



## The theater as a strategy for peace building

*O teatro como estratégia para a construção da paz*

*El teatro como estrategia para la construcción de la paz*

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### ABSTRACT

Describe the experience of a theatrical piece production with the participation of adolescents to stimulate thinking about reality and contribute to the reduction of violence. Were selected 10 teenagers, public school students who participated in the training and producing processes of a theatrical show with themes that arise out of his experiences in the social and family environment. Throughout the year 2006, the piece was exhibited in 20 shows, as part of events organized by the Municipality of Embu, in Sao Paulo state, such as the Municipal Health Conference and the schedule for presentations that accompanied the end of the year festivities. In total, nearly 3,000 people attended the shows. In the opinion of the authors, this is a valid strategy as a tool for mobilization and empowerment of the actors, teachers and local community to promote health, to confront and to reduce violence. It was considered that in order to achieve the effectiveness of the strategy in similar situations, it should be built collectively respecting the culture, history and social context of the public to whom is aimed.

**Keywords:** Violence; Drama; School health; Health promotion

### RESUMO

Descrever a experiência na elaboração de um espetáculo teatral com participação de adolescentes para estimular a reflexão sobre a realidade e contribuir para a redução da violência. Foram selecionados 10 adolescentes, alunos de escolas públicas que participaram de processo de formação teatral e produção de um espetáculo com temas oriundos de suas vivências no meio social e familiar. Ao longo do ano de 2006, a peça foi exibida em 20 apresentações, inclusive como parte de eventos organizados pela Prefeitura do Município de Embú - SP, como a Conferência Municipal de Saúde e o calendário de apresentações que acompanhou as festas de fim de ano. No total, cerca de 3.000 pessoas assistiram ao espetáculo. Na opinião das autoras, esta é uma estratégia válida, como ferramenta de mobilização e empoderamento dos atores, professores e comunidade local, para a promoção da saúde, enfrentamento e redução da violência. Considera-se que para esta estratégia ser efetiva em situações semelhantes, deve ser construída coletivamente, respeitando a cultura, a história e o contexto social do público alvo.

**Descritores:** Violência; Drama; Saúde escolar; Promoção da saúde

### RESUMEN

Describir la experiencia en la elaboración de un espectáculo teatral con participación de adolescentes para estimular la reflexión sobre la realidad y contribuir para la reducción de la violencia. Fueron seleccionados 10 adolescentes, alumnos de escuelas públicas que participaron del proceso de formación teatral y producción de un espectáculo con temas oriundos de sus vivencias en el medio social y familiar. A lo largo del año de 2006, la pieza fue exhibida en 20 presentaciones, inclusive como parte de eventos organizados por la Municipalidad de Embú, en el estado de Sao Paulo, como la Conferencia Municipal de Salud y el calendario de presentaciones que acompañó las fiestas de fin de año. En total, cerca de 3.000 personas asistieron al espectáculo. En la opinión de las autoras, esta es una estrategia válida, como herramienta de movilización y empoderamiento de los actores, profesores y comunidad local, para la promoción de la salud, enfrentamiento y reducción de la violencia. Se considera que para conseguir que la estrategia sea efectiva en situaciones semejantes, debe ser construída colectivamente respetando la cultura, la historia y el contexto social del público que se desea alcanzar.

**Descriptorios:** Violencia; Drama; Salud escolar; Promoción de la salud

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, violence represents a public health problem of great magnitude and causes strong impact on morbidity and mortality of the population. The deaths from external causes, although they occur less frequently than cardiovascular diseases, represent a larger number of Years of Potential Life Lost, by directly affecting greater numbers of young people. According to the Ministry of Health<sup>(1)</sup>, violence and accidents together constitute the second cause of death in the context of general mortality in Brazil. It affects overall childhood and adolescence, given that at ages 1-9 years, 25% of deaths are due to these causes, from 5 to 19 years, ranks first among causes of death<sup>(2)</sup>.

In the São Paulo State, data from the Technical Group for Prevention of Accidents and Violence<sup>(3)</sup> show an increased incidence of hospitalizations due to external causes (representing the fifth leading cause of hospitalization in the state) with the aggression reaching the highest rate of hospital mortality. The authors suggest that prevention of accidents and violence should be a priority on the agendas of governments, involving, besides the health sector, the sectors of public safety, education and social welfare.

In 2001, the Ministry of Health published the Portaria MS/GM n.º737/2001, which deals with the National Policy for Reduction of morbidity and mortality from accidents and violence. This Ordinance defines violence as “the event represented by the actions of individuals, groups, classes, nations that cause physical, emotional, moral and / or spiritual damage to themselves or others” and points to the following guidelines: adoption of behaviors and safe and healthy environments; monitoring of accidents and violence; systematization, expansion and consolidation of prehospital attendance; interdisciplinary and intersector care for victims of accidents and violence; restructuring and consolidation of services focused on recovery and rehabilitation, human resources training and fostering the development of studies and research<sup>(1)</sup>.

For being violence a multi-cause, complex phenomenon, and difficult to approach, it is indisputable that the measures that aim at violence reducing must be related to an intervention strategy that involves and integrates different knowledge through interdisciplinary and intersector actions, becoming vital the development of researches that will contribute to the planning, implementation and evaluation of these interventions, applying an approach focused on health improvement<sup>(4)</sup>, in particular with regard to the implementation of healthy public policies<sup>(5)</sup>. Within that context, the Escola Promotora da Saúde is characterized as an important strategy with three key components: health education with a holistic approach; promotion of healthy environment,

and provision of health services<sup>(5)</sup>.

With such perspective, many and different studies are being developed to quantify and characterize or explain it, attempting to understand and capture major process-related variables.

A document from the UNICEF<sup>(6)</sup> assigns responsibility to health professionals and scientists, with other sectors of society to be concerned and act effectively, to combat violence.

One aspect that keeps recurring in the studies and permeates the imaginary of society is that violent behavior and delinquency occur mostly among the poor and living in precarious social conditions. Thus, violence or every indication of it, is amplified, overvalued, and disseminated perpetuating a single, monolithic idea that these behaviors are prevalent<sup>(7)</sup>. Conversely actions that resist or oppose the violence are much less evident. This article presents the preliminary results from the perspective of teachers in elementary and high school, a work with adolescents living in a city of São Paulo State, using the strategy of the theater as a way to discuss the issue of violence and implement the construction of a culture of peace.

Culture is understood as a set of values, attitudes and behaviors that dominate and characterize the performance of a particular group, it allows to foresee how these groups feel, position themselves and which engines use to solve the problems that afflict them<sup>(8)</sup>.

From this perspective, the use of strategies involving artistic creativity can be understood as an activity aimed at increasing sensitivity and an awakening in adolescents' critical awareness of their rights and duties<sup>(8)</sup> providing for these young beings, new alternatives to experiencing the sense of citizenship.

Such artistic strategy is part of the project “Escolas Promotoras de Saúde: prevention of morbidity due to external causes in the county of Embu”, funded by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo – FAPESP. This project is part of the program Escola Promotoras de Saúde, an alliance with the Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP) and the Secretarias Municipais de Saúde e Educação do município do Embu/Estado de São Paulo, also involving the Board of Education of Taboão Serra, responsible for State Schools of Embu.

The report aimed to describe the experience in preparing a stage show featuring teenagers to stimulate reflection on reality and contribute to the reduction of violence.

**INTERVENTION PLACE:** the intervention was conducted in the county of Embu, belonging to the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, with a population of 244.642 inhabitants in 2006<sup>(9)</sup> - 40% under 20 years of age. It is an area affected by high unemployment, violence and social exclusion. Several government efforts

and organized civil society has succeeded in reducing mortality from external causes, especially homicide in adolescents and young adults. However, the rate of homicides (38.51 per 100,000 in 2005) remains high compared to the average of the State of Sao Paulo<sup>(9)</sup>.

Since 1970, UNIFESP has served the Local Health System, through social programs such as Programa de Integração Docente-Assistencial do Embu, with representatives at the Health City Council and partnerships with the local community.

Public schools (municipal, state, and agreements) serve more than 60,000 students (about 98% of students enrolled in elementary and high school). The school health program was created in 1984, and since 1987 has been coordinated by the Secretaria Municipal da Saúde and integrated to the Sistema Único de Saúde. In 2002, the program Escola Promotora de Saude was implemented based on three key principles: health education with a holistic approach; promotion of healthy environment, and provision of health services. The program was approved by the Health City Council and is also part of the City Health Plan.

**STRATEGY:** according to the principles of the Escola Promotora de Saúde, the theater was adopted as an intervention strategy to reduce violence. For such, a selection process was conducted for public school students of that city, resulting in a group composed by ten teenagers who went through extensive preparation work of theater, including body preparation, reading comprehension and also a process of rescuing their personal stories and family.

Then, a theatrical piece was created with texts chosen, considering the epidemiological data on the types of violence more frequent in that community and content of the work done with those young people in the workshops of experience. The texts, dialogues and speeches translated the essence of the problems experienced, resulting in a reflection on what approaches could be adopted for building peace.

By allowing a glimpse of joy, the beauty of human relationships, the value that people have in front of their own lives, we adopted the technique of the clown as a resource to address the issues in the text, collectively built based on famous writers, and also in the group's own compositions and art educators', with suggestions of the research team. The show had the building of peace as background and portrayed scenes of everyday life for children and adolescents: the rescue of childhood, the dreams and difficulties of adolescence; citizenship, maturity and old age, failure, discrimination, justice and injustice; prejudices, drug use, violence, family role<sup>(10)</sup>. This approach aimed also form alliances and partnerships with the community as part of a strategy for raising awareness and fighting violence, strengthening the engagement of

all.

During the construction process of the show and training the actors, it was established a bond with the families of adolescents, discussing the daily life and the responsibility that each (educator, actor, family) took in building peace and the project.

The play was presented at the Cultural Center of Embu, in 2006, the community of teachers, students, family and other residents of the municipality. The transportation of students was sponsored by the Municipal Education. In the course of the presentations, the work enjoyed immense impact on the community, beyond the initial objectives with performances in several events, starting to integrate the cultural agenda of the municipality. Throughout the year 2006, the show was aired on 20 presentations, reaching about 3,000 people.

To obtain a feedback on the experience, the researchers, prior to finalizing this intervention, applied the teachers a questionnaire in the last two presentations of the theatrical group, on the effectiveness of the strategy as an intervention in reducing violence, understanding that this population is a key ally construction and development of culture of peace.

Thus, a questionnaire was designed containing questions about the production of the spectacle (duration, scenery, lighting, content, soundtrack, costumes, understanding and interpretation of the scenes of the actors) as well as on the topics approached and, if the theater could be an effective strategy in building peace. Of the 37 respondents, 35 teachers felt the theater as an effective strategy for building a culture of peace. The production of the spectacle (duration, scenery, lighting, content, soundtrack, costumes, understanding and interpretation of the scenes of the actors) was evaluated favorably by most respondents.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Every kind of cultural performance, including ritual, drama, ceremony and carnival, can be understood as a way to explain life. In the case of theatrical performance, this can be seen as a distant view of everyday life that leads to breaks and things unresolved in social life, in order to resolve them through role reversal made possible by theater<sup>(11)</sup>.

The artistic representation is a tool for transformation. So, people when use the theater, have access to a means to experiment, act and make changes to become other while they themselves, changes which occur not only for the actors, but also for the audience<sup>(12)</sup>.

The interpretation of theatrical performance leads to understanding the meaning of these symbolic actions, and therefore the understanding of that culture, understood as "a web of meanings woven by social actors

themselves”<sup>(13)</sup>. All of the complexity and symbolism of the theater make this art as effective in education as in the process of building knowledge and attitudes.

Thus, “any cultural event or social practice that produces a positive effect on a particular group of people, communities, makes the web of meanings that it allows to build, and the utilization of internal or external resources that empower these people within the context of concrete social relations”<sup>(7)</sup>.

This statement is reflected in the reporting of some teachers, as described below:

*“The theater allows expressing more intensively the issues to be addressed by raising awareness and contributing to internal changes”.*

*“The theater brings people together, because the actors just talk to us, involving us in the topics they are addressing”.*

For this communication to be effective in its complexity and its transformative potential, it is necessary to seek technical and aesthetic quality, which include beyond the work of the actors, preparing sets, costumes and lighting appropriately to the music and its context. It should be emphasized that this group of adolescents had no previous contact with the theater, except for improvised performances with educational purposes, provided in schools. Such activities, which they viewed as poor quality, may have limited impact on the target audience for not allowing weaving a web of meaning that leads to mobilization and empowerment. Thus, at the request of

the group of actors and art educators, the show was presented in a conventional theater space with lighting features, scenery, costumes and soundtrack, within the budgetary possibilities of the project.

According to the teachers, this strategy allowed to work with serious and controversial themes, because they presented a synthesis of reality and the conflicts with which young people live daily, and promote reflection and self-assessment of their role in society.

Most respondents reported that the show provided a reflection on life, everyday life and the human being at the same time that aroused many emotions such as hope, peace, serenity, emotion, and joy. Saw the show as a strategy to address important and controversial issues such as drugs, teenage pregnancy, respect for others and oneself, the importance of the study, prejudice, and the importance of getting along well with the differences of others.

In the opinion of the authors, this is a valid strategy as a tool for the awareness and empowerment of the actors, teachers and local community to promote health, fighting and reducing violence.

For this strategy to be effective in similar situations, it must be collectively constructed, respecting the cultural, historical and social context of the target audience.

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