

**Il teatro come dispositivo pedagogico performativo nella formazione dei docenti:
un'indagine sui Master universitari in Teatro, Pedagogia e Didattica e in Arti
Performative**

**Theatre as a Performative Pedagogical Device in Teacher Education:
An Investigation into University Master's Programs in Theatre, Pedagogy and
Didactics and Performing Arts**

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Questa ricerca pilota indaga l'uso di pratiche teatrali nella formazione iniziale degli insegnanti, esplorando il contributo delle arti performative allo sviluppo di competenze professionali quali consapevolezza corporea, gestione delle relazioni educative, comunicazione efficace e riflessività pedagogica. I corsi magistrali Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics e Performing Arts dell'Università Suor Orsola Benincasa di Napoli sono presentati come esempi di buone pratiche basate sui principi dell'Embodied Cognition e su esperienze laboratoriali centrate sul corpo e sulla relazione. Attraverso un approccio qualitativo e la metodologia CReAP+T nell'ambito dell'Art-Based Research, i risultati evidenziano il valore formativo del teatro come strumento innovativo per la professionalità docente.

PAROLECHIAVE: TEATRO; EMBODIMENT; DIDATTICA PERFORMATIVA; FORMAZIONE DEGLI INSEGNANTI.

This pilot research explores theatre-based practices in initial teacher education, examining how performing arts methodologies support the development of professional competences such as bodily awareness, management of educational relationships, effective communication, and pedagogical reflexivity. The Master's programmes Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics and Performing Arts at Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples are presented as models of good practice grounded in Embodied Cognition and laboratory-based, body-centered learning experiences. Using a qualitative approach and the CReAP+T methodology within Art-Based Research, the findings highlight the strong educational value of theatre as an innovative and reflective tool for teacher professionalism.

KEYWORDS: THEATRE; EMBODIMENT; PERFORMATIVE DIDACTICS; TEACHER EDUCATION.

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Introduction

The integration of artistic practices into teacher education represents a growing field of inquiry within pedagogy (Gallagher & Lindgren, 2015), particularly for the contribution these practices offer to the development of a complex, reflective, and situated professional identity (Carlomagno, 2022). Among emerging educational devices, theatre functions as a generative space for a communal learning environment capable of activating deep transformative processes that engage bodily (Damasio, 1999; Sibilio, 2011), cognitive (Maturana & Varela, 1991), emotional (Goleman, 1995), and relational dimensions (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2011; Gallese & Morelli, 2024). In this perspective, the theatrical language is not conceived as a mere accessory tool but, in line with the bio-educational approach (Frauenfelder & Santoianni, 2018), as an epistemological and pedagogical device (Riva, 2006) able to generate awareness, symbolic action, reorganization of the educational posture, and embodied learning (Gallese, 2005). This research aims to analyze the pathways of first-level university Master's programs in Theatre, Pedagogy, and Didactics; methods, techniques, and practices of the performing arts; and second-level programs in Performing Arts; methods, techniques, and practices of the performing arts offered at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University, as university programs oriented toward teacher training through theatrical practices. These programs promote forms of experiential learning, supporting the premise that “cognition is action” (Maturana & Varela, 1984) in interaction. These training pathways are structured as performative pedagogical devices (Carlomagno, 2020), in which the integration of knowledge is a core component of both the curriculum and the methodology. The hybridization of pedagogical, neuroscientific, and artistic knowledge, through a laboratory-based approach (Dewey, 1938) oriented toward experimentation and critical reflection (Carlomagno, 2022), represents a significant example of transdisciplinary education and didactic innovation, capable of addressing the current challenges of initial teacher training at all levels of schooling. The analysis of these educational devices makes it possible to investigate how theatrical action can be conceived as a pedagogical field of experience (Dewey, 1938), in which the professional self can be problematized in relation to others and to the context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The guiding hypothesis of this research is that, within an experience-oriented educational framework, theatrical practices

generate forms of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003) that impact the construction of teaching identity through processes of self-observation, decentering, and symbolic re-elaboration of educational action (Demetrio, 1996). This approach centers the body as a locus of knowledge and relation, performativity as a generative dimension of didactics, and the community of practice as an intersubjective learning space (Maturana & Varela, 1991; Kolb, 2014). The theoretical framework underlying the analysis makes it possible to explore concurrent and complementary contributions from both the sciences and the arts, evoking in a transdisciplinary manner theatre pedagogy and, more broadly, the educational sciences. Particular attention is given to the relationship between formative experience and transformative processes, as well as to the embodied dimension of learning professional competences (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022). The focus of this pilot research is not primarily on the didactic effectiveness of theatrical techniques, but rather on their capacity to activate deep, non-linear formative processes (Carlomagno, 2023) that involve subjectivity, otherness, and the learning context (Frauenfelder, 2018). From a methodological perspective, the study employs a qualitative design, adopting an exploratory and interpretive approach that analyzes students' transformation from the beginning to the end of the Master's programs. Data were collected through in-situ observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of narratives written by participants in reflective journals throughout the training. Thematic analysis was conducted with the aim of understanding how theatrical practices influenced participants' professional awareness, their educational posture, and their capacity to engage relationally with others. The aim of the research is to explore the generative potential of theatre practices in teacher education. The focus is thus on theatre (Barba, 1993; Brook, 1996; Grotowski, 1965) as a transformative environment (Mezirow, 2003), capable of activating embodied and reflective cognitive and relational processes. Analyzing this training experience underscores how corporeality, performativity, and artistic dimensions contribute to the construction of situated professional knowledge, irreducible to abstract schemas or didactic technicalities. In this sense, the Master's programs examined aim to be emblematic devices through which to interrogate the ways in which art can meet and intertwine with pedagogy (Carlomagno, 2022) as an epistemic form of education.

Theoretical Framework: Body, Experience, Transformation

Rethinking today the formative nature of theatrical practices in the educational field requires moving beyond the sharp distinction now inadequate between transmissive models and active models of learning.

Theatrical activities are not merely aimed at fostering non-traditional or creative learning; rather, they invite a deeper reconsideration of the epistemic structure underpinning education, as well as a shift from a representative and informational logic toward an experiential, performative, and critical logic of knowledge. Contemporary pedagogical reflection has already challenged any conception of the learner as a separate and disembodied entity. Knowledge is not constituted as the accumulation of contents to be internalized, but as a dynamic configuration of relations between body, environment, affects and symbols. The paradigm of embodied cognition (Maturana & Varela, 1991), in particular, has revealed how cognitive processes emerge from sensorimotor interaction with the world, according to enactive and situated modalities (Gallese, 2005; Gallagher & Lindgren, 2015).

From this perspective, theatrical experience can be understood as a form of embodied knowledge, in which scenic action does not express pre-existing content but enacts it in the very act of performance (Cappa, 2016).

The corporeal dimension, in this sense, does not function as a mere support for learning but constitutes its foundational matrix. The body is the site of processes of meaning-making, implicit memory, emotional regulation, and symbolic activation. Theatrical practices which involve gesture, rhythm, space, voice, contact, and relationship activate these levels simultaneously, offering a device capable of integrating dimensions that are often fragmented within conventional educational models (Damasio, 1999; Caruana & Borghi, 2016; Carlomagno, 2022). The knowledge that emerges is not training, but the symbolic articulation of living, condensed in aesthetic forms.

This entails a redefinition of the very concept of education, to be understood not as the application of teaching techniques but as an ontological process of transformation of the subject in interaction with their Umwelt, or environment of meaning (Von Uexküll, 1965). Teaching and theatre, by drawing on the embodied action of the body in communication and knowledge, shape the subject through educational practices that share, in the actor-spectator and

teacher-student interaction, a creative action that is non-linear, flexible, constantly evolving, and never identical to itself (Carlomagno, 2020).

Within this framework, learning is transformative (Mezirow, 2003) not only when it generates new skills, but when it reshapes the interpretative frames through which the subject perceives and acts upon the world (Dewey, 1938).

Theatre, as both aesthetic and relational practice, acts upon these frames, it stages them, destabilizes them, and renders them the object of embodied reflection (Buccolo, Mongili & Tonon, 2012). The concept of the educational field, understood as an experiential space in which the subject can be exposed to non-ordinary contexts of meaning and action, thus acquires a performative value.

It is within the protected space of scenic fiction that identity and epistemological coordinates can be suspended, explored, and reformulated.

The aim is not to represent roles but to traverse them, inhabiting them symbolically. In this sense, theatre is not merely a pedagogical device but a form of pedagogical inquiry in action, one that unveils the invisible dimensions of everyday educational experience (Frauenfelder & Santoianni, 2018; Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022). This view strengthens the idea that “didactics is theatre, and theatre is didactics” (Rivoltella, 2021), aligning the teacher with the actor, director, and playwright (Carlomagno, 2020), who interact through non-linear languages and dynamics (Sibilio, 2014). Teacher education, therefore, must be conceived as a process of reflective emergence of one’s professional stance. Aesthetic and corporeal practices, such as those of theatre, foster a type of reflexivity that proceeds not by abstraction but through resonance (Rosa, 2020), analogy and symbolic traversal. Within this framework, the assonance between theatre and teaching is expressed in the capacity to seek and recognize the other, as well as to be present in the presence of the other sharing an action that, even when only observed, «means, perceptually speaking, also simulating it with one’s motor system, in one’s motor system» (Gallese & Guerra, 2015).

The construction of educational awareness thus takes place through a form of embodied thinking, which involves decentering, emotional activation, and symbolic relation with the other. A pedagogical knowledge emerges that is not separate but complex, capable of holding together experience, otherness, affectivity, and representation (Demetrio, 1996; Kolb, 2014).

Theatre, like teaching, represents a co-participation of bodies, a sharing of space, and cannot exist without the actor/spectator relationship, without the communion of a direct, living perception (Grotowski, 1965). Theatre has always been a place of self-exploration in relation to otherness (De Marinis, 2012), a relational space for crossing our boundaries (Grotowski, 1965), where mirroring oneself in the other and resonating with the other open up intersubjective and collective perspectives, thereby grounding transformative experiences (Mezirow, 2003).

The Educational Device: The Master's Programs in Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics and in Performing Arts

The educational framework examined in this research is the First-Level University Master's Degree in *Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics. Methods, Techniques and Practices of the Scenic Arts* and the Second-Level University Master's Degree in *Performing Arts. Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics. Methods, Techniques and Practices of the Performing Arts*, both active at the University of Suor Orsola Benincasa in Naples. They are configured as a stable institutional educational structure, designed to systematically integrate performative practices, pedagogical reflection, and educational research.

In this sense, they represent a university model of teacher training based on performativity, relationality, and inclusion as both epistemological and pedagogical principles. Theatre does not merely constitute an artistic language, it functions as a relational and educational device, capable of generating communities and fostering presence and active listening (Carlomagno, 2022).

It provides a privileged space for exploring the complexity of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), promoting relationships through listening, empathy, and openness to encounter, while emphasizing the centrality of human experience. By employing a plurality of non-linear languages (Carlomagno, 2023), theatre becomes a place that educates to the diversity of communicative perspectives, attentive listening, and empathetic relationships. Theatre practices, in their relational and embodied dimension, thus represent a privileged device for inclusion and community building (De Marinis, 2012).

The structure of the Master's programs, transdisciplinary and organized across multiple levels, provides a unique vantage point for analyzing how the stage can become a field of pedagogical inquiry. Specifically, the educational offer of

the Master's programs, as performative pedagogical devices, is articulated in three distinct but interconnected pathways: a professional development course accessible to diploma holders, a first-level university Master's program aimed at students with a bachelor's degree, and a second-level university Master's program for students with a master's degree, coming from artistic, educational, and socio-pedagogical fields. Across all pathways, the curriculum is organized into thematic areas that traverse theatre, pedagogy, didactics, neuroscience, anthropology, and social and identity psychology, integrating theoretical contributions and stage practices within a framework of transdisciplinary learning. The intersection between pedagogy and theatre, in fact, evokes a dual research trajectory. On one hand, the theatrical device, not only in its performative dimension, engages much like the educational device the corporeal, introspective, emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions.

In both didactic and theatrical contexts, decentering and mimetic capacity thus constitute the heuristic foundations for a pedagogically grounded approach to training and for an authoritative, competent theatrical pedagogy.

From a methodological perspective, the Master's programs operate as permanent laboratories alternating masterclasses, seminars, internships, lectures, distance learning, and performative productions.

Participants are supported by a faculty composed of university professors, artists, trainers, and professionals of national and international standing.

The interaction between theoretical knowledge and artistic practices is fostered by a curriculum that emphasizes applied research, experiential learning, and performative didactic design. The didactic approach adopted is strongly integrated and multimodal, built upon the interplay of corporeal, vocal, dramaturgical, and musical elements that act simultaneously in the construction of the educational gesture.

In this framework, the teacher takes on multiple roles: dramaturg, capable of constructing forms of educational and creative writing; director, capable of interpreting the classroom as a generative scenic space; actor, capable of reading and managing interaction through body and feedback; and spectator, capable of co-constructing the educational relationship with the learner. Attention to the neuroscientific foundations of learning (Frauenfelder & Santoianni, 2018) and to embodied action theory (Maturana & Varela, 1991) allows for a reinterpretation of the educational process as a relational, situated, and transformative event. In this context, the teacher is no longer a transmitter

of content but a dramaturgical, directorial, and performative figure who designs, directs, and inhabits educational scenarios through multiple languages (Carlomagno, 2022; Carlomagno, 2023). Their presence is not merely cognitive or organizational but fully performative, shaped by coherence between word, body, intention, and relationship. A central element of the program is the construction of a temporary learning community, in which participants act as co-researchers of their own experience. The unity of meaning is not given by the linear sequence of activities but by the non-linear (Sibilio, 2014) and laboratory-based logic that connects them, particularly through learning generated in reciprocity of exchange and in the dialogical dimension of the training process. The entire structure of the Master's is oriented toward generating educational contexts with high symbolic density, in which theatrical action functions as a catalyst for processes of self-reflection, relational awareness, and pedagogical experimentation. The blended mode of delivery with in-person meetings and online activities is designed to ensure both accessibility and continuity for students, while maintaining the quality of didactic interaction (Sibilio, 2020). Attendance is mandatory and monitored, confirming the intent to guarantee an intensive and immersive educational experience. Internships, consistent with the professionalizing nature of the pathway, allow the acquired skills to be transferred into real contexts school-based, theatrical, or socio-educational through collaborations with local institutions and partner organizations.

The overall duration of the Master's is 1,500 hours per year, structured over one academic year, with a didactic calendar including weekly sessions, asynchronous activities, collective feedback sessions, and a final performative project in which all students write and stage a text. The concluding performance represents a concrete synthesis of the knowledge and practices developed during the program, functioning as both an evaluative and self-reflective device.

The Master's programs thus constitute an ideal context for investigating how theatrical practices can be configured as a performative pedagogical device (Riva, 2006) in teacher education, insofar as they activate processes of awareness, transformation, and relationship that significantly affect the construction of personal and educational identity.

Methodology

The present research adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretative approach, with the aim of investigating the generative potential of theatre practices within an educational framework designed to build and transform teachers' professional identity. In this perspective, the methodology is based on the experimental and multimodal approach CReAP+T (Carlomagno, 2022), which encompasses the following dimensions: Corporeality and Creativity, Relationship, Emotion and Empathy, Action, Performativity, Technology and Training, placing corporeality and creativity at the center of the learning experience, fostering educational relationships, activating the emotional dimension, and encouraging action. This model reinforces the dramaturgical, artistic and pedagogical nature of performativity, also through training practices in technological environments. CReAP+T is developed through theatrical performative practices that require the active involvement of participants within experiential workshops. These activities promote the exploration of the self in relation to others and to the context, within a process of continuous adaptation aimed at generating shared meanings and strengthening relational dynamics within the educational setting. This mode of pedagogical intervention establishes an action-oriented pedagogy that generates awareness, symbolic action, reorganization of the educational stance, and embodied learning, adopting a systemic, inclusive, adaptive, transformative, and non-linear approach that recognizes the body as central in knowledge-construction processes, through practices of creative contamination and transposition.

This approach aligns with the methodological paradigm of Art-Based Research (McNiff, 2008), which uses art and artistic practices as fundamental tools for exploring reality and producing knowledge, fostering epistemological processes grounded in aesthetic, symbolic and embodied experience.

The methodological choice of this pilot study is consistent with both the research focus and the theoretical framework, as it allows access to the complexity of the educational experience through the voices and reflections of those involved. The investigation focused on participants' lived experience during the Master's activities, with the goal of understanding how theatre practices impacted self-discovery and the construction of professional competence. The research design was guided by questions aimed at directing

the collection and analysis of data. The first concerned the exploration of professional transformation processes as perceived by participants within a performative educational framework. In particular, the study investigated how the theatrical experience, lived within a structured university institutional context, could influence the construction of teacher identity and educational stance. This central question was accompanied by several dimensions aimed at exploring:

1. the bodily, emotional, and relational dimensions activated by performative practices;
2. the intersubjective dynamics emerging in laboratory work;
3. the ways in which theatrical practices were integrated into participants' educational planning.

These questions served a guiding function in the organization of data collection instruments, the construction of analytical categories, and the interpretation of the materials.

Data collection relied on a triangulation of tools:

Participant observations: conducted during workshops and performative activities, aimed at capturing emerging bodily, relational, and communicative dynamics;

Semi-structured interviews: with a sample of participants, aimed at exploring training experiences, processes of self-observation, and perceived transformations;

Analysis of narrative and reflective materials: produced by participants during educational activities, including written reports, project work and reflective journals.

The sample analyzed consisted of 28 participants, 9 male and 19 female. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 41 years, with the following distribution: 17.9% under 27; 28.6% between 27 and 30; 17.9% between 33 and 40; and 35.7% over 41. Professionally, 40% of participants worked in the educational sector (teachers and educators); 34% were artists (actors, singers, dancers, and theatre trainers); 7% were freelancers; 3% were students; 3% were administrative consultants; 3% were innkeepers; and the remaining 10% were unemployed.

In terms of geographical origin, 57.1% resided in the Campania region, while 42.9% came from other regions of Italy. For the interview sample, participants

came from different backgrounds (artistic, pedagogical, educational), in order to value the multiplicity of approaches and the transversality of languages involved. The interviews, conducted at the end of the program, followed a semi-structured format designed to balance thematic coherence with narrative openness. Guiding questions were organized into four sections, exploring in depth: representations of professional role; emotional and relational awareness in the educational context; intersubjective dynamics activated during workshop activities; and the impact of the performative experience on educational design. This structure enabled the collection of articulated narratives that captured the complexity of pedagogical subjectivation processes.

The interviews functioned as reflective spaces where participants could critically elaborate on their journey, verbalizing perceived changes in identity, relational, and professional terms. The qualitative analysis of the material highlighted four main transformative cores, interrelated and transversal across testimonies, outlining a common trajectory of professional self-reorganization. The selection followed criteria of heterogeneity and voluntary availability, in compliance with ethical principles of educational research, with prior information and informed consent. Data analysis adopted a thematic approach inspired by phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology. Textual units were analyzed through an iterative process of coding and interpretation.

The qualitative dimension of the study does not aim for statistical generalization but for a thick description of the observed educational processes, thus describing actions not only in their visible and concrete aspects but also by including the cultural, social, and symbolic contexts that give them meaning.

The knowledge value of this pathway lies in its ability to highlight situated transformative configurations, identifying recurring patterns in the ways participants narrate, reflect, and reframe the theatrical experience in professional terms. The analysis was conducted through a qualitative thematic approach, predominantly inductive, consistent with the exploratory and interpretative nature of the research. In the first phase, all empirical materials (logbooks, interview transcripts, and observation notes) were subjected to an in-depth reading aimed at identifying relevant units of meaning.

Subsequently, open coding was performed, during which codes emerged directly from the data, without the application of predefined categories.

In the second phase, the initial codes were progressively reorganized and aggregated into broader categories through a process of constant comparison across the different data sources. This step led to the identification of recurring thematic cores, which guided the overall interpretation of the results.

The analysis was conducted manually, given the relatively small size of the textual corpus and the need to maintain interpretative proximity to the narrative materials. The validation of categories was carried out through source triangulation (interviews, diaries, observations) and continuous reference back to the original data, in order to verify the interpretative consistency of the emerging themes. This procedure allowed the construction of an interpretative framework capable of reflecting the complexity of the observed educational experience, in line with the epistemological assumptions of qualitative research and Art-Based Research. The context in which the research took place, a training framework based on performativity, cooperation, and experimentation, raised significant epistemological questions regarding the researcher's position.

The researcher did not participate in the design or teaching of the Master's programs under analysis, nor did they hold any evaluative roles with respect to the participants. The approach adopted was that of a non-interventive participant observation, characterized by interpretative engagement without operational involvement, consistent with the qualitative and relational nature of the observed educational framework. This stance, defined as involved but reflective, acknowledges the relational and co-constructed nature of the knowledge produced, while maintaining interpretative rigor.

Within this framework, the act of observing was conceived as an integral part of the educational process, not as direct intervention in the training setting, but as a practice of situated understanding, supported by methodological reflexivity strategies such as source triangulation and continuous reference to the empirical materials.

Results

The data, obtained through qualitative analysis of the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, represent the findings of the present study. The data analysis identified four main thematic cores that span the participants' educational experience: the restructuring of professional stance;

the development of relational and emotional awareness; the re-elaboration of intersubjective dynamics; and the performative integration in teaching design. These areas do not function as separate categories but appear as interconnected and interdependent dimensions within a complex process of pedagogical subjectivation. In this process, body, relationship, and reflection intertwine dynamically, generating spaces for transformative learning in which professional identity is continuously redefined.

1. Restructuring of Professional Stance

One of the main outcomes that emerged concerns the redefinition, in participants' perception, of the teaching role. For many, this was described as a shift from a transmissive vision, focused on technical competence and control, to a more situated, relational, and performative perspective. However, this transition did not occur in a linear or uniform way for all participants. Engagement in theatrical practices involving the body, voice, stage presence, and the ability to inhabit the context led, for some, to an initial experience of disorientation, allowing participants to progressively adopt a professional stance based on greater listening, co-presence dynamics, and shared responsibility among participants. The embodied experience was often perceived as an opportunity to rethink the educational stance, which came to be seen not solely in operational terms, but as an integral part of the teacher's identity. Nevertheless, some participants reported difficulty in consistently transferring these insights to their own institutional contexts, which were sometimes constrained by organizational limitations and less oriented toward the performative dimension. In this sense, the teacher was reinterpreted as a subject on stage, simultaneously author and performer of the educational relationship, in a multimodal and dialogical position where authority is not imposed, but constructed through the reciprocity of the relationship.

Below are the most significant student responses to the question: *What opportunities has the Master provided that you can bring into your profession?*

Tab. 1

MACRO-AREA: Representation of One's Professional Role

| Students' Responses |
|---|
| <i>The Master expanded my cultural horizons and strengthened my professional identity</i> |
| <i>It helped me identify my gaps and understand which aspects of my training to deepen</i> |
| <i>I acquired new tools that I am already applying in my daily professional work</i> |
| <i>I had the opportunity to rethink my role both as an actor and as an educator, integrating different perspectives</i> |
| <i>The Master offers a new and useful pedagogical language to redefine my position between education and the performing arts</i> |
| <i>I now have a more solid foundation to work from; I acquired new skills, know my strengths and weaknesses, and can leverage the former while addressing the latter</i> |
| <i>The Master gave me the chance to meet great professionals and gain new knowledge about the theatrical and pedagogical world</i> |
| <i>Exploring the performing arts has increased my awareness of my personal and socio-relational skills and allowed me to acquire new passions</i> |
| <i>To better understand the performing arts, which have always fascinated me, in order to draw elements for my teaching profession</i> |
| <i>Learning non-traditional teaching methods</i> |
| <i>To engage with pedagogues and understand how neuroscience supports teaching in various fields, applying these techniques in my work as a community theater trainer</i> |
| <i>To have experienced art and collaborated with professionals I could work with</i> |
| <i>Writing a scientific article, participating in the "Quartieri di Vita" project within the Campania Teatro Festival, and assisting as assistant director in the play 2084. The Year</i> |

We Burned Chrome

I met a professor with an association for “Theatre, Research, and Education” in the Campania region, with whom I currently collaborate as a volunteer in his theater laboratory.

2. Development of Relational and Emotional Awareness

A second significant transformative domain concerned the emergence and elaboration of emotional experiences related to one’s own educational practice. Theatrical practices created safe and shared spaces in which it was possible to recognize, name, and thematize emotions that are usually overlooked or repressed in professional contexts. However, this process was not without ambivalences, as for some participants the emotional exposure initially generated discomfort or a sense of vulnerability not typically experienced in the teaching role. This emotional literacy contributed to destabilizing the ideal of teacher neutrality, opening up the possibility of conscious affective responsibility. In some cases, however, this destabilization was experienced as a challenge to one’s professional image, requiring different times for reflection and processing. In particular, participants showed an increased ability to recognize emotions at the moment they arise, to reflect metacognitively on them, and to acknowledge their pedagogical significance. Not all participants reported feeling immediately capable of managing the emotions experienced; for some, the process represented a first moment of awareness. This allowed participants to explore new ways of inhabiting the educational relationship, grounded in empathy, emotional resonance, and care for others, understood as a fundamental professional dimension. The narratives collected predominantly reflect experiences of personal enrichment; however, they also highlight the complexity of the process, which involves navigating zones of uncertainty and identity redefinition.

Below are the most significant responses from students to the question: *What opportunities has the Master provided you in terms of emotional and relational awareness?*

Tab. 2

MACRO-AREA: Emotional and Relational Awareness in the Educational Context

| Students' Responses |
|---|
| <i>Understanding myself and others better</i> |
| <i>I met new people who enriched me both personally and professionally. We created a "network"</i> |
| <i>I had a positive experience that enriched me personally and strengthened my educational relationships</i> |
| <i>The relationships built with teachers and colleagues were a great source of personal enrichment for me</i> |
| <i>Encountering different experiences and people gave me the opportunity to recognize and value diversity as a resource</i> |
| <i>Rediscovery of myself, with new insights for my future</i> |
| <i>I reflected on words, even those often left unsaid, choosing ones better suited to describe myself, my work, and to interpret the work of others</i> |

3. Reworking of Intersubjective Dynamics

Laboratory work allowed participants to engage in an intense and in-depth exploration of the intersubjective dynamics that permeate the educational relationship. Theatre acted as a decentering device, offering the opportunity to observe and reconsider one's relational patterns in a protected yet authentic context. By adopting other points of view, participants were able to experience different forms of empathy, recognize recurring relational patterns, and activate critical reflections on implicit stereotypes, expectations, and power dynamics.

In some cases, awareness of these dynamics produced temporary tension, particularly where communicative rigidity emerged. The deforming function of theatre thus opened a new perspective on the educational relationship, enabling the construction of more authentic and intentional pedagogical alliances. Not all participants, however, reported feeling fully at ease in group work from the very beginning of the program; for some, managing conflict, heterogeneity and mutual exposure required a gradual process of adaptation. Below are the most significant responses from students to the question: *What opportunities for enhancing intersubjective dynamics did the Master provide you?*

Tab.3

MACRO-AREA: Intersubjective Dynamics Activated in the Laboratory Work

| Students' Responses |
|--|
| <i>Engaging with a highly diverse and rich group</i> |
| <i>The laboratory lessons provided opportunities for dialogue between theory and practice, fostering continuous comparison</i> |
| <i>The relationships built within the laboratories were fundamental for experiential learning</i> |
| <i>Expanding contacts, knowledge, and skills</i> |
| <i>Interacting with other professional realities</i> |
| <i>Participation in original and innovative lessons</i> |
| <i>Hands-on experience in the world of theatre at multiple levels, with the ability to transfer this acquired knowledge to everyday school work</i> |
| <i>I am planning and will soon conduct theatre workshops with children and adolescents, as I believe I have acquired adequate skills to lead them</i> |
| <i>The pleasure of participating in a performance project with Austrian director Ed Hauswirth within the "Quartieri di vita" laboratory and discovering parts of myself I did not know</i> |

4. *Experiential dimension in Instructional Planning*

Another significant outcome concerns the impact of the theatrical experience on the participants’ educational planning. This goes beyond merely incorporating theatrical techniques into educational activities; it involves a profound rethinking of the very concept of planning, guided by a performative logic. However, this revision was neither immediate nor uniform for all participants, requiring in some cases a gradual process of reworking their own methodological habits. The theatrical stage was recognized as a generative pedagogical space, where the relationship with knowledge, with others, and with oneself can be renegotiated through the language of the body, action and presence. Participants described a shift from prescriptive teaching to an open, workshop-based approach, grounded in shared experience and the collective construction of meaning. Performativity was thus not treated as a decorative element but as an epistemological and pedagogical principle capable of renewing educational practice, allowing for multiple forms of expression, non-linear modes of knowledge, and the valorization of the complexity of learners. Experiential integration is therefore configured as an open and evolving process, rather than a completed outcome, implying continuous reflection on one’s professional practice.

The following are the most significant student responses to the question: *What impact did the Master have on your educational planning?*

Tab. 4

MACRO-AREA: Impact of the Performative Experience on Educational Planning

| Students’ Responses |
|--|
| <i>The Master offered me the opportunity to develop and apply skills I hadn’t realized could be transferred to the educational context</i> |
| <i>The Master allowed me to critically review my teaching practices, integrating theatrical and pedagogical methodologies</i> |
| <i>I acquired a performative language useful for designing more engaging and innovative educational pathways</i> |
| <i>I was able to experiment with the combination of theatre and pedagogy, and now I feel equipped with concrete tools to apply it in the classroom</i> |

I am planning and will soon conduct theatre workshops with children and adolescents, as I believe I have acquired the necessary skills to lead them effectively

I would really like to continue collaborating with the Master to continually update my teaching professionalism through the use of non-linear languages

Discussion

The results of the study confirm that the Masters programs function as generative educational devices, where theatrical practices do not serve merely as accessory or ornamental elements but constitute a full-fledged field of educational experience. Within this meaningful space, participants' staged actions transform into reflective experiences, enabling the restructuring of perceptual frameworks and activating profound transformative processes.

The guiding research question *how can a transdisciplinary pathway based on theatrical practices be configured as a generative pedagogical device in teacher training?* finds an answer in observing the tension between body and reflection, between stage and authenticity, made experientially accessible through theatrical practices. By engaging their bodies and voices, participants could observe their habitual educational gestures and relational patterns from a novel, distanced perspective. As emerges from the narratives collected in the logbooks and interviews, some participants describe the theatrical experience as an opportunity to "rethink their role" and "acquire new tools applicable in daily professional practice," highlighting a process of restructuring their professional stance (Tab. 1). The body, activated within an aesthetic and protected frame, becomes an epistemological medium capable of generating understanding and transformation not through abstraction, but via aesthetic and symbolic experience (Stern, 2010; Brook, 1996). The data analysis aims to show how the embodied experience was frequently interpreted by participants as an opportunity to observe themselves in action, questioning relational automatisms and established teaching habits.

This embodied observation activates a reflexivity that precedes discursive language: the subject does not merely think about the action but sees it unfold in a vital, expressive form, allowing for the reconfiguration of professional identity through stage presence (Jola & Hansen, 2021). The participants' accounts aim to highlight how this process emerges primarily during laboratory

practice, in which the performative dimension allows them to observe their own modes of educational interaction from a distanced and reflective perspective.

In this perspective, training shifts from an internalization logic to a performativity logic, where knowledge is constructed in the act of doing and elaborated through symbolic action. Furthermore, the theatrical practices implemented in the Masters enabled radical decentering, beyond simple empathy exercises. Assuming roles and fictional identities generated profound perspectival dislocation: participants, situated within alternative narrative contexts, could observe their ways of inhabiting educational relationships from a perturbing and generative distance (Gadamer, 2000; Meedendorp & Deunk, 2025). This process is confirmed by the responses reported in the macro-area related to intersubjective dynamics (Tab. 3), in which participants emphasize the value of engaging with a heterogeneous group and the opportunity to experiment with forms of interaction different from those encountered in their professional contexts.

Decentering here assumes full pedagogical significance, not as a temporary suspension of the self, but as an opening toward a dialogic reformulation of professional identity. Themed reflection on the self in relation to others constitutes the third emergent axis. Theater, understood as a performative language, produces an intermediate space between truth and staging, allowing emotions, ambivalences, and conflicts which often remain unspoken or repressed in ordinary educational contexts to be brought to the fore.

As highlighted in the results concerning the development of emotional and relational awareness (Tab. 2), participants describe the training experience as an opportunity to recognize and name their own emotions, which had often been marginalized in their role as teachers, thereby challenging the ideal of emotional neutrality frequently associated with educational professionalism.

This thematization occurs not through representation but through exposure, the relationship with the other scene partners, characters, audience becomes an opportunity to construct embodied reflective awareness, capable of interrogating conventional forms of educational interaction (Bateson, 1972; Massa, 2001). Another distinctive element emerging from the analysis concerns the institutional nature of the observed educational framework.

The Master's programs demonstrate how performative pedagogy can be stably integrated within the university as a structured educational architecture,

capable of influencing the processes of teacher professional development. Performative integration in instructional design, highlighted in the fourth macro-area of the results (Tab. 4), shows how some participants began to rework their educational practices by introducing theatrical practices and more laboratory-oriented methodologies into training contexts. In this sense, the contribution of the research lies not only in demonstrating the effectiveness of theatrical practices (Gallagher & Lindgren, 2015; Cappa, 2016), but in showing how such practices can be coherently and intentionally integrated within a university program. These findings suggest that theater is not merely a didactic methodology but an autonomous epistemic form capable of generating nonlinear, contextual, and symbolic knowledge (Schechner, 1985; Brook, 1996). The data aim to show how participants did not interpret the use of theatrical practices solely as a teaching approach, but as an opportunity to rethink more broadly the relationship between knowledge, the body, and the dynamics of the educational relationship. The stage is not a metaphor for educational reality but a device that produces reality, generates possibilities, and constructs forms of feeling and understanding. In this sense, the observed Masters represent a paradigmatic example of performative pedagogy, where learning emerges through continuous tension between body and mind, action and observation, individuality and collectivity. The theatrical stage is increasingly recognized as a privileged training environment for developing equity literacy, interpersonal sensitivity, and professional agency (Meedendorp & Deunk, 2025; Giera, 2025). These dimensions emerge particularly in the participants' narratives, which highlight the building of professional networks, engagement with different experiences, and the development of a broader and more reflective perspective on educational practices.

The resulting learning is transformative, as it reshapes participants' interpretive frameworks, promoting a more aware, open, and critical educational stance (Faella, Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2025). Finally, the Master's educational device proves effective in unifying research, action, and reflection within a single field of experience. The variety of materials collected—logbooks, interviews and reflective feedback—aims to show that the joint presence of artistic practices, neuroscientific references, pedagogical models, and narrative devices constitutes an approach capable of enhancing the wholeness of the learner.

The pedagogical knowledge generated is pluralistic, multisensory and situated; it emerges in relational contexts, is constructed in action, and elaborated through collective reflection.

This integration of knowledge, postures, and sensibilities makes theater and in particular its educational implementation in the observed context a space of resistance and possibility: resistance to the automatism of technical-competency training, and the possibility of rewriting the fabric of educational relationships through a bodily practice that is not mere expressivity but a critical form of knowing.

Conclusions

The research investigated how a transdisciplinary training program based on theatrical practices can be configured as a generative pedagogical device (Riva, 2006) in teacher education. The results, articulated on multiple levels, allow for some conclusive reflections that confirm not only the theoretical relevance of the issue but also its practical applicability through specific educational experiences, including the university Masters in Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics, and in Performing Arts, which represent a particularly significant example. In particular, the analysis of the qualitative data highlighted four main dimensions, the restructuring of professional stance, the development of emotional and relational awareness, the reworking of intersubjective dynamics, and performative integration in instructional design, which together describe the transformative process experienced by participants during the training program. The Masters constitute an innovative training model, based on a convergence of pedagogical, performative, neuroscientific, and reflective languages, which transform education from the mere transmission of knowledge into a generative, embodied, and situated space.

The effectiveness of this device does not lie solely in the multiplicity of techniques employed acting, directing, dramaturgy, work on body and voice but in their coherent integration within a field of experience in which teachers in training can activate processes of self-observation, decentering and thematization of the self in relation to others (Massa, 2001).

These processes are essential for restructuring professional identity in a reflective and conscious manner, surpassing authoritarian, linear, and traditional models of teaching. In this sense, the Masters act as a transformative environment, not

merely a technical training space, but a performative and symbolic context in which the experience of the self as an educational subject simultaneously corporeal, emotional, and cognitive becomes possible (Brook, 1996; Schechner, 1985; Stern, 2010). The structuring of the programs into modules that combine pedagogical, artistic, psychological, and didactic dimensions through laboratories, masterclasses, and ateliers enables an implicit and generative pedagogy, in which the teacher is encouraged not only to design educational actions but also to engage personally through theatrical practice, as actor, director, and observer of the self. In this way, training is configured as a transformative experience, in which professional identity evolves through a dialogic process involving body, relationship, imagination, and reflection (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Gallagher & Lindgren, 2015).

The Masters can therefore represent an exemplary good educational practice, characterized by three dimensions:

Modular and transdisciplinary structure: fosters the development of complex and integrated competencies (bodily, relational, cognitive, and planning) in continuity between theoretical knowledge and educational action;

Creation of a protected symbolic and relational field: allows for experimentation, educational risk-taking, and the questioning of professional roles through the language of theatrical fiction, creating a temporary learning community based on shared aesthetic and affective codes;

Valorization of the stage as a training space: the stage is not only a performance but becomes a pedagogical space in which the actor/teacher can explore and transform their professional posture, acting on the emotional, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of their practice.

In relation to the research question, the Masters highlight that theatre, understood as both language and training device, can indeed generate pedagogical awareness, professional transformation, and educational agency, whereby theatricality is enacted not as a methodological ornament but as a deep structural dimension of educational and training action. In light of these findings, it is hoped that similar models will be recognized and supported by educational and university policies as systemic and strategic experiences for teacher training, particularly in contexts of high educational complexity.

Such devices not only respond to the contemporary urgencies of schooling pluralism, inclusion, relational well-being, and citizenship but also radically rethink

the forms and modes of educational professionalism, fostering the development of practitioners capable of inhabiting complexity with creativity, awareness, and responsibility.

Limitations and Future Perspectives

As a qualitative pilot study conducted within a single university institutional context, with a numerically limited sample ($n = 28$), the research findings are not statistically generalizable. However, consistent with the qualitative and exploratory approach adopted, the aim of the study is not generalization, but an in-depth understanding of situated educational processes, analyzed in their complexity and contextual specificity. In this sense, the value of the research lies in its potential to provide reflective insights and interpretative categories that can be transferred to other teacher training contexts with similar characteristics. Further research, conducted in different settings or through comparative designs, could deepen and expand the evidence gathered, contributing to a broader understanding of the pedagogical potential of theatrical educational frameworks in teacher training.

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