

# My Stage – sharing and creating a story of our past, present, and future in Finnish Lapland

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## Intro

This article addresses the ‘My Stage’ participatory theatre project for women with an immigrant background in Rovaniemi, Finnish Lapland. One of the fundamental ideas underlying the project was the conviction that multidisciplinary dialogue can be helpful in supporting social integration processes in an increasingly multicultural society. Based on our experience and research, we propose that participatory theatre workshops can offer a creative space for these dialogues. In this article, we analyse those experiences by combining social work and socially engaged art education approaches. We address ethnic, cultural, and gendered ‘otherness’ and aim at understanding the impact of unequal power relations, social privileges and hierarchies in the integration processes.

The main research question that connects social work and art-based research in this project is “to what extent does taking part in art and design workshops promote social integration?” The empirical data was collected using ethnographic and participatory theatre methods. The multidisciplinary team of authors behind this text includes a theatre practitioner plus, service design, art education, and social work researchers, as well as a workshop participant.

## Intertwining socially engaged art and social work in the Finnish socio-cultural context

This article is based on multidisciplinary analysis of the participatory theatre project, ‘My Stage’. The project was subjected to women with immigrant backgrounds in Finnish Lapland and it was part of a larger project entitled ‘Art Gear’ (2016–2018). The project is run collaboratively by the faculties of Art and Design and Social Work at the University of Lapland, the Artists’ Association of Lapland, and the Cross-Art Collective Piste in Rovaniemi.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> The Faculty of Art and Design administers the project and develops the art-based methods through a process of documentation and evaluation (Jokela, Hiltunen & Härkönen 2015). The department of social work researches the integration processes in the project and endeavours to increase the use of art methods in social work. The university is responsible for the dissemination of the project’s results.

project promotes interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue and provides a space for different voices to share and reflect their experiences through art-based methods.

In this article, the social construction of art-based activities and research is bound to the Finnish socio-cultural context. Finland is the most sparsely populated country in the European Union. In 2013, immigrants made up only around 3 per cent of the population (Statistics Finland, 2013.) The amount of immigrants doubled in 2016, (about 330,000 people), comprising about six percent of the total population.<sup>2</sup> (Jauhiainen, 2017, p. 168.) Finland provides an interesting context for exploring the dynamics of power around the construction of social integration, as the overwhelming majority of Finnish population is represented by native born residents. Uncertain global phenomena, such as conflicts, climate change and increasing inequality, predict that the flow of immigrants and asylum seekers is also the question of the future. In spite of different geopolitical situations, racist and hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers have arisen over the Western contexts (e.g. Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). For these reasons, there is a need to study the phenomenon and explore how art-based methods can be useful tools to be properly prepared for immigration to Finland especially in terms of social integration, societal coherence, and global justice.

The overall aim of the Art Gear project is to support interaction among young people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, thereby reducing radicalisation and biases. According to Jauhiainen (2017, p. 153) “There is a common solidarity among people and from people to people. On the other hand, there are nationalistic, local and selfish interests to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers at particular locations.” As in many other contexts, also in Northern Finland the asylum seekers and immigrants face both, hospitality and hatred from the local population. It reflects larger geopolitical and global scales of for example organized crime and economic interests that affect, among other factors, people’s attitudes towards migration (ibid.).

Our project aims at creating safe places for encounters in which differences are welcomed and cultural and social borders are crossed. The long-term aim is to increase the immigrants’ capabilities of employment and participation in the society. Integration is seen through a critical lens and as a complex process, in which overlapping power relations and hierarchies need to be reflected and questioned (e.g. Dominelli,

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<sup>2</sup> In the past ten years, between 2007 and 2016, the average immigration balance has been around +15,000 persons annually.

2010). This leads to the most marginalised voices being recognised and it positions the immigrants as experts in their own integration process.

One of the tasks of this project was to establish and deepen the cooperation between the fields of social work and art, as well as amongst participants and researchers. The multidisciplinary team of authors behind this text includes a theatre practitioner, service design, art education, and social work researchers, as well as a workshop participant. In spite of having shared questions as researchers, we have different ways in which we practise, write, and share our research outcomes. The data collection and evaluation of the workshops were carried out in collaboration between the theatre practitioner and the social work and service design researchers. Workshop participants had an active role in the process, too. Sharing our diverse knowledge and ideas was a learning process that called for listening and contributing to multidisciplinary discussions (Foster, 2012). It leaned on shared creativity and a continuous negotiation to provide knowledge that crosses borders.

Social work and socially engaged art share a common value base, and both can be used as instruments for social change (Schubert & Gray, 2015, p. 1350). When these fields' aims, contributions, and methods are combined, it has fruitful outcomes in terms of social integration (see also Gergen & Gergen, 2017.) Socially engaged art is an artistic practice that requires interaction with local communities, that is also a crucial part of social work practice. They both include collaborative, community-based, process-based, public and dialogic practices that rely on social exchange. (see Bardy, 2007; Hiltunen, 2010, 2008; Kester, 2004; Beer et al., 2010; Dewenhurt, 2014; Thompson, 2012; Oikarinen-Jabai, 2015)

Through such cooperative work, the field of Art and Design can provide tools and methods that serve as alternatives to the social work research, but also transformation of one language into another, and even more comprehensively the transformation of one form of knowledge into another (Jokela, Hiltunen & Härkönen, 2015; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017).

## Research question, methods and data

The main research question that connects social work and art-based research in this project is 'to what extent does taking part in art and design workshops promote social integration?' The participants of the workshop and the research were ten women of different ages (from around twenty to around fifty), geographical origin (South America, the Middle East, Asia, Southern

Europe, and Northern Europe), cultural background, language skills, and current life-situation in Finland. The personalities and social positions of the participants were also different, which affected the interaction. The workshop was held once a week during autumn 2016. The project continued in spring 2017 and concluded with a performance.

The research data consisted of visual documentation (photographs and video clips), audio recordings of the discussions during the workshops, and drawings and poems done by the participants. The data was collected by using ethnographic and art-based, especially participatory theatre methods. The research data also included reflective research notes done by the researchers. The research was an open and creative process with critical reflection and ethical sensitivity upon the research knowledge production and research relations (e.g. Mikkonen & Laitinen & Hill, 2017).

Art-related methods are useful when it comes to exploring the nuances of lived experiences and promoting dialogue that is a core of social work (Foster, 2012, p. 353; see also Leavy, 2017). In both fields, there are no ready-made formulas to work with, but social work as well as art processes are creative in their own ways. Combining them is an innovative process in which social work research offers platforms to artists and designers to apply their work and methods in a socially valuable way.

In our workshop we sought a working method that would give the participants a chance to share stories from their own lives and create a space for every voice in the group to be heard. The facilitator – a theatre practitioner – used different theatre practices, such as an easy variation of Playback Theatre (PT)<sup>3</sup>. By using the PT she wanted to be able to show to the participants how their ‘normal’ daily life stories can be amazingly interesting and important.

Ethnography was used as the social work research method. It leans on participatory observation of the researcher, with a context specific and reflexive framework. It emphasises locally-relevant and culturally-sensitive research method, and questions the power structures within the research encounters (Mikkonen, 2017, p. 71; Ledwith & Asgill, 2007). Leaning on these approaches, we see the research partners as experts in their own lives and recognise their

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<sup>3</sup> Playback Theatre (PT) is a community theatre method which was created by Jonathan Fox in the 1970s, and is based on improvisation theatre. The idea is to build a community through listening to personal stories told by the audience and then seeing those stories represented by a team of professional actors, emcee (the conductor), and sometimes a musician.

capabilities, knowledge, resources, coping strategies, and potential to analyse and propose solutions to their own problems (e.g. Mikkonen et al., 2017).

In the planning stages of the 'My Stage' workshop we reflected on the project's setting; primarily focussing on what participants could personally gain out of this. We needed to consider our theoretical and ideological aims in terms of migration, integration, and interdisciplinary working methods: for the participants maybe none of our aims really mattered. They faced the difficulties of (forced) migration and integration in their everyday lives. How could our workshop possibly benefit them? How could we create the experience of belonging and participation? This led us to consider what their real needs might be and to use them as the main source of information. This kind of starting point has an eye towards the future – onwards rather than backwards. From social work point of view, the working method leaned on a broad understanding of human rights concept (e.g. Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003): that takes into account the cultural and contextual specificities but also respects the equal value of the human beings through universality.

The call for the project was kept open, without setting out expectations of participants' backgrounds or personal skills but emphasising the interaction and sharing of experiences. This was to encourage women from different backgrounds, life situations and social positions to take part.



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**Hei Sinä yli 18 vuotias nainen!**

Kiinnostaako sinua näytteleminen, musiikki, tanssi, kirjoittaminen tai piirtäminen? Haluatko oppia suomen kieltä taiteen keinoin? Haluatko kertoa unelmistasi, peloistasi, harrastuksistasi, kotimaastasi, kulttuuristasi tai jostain muusta sinulle tärkeästä asiasta? Haluatko löytää uusia ystäviä tai oppia uusia taitoja? Haluatko esittää jotain, mitä rakastat tehdä?

**Tervetuloa Taidevaihte - projektin työpajoihin!**

**Over 18 years old women!**

Are you interested in acting, dancing, music, writing, or drawing? Do you want to learn more Finnish? Would you like to tell about your dreams, fears, hobbies, home country, culture or something else that is important to you? Would you like to find new friends or learn new skills? Do you want to show something that you love to do?

**Welcome to the workshops of ArtGear - project!**

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Image 1. Are you interested in acting, dancing, music, writing or drawing?

## Hands on – souls with

Participatory theatre can be used as a holistic working method, which provides an instrument to frame social integration processes in terms of social justice and equality (e.g. Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). Cemlyn and Briskman (ibid.) state that one of the practitioners' ways to advance social justice is the framing and developing of human rights through dialogue and human interaction. The theatre exercises expand the traditional, sometimes hierarchic social work methods to more creative and interactive sphere, which creates a space for advancing equality and social justice.

Play-back theatre (PT) was an interactive, flexible, and spontaneous working method used in the workshop. As there was no set play, the working group created both the atmosphere and the content. We mainly transformed our stories into theatrical pieces using spoken improvisation. One of the participants described the diversities within the group: "It's amazing that we don't speak the same language but we communicate". PT is based on trust and familiarity between the participants, and this strengthened the process of bonding and belonging. Therefore, PT can function as an important bridge between people of different cultural backgrounds: "It made me feel good and happy. Here I come, I see you, I learn things. Theatre is important, it helps us". This created space for encounters with equality and respect, which advanced dialogue and interaction towards social justice.

The workshops included also other art modes such as drawing, poetry, collage and different theatre preparatory exercises. Even though the workshops were led and instructed by the theatre practitioner, the participants themselves were encouraged to take an active role in its exercises and in setting the goals of the process. The instructor has once observed that "we are all so different that it makes us the same". She encouraged the participants to express their wishes, dreams, and aspirations, which led to a group with specific roles determined by individual personalities, cultures, and social relations. One of the most relevant methods in expressing the participants' wishes was the collage. In creating the collage, the women expressed their wishes of finding new friends, of care, support, safety, employment and self-expression. Ultimately, they wished for happiness and a balanced life—manifesting loneliness and longing for friendship and closeness. This indicated that in spite of the differences among the participants, the basic needs and wishes were similar and shared.

By becoming an imaginary character and exceeding one's personal limits through a theatrical exercise, one is able to reach a new level in her own experience. By dramatizing any life event, playing a game, or creating a character, we create a distance to our experience. This results in us becoming more in tune with ourselves and helps us to get in touch with experience of, for example, a racist assault or other painful incident (Kaptani & Yuval-Danis, 2008). Thus, participatory theatre methods align with social work task to address hardships of individuals' and communities' lives and in the aim of overcoming them.

Theatre practises may push people out of their comfort zone, which is a crucial element in developing a deeper understanding of marginalisation and otherness. This kind of understanding was gained through, for example, an exercise of trust, where one participant was leading another one with closed eyes. As one of the participants said: "This was very difficult for me to do. I usually do not trust other people easily or let other people lead me". It arose out of her fear of being in the dark, and awoke some traumatic memories from her past in the bomb shelters. These forms of emotions encouraged the emergence of crucial information about the participant's past, which can lead to understand their experience of integration. It reflected the meaning of knowing the global context in the individuals' experiences – the geopolitical facts that had led this participant to experience the war and conflict, which the exercise brought forth in the form of fear and anxiety. These emotions needed to be reflected with ethical sensitivity towards the individual's vulnerabilities.



Image 2. The process. Photo: Moira Douranou, 2016

During the whole process, one crucial element was a continuous reflection of the exercises and the directions of the workshop with the participants. This reflection was used as an analysis method in our interdisciplinary research, too. We reflected the questions such as the quality of art based methods and

their outcome. To overcome social boundaries that may have brought some conceptual misunderstandings between the participants and the researchers, we used different methods in the evaluation. Our challenge was how could we create a platform to get different feedback and to approach the participants' answers from multiple perspectives. For this reason, we held three different ways of evaluation: visual, physical and an oral one. The visual evaluation let the participants to wander around the room freely, to draw their feelings on the given questions about the workshop exercises. As an outcome, we got their expressions on the exercises of the workshop: they pointed their favourite exercise, the one that they maybe disliked, that had taught them something, that was hard to understand or that was helpful or interesting. This helped us to evaluate their overall feelings of the exercises. However, we needed additional methods to deepen our analysis.

The physical questionnaire called for the participants to stand on an invisible line while nine different questions considering the workshop sessions were asked. The participants placed themselves on this imaginary line, which expressed their feelings about the outcome and process of the workshop. In addition, the participants were given a chance to explain their feelings. The oral questionnaire was conducted through an open group conversation about the methods and the workshop as a holistic experience in the end of the workshop session.

The evaluation methods carried different strengths and weaknesses within them, and together they formed a holistic picture to the participants' views of the art-based methods in terms of their social integration. The visual questionnaire gave them most freedom to express themselves without anyone observing them, which we believe to be the most neutral way. However, it was rather descriptive and superficial, as we did not have a chance to ask additional questions or have a reflective discussions on them. It appeared that the second questionnaire, the physical one, was the most uncomfortable for the participants. Standing on a position that expresses one's opinion is the most visible, dynamic, and for some people, a hard way to represent themselves. Getting out of their comfort zone is not easy, but it can reveal a lot about a person's character and social context. Besides being a demanding one, the physical questionnaire appeared to be interesting, since it combined the physical aspect, the nonverbal with the verbal communication, and the participants' answers.

The oral questionnaire was a deepening one as it was based on the previous tasks and questions of the visual and physical questionnaire, while the participants sat in a circle facing each other. The circle sitting position brought the sense of togetherness, compared to the face-to-face physical questionnaire, which brought up the sense of hierarchy between the theatre practitioner and the participants. The oral discussion as an evaluation form brought forth the participants' willingness (or unwillingness) to talk and the sense of belonging to the group. Different evaluation forms brought forth significantly different perspectives and they also provided multidimensional data to work with.



Image 3. The workshop data collection and evaluation were carried out in collaboration with the participants. Photo: Moira Douranou, 2016

## Emotions and difficulties

The exercises were experienced differently by the participants. For example, the PT exercises were evaluated as interesting by four participants, and two felt that they had learned a lot from them. As one of the participants said: “I still remember the first story I ever shared in the workshop. It is lovely to let other people hear your stories. It made me think back to the first time I came to Finland. It was nice to hear other people’s stories as well”. However, two participants found the PT exercises to be less positive, as they felt that their stories were not interpreted correctly. One of them stated: “It was difficult to see how my story was not completely understood by others and watching it was uncomfortable”. This led to a reflective discussion on the interpretations

of the other people's stories and the dangers inherent in the process. "Playback theatre can be a dangerous exercise", said the theatre practitioner, and she continued, "Being part of all of the sessions and practices is essential". Especially the exercises based on trust, demand the commitment of the members. The questions of time and intensity were considered as well; the exercises were intense and took the participants deeply into the creative process, and were sometimes quite exhausting. Due to this depth in the experience, we considered that employing shorter periods with more frequency than the established once-a-week schedule would be more functional.

One of the challenges we experienced was the lack of commitment of some of the participants. As one solution to this, we offered the workshop as part of their language studies. However, some of the women skipped many of the sessions and this affected both, the workshop outcome as well as our research. As the artist said during the oral questionnaire: "I have exercises, how we came to do these stories. And then you come here from the middle and maybe you took it in a little bit different way than others, because the others have been here the last time... I cannot do the warm ups again and again and again, I have to be going also".

Considering the research outcome, the evaluation through the three questionnaires happened during the last session when all of the participants were not present. Moreover, those who participated in the questionnaires, were not present in all of the sessions. Therefore, the questionnaires were not the only way of gathering data; besides those, field notes and sketches were made during all of the sessions in order to achieve as diverse and holistic outcome as possible.

Considering the intensity of the workshops, one of the participants said: "It was not that good, I would prefer something more intense", and added: "I was expected the group to create something concrete together, but it did not happen. It is difficult to create a bonding within the group since people come and go". The lack of commitment impacted on the process being more fragmentary than a holistic one. This appeared as a weakness of this kind of working method, which complicated the analysis of the real outcomes of the workshop. However, each session as such was a holistic one and during them the participants bonded in a unique way, which is important to note.

Besides the practical challenges such as time and the participants' commitment levels, the core question for this project was linked with intersecting social hierarchies and otherness. As people have their specific social backgrounds and identities, such as class and ethnicity (e.g. Dominelli, 2010; Mookherjee, 2011), they inevitably impacted upon interaction in the workshops. Some of the exercises brought forth the privileges and vulnerabilities that both separated and connected the participants. Those were seen in for example how the exercises were understood, which kind of emotions they arose and in difficulties to communicate or understand each other. However, when carrying out creative practices, the participants opened themselves up to each other which built trust, and those hierarchies were diminished at those particular moments. This created a safe space into which the workshops had developed.

**"The more stories I hear, the more common things I found. We are all so much the same"**

Dialogue was one of the most important tools in the project. Multidisciplinary dialogue called for sensitivity to both cultural and disciplinary differences. Therefore, the main instruments of the dialogue were creativity and spontaneity. As many of the participants did not have a common language, non-verbal communication formed a basis for an open dialogue. In spite of the openness and spontaneity, the theatre practitioner acted as an instructor and had the main responsibility for the whole process. She needed to do background preparations and have a holistic picture of the workshops. Moreover, she needed to consider the participants as unique individuals. This required her to give some extra time and recognition to a couple of the women in order to make them feel more secure and relaxed in the group.



Image 4. Non-verbal communication formed a basis for an open dialogue.  
Photo Enni Mikkonen, 2016

In the exercises the roles overlapped and the women encountered each other as women rather than as researchers and participants. This crossed social boundaries and transgressed privileges and inequalities for the particular moment. It called for challenging one's initial understanding and ways of seeing the world, as one participant stated: "I have learned a lot as a person". However, the global inequalities and power imbalances were not possible to be crossed completely. They became visible in areas such as, for example, terms for freedom of movement; when sharing the stories of individual pasts, a participant with a Finnish background was talking about travelling as a choice, whereas for a woman with a refugee background from the Middle East, travelling had been a matter of survival. The inequalities were concretised in an unexpected way. This was insightful from the perspective of social work and socially engaged art: the exercise created a space so that the researcher could imagine herself in the position of the participant. It brought forth the experiences based on the privileges, which affect our understanding and the interaction. It also emphasises the fact that professionals are not neutral participants – instead they have their own backgrounds that affect their interpretations and encounters.

Probably one of the main power asymmetries we had during the workshops was the mastering of the Finnish language. Most of the participants did not understand everything that was said, and they could pick up only part of the verbal communication. However, shared action appeared as a fruitful platform to learn the language. Becoming more fluent and self-confident in the spoken Finnish language has been one of the main achievements for some of the participants. "Now I'm content to handle cashier work, I talk more, and I am more confident".

Often intercultural communication and crossing social boundaries happen at the margin of the official programme. They cannot be predicted and they are created mutually between the participants. Mutual sharing and bonding was expressed for example in the hugs between the women. Those were the factors that kept the participants committed to the whole process. Or, as another example, once a participant wrote a sweet personal message on paper to another participant when she was actually supposed to give general feedback for an exercise. It is impossible to know if in fact she did not understand the instructions or if she just used the occasion to write secretly to the other participant. This led us to consider that, when constructing the framework for intercultural communication with immigrant women, the actual communication that overcomes differences often happens spontaneously and cannot be planned.

One core reflection of the workshops was about trust. To create an open cross-cultural dialogue, trust is a matter of getting to know each other and overcoming social hierarchies. Trust was indicated in the different actions that the women presented during the process. For example, a woman wearing a hijab took it off during one of the workshops. This was seen as an action of trust in the space with other women that she had come to know gradually and who made her feel safe.

On the other hand, building trust was a contradictory and personal matter. For example, the exercise which was meant to create trust (with closed eyes, allowing the partner to move you in the space) was perceived varyingly by the participants, as some could relax and trust their partner, while the others were scared of it. Afterwards they could share their feelings of unease and somehow the whole level of trust in the group increased. The levels of trust were impacted by a participant's character, life-situation and social position. They also linked to the global geopolitical situation that had affected personal histories of the participants and their reasons for migration. Those diversities created different reactions to the exercises. The feelings arisen in the exercises were shared and discussed, and it was insightful in terms of, for example, cultural differences and commonalities.

Even though the participants were all women, they carried diverse social identities and cultural manners that intersected in various ways and brought diversity to the group (see also Mookherjee, 2011; Kallio-Tavin, 2016). One of the participants reflected upon the differences between the women in terms of make-up and dressing habits:

*The women from South America related how they made-up and dressed up for going out, and somehow seemed to care about their public appearance a lot, while at home they were more relaxed. The women from the Middle East said how they make the greatest effort to be attractive at home, wearing make-up and doing their hair, while they covered themselves up when going out – whereas one girl now in Finland had adapted to the habit of staying in her pyjamas at home, but related how she has to dress up, put on her make-up, and do her hair if she shares video calls with her mother, who would disapprove of her being shabby at home.*

This example brought forth how gendered expectations differed among women from different cultural backgrounds, and how gendered and cultural manners are not stable but can gain new forms, for example, when a woman changes her social environment. One of the difficulties in intercultural interaction comes

back to language and cultural values. Therefore, we must equip ourselves with knowledge about other cultures. Intercultural knowledge reduces anxiety and uncertainty, making the communication process smoother. However, knowing the other culture is not sufficient – or even completely possible – in creating social justice, which is a process that calls for critical consciousness of the inequalities and hierarchies that affect the understanding and interaction (Liu, Volcic & Gallois, 2010; Jönsson, 2013). It also requires understanding the past and present of each other as well as their impact on future views. One measurement of ‘success’ in intercultural communication is the feedback such as “I felt homely and easy to be here” and “I felt happy every time I was here or leaving from here”.

**“There is something special going on in this room – some magic that does not exist outside”**

Ideally, both socially engaged art and social work bring people together and provide a sense of connection and community (Schubert & Gray, 2015, p. 1351). However, this ideal often includes obstacles for reasons such as, for example, ethnic, gendered, and cultural boundaries and contradictions. Schubert and Gray (ibid.) have stated that socially engaged art involves a social process on living through the contradictions and articulating ambivalent interests and identities. This resonates with social work that is accomplished through communication and meaning-making, and focuses on the tensions between diverse interests within the community (ibid). Cross-cultural adaptation is not a one-way process that considers only immigrants; host nationals also have to experience cultural adjustments when their society is experiencing change. This was clearly visible in our workshop as well. One of the women participating in the workshop stated that she felt that biases from host nationals were one of the obstacles in interacting with local people:

*I work in a shop and I don't really want to interact with people. I avoid being the cashier. I prefer to organise the products. I am afraid that people can see that I'm a foreigner and don't like me.*

The tension between immigrants and host nationals is often generated in regard to the extent to which immigrants can maintain their heritage culture in the host country (Liu, Volcic & Gallois, 2010). Overcoming this tension requires – beside micro-level encounters such as the art workshops – also

structural changes where social boundaries are considered critically and social justice is a leading principle.

A deeper question in terms of ethics and social justice that arose during the planning and management of this participatory theatre project was: why should someone leave their duties, personal life, job, or studies to come to the workshop if we cannot persuade them that what we do really benefits them (see also Mikkonen et al., 2017). The participation in the art based workshops needs to be seen as being valuable for everyday life experiences and also as rewarding learning sessions. Moreover, they would probably be applied more easily if they were strongly connected with the needs of the participants. A strong feeling of connection and emotional bond was presented by one of the participants as being an important outcome of the workshop:

Overall, the workshops were always very intense and emotional moments, as we would always start by sitting in the circle and telling everyone about the mood we were experiencing as we arrived at the workshop, and would always end with a relaxation and short emotional-feedback session, where we could again share our feelings before parting. Somehow, an impression of there is something special going on in this room, some magic that does not exist in the outside was created.

Art can provide a meaningful catalyst for engaging individuals and communities in terms of taking action regarding a social issue and promote social justice. The processes by which people create and interact with art can help them to understand and challenge inequities (Hiltunen, 2008, 2010). Based on our experiences this can happen through cross sector collaboration. This calls for an interdisciplinary approach and a deep understanding of art, social engagement, and pedagogy. In addition, from the perspective of art education, the artist-teacher-researcher should produce new areas of knowledge and practices that are both aesthetically and pedagogically effective.

Art-based action research and social work research offer an ethical space to build an understanding of migration as a social issue from a gendered perspective. They also offer a path into knowledge production that aims to promote social justice. The connection between social work, art education, and critical pedagogy are apparent: art methods overlap with social work aims when it comes to challenging the power

and inequalities between the participants, as it can reach areas of knowledge without words, strengthen people's agency and the sense of belonging, and cross boundaries that may hinder interaction in everyday life situations for people with immigrant and Finnish backgrounds.

The participatory theatre methods created space for dialogue that crossed borders, in terms of language and cultural differences. However, our experiences and research analysis indicate that, without critical reflection on power, privileges, and inequalities that occur in social relationships, the interaction may remain hierarchic, or idle (e.g. Jönsson, 2013). Promoting social justice as part of social work and socially engaged art methods calls for recognising diverse past, present and the future views that the participants live with. It also requires crossing and renegotiating the ethnic, gendered, and cultural boundaries and recognising what is common between people beyond these boundaries. Those boundaries and categories often intersect and create otherness which, however, can be overcome as an experience during a shared creative process.



Image 5. Move or stay–performance 2017. Photos: Mirja Hiltunen, 2017

At the end of the process, the women's stories were intertwined into a performance. The aim of the performance was to bring multiple voices and stories of moving and staying to the public gaze to widen the prevalent narrative that often simplifies the experiences of immigration. Immigrants are not a homogeneous group, but their social identities intersect with the Finnish people's diverse social realities and categories. These forms of creative processes with interdisciplinary collaboration create alternative stories and serve to highlight the diversities that our society increasingly includes. Telling diverse stories overcomes biases and, therefore, in the long run, it can create societal coherence and a more peaceful society.

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