

**Applied Theatre as a strategy for intervention with
disadvantaged groups: a qualitative synthesis**

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Abstract

Background: Applied Theatre (AT) is a relatively recently-created interdisciplinary field that includes investigation of the social and educational uses of its practices. Since its emergence as a discipline in the 1990s, research has proliferated. However, to better understand the breadth and depth of AT's social and educational applications, there is a need to review and synthesize the scientific literature in this developing area.

Purpose: We sought to address this gap by providing a qualitative synthesis of relevant literature focusing on theatre as a tool for social and educational intervention with socially disadvantaged groups, capturing some of the key achievements and challenges in the field.

Design and methods: A qualitative review of scientific literature published on this issue in the last decade was conducted. After obtaining an overview of the literature, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify the central themes of the research.

Findings: Scientific discussion on the social and educational uses of theatre has expanded significantly in the last decade. Our thematic analysis identified the documentation of a rich multiplicity of social and educational possibilities for applying theatre to contexts of social vulnerability, including: empowerment and development of critical awareness, promotion of personal and community development, construction of spaces of recognition, development of empathetic attitudes towards human differences, and the recovery of silenced narratives. This review also uncovered a number of challenges and dilemmas inherent to the field, such as the question of power distribution in applied theatre processes or the complexities created by an instrumental vision of the arts.

Conclusions: This qualitative synthesis of research demonstrates how AT as a framework for reflection and action of an interdisciplinary nature offers useful dialogical, creative and critical tools for generating viable alternatives in diverse social and educational contexts. The review of research draws attention to how AT may provide a platform for the recognition and participation of marginalised groups and individuals and offer a potentially relevant mechanism for moderating social and educational inequality.

Keywords: Applied Theatre, literature review, socio-educational intervention, disadvantage, social justice, participation

Introduction

Internationally, numerous reports (e.g. Alvaredo et al. 2018; United Nations, 2020a) have laid bare the widening of social gaps and inequalities, which are now being further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations 2020b). In this context, there is ever more need for creative strategies that can facilitate social and educational processes for the inclusion of the most vulnerable individuals and groups. There is a vast scientific literature demonstrating the immense social and educational possibilities that are presented by the theatre. Theatre — due to its integrative potential — can contribute to both collective and individual development (Baldwin 2014) and to the creation of strategies for social cohesion and empowerment (Mills, 2009). It also enables new codes of expression and dialogue (Allan 2014) and prepares people to face conflict situations in a peaceful and creative way (Aguilar 2020). Theatre as an educational and social tool has a wide scope and is difficult to define. Its wide variety of practices and disciplinary approaches requires a general framework for rigorous study, which, in turn, could lead to a broadening of the theoretical-practical possibilities of the field. Applied Theatre (AT) is a broad, inclusive concept representing a diverse set of theories and practices that make use of theatre for a variety of purposes. It is a heterogeneous area of knowledge which is currently expanding, as reflected by the plethora of conferences, journals, and postgraduate courses in this area.

With the aim of contributing to the greater systematisation of this emerging field of knowledge, in this study we offer a qualitative synthesis of scientific literature published during the last decade on educational and social processes developed through theatrical strategies with various socially vulnerable groups. This study is part of a research and development project called 'Nomadis: Knowledge Nomads in Emerging Pedagogical Contexts: Mapping Disruptive Practices', which was funded on a competitive basis by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. The general purpose of the project is to search for, and research, the "disruptive" educational methodologies that manage to renew a social and educational paradigm that many sociological currents consider obsolete (Bauman 2007). Our research group recognises the value of theatre and dramaturgy to generate new and creative educational and social frameworks (Hunter 2016; Vieites-García 2015). Through artistic methodologies, significant and pertinent learning can be summoned from a wider perspective based on critical transformation (McLaren 2019; Mezirow 1981); dialogical and emancipatory learning (Freire 2012; Rancière 2002), interdisciplinarity (Morin 2001) and the importance of context in educational practice and policy, and in research.

Background

AT as an interdisciplinary field: concept and characteristics

Diverse perspectives on the specific role of theatre as a tool for social and educational intervention are evident in the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton in the 1970s (Baldwin 2014) and later on, in the contributions of many other drama educators such as Jackson (2005), or Neelands and Goode (1990). Today, the voices within the field of AT have multiplied, animated by different approaches, theories and practices, some of which will be described here. Whilst others will not be represented here, due to space limitations and/or because they lie beyond the specific focus of this study, they are still worthy of note and include the works of Anderson and O'Connor (2013), McAvinchey (2020), Kershaw and Nicholson (2011), White (2015) and Zakes Mda (1993).

Currently, AT is typically used as an 'umbrella' term (Ackroyd 2000) designating an interdisciplinary field of research (Sedano-Solís 2019) that saw emergence in the 1990s in England. According to Nicholson (2005), dramatic applications encompass those 'dramatic activities that exist primarily outside conventional theatrical institutions and are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies' (in Sedano-Solís 2019, 106). It is thus a 'theatre outside the theatres' (Remedi, 2015, 10), since its experiences are usually developed in spaces other than those regarded as conventional, in places such as streets, schools, squares, universities, prisons or civic centres. This allows for reclaiming participatory spaces for the community whilst making use of its endogenous cultural capital, developing strategies of cultural democracy (Infantino 2020). Motos and Ferrandis (2015) highlight three essential features of this theatrical modality: intentionality (or the will to influence human activity), hybridisation (referring to theatre and something else; thus, interdisciplinarity becomes unavoidable), and otherness (focus on the other, that is, on the needs of people and communities).

Theatre, as a live social phenomenon, calls for a relational and performative process or theatrical 'convivio' (Dubatti 2011), which involves the real-time connection between actors and audience to recreate an imaginary space and time. In AT shows, strategies are used to involve the audience in the scenic game, which narrows this 'conviviality' between the parties. Augusto Boal coined the term 'spect-actors' to refer to the new formula that breaks with the traditionally divided roles of spectator/actor (Silva and Menezes 2016). The opportunity for the audience to participate in the show — which is held in a familiar space with barely any physical distance between actors and audience — enables the audience to generate a direct emotional response. This also alters the passive receptive habits of the

audience, creating a mirror in which the community can look at and actively question itself in a critical manner. Moreover, within certain approaches to AT, the boundaries between theatre and life itself are blurred, as they represent ‘dramatised images of the subjective realities experienced by each actor and by the collective as a whole’ (Cordero-Ramos and Muñoz-Bellerín 2019, 7). This can also facilitate intellectual and emotional engagement on the part of all those present in the performance (McQuaid and Plastow 2017) and, in turn, pathways of recognition for people in vulnerable situations.

Typologies of AT practices

When we speak of AT, it is necessary to highlight a wide range of forms or typologies, which include: Popular Theatre, Theatre in Health Education, Theatre in Education, Theatre of the Oppressed, Prison Theatre, Theatre of Reminiscence, Museum Theatre, Community-Based Theatre and Theatre for Development (Nicholson 2005; Prendergast and Saxton 2009). Other authors, such as Balme (2013) or Motos and Ferrandis (2015), have proposed alternative forms of classification. For example, Balme (2013) proposed a distinction between therapeutic, educational and political forms of AT. Motos and Ferrandis (2015) have identified four typologies: Theatre in Education, Dramatherapy, Social Theatre and Theatre in Business. However, the categories presented in these taxonomies should not be understood as watertight compartments, since the majority of AT practices occupy borderline spaces that go beyond any possible effort to pigeonhole them. In this sense, AT is always of a hybrid nature; it refers to theatre and ‘something else’. For this reason, the study of theatre as an educational and social experience for the transformation of inequalities requires an interdisciplinary and complex approach.

AT for social and educational intervention with vulnerable people

Matters related to social exclusion and vulnerability are widely discussed through many scholarly fields, areas and disciplines. Although an in-depth discussion of the concept of ‘vulnerability’ lies outside of the scope of this paper, we situate our study by acknowledging the theoretical approaches from which we start to characterise those who will be considered here as ‘vulnerable groups’. We shall refer fundamentally to the conceptualisation of ‘social exclusion’ developed by the French tradition of sociological analysis of exclusion, with Robert Castel (1995) as one of its main exponents. This author understands exclusion as a dynamic, reversible and cross-cutting social phenomenon, which includes not only a lack of income and withdrawal from the labour market, but also a weakening of social ties, a decline

in social participation and, therefore, a loss of social and cultural rights. Thus, the groups and individuals that will be considered 'vulnerable' in this review, according to Castel's (1995) categorisation, move between the zones of 'vulnerability' and 'exclusion', and are usually bearers of a stigma, a 'deeply discrediting attribute' (Goffman 2006, 13) that derives from their marginal status. They are subjects marked as 'abnormal' (Foucault 2001), 'unproductive', and 'ignorant' (Santos 2010), as they lie outside the category of so-called 'normality' created by a society that fears what is different (Bauman 2006) and, therefore, discriminates against it and expels it (Han 2017). According to Motos and Ferrandis (2015), AT should be 'a practice that generates critical knowledge from practice to guide it to practice, with the will to contribute to social change in favour of respect, equality, access to goods and solidarity' (11). In our review, the focus will be on research relating to experiences and discourses on the social and educational uses of theatre in contexts of social vulnerability.

Purpose of the study

This study sought to review literature systematically (Gough, Thomas and Oliver 2012; Petticrew and Roberts 2006) in order to provide a qualitative synthesis of the socio-educational applications of theatre in contexts of social and educational vulnerability. Such reviews are not prevalent in the field of AT (Crossley et al. 2019). Therefore, an analysis of recent and relevant scientific literature on the subject is particularly valuable for an emerging discipline such as this one, as it could potentially open up new lines of research, expand the possibilities of existing research, and contribute scientific rigour to a field that has a long tradition of adopting a practical — as opposed to a scientific — perspective. The fundamental purpose of the analysis was to provide a descriptive overview of the literature in this emerging area of study, and to summarize and condense the central concerns and relevant challenges in the field. To this end, it was necessary to establish a general framework that included the research of the last decade and the main findings within this field of research. Based on previous reviews of related issues (Crossley et al. 2019; Fernandez-Aguayo and Pino-Juste 2018; Heard et al. 2020; Leonard, Hafford-Letchfield and Couchman 2018), we proposed the following three research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of studies on the use of AT for socio-educational interventions in vulnerable contexts? (2) What are the main themes of research identified through thematic analysis? (3) What socio-educational implications and pathways for future investigations have been identified through this review?

Methods

In order to address our research questions, the analysis was divided into two main phases. Our review procedure was based on the PRISMA protocol (Moher et al. 2009). The aim of the first phase was to outline the characteristics of the selected literature, analysing the temporal distribution of the studies, their geographical location, and the research designs employed (Hallinger and Kovačević 2019). The second phase consisted of a thematic analysis of the reviewed literature. By using the basic principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we were able to observe the emergence of the central themes that were present in the selected studies.

Eligibility criteria

The data collection was carried out using three relevant international databases, two of them generalist (World of Science and Scopus) and the other specialised in the educational field (ERIC). We developed a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria to select the studies for review. We included: (1) peer-reviewed articles published between 2011 and 2020; (2) studies focusing on our main theme – i.e., socio-educational applications of theatre in contexts of social and educational vulnerability; (3) studies from the research areas of ‘Arts and Humanities’ and ‘Social Science’. We excluded: (1) materials that were not journal articles (e.g. letters, book chapters, conference materials); (2) studies focused on disciplines other than non-formal education and social work.

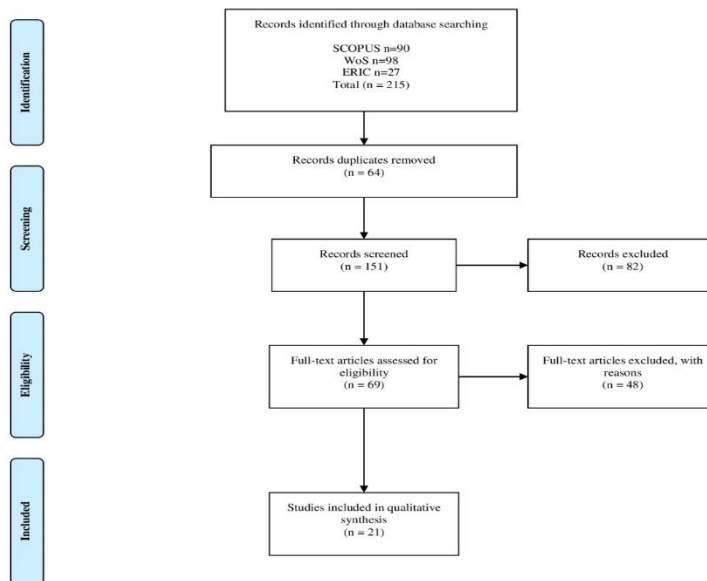
Search strategy, data extraction and quality assessment

As a consequence of the terminological plurality that is inherent to this research field, the choice of keywords and the design of the effective search strategy both posed methodological challenges. Thus, according to the recommendations for effective search established by Sunny and Angadi (2017), we made a careful selection of five words from the ERIC thesaurus (*Drama Workshops, Theatre Arts, Dramatic Play, Social Integration, Empowerment*) and two from the UNESCO thesaurus (*Disadvantaged Groups, Social Exclusion*). In the search equation, we included the keyword ‘applied theatre’, which, on account of its emergent nature, does not appear in the thesaurus but was essential given the subject matter. To ensure accuracy in the search we used quotation marks (‘applied theatre’) and connected the terms through Boolean operators (AND/OR/NOT). Table 1 shows the search equations implemented and the number of articles obtained with each one.

Table 1. Search strategy used with each database, and number of articles yielded by search

Database	Search specifications	N articles
Scopus	Search equation: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Drama Workshops" OR "Theatre Arts" OR "Applied Theatre" OR "Applied Theater" OR "Theatre" OR "Theater") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Social Integration" OR Empowerment OR "Disadvantaged Groups" OR "Social Exclusion")	90
WoS	Search equation: (TS = (((("Drama Workshops" OR "Theatre" OR "Theatre Arts" OR "Applied Theater" OR "Applied Theatre") AND ("Social Integration" OR Empowerment OR "Disadvantaged Groups" OR "Social Exclusion"))))	98
ERIC	Search equation: (((("Drama Workshops" OR "Theatre" OR "Theatre Arts" OR "Applied Theater" OR "Applied Theatre") AND ("Social Integration" OR Empowerment OR "Disadvantaged Groups" OR "Social Exclusion"))))	27

As indicated by the flow chart in Figure 1, abstracts were reviewed and included or excluded according to the pre-determined selection criteria. Following this process, the full text of the included studies was accessed and assessed in depth to ensure their thematic suitability. This phase was carried out through a peer review process (Sarhou, 2016). The selected articles were discussed and the final decision on their inclusion in the qualitative synthesis was reached through a consensus process. Thematic synthesis was conducted with the support of the qualitative software Nvivo 12. The researchers also agreed on the main themes that were extracted from the review, providing coherence to the thematic coding of the literature.



Findings

This section presents the findings from our qualitative synthesis. The first part describes the main characteristics of the selected studies, with a focus on the studies' purposes, the methodologies employed, and the research contexts in which they were conducted. In the second part, we detail the outcome of the thematic analysis, describing the central themes that emerged from our scrutiny of the selected papers.

Main characteristics of the selected studies

The selected articles contained a wide variety of study purposes that focused on the use of AT in particularly vulnerable contexts (see Appendix for a summary of key characteristics). Much of the research was concerned with the educational effects of theatre on the social development of excluded communities and individuals. For this reason, they implemented strategies of an interpretive-phenomenological nature, emphasizing the discourses and narratives of the participants, with rather less emphasis on quantitative impacts. The chief attribute that the research contexts shared was the social vulnerability of the people and communities that were the focus of study. Among the articles, we found studies conducted with poor citizens of developing countries (McQuaid and Plastow 2017; Yarrow 2012),

homeless people (Cordero-Ramos and Muñoz-Bellerín 2019), female victims in settings where human rights had been violated (Saeed 2015), children who live and work on the street (Tsourtou, Hatzinikolaou and Chatzinikolaou 2014), and people with disabilities (Genova 2015; Goddard 2015).

Qualitative methodologies were employed in all cases, with the research making use of techniques typical of an ethnographic approach, including participant observation, in-depth interviews or discussion groups. Most of the research was based on single case studies where the educational and social possibilities of theatre were activated in different contexts. Whilst some of the articles focused on the description and analysis of the experiences and others aimed to advance theorisation of the field of AT, they all started from empirical references. In the studies we analysed, the researchers were usually part of the professional team that implemented the AT experience. This methodology merges social intervention with research and is known as "practice as research". According to Bruun (2017), this approach allows the researcher to gain the trust of the group being researched and reduces the sense of alienation and unfamiliarity. However, it is important to note that, when a person assumes the combined role of researcher and mediator, several challenges become evident, including the need to find strategies for balancing familiarity with the situation and the necessary distance required for reflective and abstract thinking. One such strategy would be to film rehearsals and performances for later analysis (Goddard 2015). Other studies made use of the subjective experiences of the research subject to enrich the research, thus adopting an autoethnographic approach. This was the case, for example, in Hunka's (2015) study, in which the author made explicit the direct connection between her past as a victim of harassment, who experienced the healing potential of theatre, and her subsequent interest in research and action in the field of AT.

Thematic analysis

In the studies we explored, theatre was put into play and experienced in many different ways. In some of the studies, it took on an important role in scientific discussion (Cordero-Ramos and Muñoz-Bellerín 2019), whilst in others it was a mediation of social and educational work (Bruun 2017), or another method of ethnographic data collection that allowed a better understanding of a certain social problem that was unrelated to artistic concerns (Genoa 2015; Tsourtou, Hatzinikolaou and Chatzinikolaou 2014). It should not be forgotten that artistic practice is, in all cases, 'applied', which intuitively leads one to think that it is used to serve something that is alien to it. However, the way in which the instrumentalisation of the

arts manifests itself, and is thought of, in AT practices is a subject of particular interest in this discipline. In this sense, some authors prefer to speak of theatre 'as' development rather than theatre 'for' development (Yarrow 2012), in order to break the dichotomy between artistic and social purpose and highlight the complementarity of both instances. These approaches argue that the nature and quality of theatre practice should not be subordinated to the political or social message, and vice versa.

The question of artistic quality, and the discussion of whether or not the traditional concept of quality proper to professional theatre could be extrapolated to AT performances, were common concerns in research in the area (Bruun 2017; Sales-Oliveira et al. 2019; Thompson 2015). AT practices inhabit the boundary between the artistic and the social, and, for this reason, they can hardly compete with the professional agenda, as they are composed primarily of non-professional actors and, in many cases, participants with particular problems. This means that the pedagogical facilitation required in AT practices is very different from that applicable in professionalised environments, which makes it necessary to construct a different framework for judging the quality of productions. For this reason, some research studies proposed alternatives to the Western canonical discourse on quality which went beyond the exclusive focus on aesthetic virtuosity and values with community and social dimensions. Quality understood from a relational perspective was therefore measured in terms of its capacity to generate shared affective experiences in communities (Cohen-Cruz 2019), which challenged the dichotomies between high and low culture, and between popular arts and elite arts. In all the research we analysed, this discussion was connected to the concepts of democratization and cultural democracy and was a transversal key. Most of the artistic strategies put into play in AT practices (documentary-theatre, forum-theatre, rainbow of desire, legislative theatre) are anchored in the Theatre of the Oppressed created by Augusto Boal (2015), which in turn, is inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2012). Whilst the uses of the theatre are diverse, they all combine the political, the educational and the social, as Freire (2012) points out with his concept of critical consciousness. Below, we highlight some of the most important aspects that emerged from the thematic analysis focused on the uses and effects of theatre. It should be noted that the dimensions described are interdependent in nature.

Empowerment and development of critical awareness: The selected studies highlighted the potential for AT to promote empowerment (or self-empowerment) among individuals and communities. In Wrentschur and Moser (2014), theatre was regarded as a privileged tool that could be used to improve the empowerment of young people, helping them to become

involved in efforts to solve problems, adopting attitudes of self-confidence and self-assurance. In studies such as Yarrow (2012), Gallagher and Rodricks (2017) or Oliveira-Sales (2019), which focused on severely disadvantaged groups, AT proved to be a very useful methodology for developing body-centred learning that helps to transform the habits that limit our perception of what is possible. In this sense, it is evident from Abraham (2017) that theatre can be an empowering facilitator that has the potential to break with those elements that make up our habitus, weaken activism and constrict to circles of thought and action imposed from outside (Saeed 2015). Thus, McQuaid and Plastow (2017) or Kazubowski-Houston (2011) reflected on the complexities faced by silenced collectives such as women, and the possibility that theatre could promote their empowerment. These authors championed the idea of power other than 'power over', defending the need for the emergence of a 'power within'/'power with' in communities that allow for the critical awareness needed for the transformation of injustice. In relation to studies with a feminist focus, Dutta (2015) revealed that many of her participants lived the experience of theatre as a process of catharsis, which served as a tool for fighting against social injustices. Wynne (2019) applied a Foucauldian approach to understand an experience of Theatre of the Oppressed, arguing how it could be a tool for repressed voices to become heard. This was advocated by De Smet et al. (2018) in their study, where, through their theatrical intervention, they found that their refugee participants experienced the opportunity to be heard and supported.

Promotion of personal and community development: Another emerging theme was the use of theatre to strengthen individual and community development. Many people labelled as 'abnormal' (Foucault 2001), vulnerable or outsiders are anchored to very strict forms of control over their identity, to social conventions and cultural norms of their groups of origin. Studies such as that of Bruun (2017) argued that, in the face of this, theatre enables a person to create an 'aesthetic distance' from their own life. Tsourtou (2014) resonates with this perspective, with the study demonstrating that, through the construction of imaginary situations, different possibilities of behaviour and attribution of meaning can be tested. In some cases, through fiction, it could even be possible to reach the necessary conditions for revealing traumatic events in one's life that had previously been hidden (Palidofsky 2010). The fictional space thus may provide a form of security to test possibilities, imagine alternatives to 'the real', trying out new ways of looking at oneself that allow for the reconstruction of identity (McQuaid and Plastow 2017). In this context, the body constitutes a personal research strategy as well as a necessary resource for training an actor in the theatre.

It can offer an enclave to transform, deeply, the perception of one's own status, role and personal value (Yarrow 2012).

For many vulnerable people, rebuilding their social fabric and community identity is challenging (Cordero-Ramos and Muñoz-Bellerín 2019). In the studies we analysed, participants of AT experiences reported how they found 'refuges' from a hostile living environment through contact and affective relationship with the group. In studies such as that of Brunn (2017), the daily rituals of theatre operated as a symbolic 'home' for people in need of such space, where relationships of solidarity emerged. Elsewhere, Milton et al. (2016) and Wrentschur and Moser (2014) explored the value of theatre in building a sense of group and human support.

The principle of inclusion and the heterogeneity of the groups was evidently a particularly valued and relevant aspect in the experiences of AT, allowing the renegotiation of relationships, affections and perceptions about oneself and others (Tsourtou 2014). Likewise, Preston (2011) pointed out the relevance of the mixture of different people to enable spaces for the clash of postures and positions. This draws attention to how dissent can be productive and necessary to convene participatory and democratic spaces, where community is built through dialogue between parties and the management of conflicts inherent in human relations (Aguar 2020). In this sense, Boal (2015) reminds that AT aims at moving certainties rather than seeking consensus or answers; its objective is to reach not to a reassuring balance, but rather to the imbalance that leads to action.

Construction of spaces of recognition: The final subsection of our thematic analysis refers to the value of AT for breaking cultural and stereotypical patterns. As Cordero Ramos and Muñoz Bellerín (2019) found, AT provided spaces of recognition for people in vulnerable situations that allowed them to combat the sensation of invisibility they usually suffer. In this way, it can help to establish inclusive spaces through the theatre, in order to combat ignorance, stereotypes and the stigmatisation of various groups. For example, Songe-Møller and Brunvathne (2012) argued that theatre can act as a facilitator of situations that cause the breaking down of prejudices. The participants in their study experienced a process of metamorphosis by broadening their vision through contact and meeting with immigrants. Through this, their conception of this harshly disadvantaged group changed, with both groups exploring strategies to challenge the oppression they suffered. The intersection between theatre and life afforded by documentary forms of theatre can help give value to the stories of ordinary people and the 'narration of the absent' (Santos 2010). This could educate society in a broad sense, whilst creating affective gazes towards the other and

allowing for the reinvention of alternative and counter-hegemonic stories. The studies we analysed suggested that AT processes can contribute to making the invisible visible, telling the 'other stories' (McQuaid and Plastow 2017, Saeed 2015). For example, certain experiences of AT were aimed at empowering and making visible the capacities of disabled people, enabling them to show precisely what they are capable of doing, by questioning ableism and using, as a starting point, the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model (Genova 2015).

Discussion

According to the literature reviewed, AT can offer potentially valuable intervention strategies for working with vulnerable groups. AT practices can open up very significant pathways towards the identity and ontological re-foundation (Proaño-Gómez 2013) that are crucial for many people and communities in situations of vulnerability, enabling a roadmap to empowerment. The transformative impact it generates is understood from a multidimensional, rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and non-hierarchical perspective. The notion of change and transformation is at the very heart of AT practices (Motos and Ferrandis 2015), and in fact, some authors speak directly of 'theatre for change' (Landy and Montgomery 2012, 20). Consequently, the debate on what is understood by 'transformation' and the hermeneutic approach to understanding the effects produced by AT experiences are the subject of highly topical and intense discussions among researchers in the field. For example, some authors (Balfour 2009; Bishop 2014) highlight the perceived powerlessness of AT to transform systemic macro-problems such as unemployment, gender inequalities, ethnic conflicts or distributive injustice. Other approaches draw attention to the limitations of a purely instrumental approach to envisaging AT practices, arguing in favour of other types of hermeneutics that vindicate the role of affect and its social and cultural repercussions (Ahmed 2014). Elsewhere, Thompson (2009) discusses the 'end of affect', proposing an 'affective turn' that allows us to understand the effects of these experiences in less utilitarian terms, questioning, for example, the 'affects' that emerge from the intersection between AT, embodied pedagogies and transformative education (Sales-Oliveira et al. 2019). Duncombe (2016) also proposes the neologisms of 'affect' and 'affectivity' to introduce the stimulation of affects in the understanding of the effects and potential efficacy of artistic practices to produce social change. Such approaches prompt the study of resonances made possible by transformative art, through its capacity to stimulate affect, generating aesthetic pleasure and emotional responses in participants.

Beyond the potential and achievements of AT experiences, specialists delve into the dilemmas and challenges inherent to this field of action and reflection (Bishop 2014; Prentki 2011), and consider the possible perverse effects that can be generated by such experiences (Wynne 2019). It is evident that Thompson (2015), McQuaid and Plastow (2017) and Chinyowa (2015) stress the need to temper optimism in stating the potential of AT and to challenge the tendency towards romanticisation that some studies engage in, questioning, in depth, the linear narratives of 'success', 'empowerment' and other similar terms. Thus, authors such as Hargrave (2010) and Haseman and Winston (2010) warn against the dangers of considering AT to be a recipe or formula that guarantees success, and instead focus on the contradictions and mismatches between the 'good' intention and the real effects. For example, in a study of an AT experience with Afghan women, Saeed (2015) warns of the potentially dangerous mismatch between the macro and micro transformations generated by projects. Specifically, Saeed points out that the suffering of excluded communities may increase if the advances in awareness and empowerment generated by AT projects are not accompanied by an effective transformation of oppressive social structures and undignified living conditions. This same concern can be found in studies on similar experiences with homeless people (Busby 2018; da Silva Perez 2015).

Moreover, some studies on art and social transformation (Infantino 2020; Preston 2011) point out how these practices can lead to a paradoxical effect by reinforcing stereotypes or increasing the inequalities that they aspire to combat. These positions argue that theatre in its 'pure' format continues to belong to an elite, and that AT aggravates the social inequality between those who enjoy 'art for art's sake' and those who do not enjoy this privilege and have to be content with the applied versions. According to this view, applied forms of theatre serve as instruments that can be used for various purposes and are reserved for the 'vulnerable', dangerous or needy segments of the population. These positions warn of the danger of a utilitarian approach to theatre (Infantino 2020, Snyder-Young 2011). In this sense, authors such as Ackroyd (2000) prefer to consider theatre and applied theatre as a continuum and not as two separate compartments. Jacques Rancière's (2002, 2010) more contemporary views on equality as an unavoidable starting point of emancipatory practice, rather than as an end, also connect with this critical approach (Bilbao 2017).

It should also be noted that in the research included there is a shared concern with regard to power management in projects, and the need to balance differential positions between facilitators and individuals and communities in the contexts where they work. In many projects, there are cross-cutting circumstances in which the facilitator is a person of

higher socio-economic status, comes from a highly literate environment, or is even a famous artist, as in the experience analysed in Busby (2018). This can create a distance between the facilitator and the participants or even give rise to new oppressive structures that restore the inferior position of people in situations of exclusion. Preston (2011) suggests that local facilitators could be a solution to this problem, which could, in turn, lead to greater community involvement. Another recurrent discussion is the professionalization of theatre projects involving people in situations of exclusion. A professionalized framework is a factor that stimulates the motivation of the participants and can contribute to the recognition and reassignment of a social role of dignity and prestige that is necessary for stigmatized people and communities (Bruun 2017). This positive view on the inclusion of vulnerable people in the professional artistic world is discussed in other articles (Da Silva-Pérez 2015), which warn of the risk of vulnerable groups becoming parasitized by professional theatre companies for their own commercial gain.

Our analysis revealed the relatively higher proportion of research studies conducted in the northern hemisphere in countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. This is important to acknowledge, and denotes an ethnocentric bias that privileges specialized research from the countries of the north, meaning that research conducted in countries such as Argentina —where the study and practice of Community Theatre was pioneered — or Colombia, an international reference for collective theatre creation, are not represented. In the references cited in the papers, the presence of scientific material from these countries is also negligible (with the notable exception of Augusto Boal, of Brazilian origin). Whilst further discussion of this important point is beyond the scope of the current study, our findings nonetheless invite us to think about the visibility of what is absent and consider the possible *epistemicide* (Santos 2017).

Limitations

We conducted a descriptive thematic analysis of a small, heterogeneous and carefully selected set of small-scale case studies that offer interpretations and explore perceptions of the various actors involved in AT processes. However, it is important to highlight certain limitations inherent in the methodological approach used in this study. Due to the qualitative nature of the studies, the findings are not generalisable. Furthermore, the review relates only to the specific time period established for the selection of articles. This criterion was applied because we wanted to review, in detail, the published literature on AT as a strategy for social and educational intervention with socially disadvantaged groups in the last decade (2011-

2020). Nevertheless, this meant that we were unable to consider previous studies and present the findings within a broader historical context. Another limitation is that most of the articles included in our review were written in English, which may be related to the ethnocentric bias discussed above and could mean that relevant works written in other languages were excluded.

Implications and future research

This study highlights the need to reconsider traditional strategies of social and educational intervention with groups in vulnerable situations. The articles we analysed demonstrate a shared interest in the ways in which AT experiences facilitate new forms of linkage between professionals in the educational, social and artistic sectors and vulnerable people. The research on AT also proposes development of the capacities to understand, critically, the actions, behaviours and attitudes that impact on one's professional practice, with the aim of improving the latter through critical pedagogical reflection (Linds and Vettraino 2012). Likewise, learning through the body - on which AT practices are based - can allow the breaking down of dichotomies between body and mind, working from holistic perspectives (Thorburn 2020). Overall, the research suggests that AT can enable innovative pedagogical strategies to be put into play in particularly challenging contexts, which demand creative solutions to problems of great social significance. On the other hand, research also highlights the need for AT processes to be developed over a long period of time so that transformations can effectively take place. Moreover, according to some research studies, the engagement modes adopted by facilitators are regarded as critical to determining the likelihood of success in AT experiences (Yarrow 2012). These studies point out that facilitators must democratise spaces and implement strategies to help deconstruct normative beliefs that assign certain groups to culturally inferior positions, encouraging inclusive participation of all people regardless of gender, age, social class, disability or educational level.

Conclusions

Our small-scale, qualitative synthesis of selected AT literature highlights how interdisciplinarity is a defining characteristic of this field of knowledge, operating from a scientific paradigm that opposes the classical disciplinary division of modern science (Morin, 1994). It is interested in intersections, exploring the infinite possibilities derived from disciplinary cross-fertilisation and the inclusion of arts in the processes of research and action. The 'applied theatre' is 'undisciplined': it does not have an owner, nor does it want to own, exclusively, a plot of knowledge. In its journey through disciplinary interstices, AT

constructs a 'new object that belongs to no one', as Barthes defined it when speaking of interdisciplinarity (in Clifford and Marcus 1986, 1).

This review also underscores the need to explore forms of research that reduce the distance between the subject and the object of investigation and that include the voices of those belonging to the less favoured sectors (Abraham 2017). The 'practice as research', commonly used for research in this area, allows for the development of empirical work that is committed to social transformation that has the potential to improve the conditions of vulnerable groups. Milton et al. (2016) point out the need for more research using theatre to empower silenced groups. This view is also shared by Songe-Moller and Brunvathne (2012) or Mills (2009), who call for more extensive training in the instruction of theatrical processes that struggle to empower individuals involved in an increasingly culturally diverse environment. Moreover, Wrentschur and Moser (2014) argue that more studies are needed to address the problems of vulnerable young people through self-empowerment and engagement with social policy issues. Finally, our synthesis of a small, carefully selected collection of AT literature is offered as a starting point. It is recommended that further review studies of AT are conducted, in order to expand the theoretical and practical possibilities of a field that has a long practical tradition but is still emerging in scientific terms.

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Appendix. Main characteristics of the studies

Authorship and year	Setting	Study purpose	Methods	Participants
Abraham (2017)	London	To study the impact of a participative theatre project with vulnerable young people through their own voices.	Case study of a small theatre forum through a pluralistic approach.	Students from a primary school in London's Lambeth district.
Bruun (2017)	Norway	To investigate the potential of the P:UNKT project of the company "Akershus Theatre" for the integration of foreigners.	Ethnography. Case Study.	Foreign asylum seekers and Norwegian citizens.
Chinyowa (2015)	Johannesburg, South Africa	To explore how actors are involved through their participation in a theatre organisation, based on the illustrative paradigm.	Case study about Themba's methodology, a particular organization who use interactive methods during their performances.	Members of Themba Interactive Theatre Company.
Cordero-Ramos and Muñoz-Bellerín (2019)	Spain	To describe and investigate the transformative effects of the <i>Teatro de la Inclusión</i> experience with	Ethnography. Case Study.	Homeless people.

		homeless people in the city of Seville.		
De Smet, De Haene, Rousseau and Stalpaert (2018)	Berlin	To discuss the positive dimensions of refugee theatre participation in a stigmatized and polarized political and social environment.	Case study through semi-structured interviews and observation of workshops, rehearsals and group meetings.	9 refugees from Hakawati.
Dutta (2015)	West Bengal	To study the empowerment of rural women who suffered discrimination through their participation in a social theatre project proposed by an NGO.	Case study through face-to-face and semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation.	7 women committed to Jana Sanskriti's social theatre.
Gallagher and Rodricks (2017)	Toronto	To analyse how theatrical pedagogy mobilizes a theatre classroom with a strong problem due to racial issues.	Case study through micro-encounters.	Classroom with 11 students, 3 boys and 8 girls.
Genova (2015)	Greece, Spain and Lithuania	To explore the barriers to the real implementation of inclusive education, through the voice of people with disabilities.	Activism and theoretical research. Theatre-forum as a technique for data collection.	58 disabled young people from Greece, Spain and Lithuania, aged 18-30 years.
Goddard (2015)	Ireland	To study the role of the teacher 'as witness' to the impact of a participatory theatre project with vulnerable young people.	Longitudinal study; Case study in Kids Company (London). Theatre-forum as a technique for data collection.	Children with learning disabilities from vulnerable areas.
Hunka (2015)	London	To critically question the appropriateness of community spaces where AT practices are usually carried out for work with vulnerable children with	Practice as research.	Abused "vulnerable" children with neurological trauma.

		neurological trauma.		
Kazubowski-Houston (2011)	Poland	To study power struggles through the implementation and development of an ethnographic theatre project with Roma women.	Case study of an ethnographic theatre project.	A group of Roma women and local actors.
McQuaid and Plastow (2017)	Uganda	To critically reflect on the successes, complexities and failures of a feminist-focused AT project in Walukuba, Uganda.	Ethnography. Project implemented and researched by the authors.	Women and men of various ages and ethnicities.
Milton et al. (2016)	Río de Janeiro, Brazil	To analyse the use of communication strategies in vulnerable African-Brazilian adolescents who participated in a theatrical performance.	Socio-pedagogical action-research method.	A group of 20 teenagers who lived in refugee homes.
Preston (2011)	London	To critically investigate an AT experience with vulnerable children and analyse the limitations of the experience in terms of integration and inclusion.	Ethnography. Case Study.	9 adolescent women in London in a situation of social and economic vulnerability.
Saeed (2015)	Afghanistan	To investigate the empowering effects of a legislative theatre experience with Afghan women.	Ethnography (field notes and in-depth interviews).	Poor women of different ethnicities and a very wide age range.
Sales-Oliveira, Monteiro and Pinto-Ferreira (2019)	Portugal	To investigate the potential of applied theatre to develop gender awareness through the experience of	Union research and intervention. Ethnography.	Unemployed women.

		two workshops with unemployed women.		
Songe-Møller and Brunvathne (2012)	Oslo, Norway	To explore how theatre can be an empowering tool in the face of oppression in a culturally diverse society.	Action research.	A group of future ethnic Norwegian teachers.
Tsourtou, Hatzinikolaou and Chatzinikolaou (2014)	Greece	To investigate the perceptions of a group of children working on the street through a "Theatre for Development" methodology.	Action research.	34 children and 16 adolescents of various ethnic groups, working in the street.
Wrentschur and Moser (2014)	Austria	To explore the power of theatre to enhance youth empowerment and critical awareness of the society and politics that surround them.	Case study through participant observation, qualitative interviews and a questionnaire.	A group of 12 disadvantaged young people.
Wynne (2019)	New South Wales, Australia	To explore from a Foucauldian perspective the performance of a theatre group that used "Theatre of the Oppressed" as a means of addressing the external barriers that weaken them as human beings.	Case study through participant observation and in-depth interviews.	Young people who lived in public housing in the neighbourhood.
Yarrow (2012)	India	To explore the operation of forms of embodied learning in Forum practice, with particular reference to the work of Jana Sanskriti, in India.	Ethnography. Documentary research.	'...mainly agricultural workers, day-labourers, housewives' (220).

Post-print