

Embodying occupational justice and narratives: A theatre-pedagogy session in occupational therapy education

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Abstract

This study explores how a theatre-pedagogy session supported first-year occupational therapy students in engaging with the foundational concepts of occupational justice and occupational narratives. The session was embedded in a core undergraduate course and aimed to provide a relational, embodied alternative to theoretical instruction. The session followed a four-phase structure - activation, deconstruction, reconstruction, and reflection - and was grounded in embodied participation, symbolic interaction, and collective meaning-making. Post-session interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings suggest that participants began to interpret occupational justice and occupational narratives not through theoretical abstraction, but through lived, emotional, and relational experience. Themes such as narrative expression, positional tension, and socio-cultural awareness emerged as central. While understandings remained tentative, they marked an entry point into the personal and social dimensions of professional learning. The study illustrates how theatre pedagogy can support the development of reflexivity and critical awareness in early stages of professional education, contributing to wider conversations around the role of arts-based methods in socially responsive and justice-oriented occupational therapy.

Keywords: occupational therapy education, theatre pedagogy, embodied learning, experiential learning, reflexive practice.

Incorporando a justiça ocupacional e narrativas: Uma sessão de teatro-pedagogia na educação em terapia ocupacional

Resumo

Este estudo explora como uma sessão baseada na pedagogia do teatro apoiou estudantes do primeiro ano de terapia ocupacional a se engajarem com os conceitos fundamentais de justiça ocupacional e narrativas ocupacionais. A sessão foi integrada a um curso obrigatório de graduação e teve como objetivo oferecer uma alternativa relacional e incorporada ao ensino teórico. A sessão seguiu uma estrutura de quatro fases – ativação, desconstrução, reconstrução e reflexão – e foi fundamentada na participação corporal, na interação simbólica e na construção coletiva de sentido. As entrevistas realizadas após a sessão foram analisadas utilizando análise temática reflexiva. Os achados sugerem que os participantes começaram a interpretar a justiça ocupacional e as narrativas ocupacionais não por meio de abstrações teóricas, mas através de experiências vividas, emocionais e relacionais. Temas como expressão narrativa, tensões posicionais e consciência sociocultural emergiram como centrais. Embora as compreensões ainda fossem iniciais, representaram um ponto de partida para dimensões pessoais e sociais da aprendizagem profissional. O estudo demonstra como a pedagogia do teatro pode apoiar o desenvolvimento da reflexividade e da consciência crítica nas fases iniciais da formação profissional, contribuindo para discussões mais amplas sobre o papel de métodos baseados em artes na educação em terapia ocupacional orientada para a justiça social.

Palavras-chave: educação em terapia ocupacional, pedagogia do teatro, aprendizagem incorporada,

aprendizagem experiencial, prática reflexiva.

1. Introduction

Occupational therapy education consistently seeks to equip students with the ability to understand and respond to complex human experiences (Beanlands et al., 2025; Grenier, 2020). Among the central yet challenging concepts are occupational justice and occupational narratives; socially and politically embedded ideas that demand both conceptual and experiential engagement (Sakellariou; Pollard, 2012). When such constructs are introduced through abstract, theory-heavy instruction, without opportunities for embodied or contextualized exploration, students may struggle to connect them to their own experiences and values, or the social determinants that shape participation. (Canty et al., 2020; Miller; Roberts, 2020).

As occupational therapy increasingly embraces its social and political dimensions, educators are called to develop pedagogical strategies that cultivate critical thinking (Irvine-Brown et al., 2020) and professional identity rooted in reflexivity (Grenier et al., 2020). In this context, bridging theory with praxis becomes essential (Ikiug; Smallfield, 2015; Smallfield; Milton, 2020), particularly when addressing issues of inequity, marginalization, and the sociocultural forces that shape occupational engagement (Gallagher et al., 2015). The need for educational approaches that are not only informative but also transformative has led scholars to explore experiential learning, arts-based methods, and embodied engagement as means to deepen students' understanding (Coppola et al., 2017; Morris, 2019; Ranken et al., 2024).

Occupational therapy students are not merely learning techniques (de Saxe Zerdin; Hocking, 2020; Henderson; Coppard, 2018), but they are stepping into the ethical (Holmes; Scaffa, 2009), social (Malfitano, 2022), and relational (Weiste, 2018) dimensions of human life. In this sense, pedagogy is not neutral (Brown & Croft, 2020); it either reproduces dominant structures or opens up spaces for reflexive engagement and justice-oriented practice (Farias & Rudman, 2019). Experiential learning frameworks have thus emerged as critical tools in bridging theoretical instruction with lived experience, particularly in professions that require relational sensitivity and social responsiveness (Beier et al., 2021). This educational turn resonates with movements in the arts, humanities, and critical university studies, where learning is conceptualized as a relational and socially embedded practice (Gravett et al., 2021).

One such approach is theatre pedagogy, which draws on the principles of drama and performance to facilitate active, participatory learning (Yazdafari et al., 2025). Rather than functioning as a simulation or the reproduction of clinical scenarios (Van Bewer et al., 2021), theatre pedagogy fosters creative, relational, and often improvisational exploration of meaning through role-play and collaborative action (Franz, 2015; van de Water, 2021). Unlike simulation-based learning (Παπαδόπουλος, 2010), it does not aim to imitate client behavior or therapeutic interaction, but to provoke symbolic and relational insights through shared imaginative practice, and to activate embodied, affective, and critical dimensions of learning (Bale, 2020; Hong; Hong, 2022). Informed by traditions of critical pedagogy and performance studies, it allows learners to explore complex constructs, such as power, identity, and justice, by disrupting dominant narratives and inviting situated reflection (Dawson; Lee, 2018; McCadden et al., 2019). Such methods have been shown to foster empathy, communication skills, and ethical reasoning, while supporting students in reflecting on their own roles and responsibilities as future professionals (Goh; Sandhu, 2020; Mardas; Magos, 2020).

Theatre pedagogy has been increasingly integrated into the education of health professions such as nursing and medicine (Arveklev et al, 2015; Jefferies et al., 2021) and occupational therapists (Barmpagiannis; Chazapi, 2025). Through its structure, learners are invited to embody diverse perspectives, confront socio-cultural tensions, and experiment with alternative ways of responding to human complexity (Γραμματάς, 2014a; Karahasanović-Avdibegović, 2023). Despite this growing evidence base, the use of theatre-based methods in occupational therapy education remains limited. This is particularly notable given the profession's focus on participation, meaning-making, and social determinants of health; all of which are inherently narrative, relational, and embodied (Heller et al., 2024). Theatre pedagogy, by engaging students in creative acts of co-construction and critical reflection (Γραμματάς, 2014b), offers a uniquely aligned methodology for supporting occupational therapy learners in understanding how occupations are shaped by context, culture, and privilege (McKenna et al., 2017).

This study focuses on how students begin to engage with the concepts of occupational justice and occupational narratives through embodied educational experiences. Rather than approaching these constructs through theoretical exposition alone, the study emphasizes lived and relational resonant modes of learning.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore students' personal experiences and evolving conceptualizations of the terms 'occupational narratives' and 'occupational justice' through an embodied educational session. The approach was grounded in theatre pedagogy theory and critical reflection, aiming to capture the meaning-making processes activated during and after the theatre-based session. Rather than seeking generalizability, the study focused on interpretive depth, situated understanding, and pedagogical relevance.

2.2 Participants and recruitment

The session involved ten undergraduate students from the first-year cohort (N = 52) of the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Western Macedonia, Greece, during the 2023–2024 academic year. All students in the cohort attended the experiential theatre-pedagogy session as part of the foundational course 'Occupation and Activity in Occupational Therapy'. The two core concepts explored - occupational justice and occupational narratives - had been selected and introduced in accordance with the Department's official undergraduate curriculum (Πανεπιστήμιο Δυτικής Μακεδονίας, 2022), which designates them as foundational components of early occupational therapy education.

In the class immediately preceding the session, students were introduced to these terms through a theoretical lecture. However, no experiential or embodied activities had been employed to support their engagement. Occupational justice was presented as the equitable opportunity to engage in meaningful occupations shaped by sociopolitical structures (Whiteford et al., 2021), while occupational narratives were framed as the dynamic, storied processes through which individuals make sense of identity and participation in everyday life (Taylor; Kay, 2013).

Following the session, all students were invited to voluntarily participate in individual interviews. From those who expressed interest (N = 51), ten students were randomly selected. The final sample included five females, four males, and one non-binary student. This sample, approximately 19% of the cohort, was considered sufficient for capturing a range of reflective experiences (Lim, 2024) and enabling thematic variation.

2.3 Educational context

This experiential session was conducted within a single experiential learning session using theatre pedagogy (Pinkert, 2011) as the primary educational approach. The session was designed and facilitated by the first author, an occupational therapist and occupational therapy educator, formally trained in theatre-based pedagogy, with extensive experience applying this methodology in both therapeutic and educational settings. The second author was not present during the delivery of the session but contributed exclusively to the research process, including interview co-conduction and data analysis. Both researchers are trained in reflexive thematic analysis and have applied it in multiple qualitative research contexts. The theatre-based approach differed from simulation-based instruction in that it did not aim to replicate real-life clinical scenarios. Instead, it emphasized co-construction, symbolic play, and embodied relational dynamics.

2.4 Linguistic framing and cultural ethics in pedagogical terminology

In the Greek language and educational context, the term andragogy, often used in international discourse to distinguish adult learning from child-focused pedagogy, is not widely adopted. The Greek word ανδραγωγία (andragogia), deriving from ανήρ (man), embeds a gendered and exclusionary reference to the male subject (Watts; Pring, 2000). Recognizing its sexist etymology, Greek education continues to use the more inclusive term παιδαγωγική (pedagogy) even in adult education. In alignment with this linguistic and socio-cultural stance, the term pedagogy is maintained throughout this article to refer to the experiential session, despite the adult status of participants. This lexical choice reflects a broader orientation toward inclusive, socially aware educational discourse.

2.5 Process of the session

The structure of the session drew upon Κουρετζής (2008) and followed a four-phase structure: Activation,

Deconstruction, Reconstruction, and Reflection. Each one of them was designed to foster embodied and reflective engagement with core occupational therapy concepts.

In the activation phase, the aim was to welcome students into a playful, exploratory learning space and to foster initial bodily and social attunement. Students were given a single sheet of paper and invited to move and balance it on different parts of their bodies, without using their hands. This individual movement exercise promoted bodily awareness and playful experimentation. The activity then evolved into a structured game, in which students simultaneously attempted to catch their own paper mid-air while trying to disrupt others. This dynamic introduced elements of competition, advantage, and exclusion in an implicit, non-verbalized form.

The deconstruction phase was designed to provoke critical engagement with social roles and how students understand and reproduce sociocultural dynamics. Specifically, 52 additional sheets of paper were thrown on the floor, and each of the participants was randomly assigned a role to embody, such as helper, non-helper, inclusive ally, ignorant bystander, or competitive rival. Participants enacted these roles without prior explanation, engaging in embodied interaction that mirrored systemic dynamics. The instruction that was given was “Get as many sheets as you can”. This performative structure allowed students to experience the social construction of inclusion and exclusion through action rather than discussion.

During the reconstruction phase, the focus shifted toward relational synthesis and collective meaning-making. Students formed small groups and were asked to improvise theatrical scenarios that modeled cooperation, collective problem-solving, and inclusive engagement, according to their experience of the previous games. Each group developed a short performance, drawing on emotional and relational material from previous phases. The improvisation here was not aligned with formal theatrical improvisation, but rather with a pedagogical use of spontaneous co-creation and meaning-making.

Finally, the reflection phase served as a space for integrative analysis and demystification of the entire process. Through a facilitated group discussion, students were prompted to analyze the experience, their roles, and their reactions, and to link them with two concepts, “occupational justice” and “occupational narratives”, inviting them to relate their embodied experiences to the theoretical content previously covered in the foundational lecture. This connection served as a bridge between experiential learning and prior classroom instruction, supporting integrative meaning-making. The facilitator adopted a non-directive approach, supporting open exploration of interpretive tensions, emotional responses, and socio-cultural questions.

The session lasted approximately three and a half hours and was held in a flexible classroom space with movable seating. All 52 students in the cohort participated. Materials were deliberately minimal (two A4 sheets per participant), reinforcing symbolic and relational engagement over technical complexity.

2.6 Data collection

Over a week after the session, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the randomly selected participants via Zoom. Those ten days in between were intentional, both to allow time for internal reflection but also to ensure that no additional coursework or instructional framing had intervened in the meantime. This temporal buffer minimized the potential influence of the course instructor’s theoretical reframing, allowing students’ reflections to remain closely tied to their lived experience of the session. Interviews were co-conducted by both researchers, allowing for consistency in process and triangulation of interpretation.

The interview guide consisted of two open-ended questions drawn from the reflective framework used in the final phase of the session:

1. What is your personal experience from participating in the experiential educational session?
2. How has your understanding of occupational justice and occupational narratives been influenced by participating in the experiential activity?

Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes and was video recorded with participants’ consent. Transcripts were produced verbatim. While each interview was relatively brief, its structure and focus were intentionally designed to elicit direct reflections on the session. Rather than functioning as full-length in-depth interviews, they operated as targeted reflective dialogues, anchored in a shared experiential framework. This format, situated within an educational context and immediately linked to the pedagogical session, allowed participants to articulate key insights, tensions, and interpretive shifts without requiring narrative elaboration beyond the scope of the learning activity.

The prompts were pedagogically embedded and served dual purposes: supporting students’ reflective processing

and providing structured data for qualitative analysis. The format reflects a common educational-research hybrid approach found in experiential learning environments (Allison; Seaman, 2017).

2.7. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the analytic framework, following the six-phase model by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2022). The researchers first immersed themselves in the transcripts by reading and re-reading the material. Initial codes were generated inductively to capture recurring patterns in the data, while remaining sensitized to theoretical concepts explored during the course. These codes were organized into candidate themes, which were then reviewed, refined, and clearly named to reflect their conceptual structure and alignment with the research questions.

This process was situated within a reflexive thematic analysis approach, which emphasizes the active role of the researcher in interpreting patterns of meaning (Braun et al., 2022). Both researchers independently coded the data and met regularly to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and collaboratively refine the emerging thematic framework. This process was supported by ongoing reflexive journaling and peer discussion, enhancing transparency, coherence, and analytic rigor. Themes were structured in alignment with the two research questions, reflecting both experiential and conceptual shifts in students' occupational understanding.

2.8 Reflexivity

Given the first researcher's dual role as educator and interviewer, particular attention was paid to issues of positionality and influence. The facilitation of the session may have shaped the dynamics of the interview process, potentially influencing participant responses. To mitigate these concerns, the researchers employed co-interviewing, trying to create a safe environment, and engage in iterative self-reflection.

The study was grounded in a relational epistemology, which views knowledge as co-constructed through interaction (Pretorius, 2024). Reflexive practices, including journaling and peer debriefing, were employed to examine researcher assumptions and positionality throughout the study.

2.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Western Macedonia's Ethics Committee. Participants received detailed written and oral information about the aims, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. All participants signed an informed consent form. Interviews were conducted confidentially, and data were anonymized and securely stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Given the emotionally immersive nature of this experiential session, students were reminded of available support services and reassured that participation or non-participation would not affect academic performance or grading.

3. Results

The findings are organized into two overarching themes for each research question, with associated subthemes. The themes related to Research Question (RQ) 1 focus on students' embodied and emotional experiences during the theatre-based session, while those related to Research Question (RQ) 2 explore how students conceptually understood the ideas of occupational justice and occupational narratives through the activity. These results are presented in Table 1.

3.1 First theme of research question 1: Embodied learning and emotional awakening

This theme captures the visceral, emotional, and bodily nature of students' participation. Through symbolic movement and improvised interaction, participants experienced a sense of disruption, intensity, and reflection that shaped their personal engagement.

Given that all participants were first-year students with limited exposure to occupational therapy theory, the reflections shared here represent emerging forms of understanding rooted in experience rather than formalized knowledge.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes.

	Themes	Subthemes
RQ1	Embodied learning and emotional awakening	Affective and relational activation
		Embodied metaphor as moral discomfort
	Relational action as socio-cultural insight	Collaborative resistance as justice
		Encountering humility through shared narratives
RQ2	Justice as situated tension and responsibility	Justice as positionality and tension
		The role of context and meaning
	Occupational identity through narrative reflection	Personally meaningful expression
		Emergent understandings of narrative embodiment

Source: Authors, 2025.

3.1.1 Subtheme: Affective and relational activation

Students described how the early moments of the session were unexpectedly powerful in terms of emotional and social impact. The playful yet chaotic nature of the activity brought forward feelings of competition, laughter, vulnerability, and surprise.

“I didn’t expect that a piece of paper could make me feel so much - like laughing, running, trying to win... It was simple but so intense.” (Participant 2)

“We were suddenly thrown into something chaotic and fun... I remember hearing everyone laugh, then suddenly people were yelling about who stole whose paper!” (Participant 6)

At the same time, some participants expressed ambivalence or initial confusion, revealing how affective activation did not always lead to immediate clarity or connection.

“At first I was confused—what’s the point of this? I thought, why are we doing this instead of learning theory?” (Participant 1)

“I didn’t connect with the game part. It felt silly, and I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to be learning.” (Participant 4)

These reflections highlight the emotionally charged environment of the session and the diverse ways students entered into relational and embodied play.

3.1.2 Subtheme: Embodied metaphor as moral discomfort

As the activity transitioned into assigned roles, students began to embody actions that mirrored exclusion, power, and support in ways that felt personally confronting.

“I was supposed to help, but I just stood there. And then I realized that’s the point. We don’t always help, even when we can.” (Participant 3)

“It made me think of how easily I ignored someone when I was told not to help. That scared me a bit.” (Participant 7)

For several participants, moral discomfort emerged as they reflected on how easily they performed actions that contradicted their values.

“I only cared about winning. But in the classroom, everyone should win, right? It felt fake. I felt bad

afterward.” (Participant 4)

“I didn’t like playing a competitive role. I felt ashamed, even though it was just a game.” (Participant 8)

This bodily and emotional experience acted as a metaphorical lens for reconsidering social behavior and social, even ethical, responsibilities. For many, these insights emerged not through technical knowledge of occupational therapy, but through personal recognition of lived contradictions.

3.2 Second theme of research question 1: Relational action as socio-cultural insight

This theme explores how collaboration and co-creation during the improvisational and reflective phases enabled students to express, process, and interrogate justice-related ideas in action.

3.2.1 Subtheme: Collaborative resistance as justice

Participants described a sense of reclaiming agency during the reconstruction phase, where collaboration offered a space to imagine and rehearse socio-cultural forms of occupational engagement.

“I was finally able to express what I wanted to say, not with words, but through movement and our group’s story.” (Participant 5)

“Creating something with others felt like resisting all the chaos from earlier. It was peaceful, and political at the same time.” (Participant 2)

“We made up a scene where everyone helped each other. It wasn’t realistic, maybe, but it showed how things could be.” (Participant 6)

Still, not all participants accepted these representations uncritically. Some expressed skepticism about whether such justice-oriented enactments could translate into everyday action.

“We were acting out what’s fair and good... but it felt too perfect. Life isn’t like that.” (Participant 1)

“It was fun to imagine justice. But I wonder, what happens when we leave this room? Can we actually do something?” (Participant 10)

These tensions reflect the complexity of translating performative insight into applied justice.

3.2.2 Subtheme: Encountering humility through shared narratives

As students witnessed and engaged with each other’s reflections, moments of humility and vulnerability emerged. The shared affective space became a site for witnessing.

“When someone said they had never felt included in a group before, I froze. It was such a personal thing to share.” (Participant 9)

“I saw people differently. Even the ones I thought I knew. There was a softness in the room after that.” (Participant 3)

Others noted the difficulty of speaking openly, despite feeling moved, revealing the emotional labor required to participate in this type of dialogue.

“I didn’t feel ready to talk. I was moved, but I didn’t want to speak in front of everyone.” (Participant 7)

“We said big things, but what if someone misunderstood me? I was scared to sound wrong.” (Participant 4)

This interplay of speech, silence, and emotional exposure was not always comfortable, but it marked a meaningful step toward relational insight. While these reflections may not yet articulate theoretical constructs, they reflect an embodied entry point into the different dimensions of occupation and justice.

3.3 First theme of research question 2: Justice as situated tension and responsibility

This theme reflects students’ emerging awareness that justice is not a static principle but something shaped by context, relationships, and personal responsibility. Their reflections were rooted in the lived experience of the activity, revealing an intuitive - but often still forming - understanding of power, exclusion, and action.

3.3.1 Subtheme: Justice as positionality and tension

Through their assigned roles and the dynamic of support versus exclusion, students began to reflect on how justice operates differently depending on one's position, action, or inaction.

"Helping others shouldn't be optional. It made me realize that justice is about noticing who's left out and why." (Participant 6)

"Justice isn't about rules. It's about how we treat each other, and how we choose not to." (Participant 2)

Yet, for many, this realization was not fully articulated in theoretical terms. Several participants expressed confusion or uncertainty, pointing to a gap between felt experience and academic language.

"We were just acting. It was emotional, yes, but is that really justice? I don't know what I should have learned." (Participant 1)

"I'm not sure how justice fits into brushing your teeth or taking the bus... It still feels too big for me to understand." (Participant 3)

These reflections suggest that positionality and socio-cultural tension were meaningfully encountered, but not yet conceptually stabilized, an expected developmental stage for first-year students.

3.3.2 Subtheme: The role of context and meaning

Beyond individual roles, students reflected on how occupational participation and exclusion are shaped by situational factors. The activity led them to consider how the meaning of an action changes depending on its context.

"Depending on your role, the same action can mean helping, harming, or ignoring. It all depends on the context." (Participant 9)

"There's no one way to 'do inclusion.' It depends on the people, the situation, and how much space you're given." (Participant 10)

Still, some students struggled to apply this insight to everyday occupations or to broader societal structures.

"It made me think, but I'm still not sure I understand what justice means in occupational therapy." (Participant 7)

"Justice sounds too big. We just did an activity. I'm not sure how it connects to real practice yet. It still makes sense, but I am trying to find my words..." (Participant 4)

Here, the seeds of contextual awareness are clearly present, though not yet integrated into a full professional framework.

3.4 Second theme of research question 2: Occupational identity through narrative reflection

This theme explores how students began to connect their embodied experiences to questions of professional identity and occupational meaning. The activity became a space to reflect on what it means to be an occupational therapist, even if such reflection was partial or tentative.

3.4.1 Subtheme: Personally meaningful expression

For many students, the theatre-based process allowed for emotional and personal expression in ways that traditional classroom learning had not. This created a sense of ownership over what they were learning and doing.

"I'm not good with words, but this helped me show what I believe. It gave me a different voice." (Participant 5)

"It made me think—how would I act if this were real? What kind of therapist do I want to become?" (Participant 2)

These moments suggest the beginnings of identity formation grounded in lived, rather than conceptual, understanding.

"I realized that part of our job might be to see who's invisible, and not let it stay that way." (Participant 9)

Yet again, some participants expressed hesitation about the depth or validity of these insights.

"Maybe I'm overthinking it. We just did a group activity. It was fun, but is that enough to say I understand occupational therapy?" (Participant 1)

3.4.2 Subtheme: Emergent understandings of narrative embodiment

Some students described the activity as helping them to perceive how stories - both their own and others' - are carried in the body, shaped by roles, and enacted in relationship. These realizations were often intuitive, emotional, and difficult to verbalize.

"We played roles with many stereotypes... how a disabled person thinks... The hardest part was thinking without thinking only about the disability." (Participant 6)

"I saw myself in some of the stories we acted. Not because they were mine, but because I recognized the feelings." (Participant 3)

Still, for several students, this level of reflection remained fragile or ambiguous.

"I don't know how to explain it, but the activity made me feel things I couldn't say in theory." (Participant 4)

"I felt like I was part of a story, but I couldn't name it. Maybe that's the point?" (Participant 7)

These early expressions of narrative embodiment suggest a growing awareness of occupational meaning as lived, contextual, and relational - but still in the process of taking conceptual form.

4. Discussion

This study explored how first-year occupational therapy students engaged with the concepts of occupational justice and occupational narratives through a theatre-based experiential session. Rooted in embodied and relational learning, the session invited participants to reflect not only cognitively but also through their personal and social experience. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, our findings reflect co-constructed meanings rather than definitive truths, and our interpretation remains situated within the shared experiential and educational context. Given that participants had received only a limited theoretical introduction to occupational justice or occupational narratives, the results must be understood as capturing emergent and intuitive, rather than stabilized conceptualizations. Students' reflections revealed a process of becoming aware of self, of others, and of broader occupational constructs through action, emotion, discomfort, and dialogue.

The findings reaffirm that embodied participation functions as a powerful catalyst for affective and socio-cultural insight (Danish et al., 2020). Students encountered moral ambiguity, relational vulnerability, and social power dynamics not as abstract ideas but through symbolic and performative action, suggesting that experiential pedagogies generate deeper learning by evoking emotional resonance (Bale, 2020; Patel, 2023). One student's admission of feeling ashamed for prioritizing competition over collaboration revealed a moment of dissonance that prompted critical reflection; what Whiteford & Townsend (2011) describe as occupational justice moments, where lived contradictions become visible. At the same time, some participants expressed confusion or resistance, underscoring that embodied engagement does not always lead to immediate conceptual clarity. As Helyar et al. (2021) argue, the ability to tolerate discomfort and ambiguity is essential for justice-oriented pedagogy, which privileges process over resolution. This aligns with the goals of occupational therapy education to prepare students to engage with complexity and ethical ambiguity in real-life practice (Bushby et al., 2015).

Reflections also revealed how students began to connect their lived participation with abstract occupational concepts. Although the cohort lacked extensive exposure to theoretical frameworks, many articulated socio-cultural tensions in relational and situated terms. Statements like "justice isn't about rules... it's about how we treat each other" resonate with ideas that frame occupational justice not as a fixed ideal, but as an enacted, contextual process (Bailliard et al., 2020). Likewise, students' awareness of narrative embodiment - how stories are lived, enacted, and shared - emphasizes that narratives are not only told but felt, co-created, and relationally held (Hansen, 2017). These forms of embodied insight may serve as valuable precursors to more explicit conceptual learning and critical reasoning.

Importantly, this process enabled students to engage not merely with abstract social concepts, but with their own lived narratives, often in ways that would probably not have emerged through conventional discussion or written tasks. Through embodied action and role-play, students were invited into a space where dormant experiences,

emotions, and positions were surfaced, questioned, and reinterpreted. This suggests that embodied methods may help open space for new and diverse narratives to emerge (Chadwick, 2016), particularly for participants whose prior experiences may not have been recognized as relevant or articulated in more traditional academic settings (Coppola et al., 2017). Such affective moments suggest that embodied reflection may offer a crucial entry point for introducing occupational concepts early in training (Bonsall et al., 2023), provided these are later scaffolded with theoretical depth (Henderson; Coppard, 2018).

Moreover, these embodied engagements are particularly meaningful in a historical moment where textual production through artificial intelligence, algorithmic tools, and digitized frameworks is becoming increasingly effortless and abstracted (Dergaa et al., 2023; Lund et al., 2023). In contrast to the ease of accessing or generating written definitions, embodied experience resists simplification. It unfolds in real time, through vulnerability (Käll, 2016) and relationship (Rozmarin, 2021). For students situated within privileged educational contexts, the theatrical process can disrupt passive learning (van de Water, 2021) and activate a situated uncertainty (Bird; Tozer, 2018). By moving from the textual to the experiential, learners encountered concepts not as fixed categories to memorize, but as lived tensions to navigate (Southworth, 2022).

Yet this resonance was not universal. Not all students experienced the session as equally accessible or meaningful. While some described emotional and socio-cultural connections, others expressed hesitation, discomfort, or uncertainty. This variation underscores that embodied learning engages students differently (Garret, 2022), depending on their prior experiences and expectations around learning (Sato et al., 2020). These nuances, emerging as both enthusiasm and ambivalence, offer important insight into how pedagogical risk and personal history shape the reception of creative methods (Pilcher, 2017).

Beyond individual insight, the session also functioned as a performative space where learning was enacted rather than transmitted. Theatre pedagogy, in this context, aligns methodologically with a performative epistemology of education (Bird; Sinclair, 2019), where knowledge is not merely acquired but embodied and relationally constituted (Dawson; Lee, 2018). Learning through theatre-based approaches fosters a mode of knowing that is dynamic, iterative, and socially embedded (Karahasanović-Avdibegović, 2023), an approach particularly suited to cultivating social and political awareness in health professions education (de Saxe Zerdin; Hocking, 2020; Gray et al., 2024). These connections between artistic practice and professional learning reflect a broader pedagogical imperative across health education: to integrate arts-based (Slater et al., 2025), critical (Fassett et al., 2025), and narrative (Liao; Wang, 2023) methodologies that resist reductionism and promote socially responsive knowledge. The session thus operated not only as a pedagogical strategy but as a performative apparatus (Myles; Havsteen-Franklin, 2025) through which professional identities and justice-oriented dispositions were momentarily staged, explored, and reflected upon.

In summary, this session tried to activate personal, emotional, and social dimensions of learning in ways that may be especially valuable during early stages of occupational therapy education. While the resulting understandings of occupational justice and narrative were often tentative, they were nonetheless rooted in meaningful experience. As such, embodied methodologies may act not only as bridges between theory and practice, but also as catalysts for personal and political meaning-making, especially in a pedagogical landscape increasingly saturated with disembodied knowledge and technologically mediated expression. This suggests that theatre pedagogy can offer a productive, if not definitive, pathway for cultivating the kind of reflexive, justice-oriented awareness, increasingly called for in socially responsive occupational therapy education.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how first-year occupational therapy students engaged with the concepts of occupational justice and occupational narratives through an embodied, theatre-based learning process. Rather than relying on cognitive acquisition or theoretical exposition, the session activated affective, relational, and symbolic ways of knowing, enabling students to explore complex socio-cultural and professional tensions through lived experience.

The findings suggest that such pedagogical approaches, rooted in participation, improvisation, and critical reflection, can meaningfully support the development of socially responsive professional identities. While student insights remained provisional and emotionally charged, they revealed early moments of socio-cultural awareness, narrative engagement, and positional reflexivity. These processes may also foster critical thinking, creativity, communication, and relational skills fundamental to contemporary health professions education.

In a time when knowledge is increasingly abstracted, disembodied, or technologically mediated, embodied

arts-based methodologies reassert the importance of presence, dialogue, and co-constructed meaning. When carefully scaffolded, theatre pedagogy offers not only an alternative route to conceptual learning but a transformative space for confronting justice, power, and the responsibilities of professional practice; qualities increasingly essential for those committed to addressing social inequities and advocating for justice-oriented occupational therapy practice. Integrating such methods into early curriculum design may help prepare students to engage critically with the socio-political dimensions of occupation and to develop reflective therapeutic reasoning rooted in equity and inclusion.

6. Future Implications

Building on these findings, future research may explore the longitudinal role of early embodied engagements with occupational justice and narrative, particularly in shaping students' evolving professional identities. Comparative inquiries across academic levels, cultural contexts, and learner profiles, including neurodivergent students or those with alternative expressive modes, could further illuminate how diverse participants experience arts-based pedagogies.

Studies might also examine how theatre-based methodologies compare with other experiential approaches, such as simulation, in supporting critical reflection, socio-cultural awareness, and justice-oriented learning. Attention to emotional safety, inclusion, and the politics of vulnerability remains crucial when working with immersive and performative methods.

At the level of pedagogy, embedding embodied and participatory learning opportunities early in professional education may offer meaningful ways to connect students with complex social dimensions of their future practice. In occupational therapy education, in particular, such approaches may contribute to the formation of reflective, relational, and socially responsive professional identities. Rather than proposing fixed models, such work invites continued dialogue around how artistic methodologies can support socially responsive and relational forms of knowing. This suggests a potential role for arts-based pedagogy in the intentional scaffolding of key concepts in foundational OT curricula.

7. Methodological Reflections and Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the use of theatre-based experiential learning in occupational therapy education, some limitations should be noted. First, participants were first-year students with minimal prior exposure to the concepts of occupational justice and occupational narratives. As such, their reflections reflect emergent and intuitive understandings rather than fully articulated theoretical positions. While this allowed access to the early stages of professional identity formation, it also limited the conceptual depth and precision of participants' responses.

Second, data collection relied exclusively on brief, semi-structured interviews guided by two open-ended questions. Although this design encouraged focused reflection, the brevity and individual nature of the dialogues may have constrained the expression of more complex, emotionally layered, or contradictory experiences.

Third, the facilitator's dual role as educator and lead researcher may have shaped participants' responses, both during the session and in the follow-up interviews. Despite the use of reflexive strategies and co-facilitation to mitigate this dynamic, the potential influence of perceived authority and social desirability remains relevant when researching within one's own classroom context.

Finally, the study was conducted within a single academic context and applied one specific theatre-based methodology. Its findings are therefore not intended to be generalized, but to offer a situated and exploratory contribution to the discourse on embodied pedagogy and justice-oriented learning in professional education.

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9. Authors' Contributions

The first author designed and facilitated the theatre-based session and contributed to all phases of the study, including conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing. The second author contributed to the design of the study and was involved in interview co-conduction, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. The roles and contributions of each author are described in greater detail within the main body of the manuscript.

10. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

11. Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. Access to anonymized excerpts may be granted upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to institutional approval and participant consent.

12. Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Western Macedonia in March 2024. All participants provided informed consent before participation. Details regarding ethical procedures, consent, confidentiality, and data protection are described within the main body of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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