers documented how such a methodology reached a democratizing sense in the circulation of power and knowledge that is particular to the research field of mental health, which allowed the participants to engage in a political subjectivation process.

On the other hand, in Cataluña²², a study on Collaborative Management of Medication, with antecedents in Canada and Brazil, was prone to negotiating mental health treatments from a horizontal outlook that sought to foster autonomy in those affected. The investigation highlights the need for researching and establishing new ways to care for mental health, transcending the pharmacological answer in cases of serious mental suffering and embracing a collective construction of care, based on dialogue; and in Brazil, inquiring on a case of Primary Health Care²³, the authors suggest educating permanently in health from a collective construction of knowledges installed in the social context, as well as promoting interdisciplinarity and integrality for assisting psychical suffering.

To conclude, it is feasible to contend that there is a sensitive affinity between mental health, armed conflict, and peacebuilding, which is visible in this study. Findings show that theater-pedagogy education contributed to the understanding and boosting of mental health. By the same token, the investigation casts light on the relevant place of the body, and inside it, the place of symbolization and movement for reapproaching the past, reinterpreting the present, and constructing senses for peaceful social transformation. Furthermore, it posits harmony between the participants' healing experiences and those of political subjectivation. With this, the place of "patients", which is how people with mental conditions are conceived, is overcome. Finally, the study reveals a positive experience regarding mental health as a state of inner peace rather than a treatment based on medicalization; healing here entails understanding social reality from life itself, contributing to its transformation.



Authors' contribution

All authors actively participated in all stages of preparing the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Resumen

El estudio de la salud mental, en Colombia y en el mundo, ha sido enfocado desde una perspectiva morbicéntrica y conductual. Este trabajo presenta un estudio de caso que tuvo como objetivo comprender de qué manera el proceso de formación en teatro pedagogía, como iniciativa de construcción de paz, puede aportar a la salud mental. A partir de la confluencia del teatro social, la pedagogía crítica y las experiencias de vida de los y las participantes, se realizó análisis documental, y categorización al diario de campo, entrevistas y grupos de discusión. Participaron personas involucradas en la formación y público asistente en los foros de las presentaciones teatrales. Se encontraron elementos sobre sanación, cuerpo, juego, movimiento y simbolización en relación con salud mental. Se espera que este sea un aporte a la democratización en salud mental en contextos de sufrimiento social.

Palabras claves: Paz. Salud mental. Teatro.

Resumo

O estudo da saúde mental na Colômbia e no mundo tem focado numa perspectiva morbicentrica e comportamental. Este trabalho apresenta um estudo de caso que teve como objetivo compreender de que maneira o processo de formação em teatro pedagogia, como iniciativa de construção de paz, pode contribuir à saúde mental. A partir da confluência do teatro social, a pedagogia crítica e as experiências de vida dos e das participantes, e mediante categorização, realizou-se análise documental, de diário de campo, entrevistas e grupos de discussão. Participaram pessoas envolvidas na formação e público assistente nos foros das apresentações teatrais. Foram encontrados elementos sobre cura, corpo, jogo, movimento e simbolização na relação com a saúde mental. Espera-se que este seja uma contribuição à democratização na saúde mental em contextos de sofrimento social.

Palavras-chave: Paz. Saúde mental. Teatro.