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Stimulating Social Engagement of Adolescents Through Theatre: Findings from a Multi-Perspective Survey

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Abstract

This study explores how theatre activities can stimulate the social engagement of adolescents based on data collected in a survey carried out within the ForesTEEN project. Drawing on the responses of 144 participants (i.e., adolescents, theatre professionals, teachers, project partners, parents, and audience members), this article compares multi-perspective views of the work of theatre, adolescents' motivation to participate, perceived barriers, and successful strategies to encourage adolescents' participation. It has been found that active theatre participation can lead to the improvement of communication skills, empathy, and self-esteem of adolescents. Most significantly, engaging teens in theatre provides a key avenue for social integration. By offering adolescents with different cultures and ethnic identities a platform to be heard, co-create stories, and feel connected to others, theatre is a space of belonging and shared humanity. Theatre is utilised in reducing social and cultural inequalities to allow adolescents to be actively involved in society and develop interpersonal and civic skills. Several recommendations are provided in the study, which illuminate how theatre can be more participatory, accessible, and inclusive, and how it is to be recognised as a strategic tool enabling adolescent social engagement.

Keywords: social engagement; theatre; adolescents' engagement; multi-perspective survey; cultural; arts



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1. Introduction

Theatre has long been a powerful tool to engage with culture, identity, and the human condition. In this context, culture is the shared meanings, values, and practices that constitute collective identity. For adolescents, it is not entirely about art but also a school of self, relationship, and change. Change denotes the processes of individual and social transformation arising from involvement in creative and collaborative theatre practices. In Europe, theatre's contribution to adolescents' development is receiving much attention due to its capacity for developing empathy, self-esteem, creativity, and communication skills (Lewandowska and Węziak-Białowolska 2020, 2023; Berni et al. 2023; Morelli and Alby 2024). The hallmark of European youth theatre is its focus on social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and involvement in the creation process, which is in line with the EU cultural policies that consider the arts as a tool for civic engagement and social integration. Despite these quoted advantages, however, many theatre institutions continue to struggle to engage adolescents, particularly those from low-income, migrant, or rural backgrounds. Issues of accessibility, age-related stereotypes that present theatre as an art form for older adults, and a general attitude of theatre as elitist or out-of-touch art still limit adolescents' attendance

(Anderson et al. 2014; Sanderson 2024). These are difficulties exacerbated for adolescents from marginalised or underprivileged environments, where financial limitations, lack of cultural exposure, or distance can further diminish their capacity for involvement in, or even presence within, the theatre. On this level, theatre threatens to become not an arena of shared inclusion and dialogue, but an arena of separation and cultural disconnect.

Within such a scenario, active engagement of adolescents in theatre is not only a question of cultural participation but also a very effective social engagement strategy. Several studies demonstrate improvements in peer relationships, social support and a sense of belonging when adolescents are involved in theatre practices. For example, youth participation in a theatresports programme can foster positive relational and civic dispositions (Chan et al. 2023), while drama clubs exhibit higher odds of strong peer-social support and lower engagement in antisocial behaviours (Bone et al. 2022), and interactive psychodrama addressing bullying enables youth not just to consume culture but to critically engage with it (Agle et al. 2021). As noted by Hughes and Wilson (2004), theatre practice enables adolescents to construct healthy identities socially, especially if they belong to under-represented or marginalised groups. According to the authors, participation in youth theatre equips adolescents with one of the most significant socio-emotional spaces. This is where they are able to develop their self-images in a positive way, create relationships, and receive various kinds of skills besides the aesthetic value of the performance. Similar concepts have been echoed in community theatre initiatives that aim to achieve social inclusion and collective empowerment through the use of participatory theatre (Viola et al. 2024). However, theatre's transformative potential depends greatly on facilitation and process. The outcomes of theatre participation vary according to the pedagogical approach, inclusivity of the creative process, and the community's capacity to co-construct narratives that reflect their lived experiences (Boal and Jackson 2002; Gallagher and Freeman 2016).

This transformative function is especially relevant in multicultural and socioeconomically different environments, where hegemonic cultural spaces are typically off-limits or indifferent towards minority teenagers (Irwin 2019). If participation in such spaces is understood through the lens of participatory and applied theatre practices, one can see how the marginalised youth obtain an opportunity to challenge and change the dominant narratives from the inside instead of adapting to them (Vettraino et al. 2017). Turning adolescents into co-producers rather than passive witnesses, theatre is able to cross different cultural boundaries, and thus, the cross-cultural encounter, exchange, and active citizenship become possible. These results can be achieved only if there is a real power-sharing between the participants and the process (for example, by engaging the adolescents in decision-making, theme selection, and performance design), thus making sure that collaboration is a reflection of the reciprocal influence rather than the token participation (Prentki and Preston 2009). This strategy aligns with co-production paradigms, which emphasise the engagement of young people in the co-design of arts and cultural interventions (Tinner 2024). This way, adolescents' involvement in theatre gets linked to larger social justice agendas, education justice, and cultural democracy (Mulè 2022).

This study is conducted as part of the European project ForesTEEN,¹ a representative example of youth-oriented participatory theatre initiatives in Europe. The project provides a multi-country European framework for understanding how the use of participatory theatre practices as a socially inclusive means can stimulate social engagement among adolescents. Though ForesTEEN shared an overarching conceptual framework, the concrete programming and activities at the different partner locations varied. Each partner adapted the activities to fit the local needs, resources, and artistic practices; thus, there was no uniform curriculum that was implemented in all the contexts. The research is centred on participatory and community-based theatre activities that regard adolescents as the ones

who, along with the artists, create the theatre and not as the ones who simply watch the performance; thus, it surpasses the models based on the traditional repertoire that may be culturally biased and lack contemporary relevance. Inherently, participatory theatre is considered an applied theatre practice that engages different groups in co-creation, collaboration, and social reflection, whereas in the traditional representational models, the focus is mainly on the scripted performance. [Prentki and Preston \(2009\)](#) argue that this is a very important difference because participatory theatre is the one that very directly influences the way adolescents see themselves, as belonging to the community, and as being able to express themselves within the cultural spaces. Several activities in ForesTEEN were based on devised theatre principles: adolescents decided the themes, co-wrote the scenes, and worked with theatre professionals to develop the performance material. Although the partners did not have co-produced performances for all of the events, the devised component was a significant part of the project's approach.

Through a multi-perspective survey conducted between November 2023 and February 2024, the study intends to explore these dynamics more comprehensively. The survey included 144 participants from various groups: adolescents, theatre professionals, ForesTEEN project partners, teachers, parents, and spectators. Specifically, adolescent participants are those taking part in theatre action groups, participatory workshops, and group discussions organised within the ForesTEEN project; theatre professionals design and facilitate the creative sessions within the events organised by the ForesTEEN project partners; teachers and parents of these adolescents are those interested to participate in the ForesTEEN project; and spectators represent the wider community attending events organised by the ForesTEEN project partners.

Their perspectives provide rich insight into their perceptions of theatre's social function, the perceived value of adolescent engagement, and the specific barriers impeding greater participation and impact. The aims are to explore the engagement of adolescents in theatre activities and to analyse the barriers to the limited accessibility and inclusiveness of current theatre opportunities for adolescents, as well as the lack of formats that allow active participation and engagement. Key recommendations for theatre decision-makers are provided to respond to the current gaps and make theatre more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to adolescents' interests and needs. Although the existing research on participatory and inclusive theatre is extensive, our study offers relevant contributions linked to (1) the involvement of various viewpoints, including opinions of adolescents, parents, teachers, and theatre professionals, to investigate how stakeholder expectations overlap or disagree; (2) the examination of the cross-European theatre programmes that reflect differences at the national and institutional levels in youth theatre access; and (3) the conversion of qualitative findings into key recommendations for policy and programme planning aimed at fair youth engagement.

The research question guiding this study is:

What are the factors influencing adolescents' engagement in theatre, including their motivations, perceived functions of theatre, and the measures that can enhance their participation?

The expression adolescents' engagement is meant as an inclusive collaboration among adolescents and all the players of the theatre system, where adolescents' ideas, views, and competencies are incorporated into the design of theatre/cultural programmes and activities. If the cultural space is to be transformed into a more vibrant, diverse, and sustainable one, adolescents need to take up a greater share of the responsibility. It is only by involving them in the creation and delivery of theatre programmes that their genuine voices, fantasies, and foresights can be identified and developed. An authentic participatory approach not only renders cultural spaces more attractive to the youth by,

among other things, giving them a feeling of belonging and possession (Brown and Novak-Leonard 2011; D'Andrea and D'Ulizia 2024) but also contributes to the production of young artists, the initiation of intergenerational artistic dialogues, and the creation of future audiences. Through a reading of the views of several sets of participants, the research provides evidence both of converging ideals and conflicting expectations regarding the partnership between adolescents and theatre.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, there is a summary of current research on theatre's impact on adolescent development. Section 3 describes the method used to conduct the survey. In Section 4, the results of the survey are provided. In Section 5, a discussion of key recommendations to address the existing gaps in adolescents' engagement in theatre activities is provided, along with some conclusive remarks.

2. Background

Over the last few years, some studies have looked at the positive effects of engaging adolescents in theatre practice and focusing on the social, affective, and cognitive dimensions of adolescent development. Hughes and Wilson (2004) studied theatre as a learning process and asserted that it provides a means of creativity, simultaneously being a powerful vehicle for development in adolescence. One factor that should never be overlooked is how theatre affects adolescents' communication skills. Hence, after students have engaged in theatre arts and activities, their requirement of thinking within a certain framework, and even feeling in that same way, contributes significantly to the expression of the self both verbally and non-verbally, which in turn leads to the improvement of their communication skills. This process trains people to listen better, work in a team, and adapt to different modes of interaction. Recent research shows that the changes that happen with youth through participation in applied or educational theatre lead them to become more empathetic and collaborative and develop interpersonal skills (Agle et al. 2021; Chan et al. 2023). Engaging with self and others enables adolescents to articulate, listen to reasoned arguments, and relate to different social environments. Moreover, skill in performing and presenting helps to foster confidence in public speaking and promote assertive communication beyond the theatre setting (Bone et al. 2022).

Theatre also helps in the development of imagination and creativity. It provides adolescents with an opportunity to analyse characters, which helps them empathise with and understand other people's points of view. This helps them appreciate the different cultures and narratives and broaden their worldview (Morelli and Alby 2024; Celume et al. 2019). This capacity to empathise with the perspectives of others also enables adolescents to understand others' dilemmas, bringing about a sense of solidarity that diverse societies need. Theatre is therefore both mirror and bridge—reflecting individual circumstances and connecting different parts of divergent social segments.

Besides that, theatre can do so much to make one socially aware. With social and cultural matters being presented on stage, adolescents become not only aware of social interactions but also, they develop a critical sense of the world around them. Though adolescents from marginalised contexts might already be significantly conscious of unfairness in society, theatre helps them reflect and share those experiences in a safe and supportive space, thus turning critical awareness into dialogue and even social change. Such a process of awareness results in active and participatory citizenship. Based on this, we may reconnect to the research of D'Andrea and D'Ulizia (2023), whose authors claimed the power of local community engagement in cultural activities, especially those which facilitate the communication between different generations, as a means of identity and community tie strengthening. In a similar manner, the engagement of adolescents in theatre when they have an active role in defining the themes means they are thereby transformed

from being mere recipients to co-creators of cultural narratives, a concept that is the foundation of the most efficient community involvement strategies. Through grappling with the sorts of complex social issues such as inequality, environmental sustainability, or identity, adolescents develop the capacity to think critically about and engage in creating change in society. This not only makes them more ready for social responsibility but also makes them ready to be engaged, active citizens who are aware of the issues and potential of their communities.

This potential for critical engagement with social and cultural issues through theatre can be even stronger when combined with deliberate, strategic interventions in educational frameworks (Mulè 2022). Educational approaches grounded in critical pedagogy (Freire 2020), aesthetic learning (Abbs 2003), and dialectical methods (Fabbro and Isham 2022) further emphasise the role of theatre in fostering reflective, participatory, and dialogic learning environments that promote agency rather than compliance. It has been researched that wherever theatre is included in formal curricula, it supports a richer kind of education, offering young people the potential to examine power relations, inequalities, and ethical issues in society (Mulè 2022; Sallis 2023).

Finally, theatre provides adolescents a platform with lots of room for development as human beings and as empathetic, expressive, and socially aware individuals who can contribute meaningfully to their communities. Indeed, when supported by intentional facilitation and inclusive pedagogical approaches, the process of acting can enable the development of abilities, such as effective communication, creativity, empathy, and social consciousness, which are essential to their overall growth and the building of a more integrated society (Irwin 2019). In line with D'Ulizia et al. (2025), who advocate for integrated participatory design methods to address complex social challenges such as adolescent health and well-being, we can see how similar principles apply here: theatre, too, benefits from inclusive strategies that directly involve adolescents in co-creating solutions and spaces that respond to their needs. Similar patterns amongst others have also been documented in inclusive performing arts contexts; for instance, for young people with disabilities, where accessible and co-created practices can exponentially scale participation (le Roux et al. 2021). Theatre is not merely an aesthetic pursuit, but it is also a very important need of society which requires young people to be grown-up as creative, empathetic, and rational individuals, which will allow them to become full and equal members of society instead of being only passive recipients of culture. Such skills, sharpened through theatre participation, carry over far beyond the stage into every part of the adolescent's life, equipping them to face the coming years' challenges with flexibility, originality, and empathy. Hughes and Wilson (2004) claim that the relevance of adolescents' participation in theatre is more profound than an aesthetic experience and transpires over to the social sphere, where adolescents are increasingly being engaged in social discourse. This perspective is the basis for the argument that the future of theatre among adolescents cannot be limited to entertainment or instruction but has a significant vested stake in the social fabric, enabling adolescents to be contributing participants in societal challenges. Thus, theatre's power to shape adolescents' lives makes it a worthy and indispensable ingredient in the educational and social development of adolescents. Building upon the growing body of research that highlights the positive impact of theatre on adolescent development, particularly as it affects communication, imagination, empathy, and social responsibility, this article tries to make a step toward application from theoretical frameworks of participatory arts, youth theatre, and social inclusion (Boal and Jackson 2002; Hughes and Wilson 2004; Gallagher and Freeman 2016). This research, in particular, is primarily concerned with the purpose of evaluating the engagement of adolescents in theatre activities in Europe. By pointing out the gaps and problems in this involvement, the article intends to offer some

key recommendations regarding ways of theatre becoming more accessible, friendly, and responsive to the interests and needs of adolescents. In this article, theatre participation is seen as a performing art practice that focuses on co-creation, collaboration, and social reflection, rather than a traditional representational model of a scripted performance. This distinction is crucial, as participatory theatre directly shapes how adolescents experience agency, belonging, and self-expression within cultural spaces (Prentki and Preston 2009).

3. Materials and Methods

Data were collected through an online questionnaire that was carried out through the Google Forms platform from 1 November 2023, to 28 February 2024, for a total of four months. The questionnaire was spread by the ForesTEEN project partners both through their social networks and their professional contacts by reaching out to adolescents, theatre professionals, partners of the ForesTEEN project, teachers of adolescents, parents of adolescents, and spectators of theatre events. A total of 144 people responded to the questionnaire. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents per type, Figure 2 per gender, and Figure 3 per nationality. Note that the over-representation of Spanish respondents is because Spanish partners of the ForesTEEN project disseminated the questionnaire more widely. However, this imbalance does not compromise the validity of the questionnaire results, since the aim of the study is not to produce a statistically representative sample of the general population. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and all participants were informed that the data collected was anonymous and that all data would be used only for research and evaluated anonymously. All respondents provided informed consent before taking part in the survey.

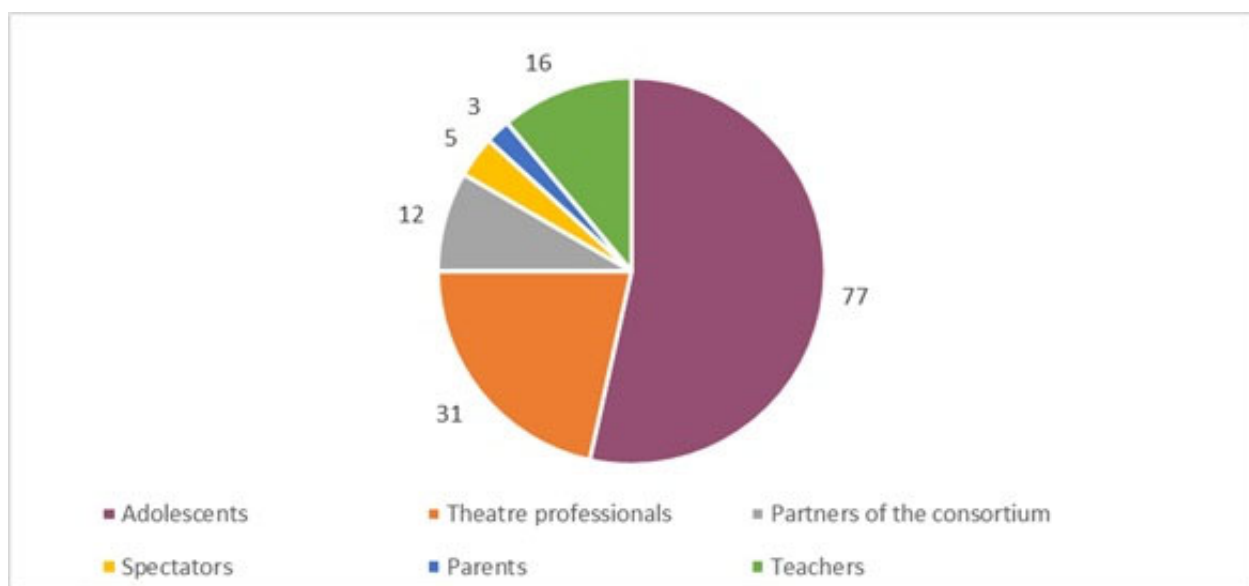


Figure 1. Number of respondents per type.

The questionnaire used to conduct the survey is structured in the following five different macro-areas:

- Socio-demographic information (e.g., age, gender, and nationality of respondents);
- Perceived function of theatre in society (e.g., social function of the theatre and satisfied needs);
- Motivations for engaging adolescents in theatre activities (e.g., why the involvement of adolescents in theatre work is significant for their personal, social, and cultural development);

- Factors influencing adolescents’ engagement in theatre activities (e.g., inner and outer challenges that tend to encourage and discourage adolescents from engaging in theatre activities;
- Measures for encouraging adolescent engagement in theatre activities (e.g., measures which can be implemented for promoting heightened participation of adolescents).

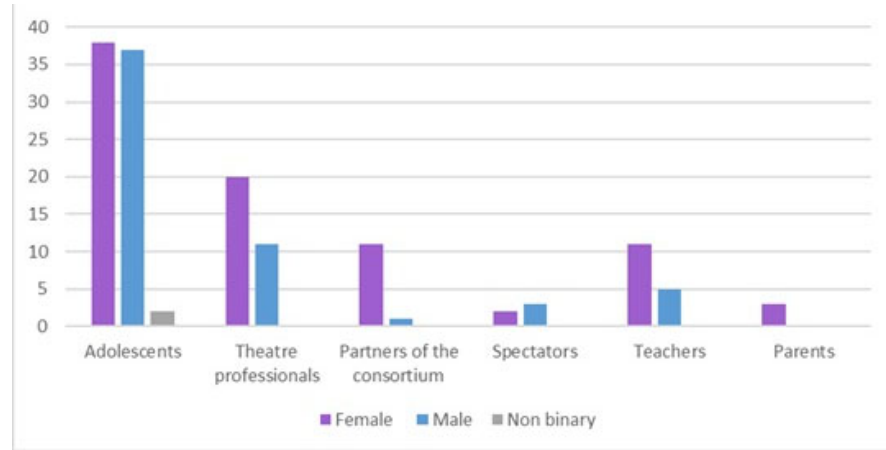


Figure 2. Gender of the participants.

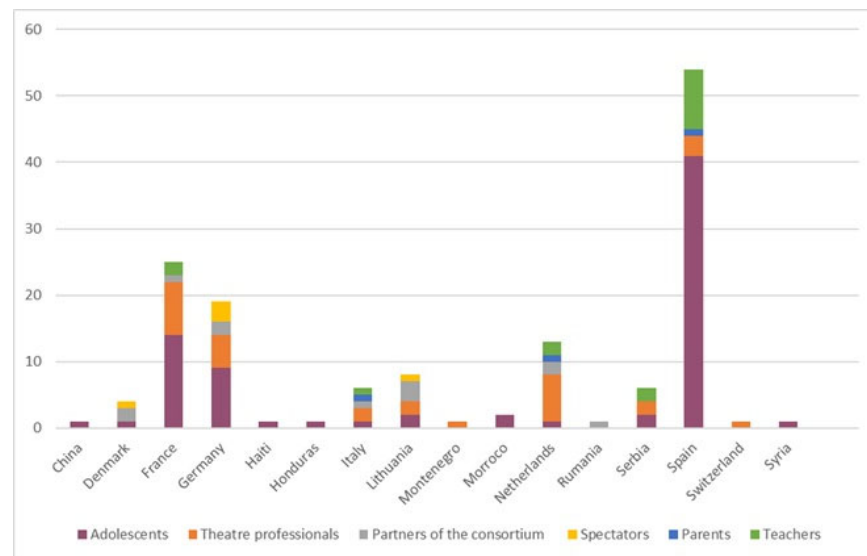


Figure 3. Nationality of the participants.

The data collected through the survey was subject to qualitative analysis by means of content analysis. The answers were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. This approach allows to understand the participants’ perspectives and to obtain a large amount of information to answer the research question guiding the study.

In the next section, the results of the survey according to the participants’ point of view are described in detail.

4. Results

This section provides an overview of the survey findings. It compares the feedback from different survey respondents concerning the key themes of adolescents’ engagement in the theatre (e.g., perceived function of theatre, motivations for engagement, factors influencing the engagement, and measures for engagement). Keep in mind that the survey

questions were not all mandatory. Therefore, some respondents skipped some items; thus, there is a difference in the number of responses per question.

4.1. Perceived Function of Theatre

The perceived function of theatre, as extrapolated through the voices of different respondent groups, is a complex and multilayered notion, shaped by various experiential, generational, and professional filters. The very multiplicity of meanings not only attests to the multidimensionality of theatre itself but also to sociocultural positions from which the respondents interact with it.

For adolescents, the function of theatre is commonly defined in terms of entertainment, an answer provided by most of the respondents belonging to this group. This can mean a departure from more professional or adult-oriented thinking, which is likely to conceptualise theatre as being more than a diversion. Entertainment is most typically associated with a feeling of escape from reality, suggesting a desire for temporary escape, perhaps symptomatic of the psychological and emotional challenges typical of this stage of development (Cherewick et al. 2025). A few of the participants pinpoint it as a site of community and shared experience, while others view it as a means of self-expression, an art form in which their voices and inner worlds can be expressed. Then, and to a lesser extent, they attribute to theatre cultural, educational, and social functions, significantly bringing critical thought regarding contemporary societal issues. These acknowledgements, even if not explicitly expressed, reveal a tacit awareness of the capacity of theatre to stimulate thought and social consciousness.

Theatre professionals have a more formalised and reflective perspective, based on their direct experience of the medium. They mostly define theatre as a socially engaged art form, capable of dealing with and elaborating on matters of pressing concern in society. They emphasise its educational function and critical thinking development, defining it as a space where audiences are intellectually and emotionally challenged as well as being entertained. The concept of theatre as a community is also a leitmotif, conceived not just as a gathering of individuals but as a site of shared meaning-making. Interestingly, professionals also appeal to the transformative power of theatre as a means through which audiences can gain access to different points of view and cultivate empathy. In addition to the political and social, however, they also recognise theatre's intrapersonal dimension: a means of exploring one's emotions, negotiating internal conflict, and facilitating individual development. Inexplicably, few practitioners consider the ambivalence of theatre's role as both escapist and realist, thus upholding the idea that its purpose is not absolute but relative to circumstance and intention.

According to the ForesTEEN project partners, theatre is a space where adolescents can rediscover themselves and build community, though a small subset of respondents perceive it as unsuitable for their age and rarely attend with peers. Two women partners highlighted the importance of family and school influence in introducing adolescents to theatre. When asked if there are specific contents suitable for adolescents, 6 partners stated there is no content for adolescents, believing they should be exposed to all types of performances. However, 3 partners felt the most suitable content would directly involve adolescent themes, such as stories with adolescent protagonists. Three other women emphasised the need for modern or contemporary representations, like slam poetry or interactive forms. On the social function of theatre, 4 partners shared that theatre historically reflects and brings to the forefront social issues, staging real-life experiences that provoke thought. Four women also highlighted theatre's role in eliciting emotion and connecting with others. Another partner expanded on this, linking it to cognitive aspects as well. Additionally, two partners acknowledged the theatre's potential to enhance interpersonal and social relationships.

Furthermore, 5 partners noted that theatre connects adolescents with their inner world, helping them better understand and manage their emotions.

Teachers provide a pedagogically guided vision of theatre as a didactic, cultural, and emotional resource. They stress the ability of theatre to engage adolescents in their heritage and with multiple perspectives, to think critically, and to participate in intercultural communication. This ability is confirmed in a study conducted by [Fabbro and Isham \(2022\)](#) who demonstrated how theatre can be used as a pedagogical practice to help educators enhance their ability to support young people's civic participation and citizenship education. Theatre is seen to be simultaneously both educational and entertaining and to be capable of evoking curiosity as well as communicating values. Furthermore, some teachers focus on its use for emotional and bodily expression, emphasising its use in integral education. Although some answers are more abstract, referring to theatre as a place for transformative experiences, the overall trend is to describe it as an adjunct to schooling, whereby education occurs through reflection, compassion, and beauty.

Parents generally described theatre primarily as a cultural resource that contributes to adolescents' cognitive and social development. Some associate it with reflection and debate, presenting this art as a challenge to confront the problems of the world. Although there are few responses, the tone communicates a wide sense of appreciation of theatre's intellectual and moral value, although less is given to its affective or relational properties.

Finally, spectators fully seize these recollections in their individual but thematically convergent accounts. Their experiences underscore theatre's social mission, its ability to bring people together and create community. Others cite its potential for breeding empathy and mending things so that it allows observers to step into other people's shoes and reconsider their perspective. Few spectators demonstrate keen sociopolitical awareness, describing theatre as a space for staging the present and as a site for critique and envisioning.

In Table 1, the primary perceived functions of the theatre provided by the different respondent groups extracted from the analysis of closed and open questions are summarised.

Table 1. Primary perceived functions of the theatre provided by the different respondent groups.

Respondent Group	Primary Perceived Functions	Number of Respondents
Adolescents	- Entertainment - Self-expression - Shared experience and community	(43—16 women, 26 men, and 1 non-binary) (12—6 women, 6 men) (17—11 women, 6 men)
Theatre Professionals	- Social interaction - Educational function - Critical thinking development - Site of shared meaning-making - Cultural and emotional transformation - Intrapersonal exploration	(12—7 women, 5 men) (3—2 women, 1 man) (5—3 men, 2 women) (9—6 women, 3 men) (3—2 women, 1 man) (6—5 women, 1 man)
ForesTEEN Project Partners	- Rediscovery and construction of community - Enhance interpersonal and social relationships - Contact with the inner world - Reflection and emotions	(3 women) (1 man and 1 woman) (5 women) (4 women)
Teachers	- Entertaining and didactic resources - Expression of emotions and body - Transformative experiences and intercultural reflection	(4—3 men, 1 woman) (2—1 woman, 1 man) (4—3 women, 1 man)
Parents	- Cultural resource - Intellectual and social development - Inciting reflection and debate	(3 women) (2 women) (2 women)
Spectators	- Construction of the community - Empathy and shifting perspective - Social criticism	(3—1 woman, 2 men) (1 woman) (2—1 woman, 1 man)

These findings, as presented in Table 1, state that although adolescents perceive theatre as fun and expressive, theatre professionals and teachers signify its community-building,

socio-educational, cultural, and transformative roles. This misalignment has practical implications: programming designed around adult expectations may not resonate with adolescents, while adolescents' desire for relevance, representation and agency remains under-addressed.

4.2. Motivation for Engaging Adolescents in Theatre Activities

Engaging adolescents in the theatre is not just an act of cultural inclusion but a multi-faceted strategy for individual and collective growth. In the diversity of respondents, there is an overlap across the value of the theatre as a formative experience, but with differing emphasis according to each group's location and agenda. Adolescents, for instance, oscillate between envisioning theatre as a fun new experience and as the path to psychological and emotional maturation. Some adolescents describe entertainment as theatre's primary allure, while others describe the value of stepping outside their comfort zone through activities that challenge habitual ways of thinking and acting as the way to richer views and greater self-understanding. A significant percentage highlight theatre's role in encouraging critical thinking and cultural literacy, with most respondents framing their engagement in terms of subverting reductionist education clichés that associate theatre with old or exclusively classical forms. Most strikingly, however, is the adolescents' identification of themselves as theatre's future, something which testifies to a sense of ambition as much as an active notion of artistic succession. In several responses, indeed, adolescents expressed their interest in becoming performers or creators, as well as their opinion that new generations must modernise theatre. This is also borne out by appeals for greater diversity of narratives and greater adolescents' representation on stage.

In contrast, theatre professionals approach the inquiry from the point of view of cultural continuity and artistic sustainability. They underline that without the participation of adolescents; the very future of theatre is at risk. Consequently, they emphasise the need to cultivate a new generation of audience and makers, identifying adolescents as a traditionally underserved group whose participation is not only desirable but imperative. Several respondents point to theatre's pedagogical possibilities to make empathetic, tolerant citizens, capable of understanding complex social phenomena through lived, embodied narratives. They also envision theatre as a singular refuge from hyper-digitalised environments, a physical and communal realm in which reflection, authenticity, and human connection can still flourish. Others also refer to theatre's capacity to allow adolescents to confront inner fears, test identity, and establish fulfilling relationships, both with their peers and with adult mentors within the theatre community (10—7 women, 3 men).

On the other hand, the ForesTEEN project partners underlined the important role of the school and the family in exposing adolescents to theatre and stimulating interest, and the impact of peer groups. Some partners observe that individual tastes and interests can naturally draw adolescents to this art form when the content of the performance is of interest to them. Relevance to their everyday lives and concerns is what draws adolescents to theatre, say some partners, not necessarily entertainment but the opportunity to see themselves reflected, to be heard, and to engage emotionally with performance.

Drawing on the teachers' responses, engaging adolescents in the theatre is mainly for their personal and social development. The most cited reasons included being in a group and being close to others, and working in a team, and individual preferences. Three of the respondents emphasised self-expression and experimentation as drivers, and three of them emphasised entertainment, enjoyment, and escape from reality. One respondent spoke about the role played by educational institutions like schools and families in facilitating adolescents' participation.

Parents ranged from helping adolescents to bring out their emotions and stimulate their thinking to promoting cultural and personal growth and facilitating comparisons with similar and different realities. Other main motivators included affordable prices, the presence of their peers and friends, or school activities.

Spectators offer various insights. One spectator sees theatre as important for entertainment and broadening adolescents’ horizons. Another spectator believes that theatre helps adolescents grow by experiencing social situations and problems from the perspective of others. A third spectator views theatre as a way to distract from the pervasive use of technology and create new experiences. The last two spectators (men) focus on adolescents being the future of theatre, envisioning them as potential new audiences or actors.

In Table 2, the motivations identified by the different respondent groups are summarised.

Table 2. Motivations identified by the different respondent groups.

Respondent Group	Motivations Identified	Number of Respondents
Adolescents	- Entertainment	(4—3 women, 1 man)
	- Stimulation of critical thinking	(17—8 women, 9 men)
	- Richer views and greater self-understanding	(6—3 women, 3 men)
	- Subverting reductionist education clichés	(6—3 women, 3 men)
	- Sense of ambition	(10—5 women, 4 men, 1 non-binary)
Theatre Professionals	- Artistic sustainability and cultural continuity	(4—2 women, 2 men)
	- Learning to empathise and become tolerant	(12—7 women, 5 men)
	- Refuge from hyper-digitalised environments	(2 women)
	- To confront inner fears, test identity, and establish fulfilling relationships	(10—7 women, 3 men)
ForesTEEN Project Partners	- School, family, and peer influence as crucial	(5 women)
	- Engaging emotionally with performance	(2—1 woman, 1 man)
Teachers	- Being in a group and working in a team	(2—1 woman and 1 man)
	- Individual preferences	(4 women)
	- Experimentation and self-expression	(2 men and 1 woman)
	- Escape and pleasure from the real world	(2 women and 1 man)
Parents	- Emotional and intellectual stimulation	(3 women)
	- Cultural growth and comparison with alternative realities	(3 women)
	- Low costs and peer participation	(3 women)
Spectators	- Amusement and expansion of horizons	(1 man)
	- Empathy and self-discovery	(1 woman)
	- Disconnection from virtual spaces	(1 woman)

As Table 2 illustrates, a variety of motivations for engaging adolescents with theatre all come together to something more than individual development, to a greater feeling of recognition, belonging, and voice. Adolescents themselves say that they wish very much to be heard and spoken for on stage, and spectators and theatre professionals report the life-transforming power of shared experience. This intersection between groups suggests that theatre engagement of adolescents is something more than entertainment or education, but an actual way to become socially integrated.

4.3. Factors Influencing Adolescents’ Engagement in Theatre Activities

A comparative evaluation of the diverse perceptions of the respondents’ groups shows a complex set of factors that deny adolescents an opportunity to engage in theatre activities. From the adolescent’s perspective, the primary obstacle seems to be an overall personal uninterest in theatre, usually premised upon an assumption that its content and structure do not satisfy the standards of values or aesthetics of their generation. This alienation is frequently added to by a theatre repertoire perceived as being old-fashioned, irrelevant, or aimed at older individuals. An additional layer of complexity is added by the weight of adult-imposed stereotypes, whereby theatre-inclined adolescents are viewed as peculiar or misplaced. Adolescents themselves can also possess preconceived notions of the theatre

world, seeing it as elitist, inaccessible, or inherently dull—an attitude too often bolstered by restrictive exposure and a lack of accessible information.

Practical barriers are filled by these attitudes. Barriers such as the lack of time, disorganisation, stress, or social embarrassment of attending a formal cultural event, or effort required are mentioned by some adolescents. Financial and geographical limitations also limit engagement, where theatre facilities are scarce or costly. The family setting enters the picture also: if parents are completely unfamiliar or alienated from the world of drama, chances for cultural discovery are significantly minimised. Contemporary concerns such as digital saturation and the dominance of social media also enter the picture, drawing attention away from traditional forms of art and diminishing the value placed on live performance.

Theatre professionals identify a range of obstacles, among the most significant issues is the cost of attending performances, which, combined with adolescents' general lack of interest, presents a significant barrier. Another major issue is the lack of communication and information about theatre productions, which results in a position where many adolescents are simply not aware of what is available to them. Theatre professionals also note that theatre is typically regarded as being old-fashioned and out of touch with the lives of adolescents, having subjects that are obscure or immaterial and performances that fail to consider adolescents as a target audience. In addition, there are socio-economic issues at play as theatre is sometimes seen as an elite space, for the privileged minority, making the adolescents feel like they do not belong or are excluded. Some other factors include a lack of adolescents' input in the decision-making process and a cultural or educational disconnection from households where exposure to the arts is low. Also, the marketing strategies are outdated and do not appeal to adolescents.

The partners of the ForesTEEN project acknowledge some challenges, mainly related to structural and emotional barriers, ranging from economic limitations to no family support and negative associations with past performances. The same problems have been found in the results as well, i.e., limited communication and the overall lack of familiarity of adolescents with the theatre world. As a partner said, a lot of adolescents are only "not used to going" and their families provide them little support in this respect. A more general disengagement was also revealed, with one partner describing the problem as a "lack of interest" of adolescents.

Teachers provide another perspective, stating that the lack of awareness and the cost of theatre events as the main reasons. Their reports mention emotional and intellectual challenges that may include among them embarrassment, fear of being judged, and a feeling of inability to understand complex theatre plots, which, thus, can be additional deterrents. A teacher also noted that if theatre is great and accessible, adolescents would be very willing to participate, but usually, the product is either invisible or does not attract them. The school-mediated experience alone is thus considered not enough to create real, self-generated interest in theatre.

Parents stated simply that theatre might just not appeal to adolescents and pointed to the lack of information about theatre and the fact that adolescents are not used to organising their own schedules. Finally, another parent emphasised the perception of theatre as something outdated, saying it is often seen as "old folks' stuff", reinforcing the idea that generational stereotypes play a significant role in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward theatre.

While from the spectator's perspective, several recurring themes emerged. Issues related to communication and outreach are also emphasised. Two spectators highlight how difficult it is to attract adolescents to theatre performances outside of school-related

activities, suggesting a gap in how theatre connects with adolescents' audiences on their own terms.

In Table 3, the barriers/issues identified by the different respondent groups are summarised.

Table 3. Barriers/issues identified by the different respondent groups.

Respondent Group	Barriers/Issues Identified	Number of Respondents
Adolescents	- No personal interest in theatre	(17—6 women, 11 men)
	- View of theatre as being old-fashioned or irrelevant	(15—9 women, 6 men)
	- Preconceptions about theatregoers	(5—4 women, 1 man)
	- Cultural anachronism	(8—3 women, 4 men, 1 non-binary)
	- Adult-imposed stereotypes	(6—4 women, 2 men)
	- Lack of time	(7—4 women, 3 men)
	- Disorganisation, stress, social embarrassment, or effort required	(10—8 women, 2 men)
	- Financial and geographical limitations	(9—5 women, 4 men)
	- Family setting	(2 women)
- Digital saturation	(1 woman)	
Theatre Professionals	- Lack of interest	(8—5 women, 3 men)
	- Expensive nature of attending performances	(12—10 women, 2 men)
	- Outdated marketing strategies	(3—1 woman, 2 men)
	- Lack of adolescents' input in the decision-making process	(6 women)
	- Cultural or educational disconnection from households	(3—1 woman, 2 men)
- Material viewed as old-fashioned or irrelevant to adolescents	(14—11 women, 3 men)	
ForesTEEN Project Partners	- Lack of interest	(1 woman)
	- Budget constraints	(2 women)
	- No parental encouragement	(1 man)
Teachers	- Poor previous theatre experiences	(2 women)
	- Expensive and unaware	(10—8 women, 2 men)
	- Emotional barriers like fear of being judged or not being able to follow complex plots	(5—3 women, 2 men)
	- Invisible theatre product	(1 woman)
Parents	- Insufficient self-generated interest	(2 women)
	- Perception of theatre as something outdated	(1 woman)
	- Not enough information about the theatre	(2 women)
Spectators	- Adolescents' inability to plan schedules	(2 women)
	- Lack of exposure and knowledge	(1 woman and 1 man)

Table 3 illustrates how systemic and cultural barriers, tenuous along the continuum from cost, accessibility, and age-out-of-date material to sociocultural stereotype, undercut teens' ability to enter theatre. These barriers are symbolic in the manner that they identify who requires cultural space and who does not. On this foundation, overcoming these barriers is not a question of simply building attendance, but of making equal access to participating in culture, a fundamental element of social engagement.

4.4. Measures for Encouraging Adolescent Engagement in Theatre Activities

A close and probing analysis of the responses draws out convergences and divergences in the proposed measures to increase adolescent engagement in theatre activities. Nearly all of the contributions boil down to one common understanding: the existing theatre ecosystem is not engaging young people in a way that is relevant, representative, and resonant with their own lives. In this sense, the expression "theatre for and with adolescents" is not a concept, but a challenge to cultural institutions to radically change their relationship with adolescents. For a large number of participants, there is a need for theatre programming which will respond to their tastes, their concerns, and their social questions. On the one hand, the subject matter of performance has to come from the lives and the experiences of the new generation; on the other hand, it has to deal with the issues that fascinate them, be written in the languages they speak, and be presented in the formats they know.

Adolescents' responses consistently foreground a desire for active participation. Most of them say that they should be actually engaged in creative and curatorial work. They

demand more workshops, interactive events, and places where not only their presence is assumed but their voices are also heard. This indicates their need for authority and recognition. This finds affinity with the spirit of youth-led participatory arts research, in which young people are co-researchers and creative agents of change rather than passive recipients (Wright et al. 2022). This is not a group that is interested in being merely entertained, but one that is interested in contributing, creating, and being taken seriously as cultural interlocutors. Among the less often cited but still notable motivations, there are the need to improve communication strategies to make theatre more appealing, breaking existing stereotypes, organising more events that are specifically designed to make adolescents closer to theatre, and making theatre more accessible physically and economically. One very relevant suggestion was put forward by a younger respondent who stressed the importance of attending the theatre with relatives and parents, emphasising the potential role that shared cultural activities could play in instilling positive attitudes.

Believing that the theatre should not be destined for a bleak and disconnected future, ForesTEEN partners stressed the importance of ensuring more control and participation with and through adolescents, advocating for participatory methods and experimental approaches that engage adolescents not just as spectators but also as creators. Echoing previous remarks—and in agreement with what later was proposed by some teachers—three of the partners established the central role of schools for getting acquainted with theatre, suggesting regular visits to the theatre by schools and even the introduction of a “theatre subject” within the school curriculum. Besides schools, family was also viewed to be central in introducing children to theatre at an early stage. Two other partners (women) emphasised context-specific communications strategies targeted especially at young people, i.e., organising pre- and post-performance discussions. From an economic perspective, two women believed that theatre could be more affordable for youths if it was made economically more available for teen audiences, with one of them stating should be even “charge-free”. Another respondent gave a broader perspective, arguing that theatres not only should open up to adolescents but to other marginalised groups as well.

The proposals from teachers mainly focused on accessibility, content, and educational involvement. Three teachers reiterated issues they had previously mentioned as barriers, namely, the need to lower costs and provide more information about theatre. Others emphasised the educational aspect, suggesting the inclusion of drama education in schools and through workshops. Two other teachers stressed the need for more visually appealing promotional techniques aimed at youth markets. Lastly, three teachers stressed the importance of collaborative work among generations in order to restore theatre and enhance its importance among adolescents.

Parents offered more pragmatic and family-centred suggestions. One of the respondents pointed out that event planning should be improved and people made aware of theatre events. Another respondent mentioned the importance of publicity appealing strategies for adolescents. Finally, one of the respondents highlighted the importance of sharing theatre experiences as a family activity.

Spectators also offered practical suggestions. A new approach to marketing was recommended by one respondent, while another one underlined the necessity of propagating theatre culture in schools. A young German girl emphasised the need for better planning of theatre events, involving adolescents as active participants. A Lithuanian spectator called for more attractive and engaging content communication.

In Table 4, the proposed measures provided by the different respondent groups are summarised.

Table 4. Proposed measures provided by the different respondent groups.

Respondent Group	Proposed Measures	Number of Respondents
Adolescents	- Improve communication strategies to make theatre more appealing	(6—4 women and 2 men)
	- Breaking existing stereotypes	(4—3 women and 1 non-binary person)
	- Involvement in creation and curation	(21—11 women, 9 men, 1 non-binary)
	- Workshops and participatory events	(11—6 women, 5 men)
	- Theatre engagement initiatives	(5—4 women and 1 man)
	- Affordable and accessible theatre	(4—2 women and 2 men)
ForesTEEN Project Partners	- Experimental practices and participatory approaches	(5 women)
	- Regular visits to schools by the theatre	
	- “Theatre subject” in schools	(3 women)
	- Context-specific communication strategies	
	- A theatre that is affordable for adolescents	(3 women)
Teachers	- Theatre education programmes in schools	(2 women and 1 man)
	- Increased information and outreach regarding theatre	(3 women)
	- Eye-catching marketing campaigns	(1 woman and 1 man)
	- Collaboration between generations	(2 women and 1 man)
Parents	- Better event planning and communication	(1 woman)
	- Adolescents’ publicity campaigns	(1 woman)
	- Theatre as a family pastime	(1 woman)
Spectators	- New marketing campaigns	(1 man)
	- Promote theatre culture in schools	(1 man)
	- Better planning and engagement with adolescents	(1 woman)
	- More attractive and engaging content communication	(1 woman)

Table 4 shows that all groups of respondents, adolescents and partners especially, regard inclusive audience participation in theatre as a practice and aspiration. Open invitations to participatory creation, representative diversity, and accessibility address the potential of theatre as not just an entertainer or educator but something that can contribute positively to social cohesion. The proposed measures further consolidate theatre as a strategic sphere for social engagement, particularly for under-represented or disadvantaged youth.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study align with and go beyond the research literature cited in the first sections, which addressed the social and developmental functions of theatre for adolescents. Consistent with the conclusions of [Hughes and Wilson \(2004\)](#) and [Lewandowska and Weźiak-Białowolska \(2020, 2023\)](#), the results indicate that theatre participation serves as a tool for youngsters to improve their interpersonal skills, empathy, and self-esteem. The importance to respondents, particularly theatre professionals and teachers, of theatre as a place for social interaction and community building reflects their words in the literature whereby previous research pointed to theatre as a means of social inclusion and civic engagement ([Viola et al. 2024](#)). Besides that, the willingness of adolescents to involve themselves in the creative and curation process of theatre means that they are not only the audience but also the co-producers, according to the paradigms of [Tinner \(2024\)](#) and [D’Ullizia et al. \(2025\)](#), which advocate for youth-led cultural activities. Simultaneously, obstacles such as perceived elitism, unavailability of access, and aged characters identified in our study corroborate the difficulties that still exist in [Sanderson \(2024\)](#) and [Anderson et al. \(2014\)](#), implying that social and cultural inequalities still hamper the engagement of adolescents, although the powerful potential of theatre is generally acknowledged. Therefore, the current research affirms, on the one hand, theoretical literature about the social function of theatre and, on the other hand, it advances the debate by providing empirical evidence on the necessity of participatory, adolescent-centred approaches which can reconnect youth with theatre practice.

These findings provide significant contributions in developing the following six key recommendations for theatre decision-makers (e.g., theatre associations and arts institutions) to address the existing gaps in adolescents' engagement in theatre activities and make adolescents feel much more engaged. It should be noted that some of these recommendations have already been somewhat put into practice by the ForesTEEN project. For example, participation and involvement of the community/family were core components of the ForesTEEN project activities. However, the survey findings revealed that adolescents and partners consider that there is still a considerable way to go, especially in terms of content relevance, communication strategies, and accessibility.

5.1. Reducing Costs for More Affordability and Accessibility

One of the strongest barriers to adolescent participation in theatre is event prices. To overcome this, theatres must encourage cheaper ticket prices for adolescents or even give adolescents free entry. This solution removes the cost factor, which is always a big issue for adolescents, especially those who come from poor families. Second, available venues are required. Theatres have to physically make their spaces accessible to adolescent audiences so that they are easy to navigate and welcoming. Cultural accessibility is also included here, i.e., the programming should be diverse in terms of stories and themes that are relevant to the vast majority of adolescent experiences, namely social, cultural, and emotional.

5.2. Developing Adolescent-Centred Programming

Another crucial policy is the development of adolescent-centred programming that engages directly with the interests, issues, and concerns that adolescents are facing. This entails the creation of theatre that explores topics such as identity, social justice, mental health, and relationships, topics that are particularly relevant to adolescents. In so doing, theatre is not merely an entertainment resource but also a vehicle for individual reflection and social affiliation. Moreover, interdisciplinary works that combine theatre with other art forms—such as music, dance, and digital media—can be more engaging for adolescents, with various points of entry into the arts.

5.3. Encouraging Participatory Engagement

Theatres must move beyond the passive viewer model by adopting policies that encourage active engagement. Adolescents must be given opportunities to engage in the creative process itself. This can entail holding workshops wherein adolescents are invited to work with professional artists, creating and performing pieces that they own. Adolescents may also be engaged in programming choice, wherein they are requested to give their inputs on what subject matter and shows they would like to have, thereby becoming decision-makers in the culture. Engaging them in such a way allows adolescents to feel a sense of ownership and attachment to art.

5.4. Integrating Education

To establish a heightened, long-term interest in theatre among adolescents, theatre must be incorporated into formal learning. This can be carried out through partnerships/collaboration between theatre associations and schools to integrate theatre within school curricula, where students can be taught about and involved in theatre as part of their education. A close and probing analysis of the responses draws out convergences and divergences. Outside of school, theatres can collaborate with schools to provide extracurricular activities, including after-school drama clubs or theatre workshops, to create further opportunities for adolescents to engage with the medium. Furthermore, theatre workshops and educational programmes in community centres can provide increased exposure to the arts and provide adolescents with an environment to try out creative expression.

5.5. Promoting Strategic Communication and Marketing

Successful communication strategies are crucial to attracting adolescent audiences. Theatres have to be proactive in making use of targeted marketing that reaches the platforms and language most used by adolescents, such as social media, YouTube, and influencer partnerships. Through online platforms, theatres can create engaging content that shows the relevance of the plays among adolescents, thereby increasing the rate of attendance. In addition to the traditional means of marketing, the theatre can also offer pre- and post-performance discussions or an interactive session to ensure further engagement and knowledge of the play among adolescents. This offers an opportunity for the adolescents to deliberate on play topics, ask questions, and exchange opinions that can further involve them.

5.6. Stimulating Community and Family Involvement

Finally, theatres must realise the important role family and community play in adolescent development. Policies need to support the production of family-friendly shows, which allow adolescents to go with their parents, guardians, or brothers and sisters. Consequently, theatre becomes a family experience instead of an individual one. Community engagement activities are another way of attracting people and making them aware of the theatre's value. Local theatres can work with schools, adolescents, and community centres to organise smaller festivals where adolescents from diverse backgrounds can access arts and culture through theatre.

By implementing these significant policies, theatre companies can create a more interactive, inclusive, and accessible space for adolescents. These policies not only try to reduce the barriers that adolescents face in being engaged with theatre, but they also attempt to establish an extended relationship between adolescents and the arts, which will cultivate a new generation of theatre patrons, artists, and supporters. To begin with, it fosters recognition of youth theatre activity as a social requirement in addition to being a vehicle for societal transformation. Theatre offers space for intercultural communication, intergenerational negotiation, and negotiation of different social roles, expectations and identities, thus a significant tool in avoidance of marginalisation among adolescents mainly linked to age-based exclusion (D'Andrea and D'Ulizia 2024).

Youth theatre policy should not be viewed as mere educational or artistic investments but as social cohesion, inclusion, and resilience strategy interventions, especially during periods of inequality or social fragmentation (Morelli and Alby 2024; D'Ulizia et al. 2025).

The study presents some limitations. The sample group, while heterogeneous, is not necessarily representative of all aspects of geographic, cultural, or socioeconomic diversity. The findings are generally drawn from European environments, which would not necessarily translate to other cultures with utter ease. Secondly, the research freezes a moment in time, with no longitudinal view of how young people become involved in theatre and what longer-term impact it has on them. Thirdly, some voices—those of disabled young people, migrant young people, or young people in marginalised settings—were under-represented, and future research must strive to include these more fully. Subsequent research should aim to address these gaps with longitudinal approaches to investigating the long-term effects of theatre participation upon adolescents' emotional lives, identity development, and civic involvement. Also, researching how digital technologies can be integrated into theatre can help to bridge generational gaps and broaden the audience for this medium among young people nowadays. Lastly, the study underscores the importance of a combined and concerted effort. Through the blending of varied perspectives and the creation of participatory, inclusive, and emotionally charged theatre experiences, we can

anticipate re-engaging youth with this art and empowering them to take charge of it as artists, intellectuals, and leaders of the future.

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Note

- ¹ <https://www.segnidininfanzia.org/en/foresteen-2023-2027-building-a-resilient-european-teen-cultural-ecosystem/5084/> (accessed on 1 October 2025)

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