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**“The Shakespeare Sessions”: a qualitative evaluation of an
online intervention to prime studies with youth at risk of violence
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"The Shakespeare Sessions": a qualitative evaluation of an online intervention to prime studies with youth at risk of violence

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MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

TITLE: “The Shakespeare Sessions”: a qualitative evaluation of an online intervention to prime studies with youth at risk of violence

ABSTRACT:

There was a reduction in recorded violence committed by children during the COVID-19 pandemic in England and Wales. It was during this time that online interaction became more prevalent, as the technology supporting this kind of interaction became essential. Following the pandemic, we attempted to use this extant social change through an online intervention involving youth at risk of violence. The aim of the Shakespeare Sessions was to empower young people with the skills to avoid violence irrespective of any in-person, or online, socio-economic barriers to theatrical intervention.

A qualitative approach, which used five semi-structured interviews with youth workers and actors and one focus group with four young participants, was designed to explore the participants’ experiences of this intervention. Three themes were generated in a thematic analysis: “Challenges and barriers to the intervention”; “Impacts and effects of intervention”; “Why Shakespeare?”.

Noticeable positive changes were observed in all participants in terms of the protective factors of confidence, empathy, and resilience. A hybrid format, allowing online attendance from a secure and accessible place, has the potential to address any in-person, or online, socio-economic barriers to intervention.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The results indicate this interdisciplinary approach, mixing social work, psychology, criminology, and theatre built a positive and nurturing environment. Youth workers can discuss lived examples of violence with young participants based on forum theatre and Shakespeare.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

Our research makes an original contribution to knowledge because the youth interacted with actors online and after the pandemic. It seeks to expand the existing literature by priming similar studies.

“The Shakespeare Sessions”: a qualitative evaluation of an online intervention to prime studies with youth at risk of violence

Introduction

There was a reduction in recorded violence committed by children during the COVID-19 pandemic in England and Wales. Knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children declined by 21% during the first 12 months of the pandemic in England and Wales, compared to the previous 12 months (Youth Justice Board, 2022). During lockdown procedures instigated by the UK government, fewer activities were permissible outside and less interaction between young people seemingly had an impact on recorded violence. A similar phenomenon has been observed with those children involved in the trend for trafficking drugs through vulnerable and arrest-resistant agents on the rail network, who were more easily disrupted by the police, although the wider safeguarding picture was more complicated (Brewster *et al.*, 2023). It was during this time that online interaction became more prevalent, as the technology supporting this kind of interaction became essential. Following the pandemic, we attempted to use this extant social change through an online intervention involving youth at risk of violence.

The aim of the Shakespeare Sessions was to empower young people with the skills to avoid violence irrespective of any in-person socio-economic barriers to intervention: these barriers include the danger in bringing together youth with so-called “postcode” rivalries (Kurtenbach *et al.*, 2021), and the affordability of transport to bring them together from socio-economically deprived areas (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). Our online intervention attempted to address the lack of online devices and internet available to youth in these areas. The means of accomplishing this was through the following: (1) educate the participants in the situational and psychological triggers for violence in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*; (2) draw out skills from within the

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participants to enable them to respond differently to those triggers; (3) enhance the participants confidence, resilience, and empathy when dealing with situations of conflict; (4) help practitioners to apply the lessons learnt through the project; (5) give participants the opportunity to be involved in a production of Romeo and Juliet. Our research makes an original contribution to knowledge because the youth interacted with professional actors online and after the pandemic in 2022. It seeks to expand the existing literature in relation to online intervention and youth violence by priming similar studies.

Literature Review

The way in which young people understand and respond to conflict plays a large part in the development of aggression and violence (Malti, 2016). There is a significant amount of research in relation to the risk factors for youth violence and, more recently, the relevant protective factors. Further research is required on how these factors interact (Beauchaine and Hinshaw, 2016). A focus on a constellation of factors fits with a theoretical approach to youth violence (Duncan *et al.*, 2019). Developmental psychopathology and social-ecological theories indicate that individual traits of children can be affected by and affect proximal (e.g. family) and distal (e.g. community violence or gang membership or poverty) systems (Cicchetti and Rogosch, 2002; Sitnick *et al.*, 2017). Psychopathy and self-control theories are key factors in antisocial behaviour, highlighting individuals who lack self-regulation, empathy, and emotional control, seeking immediate gratification (DeLisi *et al.*, 2018). Gottfredson and Hirschi’s “A General Theory of Crime” (1990) posits that poor parenting leads to low self-control, impulsivity, and risk-taking, making it a strong predictor of crime and maladaptive behaviours (DeLisi *et al.*, 2018). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that individuals with low self-control tend to exhibit a high rate, frequency, and severity of offending, starting early

and continuing late into life, resulting in prolonged criminal careers. Research links low self-control to violence (Larson *et al.*, 2015).

Sampson and Laub's (1993) leading theory on desistance from crime links juvenile delinquency and adult crime to informal social control. They identified three components: causes of juvenile delinquency, stability in criminal behaviour, and changes due to social control in adulthood. Structural disadvantages weaken social control and increase attachment to delinquent peers and siblings, which leads to delinquency. Subsequently, Laub and Sampson (2003) explored aging, human agency, and situational influences, emphasising "turning points" like marriage or employment in desistance from crime. This theory is important for the current study, as the focus is on young people at risk of delinquency, who come from a background characterised by structural disadvantage, as described by Sampson and Laub (1993), including low socio-economic status, separated parents, an overcrowded household, residential instability, parental unemployment, and parental deviance.

Moffitt's developmental taxonomy (1993) categorises antisocial behaviour into life-course persistent and adolescence-limited types, reflecting the age-crime curve where crime peaks during teenage years. Life-course persistence involves early neuropsychological issues and social failure, while adolescence-limited behaviour stems from the gap between biological and social maturity. Moffitt (2006) confirms many predictions of this theory. Brain-imaging studies link brain development with impulse control and decision-making (Casey *et al.*, 2008). The "Pathways to Desistance Study" (Mulvey *et al.*, 2010) tracked 1,354 serious juvenile offenders for seven years, finding that most desist from crime, with less than 10% continuing high-level offending. Persistence was linked to less maturity in impulse control and perspective-taking, while desistance was associated with typical positive development. This study highlighted the

critical importance of incorporating these factors into the development of interventions for young people. Specifically, it underscores the need to foster empathy, enhance self-control, improve emotional regulation, and deepen understanding of anger management.

Unlike traditional offender programmes theatre ensembles emphasise trust and communal action, which Bazemore and Erbe (2003, cited in Davey *et al.*, 2015) suggest are crucial for forming a pro-social identity and, therefore, for turning points. McNeill *et al.* (2011) suggest that arts and theatre-based approaches should not be seen as isolated, targeted, interventions. Instead, they highlight the unique and valuable potential of these approaches to inspire the desistance process. Similarly, Hurry *et al.* (2005) found that young offenders had significantly more positive associations with art and drama activities compared to formal education. The website of Intermission Youth Theatre, which uses Shakespeare to transform young people's lives, indicates that since 2008 only one ex-offender has re-offended after joining IYT (n.d.).

The following review of theatre programmes illuminates how confidence, resilience, and empathy, in particular, have been seen as key protective factors in relation to theatre programmes with youth. According to self-efficacy theory, confidence in ability to perform impacts performance and can be developed through five means: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; imagined experiences; social persuasion; and emotional or physical cues (Gallagher, 2012). Self-efficacy is a protective factor linked to resilience and is an indicator of the capacity to walk away from violence (Meichenbaum, 2008; Allen and Solomon, 2012). The review reveals the relative importance of acting, ensemble-building, and forum theatre to these programmes.

Applied Theatre

In 1979, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed weaponised theatre for equitable social change. Applied theatre has framed its use in education, in the community, and in prison. The potential impact of applied theatre on youth is telling. It can be used to promote 'empathy, self-expression, and self-efficacy' (Brenner *et al.*, 2022, p.6). It is described as 'theatre as a means towards a larger communal, pedagogic, or political goal rather than an end in and of itself' (Brenner *et al.*, 2022, p.5). Our goal was to reduce the likelihood of youth violence irrespective of social and economic barriers. The means was the empowerment of youth with the skills to avoid violence, through the rehearsal, discussion, and performance of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Boal understood theatre as a forum for sociological discourse with the audience, which engages them in role-playing how a scene could end based on lived experience (Boal, 1992). Shakespeare's themes are universal and his use of soliloquies broke the fourth wall (Palfrey and Stern, 2010).

Theatre Programmes in School

Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation (CSSF) is a charity in the United Kingdom (UK) that holds an annual Theatre Festival, which is the largest youth drama project in the world. CSSF produces half-hour-long cuts of Shakespeare's plays (Kitchen, 2015). Primary and secondary school participants, including those with Special Educational Needs and / or Disability (SEND), share the stage and at least one third of the schools belong to the top three deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rathe and Ellis, 2023). The importance of working with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds is highlighted by Arts Council England's 2016 report *Every Child:*

Equality and Diversity in Arts and Culture (Blood *et al.*, 2016). It found the strongest positive correlation in relation to youth's disengagement with arts and culture, including educational attainment in the arts, is disadvantaged socio-economic background. In 2019, CSSF undertook the Shakespeare For All project (CSSF, 2019). In social development, the group 'working below' national expectations demonstrated the greatest gains across the social skills measured. In Cultural Capital, those 'working below' national expectations and with SEND developed most interest in Shakespeare.

CSSF responded to the pandemic through a series of online CPD sessions for teacher-directors. This was followed by In-School Workshops, sometimes online, and One Night of Shakespeare, which streamed performances recorded in schools. CSSF reports that 95% of respondents (41 teachers) said students were more able to empathise with each other, and 98% of respondents (42 teachers) said students were more confident as a result (CSSF, 2021). A further 98% of respondents (113 teachers) reported their students were confident in the following year (CSSF, 2022). Kitchen suggests ensemble-based projects such as CSSF could be perceived as a 'pedagogic space' (Kitchen, 2015, p.90). In the case study schools, teachers referred to the CSSF project 'as an ongoing and changing space in which both they and their students could develop' (Kitchen, 2015, p.102). Kitchen argues, via another ethnography of CSSF's festival project, that ensemble pedagogy creates a shared space for 'empathetic discourse' (Kitchen, 2021, p.372).

Urban Improv (UI) by Rehearsal for Life has been used as a youth violence prevention (YVP) programme for inner-city youth based in the United States (Zucker *et al.*, 2010). An initiative in Boston Public Schools, it involves 'structured theater improvisation to address youth decision-making, impulse control, and conflict resolution skills' (Kisiel *et al.*, 2006, p.23). A

1 theatre-based approach to YVP allows ‘students to act out, break down, and analyze the stages
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3 of a violent event in an experientially vivid manner within a safe and contained setting’ (Kisiel
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8 *et al.*, 2006, p.22). In an extension of the UI programme, an assessment was made of the
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‘replicability of the positive program impacts when implemented by nonprogram originators,
as well as the utility of a comprehensive version of the UI program that included a classroom-
based teacher curriculum (TC)’ (Zucker *et al.*, 2010, p.117). The TC was developed by ‘fourth-
grade Boston public school teachers, UI actor/educators, and trauma center psychologists’
(Zucker *et al.*, 2010, pp.119-120). The study compared 260 elementary school students from
six inner-city schools in one school district: the comprehensive programme (UI + TC) showed
‘an additive effect over UI alone’ and the TC showed potential as an independent YVP
programme (Zucker *et al.*, 2010, p.117). In its most recent Impact Report, Rehearsal for Life
reports that approximately 1400 students aged nine to fourteen years had been engaged in seven
partner schools and 61 classrooms: 91% of respondents involved in the programme agreed that
their class showed increased self-confidence and empathy skills (Rehearsal for Life Impact
Report 2022-23, 2023).

Theatre Programmes in the Community

Intermission Youth Theatre (IYT) supports 16-25 year olds who lack opportunities or
confidence, are vulnerable, at risk of offending, identify as carers, or are socio-economically
disadvantaged. IYT’s ““vision and values”” statement outlines a family-centred approach: ““a
sense of home and family in a safe place...”” (Wade, 2016, p.56). One programme lasts 10
months and includes a fortnight of Summer School and a devised production in November.
The text is cut for use in a ‘contemporary relocation’, the narrative or characters rewritten to
include ‘contemporary street vernacular’ (Wade, 2016, p.54). Research suggests youth gain

ownership of a play linked to their own community (Winters *et al.*, 2015; Hallewas, 2019).

Forum theatre is used in rehearsals and actors sometimes take part in a 'talkback', following the production, which has similarities with the 'spect-actor' of Boal's forum theatre (Hammock, 2011, p.378).

A case study by Evans (2018) includes current or past IYT participants, representatives from external organisations in professional contact with IYT, and IYT staff. Evans believes the emerging themes are consistent enough to conclude that IYT is responsible for positive change in the lives of its participants (Evans, 2018, p.4). Evans corroborates Wade (2016) in identifying 'a strong family network' as central to IYT's programme (Evans, 2018, p.4). The report underlines potential 'reductions in offending/re-offending or decreased risk' (Evans, 2018, p.7). One recommendation included researching 'the specific impact that working on Shakespeare has for young people considered at risk' (Evans, 2018, p.9). On this point, one participant reflected on how gang violence was explored through Romeo and Juliet: 'we saw the conflict and how a little thing sparked an argument. And it made you reflect on life' (Evans, 2018, p.29).

IYT was able to rehearse two productions on Zoom during the pandemic and continued its mentoring work through phone calls (IYT, 2020). Three surveys of the cohort were conducted by Relationships Foundation in June 2020. The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Survey showed the participants' mental well-being was below the baseline of a random sample of the UK population. The Intermission Youth activity survey showed the cohort valued social interaction such as phone calls with staff over organised activities such as online rehearsals for The Tempest although fewer participants were involved in the latter. The Intermission Youth

Feelings survey showed a majority missed meeting in person but believed planned events had kept them motivated.

One study involved a project by the Artistic Director of Friches Théâtre Urbain, a street theatre company in Paris, to avoid an escalation of violence following the death of a 15-year-old boy in a violent clash between rival gangs aged 14 to 20 years old (Haedicke, 2016). The Artistic Director subsequently led a year-long performance-based project with youth, adults, and old-age pensioners to ‘create imagined exit points from the accumulating tensions by drawing on lived and imagined experience’ (Haedicke, 2016, p.173). Shakespeare was translated into “‘street’” French by the young participants, which included ‘street vernacular, slam poetry and rap’ (Haedicke, 2016, p.173). The production, *Blood Will Have Blood*, involved Shakespearean scenes of violence, (Haedicke, 2016, p.173). Following the project, ‘the children and adults of the two towns see working together as the norm, and gang fights in the disputed metro station have all but ended’ (Haedicke, 2016, p.173).

Theatre Programmes in Prison

There is sound empirical research indicating arts programming in prison works. This includes significantly reduced rates of recidivism in longitudinal study (Shailor, 2010). Theatre has particular characteristics in prison including sanctuary from its environment and the development of employability or life skills (Shailor, 2010). McNeill *et al.* (2011) found that arts interventions in Scottish prisons boost self-esteem and self-confidence and develop self-control. Trusting relationships with arts practitioners helped prisoners challenge negative identities. Public performances fostered new, positive, identities. These interventions also engaged prisoners in educational and personal development.

Programmes in the USA have used ‘Shakespeare’s “criminal tragedies” (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*)’ in adaptations written by prisoners in solitary confinement to confront and overturn the way participants think (Bates, 2010, p.33). Prisoners in the open population perform the adaptations that are broadcast to all prisoners, alongside conversations in which the prisoners discuss the plays (Bates, 2010). One performance adapted *Macbeth* using contemporary hip hop language (Bates, 2010).

Kaplan (2021) recognises that working in a prison environment requires a high level of adaptability. She reports some participants’ attendance at workshops is erratic. Kaplan therefore uses most of the time to create an ensemble (Kaplan, 2021). ““Conflict scenes”” conceive of a conflict that is performed but not resolved. Participants identify with it, or ask questions, before adding to a scene based on their lived experience (Kaplan, 2021, p.207). Kaplan never uses scripts because of the barrier they create for low literacy levels among incarcerated youth (Kaplan, 2021). Even if the performance is not of ‘high artistic quality’, a focus on the ensemble means the youth will have been heard (Kaplan, 2021, p.209). Furthermore, Davey *et al.* (2015) showed that prison theatre projects often focus on developing an ensemble, which fosters group cohesion, teamwork, and creative collaboration. This approach helps participants build a sense of usefulness, a non-offending identity, and pro-social belonging.

Materials and Methods

The research project involved online drama workshops. The evaluation aimed to explore the experience of the participants and included measures of confidence, resilience, and empathy.

The theatre programmes of CSSF and IYT suggest that Shakespeare can build these protective factors with socio-economically disadvantaged youth. These youth were the subject of our study in relation to violence, given their inclination for disengagement with arts and culture, the positive impact Shakespeare-based theatre programmes can have on their interest in Shakespeare, and the structural disadvantage of low socio-economic status, which can affect their propensity for delinquency. Due to the number of participants, this report focuses on the qualitative findings.

Sample

This study used a purposive sample (Walliman, 2006). Participants were recruited through two youth workers employed by a city council. The parameters were between 11 to 16 years of age and of a similar age with a representative sample of gender. To recruit participants, the youth workers were asked to use a multi-agency safeguarding tool, which is not labelled more specifically to protect the anonymity of participants using it. In consultation with the youth workers, indicators from the tool were chosen because they represented a risk of violence. Participants would be selected if they returned a 'Yes' for at least one of the following indicators:

- (1) Physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse; neglect;
- (2) Witness to domestic violence/abuse at home;
- (3) Physical injuries such as bruising suggestive of either physical or sexual assault
(include any knife, acid or weapon injuries, drug concealment);
- (4) Bullying or being bullied;
- (5) Aggressive or violent including to animals, parents, siblings, teachers or peers;

- (6) Intelligence/suspicion to suggest that they carry or are carrying weapons or drugs;
- (7) Disclosure of sexual /physical assault followed by withdrawal of allegation. Coerced into sexual activity;
- (8) Accessing online material that promotes violence/use of weapons/criminal activities.

Youth workers explained the intervention and study to potential participants. Interested participants were given written information and consent of a parent or guardian was obtained before the start of the programme. Participants provided written consent before completing the questionnaires, interviews, or focus group. Six young people started the intervention and four took part until its end, all of whom participated in the focus group. The sample for the qualitative part of this study comprised of four young people and five staff members involved in the intervention. The age range of the young people was 13 to 17 years old and comprised two males and two females. The staff members included three females and two males.

Intervention Structure

Twelve online workshops were designed by a professional actor with 25 years’ experience of education and theatre practice including Shakespeare. This actor facilitated the workshops with the support of two professional actors, who joined online from the USA, and two youth workers.

Following on from the literature review, the programme was designed to be an amalgam of ensemble-building, forum theatre, and rehearsal. This led to a programme in which exercises brought the young people emotionally closer, trained them in acting (Shakespeare), allowed them to discuss its relevance to the potential triggers of violence in their lives, and culminated

in rehearsing the play. The design of the programme had to respond to the engagement and learning needs of the young people (e.g. dyslexia) as well as their erratic attendance. The 90-minute workshops took place weekly and no young people attended on three occasions. However, at least three of the final four took part in all but three sessions.

The intention was for them to be online at their home addresses. However, it was not possible to provide all of them with internet access and some did not have an appropriate space. As a result, they were supported by youth workers to attend a family centre and to join from separate rooms where possible to replicate the intended experience. This hybrid approach involved most workshops separating the young people in two rooms.

At the start of each workshop the facilitator checked in with all participants, completed a warm up, and asked them for feedback at the end. During activities, the facilitator ensured everyone understood the vocabulary used. Following feedback from the youth workers, a 10-minute break was built into the middle of each session from the fifth week. The programme ended, followed by the focus group, before a ~half-hour performance of Romeo and Juliet in-person.

Data Collection

A focus group generates data via interactions between group members (Morgan, 2012), and was chosen to understand the experience of the young people, while individual interviews were conducted with adult participants. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 35 and 52 minutes, while the focus group took 53 minutes. All interviews took place online, while the focus group took place at a family centre with support of the youth workers. Participants were asked to talk about their experience of the intervention, their expectations, their motivations,

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what they liked or disliked, the progression and change they might have noticed, as well as their recommendations for the intervention. Gathering multiple perspectives on the intervention can offer richer and more reliable information (Silvergleid and Mankowski, 2006).

The recorded interviews and focus group were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12 (i.e. software allowing the coding and classification of data). Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data, adopting the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006): in-depth reading, initial coding, grouping codes, refining themes, defining themes and final analysis. The transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the content of the interviews. Annotations were made during the reading process. A reflexive approach was adopted with codes evolving, expanding or contracting and becoming more interpretative through the process (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) values the creative interaction between the researcher, methods, and data, emphasizing researcher subjectivity and participants' meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2019). It is ideal for exploratory studies on participants' experience and motivation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The authors discussed and brainstormed shared aspects of codes and sub-codes, refining and collating them into potential themes that were finally labelled.

The study received ethical approval (P134019) from the university's Research Ethics Committee and adhered to ethical guidelines. Adult participants received no incentives, while young participants were offered two £5 vouchers for completing a pre- and post- intervention questionnaire, as well as a £10 voucher for their participation in the focus group. Identifiable information was anonymized.

Results

The findings from the interviews and focus group highlight the benefits and limitations experienced by all participants and are summed up by three themes that were generated from the data: 1. Challenges and barriers to the intervention; 2. Impacts and effects of intervention; 3. Why Shakespeare?

1. Challenges and barriers to the intervention

This theme represented participants' perception of the challenges that had to be overcome to complete the intervention and included three subthemes: Online and technical challenges; Working with young people (YP) at risk; Group dynamic.

1.1 Online and technical challenges

Participants (YP and adults) discussed technical issues faced when in an online environment, but also access to and affordability of internet from home. Not all YP had access to an electronic device and internet, or could be provided with them, as highlighted in this quote:

They don't have access to the gadgets that we think they have actually, you know, I think everyone assumes, everyone's got Internet at home, not everyone has laptops.

They might have a phone. They're more than likely to have a phone, but they don't wanna use their data [P5¹].

This quote by a youth worker underlined the economic difficulties of the YP and the choices they have to make with regard to their use of a device. It highlights digital poverty, characterised by insufficient data or devices, but also the lack of any access to the internet necessary to connect to an online intervention. As the intervention was originally designed, each young person would have been given devices and internet access. However, additional challenges would have been observed at home including a lack of personal space [P5].

At the start of the intervention, the YP could not communicate online with youth workers and noted the social impetus to become involved in other activities when at home [focus group]. All participants therefore wanted the start of the intervention to be in the same physical space, where they would have expected more effective interaction. The intervention was resultingly implemented as the hybrid model in which the YP accessed the online intervention from the family centre, where the youth workers could better support their welfare. However, the actors found certain activities didn't work very well with some YP initially shy to be on camera or disengaged out of frame in the room.

1.2 Working with young people at risk

Attendance was encouraged by the youth workers, as the YP's motivation was quite weak and came from external factors including a favour for a youth worker, the vouchers, or being out

¹ P5 refers to participant 5, all participants were numbered and are represented as such. The quotes may contain spelling/grammatical errors that were not corrected to reflect exactly what was said by participants.

of the house [focus group]. The youth workers highlighted their struggle to select 'young people that would be dedicated' [P6].

A further challenge was ensuring the YP enjoyed the benefits of the intervention. This seems to have been impaired by the participants' scholarly perception of the project, but they also related the online aspect to school during the pandemic, which was not enjoyable for them. The experience of youth workers was crucial in addressing this alongside the actors, who introduced a break during each session and continued to demonstrate how physical the activities were in an effort to encourage the YP to join in. The YP initially found it quite difficult to keep focused, and appeared to be testing boundaries. The latter manifested through playing on their phones, having their heads down when being spoken to, or being out of frame, as highlighted by P8:

If I had to guess that was probably it, because they're kind of testing it to see, OK, you know, maybe if I don't participate the first couple of weeks that we just won't even they won't even do it, they won't even come back, they won't show up, they'll say, well, they'll give up on me and I'm going to give up before they give up on me. [P8]

1.3 Group dynamic

Another challenge faced by the group was their different ages, abilities, or needs. Some had issues with reading, or reading out loud, and one dyslexia. The youth workers sometimes felt it was difficult to have the YP in separate rooms at the family centre, but most participants recognised this had a strong impact on the group dynamic:

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5 that's when they gained their confidence. To be able to read, without feeling, if they got
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7 a word wrong, which is quite easy when you're reading Shakespeare for the first time
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9 and then it gave them theIt... it was OK, whereas if they'd been in the group, they
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11 may have been embarrassed. [P5].
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17 It was observed that when some YP were absent, it allowed others to blossom. For example,
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19 the influence of the oldest of the group meant other participants let that participant do the work.
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24 ***2. Impacts and effects of intervention***
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28 The second theme related to the YP's progression and potential effects of the intervention. Two
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30 subthemes were present: Building skills and self-development; and Safe place/outlet.
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35 ***2.1 Building skills and self-development***
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40 This subtheme covers the progress made by the YP and the skills they developed throughout
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42 the intervention. All participants talked about how the YP's confidence and communication
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44 skills had grown. Although not all YP felt more confident in general after the intervention, they
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46 all said they were more comfortable with each other, were happy to participate and to be on
47
48 camera:
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54 'P3: I learned how to be in a camera without being scared.
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P2: What should I like? I don't know. I think I was...I sort of impressed myself most of the time with like, some of my answers. I didn't even really think I could, like, think that way.'

The progress was seen as 'a real shift from the very first interactions to not even wanting to be on the camera to then wanting to read as much as possible' [P8]. Additionally, their social and theatrical skills improved week on week. They were engaging with the actors and each other but also engaging with their performance: 'They were so engaged and so eloquent, each in their different way, you know'. [P9]. Participants were able to maintain focus and concentration, adhering to instructions and making choices while acting, which developed their resilience and confidence. At the end of the intervention, reading did not generally seem to be an issue and the YP enjoyed themselves: 'And hearing them laugh was probably the best experience or the best moments during the entire duration of the project' [P7]. Although the online environment initially made it difficult for YP to express themselves, they were able to develop themselves:

'P2: Um, have I developed any skills? I think I may be improved on some skills. Like, um, public speaking, and um...

P4: Putting your point across.

P2: Yeah. And being sort of...

P1: Confident

P2: Yeah

P1: In your own self

P2: Yeah. Sort of like being...

P4: Self believing.

P2: able to sort of stand up and say something. I would usually just sort of sit there and let everybody else do it.

P1: Not really. I mean I kind of just changed how I perceive stuff and I guess expanded on my own abilities. I mean, like, I'm not confident, unless I'm with people I'm comfortable around, but I guess I've got more confident about being around certain people'.

This underlined how the YP reflected on their increasing confidence and resilience in an environment conducive to empathy. However, as mentioned by P6, a longer intervention programme would be needed to demonstrate further measurable impact.

2.2 Safe place/outlet

From the interviews with participants, the aim of the actors was to create a "safe place" in which YP would feel comfortable online: 'Feeling like there was a safety there and that they had permission.... and that there was no judgement in that, there was support....' [P8]. The YP who participated in the intervention perceived few opportunities to better themselves because they came from a poor and violent neighbourhood. They noted the time it took for them to feel comfortable with each other and in front of the camera. The YP, who didn't know one another before the intervention, built empathy through their relationships, which created an ensemble or family. Interviews with the adult participants revealed how some of the YP went to the gym together after the sessions. They also opened up about their perceived vulnerabilities (e.g., dyslexia or shyness).

This safe place provided a promising environment to share views of violent situations, or alternative solutions, which the characters in the play could have adopted. The YP did this for about a third of the intervention. One of the actors mentioned they would have liked to extend this in a longer intervention [P9]. The group provided a springboard to build conversations between youth workers and YP about their developing understanding of how to cope with violent situations outside of the intervention:

‘I see those young people twice a week, then we’ll have conversations about a violent attack that’s happened in the local community and will link it to what we’ve spoke about in the Shakespeare sessions. And we’ll just compare to how it might have been dealt with, you know, during the Shakespeare and how they made him deal with it now. So, they’ve gained skills to be able to talk about, and feel confident to talk about violence’ [P6].

From discussion with the youth workers and actors, it was essential to continually communicate with the YP and one another on the co-creation of the project and its progress.

3. Why Shakespeare?

During the interviews, it became clear that some of the participants had strong preconceptions about the use of Shakespeare’s plays and assumptions about who would be appropriate for the intervention. Several participants stated that Shakespeare is difficult to understand, difficult to read, and lacks accessibility. The assumption was also made that Shakespeare is more of a fit for certain YP:

1
2
3 'P2: No. Because I think especially in these areas, no one cares about Shakespeare. No
4
5 one cares. I think, one, they won't understand it.'

6
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10 A lack of academic ability was seen as a barrier by several participants. Furthermore,
11
12 participants felt that YP might see Shakespeare as unappealingly old-fashioned. However, the
13
14 actors expressed a way of personalising and connecting with the words: 'How does it make
15
16 sense to me? [P8]'. Participants explained that we can all relate to the themes and emphasised
17
18 their universality in terms of time and place. It allowed actors to explore a wide range of
19
20 emotions and themes: 'gang mentality? It's there. ...Those triggers that could lead any people
21
22 into a situation where violence is in the air. Uncontrolled emotions, lack of...violent love,
23
24 violent hate'. [P9]

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30 Although it was seen as relatable by several participants, others thought this intervention and
31
32 the use of Shakespeare would not fit youth who are already entrenched in violence and had no
33
34 exposure to Shakespeare. However, it was recognised that it is possible to learn the vocabulary
35
36 and help YP to understand Shakespeare's plays. In this way, the intervention focused not only
37
38 on how to use the words, but how to paraphrase them to build understanding.

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44 Finally, the YP thought that participation in the intervention could be seen as detrimental by
45
46 youth involved in violence and gangs, that it could endanger their reputation, and could lead to
47
48 bullying. This can be seen in the following quote:

49
50
51
52
53 'P1: I can't come out tonight. Why? I'm furthering my academic proceeds...

54
55
56 P2: Yeah. They're going to kill you.

57
58
59 P4: They'll just call you a waste of time and they won't be your friend'.
60

Participants mentioned that gangs might give YP a feeling of belonging, or a second family, and they would not want to jeopardise this [P1, P2]. Participants felt it would be very difficult for gang members to find the motivation to attend whether online or offline.

From the interviews, participants also made a series of recommendations: for example, the intervention should last longer because it takes time for YP to be comfortable with one another; introduce forum theatre once YP are fully engaged in the acting and have built their ensemble.

Discussion

Findings from this study indicated three main themes for participants: the challenges and barriers they encountered, the impacts and effects of the intervention, and why Shakespeare? Each revealed benefits and limitations. Overall, the results indicate that this interdisciplinary approach, mixing social work, psychology, criminology, and theatre built a positive and nurturing environment that overcame the structural disadvantages (e.g., low socio-economic status) described by Laub and Sampson (1993). The use of a fully online intervention proved difficult. However, the hybrid format, allowing online attendance from a secure and accessible place, has the potential to address the risk of violence and affordability of in-person interventions, while circumventing the difficulties with digital poverty in a fully online intervention.

By comparison with the 'online and technical challenges' subtheme, surveys of the IYT cohort found that organised activities including online rehearsal were seen as least valuable during the pandemic: participants missed being in-person; but felt that planned events had kept them

motivated (IYT, 2020). The participants in the current study also said that they missed physical interaction and recognised that they gained from the intervention. Although the age group of our sample and IYT participants (16-25 years) is markedly different, it suggests there is some positive psychological benefit to engagement online.

In the 'working with young people at risk' subtheme, there was a need for adaptability during the intervention in line with Kaplan (2021). This included the adaptation required due to erratic attendance. The initial erratic engagement was overcome once the actors and youth workers had dedicated time to create an ensemble in the same vein as Kaplan. This included listening to the YP in their request for a break, so they felt heard, and emphasising how physical Shakespeare is. This helped to address the fact that the YP likened the online nature of the intervention to their negative experience of school during the pandemic. Walters *et al.* (2022) found that the learning experiences of 407 students in secondary schools in Wales were notably diminished in online learning compared to traditional classroom learning.

Group dynamics played a crucial role in this small group: confidence grew when YP were separated from one another during the intervention. This aligns with the finding of Wade (2016) that everyone in an ensemble is important. The absence of some YP at certain times made the space a changing one, described by Kitchen (2021), in which all the YP could express themselves and individually develop. This included the time to address the issues with reading among our participants, which had been outlined by Kaplan (2021).

In relation to the intervention's impacts and effects, the youth workers and actors observed noticeable changes occurring in all participants throughout. The YP developed confidence, social skills, demonstrating empathy, and literacy, showing resilience. Evans (2018) found

1
2
3 similarly positive change in the lives of IYT's participants, potentially leading to reduced
4 offending, re-offending, and overall risk. Further studies focused on using theatre and
5 Shakespeare in prison have found the same benefits in terms of life skills (Shailor, 2010).
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12 Another impact of the current intervention was the provision of a 'safe place/outlet', which
13 allowed the YP to develop a social network, reflected in the themes of family and a theatrical
14 ensemble in Kaplan (2021), Evans (2018), Wade (2016) and Kitchen (2015; 2021). The current
15 study showed that this safe place enables participants to share personal experiences and
16 disclose vulnerabilities. Shailor (2010) reported that theatre was like a sanctuary to its
17 participants in prison. This 'safe place/outlet' created a pathway to impact for the youth
18 workers who were able to discuss lived examples of violence with the YP outside of the
19 sessions, based on the forum theatre experienced. This allowed them to develop their resilience
20 and the capacity to walk away from violence.
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35 The last theme 'Why Shakespeare?' contrasts the opinions of the YP and youth workers with
36 the professional actors. The first group had preconceptions about using Shakespeare's words
37 for an intervention with YP. The latter group explained how this language can be empowering
38 and how the content of Shakespeare's plays remains universally relevant. This can be seen with
39 IYT's contemporary relocation of Shakespeare (Wade, 2016). An approach relevant to meter
40 was reported by Haedicke (2016) and Bates (2010), whose participants used rap and hip-hop.
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51 This study has inherent limitations and would have benefitted from a larger participant pool,
52 which was ideally closer in age. The evaluation of the intervention would require the presence
53 of a control group, which was not ultimately available, although it was intended as a part of
54 this study. The intended quantitative component, including pre-test and post-hoc surveys
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(comprising validated questionnaires) would have strengthened the findings through a mixed method approach. Nevertheless, valuable lessons were gleaned from this intervention. The experiences of the participants can lay the groundwork for future research involving a larger sample of at-risk youth.

In conclusion, although a small number of YP at risk of violence experienced the whole intervention, lessons were learned in implementing an online intervention based on Shakespeare. The impact was positive, but this would need to be assessed longitudinally to see whether it is a turning point in desistance. Future studies should measure which factors best protect against violence.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Response to Reviewers

Thank you for the comments. We changed the title to a qualitative study as recommended.

Comments:

The addition of theory, CCE research and the discussion of digital poverty has very much improved this paper.

Additional Questions:

1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: The paper offers a unique approach to preventing violence and improving youth attitudes. This paper may well set the ground work for larger sample studies and studies over a longer period of time.

The small sample size must be emphasised here, and while the experiences of participants should not be downplayed this paper plays the role of a proof-of-concept. Accessing group interventions online and coupled with drama-based interventions may well be beneficial but this paper alone does not fully demonstrate a reduction in violence or attitudes towards violence.

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: I still think the abstract (first line) implies a direct causal relationship between COVID-19 and the reduction in recorded violence rather than a mediated relationship with opportunity. However, this is clarified in the amended first paragraph of the introduction.

The introduction of wider research of CCE/trafficking is beneficial.

Introduction of theory in the first paragraph of the literature review is a good addition. However, stronger links to the current study need to be made.

Is the introduction of Laub and Sampsons's "turning points" to suggest that the Shakespeare sessions could act as one of these? If so there needs to be an example of online intervention or drama-based sessions leading to desistance. A similar point is made in the following paragraph. This is then link to theatre programmes, but it may be helpful to make this link more explicitly throughout the beginning of the literature review.

Please see the new paragraph inserted on page 4.

Similarly, the paragraph preceding the "applied theatre" section is a good edition. The link to protective factors is greatly beneficial.

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: There is a better

1
2
3 explanation for the specific use of Shakespeare in the materials and methods section. Links
4 could also be made throughout the literature review to the decision to use Shakespeare.
5

6
7 In the paragraph on page 4 we have made a specific reference to desistance and
8 Shakespeare. Further links between theatre programmes and the protective factors or pro-
9 social belonging which might prime desistance have been made in the section relating to
10 *Theatre Programmes in Prison*.
11

12
13 The more detailed breakdown of the violence indicators is useful. Knowing the
14 breakdown of the sample may also be beneficial, although with the small sample this may
15 not reveal anything interesting.
16

17
18 Thank you for your suggestion. We have nothing of note to add for this.
19

20
21 I would break up the age-range for the youth and the staff.
22

23
24 This has been completed on page 12.
25

26
27 More detail on the number of sessions attended is given.
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29
30 Explanation for B&C's RTA is given.
31

32
33 4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions
34 adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: I agree that the quantitative
35 analysis should be discarded from the results. There is little evidence of change in the
36 quantitative questionnaires and where there are reductions these are minimal. I agree with
37 the author that that this analysis is not suitable. At most, a condensed bar graph could
38 highlight the minor changes in attitudes.
39

40
41 Digital poverty is addressed in the results and the implication for the study are explained. I
42 am satisfied that my original comments were taken onboard.
43

44
45 Resilience and protected factors are now referred to in the discussion and help articulate
46 the studies qualitative findings.
47

48
49 The discussion now ends by explicitly referring to protective factors, desistance, and turning
50 points.
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53 5. Practicality and/or Research implications: Does the paper identify clearly any implications
54 for practice and/or further research? Are these implications consistent with the findings
55 and conclusions of the paper?: The paper has implications as stated in my original
56 comments. The addition of theory to the introduction and discussion is beneficial and helps
57 explain these research implications.
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60 I think the paper lacks implications for practice and intervention due to the small sample
size but it is a good proof of concept and may be beneficial for other researchers
investigating online or theatre based intervention for youth violence.

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6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: As before, the writing style and communication of information is easy to follow.