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Rituals in Inclusive Reading Theater: A Design-Based Research Study

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ABSTRACT

Drama-based learning in inclusive classrooms presents both challenges and opportunities. While not all students are initially motivated to perform, structured drama projects can unlock individual potential by offering various roles and functions. This study explores the intervention "Stop Bullying! A Theater Project", implemented across 14 settings with over 80 students between 2021 and 2023. Drawing on four cycles of design-based research (DBR), the study analyzes reflective protocols (n = 8) and student feedback (n = 87) to identify how rituals—such as warm-ups, greeting circles, and reflection routines—support inclusive engagement. These practices are examined through the conceptual lens of the Potsdam Inclusive Didactic Teaching Model (PIMODE). While findings demonstrate the pedagogical value of rituals in inclusive theater, the study is limited by its reliance on qualitative data and contextual specificity. Implications are discussed for future inclusive educational design and drama-based literacy instruction. This article contributes meaningfully to the fields of inclusive drama pedagogy and reflective teaching practices by emphasizing the role of structured rituals in literacy development. It offers a practical framework for educators aiming to implement inclusive theatre projects and underscores the ethical dimension of inclusive education. Through its focus on co-constructed routines and emotionally secure learning environments, the study bridges theory and practice in fostering equitable and participatory literacy learning.

Keywords: Rituals; Theater Projects; Inclusive Education; Reflective Practice; DBR; PIMODE; Language Education

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1. Introduction

Reading literacy involves reading and reflection processes. Yet, fostering reading competence remains a challenge—particularly in inclusive classrooms where learners differ widely in their needs, backgrounds, and abilities.

Inclusive education demands pedagogical approaches that not only recognize this diversity but also design meaningful learning experiences for all students to promote literacy[1–4]. As Bormann et al.[1] (2024) note, inclusion in schools means all students learn and work together, with their individual needs recognized and considered in designing learning opportunities.

Within this context, drama-based learning—and specifically Readers' Theater—has gained attention as a promising strategy to support both literacy development and student engagement. Its multimodal approach combines text fluency, expressive reading, and collaborative performance, offering potential benefits for diverse learners[5, 6]. However, the performative demands of theater, such as memorization, public speaking, and emotional expression, may present barriers to participation for students with special educational needs or limited language proficiency.

To address these barriers, this study examines the role of rituals within the pedagogical framework—repetitive, structured activities such as warm-ups and reflection circles—as instructional tools that promote emotional safety, student engagement, and inclusive participation in drama-based reading projects. While prior research has highlighted the value of inclusive drama[7, 8], the specific function of rituals in establishing emotionally secure and accessible entry points for diverse learners remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how rituals serve as both emotional and procedural anchors in inclusive reading theatre. In this article, rituals are conceptualized as a pedagogical method for opening and structuring learning environments.

This article draws on findings from the three-year design-based research study "Stop Bullying! A Theater Project" (2021–2024), which was conducted in fourteen inclusive school and extracurricular settings[9, 10]. Based on qualitative content analysis of educator and student reflections, the study identifies key ritual practices—such as warm-up games, greeting circles, and structured reflection routines—that contribute to inclusive classroom engagement. These practices are interpreted through the conceptual lens of the Potsdam Inclusive Didactic Teaching Model (PIMODE), which emphasizes intentional structuring, student agency, and dialogic reflection[1, 11].

This article aims to support educators and practitioners seeking inclusive drama-based approaches. It highlights how structured rituals can reduce affective barriers and create inclusive environments where all students can engage meaningfully. The central research question guiding this study is: *How do warm-up rituals support reading theater in inclusive classrooms?*

Section 2 outlines the theoretical background, including literature on reading literacy, inclusive didactics, and the role of rituals in theater education. Section 3 details the research design and methodology. Section 4 presents findings from the four project cycles. Section 5 discusses the results in relation to inclusive teaching practice. Section 6 concludes with implications for future research and pedagogical development.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Literature Reading in Inclusive Learning Settings

Reading literacy is internationally recognized as a key skill for participation in school and society[12]. Nevertheless, the results of the 2022 PISA study show a decline in average reading literacy among 15-year-old students in all participating OECD countries. This is concerning, as reading ability is crucial for understanding complex information and navigating modern societies[13].

According to Giera and Nagel[14], the multi-level model of reading by Rosebrock and Nix[15] describes the reading process as multi-stage—from word and sentence processing to local and global text coherence, as well as the recognition of text structures and presentation strategies. On the subject level, a reader's self-image—whether they perceive themselves as a reader—significantly influences reading success. Factors such as knowledge, motivation, participation, and reflection shape the individual reading process. To support the development of a positive self-concept in reading, opportunities should be provided in meaningful, engaging contexts[13], such as through discussion, analysis, or dramatization of texts. These active approaches pro-

mote linguistic engagement and encourage identification and reflection—extending even to family and peer interactions. Conversely, negative attitudes toward reading, especially those influenced by a student's social environment, can hinder reading motivation and behavior.

One reason for declining reading achievement may be an overly narrow understanding of reading literacy that emphasizes procedural skills like text comprehension while neglecting broader, contextual aspects of reading [13]. Current research stresses the need to integrate sociocultural dimensions alongside cognitive ones [16]. Reading and writing literacy are not merely technical skills but are shaped by social and cultural contexts, such as students' ethnic and social identities.

A theater project can promote reading on multiple levels [14]. On the process level, it enhances fluency, text comprehension (local and global), and awareness of structure and style. Dramatic reading and stage interpretation combine literary learning with active engagement. On the subject level, participation strengthens students' self-concept as readers by giving them visible, valued roles. The joint interpretation of a theater text fosters motivation and identification, and a final performance offers additional motivational benefits, reinforcing social integration. Reflection and discussion after the performance further stimulate dialogue with peers, teachers, and families, promoting cultural participation.

When texts are acted out, they are first read aloud in roles and then spoken with expression. The emphasis is on prosody—intonation, pauses, and rhythm—rather than reading speed. This marks the beginning of literary interpretation. The approach aligns with Readers' Theater, which has been empirically validated as effective for supporting reading processes [13]. Theater-based reading projects support the contextual and holistic approach advocated by Rosebrock and Nix, combining cognitive effort with action-oriented, reflective learning.

Clear classroom structures are essential to enable students to take responsibility and work independently during a theater project. From a learning psychology perspective, regular practice is crucial for skill development. Well-structured classroom management—based on consistent routines, clear rules, constructive feedback, and professional handling of disruptions—supports students in developing self-directed learning behaviors. This requires teachers to possess strong pedagogical skills, flexibility, and a commitment to ongoing reflection.

Inclusive drama practices must also account for the intersection of cultural, linguistic, and neurodiverse identities. For example, rituals support neurodivergent learners by offering consistent emotional check-ins, while structured group activities can bridge communicative differences across language backgrounds. Building on Aas and Woodcock [2, 4], these pedagogical rituals not only reduce affective barriers but also affirm diverse ways of expression and participation.

2.1.1. The Potsdam Inclusive Teaching Model

The Potsdam Inclusion Teaching Model (PIMODE) [1] was initiated by the author in collaboration with colleagues in 2021 to create a practical framework for designing inclusive learning environments. During the initial development phase, over 80 participants from universities and schools contributed to an interdisciplinary discussion, reviewing theoretical foundations and drawing from eight specialist lectures.

Starting in 2022, a visual model was developed through workshops with teacher trainees, educators, and trainers. The resulting PIMODE prototype has been presented at various national and international academic forums and is now available as a digital resource to support inclusive lesson planning.

PIMODE's cyclical structure allows entry at any phase, ideally beginning with aligning curricular goals to students' interests and needs. A detailed analysis of content and prerequisites supports decisions about materials, formats, and differentiation strategies. Implementation is followed by micro-scaffolding—ongoing adaptive support through active monitoring, participation, and targeted feedback. This stage also values student self-assessment, fostering realistic self-evaluation and helping shape future learning goals. Though designed primarily for educators, PIMODE encourages collaboration with students and transparent communication of lesson goals. A consensus definition of inclusion underpins the model: the appreciative consideration of individual needs within a shared school community.

PIMODE also emphasizes contextual conditions, represented in the model's lower (yellow) section: inclusive attitudes, supportive learning environments, collaboration, institutional resources, and professional development all contribute to inclusive success. An open field within the model underscores the importance of flexibility for addressing individual situations (**Figure 1**) [1].

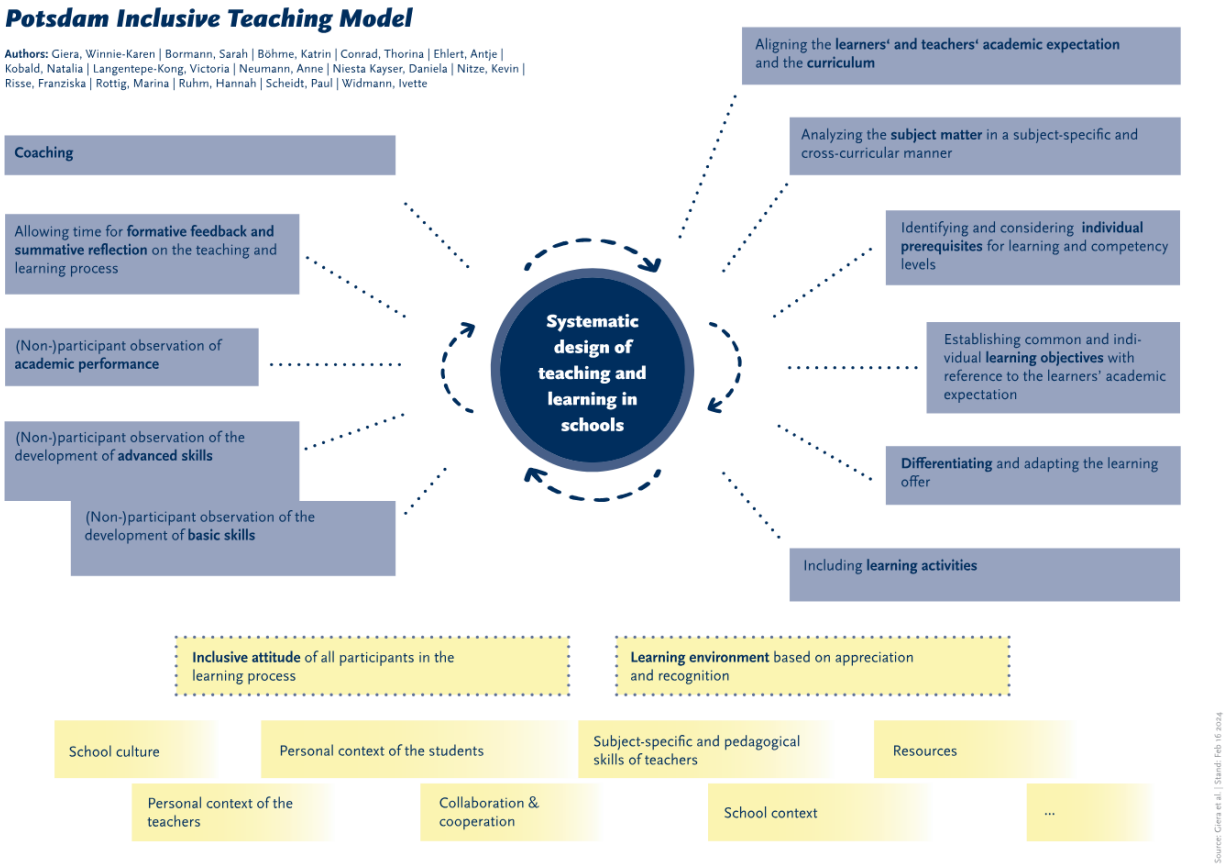

Figure 1. The Potsdam Inclusive Teaching Model [1].

PIMODE and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) both aim to support all learners but differ in approach [3]. Developed in German-speaking contexts, PIMODE emphasizes a dynamic, responsive model tailored to inclusive classrooms. Lessons are designed and adapted through continuous cycles of planning, implementation, and reflection. This process takes into account contextual factors such as group composition and school structures and encourages flexibility in everyday teaching.

In contrast, UDL is rooted in neuroscience and emerged in the U.S. as a preventive model: learning barriers are to be avoided from the outset by making content accessible through multiple modes of representation, expression, and engagement. UDL provides detailed, operationalized tools, often including technology-supported elements.

In summary, UDL plans for universal accessibility through barrier-free lesson design, while PIMODE emphasizes context-sensitive, iterative teaching practice. Both are valuable, but they serve different instructional cultures and priorities.

2.2. Reading Theater Project "Stop Bullying! A Theater Project"

Theater-based education promotes playful and expressive engagement with literary texts. It strengthens local and global text comprehension while supporting individual participation and social interaction [13]. The stage becomes a "showroom" [15], expanding reading into a dynamic space of verbal and physical expression that fosters literary learning.

According to Giera and Nagel [14] (p. 154), inclusive learning must be intentionally planned, as outlined in the PIMODE model, which defines inclusion as the collaborative, needs-based planning of learning opportunities. The "Stop Bullying!" theater project was designed for inclusive secondary school classes, with the dual aim of promoting reading comprehension through literature and encouraging professional reflection using PIMODE. University theater coaches led the sessions in collaboration with classroom teachers, guiding students through rehearsal and scene de-

velopment across all reading levels.

Readers' Theater is a fluency-based instructional method combining oral reading and dramatic expression. Students read scripts without memorization or staging, focusing on expressiveness, rhythm, and interpretation. According to Ferrada Quezada[5], this format improves oral reading prosody—intonation, rhythm, and phrasing—while also boosting motivation and engagement. Quezada's quasi-experimental study in Chile showed that Readers' Theater was effective across face-to-face, hybrid, and online settings, even with a small sample.

Hautala et al.[6], using a randomized controlled trial in Finland, found that Readers' Theater significantly improved reading fluency—including speed, accuracy, and expressiveness—among students with learning difficulties (p. 674). The intervention also enhanced motivation and confidence. These findings provide robust evidence for incorporating performance-based reading strategies in inclusive education.

Together, these studies demonstrate the flexibility and effectiveness of Readers' Theater across diverse educational contexts. While Quezada's study suggests potential for broad application, Hautala et al. provide strong empirical support for its use in special education.

Drama education also promotes communication, empathy, and social cohesion—qualities essential in inclusive classrooms[8, 17, 18]. Rituals—structured, repeated actions—offer predictability and emotional safety[16]. In theater education, warm-ups, greetings, and reflection circles act as rituals that support group dynamics, lower affective barriers, and enable students to participate according to their individual needs.

PIMODE aligns well with this approach. It encourages structures that foster student agency, differentiation, and reflective learning. The present study builds on this by analyzing rituals as inclusive pedagogical tools. As Giera and Nagel[14] (p. 153) state:

> "The design-based research study 'Stop Bullying! A Theater Project' shows that careful planning and reflection can enhance classroom management and learning time, enabling a theater project that promotes not only literary engagement but also social interaction for all participants."

2.3. Warm-Ups as Rituals in a Reading Theater Project Warm-Ups as Rituals

Rituals are structured, repeated activities that provide stability and meaning in group settings. In educational contexts, they help create routine and emotional security, allowing learners to engage more confidently[18]. Rituals can serve as transitions, social cues, and moments of reflection or activation. In inclusive classrooms, especially those involving drama or performance-based learning, rituals are a valuable tool to support social integration, reduce anxiety, and foster group cohesion.

As Giera and Nagel[14] note, the theater sessions in the "Stop Bullying!" project began with consistent warm-up routines, including cooperative games and creative exercises. These structured beginnings helped students orient themselves, build trust, and prepare for rehearsal. Over time, students became familiar with and even took ownership of these routines, occasionally requesting specific warm-ups themselves. The establishment of such rituals played a key role in shaping a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere.

Several warm-up activities were used consistently in the theater project to support emotional expression, concentration, group dynamics, and communication skills. These exercises served both as ritualized openings and as tools for inclusion. Some examples:

- "Nice to See You" This warm-up involved students standing in a circle and greeting the person next to them with the phrase "Nice to see you," accompanied by a handshake or gesture. The greeting was repeated by the receiving student. This exercise aimed to build awareness, foster mutual respect, and help everyone acknowledge each other's presence. Especially in inclusive classrooms where students arrive from different classes or activities, this greeting ritual provided a grounded and communal start.
- "Hello, Feelings" In this exercise, students greeted each other by expressing how they currently felt—using tone, facial expression, and body language. A sleepy "hello" might be paired with yawning and stretching; an angry "hello" might include a hiss or stomp. After each greeting, the neighbor mirrored the expression and passed it along. This not only encouraged emotional expression and empathy but also allowed the teacher or coach to

gauge the emotional state of the group and make adjustments if needed. It proved especially useful for students with special needs, as it created space for individual check-ins and possible one-on-one conversations.

- "This is My Name – and This is My Movement" A name-and-movement game helped participants learn each other's names and build confidence. Standing in a circle, each student introduced themselves with a unique gesture: "I am [name], and this is my movement." The group repeated the name and movement, reinforcing memory and building collective rhythm. Variations included speeding up the sequence or reversing the order. This activity trained attention, imitation, voice projection, and engagement—key elements in drama-based learning.
- "Zipp-Zapp-Zoom" This energetic exercise focused on attention and reaction. Participants passed a clap and the word "Zipp" to the right. A sudden call of "Zapp" reversed the direction, while "Zoom" directed both arms toward another participant, who then continued the game. Optional variations like "Boom" added complexity and spontaneity. This activity developed reflexes, focus, and group synchrony, making it an ideal prelude to rehearsal.

These warm-ups did more than energize the group—they functioned as inclusive rituals that signaled the start of a shared creative space. Their predictability offered comfort, especially for students who benefited from structure. Their expressive and participatory nature encouraged engagement from all students, including those with diverse learning profiles. As rituals, they provided a scaffold for emotional readiness, communication, and social belonging within the theater project.

3. Research Methods & Design

3.1. DBR

In this article the first cycles are presented. Each cycle followed an iterative process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, involving both pedagogical teams and learners[19–22]. According to Giera and Nagel (2025), design-based research follows a cyclical principle: "How can intervention X be designed for target group Y in context Z in order to achieve goal W?"[20]. This project specifically explored the question: "Which warm-up rituals support reading theater in inclusive classrooms?" This aims to identify effective ritualized introductory formats (X) for heterogeneous learning groups (Y) within the context of inclusive theater work (Z) to strengthen participation and expressive reading aloud on stage (W). These guiding questions, situated within a DBR framework, address both intervention design and inclusive educational practice[23–27].

The following graphic illustrates the chronological progression of the design-based research project "Stop Bullying! A Theater Project" through four implementation cycles between 2021 and 2023 (**Figure 2**).

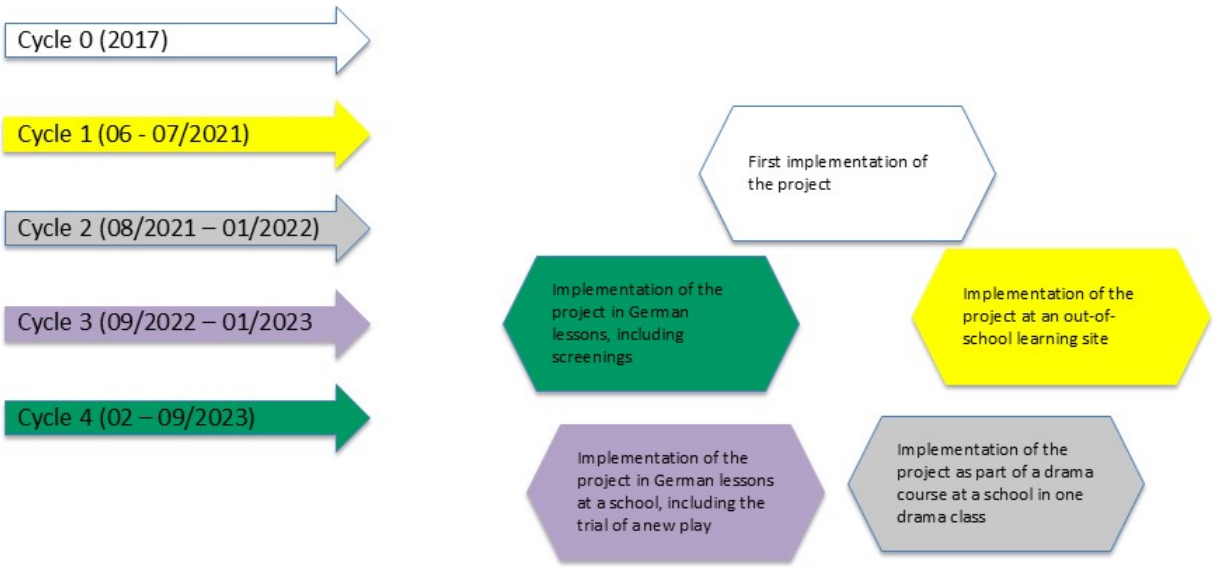

Figure 2. Process Cycles in the Drama Project "Stopp Mobbing".

- Cycle 0 (2017, n = 25) marks the first implementation of the project, serving as a pilot phase to test the foundational concept.
- Cycle 1 (June–July 2021, n = 6) involved the implementation of the project at an out-of-school learning site, focusing on drama-based learning in an extracurricular environment.
- Cycle 2 (August 2021–January 2022, n = 14) shifted to a school-based context, with the integration of the project into German lessons, including initial screenings to assess suitability and outcomes.
- Cycle 3 (September 2022–January 2023, n = 25) expanded the approach by trialing a new play within German classroom settings, continuing to emphasize inclusive drama pedagogy.
- Cycle 4 (February–September 2023, n = 47) involved implementing the project as part of a structured drama course at a school, where the project was fully integrated into one drama class.

Each cycle built upon the findings and reflections of the previous phases, following an iterative design that allowed for continuous development and refinement of the inclusive theater methodology.

3.2. Data Sampling

Fourteen theater projects were implemented with adolescents in both school-based and extracurricular contexts. Participants were recruited through partner schools and extracurricular programs that expressed interest in implementing inclusive theater-based interventions. Selection prioritized heterogeneous learning groups, including students with and without special educational needs, as well as those from multilingual or socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. Across the four cycles, participants ranged in age from 8 to 15. Further background information could not be collected due to data protection regulations in accordance with the ethics commission at the University of Potsdam.

Data sources included written reflection protocols from educators and feedback surveys from students (n = 87) collected after each session and at the end of the lesson series. Reflection here is understood as a deliberate cognitive process aimed at critically evaluating one's actions before, during, and after instructional events. As Wyss demonstrated in an empirical study using video-supported reflection [18], teachers who regularly analyze their teaching practices and engage in collegial dialogue develop deeper, more critical insights. In this study, digital written reflections of the theater coaches (n = 8) were submitted after each session [14] (p. 161).

Student perceptions were captured through a standardized feedback form administered at the end of each project cycle. The questionnaire combined closed and open-ended items to evaluate students' experiences across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Responses were anonymous and voluntary. The closed-ended section included 15 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. These items assessed key domains such as active participation, instructional clarity, emotional safety, social belonging, and perceived learning gains. The items were as follows:

1. I actively participated in the project.
2. The project was well structured overall.
3. Each individual project session was well structured.
4. The length of the project was appropriate.
5. I was able to follow the instructions well.
6. My questions were answered well by the facilitators.
7. I received support when I needed it.
8. The content was interesting to me.
9. The project encouraged me to reflect on myself.
10. I gained a lot of new knowledge through the project.

→ Please list any specific examples:

11. I learned many new methods during the project.

→ Please list any specific methods or activities you remember:

12. I actively contributed to group work.
13. I felt comfortable during group work.
14. I felt like an equal part of the group.
15. I would recommend this project to other young people.

Students were also invited to respond to three open-ended prompts:

- What was your personal highlight of the project?
- Is there anything you would have liked to do differently?
- What advice would you give to the facilitators for future projects?

These qualitative responses helped contextualize Likert-scale data and provided insight into student perspec-

tives on rituals, learning outcomes, and group experience.

3.3. Data Analysis

The collected reflections were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following Mayring's structured model[19]. The data, based on reflection protocols developed collaboratively throughout the project cycle, focused on predefined observational focal points and are considered closed reflections on action[6]. These reflections explored what the facilitators perceived as particularly successful, which challenges arose, and what surprising moments occurred—always in relation to their causes and context. According to Giera and Nagel[14], reflection allowed the team to think about how they might approach issues that had not been successfully resolved in one lesson during the planning of the next.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following Mayring's approach[19]. A deductive category system was developed based on relevant literature[18, 19], with main categories including: (1) classroom management, (2) emotional regulation, (3) peer collaboration, and (4) participation structures. Subcategories (e.g., 'use of warm-ups for focus', 'peer empathy during rehearsal') emerged inductively. One trained coder independently analyzed 100% of the dataset, while a second coder reviewed 25% of these codings. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and a refined codebook was used for the full analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Cycle 1. Implementation of the Project at a Non-School Learning Location

In the first cycle, six participants out of nine between the ages of eight and thirteen provided anonymous feedback on the theater project using a structured form. Among the responses to questions about newly learned methods, students repeatedly mentioned the games used during the sessions. The final survey in the first cycle of theater participants (n = 6) revealed that they expressed a high level of approval for the project across all 15 items (M = 3.73, SD = 0.44, 4.0 = MAX; 1.0 = MIN).

The two university theater coaches, who documented their impressions through daily field notes, observed that the collaborative development of the play significantly improved group cohesion. One coach wrote, "The children supported and motivated one another, which had a positive impact on their acting performance"[14] (p. 158). Although warm-up games were an essential part of each session and evolved into ritualized openings, they were not explicitly reflected in the feedback forms completed by either the students or the facilitators.

Warm-up games such as Zipp-Zapp-Zoom were used regularly at the beginning of the sessions. Over time, these games became routine elements that provided structure and continuity. In their final reflections, the coaches emphasized that these activities should be standard components of future theater lessons, stating, "Games should be integrated into every theater session as rituals at the beginning or as icebreakers in between"[14](p. 165).

4.2. Cycle 2. Implementation of the Project as Part of a Drama Course at a School

The second cycle marked the first time students performed a complete play together (n = 14). Over the course of three months, students participated in weekly 90-minute theater sessions that culminated in two performances on the same day.

This accomplishment was considered a major success and was confirmed by the students' reflections. One student remarked, "When we had the performance and everything worked out," while another shared, "When it was over, because it was a bit exhausting."

Although feedback was limited to a small number of participants (n = 9), these responses reflected the intensity and emotional engagement that came with preparing and presenting the play. The absence of additional comments suggested that the experience may have felt complete or self-contained. The final survey in the second cycle of theater participants (n = 9) revealed a high level of approval for the project across all 15 items (M = 1.90, SD = 0.75; 1.0 = highest agreement, 4.0 = lowest agreement).

4.3. Cycle 3. Implementation in German Lessons and Testing of a New Play

During the third cycle, the project was integrated into regular German lessons and involved the testing of a newly

developed play. Two inclusive seventh-grade classes (n = 25), including students with and without special educational needs, took part. These classes had only recently formed at the beginning of the school year, and no prior collaborative theater experience existed among them. Weekly 90-minute rehearsals culminated in a final performance for each class. Warm-up games continued to serve as ritualized components that supported both engagement and group cohesion.

The evaluation in this cycle included student questionnaires and written reflections from the theater coaches (1.0 = highest agreement, 4.0 = lowest agreement).

In Class A, students reported a high level of engagement, as reflected by the average rating of 1.5 for the statement "I actively participated in the project." Coach A validated this response and noted, "The majority therefore fully or somewhat agreed with this statement. As a project supervisor, I can only confirm this response"[14] (p. 161). The structure of the project was also positively received, earning an average score of 1.92. Coach A observed, "This shows us that the structure of the theater project was effective." Students frequently mentioned the performance and the experience of acting as the most motivating aspects of the project. In total, the class A rated the theater project positively across 15 items (M = 2.19, SD = 0.86).

In Class B, the same participation item received a slightly less positive score of 1.92. Coach B confirmed this trend and noted that it was the highest-rated item, stating, "The majority tended to agree with this statement, and this item received the most positive overall rating. As a project supervisor, I can only confirm this response pattern"[14] (p. 162). Students demonstrated ownership of the project by independently documenting feedback and inviting school community members to the performance. However, the structure of the project received a more mixed rating of 2.5 compared to the pretest. Coach B reflected, "This rating can be attributed to the fact that this learning group was repeatedly disrupted by individual students and that, overall, there was a very destructive group dynamic at the beginning of the project." (ibid). Although the team adhered to a consistent structure, extended time spent on individual phases may have been interpreted as a lack of clarity by some students. Nevertheless, over time, even initially resistant students became actively involved and contributed meaningfully to the final performance. Overall, class B rated the theater project in the mid-range across 15 items (M = 2.52, SD = 0.81).

4.4. Cycle 4. Theater Project in Regular Curriculum with Student Feedback

In the fourth cycle, the theater project was embedded in the regular curriculum of three inclusive classes, involving a total of 47 students. The evaluation was conducted through a structured feedback form administered after the final performance. In summary, the three classes rated the theater project positively across 15 items (M = 1.94, SD = 0.75).

Closed items revealed generally positive perceptions of the project. Students gave high ratings for the support they received from supervisors and the clarity of instructional methods, with the strongest agreement shown in responses to questions about teacher support and the structure of the lessons. Slightly lower, but still positive, responses were recorded for items regarding self-reflection and personal development.

Open-ended responses revealed that students had become more aware of bullying as a social issue. One student noted, "The project helped me reflect on bullying and learn how to respond." Another stated, "Before, I didn't read much at home, but now I read a lot more and feel more like it." Only one student mentioned reading fluency improvement through role-play, but many described emotional and social gains. Suggested improvements included shortening the play, reducing the reading load, increasing rehearsal time, and limiting the use of warm-up activities. Nonetheless, the final performance stood out as the most frequently cited highlight.

Students also participated in verbal group discussions, where they described the project as enjoyable and meaningful. They felt it helped them work better as a team and allowed them to engage with realistic and relatable themes. The performance itself was described as a source of pride and enjoyment. One student shared, "Acting is fun—and everyone made an effort to empathize with their characters."

Criticism focused on aspects such as the volume of reading at the beginning of the project and time-consuming warm-ups. Some students pointed out challenges like casting one person in multiple roles or uneven role distribution. They proposed improvements such as clearer role descriptions, more balanced assignments, and additional rehearsal support. Suggestions also included having a say in play selection and reinforcing respectful classroom behavior.

When asked about their takeaways, students reported learning how to freeze effectively for stage presence, developing anti-bullying strategies, and practicing focused cooperation through games like Zipp-Zapp-Zoom. One student remarked, "The ZIPP ZAPP warm-up was fun, everyone participated." These reflections underscore the project's impact on reading fluency, social learning, and emotional development within an inclusive setting.

The fourth cycle of the theater project, conducted within the regular curriculum of inclusive classes, demonstrated strong engagement from students and provided meaningful learning experiences. While the final performance stood out as the highlight for most students, the feedback also emphasized areas for improvement—particularly regarding warm-up activities, role distribution, and reading load. The students' responses—both written and verbal—offered valuable insights for refining future implementations of the project, highlighting the importance of balancing structure with flexibility and ensuring meaningful, relatable content.

5. Discussion

The four intervention cycles offer important insights into how inclusive theater projects, when grounded in structured pedagogical models like PIMODE, can support both literacy development and social learning. Through the lens of design-based research, the project highlights how repeated planning, action, and reflection phases can strengthen classroom management, foster student agency, and increase participation in diverse learning environments [14].

5.1. Participation and Group Cohesion through Theater Practice

Across all project cycles, students demonstrated a high degree of participation, confirming that collaborative theater can successfully promote engagement—even among previously reluctant learners. For instance, students in Cycle 3, despite initial group challenges, grew into their roles and demonstrated autonomy in organizing performances, inviting guests, and offering peer feedback. These actions align closely with PIMODE's emphasis on participation and context-sensitive lesson design. Coach B's reflection, that "even students who were very negative and destructive at the beginning ultimately participated," underscores the transformative potential of performative learning [14] (p. 162).

The inclusion of ritualized activities such as warm-up games was particularly effective in fostering group cohesion and emotional safety. These rituals provided structure and predictability—key components of inclusive learning environments according to PIMODE, which views a secure and appreciative atmosphere as foundational to meaningful participation [11].

5.2. Literacy Development and Motivation to Read

While the project did not primarily focus on traditional measures of reading literacy, students' qualitative feedback reveals enhanced motivation and engagement with texts. Several participants reported reading more at home and feeling more confident, which supports the idea that active and expressive reading—hallmarks of Readers' Theater—can stimulate fluency through authentic practice [5, 6, 25]. According to one student: "Before, I didn't read much at home, but now I read a lot more and feel more like it." This experiential form of reading, centered on voice, gesture, and interpretation, corresponds with Rosebrock and Nix's multi-level model, which emphasizes not only decoding but also self-concept and identification as core elements of reading success [15, 26, 27].

From a PIMODE perspective, this finding supports the idea that meaningful reading contexts (such as drama in a reading theater project) enhance both motivation and reading strategy acquisition. Students read with the purpose of embodying a role—a context that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning [14].

5.3. Emotional and Social Learning: Addressing Bullying through Drama

Cycles 3 and 4 featured a play that addressed the topic of bullying, leading to increased student awareness and reflective thinking. Open responses in the feedback indicated that students not only recognized bullying behaviors but also developed coping strategies. In line with PIMODE's emphasis on connecting curricular content with individual interests and needs, the play offered space for emotional resonance, critical discussion, and social-emotional growth. One student summarized this succinctly: "The project helped me reflect on bullying and learn how to respond." Theater can

also promote individual well-being[28, 29].

PIMODE encourages integrating learners' experiences and interests into lesson planning[1, 8, 11]. Here, the play's relevance supported both cognitive engagement and sociocultural reflection, fulfilling PIMODE's ideal of dialogic, process-oriented instruction. Furthermore, rituals such as "Hello, feelings" gave learners tools for expressing and recognizing emotions—strengthening both intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies[30, 31].

5.4. Rituals as Pedagogical Anchors

Rituals created a flexible and supportive space that accommodated diverse communicative styles and emotional needs, highlighting their strength in addressing the complex dynamics of identity, inclusion, and belonging within inclusive learning environments. Warm-up activities functioned not only as icebreakers but also as intentional rituals that scaffolded learning[29]. These rituals facilitated transitions, supported attention, and provided a framework for safe expression. Giera and Nagel emphasize that "these recurring elements created reliability and supported group processes"[14]. From a PIMODE standpoint, these rituals align with the model's micro-scaffolding principle: structured, supportive interventions tailored to learners' emotional and cognitive needs[11].

At the same time, feedback in Cycle 4 revealed that students' enthusiasm for warm-ups diminished over time. Some described them as too long or demotivating. This suggests that rituals must be responsive and adaptive, rather than static. Teachers and facilitators must continually reflect on their utility—an approach also emphasized in PIMODE's cyclical structure of planning, implementation, and reflection[18, 20].

5.5. Designing Inclusive Learning through PIMODE

The evolution of the project across four cycles reflects the dynamic principles of PIMODE, which emphasize reflective teaching, differentiated learning, and contextual responsiveness[1, 11]. Clear structures (e.g., consistent lesson formats, defined roles, reflective feedback) helped students understand expectations and build autonomy—core PIMODE values. When students suggested clearer role descriptions or more rehearsal time, they were actively contributing to the co-design of learning—a process PIMODE views as essential to inclusive education.

By integrating ritualized theater practices with the reflective and flexible framework of PIMODE, the project demonstrated that inclusive learning is not only about accommodating needs but also about cultivating a classroom culture where all students feel seen, heard, and empowered[4, 7, 8, 31, 32].

6. Conclusions

6.1. Summary of Insights

This study set out to explore the research question: *How do warm-up rituals support reading theater in inclusive classrooms?* Across four intervention cycles, the findings clearly demonstrate that rituals—far from being marginal or decorative—are central to inclusive theater pedagogy. Their structured, emotionally resonant, and adaptable nature helped foster belonging, increase engagement, and support collaborative learning among students with diverse needs and backgrounds.

First, warm-up rituals provided emotional grounding and structure. Activities such as "Hello, feelings!" helped students arrive mentally and emotionally, anchoring each session in predictability. This kind of structure, as emphasized in the Potsdam Inclusive Didactic Teaching Model (PIMODE), is essential for fostering autonomy and psychological safety in inclusive learning environments.

Second, rituals strengthened group cohesion and trust. Shared physical exercises, like "Zipp Zapp Zoom," promoted nonverbal communication and empathy—especially important in heterogeneous classrooms with varied communicative abilities. These practices reflect PIMODE's focus on dialogic learning and relational processes.

Third, rituals created inclusive participation opportunities. Structured feedback formats enabled all students to contribute, regardless of reading fluency or social confidence. This participatory flexibility aligned with PIMODE's principle of integrating student needs and voices into instructional design.

Fourth, regular reflection—both verbal and written—supported metacognitive development. Students not only assessed their learning progress but also evaluated group

dynamics and their own social behavior. This process echoes PIMODE's emphasis on reflection as a driver of personal and professional growth.

Taken together, these findings confirm that rituals act as both cognitive scaffolds and emotional anchors. They facilitated engagement, social connection, and meaningful access to literary learning. As Prengel asserts [8], inclusive education is as much an ethical as it is a didactic endeavor—and rituals support both dimensions through their structure and affective resonance.

6.2. Limitations

Despite these promising insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study relied primarily on qualitative data, such as educator reflections and student feedback in a survey. While this allowed for nuanced understanding, it limits generalizability and did not include measurable outcomes like gains in reading fluency.

Sample sizes varied across cycles, and student participation in feedback activities was inconsistent, raising the possibility of response bias. Additionally, while the DBR approach enabled iterative improvement, the overlap of practitioner and researcher roles may have introduced subjectivity.

The role of rituals, though emphasized in reflection protocols, was not always directly addressed in student evaluations, particularly in early cycles. Also, there is limited exploration of long-term impacts on literacy and social behavior which could be done in the future.

6.3. Directions for Future Research

Moreover, the study focused on secondary schools in a specific regional context. As such, the applicability of findings to other educational settings, age groups, or cultural contexts remains uncertain. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches, broaden participant diversity, and assess the long-term impact of rituals on reading development, social behavior, and student-teacher relationships [32, 33]. Further studies could also explore how these ritual-based strategies might be adapted for other subjects to analyze their academic effects [34]. A systematic analysis and publication of the structure of each intervention would provide further insight into their design and impact.

6.4. Pedagogical Recommendations

This study underscores the pedagogical value of combining structured, ritualized theater practices with the reflective, student-centered framework of the Potsdam Inclusive Teaching Model. By uniting drama expression with inclusive instructional design, educators can create vibrant, supportive learning environments in which all students—regardless of ability—can grow socially, emotionally, and academically.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore how seemingly simple routines—such as beginning with a warm-up can evolve into powerful pedagogical tools that promote inclusion, active participation, and reflective learning. These rituals contribute to a sustainable approach to inclusive theatre practice within diverse classroom settings.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Potsdam (protocol code 54/2021 and 5th October 2021).

Informed Consent Statement

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

Data Availability Statement

The data are not available because of ethical restrictions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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