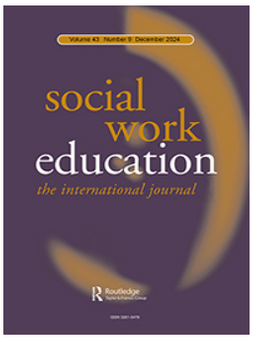

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Using the arts in social work education for short-term European mobility: evaluating student experiences on an Erasmus+ blended intensive program

Magnus Frampton [a], Ulene Schiller [b], Jonathan Parker [c], Theo Hartogh [d], Gertrud A. Arlinghaus [a], Alex D.J. Fry [c], Kirsi Autio [e] and G. Nokukhanya Ndhlovu [f]

[a]Faculty I, University of Vechta, Vechta, Germany; [b]Department of Social Work and Social Development, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa; [c]Department of Social Sciences and Social Work, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK; [d]Faculty II, University of Vechta, Vechta, Germany; [e]Department of Social Services, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Joensuu, Finland; [f]Social Work and Social Development Department, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

ABSTRACT

European higher education exchange has been reinvigorated by financial support for shorter student mobility phases, with the new Erasmus+ blended intensive programmes (BIPs) combining virtual and physical mobility. Such formats have obvious advantages in social work education, with compact programmes of workshops, agency visits, and cultural activities promoting personal development in richly intercultural settings. The natural focus on experiential learning during such exchanges suggests pedagogies utilizing creative methods. This paper offers qualitative research on students' experiences during music and dance-based BIP workshops. Thematic analysis was applied to participants' comments from a written questionnaire and group interview session. Three thematic clusters were identified: (i) positive experience, play, and learning; (ii) communication, togetherness, trust, and relationships; and (iii) skill acquisition, professional development, and personal growth. Taking these together, and highlighting the first, it is argued that such an approach facilitates possibilities for more emotion/feeling-based learning about oneself, communication processes, and collective relationship-building. More specifically, the BIP format is shown to be temporally and spatially ideal for playing, thereby facilitating students' willingness to learn by experimenting. The results are discussed with reference to play theorists such as Huizinga, Caillois, and Winnicott, suggesting that theorizing 'playing' offers potential for future research on arts-based social work education.

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CONTACT Magnus Frampton magnus.frampton@uni-vechta.de Faculty I, University of Vechta, Driverstraße 22, Vechta 49377, Germany

Introduction: higher education internationalization in Europe and the short-term student mobility experience

The internationalization of European higher education institutions is shaped by European policy developments. The most well known of these, the Erasmus program, has had a formative influence on both European education and identity (Beerkens & Vossensteyn, 2011; Cairns, 2017). The current Erasmus+ generation (2021–2027) aims to increase student take-up of mobility experiences, particularly focusing on inclusive experiences for those who previously might not have considered exchange (for family, income, disability, or educational background reasons: European Commission, 2022). New, compact short-term mobility programmes known as 'Blended Intensive Programmes' ('BIPs') form the cornerstone of this drive. These are short (5–30 days), in-person taught courses with obligatory virtual components. Grants are awarded in accordance with a minimum number of EU (including other program-country) participants, but non-program-country students may also participate if funded via other means, giving BIPs the character of an international summer school. Three or more European universities collaborate to organize each BIP, making them intercultural in delivery. Program coordinators typically have flexibility in determining BIP content, pedagogies, topic, and form.

Because BIPs are new, there is a paucity of social work literature on their pedagogies and outcomes. An initial general, cross-subject study (not specific to social work) of coordinators' views on running the programmes suggests the format offers considerable benefits to students (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024), including the opportunity to work in international/intercultural teams and be exposed to alternative cultural perspectives. This finding may be particularly important for social work educators, given the importance placed on cultural responsiveness in recent education guidelines (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). O'Dowd and Werner (2024, pp. 15–16), also note the potential for virtual pre-mobility activities to 'facilitate collaborative and interactive activities and to provide opportunities for students to develop good working relationships together'.

These findings can be supplemented by examining social work research on the similar 'Intensive Programmes' ('IPs') supported in the earlier Erasmus Lifelong Learning Program 2007–2013; such courses conceptually resemble BIPs. Fargion et al. (2011, p. 964), report on an IP employing 'active experiential learning methods' to help social work students acquire entrepreneurial competence. Time limitations notwithstanding, they found that students' experiences in international teams could be transformative, changing their mentalities; lecturers found their shift in role to international mediators challenging, given the unpredictability of situations; and the formation of strong relationships among lecturers accompanied the same among students. Onorati and Bednarz (2010, p. 57), analyze an 'immersive' interdisciplinary IP integrating participants from social work, education, and health care. This project focused on intercultural competence and employed role-play and learning journals, theoretically developed into models of reflection and transformative learning by the authors. Interdisciplinarity and interculturality were also features of the human rights-based social work IP described by Kjørstad and Wolmesjö (2016, p. 964). They observed how students contextualized human rights in agency visits and discussions. They argue that IP experiences demonstrate how traditional modules without comparative components may be lacking. Human rights

also formed a theme in the IP outlined by Danielsen and Franger (2012), using lectures and student groupwork to address the question of far-right extremism. Student participants stressed the program's intensity, with the combination of formal work and informal interaction, making for long working days. This may be a commonality of BIPs in general; a detailed impression of the magnitude and intensity of both student and coordinator workload can be garnered from social work IP materials, available via the Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid (2014), including their 38-page student guidebook.

This study addresses student learning experiences in a social work-themed BIP held in Germany. Its roots and focus lie in the student interest in several arts-based workshops during the previous year's edition (Frampton et al., 2023), activities which facilitated interaction across cultures, providing experiential learning complementing the more content-based learning in other parts of the module.

Arts-based/arts-informed learning in social work education

The use of the arts and creativity in social work has a tradition stretching back to the nineteenth-century settlement house movement via twentieth-century community development practices and playful creative techniques encouraging children's participation in care processes. This suggests a natural place for creative methods in social work education. However, the upsurge in research on arts-based methods in social work training appears to be a more recent development. A 2012 special issue of *Social Work Education* marked the boom, and important edited book collections have since appeared, including a volume specific to the arts in practice learning (Dix & Howells, 2022), and a handbook prominently profiling online (as well as in-person) uses of the arts in the social work classroom (Capous-Desyllas & Papouli, 2025). One explanation for this current interest might be countering technocratic professional perspectives. Arts-based approaches align with critical, anti-oppressive, feminist, decolonial, and other activist positions, giving students transformative exposure to other knowledges and the attendant opportunity to rethink their profession (Capous-Desyllas & Papouli, 2025; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019; Leonard et al., 2018; Schubert & Gray, 2015).

Two recent literature reviews summarize key research insights into utilizing arts-based pedagogies in the social work classroom. Leonard et al. (2018) in their systematic literature review examined nine studies in-depth, including applications of literature analysis, drama/improv theater, individual drawing and group collage, music playing, sculpting with clay, and (instructor) photography analysis. The authors establish themes in student learning: the ability to link individual micro-level practice to broader macro-level social justice and power issues, and, the production of new, less verbally centered paths to nurturing more egalitarian leadership, teamwork, and partnership working (Leonard et al., 2018). The review also generates a thematic thread on researching the impact of arts-based methods from a process perspective. The task of evidencing arts-based social work classroom pedagogies is complex, and researchers are still at a nascent stage of measuring their effects.

Concurrent to this UK study, Canadian researchers conducted a qualitative research synthesis on the use of the arts in social work education, identifying articles on arts-informed methods that specifically adopted 'anti-oppression, social justice, decolonizing,

or anti-colonial frameworks' (Wehbi et al., 2017, p. 4). Three papers on the applications of music, collage, poetry, storytelling, zine-making, and sculpture were scrutinized in-depth for themes. The authors observe how arts-informed methods lead students to show greater emotional engagement with their topic. Although beneficial, this was also challenging for students, sometimes creating discomfort, by pushing them into new places. A second theme was how the arts nurture collective rather than individual understandings of the topics examined. Students easily found a 'common ground', and 'collaborative stances' were taken, giving the students insights into relationship-formation processes (Wehbi et al., 2017, p. 9). Finally, Wehbi et al. (2017) observe how arts-informed methods trigger a shift in the position of the educator. Educators were modeling empowering, critically reflective, and anti-oppressive stances, and thereby forfeiting their traditional position of authority.

Another paper, not analyzed in either study, deserves mention. It was written in the context of the early-2000s' opening-up of UK universities to students facing barriers to higher education (on account of their low-income, disability, age, or ethnicity, student determinants reminiscent of the Erasmus+ BIP context); Simons and Hicks (2006) assess student experience in a social care module on the creative arts. The benefits of utilizing music, dance, drama, and the visual arts in contrast to more traditional verbal-cognitive methods were articulated by students. The arts seemed to offer students new empowering forms of seeing and understanding. Discussing the challenging dance/movement exercises, students observed the role 'trust' played in group formation (Simons & Hicks, 2006, p. 85), which the authors regard as supportive of risk-taking and confidence-building. Safety was a theme in participants' comments, with one remarking how story-telling enabled 'non-threatening' expressions of one's world (Simons & Hicks, 2006, p. 86). We will return to these themes later in our paper.

Methodology

Participants in our study were students on a single Erasmus+ BIP. Alongside an agency visit and cultural activities, this program combined sessions dealing with comparative social work practice and arts-based sessions using dance (Argentine tango) and music. Arts-based methods are a common part of the host country Germany's social pedagogy, giving a conceptual link between the two topics. The research question focused on the arts-based (not the comparative) sessions and reads as follows: how is arts-based education experienced in the international social work classroom?

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as it allows researchers to choose participants most likely to provide the information they need, due to their having specific qualities relevant to the study. Hence, researchers identify participants who are both knowledgeable and experienced in the subject matter and willing to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). We align ourselves with Hennink et al. (2020) understanding of qualitative research as an approach that allows researchers to explore participants' experiences in depth by using a variety of methods, here specifically: observations, a group interview discussion, and a qualitative survey. This approach allows participants to have a voice, giving them two separate opportunities to share their perspectives and reflections; observer notes provide for an independent record, checking the congruence of the findings.

An online survey was completed by 25 participants (21 females, 4 males) reflecting on the program; the full student cohort was 26. Participants were from Sweden, Estonia, Finland, Australia, Ireland, and Germany. Participants completed the survey in approximately 30 min. A guide was developed to explore the participants' experiences further, and a 50-min interview group was held with four participants (2 females, 2 males) of different nationalities.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to identify three theme clusters in the data. This was done by comparing and combining the results of the authors' coding notes. The written survey and the interview group discussion were loose enough to allow participants to discuss other parts of the week alongside the arts-based sessions. Consequentially, the themes identified address the entire week's learning and not just the two arts-based sessions in question.

The research proposal went through an Institutional Ethics Review Committee, and all applicable ethical guidelines were followed, including: 1) participants read and signed a consent form to participate in the research; 2) participants' privacy was respected by only recording interview discussions with their consent; 3) participants had the opportunity to opt out at any time during data collection; 4) participants were given a version of the first manuscript draft, so they could check their ideas were not being misrepresented in transcription and analysis.

Minor grammatical corrections have been made in transcribing and reproducing the participants' comments, given that the participants were (mostly) non-native speakers of English. All direct quotes (including single words or phrases in inverted commas) in the following results section come from the participants, either from the written survey or the interview group discussion, and are anonymized.

Results

Theme 1: in the here-and-now—positive experience, play, and learning

The first thematic cluster concerns the most immediate reactions to creative methods in the classes. This articulates how participants recall experiencing the sessions in the moment, in a very direct way. This theme has been selected to express how the interactions had a play-like structure, were characterized by positive experience, and had a practice-based learning value for participants.

Participants reflected on the pleasure they experienced in the activities, articulated with references to 'fun', 'enjoyment', 'joy', 'laughter', and 'lightness'. Participants were having positive experiences in the here-and-now of music-making and dancing. Music was at the start of the week, and participants made the discovery that 'it was so easy to get into playing'. Some comments recalled the relaxation of leisure time; however, closer examination underlines a different interpretation: enjoyment in structured play activities. The fact that the exercises represented playful work is supported by observation notes highlighting how disciplined the participants were during the sessions. Participants followed instructions in silence. At the end of the exercises, participants laughed and chatted, but during the exercises, concentration prevailed. In other words, the positive experiences coincided with bursts of focussed, goal-oriented activity. We regard participants as learning in planned play activities, and these playful working activities together

constitute a game. Indeed, one participant noted music was a 'working method', another how 'teamwork was lots of fun', and a third saw it as something helping people 'get active'. Similarly, tango, admittedly a more demanding medium for play ('a great challenge'), was celebrated by participants for its enjoyability, whilst simultaneously perceived as a 'tool' or 'technique' to achieve communication experiences. Indeed, during the creative sessions, participants were consciously learning two fresh social work methods for their future practice: most planned to 'take home' the methods as 'tools for the future to work with'.

Participants especially appreciated the opportunity for what was, in their own words, 'learning by doing', contrasting the 'hands-on' work with the more theoretical learning they were used to. This was activating theory for them in emotional/affective ways: 'experiencing it in yourself puts the theory into an actual sense'; 'I learn first-hand how [music] affects people'. Participants stressed music's inclusiveness and universality: 'music is for everyone and it doesn't matter if there is a language barrier, how old you are, your profession or background'. Everyone was dealing with similar fears in the same way, and collectively changing their emotional states with the music. The commonality of human experience was evident too in the tango session: 'music, movement, and touch are something deeply personal yet universal'. Shared feelings were frequently noted outside the creative sessions too, for instance, coping with arrival anxieties on the first day or language difficulties throughout the week. This suggests that creative methods can be employed to make an international group aware of the commonality of their emotions.

The play/game-based view of the sessions—a group of participants completing structured experience-based exercises, learning, and having fun—encompasses the whole week, highlighting one further point: many participants were mindful that the week had a set of unspoken rules-of-the-game. For example, each participant was expected to display a level of commitment. Reading between the lines, the comments reveal how this became taken for granted and deviations from the norms of the week's behaviors were noted and often responded to. An example would be some participants being afraid of speaking English or wishing to withdraw to a circle speaking their mother tongue. Whilst there was a broad understanding that these were natural impulses, they threatened to have a negative effect on group functioning. This meant potential isolation was perceived as an issue, indeed one that could be addressed by translating for others, or deliberately drawing shy participants into conversations. This suggestion of a set of rules extended naturally to the workshop facilitators as well. Time boundaries had to be strictly kept: session over-running was perceived as a problematic facilitators' mistake. Careful efforts to prepare participants for the activities were acknowledged gratefully, and organizational shortcomings were politely reflected on. The survey and interview group comments often resembled the 'improvements' part of the completely separate course evaluation conducted parallel to this research.

Theme 2: a 'group spirit' develops—communication, togetherness, trust, and relationships

The second theme addresses the processes of bond-formation between participants. This relationship-based thematic grouping acknowledges the progressive development of feelings of togetherness. It also covers the communication which

facilitates participants' coming-together. Since music opened the week and tango ended it, participants' separate comments offer insights into their perception of how their relationships were at two chronological points: at the first, earliest moment of connection/relationship development; and, after solid relationships had formed, at a point where feelings of safety and trust were sufficient to support close and personal interactions.

The theme of togetherness had accompanied the group from the week's beginning onwards. There was an immediate mutual feeling of 'connection with others', which one participant speculated was facilitated by the group members' common background in the caring professions:

> I think there's some similarities between us (. . .). The fact that we are all studying the social field (. . .) are interested in people (. . .) and you need to have some kind of background of wanting to understand people (. . .), I think that's a common factor.

The natural commitment of the participants was also high, since all were participating voluntarily: 'so many people did so much traveling, just to come here (. . .): you've really invested'. These commonalities provided a basis upon which relationships were to grow.

Comments on the music and tango sessions stressed how they brought about a 'bonding' effect on the group dynamic: a feeling of 'group spirit' developed. Observation notes highlight how a 'sense of community' was being supported by non-verbal communication using the movement of bodies and instruments: discourse via embodied creativity. Communication became a focus of the week and the tango session was identified as an opportunity to study communication practices. An exercise in this session encouraged participants to anticipate a dance partner's movements using balance through the fingertips: 'I (. . .) learned about my own communication, how important it was, and how, when I was not communicating clearly, the person would step in another [unintended] direction'. This was about giving and receiving information with the body: 'It made me realize you have to connect with your body because your body language is really important in terms of how other people see you'; 'You need more than just your listening: all of the senses are important in having an influence'. Partners were exchanged. 'Doing the tasks with different partners gave a lot of important understanding of how people react, how they connect, how it varies within us'.

A strikingly clear development for both observers and participants was how a group identity formed. The two creative sessions were critical in this, one initiating the process of relationship formation, the other demonstrating that relationship building had indeed occurred. Two comments underline this, the first refers to the opening music session: 'The interesting process, when a group of strangers comes together, and by the help of the music starts creating not only music but relationships'. Reflecting on the latter part of the week, another participant observed: 'Gradually the group was getting more comfortable with each other and this was strongly noticeable'.

The sense of group belonging was accentuated by the group being a closed one. Participants arrived and departed at exactly the same time. Almost all the week's interactions were taking place with exactly the same people, living together in shared accommodation. The group was thus a collective entity within temporal/spatial boundaries. Time/timing and space/place/presence became threads in participants' comments about their experiences. A participant noted: 'It was also (. . .) a bubble, since we were all

together; we did so much together'. 'So, there was no real reason to connect sides with the outside [of the bubble]'.

What arose from the intimacy of the shared group activities seems to be a feeling of trust within the group. Participants reflected on how the tango session utilized this, since it was a 'trust exercise'. One participant reflected: 'I was mesmerized by (. . .) the trust you need to show to perform together'. One exercise was done without the use of sight: 'When I closed my eyes, I felt so good and secure, this was really important for me'. The power of dance made some aware of their human vulnerability. Touching and moving together are especially intimate. One participant was mindful of how eye contact in dance can also be an attack, while another acknowledged having 'problems with being led'. Inevitably, as well as utilizing feelings of connection and trust, the tango exercises reinforced them: 'Observing others, I found it really interesting to see just how much trust had been built during the week'. Safety was closely tied to trust, and the participants uniformly described the tango workshop as an emotionally safe space. However, at other moments during the week, a feeling of safety had been lacking; participants used opportunities to note this, and many of their comments refer to experiences on the emotional level. Many participants noted how upon arrival they had felt anxiety. For most, this represented their first English-language seminar abroad; for many, the first time internationally traveling alone. For some participants, the act of pushing themselves was a reason for applying to the course. However, sometimes, a feeling of complete psychological safety had been momentarily lacking due to planning issues. An example of this was a prison visit, for which the main course coordinator was absent, and for which some participants had felt psychologically unprepared. Similarly, the lack of name badges and a careful introduction session at the start of the week left some feeling insecure when interacting with participants whose names they had been unable to learn. The participants' many comments on safety show how feeling protected in the international seminar is of the utmost importance and requires careful preparation. For participants, a feeling of safety is not to be taken as given but rather is something to be built up, process-wise, incrementally over the early days of the program. However, it did become clear that carefully planned arts-based sessions can be highly conducive to nurturing feelings of safety and collective emotional wellbeing in international seminars.

> I think having [the music] at the start was really good for [feeling] safe. If we had done the tango at the start, it would not have had the same effect; if we did that on day 1 compared to the day that we did it [day 4] I just do not think it would have been at all the same.

Theme 3: learning outcomes—skills, professional development, personal growth

This thematic cluster highlights participants' comments on the learning results of the week regarding personal and professional development: they had learnt new skills; they had developed professionally as trainee social professionals; and they had experienced personal growth.

Participants were reflective on their skill development, which for many had been a primary motivation for traveling. An obvious gain during the week was improved

communication skills. Whilst foreign language abilities are poorly appreciated in Anglo-Saxon social work curricula, they are a highly regarded competence for continental European practitioners. This is not only because of the ability to work more evidence-based in alignment with findings from the international literature but also for day-to-day practice in societies shaped by linguistic and cultural diversities.

> The international week gave [me] the courage to face different people and speak English with them. It also showed me that language really is a very important part of interacting.

Some left the week with plans to later use these skills in the international social work arena: 'I am now more convinced of my dream of working internationally'.

There were rich opportunities for intercultural learning, the acquisition of skills and knowledge that helps deep engagement with people from different contexts, countries, backgrounds, and belief systems (Otten, 2003). Participants valued informal intercultural exchange in the program's social and cultural activities. One evening, there was a party, in which participants shared their national culture, bringing about a 'chemistry' in the room. Intercultural learning was an explicit learning objective, which participants valued: 'The intercultural abilities were the thing I developed the most: being open to different ideas from people of different regions is something that makes a lasting impact on me'.

Many participants expressed their mindfulness that intercultural interactions required openness and courage. Participants gained insights into the basis for good interacting: 'I think the very important contributing factor is to be open in all the situations and participate and learn from each other'.

> I was really excited, open to work with anyone and eager to learn how others see and experience these same sessions we went through. It was really interesting to listen to others and also give my own input and then listen again how it affected [them].

The arts were specifically given as a method to facilitate intercultural communication: 'The activities allow me to open in so many ways that I would've never thought before. Very interesting how arts are able to make people [break down] barriers'. One participant summarized the week's learning as 'courage to think outside the box, [being] open to learn and try, being excited, interacting with others'. The reward for this willingness to test one's own boundaries was new relationships, and many participants had already made plans to visit their new friends in foreign countries.

The intercultural exchange included professional exchange, giving participants the opportunity to discuss and contrast their home countries' different national social work systems. The program was planned to give insights into German social pedagogic traditions with an agency visit and digital sessions on comparative themes. However, the intercultural area of comparative social work remained only a partial success. One factor for this was a planned residential child care agency visit failing to take place. Interestingly, the music education and dance education sessions were often talked about as 'music therapy' and 'dance therapy', which strictly speaking they were not. Salient differences between European pedagogic and (largely) North American therapeutic approaches using creative media clearly needed to be explained more than they had been. Participants in both the survey and interview noted that both more time and more structure were needed for a deeper consideration of the complex questions raised.

Embedding the arts workshops into a longer program of more than a week in duration may be necessary to contextualize them thoroughly.

Despite the course's comparative social work dimension remaining underdeveloped, participants reported substantial development of their professional selves. First and foremost, they valued the chance to be a member of a cohesive team, experiencing what they could achieve together: 'For me this group became so close and nice that I think we could survive anything that was thrown at us'. Becoming a committed member of the group required effort but facilitated personal development: 'The fact that I actively seek other students to connect and interact with has contributed to my growth'. Participants learnt the value of courage to connect with the other: 'I (. . .) found it interesting (. . .) that it was not necessarily the language barrier that stopped people reaching out: self-confidence is more of a factor'. The experiences with trust and safety in dance had obvious parallels with the social work workplace:

> The opportunity to put all the trust on someone and also be able to lead the other person just shows how the working environment is like in social care settings. Everyone has to trust one another and be able to lead in example as well.

For many, the week was a crash course in group dynamics: 'The most valuable lesson I learnt during this BIP is how groups work and how many emotions people have in groupwork; everyone's emotions need to be seen and heard, we should never bypass the emotions'. Participants reflectively observed their group processes, a development 'from strangers to becoming a group'. It can be argued that cultural humility was nurtured, since the group's diversity in interactions, 'different people with different backgrounds', was something participants were mindful of, and indeed continually forced to respond to.

An often commented-on aspect of professional development was self-learning. One participant noted: 'I think personally I especially realized some things about myself and my interaction with others, which (. . .) shed light on different aspects of my life and myself'. Another added: 'I understood how we need to be present with another human being and with our clients'. Tango's parallels to social work were acknowledged by many, in terms of how it gives 'a sensation of actually being present and listening to others'. Participants reflected on how they behaved in their own communication. 'Your body language (. . .) is important when you work with clients'. 'This was so good that you have to concentrate on your own body and have to listen to it'. The week gave participants an opportunity to push themselves past their natural limits: 'I think this week helped me be more open, getting out of my comfort zone and show my feelings more'. The result was personal and professional growth and development: 'Contributing factors for my growth were my own willingness to work with my own issues and attitudes, [and] empathetic listening'.

Discussion: theorising play for social work education

Participants' comments corroborate the aforementioned findings in the literature on arts-based methods. They underline the possibilities for more emotion/feeling-based learning about oneself, communication processes, and collective relationship-building. As in previous studies, trust and safety prove pivotal, given that both creative methods and international mobility create situations of uncertainty and vulnerability in whole-

group learning situations. Hereby, we acknowledge, however, that our study describes a classroom different to a traditional one in two ways. First, the learning environment utilized the arts. Second, it was a peculiar learning environment because of its temporal/spatial uniqueness, as a place where international students briefly come together and interact intensively. Hence, we must be cautious in putting comments down to the method of the arts, whereas many of the findings may actually result from the intensity of the short-term international mobility which participants were undertaking.

Nonetheless, the identification of 'play' as a central and unifying theme in participants' comments invites developing the concept in relation to social work education as a potentially fruitful path for further research and theory building. Whilst there appears to be a large literature base on play in social work training, closer inspection reveals that much is concerned not with playfulness but rather with tasks of (non-playful) simulation and role-playing (for instance, Meredith et al., 2021); more recently, papers on gamification/game-based learning approaches have also appeared. Technically, such work does not address the playing themes we identified, which are more specifically about utilizing playfulness (Ayling, 2012). We will thus sketch the theorizing of play and conclude by relating this to participants' reported experiences in the social work classroom.

There is a substantial historical corpus of literature theorizing play. Plato suggested playful dialogue as the path to self-development and leadership skills, and to a just and good society. However, he was ambivalent about other, non-intellectual adult play (D'Angour, 2013). Many philosophers shared this ambivalence, but Schiller (1795/2016) departed from it, being a vocal proponent of the importance of free play, seeing the humanness of the person in it. In his philosophy of aesthetics, Schiller (1795/2016) describes the play-drive as navigating and joining human sensibility and the rational (Frampton et al., 2023).

Schiller saw play as cultivating the individual, and play seems to belong in the cultural domain. In *Homo Ludens*, the historian Huizinga (1944/1949, p. 5) discusses the significance of play to human culture, arguing 'genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation'. He notes that play is characterized by its 'disinterestedness': it is outside of ordinary life, occupying its own separate time and space (Huizinga, 1944/1949, p. 9). Paradoxically however, its enriching quality makes it a regularly reoccurring activity, and thus 'an integral part of life in general', as he observes:

> It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. (Huizinga, 1944/1949, p. 9)

This seminal discussion throws up a definition of play, as:

> (. . .) an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow. (Huizinga, 1944/1949, p. 132)

This definition was refined by Caillois (1958/2001), who approached play sociologically. Caillois (1958/2001) concurred with Huizinga that play was

characterized by being free (voluntariness) and having a separateness in time and space. He added the elements of play's uncertainty (in terms of its undetermined course), its unproductiveness (in an economic sense), and its characteristic of being either rule-governed or utilizing the make-believe. Caillois examined play and games together. He identified four types: games of competition, games of chance, games of simulation, and games of vertigo. He noted how the nature of a particular culture can lead to preferences for a particular type of play. Caillois (1958/2001, p. 13), also placed play on a spectrum from '*paidia*', denoting more uncontrolled, disorderly, and spontaneous play, to '*ludus*', denoting the more contrived and rule-based games.

Caillois picked up Huizinga's view of play as cultural, and this perspective would have been shared by Winnicott, whose position we will elaborate shortly. However, given the focus on using arts-based social work education for nurturing empowering, anti-oppressive, and activist stances, we must first acknowledge that Arendt (1958) would place our learning through play in the political realm (LeJeune, 2017): both the cultural and the political represent sites of potential adult learning through play. This aligns with much of social work practice and philosophy, and its transformative potential. However, the act of play is creative and explorative, moving neatly into the performative. Sociologist Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social life can be useful here. Goffman (1959) was concerned with the presentation of the self in the world, seeing this as the performance of roles or parts, using social props and settings. Whilst Goffman neglected the emotions in the performance, this has since been reintroduced (Hochschild, 1983). The social roles we assume are socially scripted, and our performances are learned through socialization and play. These pre-defined scripts offer a structure for everyday life which is re-created and adapted through improvisation. When we playfully engage in nonfunctional action (not necessary for our survival), we open ourselves to fresh roles, experiences, and performances that allow us to create new worlds and possibilities.

The importance of play for developing the self was a primary interest of psychoanalyst Winnicott. He departed from the Kleinian position of regarding the child at play as an opportunity to acquire content for interpretative therapy. Instead, Winnicott (1971, p. 50) famously noted 'playing is itself a therapy'. Winnicott's (1971, p. 50) 'playing' is 'a creative experience taking up space and time'. Winnicott was identifying playing as a means of negotiating subjective experience and objective reality, making sense of the world and learning to be within the world. He observed how 'playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy (. . .)' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 41). The goal for the person to be helped is to have 'a new experience in a specialised setting', by entering 'a non-purposive state' characterized by 'formlessness' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 55). The sequence, he notes is:

(a) relaxation in conditions of trust based on experience;
(b) creative, physical, and mental activity manifested in play; (and)
(c) the summation of these experiences forming the basis for a sense of self. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 56)

Winnicott's premise, that only through free playing can one discover the self, is a position strikingly similar to Schiller's (1795/2016; see Belo & Scodeler, 2013; Lenormand, 2018). On a practical level, the psychotherapist becomes a play facilitator. Importantly, the therapist themselves must also be able to play (Lenormand, 2018) and is to be sensitive to play's 'precariousness', 'between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 50). So, playing has a core role in the professional development of the self as social worker, as well as human being.

Conclusion: applying play theories to BIP learning

In terms of professional socialization, the sociological play theories can explain how participants were using the creative activities to shape their own professional identity, to negotiate knowns and unknowns. Dance, in particular, enabled them to work on their own presence in the room, sensitizing them to their own body language and patterns of communication. Participants' comments underline their insights about how their future professional roles are performative. Moreover, the preparation behind the creative sessions, alongside the rationale for their timetabling at contrasting parts of the week's program, was observed and articulated by participants, who evidenced an interest in using such sessions safely and productively with their own service users. The participants also articulated how the activities were indirectly training their communication and leadership skills: the link in the literature between playfulness, communication, and leading/being led was echoed in participants' comments. The activities met Ward's (1999, p. 161, cited in Ayling, 2012) 'matching principle', in that the training mode was congruent with the methods' applications in practice. Participants were able to link the two with ease and were aware that they were learning about themselves, whilst simultaneously picking up direct work methods to help their own (future) service users' self-discovery.

The psychoanalytic play theories can also be applied to shed light on participants' comments. Winnicott's therapeutic task to search for one's self was arguably also the primary pedagogic task of the week, an objective intuitively clear to many participants. The chance to interact with students from different cultures brings a unique opportunity to question one's own culture and behaviors within it. The program was designed to be a week about transforming one's relationship to the self. Participants seemed able to 'surprise' themselves (Winnicott, 1971, p. 51) through play, finding new parts to themselves.

An awareness of the specific time and space/place of the playing is prominently featured in Huizinga's, Caillois', and Winnicott's theories and seems echoed in participants' comments. We argue that the BIP format is temporally-spatially ideal for playing. Comprising a discrete, isolated time window, and localized in a contained foreign place, it necessarily takes students out of their environment in a way that a regular university seminar would not. We argue that this facilitated participants' readiness to experiment and be playful, and what is travel, if not play? Pedagogically speaking, it seems possible for program facilitators to mimic Winnicott's prerequisite conditions for play in terms of safety, relaxation, and trust. This paper has omitted a discussion of Winnicott's (1971, p. 100) analytic idea of the 'potential space' between the person and their object/environment (Spencer, 2012), and also

psychoanalytic perspectives on holding and containment: these concepts could be developed in application to the learning group. One of the challenges of using play in the social work classroom is the availability of follow-up support after the session (Ayling, 2012). In fact, this is actually easier in the BIP format, since facilitators accompany participants in the evening post-session periods. Participants are thus less likely to be left alone with their reflections and can easily debrief (during the week at least). However, there are issues regarding the post-program period, where traveling students will be less able to rely on the program coordinators for follow-up support. A related issue which participants raised was the short duration, both of individual sessions (such as the dance activity) and of the program itself. Unlike the older IPs, BIPs are usually only 1 week in duration (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). For some, this short duration limited the learning/experiential possibilities of the sessions, and also the possibilities for relationship-forming. BIP facilitators should thus ensure that time for an appropriate Winnicottian 'summation' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 56) is programmed into the schedule.

Winnicott's therapy is conceptualized on free and spontaneous play, namely that play at the *paidia* (not *ludus*) end of Caillois's spectrum. Admittedly, this aspect is awkward to apply to the BIP's music and dance sessions. These sessions, as both participants and observers noted, were necessarily relatively structured. This raises the question as to how students would be able to participate in those freer, less structured activities: more playful and less game-like, where a Winnicottian 'search for the self' is best located (Winnicott, 1971, p. 53). Again, one solution here would be a longer, two-week program, in which the activities could become looser as the program progresses. A related issue here is also the degree of freedom which students have, to participate or to not participate. Even if students are presented with the chance to opt out of an activity, peer pressure will encourage whole-group participation. This contradicts Winnicott's (1971, p. 51) premise that play must be 'spontaneous and not compliant or acquiescent'. BIP facilitators will learn from evaluations that a small number of students struggle to commit to full participation. For some, this may be tied to the anxieties of the week. Anxiety cannot be dismissed since it is part of play itself. As Winnicott (1971, p. 50) notes, 'playing is always liable to become frightening'. A practical issue is that a student's reluctance to participate may be concealed, as they go through the motions of formally taking part in activities. This problem of nonparticipation can be mitigated by selecting activities which are inclusive and very low-threshold, music being a good example. Nonetheless, the right of some individuals to *not* play needs to be respected, and steps to support their learning from the programme taken.

We have tried to demonstrate how participants' observations, whilst specific to a very particular international learning environment, reiterate established ideas from play theories. Social work BIPs represent a new and exciting pedagogical opportunity, one deserving further research. Our first findings are that participants' experiences of play and performance, of communication and relationships, and of learning about others and self-learning, are rich. The uniqueness of participants' reflections notwithstanding, we observe the ease with which they fit with existing sociological and therapeutic theories of learning and growth through play. This fit suggests much can be gained for program coordinators, who wish to optimize the student learning experience in practice or to conceptualize this learning experience theoretically.

Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2012, p. 684), have noted that mobilizing imagination and creativity has 'transformative potential for learning and intercultural dialogue'. It is perhaps unsurprising that the intercultural, international classroom seems to present an especially rich setting for this.

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ORCID

Magnus Frampton http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9070-6717
Ulene Schiller http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-9082
Jonathan Parker http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3817-4781
Theo Hartogh http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8272-8932
Gertrud A. Arlinghaus http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0667-9766
Alex D.J. Fry http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7731-7992
Kirsi Autio http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9538-9359
G. Nokukhanya Ndhlovu http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5736-3345

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