

EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES OF A THEATRE INTERVENTION FOR YOUTH ON PROBATION AND THEIR UNIVERSITY PEERS

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This study examined the qualitative impact of a unique theatrical partnership, The Odyssey Project, between a university and a probation camp facility for boys. Seven youths who committed criminal offenses and seven university students were brought together as peers and mentored daily by university faculty for six weeks. They participated in structured theatrical activities that culminated in a public performance of an adaptation of the Homeric epic poem The Odyssey. Observations, interviews, and questionnaires investigated participants' experiences and interpretations of class activities including why they joined, how they interpreted their experiences, and what impact the program had on them. Results suggest that a psychologically safe space was created by clear expectations and boundaries, positive regard shown to participants, and distress-reducing mindfulness activities, which allowed the participants to feel comfortable enough to share and be vulnerable. Program processes and outcomes are discussed along with limitations and future directions.

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The Odyssey Project (TOP) is a theater intervention that evolved from a summer course, The People's Voice, created and led by Dr. Michael Morgan, senior lecturer in the

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Department of Theater/Dance at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). TOP fosters a novel alliance with teens at a local probation camp and undergraduate students at UCSB. The course is designed to inspire youths who have committed criminal offenses in a theatrically creative way by bringing them into the university to be mentored by faculty and joined by undergraduate student peers, culminating in a public theater performance in downtown Santa Barbara of an adaptation of the Homeric epic poem *The Odyssey*. Examining the fifth year of TOP, this study focuses on the experiences of the students participating in this 6-week course.

APPLIED THEATER PROGRAMS

Applied Theater refers to the burgeoning field of theater practiced in social contexts, often beyond traditional theater spaces. Breaking the bastions of mainstream theater often driven by an elite actor/audience model, applied theater offers an alternative by engaging disenfranchised populations. For example, Palidofsky (2011) wrote about participants in Storycatcher Theatre, which teaches youths at-risk to roleplay themselves and others, “If we could inspire them to discover the power of their imaginations and to believe in their futures, they might have a chance of success, not just survival, in the outside world” (p. 143). Further, Shailor (2011) documents case study evidence supporting programs that serve prisoners. However, there appears to be little evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of theater programs for youths on probation and the impacts of such a program on college students who perform with them. Thus, it is critical to evaluate theater interventions such as TOP in order to determine their impacts on participants and to inform this burgeoning field of intervention.

THEORY GUIDING TOP AS AN INTERVENTION

Interactional theory states that delinquency derives from a reciprocal association between the individual and their peer groups and other social structures including family and school contexts (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). Whereas weak social bonds to family members and teachers and reinforcement of delinquent behaviors with deviant peers increase the likelihood of delinquency, the opposite is true as well. Strengthening social bonds and reinforcing prosocial behaviors should decrease the likelihood of delinquency. Complimenting interactional theory is the configuration protective model (Lenzi et al., 2015), which is based on research demonstrating that a sufficient number of strengths in a sufficient number of domains (as opposed to specific strengths in specific domains) yields the strongest protection against negative outcomes.

PURPOSE

This exploratory study of TOP was designed to understand participants’ experiences and interpretations of class activities including why they joined, how they interpreted their experiences, what they liked/disliked, and what impact the program had on them. Given our guiding theories, we hypothesized that probation and university students would

gain interpersonal connections with each other and a feeling of self-efficacy and accomplishment. We hypothesized that probation students would gain a more accurate picture of college students and a future orientation towards college participation. We hypothesized that college students would gain an understanding of youths in the juvenile justice system including more empathy for their circumstances.

METHOD

Participants

UCSB students enrolled in TOP as part of a summer session course, The People's Voice, which is open to all undergraduate students but requires an interview with the director. Seven UCSB students enrolled; they ranged in age from 18 to 27 years old and were between their second and fourth years of study. One student had participated in TOP the previous year. Two students identified as White, two as Asian, one as Black, and one as Hispanic. There were three females and four males.

Probation participants volunteered to participate after Dr. Morgan conducted auditions with near-college-age youths at a boys' probation camp. Although auditions took place, no boy who was interested was turned away from participating. Nine boys from probation started with TOP but, within the first two weeks, two had exhibited behaviors egregious enough for probation staff to revoke their privilege to participate, leaving seven who remained with TOP for the rest of the six weeks. Probation participants were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old. Five boys identified as Latino, one as Black, and one as American Indian and White.

Measures

Prior to TOP, all participants were asked about their reasons for joining TOP and what they hoped to get out of their participation. The UCSB students were also asked to elaborate on their views of youths who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Participants were then asked weekly during the summer program about what they liked and disliked about TOP as well as how TOP had affected their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Post-TOP interview questions asked participants what they got out of TOP overall, areas in which TOP exceeded their expectations, and areas in which they were disappointed. UCSB students were asked about any possible changes in their beliefs about youths involved with justice system and the probation participants were asked about changes in their thoughts and feelings towards college students. Participants from probation were also asked about their higher education aspirations. All questions are provided in the appendix.

Procedures

Pre, post and weekly qualitative interviews were conducted one-on-one and in person for the probation participants and through an online Qualtrics survey for the UCSB students. Additionally, TOP classes were observed weekly. Responses were inputted into a spreadsheet. Two researchers independently coded responses for themes and subsequently met to refine them. They used quotes to provide objective evidence for themes to reduce bias. The written description of themes was reviewed by the TOP director for validity.

RESULTS

Reasons for Joining TOP – Probation Participants

Six of seven probation participants referred to prior experiences with acting, including doing an acting program available through probation, and having been in plays in church as reasons for joining TOP. Five of seven participants reported some sort of expectation of a positive emotional experience, including believing that it would be “fun” and that it sounded “interesting.” Two of these participants knew of peers who had participated in TOP and had positive experiences the previous year. Two students expressed interest in gaining acting skills and experience. Another reason for joining included a sense of accomplishment – e.g. “[TOP] makes me believe that I can actually do something instead of being locked up or doing bad things...that I could actually do something good and have fun without drinking or smoking...with hard work and dedication.” Two probation participants wanted to make their family proud, and one mentioned an interest in becoming more motivated for college, stating “Most people here want to go to college but nobody tells them.... I’m looking forward to hearing that.”

Reasons for Joining TOP – UCSB Participants

The reasons for the UCSB students joining TOP were split between three themes – a desire to make new connections with others, especially those who struggle, self-improvement, and enjoyment of theater. One student stated, “I decided to join the project because I thought it would be a good opportunity to create a bridge between the UC students and the community...particularly those in less fortunate situations.” In terms of self-improvement, students said that they wanted the TOP experience to teach “more about myself and the power I have,” to help “find my voice” and to “gain new experiences and grow.” Two students mentioned enjoyment of theater as a reason for joining TOP. One student had participated in TOP the previous year while the other simply wanted more exposure to theater classes.

The UCSB students reported no prior connections to probation or the juvenile justice system. The UCSB students’ perceptions of youths who had been involved in the juvenile justice system primarily centered on beliefs that environmental influences had negatively affected such youths – e.g. “I think they are people who have been given hard situations and made choices that sent them down a hard path.” Students also expressed hope for better futures for the youths, stating, for example, “They can learn from their experiences and choose to do what is right.... I think that youths in the juvenile justice system need to know that this doesn’t have to be the end of the road for them....” One student believed that the boys were misunderstood, “maybe even ignored or neglected,” and another simply expressed curiosity: “I want to see what kind of people they are.” The UCSB students believed that the harder things that youths face when entering the justice system included negative judgment by society or negative self-judgment, lack of positive influences, and lost opportunities.

Summer TOP Activities

Both probation participants and UCSB students described writing, physical activities, (yoga and dance), visual arts (masks and drawings), production (rehearsing, acting,

and blocking), and writing and practicing raps as activities done in TOP. Both groups also described interactions with others as a regularly occurrence. The UCSB students described meeting the “campers,” getting to know them, and participating in activities with them, such as going to the camp to help the boys do a visual arts project. The probation participants also described getting to know the UCSB students and communicating with them.

UCSB students generally included more detail in their descriptions of the activities and included more activities. For example, four of seven of the UCSB students versus only one of the probation boys described participating in a fire ceremony in the third week of TOP (“We wrote down all of the things that were holding us back, ripped the paper, and threw it in the fire to release it”). Additionally, UCSB students described doing voice work, such as vocal exercises and breathing work. One activity the probation boys described, and which the UCSB students did not, was getting in trouble with probation. In particular, two students described an incident where, in the process of doing a paint project for TOP, some paint got on the boys’ clothing and shoes and caused the probation staff to get “really mad.”

The researcher also witnessed most of the activities during weekly observations. TOP activities in the earlier weeks began with writing then drawing, with students reflecting on past events in their lives, hardships, and future hopes that paralleled the journey of Odysseus and the many obstacles he had to overcome. For example, one of the writing prompts asked participants to write about a time of betrayal “of yourself, by yourself to others, or from others to you.” Other verbal reflection activities were incorporated. For example, during the first day, Dr. Morgan asked the participants to answer a series of questions about their voice: “Do you like your voice? What do people say about your voice? Do you think your voice can affect others?” As TOP progressed, physical and visual arts activities became more prominent, with students sometimes taking time away from rehearsals to consult about their masks. During the latter part of TOP, participants were involved in the production process, rehearsing and blocking both at UCSB and at the theater in which they conducted the final performance.

Favorite Components

Over the course of the six-week project, all participants most frequently indicated interactions with others as something they liked about TOP. The probation boys said they liked “getting to work with other people,” “hang[ing] out with other kids besides in your own program,” “that we can be ourselves...we get to act kind of silly,” “just talking,” getting “good advice” from and “getting closer to” the UCSB students, and working “as a team” and having “lots of fun” with the UCSB students. One student expressed admiration of the UCSB students’ talents. Some students referred to interactions with specific people and/or around specific events. For example, one probation boy described when a UCSB student found out that he liked soccer. The probation participant requested that the UCSB student bring a soccer ball, which he did. The young man from probation said, “We haven’t played soccer in so long. I felt like going home that day.” Another probation participant described a birthday celebration in which “everyone there pitched in to buy me cupcakes. They sang happy birthday to me. Normally, my friends on the outs wouldn’t even sing me

happy birthday. They would basically bring me alcohol. It was nice to have something different and to see how it feels like.”

The UCSB students at the beginning expressed enjoyment of “getting to know the campers, trying to connect with them.” As TOP progressed, some students expressed feelings of awe – “It is such an incredible experience to work on these exercises and challenges with these boys.” Others simply expressed enjoyment about spending time with the Probation participants.

Probation boys also liked participating in creative activities. Four of seven particularly enjoyed making masks. Two mentioned dancing as something they liked and one consistently mentioned the fight scene as enjoyable, because “I’m the one that gets to beat everyone up. I’m Odysseus...” Some of the boys simply described their experiences in general positive terms (“fun”, “cool” and “tight”). The probation participants also said the acting component was “fun,” particularly during the last two weeks of TOP. Lastly, one of the probation participants mentioned enjoying the fire ceremony.

The UCSB students mentioned enjoying the acting components, blocking and rehearsing, more than the probation participants. For example, all but one indicated having a script to work with, “doing a read through of the play,” “working on the stage,” and “working through the blocking” as aspects of TOP they enjoyed once scripts were received in the fourth week. All students also mentioned enjoying the creative activities of mask-making, dancing, and writing. For example, “I liked writing about all these various topics that make us think more about ourselves,” and “Working with rap artists was a great experience.” The UCSB students also mentioned physical activities of yoga, a game of tag with the fight coordinator, fight scenes, and, for one participant, “getting lifted” to become like a ship sail. Four of the UCSB students also mentioned that they liked learning and self-improvement – e.g. “I felt that everything we do helps us think deeper about our lives.” Lastly, two students mentioned enjoying the fire ceremony.

Least Favorite Components

Areas of dislike with TOP mentioned by probation participants centered on logistics, interactions with others, and vulnerability or emotional discomfort. Logistical issues included too much writing, getting in trouble with probation, the brevity of breaks, feeling hungry, discomfort with the amount of standing time, and other issues specific to each individual probation participant – for example, one young man expressed concern about his mask not being done on time and another about his younger brother potentially not being able to attend the show. Five of the boys also expressed dislike with interactions with others, including tensions with other probation participants (e.g. “There’s a kid in there who kinda pissed me off”), getting distracted by off-task behaviors (e.g. “Getting distracted with the people I go with”), and tensions with probation and/or TOP staff. Two participants said that they disliked Odyssey ending and having to say goodbye. One probation participant had difficulty with some of the vulnerability that was required of and intrinsic to the TOP activities, saying that he did not “want to expose myself in front of all those people,” and yoga, which made him feel anger.

About three-quarters of the UCSB students indicated least favorite components of TOP. The most common concern, expressed in one-fifth of all responses, had to do with lack of time, including the limited length of the university's summer session and logistical constraints related to probation. Four of the UCSB participants expressed concern and/or frustration at negative behaviors of others. This was due to the lack of focus of participants during rehearsals, a perceived personality mismatch with the dance instructor, and dislike of the way that probation officers treated the probation boys at the camp. Two students also stated twice each dislike for the dance component of TOP. Two students expressed dislike of the "slow process" of blocking. Lastly, three UCSB participants disliked losing two of the probation boys, saying, "It's just been really hard because we've all started to grow and move toward something great, and it's just sad that they cannot finish this journey with us."

Weekly Impacts of TOP – Probation Youth

Positive impacts described by probation participants fell into three broad categories: current positive impacts, anticipated impacts in the future, and reflections on the past. Within current positive impacts, themes were positive bonds with others, positive mood, and belief-in-self. One of the boys described positive bonding experiences with the UCSB students, such as that they "have done some of the stuff that we've done – like we're not that far from them. They're just human like us. We just chose the wrong path." Another expressed that the staff "support you, even if you mess up. They don't leave you feeling all dumb. They help you get through stage fright. That makes me feel more confident." Some of the boys simply expressed that they had a more positive mood: "I feel happy, like I finally did something good. That's a new feeling," and "When I get there, I concentrate better." Expressions of belief-in-self were also common: "I know I got it" and "I just do what I'm supposed to do. It feels good."

The probation participants' descriptions of anticipated impacts in the future fell into two subcategories: anxiety and a positive future orientation. Participants stated feeling nervous about the upcoming performance, particularly performing in front of many people. On the other hand, five of seven participants expressed hope about the future – e.g. "It makes me think I can actually do something for once," "I feel like I want to go to college," and "I can actually make it, that I can actually be successful... The way Mr. Morgan talks to us, he makes us think we can actually do something."

The probation participants reflected about their past as well, sometimes expressing increased self-awareness and regret. One participant said, "...when I was 13 through 16, most of my time I spent it working and stuff. Basically, I was trying to act mature at that age that I didn't focus on having fun and stuff... Now I tell myself I shouldn't have done that. I should've focused on having fun at the time. Now that I want to have fun, I can't... I can't be acting like a kid but I'm like I want those years back." Another said, "I've learned a lot. The way we interact with people – it opens your eyes to see what you're doing. To see the wrong instead of the right. Cuz we're doing a project and I seen that I always did drugs when I could've been doing way more things with my time."

Weekly Impacts of TOP – University Students

UCSB students referred to self-knowledge/growth multiple times throughout the six weeks as an area in which TOP was impactful – “I’ve definitely grown a lot and I’m more certain of myself and my goals in life,” “I’ve started to be more confident with my voice this week and trust that I know what I’m doing,” and “Being in Odyssey this week has made me think about what I want to get out of life, and I’ve been working up the courage to pursue my real life goals.”

Five of seven UCSB participants also expressed having new perspectives on the boys. Two expressed feeling inspired by the boys, three came to realizations about their privilege relative to the probation participants, and one UCSB student’s response expressed admiration for how “smart” they are and how much they know about “the world and the system which they’ve been put into.” Several of the responses reflected joy on behalf of the boys for “seeing them find their voice” and seeing them “get so excited about working on the show and proudly showcasing their work and just going for it.”

Several students also said that they experienced professional growth specific to activities in TOP. For example, one student said that they were “beginning to understand the Odyssey better.” Another had it “set in” for her that they would be performing. Yet another student found a particular writing exercise to be impactful in allowing her to express herself in a new way.

Two students, during the fifth week of TOP, came to the realization that they needed to be role models. One said, that TOP “has taught me to be better at being an example for others during times when we need to get work done,” and the other said “we have to set an example, especially since most of these guys [from probation] have never done a show before so they don’t necessarily know the etiquette for when someone else is working on stage.”

What I got out of TOP – Probation Youth

When asked what the participants got out of TOP, probation participants’ responses most frequently reflected a sense of belonging and connections with others, motivation for success, and self-efficacy. Some felt connections with their fellow TOP participants – “... we thought we were going to be different from the UCSB students but then we wound up getting together as one group, with a lot of similarities” – while others felt a connection to a broader group – “There’s programs out there for us that we can do. There’s a college out there for us.” Six out of seven of the probation participants reflected this theme. Furthermore, three of the boys referred to feeling connected with others as an area in which TOP exceeded their expectations. One young man in particular exclaimed astonishment that one of the UCSB students was 18 like himself but in college and said “I just still have some questions...like how they...made it to go to college.”

Similarly, six of seven probation participants also mentioned motivation for success as an outcome of their participation in TOP. One boy said, “It makes me not want to do bad, because looking over my whole story made me realize ‘How stupid could I have been?’ I could have been off of probation if I hadn’t been on the run.” Another said, “I

realized that I need to change the journey that I've been through... We all need to get to our own Ithaca [home].... It makes me think differently because it makes me want to do good." Five of seven probation participants mentioned increased self-efficacy as a result of participating in TOP – "It showed me I could go to college.... I have been through a hard journey but at the end, it's going to pay off. I'm going to get to my Ithaca." One participant expressed a sense of persistence: "It's okay to make mistakes as long as we keep trying. I learned more about myself – that I'm capable...."

Two of the young men mentioned improvement in specific skills of writing, acting, voice projection, memorizing lines, and acting. Two youths also mentioned a positive impact on family. One boy said, "I made my parents proud that I'm actually doing something good. Recently, one of my friends got killed, so my parents don't me want to be on that path. I'm showing them that I'm doing better."

What I got out of TOP – University Students

The strongest theme that emerged from the responses of the UCSB students was increased self-knowledge/growth, with four of the students referring to this. One student talked about being able to "resolve many internal problems." Another realized that "my experiences and privileges are nullified in the sacred space of the theater." Two other students talked about new perspectives on their future goals. This was an area that exceeded the UCSB participants' expectations – e.g. "...I didn't know how powerful the impact would be on me...."

Three UCSB students referred to learning from the boys and discovering the power of voice. One realized the equality that the "UC kids and boys from camp" had. Another said, "This experience showed me so much about what these boys face as minorities in low socioeconomic neighborhoods," and a third expressed inspiration from interacting with the boys. Learning about the boys was an area of impact that exceeded the several of the UCSB participants' expectations, with one saying, "I expected to be a mentor. And I was completely a student... I love that I learned just as much from [the boys] as I did from Michael. I got the heck off of my petty pedestal."

Students stated that TOP made them realize the power of voice, "we all have a voice that matters. No matter where we come from in life, we have a story that is valid." Two students realized the power of their own voices – "I think I've gained a knowledge of my power....," and "I learned even more...on how to say the words using breath."

In addition to the aforementioned themes, one student said that TOP influenced her by increasing her connections with others, saying, "I've gained friendships that I could never have made if I didn't join this project." Another described the positive impact the project had: "This work is meaningful and impactful to young live[s] that matter."

Empathy and Group Perceptions

When asked about how participants' thoughts and feelings changed toward their UCSB peers, probation participants realized UCSB students were normal or like them. For example, "I thought they would be snotty, selfish, but they're actually good people," and

“I can see that college students are kind of like us. Some of them grew up like us, like how we did, in a rough environment.” The probation participants also expressed a desire to or belief in their ability to go to college. One young man said that simply being around the UCSB students made him think that he should go to college. A 27-year old student, saying, “He was probably going through the same things as us, not having enough motivation or encouragement... if he can do it, I can do it too,” inspired another probation participant.

The UCSB students’ perceptions of youths involved in the juvenile justice system changed for four participants, while three reported confirmation of previous thoughts and beliefs. One student was appreciative that she “never bought into the labels society gives them because those labels are false.” Two others had their previous beliefs confirmed: “I believe all of these kids haven’t been socialized to the society that most [of] this country expects them to live in, while making it an actual private industry of locking them up,” and “...no one is a lost cause. Everyone has a voice in the world that matters.” Two students did express more understanding of circumstances leading to the youths’ current situation: “Most of them end up in here because they lack the support system, or if they do have a support system, they just get caught up with the wrong crowd. Often times, they just don’t know that there are ways to have fun without drugs or alcohol.” Two others expressed that their own perceptions changed. One said that she “used to be so intimidated” because she expected them to be “cold and tough” but that now she found “the boys silly, charming, fun, but also vulnerable and impressionable.” Another simply said, “I see them as so much more now.... They have all gone through far more hardship than I have ever gone through, and they’re younger than me!”

Plans for Post-Release Higher Education for Probation participants

The data reflected some of the probation participants’ desire to go to college and their belief in their ability to do so. At the beginning of TOP, three were considering either a 2- or 4-year college after release from Probation boys’ camp; after TOP, there were five. Both pre- and post-TOP data showed that the most common reason for not considering college, cited by two probation participants at each assessment period, was that college was “too expensive.” Before TOP, two participants thought they could not be accepted; after TOP, only one participant thought so. Prior to TOP, one probation participant thought it would take too long to graduate, and yet another that it was not needed to achieve their goals. After TOP, no students thought it would take too long to graduate or that it was not needed to achieve their goals. Before TOP, two probation participants thought they could not get into college and after TOP only one student thought that he could not get in. Finally, one participant, after TOP, indicated that he was not considering college because he would need to work full time to earn money, whereas no participants had indicated this as a reason to not be in college before TOP.

DISCUSSION

The summer TOP experience seemed to have a profound impact on both the UCSB and probation participants by creating a venue for two groups of individuals who otherwise might not interact to collaborate as peers to meet a common goal. How TOP resulted in

these outcomes is perhaps through the work of Dr. Morgan and his staff in creating a positive climate in TOP. This occurred through a variety of means.

Setting Clear Boundaries and Expectations

Setting clear boundaries and expectations is something that TOP did from the very beginning and which research has shown helps to create effective learning environments (Bear, 2008). During the first day of TOP, Dr. Morgan facilitated participants in coming to a consensus on ground rules and values to create a safe space. By asking, "What do you need to make this a safe place?" Dr. Morgan encouraged participants to take ownership of this task. Additionally, Dr. Morgan began each day with a clear outline of the agenda for the day. The staff seemed to be well aligned with each other on the activities and tasks set out by Dr. Morgan. When Dr. Morgan gave instructions to the TOP participants, staff often followed-up, helping to create clear boundaries and expectations. For example, when Dr. Morgan was directing one of the participants to a particular stage area, the teaching assistant followed up by pointing and giving details that are more specific about the location.

Engaging and Relevant Activities

TOP also utilized multiple modalities of learning, an effective and engaging instructional strategy, especially for youths at risk (Douglas, Burton, & Reese-Durham, 2008). Some of TOP's activities were atypical of traditional drama/acting classes (e.g. yoga, rapping, and sharing of one's story). This utilization of a broad range of activities that the participants had interest in may have contributed to increased engagement. For example, when professional rap artists were brought in to help the group write their raps, all but one of the young men from the probation camp gathered to talk to the rappers during break.

Responsive Staff Members

Dr. Morgan and his support staff often noticed when participants needed help before they even verbalized it. For example, the teaching assistant circulated throughout the activities, asking participants about their progress and immediately coming to a participant's side if they showed indications of confusion (furrowed eyebrows, looking at others' work, or seeming disengaged). Another time, Dr. Morgan noticed that one of the probation boys was adjusting his posture during a scene that required him to kneel. Without the young man saying anything, Dr. Morgan asked if he was uncomfortable and offered that he could sit instead. Based on research indicating that highly responsive teachers, parents, and caregivers tend to rear students with positive psychological outcomes (Zhou et al., 2002), it is no surprise that the probation participants found Dr. Morgan and his staff to be caring.

High Ratio of Positive to Negative Interactions

There is evidence that relationships with high ratios of positive to negative interactions tend to do better (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). This was achieved in TOP through the many assurances of acceptance, positive regard, and curiosity for the participants, particularly the probation participants. When participants were asked to share about themselves, Dr. Morgan would encourage them, saying, for example, "Everything is valid here." Another example is that the teaching assistant was observed multiple times smiling at the probation participants, patting them on the back, and inquiring about their day/lives. Both

groups of participants also reported positive interactions with others as the most frequently occurring theme among aspects of TOP that they liked. Furthermore, when negative feedback was given, it was often buffered by positive feedback – for example, “Make sure we can hear the ‘v.’ Generally, you have good articulation by the way,” – and/or diffused by making the feedback general and normalizing– “Big note for everybody but I’m going to pick on you....”

Mindfulness

The “voice exercises” led by Dr. Morgan resembled mindfulness activities. For example, in one case, Dr. Morgan asked participants to stand and “Become aware of your breathing...You’re tuning into it. Be aware of how you’re feeling today... Be aware of your jaw... Allow it to relax. Be aware of your elbow joints...” In this fashion, participants were guided to become present in their bodies and their breath. Both mindfulness and yoga practices (which were also part of TOP) are known to manage distress responses (Muris et al., 2015). This was perhaps instrumental for creating an emotionally safe atmosphere for participants to be willing to be vulnerable. Even so, some probation participants experienced distress through the emotionally exposing nature of some exercises. This increased distress may be due to a combination of participating in activities requiring participants to remember unpleasant events and mindfulness, which may have simply increased participants’ awareness of distressing thoughts and feelings. Nonetheless, responses indicated substantial positive impacts of this project.

Sharing

Especially toward the beginning of TOP, participants were asked to engage in vulnerable sharing. Writing exercise prompts included the topic of betrayal, writing about “someone who has offered you unconditional love,” “about what brings you fulfillment in your life...your mission,” and a love letter to a lost beloved, just to name a few. There is evidence that engaging in such sharing promotes bonding and empathy (Saunders & Kowalski, 2015). These activities may have contributed to participants referring to their interactions with others so frequently as something they liked about TOP.

These aspects of the TOP program, primarily credited to Dr. Morgan and TOP staff, set the stage for transactions that formed positive behavioral cascades (Masten et al., 2008). That is, the psychologically safe space that was created by clear expectations and boundaries, the positive regard shown to participants, and the distress-reducing mindfulness activities allowed the participants to feel comfortable enough to share and be vulnerable. This sharing allowed participants to see similarities with each other and to feel more connected, as indicated by participants’ interview responses. This connection resulted in further positive interactions – for example, some of the participants felt comfortable enough to be spontaneously silly (e.g., during a dance rehearsal, one of the boys danced comically, causing a UCSB student to laugh). Toward the end of TOP, several UCSB students took on helping roles, assisting the probation participants in transitions, and redirecting them when needed. Additionally, the boys became more helpful with each other – for example, one young man said that “I just gotta push people I know here to read their script...I’m trying to

be a leader.” Others showed helping behaviors even with new members of the staff; in one case, a probation youth helped a new staff person find her place during a rehearsal.

Limitations and Future Directions

The results of this evaluation and conclusions should be taken with caution. The small sample size of fourteen total participants, seven from UCSB and seven from probation, limits generalizability. The impact of TOP in the context of Santa Barbara also should be considered as it is differentiated from more urban centers, such as Los Angeles, in terms of more limited access to youths involved with the juvenile justice system due to their relatively lower numbers and fewer facilities. This limitation imposed logistical challenges, such as coordinating with limited numbers of probation staff, which might otherwise be less salient in more highly populated areas. To increase sample size, future studies could consider looking at multiple cohorts over a longer period or implementing TOP in more populated areas or with probationary youth under community supervision. With sufficient funding and resources, an experimental design could be considered

Generalizability is limited given that TOP’s partnership with an all-boys’ camp inherently limited the gender of the incarcerated participants. Future studies would be enhanced with the inclusion of incarcerated female youths. Additionally, there may be differential effects due to the different interview methods for the two groups – the UCSB participants answered questions via an online survey, whereas probation participants were interviewed in person and the researcher was able to probe deeper with follow-up questions. Future studies should be consistent in how participants answer questions in order to eliminate any confounds that resulting from differing interview techniques. Given the paucity of research on incarcerated youths and theater-based interventions, further high-quality research on TOP and similar programs could make a significant contribution to the field and be positively impactful at a societal level.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Probation Participants

Pre-TOP Interview Questions for Probation Participants

Why did you decide to join The Odyssey Project? What do you hope to get out of this experience?

Weekly Interview Questions for Probation Participants

1. Give a brief summary of activities you did in The Odyssey Project this past week.
2. What have you liked about The Odyssey Project this past week, if anything?
3. What have you disliked about The Odyssey Project this past week, if anything?
4. Have your experiences with The Odyssey Project this past week made you think or feel differently about anything? If so, how? (Possible follow-up questions: What do you feel like you've learned (or been reminded of) that might be useful to you? How has The Odyssey Project affected you this week? What thoughts have you had about The Odyssey Project?)

Post- Assessment Interview Questions for Probation Participants

1. What did you get out of The Odyssey Project overall, if anything?
2. In what ways, if any, did The Odyssey Project exceeded your expectations overall?
3. In what ways, if any, did The Odyssey Project not meet your expectations overall?
4. How have your thoughts and feelings about college students changed, if at all?

Interview Questions for UCSB Participants

Pre-Assessment Interview Questions for UCSB Participants

1. Why did you decide to join The Odyssey Project? What do you hope to get out of this experience?
2. What's your connection to probation, to the juvenile justice system, if you have any?
3. What are your thoughts and feelings about youths who have been involved in the juvenile justice system, if you have any?
4. What do you think are some of the harder things a youth faces when entering the justice system?

Weekly Interview Questions for UCSB Participants

1. Give a brief summary of the activities you did in The Odyssey Project this week.
2. What have you liked about The Odyssey Project this past week, if anything?
3. What have you disliked about The Odyssey Project this past week, if anything?
4. Have your experiences with The Odyssey Project this past week made you think or feel differently about anything? If so, how?

Post- Assessment Interview Questions for UCSB Participants

1. What did you get out of The Odyssey Project overall, if anything?
2. In what ways, if any, did The Odyssey Project exceeded your expectations overall?
3. In what ways, if any, did The Odyssey Project not meet your expectations overall? How have your thoughts and feelings about youths who have been involved in the juvenile justice system changed, if at all?