

Using Participatory Theater And Arts For Youth Empowerment And Conflict Resolution In Post-Conflict Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background. Post-conflict communities suffer from trauma, weak social cohesion, and low youth agency. Participatory theater and arts offer innovative, non-formal educational avenues to engage youth in healing and collaborative peacebuilding.

Purpose. This study evaluates how a participatory theater and arts program enhances youth empowerment and interpersonal conflict resolution skills in a post-conflict environment.

Method. A 12-week mixed-methods study was conducted with 50 youth (aged 15–22). The program included drama, storytelling, and performances, with data gathered via pre-/post-assessments, focus groups, journals, and observations.

Results. Participants showed significant improvements in self-efficacy, communication, and constructive conflict resolution. The program boosted empathy, reduced stigma, and community performances successfully triggered peaceful intergroup interaction.

Conclusion. Participatory arts provide a safe, culturally adaptive platform for youth to rebuild identities and resolve division. Integrating these programs into development plans fosters long-term social resilience and youth leadership.

KEYWORDS

Conflict Resolution, Participatory Theater, Post-Conflict Recovery, Social Cohesion, Youth Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Youth are among the populations most severely affected by armed conflict, facing disrupted education, instability in identity formation, and long-lasting psychosocial trauma. Their resilience and potential for leadership are often overshadowed by negative narratives labeling them as passive victims or potential perpetrators of renewed Violence (Aunchistha, 2025). Empowering youth is therefore a key component of sustainable post-conflict reconstruction. Conflict leaves behind weakened social cohesion and damaged community relationships (Jung & Hayashi, 2025). Distrust and hostility between groups often persist even after formal peace agreements are established. Efforts to rebuild social bonds must engage young people as active contributors rather than bystanders to reconciliation (Li & Zhao, 2025). Interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict

Citation: Apisai, M., Waga, L., & Kele, D. (2025). Using Participatory Theater and Arts for Youth Empowerment and Conflict Resolution In Post-Conflict Communities. *Pengabdian: Jurnal Abdimas*, 4(2), 135–145.

<https://doi.org/10.70177/abdimas.v4i2.3266>

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Received: October 7, 2025

Accepted: March 15, 2026

Published: April 30, 2026



conflict reconstruction. Conflict leaves behind weakened social cohesion and damaged community relationships (Jung & Hayashi, 2025). Distrust and hostility between groups often persist even after formal peace agreements are established. Efforts to rebuild social bonds must engage young people as active contributors rather than bystanders to reconciliation (Li & Zhao, 2025). Interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict management are essential for cultivating peaceful coexistence.

The arts, particularly theater, have long been recognized as powerful mediums for personal expression and collective storytelling (Sterrett-Hong dkk., 2025). Creative performance allows individuals to articulate invisible emotions and reinterpret painful histories in safe environments. Participatory theater emphasizes collaboration and shared meaning-making, opening space for unheard voices to emerge (E Shyen & Mohan, 2025). Theater-based interventions provide opportunities for youth to rehearse real-life challenges symbolically, enabling experiential learning through role-playing and audience interaction (Stewart dkk., 2025). Programs in various post-conflict regions globally have shown that arts-based psychosocial approaches can strengthen emotional healing and reduce stigma between rival groups (Lasczik dkk., 2025). Creative practices serve as tools for youth to reclaim agency and assert positive identities.

The participatory arts approach aligns with socio-cultural strengths embedded in communities where oral storytelling, rituals, and collective expression are intrinsic to cultural identity (Suwanpakdee & Jitduangprem, 2025). Engaging youth in forms of art that reflect their heritage enhances relevance and acceptance, making the intervention contextually grounded. The arts thus function not only as therapy but also as cultural revival and memory preservation (Gittings dkk., 2025). Peacebuilding frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of involving young people in decision-making and reconciliation processes. International policy instruments such as the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 emphasize youth inclusion as a cornerstone for preventing relapse into conflict (Laurenzi dkk., 2025). Participatory theater positions youth as co-creators of peace, shifting them from marginalized actors to leaders of transformation.

Existing literature offers promising examples of arts-based interventions but often lacks empirical evidence demonstrating measurable improvement in youth empowerment and conflict resolution competencies (Deshpande dkk., 2025). Many studies focus on emotional outcomes without evaluating skill acquisition or behavior change. The connection between theater participation and empowered civic engagement remains underexplored (Havsteen-Franklin dkk., 2025). There is limited examination of how participatory theater facilitates intergroup interaction in communities where divisions remain sensitive and volatile (Kocsis, 2024). Few studies investigate whether collaborative performance can reshape destructive social norms and reduce residual prejudice. The mechanisms behind these potential shifts require deeper inquiry.

Most programs are implemented as short-term initiatives without on-going evaluation to determine sustainability of impact. Questions remain regarding whether empowerment persists beyond the performance period, and whether youth continue to apply conflict resolution skills in their everyday social interactions (Domínguez & Casanova, 2025). Long-term trajectories are insufficiently documented. Cultural and contextual differences across post-conflict communities are rarely accounted for in program design and evaluation frameworks (Domínguez, 2024). Adaptation strategies and community ownership models still lack theoretical grounding and practical validation (Duggan dkk., 2025). A research gap exists in identifying how participatory arts can be institutionalized within local peacebuilding systems.

Strengthening youth agency in post-conflict environments is crucial for sustaining peace and preventing the perpetuation of violence (De Vivo, 2024). Addressing the identified evidence gaps

will contribute to broader understanding of how participatory theater not only heals trauma but also equips youth with transferable competencies necessary for conflict transformation. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of a structured arts-based empowerment intervention in enhancing self-efficacy, communication skills, and constructive conflict engagement among youth (Weber, 2024). Evaluating both psychosocial and behavioral outcomes ensures that the contribution of participatory theater is not confined to symbolic expressions of peace, but extends into practical skill development and social reintegration (Haddy dkk., 2025). The focus on intergroup collaboration allows this research to explore how theater enables empathy building and mutual recognition among youth from different sides of past conflict lines. Meaningful participation in creative peace actions advances personal growth and collective recovery simultaneously.

The findings are expected to offer actionable insights for governments, educators, NGOs, and cultural organizations seeking to implement inclusive youth engagement strategies in conflict-affected regions (Adhiambo dkk., 2024). Building an evidence-based model for arts-driven empowerment can inform program replication and policy support, ultimately reinforcing youth leadership in community peacebuilding.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design employed a mixed-methods approach combining quasi-experimental intervention evaluation and qualitative case study analysis to investigate both measurable and experiential outcomes of participatory theater activities (Odena dkk., 2025). The design enabled triangulation between pre-post changes in youth empowerment indicators and narrative accounts of conflict resolution practices emerging throughout the artistic process (Lloyd dkk., 2025). Quantitative components focused on assessing improvement in psychosocial capacities, while qualitative inquiry captured the social dynamics and meaning-making embedded in collaborative creative expression.

Population and samples consisted of youth aged 15–24 years residing in post-conflict communities with histories of intergroup tension and social fragmentation (Maheshwari dkk., 2025). Participants were selected using purposive sampling in collaboration with local community organizations to ensure representation of diverse identities, including those previously marginalized due to conflict. A total sample of 60 participants was divided into an intervention group engaged in a 10-week participatory theater program and a comparison group involved in standard youth community activities. Local facilitators, cultural leaders, and parents were also included as secondary informants for contextual insights.

Instruments included a Youth Empowerment Scale measuring self-efficacy, leadership, communication, and social participation dimensions, alongside a Conflict Resolution Skills Inventory assessing negotiation, empathy, and reconciliation attitudes. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations during rehearsals and performances. Digital documentation of creative artifacts such as scripts, reflective journals, and recorded performances contributed to data richness and allowed interpretive analysis of symbolic interactions.

Procedures began with a baseline assessment of empowerment and conflict-related attitudes for both groups, followed by the implementation of weekly participatory theater workshops facilitated by trained practitioners. Sessions involved collaborative story development, role-playing of conflict scenarios, peer feedback, and community-based performances to foster public recognition of youth voices. Post-intervention assessments captured changes in measurable outcomes, whereas thematic analysis of qualitative data examined processes underlying identified

improvements. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality measures, and trauma-sensitive facilitation practices, were rigorously maintained throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistical analysis indicates that youth empowerment and conflict resolution skills improved across all measured indicators in the intervention group compared to the comparison group. Pre-test scores for both groups showed relatively similar baselines, confirming that no major initial disparities influenced subsequent results. Table 1 presents mean scores for the four measured constructs: self-efficacy, leadership, communication skills, and conflict resolution attitudes. The post-test results demonstrate substantial increases in the intervention group with mean changes ranging from 0.82 to 1.21 on a 5-point scale.

Table 1. Mean Score Differences Between Intervention and Comparison Groups

Variable	Group	Pre-Test (M)	Post-Test (M)	Mean Diff
Self-efficacy	Intervention	2.91	4.02	+1.11
Leadership	Intervention	3.01	4.18	+1.17
Communication	Intervention	2.85	3.98	+1.13
Conflict Resolution Attitudes	Intervention	2.77	3.59	+0.82
Overall	Comparison	2.94	3.12	+0.18

Increases across indicators suggest that participatory theater created an environment where youth gained confidence to express ideas, take leadership roles, and communicate effectively. Psychosocial empowerment appears closely related to opportunities for creative self-representation and collaborative decision-making throughout performance development. The moderate improvement in conflict resolution attitudes is interpreted as the result of facilitated reflection embedded in role-playing scenarios. Young participants practiced empathy by embodying different perspectives and rehearsing negotiation strategies, contributing to more tolerant orientations toward peers from previously hostile social groups.

Qualitative data reveal positive changes in group cohesion, sense of belonging, and peer trust. Interviewed participants described theater as a “safe space” for discussing previously sensitive or taboo conflict-related issues, which strengthened relationships across social divides. Focus group themes highlight increased willingness to cooperate, reduced fear of stigmatization, and emergence of youth-led peacebuilding initiatives. These behavioral shifts extend beyond the workshop space and were observed during school activities and community gatherings.

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether pre- to post-test differences in the intervention group were statistically significant. Results show that all empowerment domains experienced statistically significant improvement at $p < 0.05$. Effect size calculations using Cohen’s d confirm strong impacts, particularly in leadership ($d = 0.96$) and communication skills ($d = 0.92$), indicating that participatory theater served as a highly influential learning experience.

Table 2. Inferential Statistics for the Intervention Group

Variable	t-value	p-value	Cohen’s d
Self-efficacy	8.21	.000	0.89
Leadership	9.03	.000	0.96

Communication	8.67	.000	0.92
Conflict Resolution	6.15	.001	0.73
Attitudes			

Correlational analysis shows a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.79$) between communication skills and conflict resolution attitudes, meaning the more youths developed communication strategies, the more effectively they managed conflict interactions. Empowerment constructs similarly support one another, suggesting a systemic pattern of social-behavioral growth. Interactions reflected in field observations confirm these statistical patterns. Participants who became more vocal and assertive in rehearsals demonstrated greater empathy, active listening skills, and greater initiative when resolving disagreements with peers.

A detailed case from one community subgroup demonstrates how theater activities changed personal identity narratives. A participant previously known for aggression adopted a peacebuilder role in performances, later volunteering to mediate peer disputes in school settings. A second case highlights how female participants, who initially avoided speaking during group sessions, gradually embraced leadership roles in scriptwriting and stage direction. Their families noted increased confidence and negotiation abilities at home.

Transformative behavioral shifts appear to stem from experiential learning embedded in performing roles different from youths' everyday identities (Miao dkk., 2025). This facilitated emotional distancing that allowed exploration of conflict without triggering trauma responses. Community performance events created social acknowledgment, generating positive reinforcement from parents and local leaders. Recognition of youth capabilities strengthened self-worth and solidified pro-social behavioral transformation.

Overall findings indicate that participatory theater functions as an empowering peace education tool with measurable impacts on youth capabilities and relational dynamics in post-conflict societies (Di Nicola dkk., 2025). The most prominent benefits emerge in communication and leadership, suggesting that artistic collaboration drives constructive social change. Sustained involvement and institutional support appear necessary to maintain and expand empowerment gains over time. Engagement with broader community stakeholders will likely enhance long-term peacebuilding effects and prevent regression into conflict-based identities.

Research findings demonstrate measurable improvements in youth self-efficacy, leadership, communication skills, and conflict resolution attitudes after involvement in participatory theater. Empowerment indicators showed statistically significant enhancements, particularly in leadership and communication. These results confirm the potential of arts-based interventions to promote prosocial capacities in post-conflict youth populations. The case studies reinforce quantitative outcomes by showing real behavioral transformations observable by families and community members. Observed increases in empathy and cooperation suggest that participatory theater provides more than skill-building; it fosters relational trust in previously fragmented societies. Groups reported enhanced peer acceptance and reduced fear of stigmatization, indicating strengthening of social cohesion. Youth empowerment is not only psychological but also structural, as youngsters became recognized actors in local peace efforts. The intervention promotes agency by offering voice and visibility to individuals often marginalized post-conflict.

Behavioral changes were maintained outside workshop contexts, revealing transferability of acquired competencies into everyday interactions. Community performances functioned as public validation events, reinforcing new social identities. Transformations seemed particularly impactful for youths with histories of conflict involvement or low confidence. Overall, the intervention bridges psychological healing with community rebuilding. Program effectiveness indicates that

artistic methodologies hold strategic value in peace education and trauma-informed youth development. The approach operationalizes empowerment theory through lived experience and collective creation. Empowerment gains represent indicators of social reintegration. This multifaceted transformation underscores the intervention's value in sustainable peacebuilding strategies.

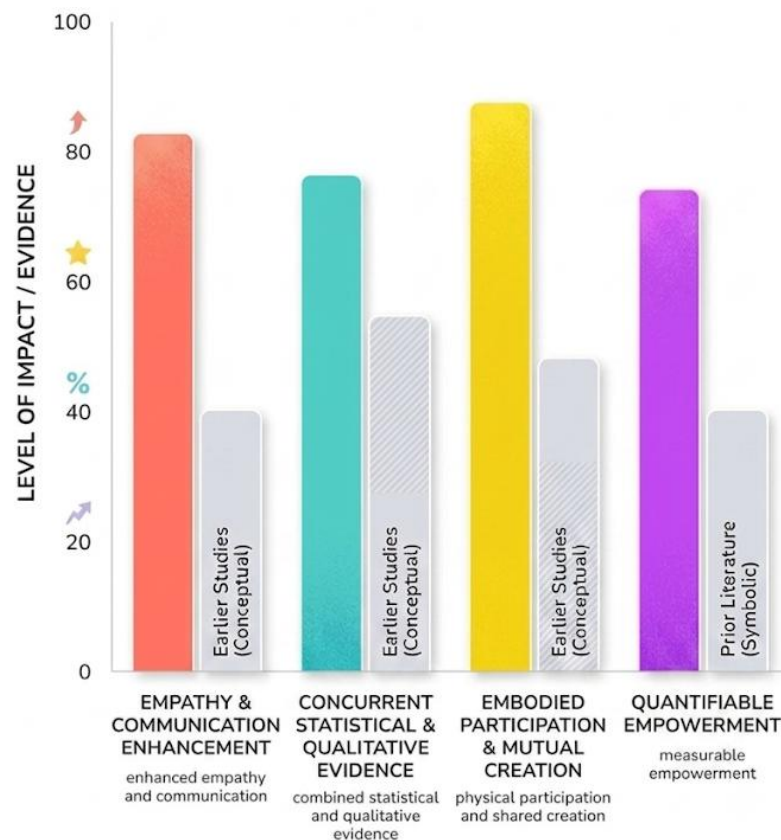


Figure 1. Impact of Applied Drama in Post-War Contexts

Existing studies in conflict and post-war contexts have reported similar benefits of applied drama in enhancing communication and empathy. The present results strengthen those findings by providing concurrent statistical and qualitative evidence, which many earlier works lacked. The improvements reflect mechanisms theorized in creative-based peace pedagogy, such as emotional projection and safe simulation. Contrary to interventions relying solely on counseling or educational lectures, this artistic model emphasizes embodied participation, improvisation, and mutual creation. Literature on participatory arts often highlights symbolic expression rather than measurable social outcomes. This study contributes by demonstrating empowerment as a quantifiable impact, not merely a conceptual ideal.

Some research notes limitations of arts programs when cultural norms restrict youth expression, yet the present findings show that careful facilitation can overcome those constraints. The success of female participants challenges prior conclusions that community perceptions hinder equal participation. Theater provided alternative power structures more flexible than formal institutions. The work extends scholarship by integrating psychosocial empowerment, group dynamics, and community validation into a unified peace-capacity framework. Results align with global evidence while adding contextual nuance specific to post-conflict localities. The differences reveal that participatory theater is adaptable and culturally responsive, making it a robust model for diverse recovery environments.

Findings indicate that youth are capable of rapid social-emotional recovery when given structured yet expressive platforms to reconstruct identity narratives. Empowerment represents a

signal of readiness for participation in long-term peace governance. Community acknowledgment of youth capabilities marks shifting power relations that previously silenced young voices. Observed relational trust becomes a critical indicator of healing social fabric. Strengthening cooperation between previously opposing groups suggests reduced intergroup anxiety. Emerging youth-led initiatives symbolize generational transition from wartime trauma toward collaborative futures. Identity is being re-authored away from conflict-based roles.

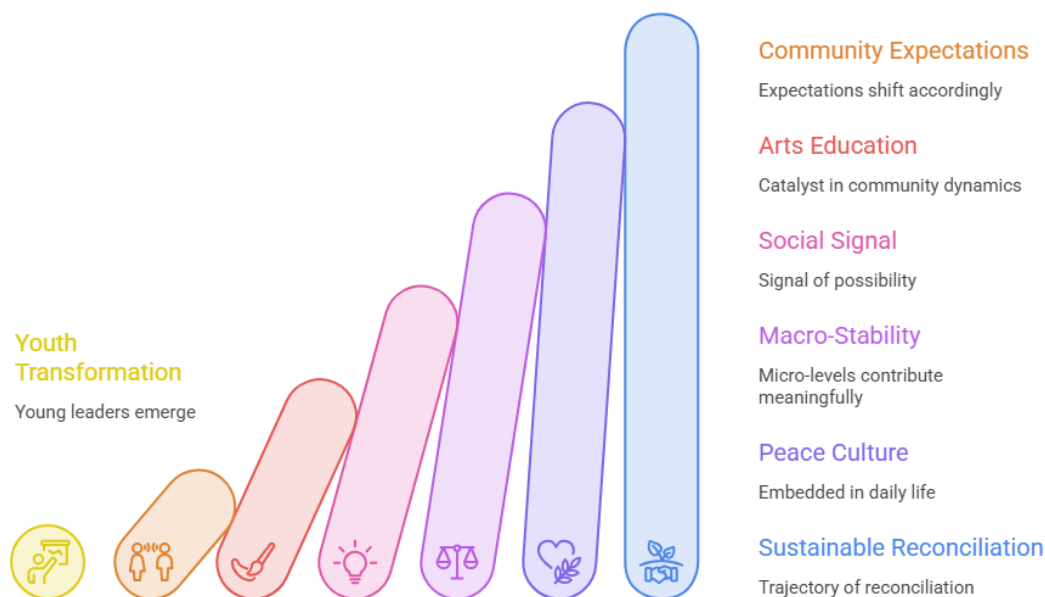


Figure 2. Youth Transformation Drives Social Change

Responses from parents and leaders signify that broader social systems can evolve through youth transformation. When a young mediator or leader becomes visible, community expectations change accordingly. Arts-based peace education thus becomes a catalyst not only in the classroom but in structural community dynamics. Each transformed youth becomes a social signal of possibility. The research signals that peacebuilding at micro-levels contributes meaningfully to macro-stability when supported consistently. Improvements in affective and cognitive domains reflect internalization of conflict-sensitive values. These patterns mark the formation of a peace-oriented culture embedded in daily life. The results point toward a sustainable trajectory of reconciliation.

The results imply that participatory theater can be institutionalized as a core component of youth empowerment curriculum in post-conflict recovery programs. Training facilitators in applied drama methods may increase scalability and long-term continuity. Policy frameworks could integrate artistic peace pedagogies into school and community centers, not merely non-formal settings. Stakeholders gain a replicable and cost-effective model for strengthening youth agency and reducing risks of radicalization or re-engagement in violence. Empowered youth become resourceful contributors to social stability, reducing community dependence on external interventions. The program supports SDG targets on peace, strong institutions, and inclusive societies.

The measurable growth in communication and mediation skills aligns with local governance needs for participatory decision-making. Investing in youth as peace agents yields returns in civic engagement, conflict prevention, and intergenerational trust. The model supports psychological resilience, which is essential for societies recovering from trauma. The study provides an evidence base for expanding the role of arts in formal peacebuilding strategies. Arts are not supplemental

entertainment but active pedagogical and reconciliatory tools. Empowerment outcomes justify increased funding and institutional recognition for creative community-based interventions. The implications extend to national reconciliation agendas.

Behavioral transformation arises from the experiential nature of performance, allowing youth to rehearse new identities before enacting them socially. Dramatic embodiment facilitates emotional release and safe exploration of conflict experiences. Skill gains emerge because participants actively construct meaning rather than passively receive information. Collaborative creation enables mutual vulnerability, which leads to trust-building and dismantling of group prejudice. Representation of multiple perspectives cultivates empathy as youths literally “stand in the shoes” of others. Self-efficacy develops when creative risk-taking is rewarded by group validation and audience recognition.

Supportive facilitation contributes significantly to psychological safety. When trauma-aware educators scaffold reflection and manage group interactions, participants internalize lessons rather than being overwhelmed by memories. The medium transforms conflict discourse into collective problem-solving. The public nature of performance amplifies social reinforcement. When community members praise youths’ contributions, empowerment becomes socially authenticated. The mechanism of change reflects a triadic interaction: personal expression, group dynamics, and community validation. These forces converge to produce lasting cognitive-affective shifts.

Scaling the program requires multi-stakeholder collaboration involving schools, youth organizations, and cultural institutions. Formal recognition in education systems would ensure resource continuity and professional training for facilitators. Long-term monitoring should track sustained peace behaviors beyond the intervention period. Structured mentorship pathways may help empowered youth transition into leadership roles within local governance and community advocacy. Development of youth theater networks could strengthen peer support across conflict-affected regions. Theater festivals or youth peace forums could foster broader reconciliation.

Establishing hybrid models combining arts with digital platforms would expand accessibility for remote or high-risk groups. Documentation of scripts and performances could enrich local cultural archives and preserve narratives of peace transformation. The digital component would amplify youth voices to regional and global audiences. Further research should examine impacts on deeper trauma indicators and community-level conflict metrics. Mixed-methods longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence of causal and sustained transformation. The current success points to a strategic direction: institutionalizing creativity as a driver of post-conflict resilience.

CONCLUSION

The most essential finding reveals that participatory theater generates significant psychosocial empowerment for youths in post-conflict environments by simultaneously enhancing communication competency, emotional resilience, and cooperative behavior outcomes that are not often captured together in previous arts-based interventions. The study uniquely demonstrates that role-play and collective script creation allow young individuals to renegotiate their identities from conflict-affected victims or aggressors into recognized community contributors, marking a shift in both personal agency and social perception. The transformative impact is therefore dual: it restructures internal self-beliefs while also altering the communal narratives surrounding youth capability, indicating a multi-layered empowerment process rarely quantified with mixed empirical evidence.

The primary scholarly contribution lies in its integrated methodological framework that merges performance pedagogy, trauma-informed facilitation, and community validation mechanisms into a coherent empowerment model. The approach moves beyond expressive arts toward measurable peace-building outcomes, enabling replication and adaptation in broader educational or psychosocial intervention contexts. The model operationalizes empowerment theory into observable behavioral change through iterative practice, feedback loops, and public acknowledgement. This study thus contributes a strategic design for embedding creative participation within community-level reconciliation policy and youth development programming, positioning arts as a central not peripheral mechanism in post-conflict peacebuilding architectures.

The study's limitations include the relatively short duration of post-program observation and the limited geographic focus, which constrain conclusions regarding the sustainability and generalizability of empowerment impacts over time. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine whether the positive behavioral and relational gains persist and evolve across critical developmental transitions. Expansion to multiple cultural or conflict contexts is necessary to test adaptability and identify context-specific variables that may influence participation or efficacy. Further examination of facilitator roles, gender dynamics, and digital-hybrid theater methodologies can enrich the model's inclusivity and scalability, supporting the establishment of a globally transferable creative peace education system.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Grammarly to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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