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Experiences of adolescent participation in a four-week community-based workshop designed to improve psychosocial skills: what are the key benefits?

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The present study sought to explore the experiences of young adolescents who participated in a community-based workshop designed to improve psychosocial competence. The workshop involved 14 adolescent children aged between 10 and 14 years, who lived in socially disadvantaged areas of Liverpool, UK. Focus groups were employed to assess whether participation in ‘Skills for the Street’ workshops improved adolescents’ psychosocial functioning and personal development. A number of themes were identified in the analyses, including increased confidence, increased self-awareness admiration and team building. These themes are discussed, and we argue that the findings attest to the benefit of community-based approaches for young people living in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK.

Keywords: adolescents; community-based; development; resilience; social bonds; workshops

La présente étude a cherché à explorer les expériences des jeunes adolescents qui ont participé à un atelier à caractère communautaire conçu pour améliorer la compétence psychosociale. L’atelier a fait participer quatorze enfants adolescents âgés entre 10 et 14, qui ont vécu dans des régions socialement désavantagées de Liverpool, le GB. Des groupes cibles ont été employés pour évaluer si la participation aux qualifications de ‘pour les ateliers de Street a amélioré le fonctionnement psychosocial et le développement personnel des adolescents. Un certain nombre de thèmes ont été identifiés dans les analyses comprenant l’augmentation de la confiance en soi, l’augmentation de l’admiration de soi, et la construction du travail d’équipe. Ces thèmes sont discutés, et Nous soutenons le fait que les résultats certifient au profit des approches à caractère communautaire pour les jeunes vivant dans les voisinages socialement désavantagés au Royaume Uni.

Mots-clés: adolescents; à caractère communautaire; développement; résilience; liens sociaux; ateliers

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Previous research has shown that children growing up in chronic poverty are more likely than other children to experience poorer health, and to struggle academically and leave school early. These children are also likely to be at heightened risk of delinquency and poor psychosocial functioning (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Adolescents living in areas of social disadvantage are more susceptible to becoming involved in antisocial behaviours and gang-culture than those from less deprived areas (Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Oehme, 1997). In addition, transitioning from primary to secondary school has been found to increase this risk (Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995), suggesting that this may be a critical period for intervention. Community-based interventions, especially those that target risk factors and introduce protective factors (e.g., resiliency and mentoring), have been found to promote behavioural, psychosocial, health and academic competence in young adolescents (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Scales, 2006). Although these comprehensive community interventions hold promise for improving adolescents' psychosocial functioning, there is a scarcity of qualitative research exploring the experiences of young adolescents attending such programmes.

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS), in conjunction with social workers working for the charity Action Force Africa, organised and delivered the 'Skills for the Street Workshops' over the school summer holidays in 2009 to young adolescents from a socially disadvantaged area of Liverpool in the UK. The 'Skills for the Street Workshop' is an activity programme designed to improve adolescents' psychosocial functioning. During the programme, adolescents took part in art, culture and sports workshops as well as fire health and safety training, all of which aimed to foster this improvement. The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of these young adolescents after participating in the workshops and to explore their perceptions of any changes in their psychosocial functioning as a consequence of their participation.

Method

Design

Due to the demographics of the individuals participating, it was identified that focus groups would be the best method of data collection. The key benefit was that the adolescents would be in a group of their peers which would optimise discussion and improve data collection. In order to gain a wide range of data and improve articulation of ideas and experiences, the adolescents were encouraged to draw mind maps within the groups.

While it is conventionally accepted in qualitative research that the interviewer and the interviewee should be matched for age, social position, gender and ethnicity as far as possible (Hood, Kelley & Mayall, 1996; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996), it was not possible in this instance to match on every criterion. However, the focus groups were undertaken by two 23-year-old male research associates who were close to the adolescents' age, to try to help to put the adolescents at ease which was key to undertaking the focus groups successfully. Such matching is viewed as a means to lessen the power differences between an interviewer and the interviewee, which would otherwise inhibit the research relationship. To encourage

75 this, the facilitators attended and participated in some of the earlier workshops to make the adolescents feel more comfortable with them in the focus group interviews. As the participants were adolescents, it was important to make sure that the facilitators were informal in their appearance and could relate to the adolescents, as this would allow for a relationship to exist which would optimise data collection. These actions allowed for a good, relaxed relationship to develop, which benefited the focus group undertaking. However, it is important at this stage to note that the age and gender of the researchers may still have restricted the flow of conversation from the participants, but every effort was made to minimise this (e.g., use of mind maps).

85 *Participants*

Fourteen individuals (aged 10–14 years) attended the four-week workshops and agreed to participate in the focus groups (see Table 1 for full details of the workshop programme). All participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity. Participants were made aware through the ethics form of limited confidentiality, as quotes from the focus groups were to be used in reports and publications resulting from the research, but they were assured that their data would be completely anonymous. There were a total of five boys and nine girls who participated in the three focus groups, with a mixture of boys and girls in each.

90 *Research materials*

95 For the focus groups, a digital voice recorder was used to record participants' verbal commentaries. In order to guide the discussion, a selection of semi-structured questions and prompts were used to investigate perceptions of the workshops, views towards the fire service and psychosocial factors such as self-confidence. The questions used in the focus groups included those such as: 'What were the best parts of the workshop? What are your opinions of the fire service? How do you think you have changed?'. Participants were also given colouring pens and paper and encouraged to draw mind maps to help articulate their experiences.

100 Table 1. Outline and aims of workshop activities.

Day	Activity	Aims
Monday 2–5 pm	Arts and craft	To develop creativity and imagination
Tuesday 2–5 pm	African drumming/Indian dancing	To examine issues of culture, diversity and community. To develop creativity and imagination
Wednesday 2–5 pm	Fire service workshops	To learn and develop fire safety skills
Thursday 2–5 pm	Teamwork exercises	To learn to work effectively with others
Friday 2–5 pm	Physical activity	To develop physical fitness, courage and problem solving

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Research process

Parental and child consent were obtained prior to participation, and University ethical approval was also obtained. There were three focus groups, two of which consisted of five adolescents, and one of which had four participants. Every focus group had a mix of males and females participating. Focus groups were carried out in a quiet room at the MFRS Training and Development Academy and lasted for a period of 30–40 minutes. Adolescents were told that the interviews were an opportunity for them to talk about their personal experiences of participating in the workshops.

Analysis

The aims of the study were to fully understand the personal psychosocial experiences of the young adolescents following their participation in the workshops. As such, the transcripts were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2003). IPA involves the repeated reading of interview transcripts to identify emergent and recurrent themes. Themes arise from the researcher's personal interaction with, and interpretation of, interview data, with the aim of representing the shared meanings that the research topic has for participants (Smith, 2003). From the transcripts, possible themes were identified. These were then reduced to sub-themes and finally reduced to the master themes which are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Analysis of results

The transcriptions allowed for the identification of four themes on which all of the researchers agreed. These are discussed in detail below.

Increased confidence

It was noted throughout the transcripts that the adolescents identified a positive change in their beliefs and feelings as a result of the workshops. This included reduction of fear and anxiety, and increases in confidence, which suggests that they showed significant personal development following participation. It is also apparent that they had learned from this experience. Some of the adolescents reflected on how they were previously and how they had made a successful transition. This is illustrated from the following extracts where they spoke about their experience of the fire service workshops:

(Focus Group B)

Chantelle: Yer it kind of taught me that I don't know, cause I got a bit better on that, I was a bit scared the first time I went up, even though we had harnesses on and everything, and like all tied together. But just, was scared but then when I went up the first time was alright getting up.

Chantelle later went on to add: Yer, it made me a bit more confident in climbing, cause when I was younger I fell off the fence when I was climbing.

140 ***Admiration***

The participants held a high level of admiration for the people in the Fire and Rescue Service. This group of authority figures were given respect and very much admired by the respondents. Some of the participants discussed their bravery and the fact that they risked their lives on a daily basis. In addition, the participants were also concerned about the risks associated with prank calls. This suggests that certain individuals had developed a new level of respect, understanding and admiration for the fire service as a result of the workshops. They had clearly paid attention to what the fire-fighters were telling them, mentioning specific skills that had been covered in the sessions (such as how to walk more safely when entering a burning building). This represents a change in attitude towards fire-fighters, with an increase in admiration for those who risk their lives to save others:

(Focus Group A)

155 Jo: I think they do, like a good important job like the way they go out and save people's lives and put their lives at risk for other people's lives.

Sarah: I feel a bit scared because they risked their lives on people, and people could be messing about and there could be a real fire.

Team building

160 The transcripts also suggested that these young people had learnt how to work in a team as a result of the workshops. The frequent use of the word 'we' in the extracts demonstrates the significance of team-building and social bonding that takes place in such workshops. For some adolescents, group work was something that they were quite resistant to engage in prior to the workshops, but following the workshops their attitudes had changed, and working together with others was something they wished to continue. Some even suggested that this may lead them to help out more within the home, suggesting possible improvements in behaviour at home and potential for parental bonding:

(Focus Group C)

170 Nicole: Yes. We done team working by, we done, we had to link arms and like if we went camping and had to get wood. Then we had string in our bag and scissors, we had to see what we could make. We had, we had loads of little sticks and we made a tent with some plastic over it, we won, the girls.

Nicole: Ummm, the team building helped me work with my mum more.

175 Julie: Because I just, I feel a bit, that I didn't want to work together before and now I've done team building, so I will work together with people.

Increased self-awareness and self-esteem

180 Adolescents became more self-aware after the workshops. This became apparent after their participation in a variety of activities when they acknowledged their own weaknesses. Several adolescents mentioned that they may not be 'good at some things' but that on reflection they can identify their strengths; thus by working on different tasks, even if they were not that confident at doing them initially, they

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185 learned that they could overcome their fears and lack of confidence to become more aware of their positive attributes. The quotes below demonstrate these experiences:

(Focus Group B)

Emma: Just saying the same as her really, because it taught me that I'm not really any good at art, but it's taught me that I'm good at making things if you get me.

Sam: Why be scared of some things when you can do it.

190 **Discussion**

This research suggests that the community-based workshops organised by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service in collaboration with Action Force Africa had a positive impact on the adolescents who participated. It appeared that all of the individuals enjoyed the workshops, with a majority gaining something from them. The evidence suggests that there has been an increase in confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, admiration and team-building skills. There was also an improvement in positive emotions and behaviour which were evident from the transcript extracts. These findings suggest that community-based workshops, involving multi-agency partners located in socially disadvantaged areas may have beneficial effects for young adolescents' psychosocial functioning.

200 These findings support other work suggesting that interventions which are multi-agency and focus on improving social bonding may buffer against stress, improve resilience and self-esteem and social tolerance in at-risk youth (Elias et al., 1996; Haines & Case, 2004). In the present study adolescents became more self-aware and confident; factors that have been found to be associated with improved resilience and social skills, as well as conflict resolution strategies, including lower rates of antisocial behaviours (Fariña, Arce, & Novo, 2008). In addition, adolescents who have better social ties with family and peers tend to be more competent, confident and are better able to cope and adapt to stress and adversity (Ahearn, 2006; Ungar et al., 2004). Thus, the benefits to the self-esteem and self-awareness in these adolescents may foster greater social relationships and provide a buffering resource. The consequences of these improvements in psychosocial functioning may have important implications for the later development and adjustment of these particular adolescents. Although not all children living in areas of social disadvantage are at risk of poor adjustment or get involved in crime, those who tend to fare better are those who are more confident, resilient and have strong social connections to families, peers and community (Council of Europe, 2000). Similarly, the adolescents in this study also reported a tendency for a change of attitude and increased admiration for fire-fighters, who they now hold in high regard. Fire-fighters often encounter incidents of anti-social and criminal behaviour in many areas of their work, such as deliberate attacks on property and fire-fighters, vehicle arson and hoax emergency service calls. As such, this research suggests that participation in these workshops increases admiration for the fire service, which in theory should suggest that anti-social and criminal activities targeting the fire service may be reduced. For example, one of the extracts from the adolescents highlights an awareness of some of the health and safety implications of prank calls, indicating that this proactive community-based approach by the fire service may have benefits. However, only time and further research will tell us if this assumption is correct. In Merseyside alone since 2005 there have been more than 3000 hoax calls to

the Fire Service (Traynor, 2008), with 38,000 in the UK; estimated to cost the UK taxpayer £40 million a year (Nugent & Sidders, 2009). A reduction in the number of such calls may therefore have important economic implications.

The current study does have a selection of limitations that have to be considered. Although no gender differences were found in the emergent themes, it is possible that the gender bias of the focus group facilitators who were both male may have had some impact on the topics discussed. The workshops were undertaken in one area of Liverpool, with respondents coming from the surrounding areas. As such, responses may only be applicable to the surrounding area and not to the wider population. Further, the small sample size and the lack of pre-workshop data for comparison with post-workshop measures, and the lack of a control or comparison group limit the generalisability of the findings. However, we feel that the findings are still of sufficient interest to promote further research in this area.

The focus groups were also carried out by facilitators who were at least 10 years older than the participants, which could have limited data collection; although every effort was made to minimise these restrictions. It would be beneficial for further studies to examine if these psychosocial behavioural changes exist within other demographics, if they are maintained over time, and if they are successful at reducing anti-social behaviours directed at the fire service.

It can be concluded that these community-based multi-agency workshops have had a positive influence on the adolescents involved. Improvements were seen on a number of different levels, from improving self-awareness to developing social bonds to fostering a greater appreciation and admiration of those working in the community. These skill developments and attitudinal changes may be a key determinant of the successful negotiation of these adolescents through this transitional stage of their lives. Finally, the present study suggests that these workshops have been well received and have been effective in improving psychosocial functioning in the adolescents involved.

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