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Dramatherapy in an adapted school: what identity boxes reveal

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Background: Dramatherapy is increasingly used in special education contexts to support young people facing academic, emotional, and social challenges. In France, Regional Institutions for Adapted Education (EREA—Etablissement Régional d'Enseignement Adapté) serve vulnerable adolescents, often stigmatized and marginalized in mainstream schooling. This study explores the use of identity boxes as both a research method and a therapeutic tool in such a context.

Aims: The study investigates how identity boxes, integrated into a dramatherapy program, can foster emotional expression, self-reflection, and improved peer relationships among students in an adapted education setting.

Methods: Conducted as part of a research project, the intervention involved ten dramatherapy workshops led by a certified dramatherapist and conducted with two groups of final- and penultimate-year students. A control group, who did not take part in the workshops, nonetheless participated in two sessions dedicated to the construction of identity boxes, delivered as part of their visual arts classes. The study adopted an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of identity boxes and the associated narratives.

Results: Students in the dramatherapy group demonstrated enhanced emotional introspection, more positive peer interactions, and a stronger sense of Self, while the control group showed fewer developments. The identity boxes served both as expressive objects and as reflective instruments, offering deep insights into students' evolving self-perception and experiences of inclusion.

Conclusions: This study highlights the value of combining dramatherapy and creative visual methods in special educational settings. It underscores the importance of arts-based interventions in fostering emotional wellbeing and inclusion for students with disabilities and social difficulties, suggesting future applications in similar institutional contexts.

KEYWORDS

identity boxes, special education, dramatherapy, art based research, clinical sociology

Introduction

In this article, we present some findings from a pilot research-intervention conducted at a Regional Institution for Adapted Education (Établissement Régional d'Enseignement Adapté—EREA) in Portville (a fictional name), a medium-sized city in the Hauts-de-France region, France. This study is part of the broader ECAD research project (Expression Corporelle Adaptée et Désengagement Scolaire, or Adapted Physical Expression and School Disengagement), a 2-year research-intervention focusing on students experiencing

academic and social difficulties. Following results from a previous survey, dramatherapy workshops focused on self-expression were implemented. Dramatherapy is a form of creative arts therapy that uses theatrical techniques—such as role-play, improvisation, and storytelling—as tools for personal expression and psychological growth (Jones, 2007). It is particularly effective in non-verbal and emotionally complex contexts, such as those involving vulnerable adolescents (Bololia et al., 2022; Keiller et al., 2023). The study involved four groups of students. In this article, we will focus specifically on one group of final-year students, for whom an experimental research/evaluation methodology based on the use of "identity boxes" was employed.

Portville's EREA comprises a section dedicated to adapted general and vocational education, as well as an educational boarding school and a qualifying high school program. It provides an opportunity for students, for whom the mainstream educational system has proven inadequate, to re-enter a professional high school curriculum or to obtain a qualification within the institution itself.

The EREA caters to a specific demographic, selected through a departmental orientation commission or a commission for the rights and autonomy of disabled persons. These students typically face significant educational, mental and social challenges, have higher rates of absenteeism, and are often at risk of dropping out. They lack the necessary family support to succeed academically and pursue professional goals. As such, they are considered a vulnerable population, often coming from families affected by social marginalization. Gramsci (1934) and Maltese (2017), in his twenty-fifth Prison Notebook, referred to such groups as "on the margins of history," using this term to describe "subaltern" social groups that are fragile, vulnerable, and isolated.

We had previously encountered students from the EREA during one of our previous research-interventions. We collected data on the risk of school dropout as well as on the physical, psychological, and social health of the students at this EREA. The findings were quite troubling: beyond a significant risk of school disengagement—higher than that observed in other institutions—we found that 61.5% of the students had eating disorders, 40% were at risk of sleep disorders, 49.4% had general mental wellbeing issues, 20% were socially isolated, and 40% had very limited social lives. Physical tests revealed that the level of sedentary behavior and inactivity was also higher than in other institutions. All these factors were significantly correlated with the risk of school disengagement.

In light of these results, we, along with the EREA's teaching team, considered several intervention strategies. We subsequently implemented dramatherapy workshops focused on self-expression. The literature clearly demonstrates that this type of practice, which can also be considered a form of adapted physical activity, can positively impact the re-engagement of students at risk of dropping out (Gasparini and Vieille-Marchiset, 2015). Additionally, it plays a crucial role in addressing psychological and mental fragility, allowing for the identification of severe distress cases accompanied by social marginalization and precariousness (Arveiller and Mercuel, 2012).

More specifically, this approach is valuable in boosting self-esteem (Lapinski, 2002; Rousseau et al., 2005) and regulating

emotions through movement, offering significant benefits for mental health (Shafir et al., 2016; Mackay et al., 1987). This is particularly relevant in contexts like the EREA, where we have encountered a general situation of normalized violence. In the end, Jennings (1983) emphasizes the positive impact of this method on identity expression and reconstruction.

Another interesting aspect where self-expression could intervene is in combating sedentary behavior, a significant risk factor for chronic diseases and psychological fragility in the medium and long term (González et al., 2017). Finally, in terms of social health, the most noteworthy impact concerns the construction or reconstruction of social bonds, a crucial factor influencing the overall health of individuals or communities (Xue et al., 2020), particularly in the form of "positive social relationships" (Duh-Leong et al., 2021). In our context, as clearly stated by the French Ministry of Education and Youth, "Interpersonal Relationships" also characterize the "school climate."

Building on this framework and our findings, we hypothesized that an intervention focused on adapted self-expression would help reduce school disengagement and positively affect students' social and mental health by improving the overall school climate. To address this question, we employed several research tools:

- A two-year ethnography, which included participant observation, an analytical framework, and informal interviews;
- Semi-structured interviews with both students and selected members of the teaching staff;
- Questionnaires administered to the students who participated in the dramatherapy workshops;
- The creation of identity boxes, which also served as tools for in-depth interviews.

The dramatherapy workshops, ethnographic observations, and interviews were conducted by Cécile Nadhira Abdessemed, co-designer of the ECAD project (Abdessemed and Porrovecchio, 2024). Identity boxes and the related interviews were managed by Bérénice Mai Pruvost. Since this is a creative methodology and a form of experimentation, it involved a single class that participated in dramatherapy (the "dramatherapy group," DG), as well as a control group (CG) for comparison purposes. The CG also created identity boxes, but within the context of their regular art classes and without any dramatherapy component.

In this article, we aim to answer the following questions: "How does dramatherapy influence the emotional and social life of adolescents in an adapted education institution?". In particular, "What information do the identity boxes as a creative research method provide regarding the effects of dramatherapy on the mental and social life of these students?

While identity boxes have been used in educational and therapeutic contexts (Gauntlett, 2007; Brown, 2019), to our knowledge, this is the first study that employs identity boxes as a means of evaluating the effects of a dramatherapy-based intervention. This methodological innovation offers new possibilities for integrating qualitative self-expression tools with therapeutic and educational objectives.

In addition, the study contributes to the field by situating the dramatherapy intervention within a symbolic interactionist framework (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1956), focusing on how adolescents perform and negotiate their identities through symbolic and embodied practices. The combination of arts-based methods with sociological theory allows for a deeper understanding of how students in adapted education settings make sense of themselves and their environment.

The article first describes the context and methodology of the intervention. It then presents the results from the identity boxes and student interviews, before discussing their implications for research and practice in inclusive education and arts-based therapy.

Methods

Population, sample, and theoretical framework

In this institution, which serves students aged 11–19, everyone shares the same courtyard and a spacious building with a capacity for 136 students. Sixteen adolescents (15 boys and 1 girl) participated in the identity box workshops. The DG consisted of 10 boys, while the CG included 5 boys and 1 girl, all aged 15 to 19. The challenges they face are primarily socio-emotional. According to Le Breton (2007, p. 13), adolescents who struggle emotionally often suffer on an affective level, though their social circumstances add a distinct layer to their experience.

These young people receive adapted education, which involves adapted pedagogies and more time to complete the same tasks as in a traditional school. The general subjects taught are at a lower level than those in standard middle and high schools, which, in turn, creates a stigma for students in the EREA. They are aware of their difference from the youth attending neighboring high schools and live in the murky waters of stigmatization, unsure of how the "normal" students might perceive them (Goffman, 1963).

Our research-intervention work is based on the symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer, 1969), particularly drawing on Erving Goffman's studies on the representation of Self (Goffman, 1956).

The participants [legal guardian/next of kin] provided written informed consent to participate in this study. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Given the vulnerability of the participants, special attention was paid to minimizing potential distress.

Interventions

The interventions involved four groups of final- and penultimate-year students at the EREA. A total of 10 dramatherapy workshops were conducted for each group, involving 15 students in the first year (4 girls and 11 boys) and 10 boys in the second year. All workshops were led by dramatherapist Cécile Nadhira Abdessemed. At the time the identity box workshops were conducted, the school had just decided to continue the dramatherapy sessions, satisfied with the outcomes achieved so far.

The dramatherapy workshops were conducted in a safe and non-judgmental environment, following ethical guidelines for working with vulnerable youth. Participants could withdraw at any time without consequences, and facilitators ensured that exercises did not cause emotional discomfort beyond what was manageable in the context of the intervention.

We implemented a form of dramatherapy that we describe as "self-expression," inspired by Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1993). This theatrical approach is based on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1974), providing the "oppressed" with the means to practice resisting oppression in a fictitious theatrical space, thereby aiming for a "rehearsal for revolution" (Boal, 1993, 1996). Boal designed these techniques to be implemented not by artists, but by the "oppressed" themselves, encouraging them to become the protagonists of their own struggles for emancipation.

Theatrical improvisation is at the heart of this project, as is the "self-expression" used in our interventions. This technique provides a physical space for expression and a venue to verbalize inner states. The whole body is engaged, allowing participants to receive feedback from their peers. Self-expression facilitates communication and helps overcome barriers to mutual understanding. Goffman (1956), along with Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1996), with their concepts of "self-representation" and "common sense," guide our reflection on physical behavior and natural role-playing. Within the workshops, students are encouraged to act "as if," to play roles, and thereby become authentically themselves.

Evaluation method: identity box

Originating from the work of Gauntlett (2007) and later developed by Brown (2018, 2019) in the context of fibromyalgia, and now extended by Micol Pizzolati (Giorgi et al., 2021) in the educational field, the concept of "identity box" involves participants constructing a box that represents their "Self" and collecting items that they feel encapsulate their identity as individuals. This process also involves responding to a series of questions.

In constructing identity boxes, following Brown (2018, 2019), data is not simply collected but created or generated, thus being actively constructed. The completed identity boxes therefore represent not an objective truth but a constructed representation of personal and individual experience. The objects or artifacts in the boxes, combined with the interviews, act as "resources, mediators that [...] give shape to ideas" (Radley, 2010, p. 268; Brown, 2019, p. 490). Throughout the research process (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Brown, 2019, p. 490), researchers and participants collaborate as partners.

As Khatun et al. (2021) explain, the use of the box aligns with Pahl and Rowsell's (2010) concept of "artifactual critical literacy," which combines a focus on objects with the stories attached to them. These items might symbolize particular times or moments in participants' lives and could include books, poems, or personal objects. We encouraged participants to create their own artifacts,

focusing on their choices and actions as a process of curating meanings about themselves that they felt comfortable sharing with others.

Starting from this premise, following the work of Brown (2019) and Micol Pizzolati (Giorgi et al., 2021), the goal of the identity box project was to provide adolescents with a means to focus their thoughts, deepen their reflections, and express their feelings more readily. The identity box method was used to reposition students as active creators of meaning in their educational experience, framing them as producers of their own student identities. Once the boxes were completed, participants were invited to attend an interview based on Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) concept of interaction between participants and the researcher. During these interviews, participants elaborated on their initial thought processes and provided a more detailed and reflective analysis of their boxes.

Utilizing the trusting and supportive environment advocated by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1974), the researcher began the pilot by modeling the identity box concept to the participants. Two sessions were held for each of the two groups (DG and CG), with the researcher accompanied by Anne, their visual arts' teacher. The construction of the identity boxes took place in the art classroom, using both student-provided materials and materials available in the classroom. The boxes were created in two sessions of 2 h each. Following the second session, interviews were conducted.

Students were asked to independently prepare an identity box to be shared with the entire group. For the construction of the boxes, they were given two main instructions:

- The box had to be constructed in their image and the first object or artifact should address the question "Who am I?";
- The contents or artifacts had to answer the following questions: "How do others see me?"; "What is school for me?"; "What are Cécile's workshops (dramatherapy workshops) for me?". This last question was addressed only to the DG students.

To protect participants' privacy, no personal identifying information was included in the identity boxes or their analysis. During the interviews, students were reminded that they could skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. All data, including photographs and recordings, were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Interview transcripts and identity box descriptions were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), involving open and focused coding to identify key patterns related to self-perception, peer relationships, and school engagement.

The complete project data included photographs of the identity boxes, observation notes, and recordings of participants' interviews. Photographs of selected identity boxes are included in the Results section (Figures 1–5) to illustrate the diversity of symbolic representations generated during the intervention.

Challenges and methodological constraints

Conducting this research within special education school setting presented several methodological challenges. First, coordinating workshop schedules with the school's timetable and ensuring continuity across sessions required strong collaboration with staff and flexibility from all parties involved. Second, building trust with students—many of whom had prior experiences of marginalization—was essential for authentic engagement, particularly in the creation and sharing of identity boxes.

Another challenge was the emotional and symbolic weight carried by the objects selected or drawn by students: interpreting these artifacts required sensitivity and caution, as they often revealed deeply personal experiences. Furthermore, while identity boxes were valuable as expressive and reflective tools, they were not initially designed as assessment instruments, which posed difficulties in standardizing or comparing results across groups.

Lastly, the dual role of the researcher—as both observer and co-facilitator—required constant reflexivity to avoid over-influencing the process or interpretation of data. Despite these challenges, the richness of the material generated and the participants' engagement validated the chosen methods.

Results

General considerations

The students, who exhibited significant mental and social challenges as well as notable differences in artistic techniques and skills (Nolan, for example, a 16 years old boy, attended a year of "fine arts school" as part of his therapy), were partially supported in the creation of their boxes and the production of the items to include in them. They received guidance from both the researcher and Anne.

The interview with Anne highlights the significant effects of the dramatherapy sessions, in terms of social relationships and group dynamics. Anne points out that the workshops allowed the students to realize that they were "not so different from one another" and that, even if they didn't talk to each other before, they discovered "shared passions," which reduced animosity and rejection of others. The collective work helped create "a group" that was more united, with less mutual judgment.

She also notes that this process fostered a collective awareness of common struggles: "we're not comfortable in our skin," which created a sense of solidarity among the students. This dynamic had a positive impact on their self-confidence, with some saying, "in the end, I'm not as useless as I though."

Another important change Anne observed was in their willingness to speak up. She explains that during oral exams, for instance, the students "speak more easily" and feel more confident because of their experience in dramatherapy. The workshops helped improve their self-esteem and ease in expressing themselves, although Anne notes that physical and bodily changes were more limited.

Dramatherapy also improved the student-teacher relationship, as it humanized Anne. It helped her to be seen as a person, not just a teacher. The initial impressions of the researcher during her classroom observations suggest that there is a stronger social bond, greater respect for others, increased openness, and an overall better school climate within the DG, which aligned with the general goals of the ECAD project.
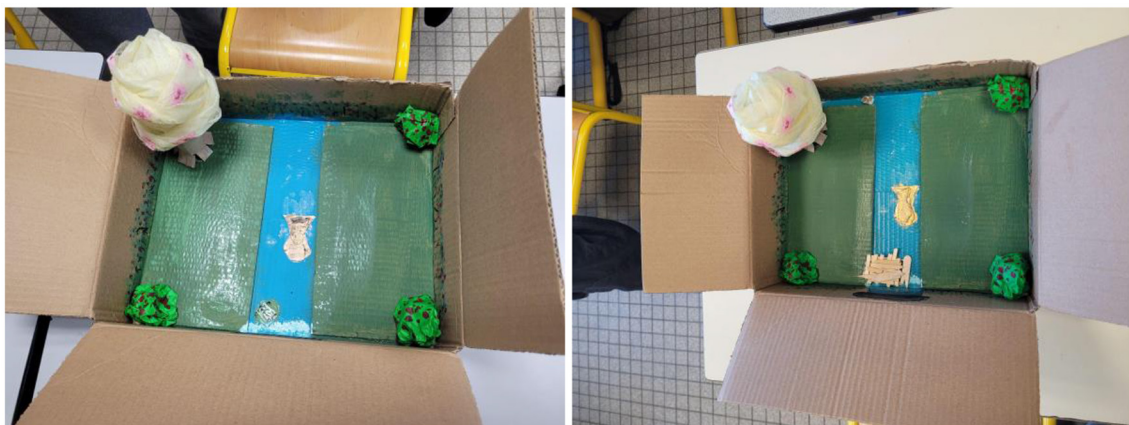
FIGURE 1
Enzo's box.

FIGURE 2
Nolan's box.

In the following section, we will present the results in detail, integrating both the analysis of the boxes and the interviews that followed. We will focus on some particularly significant cases.

The box: who am I?

To address the question "*Who am I?*", many students describe their favorite activities as a way to represent themselves. For

instance, Enzo (Figure 1), an 18 years old boy, chose a gardening tool because he loves gardening, while Thomas, though he didn't create an object, explains that he would represent himself as a wrestler. Similarly, Kevin (16 years old boy) crafted a fishing rod, reflecting his passion for fishing. Unfortunately, we were unable to photograph Kevin's identity box.

The interview with Anne revealed that students who participated in the dramatherapy workshops are now more open to self-expression and were thus more receptive to the experience
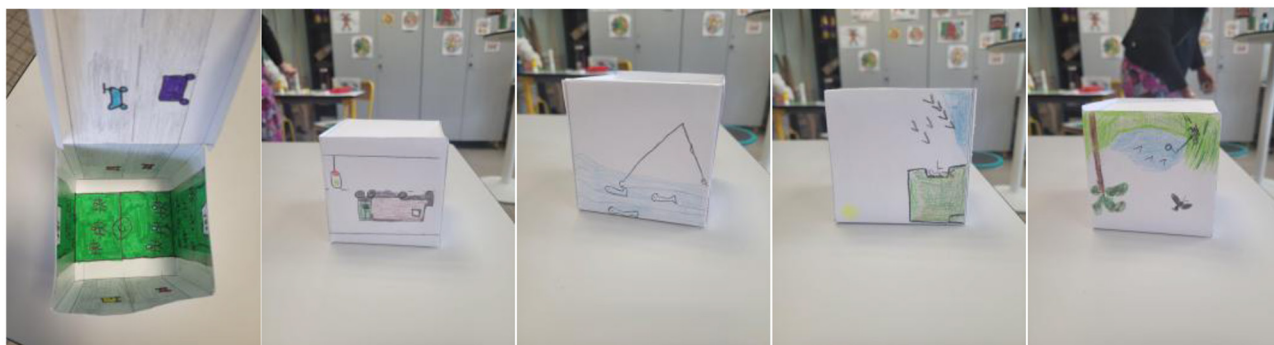
FIGURE 3
Marie's box.

FIGURE 4
Eric's box.

of creating identity boxes. In contrast, those in the CG exhibited considerable resistance. However, the experience of creating the identity box, whether using the box as an "object" or as a metaphor (Finlay, 2015; Brown, 2019), generally allowed everyone to express themselves.

The interview with Nolan (DG), a vulnerable and socially isolated student with a strong passion for school, highlights how both dramatherapy workshops and identity boxes have facilitated his self-expression and emotional articulation.

Nolan initially describes his identity box (Figure 1) as a representation of a "calm and peaceful" place, which he refers to as his "paradise" "because I like being off to the side, in my own corner." Nolan's description of the box as "a bit more beautiful" in his imagination, despite the rushed construction, highlights his aspiration for a more refined and idealized version of his "inner sanctuary."

The conversation reveals Nolan's deep connection to the elements he included in his box. A poignant moment in the interview is when Nolan mentions the field, which he associates with peace derived from his experiences at the farm. This addition reveals how his identity box is not merely a static representation but a dynamic expression of his experiences and emotions. Overall,

Nolan's identity box and interview illustrate how this creative process, facilitated through his involvement in the DG, has enabled him to articulate his emotions, desires, and self-perception in a meaningful way.

Marie (CG, 16 years old girl), who did not participate in the dramatherapy workshops, provides a contrasting perspective to Nolan's experience. Her identity box and the accompanying interview highlight various dimensions of self-expression and identity that reflect her personal experiences and attitudes.

Marie describes herself as "a superhero with a cape to show that, well, I was pretty brave, like a superhero in my life. I've been through a lot, which made me become a superhero for myself." In contrast to Nolan's more nuanced and emotionally expressive approach, Marie's box (Figure 3) includes straightforward symbols and labels.

Marie's detailed description of the various elements, such as her family members, her experience with hearing impairment, and the positive and negative aspects of her life, provides insight into her identity and relationships. The emphasis on labels and specific symbols, like the "orchestra conductor" for her father and "emergency mom" for her stepmother, reflects a more direct and less symbolic approach compared

FIGURE 5
Thomas' box.

to Nolan's more abstract and creative expression through his box.

The differences between Marie and Nolan highlight the impact of their respective experiences. Nolan's involvement in the DG appears to have facilitated a more creative and reflective process, allowing him to explore and articulate his emotions more deeply. In contrast, Marie's CG status is evident in her more literal and less expressive representation during the interview, especially in the first part.

Overall, while Nolan's identity box and interview reflects a more dynamic and emotionally engaged representation of his Self, Marie's box provides a more factual and structured view of her identity. These variations underscore the role of creative therapeutic interventions in enhancing self-expression and emotional exploration.

The "others"

The CG generally struggled to answer the question, "How do others see me?". When they heard the question, many tried asking their classmates for help. Kevin, for example, placed another fishing-related object, bringing bait this time, and created an entire box about fishing. Another student was unsure of his answer, but when asked which Pokémon others saw him as, he immediately found a response through the projection of his social Self.

In contrast, the DG didn't face as much difficulty. Eric chose to create a heart to symbolize his kindness, while Thomas, a 17

years old boy, would have selected a teddy bear because, despite his large build, he considers himself kind and struggles to say "no." Overall, the CG focused more on external aspects, whereas the DG emphasized internal characteristics.

The interview with Nolan reveals an interesting reflection on self-perception and how he believes he is perceived by others. When answering the question "how do others see me," he uses the metaphor of a "fish in water," referring to the fish visible in his box (Figure 2), explaining that "I feel like I'm at home," indicating a sense of comfort and ease in his school environment.

However, Nolan makes an important distinction when he discusses the difference between his own perception and that of others. When asked about the image he projects, he specifies that, in the eyes of others, he would be a "silver fish" rather than a "golden fish," because "I have less value in the eyes of others than in my own eyes." This distinction shows an awareness of his own worth, but also a doubt about how he is socially perceived.

By stating that he sees himself as more precious than others see him, Nolan reveals a self-esteem that remains solid despite the perceived disparity. His response highlights an emotional and identity-based complexity where he values his own self-image while acknowledging external judgment. This attitude is also found among other members of the DG.

The interviews with Marie and Eric (CG, 16 years old, boy), reveal a greater sense of isolation, disconnect and misunderstanding between their self-perception and how they believe they are perceived by others. Marie's metaphor reflects a deep sense of emotional withdrawal and a struggle to be understood by others. She describes a blank sheet of paper, saying, "it looks like I'm empty, like I'm in a box or a cage." This imagery suggests she feels confined by others' perceptions, as if they see her as someone without depth. Yet, she contrasts this by explaining that once people "open" her up, they would discover something much more vibrant: "I'm fine, you just have to learn to discover me, to open the page of the book." The metaphor of the book emphasizes her belief that her true Self remains hidden unless others make the effort to uncover it. This indicates a perceived gap between how she is seen and who she truly is, underscoring a sense of emotional distance.

Eric, in contrast, presents a more practical but still revealing metaphor. He chooses a glue stick (Figure 4) to represent how others perceive him, explaining, "because when we stick things, I like it. I like sticking photographs or things like that." His choice reflects a self-image centered on tasks and functionality, suggesting that others may see him as useful but not necessarily as someone with emotional depth. He admits that this choice wasn't deeply considered, further suggesting a surface-level connection between his perceived and social Self. When asked what object might represent his kindness, Eric hesitantly suggests "friendship bracelets," showing an awareness of his gentler side, but this response feels less thought-out compared to the more emotional responses of others.

Both interviews reveal a common theme: a disconnect between how these students see themselves and how they think others perceive them. Marie feels she is judged as "empty" but wants others to "open the book" and see her inner sparkle, while Eric's choice of a glue stick suggests a utilitarian role rather than a deeper emotional

connection. This sense of being misunderstood aligns with the overall pattern in the CG interviews, where students often express feeling less understood or appreciated by their peers. This contrasts with the DG, where students seemed more able to reconcile their inner identities with how they are perceived by others, reflecting the potential impact of the dramatherapy workshops on fostering self-understanding and social cohesion.

About school

Perhaps this is where the differences between the two groups emerge most significantly. On one hand, we have the CG, which presents a more "pragmatic" approach to school. Kevin's response reveals a practical and goal-oriented perspective on education. For him, school is a means to achieve future financial success: "School… I go to school to get a job later to earn money." He symbolizes school with a collection of money bills, reinforcing its role as a tool for financial gain: "A lot of bills."

When asked whether he finds school meaningful beyond its practical purpose, Kevin responds bluntly: "No, it's just for work later. This suggests a lack of emotional connection or personal engagement with his educational experience. His future goal of becoming a landscape gardener, which he associates with "a connection with nature and fishing," contrasts with his utilitarian view of school. Overall, Kevin's perspective emphasizes the practical aspects of education rather than personal fulfillment or interest.

Eric's response (CG) presents a more personal and positive view of school compared to Kevin's pragmatic perspective. When asked what school means to him, Eric says, "Well, I think it's good for me." He represents school with a pen, indicating a personal connection to the act of writing (FIgure 4). He enjoys school and appreciates the learning experience: "I like going to school too, to learn all of this." However, he also mentions a dislike for a specific subject, French: "But the thing I don't like is French." Overall, Eric's view of school is more integrated and positive, reflecting an appreciation for learning and personal growth, even though he has specific dislikes. Marie also enjoys school and views it as a source of knowledge.

On the other hand, Nolan's response, as part of the DG, reflects a thoughtful and maybe more abstract and metaphorical view of school. When asked what school means to him, Nolan describes it as "A place where I can… learn." He chose to represent school with a book: "Well, I made a book." Although Nolan acknowledges that the book he created does not include interactive pages due to time constraints, he suggests that it symbolizes the learning process itself. He expresses a specific interest in learning practical skills, noting that he would have "included the steps to become… to become a gardener."

Overall, Nolan's perspective highlights a constructive view of education, focusing on the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills, and demonstrates an appreciation for learning within the structure of school. Regarding the "others as students," Nolan shows a rather negative attitude as they do not seem to understand the importance of school: "Because half of the students are… either people who don't realize how rewarding school is and how much school can offer in this respect. Uh… What, basically, we need to

have a job, to work, to earn money to live." Unfortunately, Nolan did not have enough time to finalize the book to include in his box.

In general, students in the DG, like Thomas, were more willing to express their frustrations and feelings about the school environment. For example, Thomas (Figure 5) depicted a prison on the lid of his box, symbolizing how the rigid rules of school frustrate him, particularly the fact that the same rules apply to both middle and high school students. He chose the lid to emphasize that school traps him and his passions. As a solution, he suggests removing math or at least simplifying the theorems.

In informal conversations, sentiments about school were often negative, with remarks like "It's hell. I was clearly depressed. I won't be any more once I'm done with school," and "it's crap." Some students attend simply because they feel they have no other choice, or because they see it as a path to a job and to financial stability.

About dramatherapy

The following section will refer exclusively to the DG, as this question does not apply to the CG.

Nolan likens the dramatherapy workshops to "a raft" (Figure 2) that allows one to travel further, symbolizing how the sessions have helped him build self-confidence and explore new aspects of himself. This metaphor highlights Nolan's perception of the workshops as a means of personal growth and exploration, providing a stable foundation ("a raft") that supports his journey.

The imagery of the raft, though somewhat fragile, represents Nolan's recognition of the support he has received from "Cecile's ateliers." He describes the raft as a place where one can live and sleep, reflecting the safe and nurturing environment provided by the sessions. The mention of a "half-boat, half-raft" suggests a hybrid approach, indicating a blend of security and adaptability that he associates with the workshops.

In informal discussions, some students expressed their disdain for the dramatherapy workshops, with comments like "it's crap." However, participation in these sessions is entirely voluntary. During an informal discussion Anne explained that during the dramatherapy, everyone actually enjoys it. The negative remarks might be a way for them to provoke a reaction.

In an identity box interview, Thomas shared that he appreciates the sessions and would represent dramatherapy as a large space filled with mannequins to symbolize himself and his classmates. He noted that it has helped him feel more comfortable speaking in front of others and has boosted his confidence in social interactions. Similarly, Enzo chose to depict dramatherapy using effigies of himself, a teacher, and his classmates. He specifically wanted to highlight an exercise in which participants fall into each other's arms, stating that it fosters trust and makes them more at ease when speaking. He emphasized the importance of getting to know each other better, as well as understanding oneself. However, he mentioned that he wouldn't engage in dramatherapy outside of the school context.

Overall, the participant's responses illustrate how the dramatherapy workshops have influenced their ability to conceptualize and articulate their personal growth. Their use of metaphors and symbolic elements in describing the workshops

TABLE 1 Synthesis of the results.

Thematic area	DG (dramatherapy group)	CG (control group)
Self-perception	Increased introspection and emotional articulation	Limited or superficial self-description
Peer relationships	Improved group cohesion and mutual support	Fewer interactions and minimal peer engagement
Attitudes toward school	School seen as space for expression and growth	School often seen as constraint or source of frustration
Identity box content	Rich symbolic objects, personal narratives, strong engagement	Less elaborate boxes, focus on hobbies or school-related items
Interview reflections	Thoughtful, emotionally nuanced, reflective of workshop influence	Descriptive, limited emotional engagement

highlights the positive impact they have had on their self-expression and confidence. This contrasts with the CG, which did not have access to these therapeutic sessions and thus may not exhibit the same level of reflective or metaphorical thinking in their responses.

Synthesis

Summarizes key thematic differences observed between the DG and the CG in terms of identity box content, peer interaction, and self-reflection. The DG students showed deeper introspection, more elaborate personal narratives, and stronger emotional involvement, as evidenced both in their box construction and during the interviews. They also developed stronger peer connections and reframed their perception of school as a space of growth. In contrast, CG participants produced more conventional or superficial artifacts and displayed lower emotional engagement. These differences suggest that the dramatherapy workshops contributed to fostering a richer self-expressive process and a more positive social climate within the group (Table 1).

Discussion

On dramatherapy

The experiences of Bryan (17 years old boy) and Kevin emerged both during the identity box workshops and in the interviews with Anne. They illustrate the transformative power of dramatherapy in fostering a sense of community among students, effectively facilitating the transition from "I" to "we" through the "play" (*du "je" au "nous" par le "jeu"*), a concept and a process well-known in intervention-theater within Francophone clinical sociology (Badache and de Gaulejac, 2021). Within this framework, symbolic interactionism (and, more broadly, cognitive sociology), pioneered by Mead (1934), provides theoretical tools to understand the relationship between play, self-construction, and the social construction of reality. Alongside Piaget's work

(Piaget, 1945), Mead, in his interactionist theory of socialization, places great importance on play. Both free play (play) and rule-bound play (game), metaphors for the "real" social game, are defined as key elements in the infrastructure of the Self: in free play, where one engages in role-playing, the individual assumes different roles, navigates them, understands them, and integrates them. In the case of the identity box, "playing" thus becomes a transitional phenomenon in the Winnicott sense (Winnicott, 1958, 1991).

Bryan's journey highlights the importance of recognizing shared struggles, as he realizes he is not alone in his sadness. This connection to his peers provides him with a support system, which is crucial given his difficult family situation. He expresses gratitude for finding a "second family" in his classmates, which enhances his sense of belonging.

Kevin's narrative complements this by showing a significant shift in his relationship with school and social interactions. Previously isolated due to experiences of bullying, he finds companionship and solidarity with Bryan, referring to him as "brother." This bond exemplifies the construction of a collective identity within the group (from "I" to "we"), where individual challenges are acknowledged and shared, leading to emotional support and deeper connections.

The emotional climax of their final dramatherapy workshops, where both students, along with their peers, share tears and laughter, signifies a pivotal moment in the group's evolution. Kevin, who initially struggled to express himself, ultimately finds the courage to share his emotions openly. This act of vulnerability not only fosters personal growth but also reinforces group cohesion.

The shift from "play" to identity construction and interpersonal relationships through dramatherapy enhanced the students' capacity for introspection and supported their identity development, as evidenced by their responses to the questions "Who am I?" and "How do others see me?". We see this alignment with Erving Goffman's concept of the "presentation of self" (Goffman, 1956), where individuals actively manage and showcase their identities based on the context: the dramatherapy workshops have equipped students with skills related to self-presentation.

Interestingly, there is a contradiction noted among some of the more disruptive students of the DG. While some expressed disdain for the identity box activity—often referring to it as "crap"—they later requested to continue working on their boxes outside of the sessions, indicating a preference for this introspective work over their usual activities. This goes together with a complex relationship with the drama sessions: they may dismiss the activity verbally yet demonstrate engagement and interest in practice. For instance, Maxime (15 years old, boy) approached the researcher to indicate he was ready for an interview, but then he remained largely silent.

Additionally, the positive impact on students' relationships with school and the overall school climate is significant. This is corroborated by both student interviews, observations and feedback from Anne, aligning with the objectives of the ECAD project. The findings suggest that while students might initially resist the therapeutic processes, the underlying benefits in self-awareness, confidence, and community-building cannot be overlooked. Ultimately, this work reveals how dramatherapy serves

not only as a tool for personal development but also as a catalyst for enhancing the educational environment, fostering a greater sense of belonging among students.

On the "therapeutic" effect of boxes

One last aspect that should not be overlooked is the "therapeutic" dimension represented by the identity boxes' experience (Farrell-Kirk, 2001), which emerged between the lines of our observation. Beyond our experience at EREA, whether it is an individual or group construction, the creation of identity boxes can serve various functions, from emotional containment (Rogalski, 2023) to intercultural management of post-traumatic stress (Chu, 2010), among different audiences, including children (Waller, 2006), adult survivors of the Rwanda Genocide (Chu, 2010), and terminal cancer patients (MacMillan, 2019; Brown, 2019), in the form of "memory boxes," often used with dementia patients (Nolan et al., 2001; Hagens et al., 2003; Ryan and Schindel Martin, 2011).

In fact, the box is one of the oldest and most widely used "art therapy" activities. As Brown (2018, 2019) explains, part of the inspiration for the use of this kind of tool in her case comes from communication mediated through the "box," which becomes a form of metaphorical language. Paraphrasing the conclusions of her study on the experience of living with fibromyalgia (Brown, 2018, p. 13), "what happened in the course of the identity boxes project and the subsequent meaning-making processes was that [participants] reduced their personal experiences to an essence to then find a representation in the form of a metaphor." Then, the participants "explained and interpreted the meaning of their chosen metaphors, thereby elaborating on the true essences of their experiences. This interpretative work provided insight into [their] deepest emotions in a way that interviews on their own would not have allowed for, as this approach requires deep reflections and represents a holistic view of experiences. The reduction of a phenomenon and the subsequent elaboration on that reduction (Finlay, 2015) are only possible if participants look at the entirety of their experiences and then reflect on their essences" (Brown, 2018, p. 13).

The work on the *Self* thus becomes evident. Beyond the dimension more closely related to emotional management (Rogalski, 2023), which also clearly emerged from our classroom observations, MacWilliam (2017) demonstrate how the use of these techniques, defined as "Self-Boxes" in Jungian-inspired therapy (Gray, 2019), can be useful and functional in alternative learning environments (Abdallah, 2009), such as EREA, in working on attachment (MacWilliam, 2017), or more broadly in art therapy with children suffering from behavioral disorders, emotional problems, and communication skills (Yaghoobian and Emadian, 2019).

It is clear that our identity box-based work is a pilot study, and initially the use of identity boxes was more related to research than to therapy or educational mediation *per se*. In our context, the therapeutic or mediation tool was represented by dramatherapy. However, one of the objectives of the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017) that we used in the ECAD project is to bring out other aspects not previously considered in the

project's construction, and our observations make it evident that some participants experienced significant personal development through the creation of the box and the elicitation during the interview process.

Synthesis

These findings should be interpreted in light of the broader educational and social challenges experienced by regional adapted education institutions such as the EREA. These schools serve students who often carry the weight of socio-emotional difficulties, academic delay, and social stigma. In this context, both dramatherapy and identity boxes emerge as valuable tools to counteract exclusion and disengagement.

By offering a safe space for creative self-expression, dramatherapy allows students to externalize internal tensions and to experiment with new relational positions. Likewise, the identity boxes function not only as expressive containers but also as catalysts for dialogue and recognition within the group. These methods promote a form of "narrative repair"—supporting students in re-authoring their own identities and trajectories in a more empowered way.

In a time when institutions like EREA are often under-resourced and struggle to meet complex student needs (CNESCO, 2017; Ebersold, 2023), our findings suggest that creative, low-cost, and student-centered interventions can make a tangible difference in inclusion, emotional wellbeing, and school engagement. Rather than pathologizing difference, such approaches highlight potential, resilience, and voice.

Adaptive education, when integrated with creative methodologies, can thus evolve from a space of compensation into one of opportunity and empowerment. These findings also align with recent French education policy discussions (CNESCO, 2017; Ebersold, 2023), underscoring the need to integrate arts-based methods into teacher training programs and allocate resources that support socio-emotional learning and inclusion in adapted schools. These results invite educators and policymakers to view these institutions not merely as places of last resort, but as laboratories for innovative, human-centered pedagogies.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and limited to a single institution (EREA), which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples.

Second, the research-intervention design may have introduced observer bias, as the presence of researchers could have influenced participants' behaviors. Efforts were made to minimize this, but the possibility of reactivity effects remains.

Third, the identity box method is inherently subjective, relying on participants' personal interpretations and researchers' analyses, which may introduce interpretive bias. Triangulating with additional qualitative methods could help address this.

Finally, this study focused on short-term effects, and the long-term impact of dramatherapy and identity boxes remains unknown.

Future longitudinal studies are needed to assess whether the observed benefits persist over time.

Finally, it is worth noting that this research did not aim to analyse local or regional educational policies and therefore did not involve the collection of data related to government directives or funding mechanisms. The focus remained on the intra-institutional experience and the students' subjective engagement with the dramatherapy process.

Conclusion

The experience within the DG highlights the tensions that can arise when students are faced with creative activities, especially when they perceive these activities as a waste of time. One student initially rejected the idea of creating an "identity box," expressing his frustration and anger toward what he considered futile. However, this interaction opened a space for discussion where deep themes, such as suffering and acceptance, could emerge. Ultimately, he chose to participate, demonstrating that even initial resistance can transform into opportunities for expression and creativity.

This episode highlights the necessity of a flexible, non-judgmental framework that enables students to explore their identities and emotions (D'Errico and Porrovecchio, 2025). As external facilitators, we have the ability to free up communication, allowing students to express themselves through the creative process, which often acts as a sort of focus group or therapeutic discussion group. Although some students struggled to get started, the dynamics of sharing and the opportunity to revisit their creations proved motivating. The repeated requests to keep their boxes indicate an emotional attachment and recognition of the value of this exercise.

In conclusion, both dramatherapy and identity boxes offer essential educational and therapeutic dimensions. While it is not possible to determine which component was more effective in itself, their combination proved particularly valuable in this special education context. The identity boxes—originally conceived as a tool for reflection and assessment—revealed a strong expressive and transformative potential, highlighting their capacity to give form to internal experiences and support meaning-making. This dual function emerged through practice, rather than being planned in advance.

Dramatherapy, in turn, created a safe and embodied space where students could explore emotions, roles, and relationships, laying the groundwork for deeper reflection. The identity boxes then offered a material and symbolic trace of this internal work, allowing for both personal elaboration and analytical insight. Together, these tools helped students make sense of themselves and others, fostering a more positive school climate and a better understanding of Self and the Other. By integrating such approaches into the educational framework, we promote not only individual development but also strengthen group bonds—transforming the "I" into "we."

These findings suggest that creative, participatory methods such as dramatherapy and identity boxes can support emotional wellbeing and inclusion special education institutions. Future research could explore the comparative impact of such tools and investigate how they may be integrated into interdisciplinary educational strategies that combine academic learning with socio-emotional development.

Author's note

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Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because personal data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to alessandro.porrovecchio@univ-littoral.fr.

Ethics statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent has been obtained, participation was completely voluntary, and all reasonable steps have been taken to maintain subjectsâe™ confidentiality. The patients/participants legal guardian/next of kin provided written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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