



CHILDREN AS AGENTS IN EARLY YEARS THEATRE PRACTICE

Theatre & Performing Arts for Young Audiences:
Building Collective Resilience (TPAYABCR)

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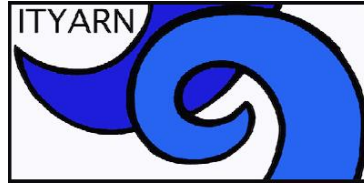


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Authors

Michelle Guerra Adame

Director, producer, and teacher. Master in Arts at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California with a focus on the Methodology of the theater directing process for children from 0 to 3 years old. Since 2005 founder and director of Colectivo de Teatro en Espiral. Director of the festivals: Semana de Teatro para Niñas y Niños Baja California "Ray Garduño" and Encuentro Internacional de Artes Escénicas para los Primeros Años: Infancia, Territorio de Paz.

Paweł Gałkowski

Researcher and project coordinator. For almost ten years associated with the theatre for the youngest in Poland. Member of the Board of Directors of the Small Size Network. President of the Management Board of the Art Fraction Foundation, Polish non-governmental organization focused in the field of art and culture for the youngest children.

Sara Myrberg

Author, creator, and actor in the field of theatre for the youngest audience 0-6 years. Member since the 80s, and Artistic director of Teater Tre Stockholm 2010-2021. Now an independent artist. Performances Halli hallo (2005) 2-4 years, Blocks (2010) 3-6 years and Good night sleep tight (2013) has toured all over the world.

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Michał Wanke

Sociologist based in Poland at the University of Opole. His research focuses on stigmatized and underrepresented groups of people who use drugs and people who migrate. He applies a variety of methods, including mixed and qualitative, also participatory or arts-based. He got his doctoral degree from Jagiellonian University in Krakow and now is a leader of the Diversity and Migration Lab of the European Universities FORTHM Alliance. Michal works at the Department of Cultural Studies and teaches in English in Public Communication and Master of Liberal Arts. He taught or had invited talks at Academies of Fine Arts in Poland, conducted courses in several universities in America, Asia and Europe.

Michał Wendland

Professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), working at Philosophical Faculty, Department of the Philosophy of Politics and Communication, member of Polish Association of Social Communication and International Communication Association.

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Summary

The main task of the report from the one-and-a-half-year-long pilot project “Children as agents in EYT practice” was an attempt to answer the question of how the youngest children (0-3) are perceived. The starting point of the research was the assumption of the existence of a network of social beliefs regarding children's agency and subjectivity as one of the important premises of children's subjectivity. The division of research work we adopted was two-track and at this stage the report consists of separate but independent entities. In this sense, they further demand continuation of the integration of the two research paths. At this stage, it can be said that it is one document containing two parts.

In the first part, using the tools of social philosophy and cultural history, we tried to conceptualize and organize the ideas about the agency of the youngest children existing in scientific and everyday discourse (first team: Pawel Galkowski, Michal Wendland). As part of the second team, through sociological research (surveys and in-depth interviews), we set ourselves an empirical task related to the reconstruction of social ideas regarding the agency of children (0-3) among the international community of artists and professionals involved in creating art for the youngest viewers (second team: Michelle Guerra Adame, Sara Myrberg, Pawel Galkowski, Michal Wanke).

The research goal of the first team (Pawel Galkowski, Michal Wendland) was to organize the conceptual wealth related to the contexts of the theory of children's agency and subjectivity in scientific and everyday discourse and to interpret them. This resulted from preliminary research, based on which we assumed that there are many different concepts of agency. The most common terms in the research literature are: “subjectivity”, “agency”, “identity”, “self-identity” and “self-consciousness”; these terms are sometimes treated synonymously or completely separately.

In the first part of the report, we shifted the emphasis from the question about the social value of theatre to the question about the social value of the youngest child. As part of the perspective we adopted, we conducted research from the level of justifying children's right to have social rights (access to culture, education, etc.) and the social belief in entitlement to having rights.

First of all, we asked the question about the role of the youngest children in social relations, and secondly, we considered the social value of EYT. In other words: we separated two main research issues, i.e. the child as an agent and EYT as

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social practice. We did not seek to answer the question about the social justification of the value of EYT by comparing it with other social practices (adult theatre or education, etc.). Rather, we tried to find an answer to the question about the current value of theatre practice based on the social valorisation of children and childhood within the social roles assigned to them. It can also be said that in the project we did not ask who a child is as a recipient of theatre for the youngest, but we tried to find the answer to two questions:

1) who is a child on the map of social relations (in the context of justifying their right to art)?

2) how can the child's location on the map of social relations affect the social value of EYT practice?

The conclusions we have formulated go beyond organizing a concept map and can provide advocacy arguments for changing the social perception of children. We believe that even though the youngest children are covered by legal protection, they are not universally recognized as equal entities in social space (Śliwerski 2017). The historically dominant and unfortunately still current belief is that the youngest children are human becoming, not human being.

We believe that the legal context of protecting the rights of the youngest children (Declaration and Convention on the Rights of the Child) should be solidly strengthened by actively promoting the perception of the youngest children as not only active, but above all as different but equal participants in social practices.

We believe that the youngest children have been and still are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion due to the historically dominant belief that they are not fully human. This belief is of fundamental importance and affects not only their perception, but also their way of participating in social life. The practices of tokenizing, manipulation, and the practice of decorating oneself with children (Hart 1995) are not a marginal phenomenon, but are a permanent element of social relations based on the belief that the youngest children are unready adults.

We hypothesize that this results from the dominant, adultistic perception of children and childhood. The social situation of the youngest child is a paradox. The historically dominant model of social relations, in which the recognized subject is an adult, and culture and social institutions have been and are created by adults and for adults and they do not take into account the ontological and psychophysical characteristics of the youngest children. On the other hand, their

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assessment and social expectations towards them are often formulated from the perspective of adults (Juul 2011).

The key role here is played by theatre for the youngest audience, understood as a social practice focused on partnership contact with the child. As it has been creating art for children and, above all, with children for several decades, it is one of the most important social institutions that allows us to break the centuries-old and often hidden domination of adults. And it is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but an ethical one, because it carries emancipatory potential, and artists creating for the youngest audiences have often taken and continue to take responsibility for rethinking our attitude to childhood. And in their work, they often deal with deeply rooted negative ideas about children.

The uniqueness of EYT lies, among other things, in the belief shared by many artists that they try to treat the youngest child as equal and in the artistic process they are perceived as an equal partner. As an entity that Is, not just Becoming. While maintaining the perspective in which a specific child is Different from us, adults, but also Equal as a socially perceived entity. In this sense, EYT is one of the most important practices that has the power to strengthen beliefs about the subjectivity and equality of the youngest children as participants in social relationships.

It is theatre for the youngest children that has special potential in the process of child empowerment. Apart from its obvious aesthetic function, the ethical function comes to the fore, i.e. opening or inviting the child to participate in collective and social relationships, in a way that takes into account their psychophysical specificity.

Chapter by Pawel Galkowski entitled "Who will cheer up the unlucky rhino?" The child as the Other and the practice of Early Years Theatre (case study), is based on the analysis of an example from current artistic practice. It focuses on the concept of Otherness and builds an analogy to colonization practices. The chapter written by Michał Wendland titled Children's agency and the issue of subjectivity is, above all, a philosophical interpretation of the category of childhood through the prism of the theory of agency and subjectivity. The concept of agency reconstructed there is partially criticized.

The research goal of the second team (Michał Wanke, Sara Myrberg, Michelle Guerra Adame, Pawel Galkowski) was related to the reconstruction of a set of beliefs connected with agency practice among Early Years Theatre practitioners.

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This part of the research was conducted using sociological methods (interview, questionnaire) and included 81 people from 25 countries on 5 continents. The research was conducted under the direction of Michal Wanke.

In this exploratory study, we seek to build a basic understanding of who the early years theatre practitioners are, and how their different positionalities, rootedness in local parenting and educational contexts and their own views on children and parents' behaviour in the performances shape the way they perceive and work with their audiences. We were predominantly interested in how this array of themes and issues contribute to the way EYT artists grant agency to 0-3 children.

First of all, the trajectories of EYT professionals are very diverse and sometimes even serendipitous. It is enriching and contributes to the field's vibrant heterogeneity, but arguably also produces different foundations to think about the early years theatre. It is evident from this research that the early years theatre practitioners share a very strong conviction that 0-3-year-olds should be addressed as a segment of the theatre audience, but there is a bit less of intersubjectivity behind it in terms of why and how to realize it.

The local contexts the EYT artists come from are very different and although reportedly parents and educators tend to think and act in line with the shared agreement philosophy of the early years theatre, it is never the case that they are fully integrated. On the contrary, the EYT artists think that there are different parents and teachers out there, and besides these progressive ones, who encourage independent action and support the youngest in their autonomy, there are others who even apply violence and restrict children.

Asked directly, the EYT artists tend to declare granting agency to the youngest ones, yet there is some hesitation and variability in their answers. It comes down to ambiguity of concepts and - as the interview module of this study suggests - to the need of redefinition of basic concepts tied to rationality or intentionality. What the results of this study suggest is that there is an urgent need for basic philosophical and lexical debate in the field in order to come to terms and develop a shared language of the conceptual backbone of the whole enterprise.

The results suggest that the role of parents is pivotal, the study participants criticized some parents who exercise controlling behaviour over their children and do not give them enough autonomy for fully meaningful participation in the performances. Parents are important and indispensable in children's participation. The EYT artists would like them to allow for full and uninterrupted participation for the youngest. Instead, many of them narrate and explain the

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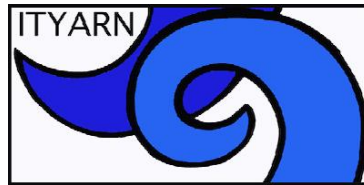


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show for the kids and structure their experience from the adult-child power relation, putting frames on their experience.

According to the study, the participation itself should be thought of in different categories than adult theatre. Instead of thinking of different means of expression separately, even if analytically, the performance should be thought of as a whole, allowing for an immersive participation for the youngest.

To grant agency to children is to acknowledge their way of comprehensive and multi-receptor, bodily presence in the performance. The artists ought to be alert and responsive and co-create the experience together with their audience rather than present a show to them.

Many of these notions are intuitively grasped by the EYT artists, and although there seems to be a common agreement, conceptual and philosophical equivocation exists. As a community of practice, the EYT field arguably requires a common ground of a shared language to talk about children and talk to parents. But most importantly, to talk to each other and to one's selves in order to streamline and channel the full potential of the heterogeneous field for the benefits of the youngest.



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PART I



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“Who will cheer up the unlucky rhino?” The child as the Other and the practice of Early Years Theatre (case study)

Paweł Gałkowski

December morning in 2023. It's slippery, snowy and cold. My four-year-old daughter and I are going to watch the show. “Are going” sounds like we decided it together, in fact it's me choosing and I decide that we're going. I also choose what we will watch. And I advertise it to my daughter as the best in the world, but I haven't seen the show. In fact, I don't even know the exact title. We're going because we both have the morning off. Last weekend, there was a snowstorm in almost all of Poland, the city is mostly covered with snow, so finding a parking space is virtually impossible.

In the *foyer* we learn that the show is performed on the last, highest floor of the theatre. There is no lift, so getting to the highest theatre stage in the city (as advertised by the institution) requires quite an effort. The stairs are as steep as a mountain climb, and to reach the fourth floor of the old tenement house, you need to make at least one stop along the way. Or rather, “set up camp”, as before the summit attack, because some parents organize feeding, hydration and defecation during the climb. Those whose children did not fall asleep in the car or tram are lucky. This usually means *game over* before the show even starts. In turn, those adults who arrived with their children by tram do not have to worry about parking space, but they usually have to carry the stroller through the narrow door leading to the *foyer*.

I carry my daughter halfway up the stairs and wonder how other parents will cope. The show is recommended for viewers “from an early age”¹, i.e. from zero to infinity, so I see some parents carrying their children, even one-year-olds, in

¹ The show premiered on April 7, 2018. After nearly six years, the theatre has changed the age rating of the show and from March 2024 it is recommended for children from the age of three.

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car seats that are uncomfortable to carry. I'm lucky that my daughter is older now. The only ones who have it worse are probably mothers who came with two children. We are one of the last to enter, taking a seat somewhere in the first rows, more or less in the middle. The seats are exceptionally good, with a great view of the ten-metre-deep stage. The amphitheatre auditorium for nearly two hundred people is three-quarters full. The audience is diverse, mainly children of different ages and their parents, but also kindergarten groups. The youngest children (those up to three years old) usually sit on their parents' laps, older children sit on their chairs between adults, and those who came in groups sit next to each other. It is easy to recognize them at the entrance, not only by the fact they walk in groups, but also by the mandatory reflective vests.

The lights go out. Blackout. An actor dressed in a grey tailcoat, wearing a black and white striped T-shirt under his jacket, and wearing a top hat, enters the dark, spotlight, ten-meter-deep stage, accompanied by drums. A large circle glows in the background. A moment later, a characteristic cane appears. The Actor – Entertainer addresses children in the audience by name. “Which of you children would like to comfort the unlucky rhino? Maybe you, maybe you?” Articulation, gestures, scenography, spotlights and drumroll make me feel like I'm in a circus and the character played on stage is a handler, an animal tamer. I am struck by his way of communicating. He slowly addresses the invitation to comfort the rhino individually to the children, his facial expressions are exaggerated and his gestures are so sweeping, as if he wanted the audience to understand the message by all means. He simplifies the message to the extreme, as if he assumed that not only were there no conversation partners in the audience who understand the convention, but also that he was dealing with someone who didn't understand the language he spoke at all. He repeats the words slowly, perhaps so that we are able to physically assimilate the sound, repeat the message, and by repeating it, remember and consequently understand? A phrase comes to my mind, most often used in education: “Hammer something into someone.”

The staging is impressive, exceptionally professional and rich, above all, in artistic means. There are many elements that allow you to achieve a strong, attractive effect. Six actors on stage creating a multitude of characters, full-size set design, visualizations, puppets, light and compositions that give the show a musical effect. The whole is complemented by the main character, a life-size rhino, realistically reproduced and bearing a striking resemblance to the real thing. Its natural appearance of a real animal is impressive, but in a sense also disturbing, because it does not seem to fit into the accepted aesthetic convention. Everything on the stage looks spectacular and this may be why the creators

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intended it to be a “complete” show for “everyone”, from zero to infinity. No one will be bored and everyone will find something for themselves. Both adults and children.

I will then focus on what may concern the youngest audience, i.e. children from zero to three years of age. Apart from the very beginning, which gives the impression that we will be dealing with handling, the performance lasted almost a full hour, which was simply too long. Apart from the utterly different cognitive and motor needs of a one-year-old child and a three-year-old child, taking into account the entire range of means used, it creates too strong a message. Of course, there are youngest children on whom the length of such an intensively constructed stage message will not make an impression, but for some it may even leave a severe mark. Not to mention children with complex needs. The use of the mentioned artistic means, I assume, was intended not only for a very strong, attractive aesthetic effect, but also for the space of the stage itself, ready to accommodate two hundred people in the audience. The diameter of the circle of the mentioned hall is almost eighteen metres, and the message must reach everyone, especially the last rows. Let's imagine how different the perspective and experience of a child sitting in the first row and the one in the last row is. In this situation, introducing a life-size animal onto the stage, imitating the movements of a real rhinoceros, and one that talks, may look good to an adult sitting in the back rows, but even for a small child it can be simply terrifying. As if that wasn't enough, in one scene the rhinoceros accelerates and runs across the entire length of the stage towards the audience, as if it was going to ram them. One could say it's an exaggeration, hypersensitivity. We are in the theatre, and as is the case in the theatre, both children and adults are protected by convention. If so, let's try to put ourselves in the position of the youngest child, say two or three years old, who is being charged at by a huge animal. At this particular performance, I saw real fear in the audience, without any trace of convention. If I were to compare the effect of this scene to something, it resembled the first reactions to the screenings of “The Arrival of a Train” by the Lumière brothers. From fear, through the desire to escape, to the hair-raising effect.

What I saw was an absolute contradiction of the so-called good practices in creating performances for the youngest audience. These usually try to take into account not only the cognitive, perceptual and motor skills, but above all the age of the recipient. The youngest audience is often defined as from a few months old (there are also performances for babies) to three or four, and sometimes even to six years of age. This, of course, differs in many factors, often including the cultural and social rules in a given country. The “formation” of a child for the

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needs of the educational system seems to be an important, relatively universal boundary. However, no matter how we define this boundary, a six-month-old child, an eighteen-month-old child, and a three-year-old child are completely different recipients. For this reason alone, awareness of the means used is crucial. The standard in such a situation is to construct the whole in close contact between the actors and the audience, individualize the message, soften the stage means used, including light and sound, frequently and deliberately refrain from introducing characters and stories on stage as well as the division into stage and audience, and especially refrain from a strong, multidimensional visual and musical message. One could point to many examples of stage practices in Europe and around the world, from Sweden to South Africa, from Mexico to Japan, which are aware of the importance and significance of the needs of the youngest children. Those that, while respecting their autonomy, sensitivity and, above all, their subjectivity, try to create art in dialogue with children. Theatre for the youngest takes various forms, from classic box theatre, in which the child is closest to the role of a spectator, to interactive forms of installations. It is also characterized by a wealth of topics such as matter, family relations, and even those that are still taboo, such as darkness. However, no matter what shades it takes, it is accompanied by the belief that the youngest child is recognized as a *partner* in creating an artistic practice. And it is realized not only at the level of artistic activity itself, but is also the subject of self-reflection of the practice itself.

In Europe and many places around the world, for over forty years it has expressed the recognition of the child as a spectator, it contains a strong element of subjectivity and emphasizes the dimension of social participation (Frabetti: 2016). It is connected with the belief that there is something unique in the “child-spectator”, and theatre is one of the few places that allows the child to be in this role. What lies behind it? First of all, the conviction that a child, even the youngest, has his or her own autonomous sphere, which can be crossed only with consent. Ritualized theatre allows for mutual challenge-response relation, and theatre is always a dialogue of at least two partners (2016: 23). A child may, of course, answer or not answer such a cognitive situation. However, putting a child in such a role should be the choice of the child, an expression of his or her intention and will. Theatre puts the child in the role of an observer with the opportunity to create ability to watch and listen and finally to develop projects. An indication of the ability to create projects indicates a cultural competence that goes beyond the dimension of idiosyncratic experience and enters the dimension of a common pattern. The “being a spectator” attitude creates the context of “being an observer”, and “being an observer” teaches how to sensitize to the emerging intersubjectivity.

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In this sense, the recognition of the youngest child as a spectator is closely related to the statement that a child is not a *human becoming* but *human being* and resonates with Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.²

One could mention many more elements justifying the subjective dimension of participation in EYT, or those related to the elementary rules of stage production for the youngest, but the selection of the plot also seems to be crucial in the described performance. The performance, apart from the means of adapting the text to the needs of the stage or adding musical compositions, quite faithfully reflects its literary prototype contained in the prose of Leszek Kołakowski, (Kołakowski 2020) one of the most famous Polish 20th century philosophers. Kołakowski wrote this book in the 1960s for his daughter. It tells the story of a rhinoceros who has a “great worry”. Not only because he has a compress on his “bottom”, but because he can't fly. This makes him sad. He is ashamed to admit his concern to the other rhinos because he sees that he is the only one concerned. He is afraid that if he reveals it to someone, he will be ridiculed. Despite this, he decides to confide in a sparrow who offers to teach him how to fly. First by observation and repetition. It turns out that it didn't make much sense except that “it was terribly clumsy and the big body was shaking all over the place” (2020: 8). The sparrow encourages the hero to keep trying, but the rhinoceros, resigned, does not decide to repeat it and gives up. They both come to the conclusion that wings would be useful. The rhinoceros had thought about it earlier, but he was crying and was ashamed to ask. The kind sparrow lends him his wings, but because they are too small, this attempt also fails. The rhino becomes even more desperate, so the sparrow suggests that he should borrow the wings of an airplane that lives at a nearby airport. After finding the airplane, he asks him to borrow his wings. Not only did the airplane refuse, but he also said that the rhino was simply “so big and so stupid” unlike him, which was “bigger and smarter”. At such a statement, the rhinoceros falls into despair again. The sparrow, hearing this story, states that the rhinoceros is an unlucky creature, i.e. a creature who is, by definition, difficult to help. However, to have a guarantee and certainty, the bird decides to put him to one more test, using wings made of sheets (handkerchiefs). For this purpose, the sparrow sends the rhinoceros to the cliff so that any failure will be alleviated by the sea. Unfortunately, this time nothing goes according to plan and the waves caused by the rhino falling into

² It is worth also pointing out the latest reports and good practices regarding the reflection of the youngest child as a spectator.

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the sea capsize the fishing boat. Outraged fishermen find the distraught rhino again and give him two “slaps”. Before Kołakowski gives us the moral, we have the opportunity to look at the lonely, crying rhino, abandoned by the sparrow, with a “compress on its bottom” as a kind of mark after the encounter with the fishermen. The book, as well as the performance, contains a moral in the form of songs sung by everyone. In the performance it is also sung by the audience, where we learn in a cheerful way that there is no shame for a rhinoceros not to have wings, especially since it has a horn. It would be a shame if he got rid of this horn. It's a shame and a pity, because with a horn you can “impale the moon, tear up the earth, or place a pumpkin on it and then eat it” (2020: 34). And if you want to fly, rhinoceros, maybe you will fly in a plane one day.

What strikes me in this story is not only the festival of humiliations that the rhino experiences, but also the way in which everyone treats him on the way to realizing his dream of flying. I have the impression that his naivety and clumsiness are exposed at every step, he is presented as a constantly crying “hysteric” with an awkward body. The sparrow calls him patronizingly “my little one”, the airplane says he is “stupid because he is younger”. He is ashamed of the fact that he imagined that he would fly and does not want to share it with other rhinos. This is hardly surprising, because the support he receives not only does not lead him to fulfil his dream, but is actually a series of advice that, if followed, leads to suffering, including physical violence. It's just that it's hidden behind well-known euphemisms like “a slap on the bottom”. In the described fragment of the book, we are essentially dealing with a scene in which three fishermen catch a lying, defenceless and again desperate rhinoceros, the first one holds him by the horn, and the other two hit him on the buttocks, one from the left, the other from the right. All three of them shout, for incomprehensible reasons, “Rhinoceros, enough of this, enough of this” (2020: 32), as if they knew about previous, unsuccessful attempts. Similarly, it is incomprehensible why, according to Kołakowski, an unlucky person is someone who is difficult to help? I know many who are difficult to help, but only a few of them are unlucky. Overall, if you read the story of the rhinoceros as the story of someone trying to realize their dream, it can be understood as a harsh lesson in the disappointment of life. No matter how you try, you can be sure that life will get to you, “my little one”. And it will crush you the more the more unrealistic your desire, and in the end, you will be left alone and licking your wounds. And well, let this remind you that you can't get any higher than that. If we find a child in the hero and the story as an example of gaining life experience, it is a description of pointless attempts that ended in failure. The narrator of the book plays an important role in this; thanks to him we know from the beginning that all the rhinoceros' hopes are in vain; he evaluates his actions and participates in the action itself. As if that were not

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enough, as readers (and in the performance, the audience) we are not only witnesses of this tragedy, but we have been actively participating in it from the very beginning. The narrator, and in the performance the Entertainer, asks us a question: “will you help?”, he asks us (the audience) for tissues from which he and the sparrow should build wings. But why, if we know from the beginning that it will end in failure?! This question borders on perversion, because in this way the children become not only complicit in the failures, but also active participants in subsequent, humiliating situations that the main character encounters.

Even a cursory reading of the book raises serious doubts not only whether this story is intended for the youngest audience, but whether it is a read for anyone other than adults who enjoy perversion? From the cover of the book we can learn that it was written in 1966 and Kołakowski wrote it for his daughter. Due to the political situation in Poland, the book was censored and published in a way that was illegal for the then authorities. With the liberal transformation in the 1990s, it was published in official publishing circulation. In 2017, it was included in the canon of recommended reading for the first grades of primary school, i.e. for children aged 7 to 9.³ The book became popular, has been staged many times and has also attracted public comments. The vast majority of comments in public circulation are positive or very positive. The authors of the few critical opinions are parents who have read the book.⁴ And these can be devastating. Parents point out that this book discourages dreams and may result in trauma. We also find outrage that it is a reading material in primary school. One of the parents writes that after reading it he regrets that there is no longer censorship in Poland. There could hardly be a darker irony.

In Poland, the book functions completely differently in literary criticism and humanities. Two examples stand out. One of them can be found in the “Guliwer” magazine, which praises it for its sophisticated didacticism, purity of style and philosophical depth of the book. (Adamczykowa 2006: 33-37) In turn, in “Studies in Polish Philosophy” we can even find an attempt to include the work in the author's entire philosophical achievements, which “allows the reader to get to know the new face of Kołakowski from the period conventionally called revisionist and literary”. (Merda 2019: 297-300) It is similar when we look at the review of the play I described. On the theatre's website, we can read, for example, that “the actors (...) once again prove that they are great at establishing contact with even the youngest audience, sincerely moved by the fate of the unlucky creature” and “in addition to its wise and timeless content, the show attracts young viewers with dynamic visualizations.” This second opinion is directly

³ It disappeared from the reading list in 2021.

⁴ <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/60607/kto-z-was-chcialby-rozweselic-pechowego-nosorozca>

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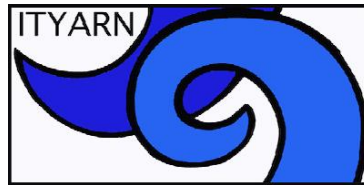


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addressed to parents of the youngest children (“even our baby sat there as if enchanted”).⁵

It might seem that the critical opinions of several parents are nothing compared to the importance of the author's achievements, the authority of the humanities, literary criticism and the experience and tradition of Polish children's theatre, which has been “teaching while entertaining” for years and shaping future generations of compatriots. After all, these critical voices have nothing to do with the multitude of stage adaptations, the work of directors of cultural institutions who decided to adapt this book for the needs of Polish stages, as well as directors, actors, stage managers, producers, art studios, set designers, composers, marketing department managers, sound and light producers, instructors, teachers who develop lesson plans based on them and exhibit the work as part of school anniversaries. Let's ignore local government bodies subsidizing public theatres for children, and even the Ministry of National Education, which decided to introduce the book to the school reading list in the form of a regulation, and even the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which subsidizes magazines that sanction the social and institutional functioning of this book. I hope I'm wrong, but so far I haven't found any public criticism or even expressed doubt about this book (other than parents).

One may ask, and this is a valid question, what does the knowledge we can gather from this local and one-off example give us? In this case, I think it is not just a single, insignificant example of “bad” theatre for children, but a case of adultism and adultistic social practices. (Hart 1997) The above show highlights the cultural and institutional conveyor belt for moulding children into our adult likeness. The case is all the more significant that it concerns especially children and the youngest viewers, from zero to three years of age.

The most common adultistic practices include: decorating oneself with children, manipulating them and tokenizing them. Decorating oneself with children means using their image for the benefit of adults. The most striking situations are related to the use of children in campaigns and political activities, but this type of adultism also includes all galas and celebrations aimed at improving the image of adults, as well as the entire advertising market that uses children to increase sales. Manipulation is a broad phenomenon, but in this case it is most often related to children's simulated participation. Pushing an adult agenda with the help of children, creating apparent advisory bodies, or organizing children's creativity competitions are just some of many cases of manipulation. Tokenizing,

⁵ <https://www.groteska.pl/spektakle/dla-dzieci/kto-pocieszyc-pechowego-nosorozca>

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in turn, is related to the apparent granting of a vote. A perfect example is all the occasionally created “children’s assemblies and bodies” (Jarosz 2017:150-152).

Kořakowski’s literary rhinoceros serves as an example of tokenization and manipulation. Creating the illusion of participation by encouraging children to cooperate. Seemingly only allowing you to express your own opinions. In addition, in the described performance itself, he manipulates children in the worst way, putting them in the role of an active participant in humiliation practices. This unfortunately shows how such a practice is carried out not only in the context of art itself, but also its social circulation. And it also says a lot about us, adults, critical or not, participating in practices of exclusion, producing and reproducing the child as the Other.

The child as the Other

The example given above is significant because it shows the operation of adultistic practices on many levels. Individual, when it comes to the reception of stage messages and literature, and social, as the subject of reviews, criticism, or publicly expressed opinions. Crucially, in the case of the performance mentioned above, by ignoring the sensitivity of children of different ages, they drive and legitimize the processes of exclusion and objectification. If we transfer this situation to the social level, by analogy it also resembles a certain way of producing Otherness.

As adults, we can deprive a child of his or her subjective status for many reasons: lack of language, body structure, cognitive competences, inability to make decisions about oneself, and lack of awareness of the consequences of one’s own behaviour.⁶ We can also do it because it is simply a child as an “unready” adult (*human becoming*). Behind this claim lies the entire history of the practice of turning a child into a “full-fledged” human being. On this path to adulthood, which is mediated institutionally (e.g. through the educational process) and socially (e.g. in the form of norms and rules shared by community members), a child, especially the youngest, may even play a model role of the Other.

An important assumption to make here is that of subjectivity itself. Our adult perception of a child is worth describing in terms of the nature of the social relationship that defines the child in relation to the adult and, conversely, the adult in relation to the child. Our adult status in relation to the child creates our adult image both in relation to the child and in relation to ourselves as adults. In

⁶ All these elements of description are not included, for example, in the classic Cartesian vision of subjectivity. See M. Wendland’s text in the next part of the report.

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analogy to how the weaker defines the stronger, or the taller the shorter. In this sense, our attitude towards a child and childhood is a measure of our agency in relation to the world, or, broadly speaking, the power that we use and legitimize in various ways. Also, the power we have as adults, as those who define what is “normal”. In an abstract cultural model in which the adult is the central figure and the features assigned to him are the measure of what is “normal”, the child will always be at a disadvantage, as never tall enough, intelligent enough, aware of his own actions or language, not human enough. All this is hidden under the concept of adultism, understood as the *systemic* abuse of an adult's power over a child and the prejudices and beliefs that support it (Bell 1995).

If we consider the cultural features attributed to an adult as an essential component of subjectivity, we can, without any particular effort, perceive the youngest child in the context of his shortcomings, what he does not have or does not yet have. This perception of the child is covered in a general sense by the statement *human becoming not human being*. This does not only apply to the child and its history, but also to the history of women, the poor, slaves, social classes, non-heteronormative people, and faith. All those who, for some reason, do not meet the current social image of “being a subject” or, in extreme cases, “being a human being”. All those whose Otherness is stigmatized and excludes them from “being a subject”. In the case of children, especially the youngest, as I want to emphasize, we are not only dealing with exclusion regardless of race, gender, social status, etc., but because *they are Other by being a child*. In this sense, Lloyd DeMause's famous quote may still be valid: “(...) the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken” (DeMause 2014: 77).

In the child understood as the Other, the philosophical *paradox* of the child's existence is also revealed, which is transferred to our common and legal understanding of his image. (Skott-Myhre and Tarulli 2008) I have the impression that the younger the child, the more it reveals itself. As adults, we claim to know them and at the same time we claim not to know them. We often claim that he is himself (a child) and is not himself (a human being). We exclude them from the group of adults and at the same time we have expectations that they will be the same as us. We grant ourselves unlimited power over every form of their existence, and at the same time we want them to be (or become) independent and autonomous *like* adults. It is at the same time a child of agency and a child of discipline.

It must be made clear that Otherness in itself need not be valorised negatively, but remains embedded in the deepest cultural codes that define who we are as subjects. In the simplest, colloquial sense, the fact that we are different from each

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other does not mean that someone is worse than someone else. Also, and perhaps also because, in a philosophical sense, Otherness can be understood ontologically as Difference (Deleuze 2015). And I see the celebration of this Difference as one of the most valuable achievements of the “discovery” of performing arts for the youngest. They are the ones who value this Difference by looking for new ways to communicate with the child.

As adults, through our actions, we fill the Otherness with negative or positive content. However, it is impossible to talk about Otherness without referring to it to legitimize the power of some social groups over others. In a philosophical sense, it is sometimes defined as a permanent element of the human condition and the constitution of the subjectivity it expresses. This is not easy to detect in discourse and action, but can be distinguished at a categorical and ontological level (Środa 2020). Otherness in this context is a category expressing the boundary of another category, most often describing a homogeneous community and class (e.g. human, national, religious or social). It also refers to its internal structure, most often pointing to a hierarchy of importance and subordination, or placing individuals in the position of centre and periphery in relation to each other. Otherness in this context can only be understood as going beyond us and our familiar world. A good example of extreme Otherness is used by Julia Kristeva, who refers to the concept of the *abjection* as something disgusting, rejecting, repulsive, which can also be understood as spawn or vomit. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the term abjection is used not only to analyse film discourse, but also becomes a category of analysis exposing homophobic and misogynistic practices (Kristeva 2024). In turn, Rudolf Otto, a classic of the phenomenology of religion, refers to the category of *numinosum*, pointing to its mystery and a terrifying encounter with a mystery from beyond this world. It seems that such exclusion from our world cannot apply to the youngest child, and yet it can appear not only in both of the above-mentioned contexts, but can even inhabit our imagination as a child-demon, a devil's spawn.

There are many reasons to consider Otherness in the negative sense as *lack*. Each of us experienced this in many ways in childhood and learned to cope with it better or worse in adulthood. A child, especially the youngest, understood as the Other, is in a unique situation because he can experience it in all the above-mentioned ways, but cannot in any way change his position as the Other. The adult Other, at least potentially, can change his position on the map of exclusion and emancipate himself in many ways (as a woman, a slave, an emigrant, a non-heteronormative person, etc.). The youngest child left alone is at a disadvantage.⁷

⁷ <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/60607/kto-z-was-chcialby-rozweselic-pechowego-nosorozca>

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He depends entirely on us, on our responsibility, power and particular whims. And on our image of him. He is not aware of any of these practices and has no way of freeing himself from us. A child comes into a world governed by “our adult rules.” Also, or especially, rules about what it is *like to be a child*. After birth, only *with the passage of time* does he become part of the community and society, of being a subject. As *homo sapiens*, it requires a long process of psychodevelopmental adaptation, and the history of childhood shows that in order to be recognized as a *human being*, it had to first be historically recognized as a child and, as such, subjected to the processes of socialization and upbringing. (Aries 2014) Contemporary philosophy of childhood and childhood studies are perfectly aware of this ambivalence, which in fact brings about a modernist understanding of the subject characterized by adultism. And it postulates rewriting the history of childhood, in analogy to feminism, queer-theory and post-colonialism in childhood studies (Peters and Johansson 2012).

Being a child often does not mean that one is recognized as a subject (including a causative subject), because one has to “earn” subjectivity, often in a brutal process of upbringing, shaping and forming. In this process, he learns how to be: appropriate, normal, polite and obedient to the social norms and directives of conduct. In other words, how to “be human.” Most often using a system of penalties and rewards. Of course, he can also grow into “humanity” in the biological sense, but before this happens, he will certainly learn how to be gentle and obedient, preferably through rewards that will allow him to learn that good treatment is an exchangeable currency, and punishment, how to enforce discipline and obedience by force. It's certainly naive, but it still amazes me that in order to form an obedient person, a “virtuous citizen”, to force a child into the functioning of some group, in so many situations we do it with the cruellest tools available, reserved only for adults. And we don't call it violence, we call it education, and torture is a necessary means of obedience or discipline. (Golus 2019) And we are often unpunished in the exercise of our power, because a child, especially the youngest, is *convicted* by us, adults, and by our ideas of them.

An adult in the service of the “civilizing mission”

Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian semiotician, wrote about two attitudes towards the Other in the context of the experience of otherness. (Todorov 1996) Both resulted from an ego- and Eurocentric approach to subjectivity. The Other in this context is primarily one who is similar but not equal. Similar to us, but in some respects, similar, but imperfect, unfinished. Secondly, the Other is the one who is hierarchically valorised as inferior. It stands lower in the hierarchy or on the “ladder of being.” The difference, expressed in terms of superiority and inferiority,

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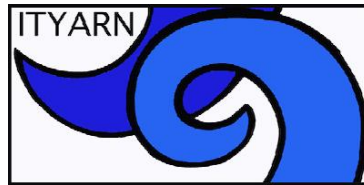


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calls into question the possibility of the existence of another human substance that can constitute something more than a simple variant of its own imperfect form. The first fits well with the understanding of a child as *a human becoming not a human being*. The second one is radically exclusive, seeing the Other as someone absolutely beyond the boundaries of humanity. Like the *abjection* mentioned earlier by Kristeva.

However, we will return to the artistic practice, to the performance, in which the book's narrator is adapted to the role of an Entertainer, confusingly resembling a circus handler, one who teaches the audience certain content. His method of communication seems very similar to handling. The spectator and the main character, an unlucky rhinoceros, are reduced to a subject of schooling who does not know the rules of communication. So, who is the performer on stage then? Doesn't he behave like a visitor from an unknown land who, not knowing the local language, tries clumsily to find an adequate language of expression, using exaggerated facial expressions and gestures? Doesn't he act as if he treated the baby rhinoceros as a challenge, a problem to solve, like an adult colonizing the child's mind? Doesn't he resemble Jason⁸ who, landing on a distant land, does not know the local language and who came to conquer, plunder and capture Colchis? On the other side he has a child - a spectator and a rhinoceros, who are not partners for him, because due to their shortcomings and imperfections, they do not yet deserve to be called a *human being*, so they need to be taught and introduced to the appropriate rules using strict methods. Like wild vegetation, an element of nature that must be carefully cut and shaped into a garden. And at the same time show us where the line between *a human being and a human becoming* is.

The otherness described by Todorov can also be interpreted in relation to children, which makes it even darker. Not only because the Bulgarian semiotician saw it in practices applied to adults, but because they were the interpretative key for the worst colonization and assimilation practices of the conquest. The first descriptions in Columbus' diary describe the inhabitants as flora and fauna, an element of the landscape. They are treated similarly to plants or animals. If he notices them, the first thing that strikes him is their *lack*, especially of their clothes. In his eyes, this proves their "wildness" and is a sign of their lack of culture. In the diary we will not find any traces of even an attempt to communicate with the Other. However, we will find a lot about differences in body and skin colour. Even though Columbus is delighted with the corporeality of the people he meets, he is surprised that despite all the deficiencies visible to

⁸ His characteristic feature is that the aim of his expedition, unlike Odysseus, is material goods and conquest. In this sense, I treat him as a prefiguration of the colonizer.

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the naked eye, which make them look more like animals than people, they seem to be smart and intelligent. He equates the lack of clothes with poverty, not so much in the context of possessions, but in the context of the lack of customs, beliefs, or, more broadly, culture. As a Christian, he believed that one of the consequences of being expelled from paradise was the need to be clothed. In this case, clothing does not indicate fashion, but is one of the important elements of identity, a component of humanity (1996: 42-44). Apart from the obvious greed and desire for conquest, one of his overt motives was the so-called “civilizing mission”. In his *Diary*, he wrote about the indigenous people he encountered: “They must be induced to build cities, taught to clothe and behave like the rest of us.” (1996: 51-52). He wanted the inhabitants he met to be like the Spaniards, who in his vision were to be preachers of Christ and adopt the traditions and customs of the Spanish. This was his “message” carried to the “New World”. Knowledge about the genocide of that time is already widely known, but its “educational” dimension is less frequently highlighted. Although Todorov’s analysis does not focus on the attitude of colonizers towards children, it is very difficult to resist the analogy that we are dealing here with the process of forming “the only correct image of man”. From this point of view, the local population is, at best, merely a *human becoming*.

A non-obvious encounter between colonization practices and the issue of childhood occurs in European culture in the 18th century. It is only then that the child begins to be the object of interest of philosophers, scientists and artists, begins to become “opaque”, and then the first modern concepts of childhood appeared, which still have at least an indirect impact on contemporary research and practice. The pioneers included the Czech Jan Amos Komenský and two Swiss men: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was the latter who turned out to be the most influential thinker, although nonetheless controversial. Rousseau’s ideas about the child and childhood, although groundbreaking and innovative in many respects, reveal deep contradictions characteristic of modern European culture.

In 1762, Rousseau published the essay *Emile, or on Education*. The work was immediately placed on the church’s index of prohibited books and caused a huge sensation. In this specific guide, the philosopher postulated treating the child as a “natural being”, i.e. by nature, from birth, good in the moral sense. Only civilization and society “spoil” the natural goodness of a child – an adult is indeed “civilized” and “socialized”, but at the same time marked by all the flaws and weaknesses of “adult” politics, ideology, economics, religion, etc. Rousseau is therefore the first to begin to perceive a child in terms of the Other, but by no means the Stranger. He advises, among other things, that mothers feed their

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small children on their own, so as not to restrict their bodies with the so-called swaddling clothes, keep them in as close contact with nature as possible. Older children should be educated mainly in practical terms, not in closed school rooms, and in such a way as to nurture their natural instincts and not force them into the rigid framework of conventions. All these suggestions were shocking for the European societies of that time, but they were undoubtedly ahead of their time and heralded many modern transformations. In this respect, *Emil* was groundbreaking and in many respects the essay had a very positive impact.

But Rousseau was a philosopher made of contradictions. It is easy to realize that his views also have a much darker side and reveal a number of disturbing tendencies towards hidden paternalism. Well, Rousseau was also a co-creator of the concept of the so-called “noble savage” (*le bon sauvage*). This concept assumed that the inhabitants of non-European lands in the Americas and Asia are indeed “savage”, and therefore “uncivilized”, unlike Europeans, but these “savages” turn out to be more “noble”, better in a moral sense, because they are not contaminated by modern culture. According to Rousseau, there is an analogy in the relationships between children and adults and between the “savages” and the “civilized”. The child and the “savage” are “natural beings”, good by nature and free from the troubles of immoral European civilization. This kind of analogy, while seemingly progressive, conceals a number of very dangerous implications.

First of all, in *Emil*, the philosopher constantly emphasizes that a child should remain under the supervision of an adult man. In this process, women should only give birth and feed, nothing more. It is not clear who such an adult male educator would be, since, as Rousseau claims, all adults are contaminated by civilization. There are many more such contradictions. It is Rousseau, seemingly innovative, who perpetuates the idea of the child as a “little adult”, as a *human becoming*.

If children are just “little people”, then they are not just people: adjectives like “little” usually suggest some form of exclusion. What's worse, comparing the child to a “good savage” turns out to be a formula of disguised colonialism. Rousseau does not realize at all that the supposedly evaluative division into “noble savages” and “civilized Europeans” is extremely Eurocentric. Colonialism in this case is “perverse” in nature, although Rousseau appears to be proclaiming the moral superiority of “savages” over Europeans and the moral superiority of children over adults. However, since the latter require, as he mentions many times, constant supervision by an adult, “savages” may also require similar “civilization care”. In this way, the alleged “civilizing mission” covers not only the so-called “savages”, but also children: both are idealized, imagined in a European

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way, objects of shaping in the image and likeness of an adult, white man – like Rousseau himself. Who, by the way, gave away the five children he fathered to an orphanage because he felt he had no time to take care of them.

Yes, attributing clear and direct colonizing intentions to him would probably be a cultural imputation, if only because *Emil* was written in opposition to the then dominant perception of the child in the context of the Catholic religion. But regardless of noble intentions, Rousseau's views lead to dangerous areas and reinforce a disturbing thesis: childhood for many centuries or even millennia was “space of colonization”. Adults, as “civilized”, empowered by themselves, imagined children as a kind of “savages”, yet to become fully human beings, in accordance with the image constructed by adults. The process of imagining a child as a *human being*, by analogy, involves a kind of “decolonization of childhood.”

Summary

The discovery of childhood in the modern era was one of the most culturally significant moments, but it is incomparable to the discovery of the child's subjectivity in the 20th century. This second revolution expanded responsibility for the child from the private sphere to the public sphere, to the sphere of duties and obligations that are socially and universally legitimized. One could say that with this, as adults, we have achieved our cultural goal, the child has been declaratively recognized as a subject, in the existential, legal sense, etc. A clear example of which is the *Declaration* and then the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, or legal restrictions on the use of corporal punishment against children. The problem is that the discovery of childhood is still, in many places, like Columbus' “discovery” of America. In fact, it legitimizes the objective and oppressive nature of the relationship between a child and an adult, and our social ideas about children resemble Columbus' ideas about “Indians.”

What is unique about the practices of producing children's subjectivity is that, as a rule, they are never fully symmetrical, especially when it comes to the youngest children. Regardless of what social role we currently fulfil as adults: parent, teacher, actors and creators, cultural workers, they permeate us through and through. And probably most of all as adults and as people. To say that we are privileged in contact with the youngest child is to say nothing, and examples show that as adults we have used this power and often use it in any way we want. The younger the child, the greater our power over him. We are supported in this by culture and history, which give us all the tools to valorise his position or status as an inferior Other.

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The key role here is played by theatre for the youngest audience, understood as a social practice focused on *partnership* contact with the child. As it has been creating art for children and, above all, *with children* for several decades, it is one of the most important social institutions that allows us to break the centuries-old and often hidden domination of adults. And it is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but an ethical one, because it carries emancipatory potential, and artists creating for the youngest audiences have often taken and continue to take responsibility for rethinking our attitude to childhood. And in their work, they often deal with deeply rooted negative ideas about children.

If we recall the phrase *child as a human being and not a human becoming*, we can read it in the context of a change in the child's place in the social hierarchy. From not being a fully valuable human being to being a full-fledged entity. This statement not only radically changes the child's position in the cartography of strangeness, otherness and exclusion, placing the child in the centre of social interests, but above all it shatters our existing idea of what subjectivity means in many societies today. I am convinced that this would not be possible without the participation and activity of the international artistic community. The importance of the existence and support of EYT may be demonstrated by the path a child must *take* to recognize his or her subjectivity and agency. And it leads through the history of otherness and strangeness. It can be assumed that on this path, which not only has not ended, but has only just begun, the child has been assigned all possible roles on the map of strangeness. He could and can be the "other good one" or the "other worse one." He could and can also be the stranger. At the same time, subjectivity on this path cannot be understood neutrally, as a pattern unencumbered by history. It is marked by our valuations and the measure of what we, as adults, consider "normal". European subjectivity had and still has its skin colour, height, and even taste, as well as, if not primarily, age and material property.

For the last dozen or so years, it seemed to me that by co-creating a theatre movement for the youngest children in Poland, I was co-creating it *for* children. Nothing could be further from the truth. Theatre for the youngest is equally important for children and adults. It can be a space for children's emancipation created according to our own ideas, and for us, adults, a social and accessible form of *social rehabilitation*. Rethinking the phenomenon of childhood, in the presence and dialogue with children. Thinking critically towards the collective ideas that have shaped us in the past. We can see it as one of the attempts to break the historical circle of adult domination towards children, the violence that we ourselves have experienced as subjects of the legal system, upbringing processes, education and cultural hegemony. An expression of our *self-limitation*

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from objectification and economic exploitation of the Other. Noticing a child as a partner in the artistic process may be the first step towards creating a common space for communication and is an expression of inclusion and expanding the community of entities. Especially where it is done together with the child, giving him the role of not only a passive viewer, but also an active participant in artistic practices. Today, I am convinced that as a social institution it plays a key role, because thanks to it we are able to, at least to a small extent, stop the historical sequence of systemic domination and power of Adults over Children. That it can be a tool that allows you to rethink what childhood is and was. And it changes our perception of the child from a *human becoming* to a *human being*, from It to I and our power over children into responsibility towards them.

Theodor Adorno (2013) wrote about modern art as the *art of resistance* to the totality of European culture. Perhaps we should remember this postulate, while maintaining cultural and historical proportions, and ask the question: How is theatre for the youngest possible as an art of resistance to the tyranny of adulthood? Promoting forms of communication that avoid violence and expanding the spheres of exclusion or historical and cultural domination (Gramsci 1991) of Adults over Children. Art that reminds us that our “natural” power over children, given to us from their and our birth, legitimized in statutory law, reinforced by the educational system, is a form of social convention that together, as adults, we create for “our” children (as we like to call them) day by day, individually, in smaller and larger groups and social classes. Power whose rule is sanctioned through a process of negotiation or arbitrarily⁹, and which, after reaching its critical mass, becomes binding law and custom, educational art and doctrine, philosophy or religion. And frozen in a non-human shape, as a rule or law, it creates and shapes new generations of children and adults and fills our social consciousness.

I do not believe that the source of our authority as adults over children is based on some metaphysics, divine laws, tradition or custom. However, I believe in our individual and social responsibility towards children and ourselves, a responsibility that allows us to be critical of ourselves, our own culture and our own childhood, which allows us to celebrate the child's Otherness and Difference and thus be critical of our ideas, instead of maintaining existing hierarchies and creating further spheres of exclusion. This is what in many cases *is* and always *can be* theatre created with the youngest audience in mind and with the participation of the youngest audience. It is our responsibility, an ethical task towards the most defenceless human being. Therefore, theatre for the youngest is an absolutely unique social practice, and having emerged several decades ago

⁹ Negotiations, that is e.g. in law-making processes; arbitrarily, that is, or privately, as parents and guardians.

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as a social phenomenon, it requires constant cultivation and reminders of its social significance and subjective dimension. Not only for the sake of children, but also for us, adults, because it gives us a chance to discover childhood together with children, but also to remind ourselves and criticize our thinking about ourselves.



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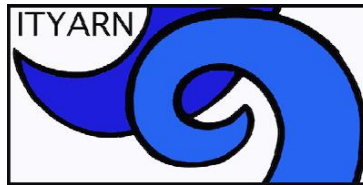


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Children’s Agency and the Issue of Subjectivity

Michał Wendland

When agency is considered in relation to children, including very young ones, it is generally treated either as something obvious, a fact (“Children are agents”), or as something desirable, a postulate (“Children should be agents”, “Children’s agency should be strengthened”). For the sake of clarity, a third option should be mentioned, namely that children’s agency can be denied, although this position is not really articulated in contemporary childhood studies. Unfortunately, however, it does appear in more ideologically-laden discussions, in the guise of an adultist thesis about children’s subordination to adults (“Only adults are agents”). There is also a fourth possibility, an intermediate position, which does not deny children’s agency but treats it with greater caution or scepticism (“Children are and/or should be agents, but...”). I acknowledge that the latter position is the closest to my own, and it will be the main focus of this part of the report.

The present text focuses exclusively on very young children – sometimes I use the broader term “children” as shorthand, but I always mean children from zero to three years old; if older children are mentioned, it is clearly stated. I would like to stress that the complexity and difficulty associated with the issue of agency increase dramatically when very young children are considered. If I approach the concept of agency with some caution or even scepticism, it is specifically in the context of babies and toddlers: if we were considering older children, teenagers, etc., the problem of agency would be much simpler, since assigning agency to children over three years old is much easier to justify.

Hence this part of the report focuses primarily on the issue of agency among the youngest children in the context of theatrical practices, or to be more precise: the perceptions that adults (parents, caregivers, etc.) have about very young children and early childhood. These perceptions were the main focus of the empirical part of the project. As a philosopher, my task in preparing the report

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was primarily theoretical, and can be summarised in two points: (1) interpreting agency from within the broader category of subjectivity, and (2) critiquing the assumptions concerning the agency of very young children.

Firstly, I sought to interpret agency in light of the broader concept of subjectivity. I assume that agency is one of the forms of subjectivity. An agent is simultaneously a subject, in this case an acting subject – one that interacts with other subjects and engages with the surrounding reality. This means that if we consider toddlers as agents, we also acknowledge their subjectivity. This is how it is often presented in the academic literature (in developmental psychology, childhood sociology, pedagogy, etc.), but also in the public sphere, in the media, in guidebooks, blogs, reviews, and so on.

Presenting the agency of very young children from within the context of subjectivity is thus primarily an expansion of perspective and ultimately an attempt to organise it in terms of terminology and methodology. Following this, my contribution to the report becomes more critical and, in this sense, directly corresponds to the section prepared by Paweł Gałkowski. As I have already noted, my preferred approach is one characterised by caution, philosophical suspicion, or even scepticism. Thus, from the perspective of contemporary philosophy, the key categories “agency” and “subjectivity” are not beyond question, nor do they exhaust the complexity of the topic. Furthermore, they are not free from specific worldview or ideological entanglements. In short, I work from the assumption that these categories are not “safe”, “neutral”, or “objective”. This critique – and this is a point I will reiterate – is not intended to call the subjectivity of very young children into question; on the contrary, I am keen to strengthen it in terms of social practices. In the humanities and social sciences, we have seen the fate of many concepts that were initially treated as “obvious” or “objective”, but which over time turned out to be ambiguous and controversial – such as “race”, “nationality”, “property”. In extreme cases, certain concepts have proven to be downright harmful. Therefore, I will not only summarise and contextualise the problem of agency but also subject it to critique. However, this critique is not intended to be destructive; it aims to be transformative. The conclusion of the second, critical thread is therefore: yes, very young children have subjectivity/agency; but what kind, and how is it achieved?

Theatre for young children has a unique potential for fostering their agency. The purely aesthetic value of the theatre tends to take a back seat, and what comes to the fore is the function of opening up or inviting the child to participate in collective and social relationships, in a way that takes into account their psychophysical specificity. At the same time, the emancipatory (communal, inclusive) function of theatre for young children is connected with a critique of

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the assumptions concerning child agency. Postulating, implementing, and bolstering children’s agency through various social practices (artistic, educational, communicative, sports, etc.) has undeniable merits and can be justified. However, it also has its drawbacks – some obvious, some hidden. Most importantly, agency is not the sole criterion for assigning subjectivity.

The fundamental concern with the issue of child agency, which will be subsequently elaborated in more detail, is that in reality toddlers have very limited agency. As human beings, they are highly – almost entirely – dependent on adults. While adults can be described as having varying degrees of agency, attempting to ascribe agency to two-year-olds, for example, might amount to imposing a category on the child that they do not fit into. Here, the postulate of child agency appears more like an expectation, one that is not necessarily verbalised; or even a demand imposed on the child. Since, as adults we are subjects equipped with agency, we expect agency from children, even though they are not capable of meeting this expectation, for objective psychophysical reasons. This is one reason why I believe the postulate of child agency should be treated with a degree of caution. If the prime example of calling for children to be treated as subjects is the 1989 Convention, it does not necessarily follow that the only criterion for subjectivity is agency. Among all the institutions dedicated to child empowerment, theatre for toddlers seems particularly important, valuable and necessary because it opens the way to empowerment through participation; and because it treats the child in a way that acknowledges their ontological specificity, while treating them as equals. It is worth noting that this is also often the first way that children enter into the world of interpersonal relationships outside the family or caregiving circles – earlier than other institutions, such as educational or political ones.

Subjectivity and Agency

Agency and subjectivity are concepts that require clarification, and an understanding of the relationship between them. Although both have been used in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities for centuries, their application in the context of very young children demands special attention. Above all, it can be said that *agency is one possible form of subjectivity*. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably; alternatively, it is suggested that agency should be discussed instead of subjectivity. The first option – agency as a form of subjectivity – is the most convincing because it allows for a pluralistic approach: someone or something that considers itself – or that is considered to be – a subject can be defined as an agent, though this does not exhaust the definition. For example, in modern European philosophy, the subject was

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identified solely with reason, and subjectivity solely with rationality. This reduction of the subject to one function proved to be harmful, so it is unwise to replace one reduction (to reason) with another (to agency). On the other hand, the attempt to replace the concept of subjectivity with the category of agency seems like avoiding the problem by changing the terminology – a solution which is too simplistic.

So, what is subjectivity?

Firstly, I can say about myself: “I am a subject”. This may mean that I possess self-awareness, that I have a sense of my individual identity and psychophysical distinctiveness. As a subject, I have cognitive abilities: using my senses, I perceive the world around me, and what is perceived becomes the object of my knowledge. As a subject, I can also make myself the object of my own knowledge. Yet this does not exhaust the definition of a subject. My subjectivity may also mean that I independently take actions based on decisions that can be judged according to ethical criteria, and I am responsible for those actions. My sense of subjectivity may also manifest in my status with regard to the law; as a subject, I am obligated by law to do certain things, I am protected by law from other things, or I have rights be able to do something. Thus, one can speak of cognitive subjectivity, which is associated with perceiving oneself as a distinct identity, but a subject can also be considered in ethical or legal contexts.

I, as a subject, encounter the Other. The Other is not merely an object of my knowledge, as they are also a subject. My ethical decisions may or should consider the Other, which opens up the possibility of building various relationships between subjects. In fact, in contemporary philosophy, the subject is primarily understood in relational terms (which, as will become evident later, leads us to the issue of the child as a “human being” or a “human becoming”). The legal relationship pertains to me, but also to the Other: we may be subject to the same law, but our subjectivities may also be defined by different legal norms. To define the relationship between the subject and the Other, the degree of otherness is particularly significant. A subject defines themselves in relation to the Other, but they can also deny the Other’s subjectivity, which typically implies asserting their dominance over the Other. In such a situation, the Other becomes objectified.

However, a subject is not just an “I”, but also, or perhaps primarily, a “We”. A subject can have a collective character, and here we enter the realm of community, of society. If, as an “I”, I encounter the Other and define myself in relation to the Other, then similarly, “We” distinguish ourselves from “Them”. And

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“We” can treat “Them” as another subject, but also deny “Them” subjectivity and attempt to subordinate them.

The subject – as an “I” and as a “We” – is a knowing subject, a decision-making subject, a legal subject, but they also have a historical character. Subjectivity does not emerge from a vacuum. It is constructed as a kind of imagination (image, narrative): I have a certain conception of myself as a subject, and a collective subject – political, religious, ethnic, etc. – constructs a certain conception of itself and other subjects. These conceptions are not stable; they change over time, although admittedly many subjects perceive such conceptions as immutable, absolute, or universal.

In the broadest terms, by “subject” here I understand (with significant simplification) a certain conception of what “a human being” is (when referring to “human subjectivity”), or of what constitutes a “person” (human or non-human, for example, an animal). Subjectivity can be constituted through perceiving/imagining oneself, perceiving/imagining others (subjects), or being perceived/imagined¹⁰ (by other subjects).

I treat subjectivity – relational, historical – as an indeterminate concept. There is no uniquely privileged type or definition of a subject. Defining subjectivity is a key task not only for philosophers but also for psychologists, sociologists, education theorists, etc. One of the forms of subjectivity – one of the ways to define it – is agency. A subject can be characterised as rational (“logocentric”); as ethical, material and mortal; as immaterial and eternal; as determined or free; but also as agential.

So it is evident that many different types or aspects of subjectivity can be distinguished. We should certainly avoid reducing such heterogeneity to just one determinant. In the humanities, these generalising, totalising approaches usually do not bode well: the attempt to encapsulate such a complex phenomenon, like a human being, in a single definition almost always means prioritising some ideology, some politics, religion, etc., and thus straying away from scientific reflection.

Situating the concept of agency within the framework of subjectivity theory does not make matters more straightforward; in fact, it complicates the picture. Both

¹⁰ When I talk about “perceiving” or “imagining”, I am not only referring to sensory perception, although this plays a crucial role. The term “imagining” in this context does not necessarily imply only “imagination”. I use these simplifying terms primarily to emphasise that subjectivity is something that is produced, obtained, or achieved, not something given “from above”. Therefore, if we talk about subjectivity in the form of “national identity” or “class consciousness”, in these cases it is the result of a community’s collective self-perception or imagination of itself, or the perception and imagination of other communities (collective subjectivity).

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the historical development of the idea of the subject and its contemporary critiques are problematic, even controversial. From the perspective of philosophy, the subject (as a “conscious I”) has been a key point of interest. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) undoubtedly played a crucial role in establishing the modern theory of the subject. It is often said that there is a “Cartesian model of subjectivity”, in which the criterion of rational thinking (the subject as a self-aware ego) takes centre stage. The Cartesian subject is above all a thinking subject, one that has a cognitive relation with reality. Notably, Descartes’ logocentric subject can also be described as “lonely”, i.e. the Cartesian *cogito* is conceived as an individual, an entity somewhat independent of social reality.

Over the next two hundred years, European philosophers developed this concept. Especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann G. Fichte, Georg W.F. Hegel, and others viewed subjectivity as logocentric (reduced to rationality) and cognitive, i.e., alongside the subject, a “cognitive object” was defined – an element of reality known by the human subject. Over time, the Cartesian subject underwent development and expansion, although its fundamental characteristics were retained. Philosophers advocated distinguishing, for example, the moral subject, social subjectivity, the legal subject, subject of history, and so on. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) saw that the subject’s object of knowledge could also be itself, i.e. a human thinking about itself is simultaneously a subject and an object. His successors, Fichte and Hegel, realized that the subject encounters not only physical objects around it but also other subjects. From this point of view, “I” can be a subject only insofar as there is some “Other” subject. This way of thinking was eventually transferred to the social and political reality, for example in the concept of international law: not only individuals but entire collectives, societies, national communities, etc., can be considered subjects that relate to each other. However, at the level of international relations it quickly became apparent that theory diverged from practice because almost all European states at the time aimed not at recognising the subjectivity of other states but at subordinating them to themselves. So the dark side of the theory of subjectivity came to light: if a subject begins to treat other subjects, individual or collective, as objects, i.e., denies them their subjectivity, everything is reduced to a struggle for dominance.

One dangerous consequence of the theory of subjectivity emerged very early on, in the views of Descartes himself. Since he defined the subject as composed of material substance (body) and thinking substance (reason), and since it was reason that was supposed to distinguish the human subject, Descartes

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concluded that animals could not be recognised as subjects. From this perspective, animals were entirely material: lacking reason and thus subjectivity, they were treated as objects. This approach – extremely logocentric and anthropocentric – reinforced the old view of humans as those who “subdue the Earth” and permitted objectifying, and often cruel treatment of non-human beings. The self-aware, rationally privileged Cartesian subject was treated as “master and ruler,” even in the cognitive dimension (Descartes’ contemporary, the English philosopher Francis Bacon, famously equated knowledge with power).

This kind of threat began to be recognised at the beginning of the 19th century by Georg W. Hegel (1770-1830), who described the constitution of subjectivity in the famous narrative of the Master-Slave dialectic (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*). While Descartes was not concerned with the social context of the subject, Hegel noticed that in social situations this image of the subject inevitably leads to an oppressive relationship between the one who subjugates and the one who is subjugated. In other words, this depiction of subjectivity inherently contains an element of violence, even if it is not immediately visible or obvious. A few decades later, Karl Marx reached a similar conclusion by associating subjectivity with the concept of labour and suggesting that class relations are based on subjugation.

Of course, one could say that the Cartesian model of the subject is simply outdated and has basically been abandoned in the field of philosophy. However, it is obvious that this is far from the case. The model still strongly influences many contemporary concepts of subjectivity, including the theory of agency. Unfortunately, the latest iteration also inherits many flaws from its earlier forms. One could argue that the Cartesian model is embedded in many conceptions of the human being, with the exception of those that have consciously rejected or at least challenged it. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, philosophers gradually became aware of how many real or potential dangers are associated with the Cartesian conception of the subject.

None of the aforementioned conceptions of the subject considered children. Children were absent. Descartes consciously excluded animals from the boundaries of subjectivity, and he and none of his successors mentioned children at all. In general, modern thinking about the subject was highly exclusive. In practice, the title of “subject” was reserved for human beings, specifically white people, males, those possessing private property. Everything and everyone else was excluded from this elite group. It is no coincidence that all modern variants of the theory of subjectivity were constructed by the very

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people who were defined as subjects –privileged white men. And, we can also add at this point – adults.

One of the most serious problems associated with subjectivity is that all conceptions of what a subject is, or *is not*, have been created by adults. Moreover, conceptions of the subject typically relate to how adults are perceived and treated. Children, especially babies and toddlers, do not produce complex discourses about the subject; yet they are encompassed by them.

When I or We construct a particular conception (about I or Us, or about the Other or Them), we often situate ourselves in a privileged or even exclusionary position. Human history is filled with notions of subjectivity that were built on sharp distinctions, exclusions, and subjugations. Consequently, definitions of the subject emerged which omitted women – their rights were limited or entirely absent, and they were treated as inferior, incomplete beings, not just different but also alien, excluded. For a very long time, perceptions of *who* could be treated as a subject, and not as an object, and *why*, were dictated by skin colour or other ethnic factors (and this tends to remain the case, unfortunately). Once again, subjectivity was granted primarily based on the criteria of difference and lack. The so-called “savage” could not be included among “civilized” subjects because he “had no clothes”, “had no soul”, “had no religion”, etc. (Todorov 2020).

So it is evident that the concept of subjectivity belongs to the group of “dangerous” or “subversive” concepts. When one collective denies another collective’s subjectivity, it is usually a prelude to acts of violence aimed at exploitation, subjugation, or extermination. Unfortunately, a collective that positions itself in a privileged place also defines itself as agential and exercises its agency through acts of violence. Agency does not necessarily lead to violence, but violence by definition presupposes the agency of the subject. This clearly indicates that the concept of agency should not be applied unreflectively.

In 20th-century philosophy, the Cartesian model of subjectivity came under intense criticism. This applied to all concepts of the subject, not just Cartesian ones. In poststructuralism and postmodernism, categories such as logocentrism, anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism, as well as objective criteria of knowledge, were all questioned. Subjectivity itself was regarded as inseparably tied to relations of power and violence, often implicitly involving paternalism, oppression and exploitation. First came the “death of the author” (Roland Barthes), and a little later, the “death of the subject” (Michel Foucault). In the second half of the 20th century, Foucault in particular – but also Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Zygmunt Bauman, and Richard Rorty – deconstructed, demystified and unmasked the concept of subjectivity itself.

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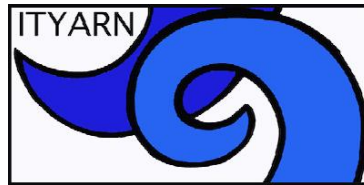


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The announcement of the “death of the subject” had certain consequences. Abandoning this concept entailed there would be unavoidable problems many scientific, philosophical, political, or artistic proposals that appealed to the categories of universality, objectivity, reality, or generality. Philosophical trends like postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism successfully exposed the dangers of totalising theories, like the theory of subjectivity, but they also struggled to propose concrete alternatives.

Perhaps in the 1970s and 1980s one could have had the impression that the “death of the subject” had decentralised and deregulated philosophy, science, and art. However, in the long run, it turned out that it this announcement had been somewhat premature. Within philosophy itself, various critical voices expressed opposition to poststructuralism. While they certainly did not express a desire to return to the Cartesian model, and they upheld most of the criticisms levelled against it, at the same time, they aimed to *reformulate* the category of subjectivity instead of eliminating it. For example, the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that a hasty postmodernist abandonment of the concept of subjectivity entails abandoning the instance of empowerment: who or what can be empowered, and how, if the subject does not exist? Habermas (1987) proposes replacing the old Cartesian formula with the category of intersubjectivity; thus a relationship assuming the existence of at least two (equivalent) subjects instead of a single, individualised one.

The fate of the subject in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences – thus outside of philosophy proper – has been somewhat different. To put it a little maliciously, only a few researchers took the “end” or “death” of the subject seriously. In modern sociology, psychology, the cognitive sciences, political science, and even pedagogy, subjectivity remains a crucial category. I would also emphasise that in ideological or political terms, the concept of subjectivity tends to be used in the context of various emancipatory movements: subjectivity can be achieved or granted (this distinction is significant and will be addressed) in the case of women, ethnic minorities, animals, children, etc. Such empowerment is understood as reversing objectification, as it entails gaining legality, autonomy, recognition, equality, and opposing various forms of chauvinism, exclusionary practices, or subjugation (adultism, racism, ageism, etc.).

Child subjectivity and the postulate of agency

The convoluted history of the concept of subjectivity does not make it easy to interpret and assess one of the most widely adopted new approaches to this topic – that of agency. Unlike the old, discredited Cartesian model of the subject,

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in this case, one cannot point to a single specific name or even a particular school of thought in the social sciences that is directly associated with the concept of agency. In the broad spectrum of inspirations and components of this concept, we can find the philosophical views of Hegel and Marx, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, praxeology, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, and many others.

In agency theories, the emphasis is not on cognitive or reflective competencies, but rather on the *capacity for action*. The subject as an agent is characterised quite differently from the Cartesian subject, and agential subjectivity is not exclusive to humans. Of course, agency need not pertain only to individuals; it can belong to various groups, but on a fundamental level an agent is perceived as an individual entity capable of carrying out actions and exerting a certain influence on reality (e.g. for Marx, the most crucial action was labour). To emphasise the significance of the concept of agency in contemporary humanities and social sciences, there is even talk of an "agential turn": "Over the past few decades, philosophy (...) has witnessed an "Agential Turn." Motivated by dissatisfaction with the idea that we are mere spectators or passive subjects of our own psychology, various human mental phenomena are increasingly viewed as *active*, and their subjects as their *agents*" (Campbell and Greenberg 2023: 224-225). Concepts of agency share a common idea, whereby agency is viewed as "intentional causal intervention in the world, subject to the possibility of a reflexive monitoring of that intervention" (Ratner 2000: 413).

The concept of agency plays a special role in childhood studies, including those focused on very young children. It is suggested that children be treated as agential, to strengthen their agency in educational practices; and that the performing arts intended for the youngest audiences should encourage them to exercise their agency. "(...) Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes", write A. Prout and A. James (1997: 8). The postulate of agency, both in the description of early childhood and in proposed educational solutions, means conceiving of the child as an unambiguously subjective being and opposes former perceptions in which "(...) the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers" (Schapiro 1999: 729). The theory of agency, often described as a turning point in early childhood studies, rejects old, logocentric assumptions: the ability to speak is no longer the sole criterion for a person's participation in interpersonal interactions.

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Especially in recent years, the field of early childhood studies has witnessed a debate on the status of the child, particularly the youngest, as a “human being” or merely a “human becoming” (Ovortrup 2009; Johansson 2012; Hagá 2023). The latter conception is critiqued as outdated, since it is derived from earlier notions of the child as a “little adult” – a being who merely aspires to become human. The sharp opposition between the “adult” (subject) and the “child” (a potential subject) places the adult in a clearly privileged position. However, in the context of agency, “The ‘being and becoming’ discourse extends the notion of agency offered by the ‘being’ discourse to consider the child as a social actor constructing his or her everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future” (Uprichard 2008: 311).

It is worth noting, however, that the debate also features a perspective that combines the “being” and “becoming” viewpoints, based on the assumption that humans, including children, are subject to continuous change and engage in networks of relationships that constantly reconstitute their existence. This approach, derived from the works of Bruno Latour, Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri, and others, places less emphasis on “beings” and more on the relationships between them. Consequently, a subject, including a child, would be a “human being” (defined, for example, by their agency), but at the same time, a constantly changing, becoming entity. Thus, the “being” and “becoming” perspectives do not have to be opposed. This approach signifies a departure from the traditional ontology of things toward a relational ontology, which is foundational for understanding a child as agential, and therefore as capable of full participation in social life.

Agency and social practice

Children gained subjectivity late. Too late. In many parts of the world, they still lack it to a certain extent. And in many cases, there is only an apparent empowerment of children (a phenomenon known as ‘the tokenization of childhood’). This is astonishing: processes leading to the recognition of children as subjects began later than similar emancipation processes for women, slaves, or animals. When, in 1833, the British Parliament issued the Slavery Abolition Act in its colonies (although British colonies themselves lasted much longer), about half a million children between the ages of 10 and 14 were working in English factories. In the same year, the English Privy Council merely recommended that children in this age range should not work more than eight hours a day. As late as 1901, as many as 22 percent of children in England were being used as cheap labour. Examples like this can be found in every part of the world, in every era. As the researcher of violent treatment of children, Lloyd DeMause, put it: “(...) The

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history of childhood has been a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken” (1994: 77).

With some confidence, we can trace the recognition of children as subjects (at least on the theoretical level) back to early modern Europe. The Enlightenment demonstrated its great emancipatory potential in relation to women (O. de Gouges, M. Wollstonecraft, N. de Condorcet), slaves (J.-P. Grégoire, P. Brissot, W. Wilberforce, T. Kościuszko), and animals (J.-J. Rousseau, J. Bentham). However, childhood was just being “discovered” at this time. In 1960, Philippe Ariès published his famous but controversial book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, in which he argued that the pre-modern social perception of children involved treating them as “little adults”, and it was only in the culture of the 18th century that this view gradually began to change. Children began to be seen as distinct subjects – but not everywhere and not universally. Objectification – similar to that experienced by women, slaves, or animals, and all other beings or social groups that face discrimination – persists to this day, in one form or another (though there has been noticeable progress, particularly in comparison to early modern times). It was not until 1989 that the Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified (based on the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child), marking the first legal act of this kind to go beyond being a mere collection of postulates. Legal protection means recognition of equality before the law, and thus recognising the subjectivity of the individual being protected by law. If rights are granted, for example, to a social class, an ethnic minority, animals, or children, it indicates they are legally recognised as subjects.

Unfortunately, however, this does not necessarily mean that their subjectivity is no longer violated or ignored. The recognition of legal subjectivity or agency is associated with a certain ideological stance: we view someone or something in terms of subjectivity (for example, agency), so we grant them legal protection. However, if we do not view someone or something this way, we exclude them from the scope of the law. Of course, a given social group can fight for their own rights, can claim subject status for themselves: women, enslaved people and ethnic minorities can emancipate themselves in one way or another, peacefully or violently. But in other special cases, this is clearly not possible (or only possible in a specific way). Animals acquire rights if humans *grant* them to them. The same applies to children, especially the youngest. This statement is not an expression of pessimism, let alone prejudice. Children aged two, six, or ten did not sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child – adults did. And while it was good that they did this, such empowerment is not the same as that gained in analogous cases involving gender, nationality, or social class. There is a significant

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difference between “emancipating oneself” and “being emancipated”¹¹ by someone who already possesses subjectivity. In the latter situation, emancipation can turn out to be tokenised, or even take the form of disguised violence or paternalism.¹²

The partial or superficial nature of children’s subjectivity is particularly evident if one considers the issue of the legality of corporal punishment inflicted on minors. Hitting a child as a form of punishment is an obvious example of violence exercised by the privileged party – in this case, an adult – and invoking the argument of beating as a “traditional form of upbringing” is pure hypocrisy. The first country to ban the corporal punishment of children (both at home and at school) was Sweden, in 1979. By 1996, social acceptance of violence had dropped from over 50 to 11 percent in this country. In Poland, similar legislation was enacted in 1997, but in 2013 as many as 41 percent of adult Poles still believed that “beating should not be used, but there are situations where it is justified” (though 47 percent believed it should not be used at all). In other countries, similar laws were introduced even later, e.g. France in 2019, Japan in 2020. In the United Kingdom and Italy, only corporal punishment in school is illegal, and in the United States this type of violence is not prohibited by law at all. The acceptance of corporal punishment ranges from 60 to 80 percent in these countries. It seems that outlawing a given violent practice promotes social change in this area, but on the other hand, such a ban is possible only if there has already been a shift in the perception of physical, symbolic, or systemic violence in a given society. Without a doubt, a great deal has been achieved in terms of strengthening children’s subjectivity over the past two hundred years – though much remains to be done, and the struggle is far from over.

Critique of the concept of agency

Turning now to the critique of the concept of agency as it is used in Early Childhood Studies, at the outset I want to make it clear that I do not consider the concept of agency itself to be incorrect, false, etc. in any straightforward manner.

¹¹ The difference cannot be reduced to the division between children and adults. In 1791, slaves in Haiti rebelled against the colonists, and two years later the revolutionary French National Convention recognised their rights in the act of abolishing slavery. This is a very different situation from when Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the emancipation of American slaves in 1863. This point here is not to diminish or relativise Lincoln’s initiative, but there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, those who cast off their chains themselves, and on the other, chains being removed by those who had previously put them on. In the first case, the empowering legal act is a consequence of people freeing themselves from bondage; in the second situation, the freeing is a consequence of the legal act.

¹² Essentially, a similar situation occurred in the 20th century with many forms of decolonisation, which often took the form of neocolonialism.

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The aim of this critique is not to discard this category but rather to point out the potential or real dangers that I believe are associated with it. These dangers, as I will attempt to show, relate to methodological issues as well as directly to social practices and collective perceptions concerning children and childhood. The latter issue is far more serious.

Secondly, I want to emphasise that here the critique of the concept of agency pertains primarily to young children and would certainly focus on something else (and be much weaker) if it were applied to teenagers or adults, for example. The issue associated with agential subjectivity that concerns me here emerges precisely when this category is applied to young children.

Thirdly, the critique of agency does not stem from any prejudice against children or childhood. If I cast doubt on agency, it is not to strip children of their subjectivity. On the contrary, I assume that children can be and are capable of participating in social life, including artistic practices. I also assume – though I do not elaborate on this in this article – that especially artistic practices (theatrical, visual, musical, etc.) foster inclusivity for toddlers. However, the critique and doubts revolve around whether the category of agency is the most appropriate one to employ in this context.

If we examine the concept of agency from the perspective of philosophy – i.e. with a certain degree of scepticism – it becomes apparent that it is strongly rooted in the old Cartesian model of subjectivity; that it is grounded historically and ideologically. “Under brief terms agency is illustrated as the ability of individuals to act in an independent way, under free will and make their own choices (...)”, writes Angela Bushati (2018: 39). “The connection between agency and art education might not necessarily be evident for many teachers or policy makers, however, art undoubtedly contributes significantly in giving children an opportunity for their voices to be heard and to have access to a space to express themselves through different ways” (2018). Generalizing phrases like “independent way”, “free will”, and “making choices”, we can conclude that an agential subject is someone who is (1) rational, (2) autonomous, and (3) intentional.

By the *rationality* of the agential subject, I mean their cognitive capabilities, which enable conscious participation in the social environment. An agential subject is also characterized by *autonomy*, which means that in their actions they operate as a “moral subject”, capable of independently evaluating their actions. An autonomous subject is both cognitively and axiologically individuated. Meanwhile, *intentionality* refers to the agential subject’s ability to

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take actions in line with a chosen goal, aimed at fulfilling certain planned activities.

Attributing this kind of property to a child under the age of three is highly problematic. The concept of agency works best when applied to adults – though even in this context it has its limitations. However, when applied to young children, its applicability is, to say the least, controversial, for many reasons. Is it possible to retain the concept of agency so that it can be applied more appropriately? Perhaps, but it would require extensive reformulation, especially with regard to what philosophers call the *full-blooded* concept of agency: “(...) the idea of ‘full-blooded’ intentional agency, which in essence involves situations where agents are aware of their actions and their reasons, they identify with those reasons, and their action stems from their deliberations (...). Full-blooded agency, for philosophers of action, is more than simply purposive behaviour, it involves a sense that one’s actions reflect one’s ‘true self’ in some way. In essence, the aim has been to extend the standard story by aiming for ‘psychological richness’ in explaining the mental states held by agents and the degree to which motivations, desires or identifications function as causal antecedents to agency” (Wilcox 2015: 269), writes Tracy Wilcox. It seems that at least in its “full-blooded” version, the concept of agency is not suitable for very young children – neither as a descriptive nor as a normative element.

On the level of description (“Children are agential subjects”), the greatest doubts are connected to the ontology of childhood. If we acknowledge that children are ontologically distinct, hence different from adults – as such, “Other” in the sense that Paweł Gałkowski discusses the issue, then the concept of agency becomes more challenging to uphold, and this challenge grows the younger the child is. Very young children are almost entirely dependent, and this dependency is not the result of some narrative, convention, or social perception, but is a factor directly conditioned by ontology and, to be precise, by biology. It is difficult to describe a child as an agential subject when one remembers that such a human being is incapable of independent movement, requires help with eating, and initially does not possess extensive linguistic competencies, among other things. Thus, their agency is limited at best.

Of course, in the contemporary humanities, it is possible to transcend the concept of agency understood only in anthropocentric terms, and instead to propose the agency and relationality of non-human entities, things and objects, or of matter in its entirety (new materialism). In this context, linking agency with intentionality would no longer be necessary. On the other hand, since the new materialist perspective emphasises its post-anthropocentric approach, it probably has little application to the issue of children’s agency, as long as we

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stick to the assumption of that a child is a “human being”. It becomes apparent that there is a conflict, or perhaps even a contradiction, at this point: the argument for treating a child as a human being clashes with the post-anthropocentric perspective. In a sense, there is a kind of “disconnect” between ideas: part of the contemporary humanities advocates moving beyond thinking about subjectivity or agency as solely human, while another part continues to grapple with explaining the human dimension of childhood.

So the following question arises: should not the contemporary, post-anthropocentric humanities “wait” for more comprehensive findings and conclusions regarding the humanity of child beings? On the one hand, there is advocacy for treating animals as partners, i.e. equally and in an inclusivity-oriented manner – which undoubtedly merits approval – but on the other hand a large part of ostensibly progressive pedagogy continues to employ concepts like “gentle discipline” or “positive discipline”. The underlying conception of the relationship between adults and children in this type of pedagogy is not only clearly adultist but also downright perverse. A significant portion of humanity has – at least on the declarative level – been able to consciously exercise self-restraint in its treatment of non-human beings by not hitting, killing, or eating them; but for some reason, there is still a noticeable lag in exercising self-restraint with regard to children – yet this would be similarly emancipatory. Some so-called developed societies have acknowledged that hitting children is ethically reprehensible, but at the same time, without much resistance, they have embraced the convenient formula of “gentle discipline”. In other words, there is still a great deal of progress to be made in this area.

The notion of agency in relation to young children raises doubts not only in a descriptive sense but also in a normative one. If we accept that “children should be agential” then the first point is that such a notion is only formulated unilaterally, i.e. by adults. It cannot be formulated bilaterally, because young children have nothing to say on the matter – quite literally. The second point is that, as adults, we recognise agency based on our adult experience. We identify ourselves as agential subjects. In a subtle sense, this is ennobling for us, similar to how it was once ennobling to identify ourselves as knowing subjects. We desire to have agency, we evaluate each other in terms of the degree of agency we exert. Agency can never be absolute; it is always relative – smaller or greater. Being agential inevitably leads to some form of control. A person with greater agency exercises greater control: over their body, over objects, over other people. If the theory of agency is based on the theory of action (interaction, influence), then action is never axiologically neutral. It was once believed that knowledge could be axiologically neutral, that the so-called cognitive interest could remain

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separate from other interests—political, economic, class-based, etc. We now know that this is simply not possible. The same goes for action. Of course, agency can and should be emancipatory. For any individual or oppressed group, achieving agency also means regaining control over their destiny. However, the dialectic of agency can just as easily take the form of one subject gaining control over the fate of another.

Thus, when adults formulate the postulate of agency for children, the effect can be ambiguous, at the very least. The old fixation on the concept of rationality caused rational adults to view children as “not yet fully human”. From this perspective, it was proposed that children should become rational, “emerge from immaturity” and, in a sense, grow up by reaching the ideal of the rational adult. The contemporary fixation on the concept of agency can lead to the perception of children as “not yet fully human”, implying that they should mature by reaching the ideal of the agential adult.

Conclusion

When acknowledging the humanity of the youngest children, we cannot help but encounter *otherness*. Though young children and adults are equal in terms of their humanity, we are incomparably stronger, more capable, more independent, and more intelligent than children. Young children – equal to us in humanity – require constant care, attention, and dedication, even for the most basic activities. It a truism, but one that needs emphasis: young children are entirely – or almost entirely – dependent on adults, both physically and socially.¹³ Moreover, young children have no control over this situation. They cannot opt out of adult or state care, nor can they resist situations where the privileged position of adults (or the state) leads to violence. Even when legally protected, children are subject to a series of legal restrictions that only cease to apply once they reach adulthood.

Parents or caregivers are obliged to use their privileged position to feed, clean and protect children. Can they use their privilege to harm? Unfortunately, yes, they can. This problem lies at the intersection of biology and morality, and it

¹³ In justifying the separation of children's rights from human rights, UNICEF states: “Children start life as totally dependent beings Children must rely on adults for the nurture and guidance they need to grow towards independence. Such nurture is ideally found from adults in children's families, but when primary adult caregivers cannot meet children's needs, it is up to the State as the primary duty bearer to find an alternative in the best interests of the child”.

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revolves around determining the conditions under which the physical privilege of adults over children will be exercised as caring protection, and not as violence.

I advocate a realistic approach to the issue of adulthood in relation to childhood. I am not interested in constructing an idealised image or model of childhood, but rather in conducting an empirical analysis of what actually occurs. We can of course change the term “privilege” to “disproportion”, for instance, but all egalitarian or emancipatory processes remain mere proposals if they are limited to terminological changes alone. I would point out that when we talk about this or that “adult narrative in relation to early childhood”, we are unable to balance this with a proportional, adequate, or equivalent narrative produced by young children in relation to adults.

Therefore, I consciously choose not to abandon the term “privilege”, I would say that adults remain in a privileged position with regard to children – especially the youngest ones –for better or for worse. I would add that this privilege is absolute as a biological fact, but the way it is exercised is a matter for the ethical dimension. Such privilege can and should take the form of a commitment (to care), not the form of violence, exploitation, or abuse of “parental authority”. Using more philosophical terms, one could also say that treating a child as a *subject* is possible (especially) in the form of a commitment to care, and by the same token, using one’s advantage in a violent manner amounts to treating young children as *objects*. The decision to transform privilege into a commitment to care is, in this case, also ethical. Treating young children as subjects involves a conscious *renunciation* of part of one’s privilege, exercising *self-restraint* regarding the advantage adults have over the youngest human beings.

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PART II



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Children as agents in Early Years Theatre practice - report

Michał Wanke

On the method

The study was conducted from November 2023 to February 2024. It comprised two methods: an online survey and qualitative interviews with EYT practitioners associated with major organizations in the field. The survey was pre-conceptualized together with experienced artists and scholars, and it contained 41 questions, both close- and open-ended. The interviews were conducted as a follow up to the survey in order to obtain even more in-depth insight.

The goal of this empirical study was to construct the way EYT practitioners approach the early years audiences (0-3 years old), how their path to the field impacts it, how the audiences are conceived and how their local parenting and educational contexts matter. We also wanted to see what works in the field and what artistic means resonate best with the participants and the creators of the performances alike. Both the survey and the interviews were designed in such a way to cover these issues.

Who speaks? About the study participants

The study sample was recruited via institutional channels (through major associations in the field) and the participation was voluntary. The survey yielded 146 answers, yet, only 52 submitted a complete questionnaire and another 39 answered some questions. The sample size ranged from 52 to 91. It is not statistically representative, but as a convenience sample, it offers enough diversity to provide a good overview of the otherwise unexplored population.

The interviews were conducted with 9 professionals from across the globe: $\frac{2}{3}$ of them female, 2 coming from Eastern Europe, 2 from the North of Europe, one Asian and four South American. They ranged from performers and actors to

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directors, researchers and educators. They were selected in a purposive sampling procedure, based on a criterion of a good understanding of the field.

The respondents come from 25 different countries scattered around 5 continents. However, Africa and Asia are underrepresented. There are no individuals from North America and Europe is very prominent in the sample, with both East and West represented. There are several South American cases, ranging from Mexico to Uruguay. There are 11 participants from the UK, 6 from Belgium and 4 from Finland. Other countries feature 3 or less informants. Overall, there is a good geographical dispersion, with some significant directions missing.

Australia	1	1,8
Bangladesh	2	3,6
Belgium	6	10,9
Brazil	2	3,6
Chile	2	3,6
Czech Republic	1	1,8
Denmark	1	1,8
Finland	4	7,3
Germany	1	1,8
Greece	1	1,8
Ireland Republic	2	3,6
Italy	2	3,6
Japan	1	1,8
Lithuania	1	1,8
Mexico	1	1,8
Netherlands	2	3,6
Norway	2	3,6
Poland	2	3,6
San Marino	1	1,8
Slovakia	1	1,8
Slovenia	1	1,8
South Africa	1	1,8
Spain	2	3,6
Sweden	3	5,5
United Kingdom	11	20
Uruguay	1	1,8

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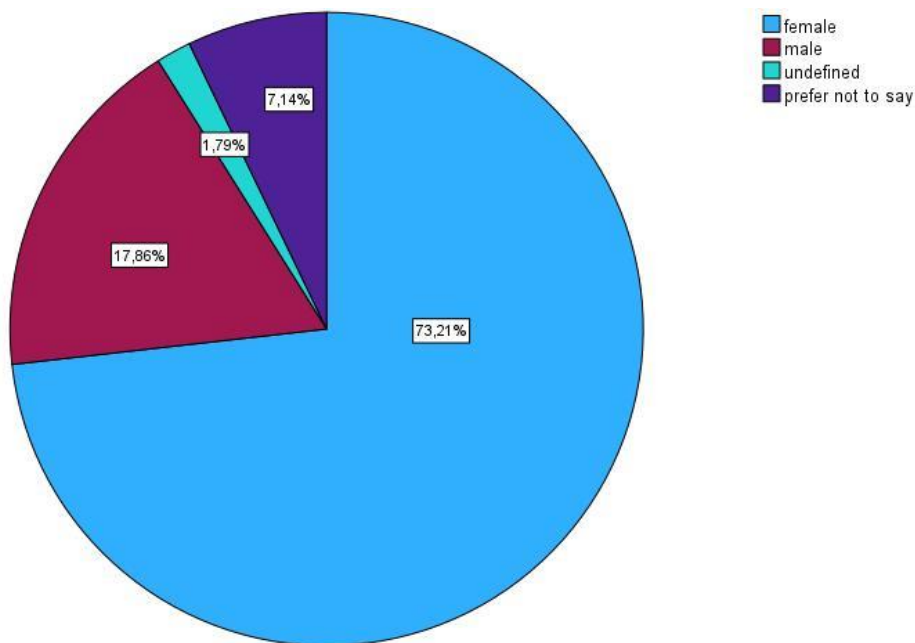


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Majority of participants are female, which is probably a good approximation of how the gender ratio looks in the field: 73% of respondents being female, 18% male, whereas 7% preferred not to disclose their gender identification and further 2% did not identify with the binary categories.



What is your gender?

Vast majority of the EYT professionals we studied have completed a higher education degree (91%), and another 9% have upper secondary education. The majors range from social sciences, humanities, professional dance, acting, dramaturgy or visual arts and music to journalism, literature, business administration and psychology.

There were two big age groups represented in the sample: 30–49-year-olds (46%) and 50–65-year-olds (45%). Additionally, there is one person aged in the range of 18-29 and also 7% respondents who are older than 65 years.

Being a parent may interact with the way one approaches the youngest. This study sample included 23% of non-parents and a majority (77%) of parents.

The participants are affiliated with either one of the major associations or with a national organization. It is possible to belong to some or all of these. ASSITEJ is represented by 82% of informants of this study, and Small Size is represented by

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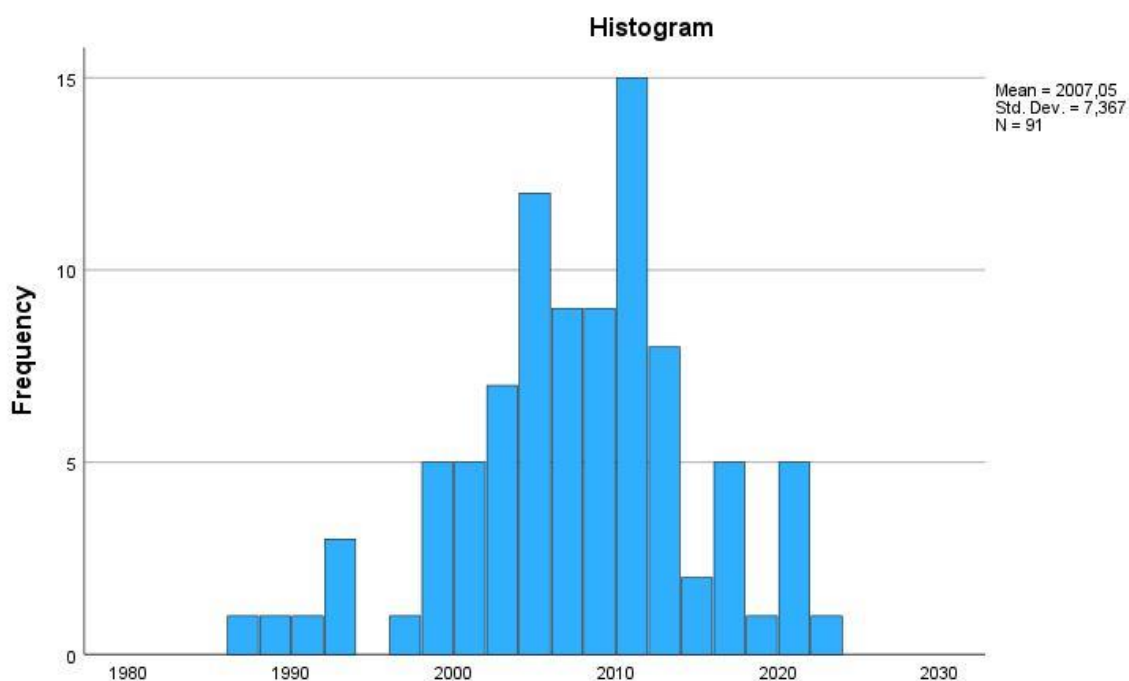


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82% of respondents too. On top of this, 35% of respondents are affiliated with national organizations.

On average, the respondents started working in the field of EYT in 2007, so they have 17 years of practice under their belt. The standard deviation is above 7 years though, so there are individuals who started recently and those who are very experienced. Taken together, the sample comprises individuals who are very well established in the field of early years theatre.



When did you start working in the early years theatre (EYT)? Indicate a year. Estimate it if you are not certain about it.

However, less than a half (45%) of the informants work exclusively in the field of EYT, whereas the remaining 55% also work elsewhere. Most of these individuals work in theatre for other ages and a significant group is affiliated with educational institutions too. There are big groups of professional dancers, musicians and other (visual, performative) art professionals.

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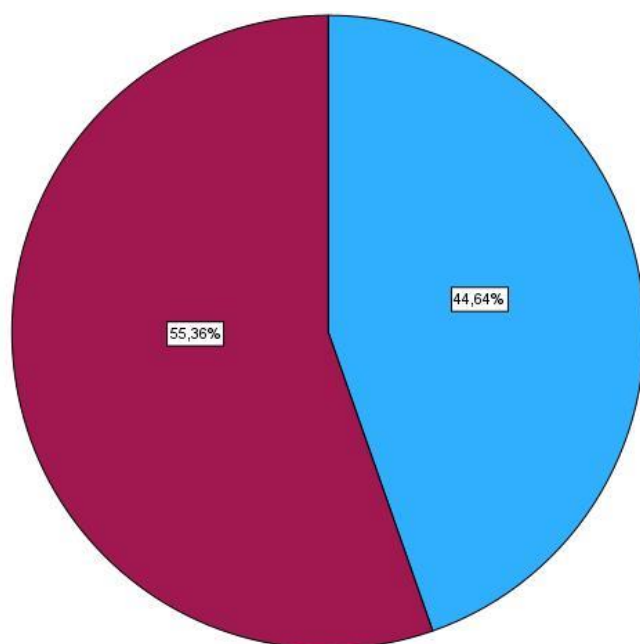


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- Yes, I work only in young audiences theatre.
- No, I also work elsewhere [Where? Write the type of industry below.]

Do you work exclusively in young audiences theatre or do you also work outside of this field?

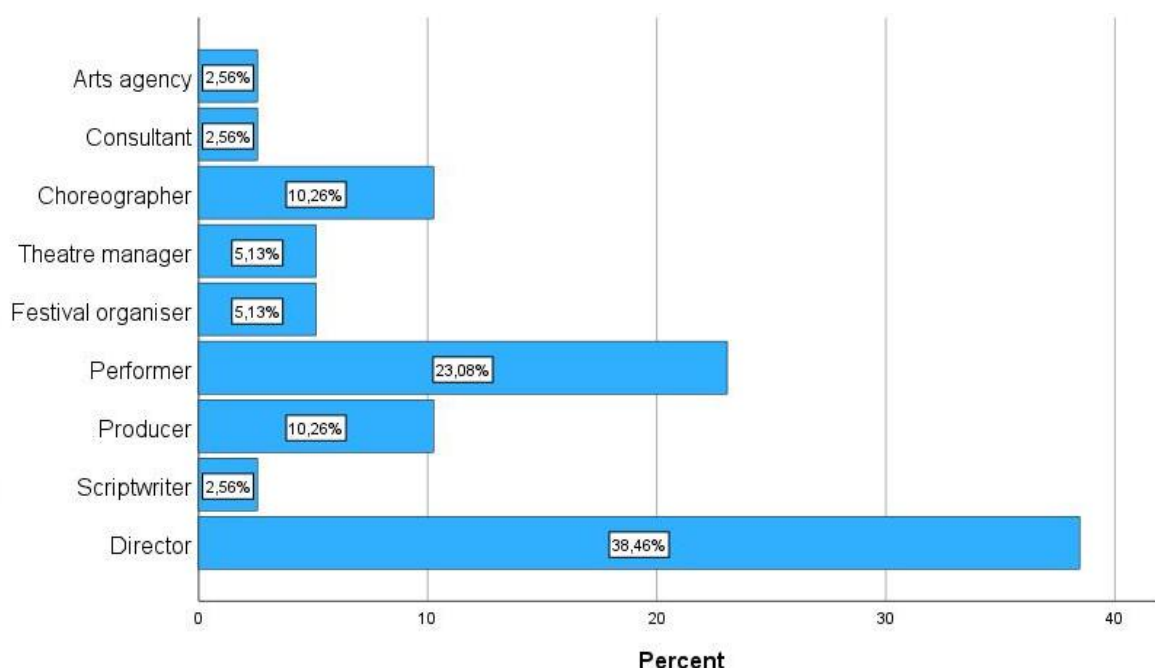
There are also different roles the respondents play in the field. Some of them are art agencies, consultants, theatre managers or festival organizers, who work behind the scenes. The biggest group, however, is directly involved with the young audiences and they are choreographers, performers, producers, script writers or directors (the most prominent group in the sample: 38%).



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What is your role in the young audiences theatre?

Taken together, 74% of the respondents to this survey are involved directly with the young audiences and the other 26% work in the more indirect roles in the field.

Overall, a very diverse sample was constructed, including different geographical locations, seniority, education backgrounds and roles in the field. The following results offer a good approximation of the attitudes in the field, yet obviously as an exploratory project, this research requires follow ups with more methodological rigour.

Into the field of EYT: motivations and routes

Motivations to start work in YET

Artists involved directly and indirectly in the EYT field entered it for different reasons. We asked whether it was a career niche, or the intrigue to work with something different, or the belief that YA needed to be addressed, as well as through a job offer. There were also many other motivations to enter the EYT world. It is interesting to see that there is a hesitation among the participants to

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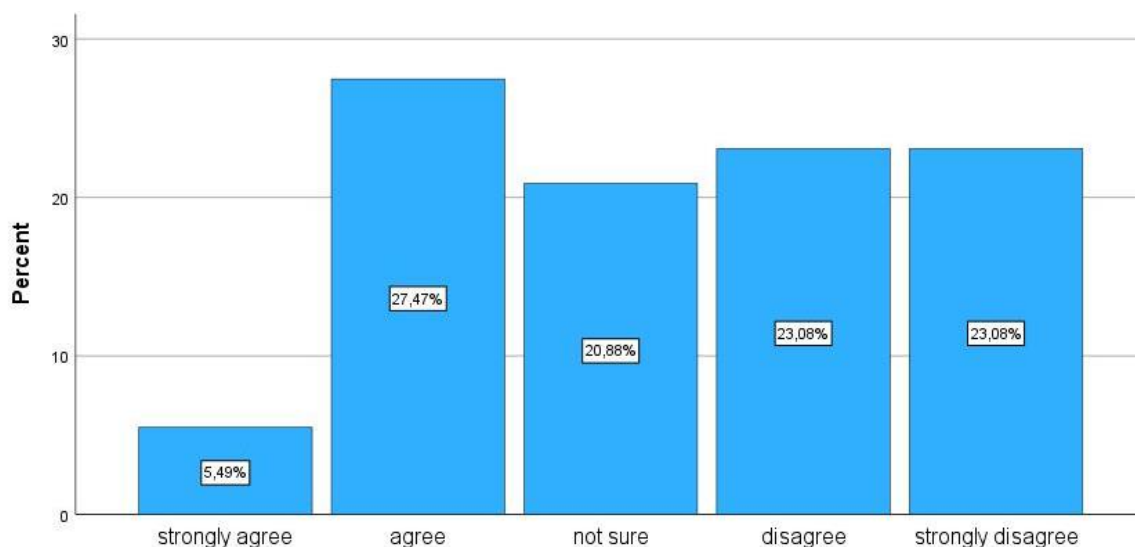


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admit to opportunistic motivations. Mere 5% definitely recognized the career niche opportunity as their motivation to enter the field compared to 27% of those who admitted that, yet not strongly. A 1/3 was not sure and further 23% opposed the idea, and another 23% opposed it strongly.



[Intended to enter a career niche.] Why did you start working in the EYT field? Would you say it was either of the following factors?

Is it the question of artists' reluctance to perceive the field as a niche or opposing the idea that they intended to deviate from a path perceived as more legitimated remains unclear.

There is much more agreement among the participants as regards the field being fascinating to them for its alleged difference. Vast majority or 3/4 of the study participants (41% - strongly, and further 35% just agree) said they were intrigued by the idea of working with something different. With only 7% undecided, there is a small opposition to this idea (17%, out of whom the majority did not oppose it strongly).



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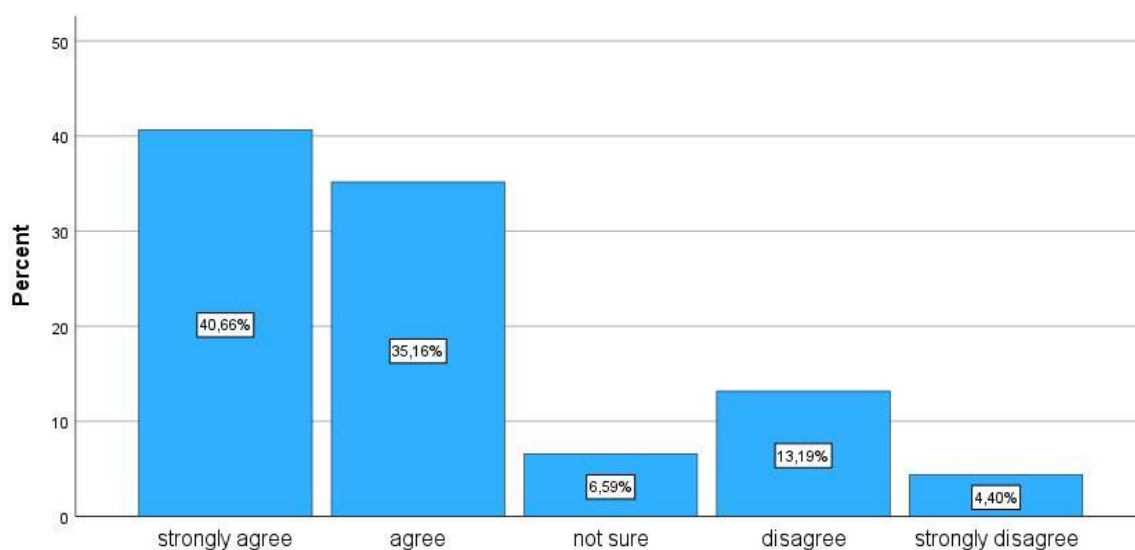


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[Was intrigued by the idea of working with something different.] Why did you start working in the EYT field? Would you say it was either of the following factors?

Curiosity and difference stand out as luring ideas for the EYT practitioners.

Even a stronger agreement exists among the participants about their motivation to embark on the EYT journey being the need to address early years audiences. More than 80% thought so, and an absolute majority of them were absolutely sure about it compared to 10% unsure and further 6% of respondents who did not agree with this idea.



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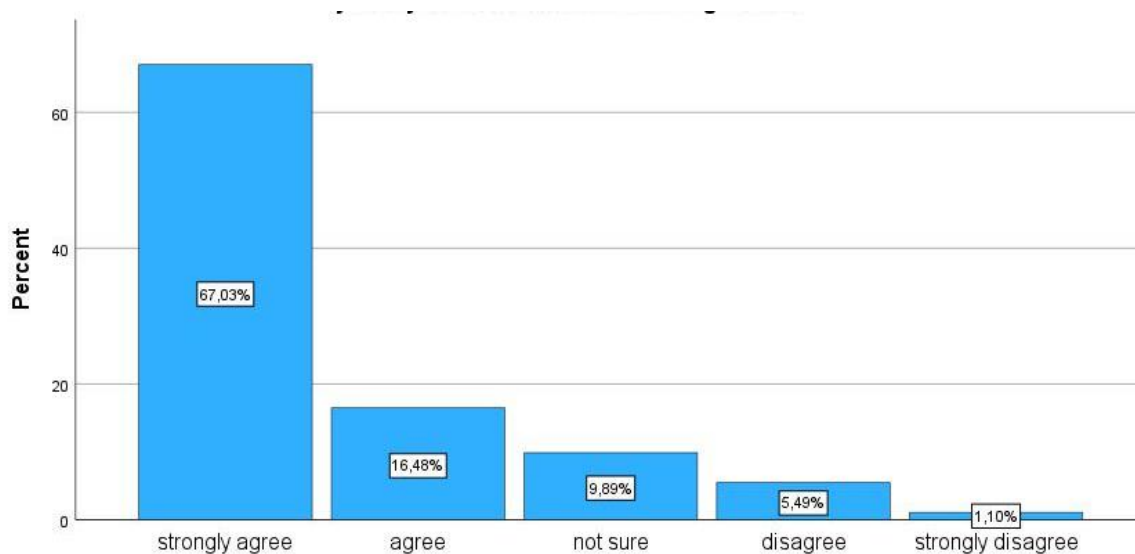


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[I believed early years audiences needed to be addressed.] Why did you start working in the EYT field? Would you say it was either of the following factors?

Overall, the participants would enter the EYT field because they recognized the need to address the early years audiences.

One can also be dragged into the field of artistic practice. Among the surveyed practitioners, there is a significant group who was offered such a job (40%), yet there are more participants, who rejected this idea (56%, and majority of them rejected it strongly).



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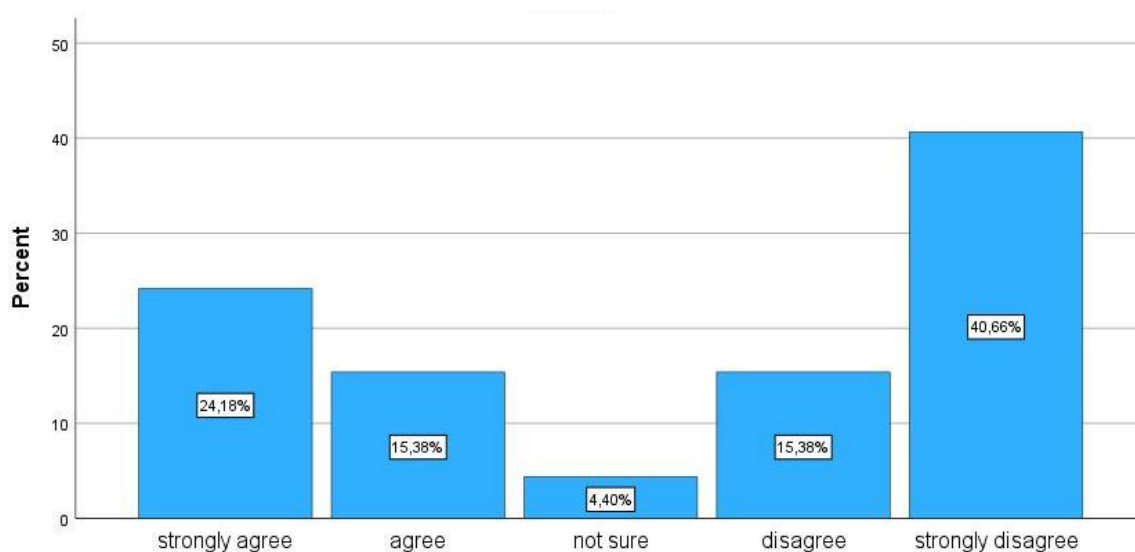


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[I was offered the job.] Why did you start working in the EYT field? Would you say it was either of the following factors?

There were 20 individuals who also added other reasons for their entrance to the field. Some of the answers expanded on the survey questions, for example they perceived it as a career niche because nothing like that existed in their location, or they discovered it through institutionalized channels, like associations or festivals. They found it intriguing too, mostly due to the challenges the young audiences presented to them. The unbiased and seemingly “raw” audiences lured the artists to the field. As one of them wrote:

“I feel that by creating work for early years, would actually make me think better, make me explore ideas better, so it was really a way that I would be challenged both as an artist and creative person, and I also think that if I understand how to make work for early years, something really powerful and raw, something innocent, but also something very important that I learn about myself and my art form.”

These qualities of the early years audiences reportedly allow the informants to explore different artistic means and use their skills in a new way. This in turn, leads to their self-development. As another participant put it: “My particular performance skill set was given space to grow within this sector”.

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In the qualitative part of this study, we inquired about performers and artists in EYT: what competencies and knowledge should they have, what training or education should they get to work with YA? How is it different from the preparation for work with the adult audiences?

We learned that there are groups of artists, allegedly from outside of the well-off north of the planet, who received no education in the field, just entered it through serendipitous encounters with the EYT, even mediated ones. They would learn through networking and mediated experiences (following performances online etc.).

Serendipity or chance, however, is also a part of the experience of trained artists, like actors for example. One of the informants, a trained actress herself, was invited to perform for children and the first time was like a “flash”:

"I was already an actress, I was already an artist, it is, I mean, I have participated in a lot of shows, plays and being on stage in the staging for babies was very transformative from the technical perspective as an artist and as a stage creator then." (South American actress and researcher)

However transformative the experience and whatever organic improvement could happen, some of the informants insisted that formal education in performing arts should simply include a module on work with the early years audiences. As another participant put it:

"R3...at least one semester that particularly studies early childhood, in relation to their artistic activity, must be included in all theatre universities." (South American director, educator and public servant)

Even the acting background needs adjustments. The input from other disciplines could help, allegedly: education or psychology. Some of our informants added that not everyone in the field is a parent and some of the artists may miss parenting experience, that might be a bit helpful.

The interviewees stressed that the most generic skill required in the EYT field is the ability to observe and react instantly to the audience behaviour. Being alert to the reactions of the early years children and at the same time being qualified to act upon such indicators. For some of the informants this was even more crucial than the whole artistic concept of a show. As they put it:

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"It is not important that, like, what you want to express during the show; it is not that important that, like, you have a strong meaning or strong idea to present. It is how you going to engage the babies to present, to participate and to enjoy art." (Asian producer)

Furthermore, another participant stressed that it is a generic attitude that is required: empathy. The reciprocity is not a mere technical skill of a performer, but it is a certain type of sensitivity:

"Empathy is a key concept. It is not so much that some hard competencies are important, but that the artist is sensitive to the completely different needs of the audience." (Northern European director and actor)

The attitude component seemed important to another informant, as they stressed the significance of respect to the youngest audiences:

"Competencies are one but most important is treating children 0-3 with respect." (Eastern European producer)

Motivations to keep working in EYT

Once in the field, the practitioners need motivation to carry on. We asked our informants what keeps them going, whether it is the fact that this is their job, or that it is unique, or that the young audiences need to be addressed. We also checked whether perhaps the chance to make it in audiences segments is low. For 70% the professional factor is important, for most of them it is very important that working in the EYT is their job. There is, however, a small group of undecided (18%), and an even smaller proportion (12%) of those for whom this is not their job or this is not what motivates them.

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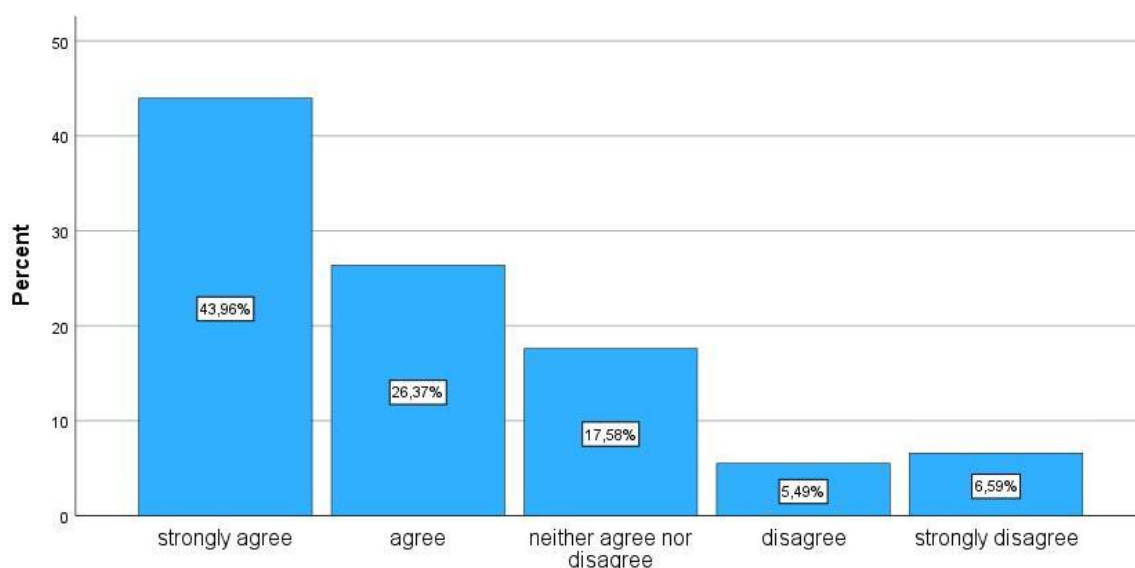


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[This is my job.] What motivates you to work in EYT now? Would you say it is either of the following factors?

This means that the field is professionalized and it works for the practitioners.

There is a strong conviction among the participants that the EYT practice is unique and therefore they want to work in it. More than 80% strongly agree with such a statement and another 15% agree.



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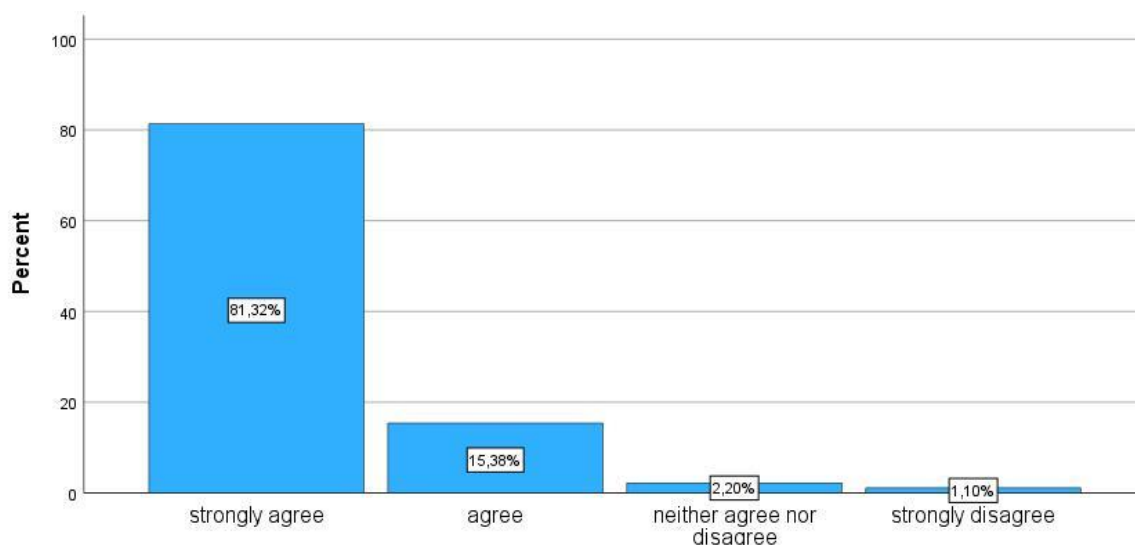


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[I feel that EYT practice is unique.] What motivates you to work in EYT now? Would you say it is either of the following factors?

The distinction being a motivating factor can be both consolidating but also may be explored further to make sure there is no a fortress effect. It is probably not a case, since a similar majority of respondents work in the field because they think the young audiences need to be addressed - 95% agree with this statement, and majority of them do so strongly.

There is only a small group (10%) of participants who think that they have low chances to make it in other age segments. Yet, ¼ of the respondents are undecided and of those who disagree, 42% disagree strongly (and 24% just disagree).



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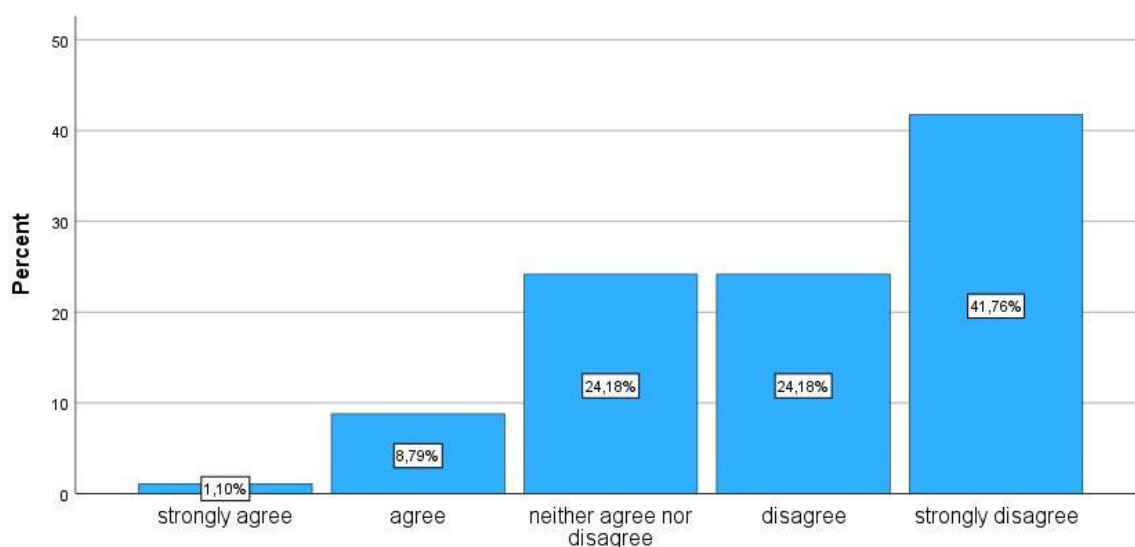


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[For me, chances to make it in other audience segments are low.] What motivates you to work in EYT now? Would you say it is either of the following factors?

Whether it is simply hard to speculate about a different career or is there a pinch of reason in these answers which are not definite is up for further inquiries.

We also explored other reasons given by the participants. Among 20 different comments, the recognition of artistic value in the interaction with the YA due to their different demands, certain open-endedness and discoverability. It turns into an opportunity for self-development and improvement. As one of the participants put it: "I feel that EYT is experimental and exciting and provides innovative areas for exploration for artists and audiences.". The qualities of young audiences were again cited as pivotal, due to their special way of participation:

"Working with an audience who does not master language, space and time is a real challenge. Creating and imagining forms that can achieve them is a stimulating area of research."

There were also voices who referred to principles: they were motivated to work in EYT, because they are convinced early years spectators have a right to art and that participation in art ought to start early for humans. They recognized a social value in working with YA.

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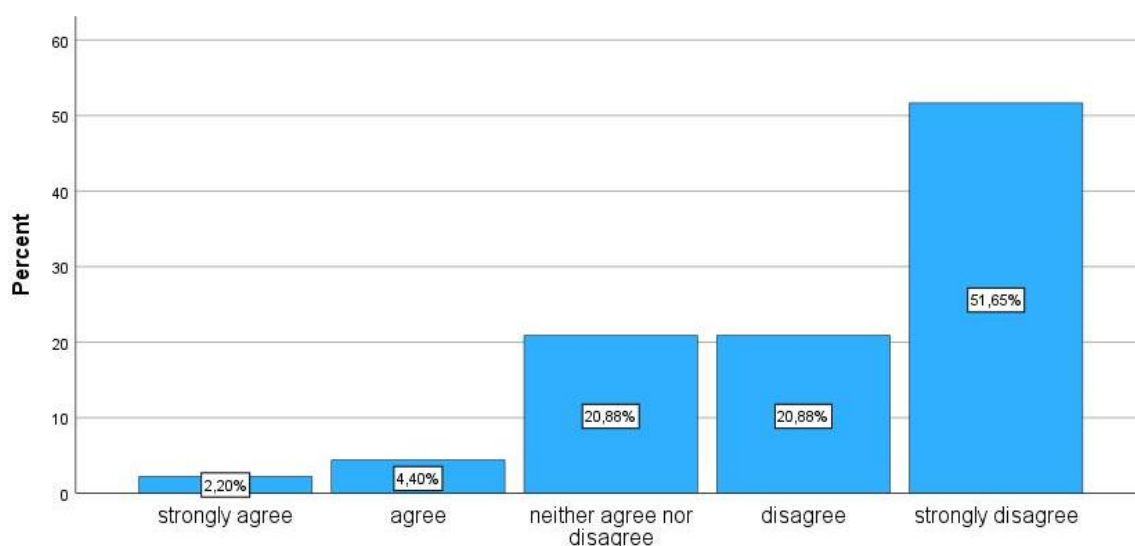
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Evaluations of the work in EYT

We also wanted to find out if the EYT practitioners enjoy working in the field or not. We asked about the joy of working with the early years audiences and the creative challenge they pose. We also asked about the downsides, such as insufficient recognition in the art world as well as not enough financial remuneration. The two positive reasons to enjoy the field got unanimous approval: 98% of the participants simply like working with the young audiences and also, 99% of them appreciate the creative challenge.

The results are more interesting at the negative end. Although more than a half (52%) of the surveyed strongly oppose the idea that they are not recognized in the art world, and another 1/3 of them (21%) just oppose this idea, there is a significant group of 21% of the undecided. Only around 6% of the respondents admit to the lack of recognition, but the group is a bit hesitant in this area, it must be noted.



[No, because I feel I am not recognized enough in the art world.] Do you enjoy working in the field of early years theatre? Relate to the statements below.

The financial recognition reflects the structural position of the field in the solid terms of financial remuneration. There is a group of 28% of folks studied by us for whom money matters for the field and they feel there is not enough reimbursement. This critical voice is not radical, though, with only 8% of respondents who agree that there is not enough financial recognition in the field, but the 1/3 who agree with this statement and more than 1/3 who is

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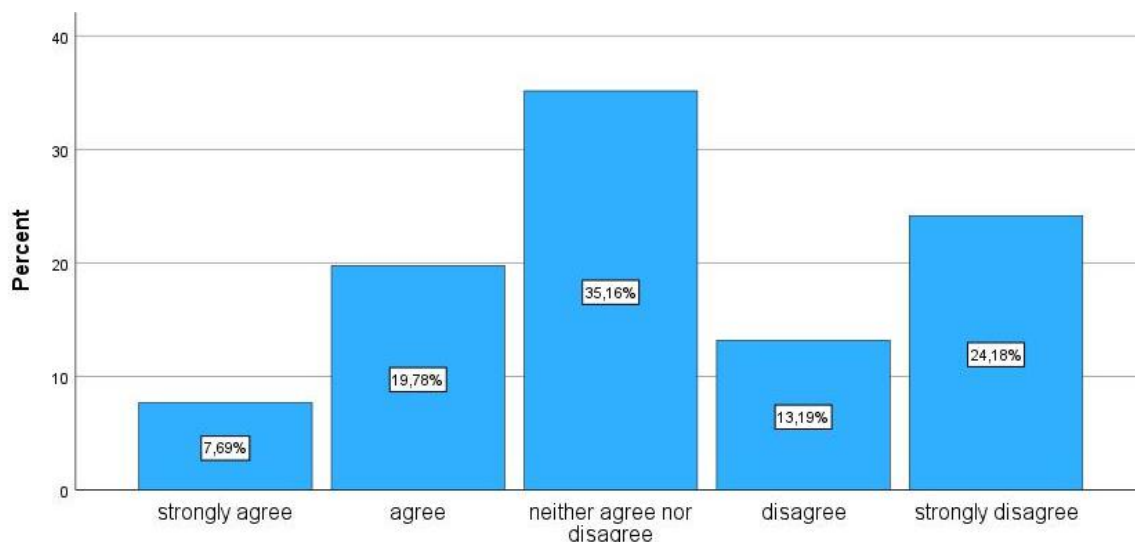


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undecided, indicate that economy matters. There is a modest group (13%) who disagree with such a view and almost ¼ who strongly disagree (24%), but they are exceptions to the rule.



[No, because there is not enough financial recognition in the field.] Do you enjoy working in the field of early years theatre? Relate to the statements below.

There were again 20 participants who expressed their views in an open-ended question. One of them practically summarized the above findings saying:

“It is certainly true that you don't enter this field if your goal is to become rich, to get famous, or to gain recognition in the art world. However, I enjoy working in this field a lot. I am excited with the work, and proud that I have managed to make a living and a practice out of it.”

Despite the ambiguity, or even amid some small turbulence, the respondents admit satisfaction with some institutional accommodation that some of them observed. At least in some countries there are grants available, inclusive projects and institutions willing to promote work for the early years theatres. The informants work despite the challenges and appreciate signs of improved reception, big or small. Some of them cite satisfaction with the way things are developing, and many enjoy self-development, the possibility to be surprised again and again by the dynamic audiences.

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Operating in local contexts: parenting and education styles

Geographical spread

Respondents in this study work in the field of the early years audiences in 28 different countries across 5 different continents. There is a comprehensive presence of European countries from all parts of the continent. The study also features a cross section of Latin American states and also some individuals from Asia, Oceania and (South) Africa.

	Frequency	Valid
Argentina	1	1,2
Australia	2	2,5
Austria	4	4,9
Bahrain	1	1,2
Belgium	9	11,1
Brazil	3	3,7
Chile	2	2,5
Czech Republic	1	1,2
Denmark	2	2,5
Finland	4	4,9
France	3	3,7
Germany	2	2,5
Greece	3	3,7
Ireland (Republic)	4	4,9
Italy	4	4,9
Korea South	2	2,5
Lithuania	1	1,2
Netherlands	4	4,9
Norway	2	2,5
Poland	2	2,5
San Marino	1	1,2
Slovakia	2	2,5
Slovenia	1	1,2
South Africa	1	1,2
Spain	1	1,2
Sweden	3	3,7
United Kingdom	15	18,5

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Uruguay	1	1,2
Total	81	100

We assumed that the local patterns and ideologies of early childhood, parenting and educating babies are different and in the subsequent sections we examined respondents' perceptions of these issues.

Local parenting styles

Early years audience members naturally rely on the parents and depend heavily on the parenting styles they are subjected to. Therefore, the parents' ways of thinking constitute an important context for the EYT practice. We asked whether parents raise children to be reflexive and emphatic, whether they support them in achieving their own goals. We also inquired if the study participants think that parents in their location discipline their children through shouting or shaming, and also whether they punish allegedly "bad" behaviour of their children. The first two questions represent permissive and supportive parenting styles, and the latter two indicate punitive and controlling ways of upbringing.

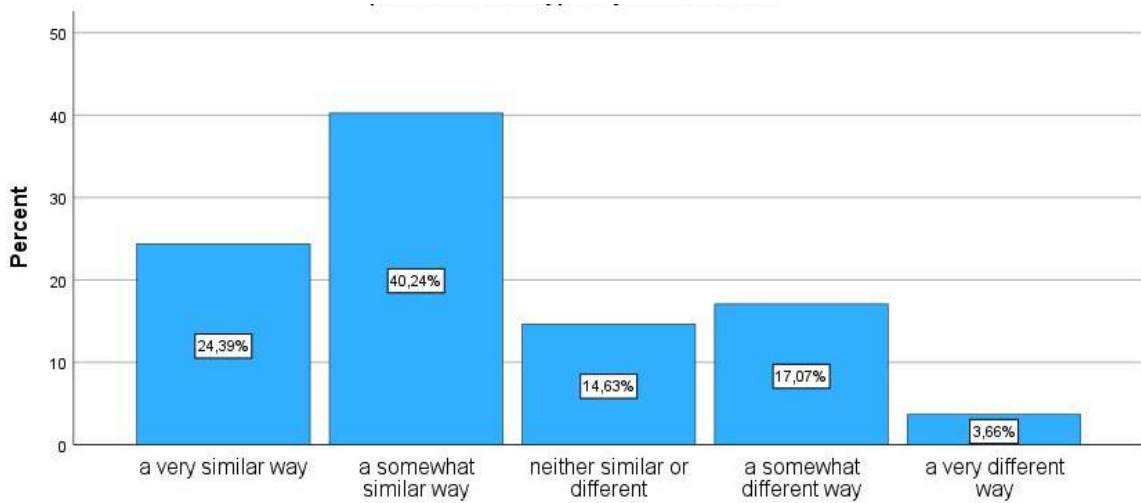
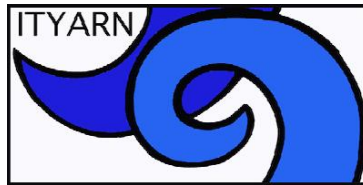
For the two supportive indicators, the majority of the participants agreed that this is the case in the country where they live. To begin with, parents raise children so they are aware of their own emotional reactions, to become responsible for their own life and the society too. The EYT practitioners are not entirely sure about that though. Only 24% of them think that this is exactly how parents in their country operate. Also, another 40% think it is somewhat like this. However, there is a group of 15% who are undecided and the remaining 21% who think it works differently in their country, and parents do not raise their children to be aware of their emotional reactions to become responsible for their own life and also for the society around them.



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[Parents raise children to be aware of their own emotional reactions, becoming responsible for their own life and also for the society in which they live.] Think about the country where you work and assess whether parents / carers typically raise their children in a similar way or a different way to each of the following statements.

In case of the parents' alleged support for children achieving their own goals, again 24% are sure this is exactly what parents in their local context do. There is another group of 40% of respondents who claim it is somewhat like that in their country. There is still a small group of study participants who are undecided (15%) and additionally a group of another 15% who think it is not the case for their country.



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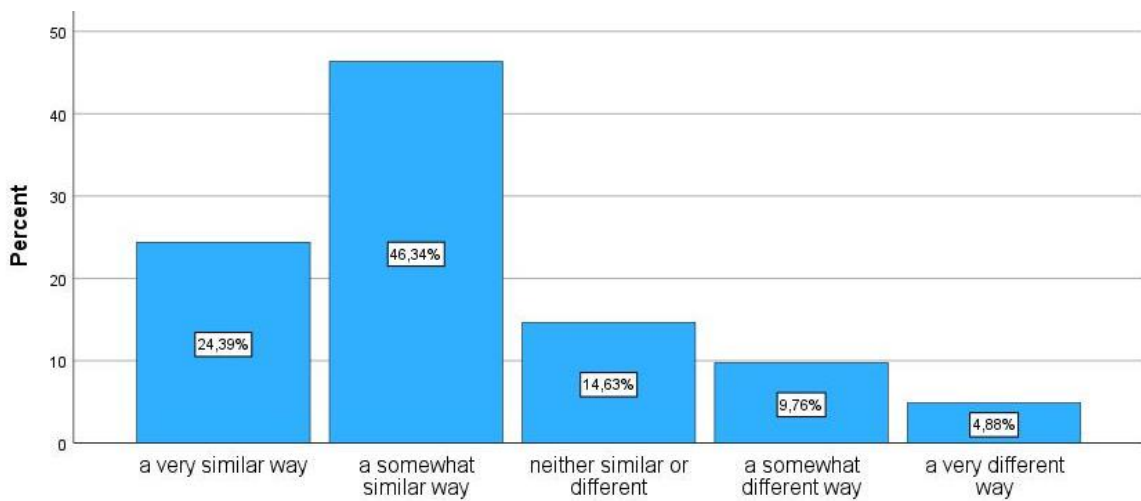
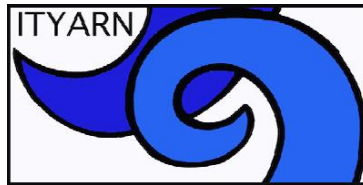


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[Parents help their children to achieve their own goals while growing into adult life.] Think about the country where you work and assess whether parents / carers typically raise their children in a similar way or a different way to each of the following statements.

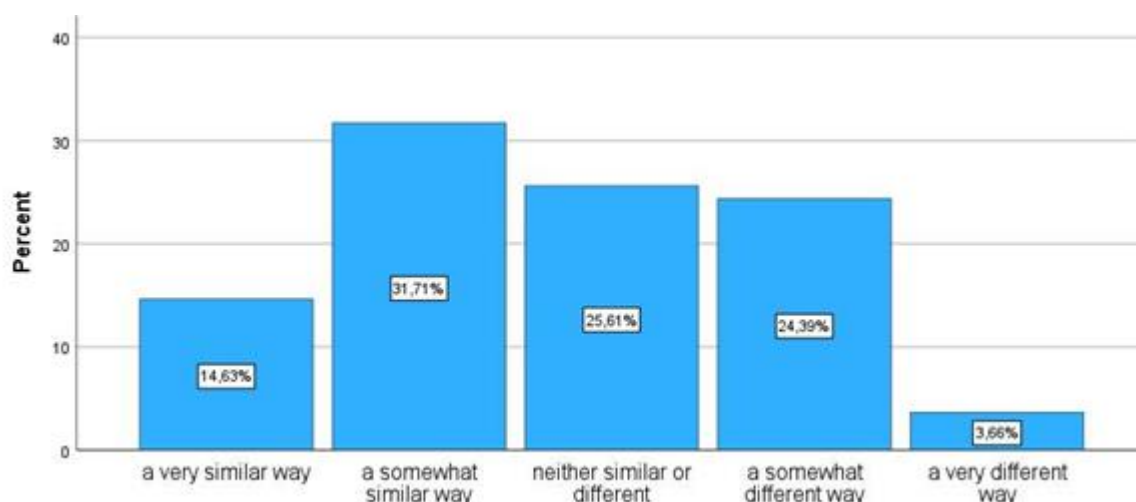
As the two supportive parenting styles are rather dominating according to the study participants, the two punitive parenting styles are not at all absent. On the contrary, they are also perceived as prevalent in their countries by the EYT practitioners. Relating to the statement “Parents respect their children’s wishes, even though discipline (e.g. shouting, shaming etc.) is used.”, 46% of respondents indicated that it is so in a very similar way or in a somewhat similar way - 15 and 31% respectively. A quarter of the study participants were undecided, but only 28% thought it is different in their country.



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[Parents respect their children’s wishes, even though discipline (e.g. shouting, shaming etc.) is used.]
Think about the country where you work and assess whether parents / carers typically raise their children in a similar way or a different way to each of the following statements.

Furthermore, the statement “Parents love and care for their children; however, punishment can be handed out for apparently bad behaviour.” yield 44% of confirmation (12% - “a very similar way” and 44% - “a somewhat similar way”). 23% of respondents remained undecided, but only 36% thought it is not like this in their country, with only 11% of all who thought it is very different in their context.



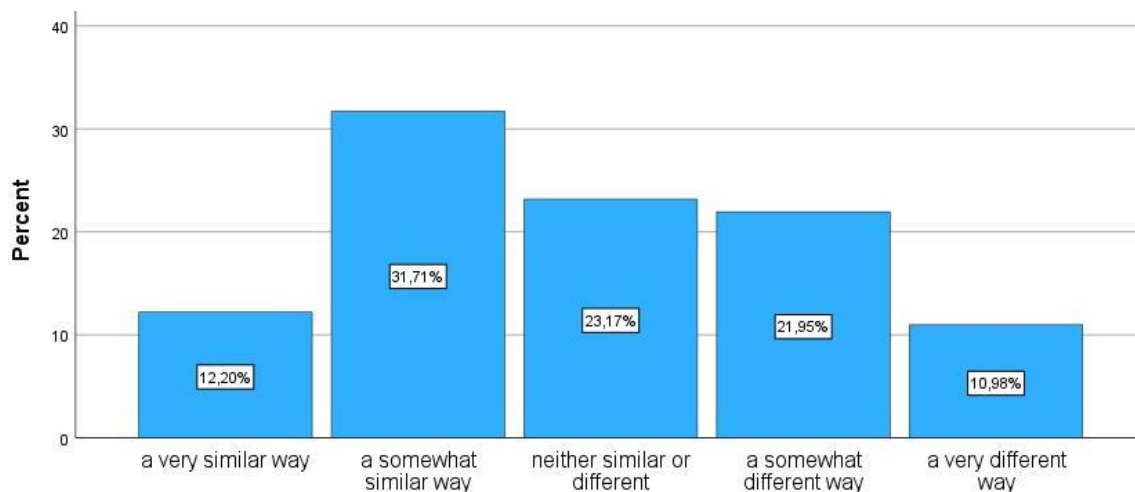
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[Parents love and care for their children; however punishment can be handed out for apparently bad behaviour.] Think about the country where you work and assess whether parents / carers typically raise their children in a similar way or a different way to each of the following statements.

This means that the EYT practitioners think they operate in a milieu of parenting styles that comprise a mix of supportive and punitive strategies.

While interviewing, we obviously confirmed that parenting styles are different across the globe and they also change locally, they change with institutional shifts and with cultural transformations.

Nevertheless, the way it works and the ideologies that underpin it, structure the experience with the EYT. For example, as an Eastern European artist told us, in their country the early years care model is enclosed in the nuclear family, which impacts any activity outside of home. Another informant from the north of Europe noted that while touring different continents they encounter different parenting styles and norms. Another Northern European told us that even though parenting is very active in their contexts and involves a relationship with nature through activities and different forms of cultural engagement, for example through books and libraries, the early years theatre is still a marginal field.

Our informants told us about the role of parental expectations during the shows that includes certain way they think the participation in the show should look like:

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"Fathers or mothers go with the desire or thinking that it is going to be the first play for their daughter, their son and that they have to have a good time and that they have to enjoy it and that they have to understand it all and it's kind of full of mandates too. And if the girl or boy is there, they don't feel like it, they are suffering, something impacts them or whatever, for the fathers or mothers. Sometimes that is also quite a frustration and a situation that sometimes costs them." (South American performer)

These expectations are connected to a parent's focus on their child. They ignore the context, situation and the performance just to concentrate on the child - either photographing them or being over-involved, narrating the show to them.

The issue of narrating also appears in the interviews, with some of the artists frustrated not only with the behaviour, but also underlying intentions:

"So, when an adult starts saying to their child: look, look, look, look, it's the same as saying, you don't know where to look, I'm going to show you, look over there because it's interesting there, you know?" (South American actor and researcher)

Narrating is for the EYT professionals a deep expression of symbolic violence, not letting the youngest perceive and decide for themselves. This is allegedly connected to parents' need for control over their children and over the dynamic situation of the show. As another informant told us, instead, parents should be present but not restricting:

"The accompanying adult must be present, active, enjoying, promoting the child's enjoyment, not restricting the child." (South American director, teacher and public servant)

Local education styles

Educators form another important group of reference after mums and dads for the early years audience members. We inquired about the local educator's attitudes and nursery settings to see how the study participants see the

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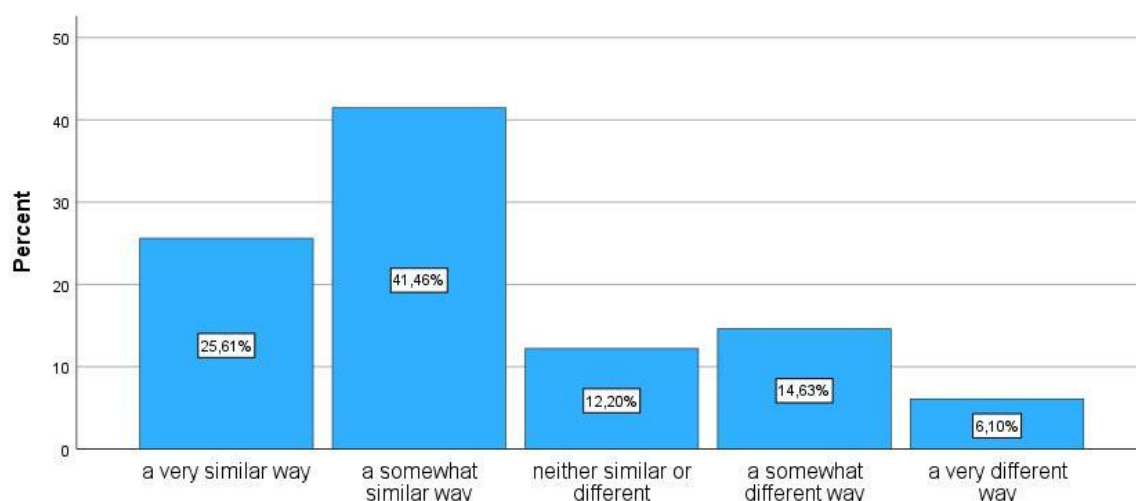
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education field of the youngest in their countries. We asked if educators promote independence of children, whether reciprocal relationships are nurtured in the nurseries and if the children are encouraged to make their own decisions. We also checked if the study participants think that the educators in their country prefer children not to express their own perspectives or whether the educators treat children as passive recipients of knowledge.

It seems that the respondents put a bit more faith in the positive role of the educators compared to parents. In case of the promotion of children independence and agency, more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the study informants are convinced this is how the local educators act (26%) - at least to some extent (another 42%). Only 12% are undecided, and another 20% think it is not the case in their location.



[Early years educators promote independence and agency, while listening respectfully to children and implementing their ideas into daily activities.] Think about your country again, and assess whether teachers/educators/nursery carers typically educate children aged 0-3 in a similar way, or different way. Relate to each of the following statements:

According to the EYT artists surveyed by us, their early education system institutions encourage reciprocal action between children and adults. Many participants are sure of that, but even more are partly convinced: 24% said it is like that in their country, and another 34% think it is somewhat like that. There is however another 24% who are undecided followed by another 18% who think it is different in their context, and reciprocal action between the kids and the grownups is not part of the nursery education.

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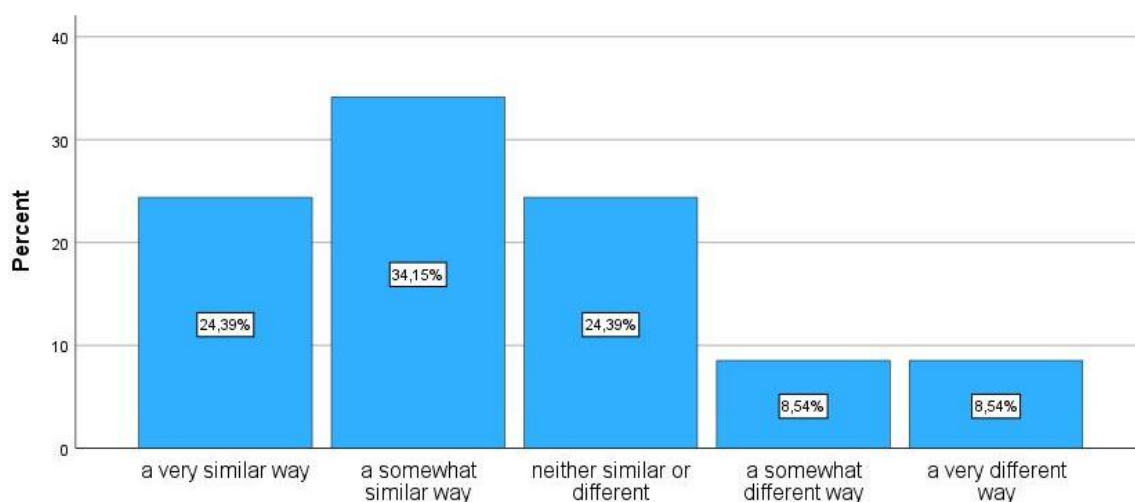


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[Reciprocal action between children and adults is encouraged in nursery settings.] Think about your country again, and assess whether teachers/educators/nursery carers typically educate children aged 0-3 in a similar way, or different way. Relate to each of the following statements:

We were also curious to see if the study participants think that early educators in their country encourage children to make decisions or handle their problems themselves (either individually or in groups). For the majority it is exactly (32%) or almost exactly like this in their home country (35%). There were however 23% of them who were undecided followed by those who think it is done in a “somewhat different way” in their country (10%).



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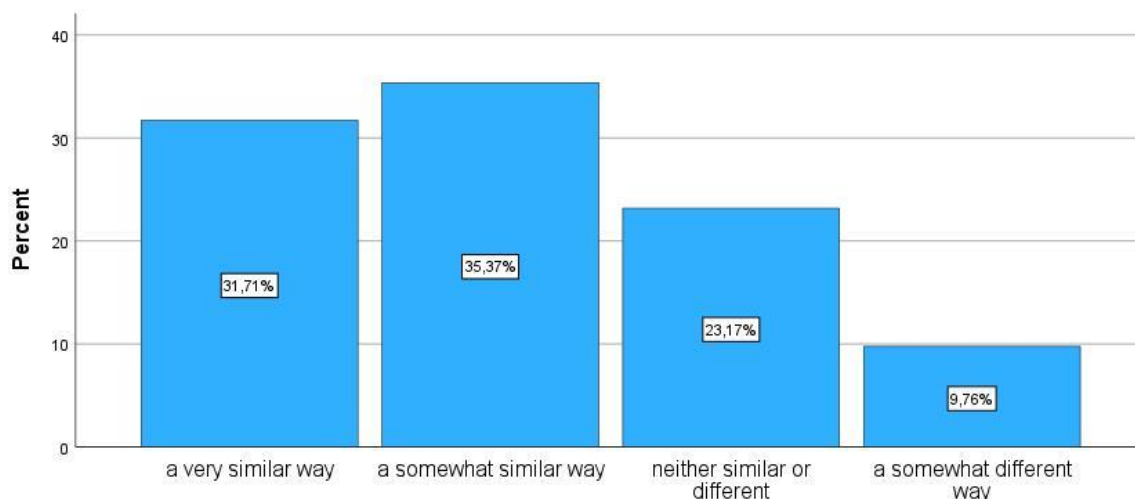


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[Early years educators make efforts to encourage children to make decisions or handle problems, individually or in groups.] Think about your country again, and assess whether teachers/educators/nursery carers typically educate children aged 0-3 in a similar way, or different way. Relate to each of the following statements:

Finally, we asked two questions about discouraging children to express their own perspectives and about treating them as passive recipients of knowledge. These two issues yield similar results, with almost no one thinking it is very much so in their country (2% and 2% respectively), but with roughly one fifth of the sample thinking that this is somewhat the case in their context (18% and 22% respectively). Furthermore, there were groups of undecided answers (17% and 21% respectively) and also a big majority of the study participants said it is not like that to some extent (32% and 26%) and it is very different in their country (30% and 29% respectively).

Taken together, the EYT artists generally present their local education systems as such that foster independence, agency and do not promote passiveness among children, but it is very far for being the case for everyone, and far from majority is 100% convinced that the early years education is like this in their home country.

EYT practitioners' views on children

Finally, we confronted the respondents' views on parents and educators in their country, with their own attitudes towards children. We asked if they think in principle that parents should always impose their will on children, or whether the

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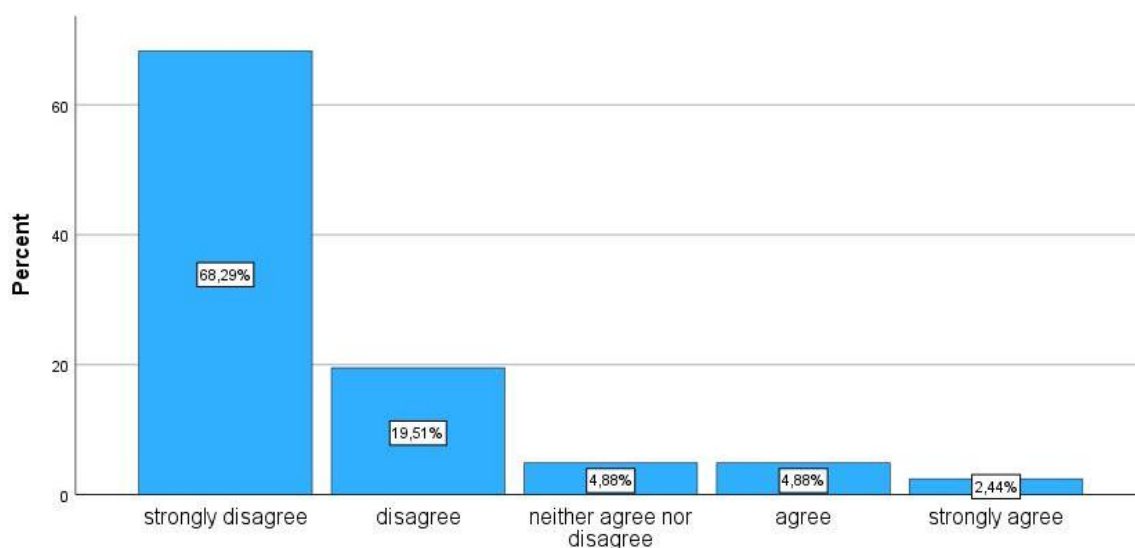
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early age children’s attitudes ought to be always taken under consideration; and if they think that early age children cannot really understand the world, or if parents can shout at their babies when upset. The responses were almost unanimous, it was the shades of grey that varied: from strong disagreement/agreement to a moderate one. These statements concerned very similar issues that the EYT practitioners assessed in previous questions indirectly regarding parents and educators and some of the difference may be connected to a boundary making process or willingness to draw distinction in the field intrinsically concerned with the early age children.

The claim that parents should always impose their will on children was strongly rejected by 54% and another 30% rejected it, with just a small group of 13% undecided and only fractions of the sample agreeing. Similarly, the informants agreed (34%) and strongly agreed (42%) that early age children attitudes should always be considered, with a minority undecided (15%) and small proportions of informants disagreeing (4%) and strongly disagreeing (6%).

The statement that the 0-3 children cannot really understand the world was met with a decisive disagreement: 68% of the study participants strongly oppose this notion, and another 20% oppose it. Just very small groups thought otherwise.



[Early age children can't really understand the world.] Now think about yourself, your own relation to early age children (0-3) and relate to the following statements:

Finally, we were curious to check what the EYT practitioners think about using verbal violence to discipline children - namely shouting if upset. Three quarters

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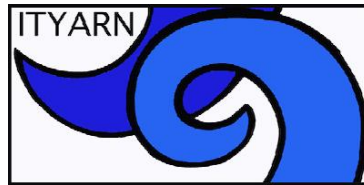


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(76%) of the respondents strongly oppose such a behaviour, and another 12% oppose it. Only very minor groups hesitated or thought that it was a good idea.

Taken together, these results suggest that in principle, the EYT artists have minor doubts to what extent parents are supposed to impose their will on their 0-3 children, or whether their attitudes should be taken into consideration. They were quite sure they fully comprehend the world, and they do not approve of aggressive verbal behaviour of parents.

We followed up on this section of questions and received interesting feedback on how - allegedly - children at the age of 0-3 understanding of the world is different, but not less valuable or less accountable. As one of the respondents framed it:

“Early years children are amazing - they are so curious about life, curious to learn, to understand, to react. They can do so much! And to perform to them and being interactive is so fantastic - everything has a meaning! Rhythms, sounds, lights, colours, look, connections, common play, feelings, touch. It is so great to get connection with them - we can learn so much from each other. And language of art - it is something what is inside of all early years children! The beauty and joy of being together with the artistic world and play together!”

In this short manifesto, a call for holistic ontology of the early years’ humans and specific epistemology of comprehending the world together with them is outlined. It explains a univocal disagreement with the statement that “children can’t really understand the world”.

There are other interesting themes that go beyond the close-ended questions outlined above. First of all, the respondents think that both educators and parents are different. There is no one-fits-all model, and the generalized answers in the survey were sometimes hard to provide. This perhaps explains why the majority of questions in this section got the “somewhat” answer. For example, one of the informants said:



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“It's quite difficult to give such a general answer for one country: parents and educators are all different, so I'm trying to think of what's recommended (but not always put into practice).”

There was another source of hesitation too. Some of the participants expressed concern about parents' power and duty of care over the 0-3 children, which allegedly has to do with setting boundaries. Another comment had it:

“Little ones are curious by nature. This curiosity keeps them moving forward. Adults must encourage children to grow while setting clear limits for them. This way, the child feels secure and free to explore.”

According to this line of argumentation, whatever the agency or freedom of the early years children, it is the adults' job to provide a framework for it. In fact, as another participant put it, the actual task of the EYT is to provide hints to the parents or educators (in the context of coming to theatre to participate in the performance) so they can in turn create limits for the children:

“There is very little that is out of bounds - it is what is communicated to parents/carers in advance so that they can be as relaxed as possible. It is more stressful to see parents/carers struggle because they are unsure of what the parameters are.”

Some other participants spoke about the ambiguity of the territories of freedom and protection. It is connected to the (lack of) competencies of adults to balance these two for proper guidance and boundary setting. As it was put:

“In Argentina there seems to be a willingness among adults to try to offer children freedom, confidence, security, self-esteem and autonomy. But at the same time there remains a protective attitude that sometimes tries to protect them from things in life that we do not consider they should know.”

Conceptualized this way, parents (and adults more broadly) are again thought to be important intermediaries for their children's agency and a way to address it is always through and with them.

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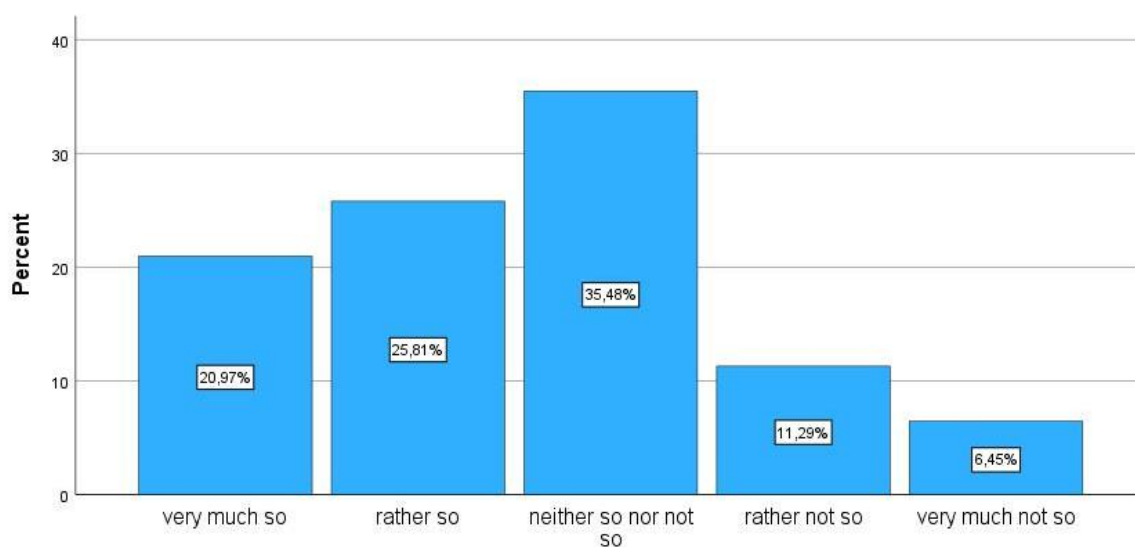


Children as audiences: concepts, behaviors and artistic means

What the practitioners make of the young audiences

The construction of child's subjects is at the core of this inquiry. After understanding the local contexts, we wanted to understand how EYT artists think about who their audiences are and what they are capable of. These survey questions yield quite a diverse range of views. Due to the complexity and abstract nature of the concepts we inquired about, this is to some extent understandable. Nevertheless, these answers indicate a very interesting heterogeneity in thinking of the practitioners in the field. We asked about the extent to which the young audiences can be deemed rational, self-aware, knowing what they want, being sociable or simply too young to participate.

Rationality was assigned by one fifth (21%) of the sample without any hesitation, and another quarter of the participants followed ("rather so" - 26%). More than a third (35%) of the EYT practitioners could not decide, but there were 11% who were leaning towards constation that 0–3-year-olds are not rational and another 6% who were convinced about that. This distribution of answers alone, suggests that the concept of rationality is highly ambiguous among the EYT professionals.



[They are rational.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and asses the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

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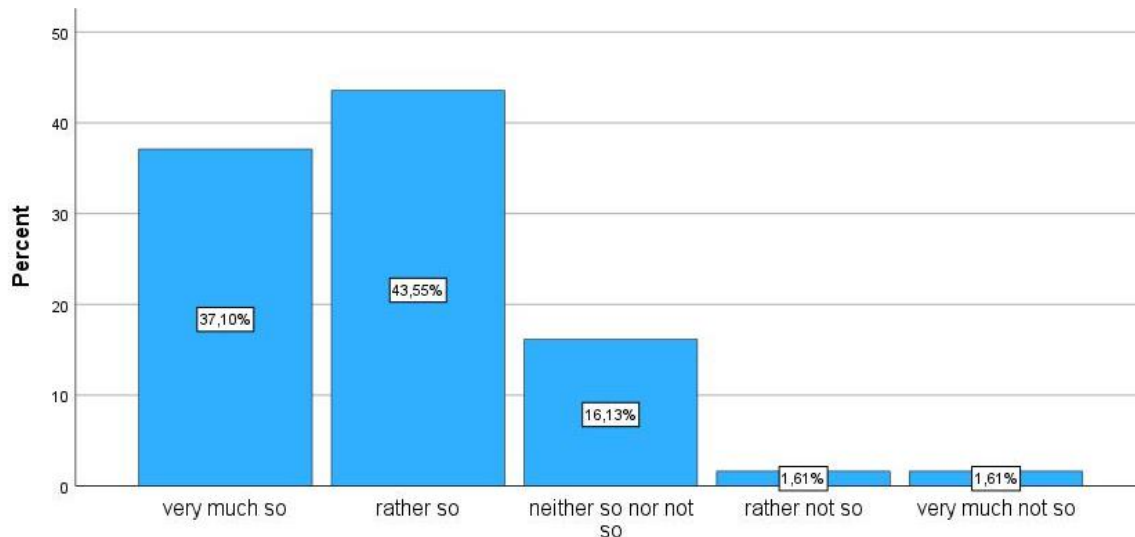


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Young audiences' members' autonomy was even less controversial: 37% had no doubt about the fact that 0–3-year-olds are autonomous and 44% were inclined to think so. There were 16% groups of undecided and very small fractions who thought otherwise.



[They are autonomous.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and asses the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

Self-awareness of 0–3-year-olds were assessed too - as perceived by the EYT artists. The majority thinks they are indeed self-aware (39%) and another group was following the suit with some hesitation (29%). Nevertheless, 18% could not decide and 11% thought this is not the case with a small group (3%) definitely rejecting such a notion.



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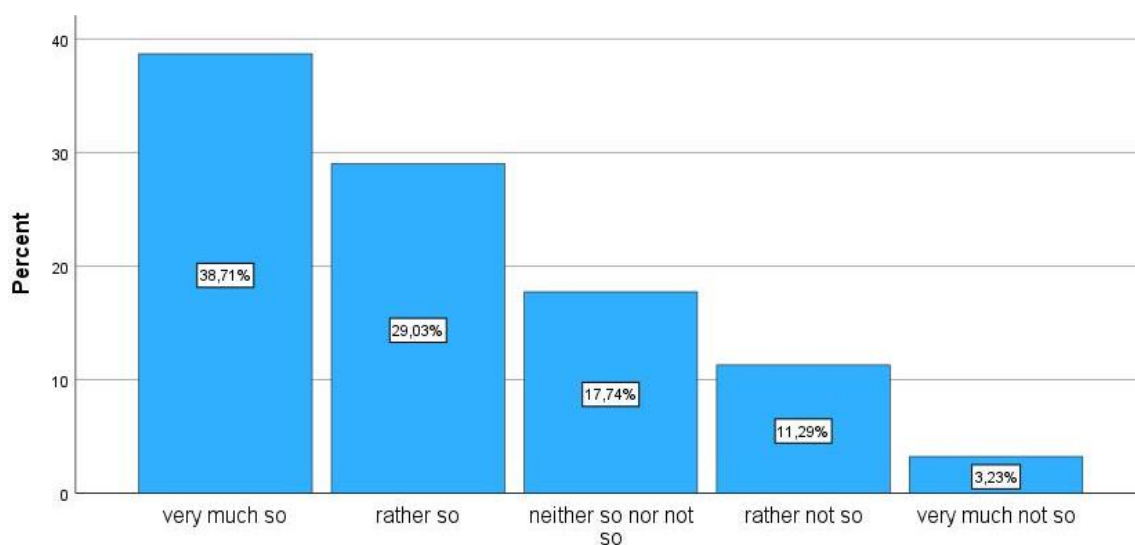


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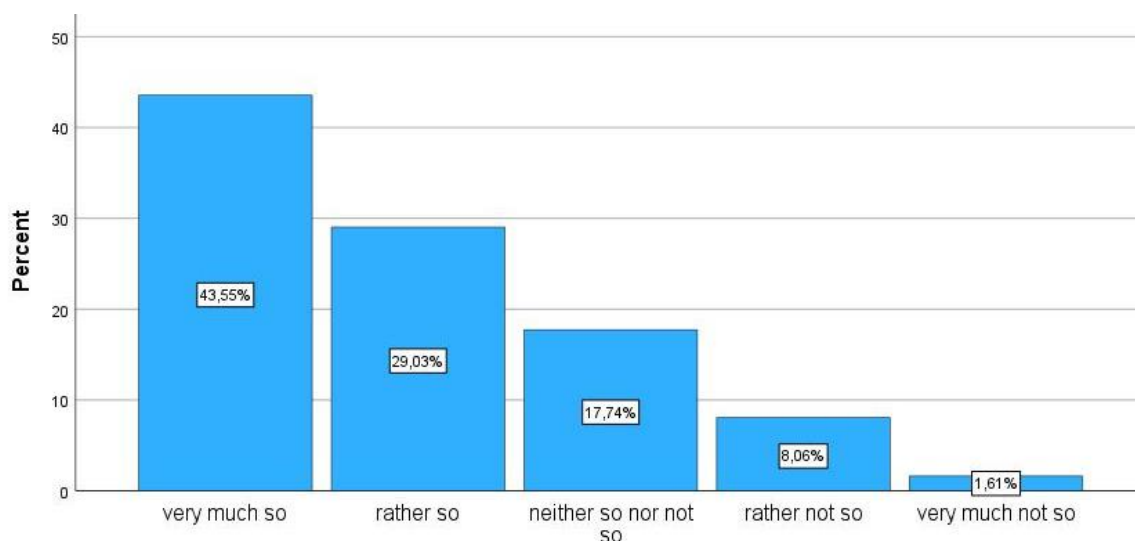
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[They are self-aware.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and asses the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

We also assessed the intentionality the EYT professionals assign to the youngest. The results were almost identical to the ones about self-awareness. With a little bit more being sure about the fact that 0–3-year-olds know exactly what they want to do (44%), whereas even small groups oppose this idea.



[They know exactly what they want to do.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and asses the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

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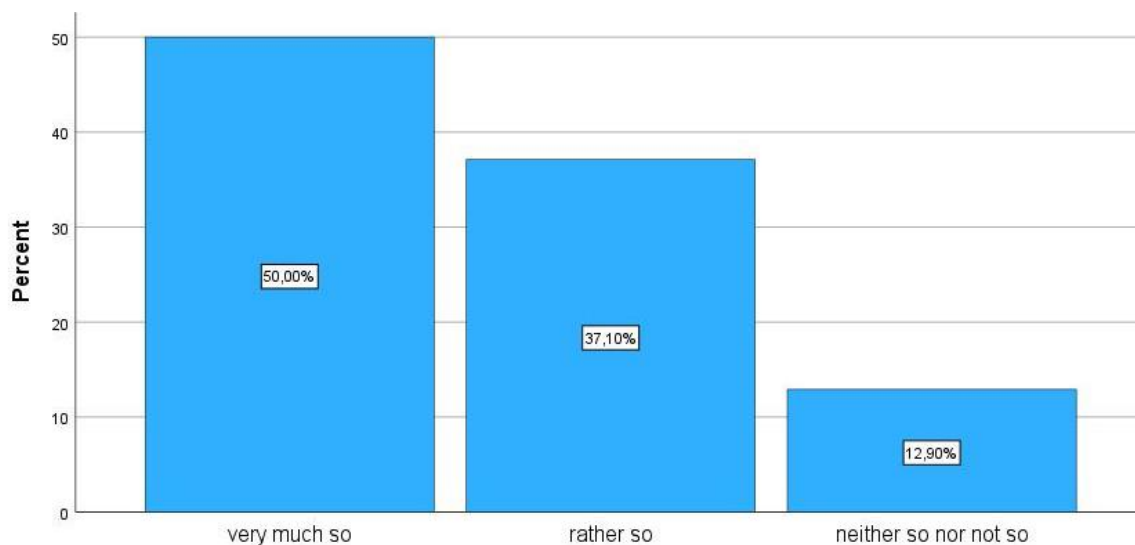


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There was no doubt among the respondents that the youngest are sociable: 50% thought that this is very much so, and 37% were inclined to think so. Only a small group of 13% were undecided and nobody questioned this idea at all.



[They are sociable.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and asses the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

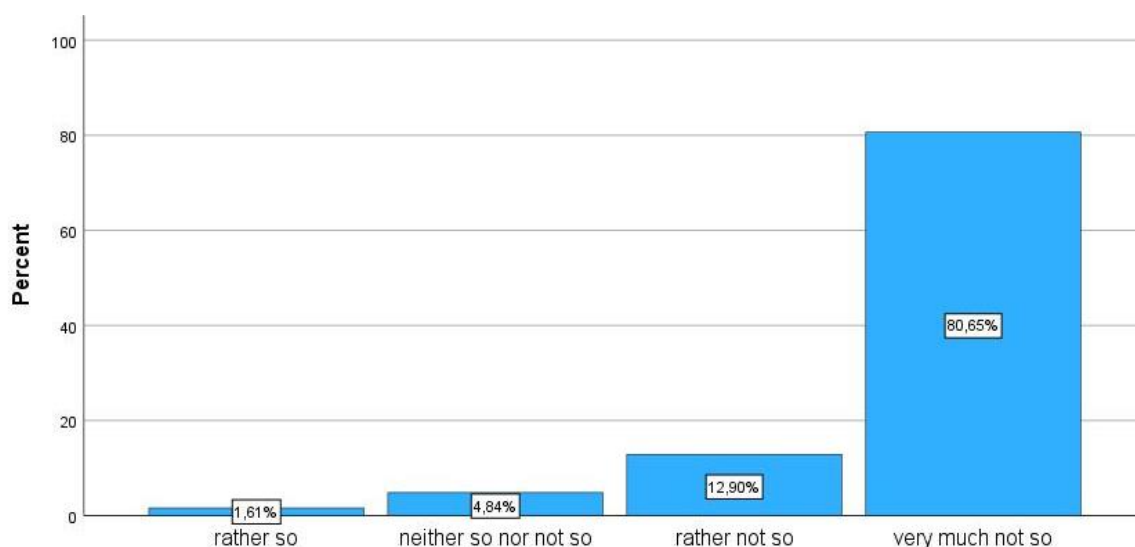
It comes as no surprise as well that the EYT practitioners think that the 0–3-year-olds are not young to participate. More than 80% were convinced that this is not the case, with just fractions thinking otherwise.



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[They are too young to participate.] Now think about 0-3 year olds as audiences in general, and assess the extent you think that during shows they can be thought of as the following:

Overall, as it could have been predicted, the EYT professionals declare that the 0–3-year-olds are rational, autonomous, self-aware, intentional, sociable and old enough to participate in the performances. This is not universally shared though, and the ambiguity should be explored further. This is why we turned to less direct measures to assess how the agency is granted to the youngest.

We delved into the EYT artists' construction of young audiences in the interviews too. We were told that thinking with the similar categories we use to understand adults may be misleading. The presence of EYT is different, and hence demanding too. Being not inhibited, they do not "cooperate" with the artists as a conventional audience of adults would. As it was put to us:

"Audience 0-3 requires more focus and [is] demanding. Substantively and organizationally. This is the most demanding audience. Extremely sincere in their emotions and presence during events. Ruthless. This group is the most fantastic because it is uninhibited in its presence. A group that cannot be pigeonholed into audience conventions. The only limitation is the parent, or the art form, unfortunately, which imposes restrictions." (Eastern European producer)

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Other informants call the effect of the presence of the EYT audience an “immersive experience”. They pointed to the overstimulation and the novelty of the performance situation to the children:

"The child is an overstimulated human being in an unusual situation. For them it is certainly an immersive experience." (North European, director and actor)

Another participant called the early audience's presence “porous” to highlight how unrestricted and holistic the experience is. It cannot be contained, and also it radiates around to the fellow audience members. They are therefore constantly and inherently open to “soak in” the performance and the situation:

"I think they're open, I think that's a word, you know? Porosity, I don't know if it's this, skin pores, pore, right? What is porosity. It seems to me that they are more there, perhaps a more animalistic place, you know, of living together, of relationships." (South American actress and researcher)

This versatile and comprehensive participation is made possible but not using any pre-existing reference points. As we heard in yet another interview about the early years children:

"They are the masters of being at presence. The presence of the little child is so complete and they don't question is this or that. They were so devoted what they are at this very moment, so that's something I understood." (North European, performer)

This different modality of being in the situation does not infer any discriminatory judgements, our informants argued. The conventional categories of agency and rationality simply have to be adjusted to the special circumstances. As another study participant elaborated to us:

"Children are rational in their own way, but they are certainly rational. They are autonomous in a limited sense; they are certainly self-aware. They are spontaneously intentional. Every movement and action stems from need

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and want, sociability is very individual, but in a general sense children are certainly intentional." (North European, director and actor)

As it was the case with the survey comments, the views varied subject to different definitions of rationality. For some it was a different kind of rationality, and for the others it was not rationality at all, "but", another category was used to express acknowledgement of a complex and deserved mode of being:

*"They are not rational, but explore the world and perceive it emotionally."
(Eastern European artist)*

Yet, rationality was deemed not the most important of factors contributing to the agency of minors in the audience. The emphasis was put back on the ways of being rather than ways of making decisions or building some kind of intersubjective connection with adults. The "completeness" of experiencing the situation was critical for our informants. As one of them elaborated:

"It doesn't just go through the question of the trait of reasoning, but rather it goes through a completeness of feeling and thinking with the whole body in that situation, and there is something there that has to do with it, which I think is interesting. And you believe that their capacity for agency is reinforced by a feeling and thinking that comes from the entire body and is not a capacity for agency that is only led to a question of reasoning, like adults, that there is a way of being and to be and a capacity to be and to be and to decide to be and to be." (South American performers)

Limits of acceptable behavior in performances

It was very interesting to find out what behaviour of the young audiences is actually acceptable for the EYT practitioners. It defines the boundaries of the audience-performer relationship and determines the role of the youngest audience members. We asked about different dimensions of non/acceptable behaviour, including talking or babbling during shows, crying, moving outside designated areas and coming in or out as well as eating or drinking. We also asked about being disruptive on purpose.

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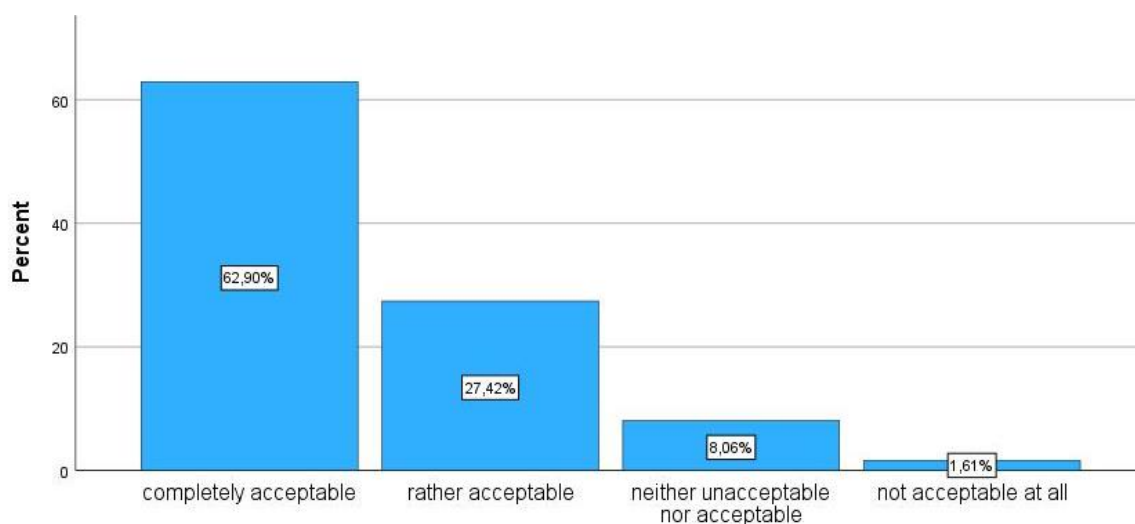


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Majority of these child-typical behaviours are completely or rather acceptable. Talking or babbling is totally fine with 81% of participants and another 15% find it acceptable too. Crying enjoys similar acceptance rates, yet just 63% are absolutely fine and 24% are rather fine with it. There is a group of 8% of the undecided.



[Crying during shows] Think about your experiences in work with early years audiences. What is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour of early years audience participants during the shows?

Disrupting the spatial order is where the study participants hesitated: moving outside the designated area for audience is still rather accepted than not, as 34% find it “rather acceptable” and further 23% find it “completely acceptable”, but there is a significant group of 27% who is undecided and also another proportion (13%) who says that it is rather not acceptable and a few (3%) who say it is not acceptable at all.



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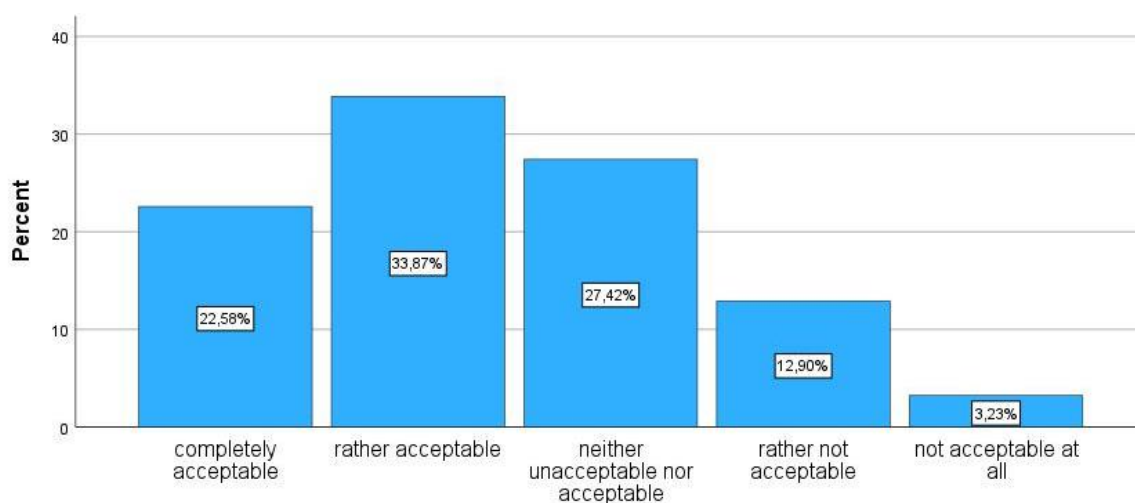


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[Moving outside the designated area for audience] Think about your experiences in work with early years audiences. What is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour of early years audience participants during the shows?

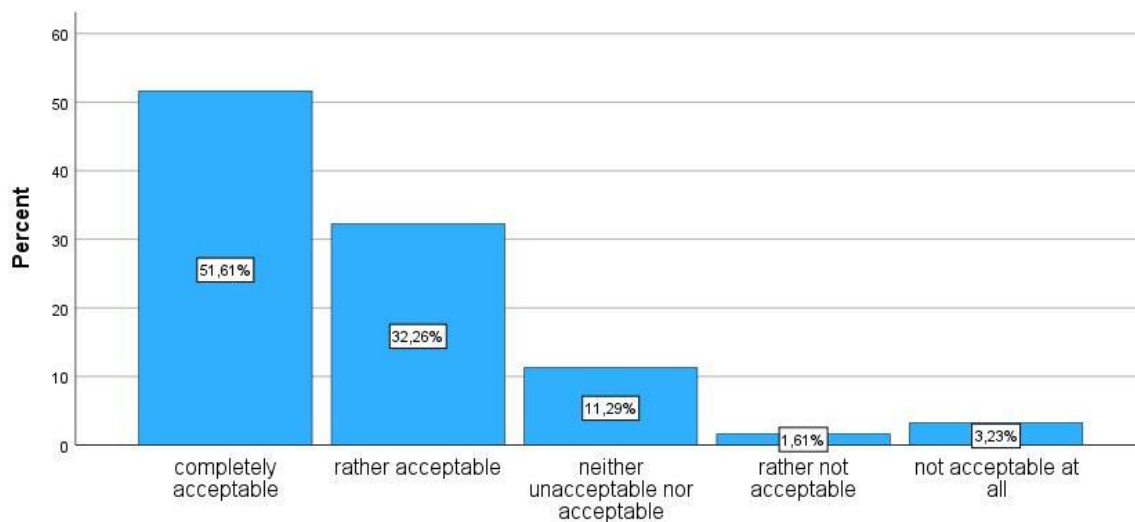
However, coming in and out of the show is fine with the respondents: more than a half of them (52%) think it is completely acceptable and another 32% think it is rather acceptable, only a handful of participants (11%) could not decide and a fraction dismissed the idea. The two space-related questions indicate an interesting discrepancy, the inner integration of the spatial order of performance is more important than entering and leaving it altogether.



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[Coming in and going out] Think about your experiences in work with early years audiences. What is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour of early years audience participants during the shows?

Eating and drinking rules divided the respondents - 23% think it is completely acceptable with another 21% "rather" agreeing, whereas 31% think it is rather not acceptable and another 8% dismiss the idea. There is a group of 16% who cannot tell.



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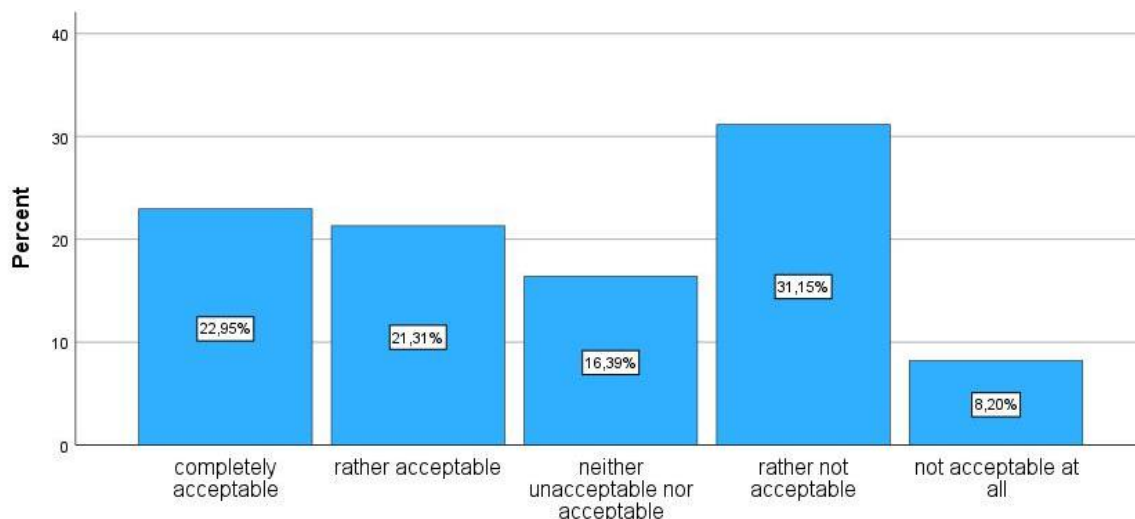


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[Reating and drinking] Think about your experiences in work with early years audiences. What is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour of early years audience participants during the shows?

Disrupting on purpose turned out to be the only behaviour we asked about that reversed predominantly permissive attitudes towards young audiences' different behaviours during shows. Only 10% of respondents found it completely acceptable and another 23% were rather okay with it. More than one quarter (26%) remained neutral, however 31% found purposive disruption unacceptable to some degree and another 11% found it totally unacceptable.



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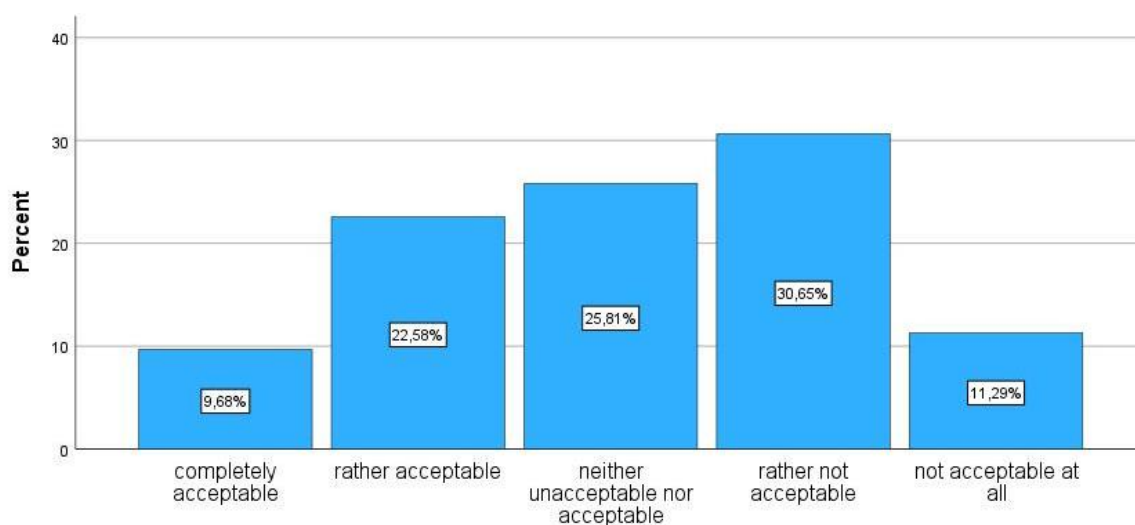


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[Being disruptive on purpose] Think about your experiences in work with early years audiences. What is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour of early years audience participants during the shows?

The participants took it to the comments to express their opinion on what they thought is the most unacceptable behaviour. Majority of the free answers concerned parents and their behaviour and not children. As one of the respondents put it: "It is never the children's behaviour that makes the difference, but the adults". The EYT artists think that parents are the mediators of children's behaviour and they should be taken accountable for whatever the early years audiences do during the show that might be disruptive. For example, crying (prolonged because allegedly unattended) was defined as an indicator of parents' inability to recognize or address the underlying needs of the young audience members and was as such criticized as disruptive when affecting others in the audience.

What the respondents highlighted is the parents' use of mobile phones, either browsing them or pointing them to their children to take photos. Parents' alleged absence from the show, either physical - by simply leaving or by not paying attention - was criticized as well. Narrating over the course of the show or otherwise interpreting the performance for the children was deemed unacceptable behaviour too as it inhibits their freedom to perceive the performance as they please and wish. In the similar vein, shushing - especially by teachers - was criticized.

The category of behaviour "disruptive on purpose" stirred respondents' criticism as they were convinced that this must be a misinterpretation and what adults

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define as such, should be understood and addressed properly. There were voices who even suggested that the performers ought to be responsible for such incidents:

“Being disruptive on purpose?! REALLY? A child who has a challenging behaviour is showing the artist that their work is not yet good enough.”

Ultimately, safety was highlighted together with respect towards other attendees as the most fundamental boundaries that should be observed during the shows with YA. Vices such as this one illustrated this concern: “Sometimes, for the safety of the child, it is not appropriate to move from the seating area.”

Parents as audiences

Since parents or other adults who accompany young audiences to the shows play a pivotal role in their participation, the experiences and observations the study participants have in this respect are not only important to understand the complexity of the situation, but they may also facilitate understanding the relational nature of children engagement and presence in the EYT world. We asked an open-ended question about what the artists do not approve of in the behaviour of parents attending the shows. Simple disruptive behaviour was highlighted the most: talking to other adults, talking to their children and using mobile phones to scroll, call or take pics seems to be a recurrent issue. Although there was a voice like this one:

“It's difficult when parents chat to each other but we try hard not to disapprove. Maybe it's the only chance they've had all day for a conversation. Also, it is our job to hold their attention.”

That attempted to develop an understanding of parents' behaviour, many other comments were very graphic, for example: “Get off your phone!”.

It is connected to the way some parents define EYT shows, as a service or time off their duties, where they drop off children and do not pay attention to what is going on. Some of our informants believe it is a legitimisation issue: “sometimes they talk too loud (like they are not believe they are in "real" artistic event) and disturb others and the show “.

There seems to be a continuum of engagement, from a complete disregard to an overinvolvement with constant instructions and commentary to their

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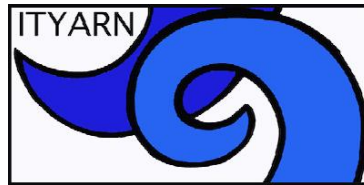


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children. Leaving the children alone, not responding to them, not acknowledging the artist and the boundaries of the set, not following the show are cited. One of the participants put it as follows:

"I am disappointed when parents are their only for/with their child and they don't see the performance has many layers so they can also be interested in/touched by it."

On the other hand, there are parents who seem to have little trust in their children, not letting them explore for themselves, overprotecting them and - what is cited as a problem many times - explaining the show to their children, before they can make anything of it themselves is criticized by the respondents. As one of the respondents framed it:

"They also often underestimate their child and explain what is happening on stage, thus not letting the child's imagination work."

Moreover, sometimes the parents push their children to "participate" and do what they clearly do not desire to be doing. Sometimes it stems from the framing of the event as the adult theatre - and imposing certain behaviour on children to meet the imagined expectations of participation or discipline. As another comment had it:

"Parents sometimes struggle to know what is acceptable in the theatre setting and are therefore too strict or controlling of their children, because they themselves feel uncomfortable."

Many of the study participants think that there is no clear frame of reference for parents resulting in them not knowing how to behave exactly and what is expected from them. Many companies and artists address this issue, but it remains a challenge.

Since young audiences' participation in theatre cannot be detached from their relatedness to their custodians, understanding how adults' presence mediates children participation is key. What they enable and how they constrain the youngest shapes how the EYT practitioners can connect to their audience and, in a way, what they make of them.

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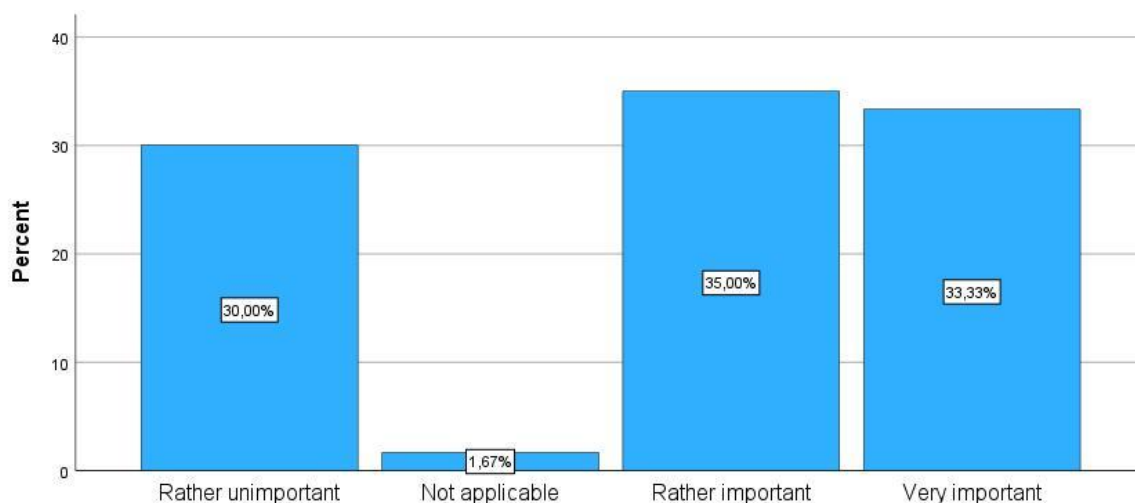


Artistic means in work with the young audiences

most fundamental language the study participants use to communicate with young audiences is the means of artistic expression. We inquired about various dimensions of the performance structure and form in order to assess the importance EYT practitioners attach to them in the relation to achieving “optimal conditions for early years theatre audiences”. The latter is subject to personal definition of each of the respondents of the survey, but it is safe to assume, ultimately this is what they strive for.

We asked about the choice of theme, set design, lights, sound, costumes, choreography, use of words, dramaturgy as well as the length of the performance, size of the audience and the cast, and also interactivity of the show, the eye contact, audience seating and about listening to the audience. Basically, all of these dimensions were considered important, but there was also some variation in answers.

The choice of theme of the show split the respondents into three groups who allocate different significance to this formal choice. 30% disregard it to some extent, telling us that the choice of theme of the performance is “rather unimportant”. Another 35% however thinks it is “rather” important followed by another 33% who think it is “very important”.



[Choice of theme of the performance] There are different ways EYT artists make their art work well for the 0-3 audiences. Consider the artistic choices below and assess how important they are to achieve optimal conditions for EYT audiences.

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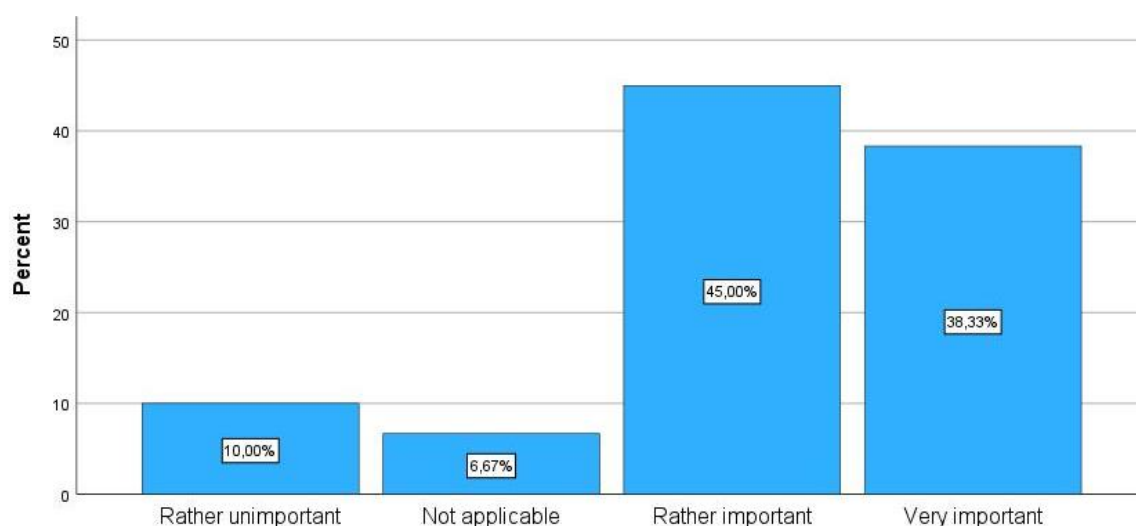
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Set design or scenography yield 33% of “rather important” and 62% of “very important” responses, making it clear this dimension bears special significance. Only single responses dismissed it or were undecided. It is a similar case with lightning design, where 37% of respondents thought it is “rather” important and 53% considered it very important. They were even more univocal when it comes to sound: 20% thought it is “rather important” and another 78% admitted it is very important. There were no opposite opinions in this regard.

The study participants were a little bit less sure about costumes. 10% of artists thought it is rather unimportant, and another 7% could not decide. Whereas another 45% found it “rather” important and another 38% thought it is very important.



[Costumes] There are different ways EYT artists make their art work well for the 0-3 audiences. Consider the artistic choices below and assess how important they are to achieve optimal conditions for EYT audiences.

Choreography or the stage movement was almost unanimously found important: 20% thinks it is “rather” important and almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (73%) admit to its high significance.

It is the use of words, however, that produced the most discrepancy. There was a very significant proportion of EYT practitioners (32%) who said it was “rather unimportant” with an additional 8% of those who thought it was not important at all. With 11% undecided, however, still more than a half of the respondents thought the use of words is important (20%) or very important (28%).

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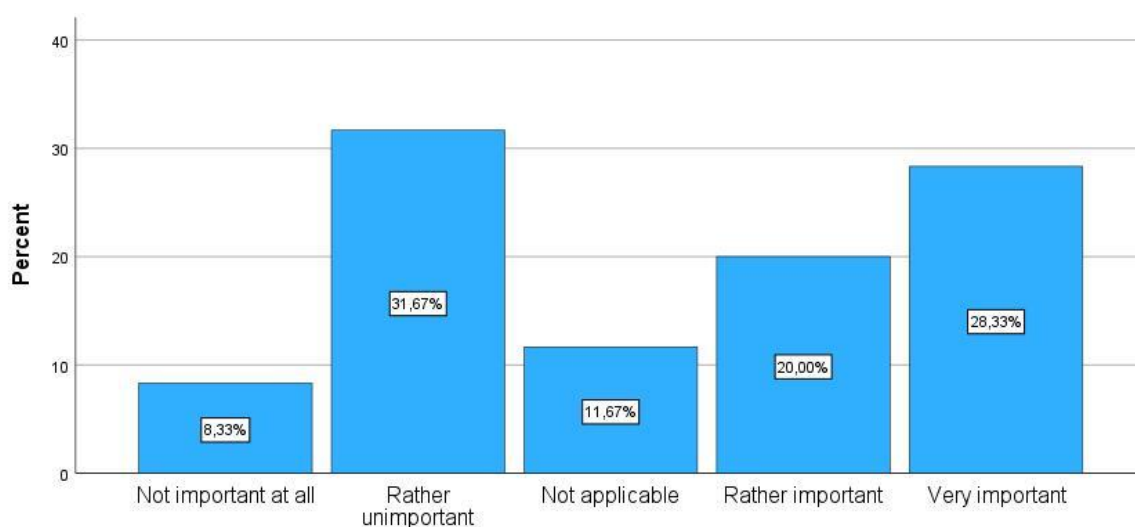


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[Use of words] There are different ways EYT artists make their art work well for the 0-3 audiences. Consider the artistic choices below and assess how important they are to achieve optimal conditions for EYT audiences.

Dramaturgy was on the other hand a non-controversial issue - a one third (30%) thinking it is rather important, and most of the respondents (63%) deeming it "very important". Quite similarly, the length of the performance is univocally significant according to the study participants with 35% leaning towards such a stance and another 58% being very sure of it. Size of the audience was again one of the least controversial issues. The study participants thought it was rather important, how big of a crowd participants in the show (22%), and the vast majority (73%) found it very important.

The sample was quite divided about the number of the performers. There were some (5%) who thought it did not matter, followed by a 1/3 (33%) who thought it was rather unimportant. Another 15% could not tell, and in turn, 30% told us that the number of the performers was rather important. It was very important only to 17% of the respondents.



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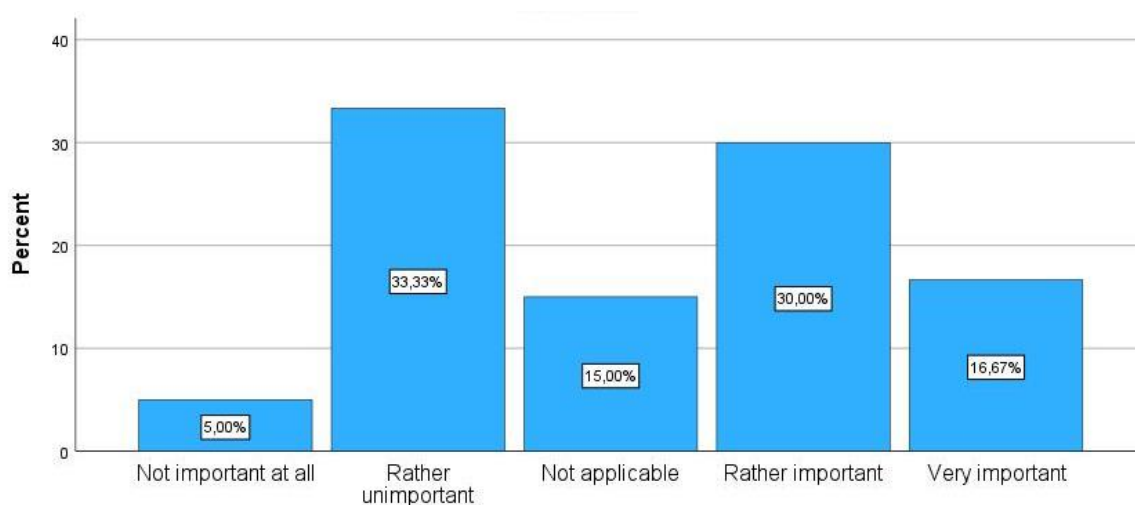


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[Number of performers] There are different ways EYT artists make their art work well for the 0-3 audiences. Consider the artistic choices below and assess how important they are to achieve optimal conditions for EYT audiences.

Although interactivity was found rather- or very important by the respondents with 37% and 43% respectively, with just a 10% of undecided and another 10% who thought it is either unimportant to some degree or unimportant completely. However, eye contact, that is definitely a means of interactivity, was considered very important by almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (73%), with another 18% who thought it is “rather” important. Only a fraction of the sample was undecided or dismissed the idea as unimportant.



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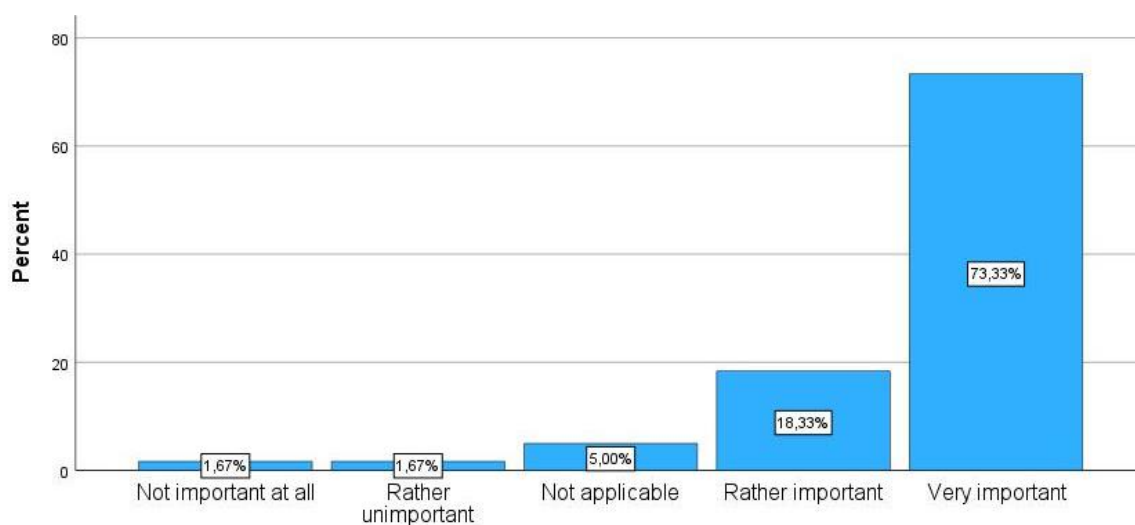


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[Eye contact] There are different ways EYT artists make their art work well for the 0-3 audiences. Consider the artistic choices below and assess how important they are to achieve optimal conditions for EYT audiences.

In a similar vein, the way the audience is seated matters to the vast majority of EYT practitioners: 22% thought it was rather important and 72% deemed it very important. Finally, observing the audience and listening to their reactions was considered “very important” by 78%, with another 12% thinking it was “rather important”. Only small proportions of respondents were undecided or opposed this idea.

Overall, the choice of the theme, use of words and number of performers turned out to be somewhat controversial and yielded diverse responses. The rest of the artistic means were considered significant in work with early years audiences.

We also asked for open comments and received 55 different answers about what matters in the area of creative means. Several themes emerged, including perceptivity, facilitating engagement, reciprocity, accounting for age, both of the early years audiences and the adults who accompany, as well as the meaning of the show idea as well as multimodality, and the artists’ passion and appropriate rhythm of the interaction.

Most of the comments were about the imperative of listening to the audiences. The respondents find it crucial to be receptive or anticipative of what they want, how they react and adapt. As one of the study participants put it:

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"I think first of all, inviting early years audiences to the creative process to observe, listen, move and dance with and receive verbal/nonverbal feedback is very important to understand their point of view and how they experience a work of theatre. In order to do that, it allows me to explore how inclusivity and access need to be considered so that they feel safe and welcomed to be a contributor and collaborators."

Because of the immersive way of participation, some of the informants thought that scenography is relatively important. It is the main part of the performance that the early years audiences would interact with. It goes beyond mere props, as the creation of space in general is crucial to accommodate all participants of the process: audiences, including children and parents, as well as the performers.

"Space as a device that orders, organizes, I mean, organizes coexistence, organizes what is going to happen or what can happen." (South American performer)

However, the elements of the performance cannot be thought of in isolation, it is the totality of the experience that matters even more for EYT. We were told this multiple times. As it was put to us:

"The combination of total measures is more crucial than individual elements. One must be aware of the effects of the process. The subject may be relevant more to the parents, although I could be wrong. The theme is certainly an essential element as a link between the caregiver and the child. Harmony and balance are most important to me in terms of effect and dialogue with the child."

Movement and visual considerations are probably the most important. Showing the body in motion in a visual and sound environment makes communication occur between the audience, allows the child to relate to his own motor skills, is the basis for interaction, stimulates the next step, to go beyond his own corporeality." (Northern European director and actor)

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The conceptual part of it alone, the theme or the words, are of lesser significance, yet should not be underestimated because of their importance for the guardians. As one of the participants cynically put it:

"- Use of words? Theme? Dramaturgy?"

-No, not at all. Well, or maybe for the parents. The parents to understand the logic. And for them to encourage them to pay for the tickets for the next time. Not for the babies." (Asian producer)

Yet, the inclusion of parents in thinking of performances should go beyond pragmatic reasons. Their incomplete participation is highlighted as one of the major issues for EYT performances, and working towards their inclusion should be one of the objectives.

On the other hand, some thought that there are certain themes that are not suitable for 0-3 audiences. It probably should be understood comprehensively as the whole idea, comprising aesthetics and dramaturgy. A producer in the study told us:

"The theme? The choice of topic matters. Some things we won't touch because of the age group. Certain things have to be adapted to developmental regularities." (Eastern European producer)

Understood as a whole, the EYT production matters as a combination of all artistic means, because the "story" as we conceive it is not the narrative the audiences get. They seemingly perceive it through comprehensive participation, and it all means dramaturgy to them:

"So, I believe that everything we put in the play is important to communicate and is an actor of the playwright, right? The actresses, the lighting, the setting, because it brings things to you, it tells you things, even if they are not logical things for a six-month-old baby." (South American actress and researcher).

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Conclusions and ways forward

In this exploratory study, we seek to build a basic understanding of who the early years theatre practitioners are, and how their different positionalities, rootedness in local parenting and educational contexts and their own views on children and parents' behaviour in the performances shape the way they perceive and work with their audiences. We were predominantly interested in how this array of themes and issues contribute to the way EYT artists grant agency to 0-3 children.

First of all, the trajectories of EYT professionals are very diverse and sometimes even serendipitous. It is enriching and contributes to the field's vibrant heterogeneity, but arguably also produces different foundations to think about the early years theatre. It is evident from this research that the early years theatre practitioners share a very strong conviction that 0-3-year-olds should be addressed as a segment of the theatre audience, but there is a bit less of intersubjectivity behind it in terms of why and how to realize it.

The local contexts the EYT artists come from are very different and although reportedly parents and educators tend to think and act in line with the shared philosophy of the early years theatre, it is never the case that they are fully integrated. On the contrary, the EYT artists think that there are different parents and teachers out there, and besides these progressive ones, who encourage independent action and support the youngest in their autonomy, there are others who even apply violence and restrict children.

Asked directly, the EYT artists tend to declare granting agency to the youngest ones, yet there is some hesitation and variability in their answers. It comes down to ambiguity of concepts and - as the interview module of this study suggests - to the need of redefinition of basic concepts tied to rationality or intentionality. What the results of this study suggest is that there is an urgent need for basic philosophical and lexical debate in the field in order to come to terms and develop a shared language of the conceptual backbone of the whole enterprise.

The results suggest that the role of parents is pivotal, the study participants criticized some parents who exercise controlling behaviour over their children and do not give them enough autonomy for fully meaningful participation in the performances. Parents are important and indispensable in children's participation. The EYT artists would like them to allow for full and uninterrupted participation for the youngest. Instead, many of them narrate and explain the show for the kids and structure their experience from the adult-child power relation, putting frames on their experience.

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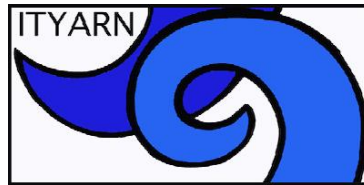


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According to the study, the participation itself should be thought of in different categories than adult theatre. Instead of thinking of different means of expression separately, even if analytically, the performance should be thought of as a whole, allowing for an immersive participation for the youngest.

To grant agency to children is to acknowledge their way of comprehensive and multi-receptor, bodily presence in the performance. The artists ought to be alert and responsive and co-create the experience together with their audience rather than present a show to them.

Many of these notions are intuitively grasped by the EYT artists, and although there seems to be a common agreement, conceptual and philosophical equivocation exists. As a community of practice, the EYT field arguably requires a common ground of a shared language to talk about children and talk to parents. But most importantly, to talk to each other and to one's self in order to streamline and channel the full potential of the heterogeneous field for the benefits of the youngest.



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