DRAMA/THEATER-BASED RESEARCH AS A MEANS TO EXPLORE THE KEY ASPECTS FOR INSTRUCTORS APPLYING DRAMA AND THEATER WITH AT-RISK YOUTH

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Abstract

Objectives. The study sought to identify the most important psychological and professional training competencies of theater instructors in working with marginalized populations and to identify methodological difficulties and practical obstacles encountered during interactions with at-risk groups.
Material and methods. The study involved nine theater instructors, aged 24-35, who delivered an intervention for at-risk youth. After the activities, interview and focus group methods were employed to facilitate discussions concerning the professional competencies and psychological traits of theater instructors in the context of challenges encountered when working with at-risk groups. The outcomes were subsequently analyzed using categorical analysis grids.
Results. Participants highlighted challenges related to experiencing secondary traumatic stress and adopting a 'rescuer' role when working with young people at risk. They noted that there wasn't a significant difference in their approach when working with the at-risk group compared to their standard practices, indicating the value of pre-existing training in mitigating potential stressful situations.
Conclusions. This qualitative investigation has revealed that drama instructors encounter various challenges when working with at-risk groups, but these can be effectively addressed through the cultivation of specific psychological attributes and professional competencies.

Keywords: applied drama/theater trainer, at-risk youth, teaching difficulties, secondary traumatic stress, trainer's competences

Introduction

Background

In Romania, addressing the well-being of children and young people remains an ongoing concern. Young people within the special protection system are among the groups adversely impacted by the delayed implementation of public policies aimed at enhancing their well-being (Alexandrescu, 2019). According to the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights

and Adoption (2022), at the end of 2022, 11.629 minors were in public or private residential services and 30.400 in family-type services (overview section of the special protection system). The recipients of these services were minors who could not continue residing within their biological families. State intervention in their cases was carried out through three specific pathways, namely: 1. the child's passage through a family until a disruptive event occurred (death of parents or close relatives, parents' departure for work, parental rights termination, etc.); 2. placing the child in healthcare facilities; and 3. abandoning or finding the child on the street (Stănculescu, Grigoraș, Teșliuc, & Pop, 2016).

Studies on the deprivation of children and young people from their family environment are numerous and identify serious deficiencies in their psycho-emotional development. Deprived of social interaction, stimulation, and empathic care, institutionally raised youth may exhibit a diverse range of emotional and social disorders in adulthood, in addition to alterations in brain development and cognitive delays (Nelson, Fox, & Zeanah, 2014). Lacking warmth and predictability, institutionalized youth are exposed to various forms of abuse and neglect (Ciocan, 2023), which predisposes them to display a lack of empathy, cognitive inflexibility, adjustment and personality disorders, and aggressive behaviors in adulthood (Johnson, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, & Bernstein, 1999). In light of these limitations, it is essential to consider promoting the placement of minors in family-like care services or offering interventions aimed at preventing the child's separation from their parents. This approach helps mitigate the long-term psychological and social consequences associated with the deprivation of a familial environment.

When foster care is not a viable option and efforts to prevent abandonment are unsuccessful, various intervention programs have been established by non-governmental organizations (UNICEF, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, and Concordia in Romania), associations (The Social Incubator), as well as social and artistic professionals. These programs aim to narrow the cognitive, emotional, and social development disparities between minors in residential care and their peers in the general young population (O'Brien & Donelan, 2008).

The conclusion of the communist regime exposed a grim image to the world, revealing overcrowded orphanages in Romania where children endured emotional deprivation and inadequate living conditions (Alexandrescu, 2019). These institutions have become case studies for professionals abroad (Cyrulnik, 2009), some of whom have commenced research into the impact of play-based activities and direct interactions on institutionalized young people (Brown, 2014a, 2014b; Jennings, 2011).

In recent years, within the Romanian context, a focus on working with underprivileged youth, including those in institutional care, using theatrical and art-therapeutic exercises has emerged. These approaches have been implemented through dedicated programs by certain organizations (Ajungem Mari, Lindenfeld Association, and POT, Tangent Association) and practitioners (Apostol, 2018a, 2018b). These programs facilitate the expression of emotions and the conversion of personal experiences into empowering narratives, which are vital aspects of the process of reintegrating these young individuals into society.

"If we wish to transform horror, we must create places where emotions can be expressed; resocializing children 'as though nothing had happened' emphasizes their wounds, but they can easily be transformed if we can draw them, put them on stage, or turn them into a story" (Cyrulnik, 2009, p. 88).

Although these initiatives have yielded positive outcomes, their occurrence remains infrequent when contrasted with the significant number of individuals who could benefit from them. Historically, the scarcity of such initiatives can be attributed to the undervaluation of professionals

from the theater and film sectors who engage in social work with vulnerable populations. There has been a prevailing notion that individuals graduating from arts programs achieve success solely through involvement in cultural institution projects (Razar, 2009, as cited in Zikry & Ceobanu, 2020).

In Romania, there has been a progressive and sustained lobby for the social integration of vulnerable populations through theater in the last few years. Starting with 2015, "I.L. Caragiale" National University of Theater and Film in Bucharest (UNATC) has ensured, through conferences, workshops, and demonstration performances, the awareness of the general public and decision-makers on this topic. A decisive development occurred in 2023 when the significance of education through theater within the social sphere gained more recognition with the introduction of master's degree programs that actively promote the development of expertise in working with marginalized populations—Master's *Degree in Theater Pedagogy* and *Master's Degree in Community and Therapeutic Theater—at* the UNATC, as well as by the implementation of specialized projects within the same university—"Sunshine. Education through Theater", a project co-financed by the National Cultural Fund Administration.

Role of the instructor

Conducting a workshop with institutionalized young people requires a specific skill set, which, while sharing similarities with that of a theater instructor, also presents unique methodological challenges. The starting point for the activity leader is to understand that his or her role is that of facilitator. Grasping the original meaning of this term, "to make easy" (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009), helps the coordinator position himself/herself correctly in relation to those he/she works with as a person who skillfully guides communication and planned activities to facilitate the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, or awareness related to various aspects of the socio-emotional domain. The coordinator must avoid taking on the role of a teacher, as this might create a perceived power imbalance and resistance among the participants, particularly in the case of a high-risk group.

Paolo Freire (2017) advocated for the shift from unidirectional educational settings to bi-directional frameworks where both the teacher and the learner are regarded as equal participants in the dialogue. By adopting the role of a subject in the process, as opposed to being an object, the learner empowers themselves through the encouragement they receive from the knowledge facilitator. In drama/theater-based activities, this type of relationship is reflected in the principle set out by Viola Spolin (1999): "We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything". In essence, it is imperative for the facilitator to exercise patience and instill trust in those they are working with. They should apply their techniques adeptly to bring forth individuals' personal resources. This approach implies a sense of generosity, as it demands the capacity to 'de-center,' meaning to acknowledge that the work centers on the beneficiaries—it originates from them and pertains to them rather than the facilitator (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013).

An intervention targeting beneficiaries of protection services entails meticulous planning of the conducted activities with the aim of attaining predefined developmental objectives aligned with the socio-emotional priorities identified by the stakeholders. This rigor is complemented by the trainer's flexibility, as they consider the needs expressed both directly and indirectly by the participants. Active listening, continuous curiosity demonstrated through questioning, and honesty enable the coordinator to adapt and refine the work process to best suit the group's requirements (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013). The principle of transparency should be promoted in the professional

training courses (theater education and art therapy) of future instructors, as it is a quality in working not only with at-risk groups but in any educational context due to the balance it brings to the instructor-participant relationship.

"If facilitators are transparent about their intentions and about the 'baggage' they bring with them into the work, there is a chance that any contradictions that may emerge between the aspirations of the participants and those of the facilitator can be used as part of a developing analysis, which may itself be a prelude to a discernible, sustained impact" (Etherton & Prentki, 2006, p. 150).

Participants place their trust in trainers based not only on their honesty and willingness to listen but also on their ability to maintain a non-judgmental stance. One potential challenge for a workshop coordinator is entering the workspace and, by extension, the relationships with participants, with preconceived notions and biases. This type of interaction will make it difficult to establish a relationship of trust and will be detrimental to the smooth running of the activity. The key to harmonious interactions aligns with Berne's theory (2018), emphasizing the importance of eliminating any preconceptions or prejudices when engaging with each individual. By adhering to this principle, a transparent relationship is fostered, beginning anew and involving both parties actively. Maintaining a non-judgmental mindset allows the trainer, when necessary, to step aside, allowing participants the freedom to explore and discover their own answers. By adopting this approach, the facilitator can effectively discern the requirements and preferences of the participants, subsequently incorporating them into the design of the planned intervention (Brown & Taylor, 2008). Called "negative capability" by Fisher (as cited in Brown & Taylor, 2008, p. 178), this ability does not imply passivity or relaxation on the part of the coordinator, but implementing the skill of actively being with a situation without jumping to conclusions and acting in anticipation.

Among the damaging preconceptions is that of viewing welfare recipients as victims in need of rescue through drama- or theater-based intervention programs. From this perspective, one of the challenges faced by the drama facilitator is to avoid assuming any of the roles within the dramatic triangle, notably that of the rescuer, in their interactions with the participants (Karpman, 2016). Although at risk, these young people are survivors of unsettling events, as a result of which they have developed various coping mechanisms to deal with adversity. Intervention is timely because it aims to redress disruptive behaviors (adopted as a coping measure by some young people) and provides an opportunity to heal trauma. Interventions utilizing theater for disadvantaged young people do not endeavor to 'rescue' them but rather to provide a platform for them to articulate their emotions, explore solutions to their circumstances, and engage in resocialization processes. The risk of individuals conducting social interventions developing a savior complex is significant, particularly when they perceive themselves as privileged and believe they possess superior knowledge compared to the individuals they are assisting (Flaherty, 2016). To establish appropriate boundaries, it is beneficial for the facilitator to maintain the understanding that their role is that of a guide, assisting participants in discovering their own solutions rather than providing predefined answers (Stewart & Joines, 2004).

Working with at-risk youth can also lead to secondary traumatic stress for the facilitator (Ormiston, Nygaard, & Apgar, 2022; Tumwesigye, 2021; Weiss-Dagan, Ben-Porat, & Itzhaky, 2022). When the coordinator successfully establishes a secure environment where each participant feels respected and acknowledged, it can encourage catharsis. In such cases, some young individuals may be willing to confide in the facilitator about past or ongoing abusive experiences. Hence, the drama/theater coordinator working in applied settings faces a significant risk of emotional exhaustion unless they have acquired the skill of establishing clear boundaries between their

professional and personal lives or engage in counseling and reflective discussions with peers who share similar professional challenges (Zikry & Ceobanu, 2020; Stevenson, 2022; Gordon, Kirtchuk, McAlister, & Reiss, 2018).

Material and methods

Two primary objectives were pursued by the study. Firstly, it aimed to identify the critical psychological and training competences exhibited by theater instructors engaged with disadvantaged children and young individuals, classifying them as ‘training attributes’ within the educational (training) context. Secondly, it sought to evaluate methodological challenges, including those encountered in practical situations involving at-risk groups.

A qualitative research design rooted in the empirical theory method was employed. As demonstrated by Popa (2018), this approach entails the inductive development of a theory derived from data gathered during the research. Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of the professional experiences of theater instructors actively engaged in social interventions with at-risk youth was conducted. This analysis aimed to extract the distinctive aspects of the required training and the challenges faced during the process.

Nine theater instructors, aged 24 to 35, participated in the study. Two of the participants were male, while the others were female. All of them held Master’s degrees in Theater Pedagogy from the “I.L. Caragiale” National University of Theater and Film in Bucharest, representing four different graduation years, with the oldest being from the class of 2017. In 2022, four of these instructors were pursuing their PhD studies at the same university, while the remaining participants had completed their Master’s degrees in 2022. Each instructor possessed a minimum of two years of experience working with children and young individuals from various backgrounds, excluding those classified as at-risk. The group’s average age was 27.8 years, with an average of 5.88 years of experience in theater pedagogy. To maintain confidentiality in the presentation of results, each instructor was assigned a code from P1 to P9.

A social intervention was conducted by the team of instructors using applied theater and drama techniques with at-risk young people who were under state protection and placed in residential services (both public and family-based). These interventions were carried out in various geographical locations across Romania, including Bucharest, Craiova, Suceava, and Gura Humorului. The intervention encompassed an interactive performance addressing three distinct abuse scenarios, accompanied by a series of five workshops utilizing art-therapeutic and theatrical exercises to foster the development of socio-emotional skills. In each location, three separate working groups were formed: two comprised of children and (pre)adolescents, and one composed of institutional staff.

Drawing from documented accounts of abuse among disadvantaged youth, the performance had a duration of 45 minutes and was followed by a 30-minute discussion session centered on the presented themes. Six instructors took part in the performance, with one of them facilitating audience interaction, following a model similar to the ‘Joker’ role in Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed method (Boal, 2022). The remaining three instructors were responsible for guiding the post-performance discussion session.

The drama workshops spanned five consecutive days, with each session running for three hours. The module concluded on the sixth day, culminating in the presentation of the outcomes to the center’s community through brief demonstration workshops. The trainers were organized into three working teams, each containing at least one PhD student. The composition of these teams

varied from one institution to another, with the sole consistency being that the two male instructors remained with the pre-adolescent groups, offering young people a male role model.

Before the intervention, an informational session regarding the psychological characteristics of the target group was organized, conducted by a psychologist, and attended by all instructors. Additionally, there were three subsequent meetings with the same psychologist throughout the intervention, serving as opportunities for the trainers to reflect on both their achievements and the challenges they encountered during the program. Final feedback was provided by both the psychologist participating in the activities and an independent psychologist. The psychologist had an overview of the activities carried out and assessed the compliance with the qualitative research methodology in terms of the constitution and functioning of the focus groups. Thus, the results of the research were assessed as consistent and generalizable for the professional group of trainers.

The study took place following the intervention and employed semi-structured interviews with preset open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014) and focus group discussions as data collection techniques. Nine individual interviews were conducted alongside a group discussion that involved all the instructors. These sessions were overseen by the author of the study and carried out through online meetings using the Zoom video conferencing platform. To ensure transparency and with participants' consent, the discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed using an online tool.

The interviews were conducted approximately three weeks after the conclusion of the activity. These interviews were based on a standardized set of six open-ended questions (see Annex 1), posed to all trainers in a consistent order. Each interview had a duration of approximately 20–30 minutes.

The focus group was carried out six months following the conclusion of the activity to assess any shifts in the instructors' perspectives that may have occurred since the initial interviews. During the focus group session, participants engaged with a series of open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection on the skills and challenges they had encountered (see Annex 2). This session spanned a duration of 2 hours and 20 minutes.

To analyze the data gathered from the nine interviews and the focus group, a categorical grid was employed. This grid was developed based on the two primary objectives of the study.

Results

The analysis of data from the interviews (I) and focus group (FG) followed a categorical grid derived from the outlined objectives, namely: psychological competences and professional competences of the theater instructor; methodological difficulties and practical difficulties of working with young people at risk (Table 1).

Below, the issues are presented based on the established categories, along with the responses provided by the study participants.

Among the **psychological competences of the theater instructor**, a number of positive elements that make up the personality have been identified, with emphasis on the emotional and creative dimensions. Thus, the responses reflected that emotional and personal intelligence are necessary skills in working with people in general, especially in the case of at-risk youth, where their emotional responses may manifest themselves in impulsive and aggressive behaviors:

"*It helped that I'm empathetic*" (P8, 30 years old, I);

"*Empathy proves invaluable when working with any group*" (P2, 24, I);

"*I found understanding and empathy from colleagues. Empathy was the key to working effectively with this risk group*." (P1, 24, I);

"*I have learned to manage my own emotions when working with a vulnerable group*" (P5, 28, I);

"*I took more care in dealing with them through expression and tried to keep my composure for situations where they might become aggressive or vulnerable*" (P4, 26, FG);

"*Managing one's own emotions and emphasizing emotional resilience, which involves self-regulation skills, is essential because you serve as a role model for the workshop participants*" (P9, 35, FG).

Another aspect that the instructors found useful was patience with workshop participants.

"O*ne of the skills that helped me a lot was patience*." (P3, 25 years old, I);

"*In this specific context, I think that among the most useful skills is patience*." (P9, 35, I);

"*Patience has helped a lot, both with myself and those I have worked with*" (P2, 24, I).

It was emphasized that a certain level of firmness is necessary to effectively manage groups of at-risk young people.

"*A second skill was firmness*" (P3, 25 years old, I);

"*Sometimes it also required firmness because some participants refused to follow the rules of the game, so they ended up disrupting the activity for others*" (P4, 26, FG).

Despite the serious and responsible nature of coordination work, successful instructors were characterized by their ability to maintain a sense of playfulness.

"*Joviality and constant playfulness*" (P7, 30 years old, I);

"*'Enjoy yourself; what you're doing is fun'. It was an encouragement for me as well, not just for the participants. Sometimes, I tend to take things too seriously and forget to simply have fun*" (P2, 24, I);

"*I have a positive, playful attitude that prevails during the workshop*" (P8, 30, I).

It was stressed that it's beneficial to refrain from forming any expectations regarding how the activities or interactions with the target group will unfold. Additionally, it's important to avoid preconceived notions or prejudices towards young people at risk, as these attitudes can lead to underestimating them.

"*It helped that I had no expectations about what was going to happen during the workshops*" (P5, 28 years old, I);

"*From now on, I will choose to let go of the preconceptions I tend to have before any activity involving a group*" (P1, 24, I);

"*Young people at risk need friendly people around them who are open to dialogue and who don't judge them or tell them what's good or bad*" (P8, 30, I);

"*I learned how hard it is to accept people as they are*" (P9, 35, I);

"*We noticed an inclination towards familiarity with emotional language in all groups. It was surprising because I expected them to know nothing. [...] From now on, I will choose to approach each participant with an open mind, starting from scratch*" (P3, 25, FG);

"*After all, we are all humans. I understand that it's important to let go of prejudices and any other parasitic thoughts before meeting them*" (P4, 26, FG).

Another point indicated by the instructors was the importance of demonstrating generosity, not only towards the participants but also towards their colleagues.

"*I found support in my colleagues whenever I looked for it, and they found it in me*" (P1, 24 years old, I);

"*Any opportunity to share my knowledge with others made me feel fulfilled"* (P4, 26, I);

"*I wanted to be able to give others some of the things I acquired during my studies*" (P2, 24, I);

"*I believed in the power of the intervention to bring a little ray of sunshine into the lives of institutionalized children*" (P7, 30, I);

"*I have identified a greater desire to help them or to observe changes at the end of the intervention compared to the workshops I usually conduct in Bucharest*" (P9, 35, FG).

Certain psychological characteristics identified in this study can be regarded as skills essential to the training of theater professionals and may also be viewed as professional competences. For instance, the capacity for observation, not only of the individuals one collaborates with but also of oneself, provides an opportunity for self-regulation in interpersonal interactions.

"*I think a useful skill in this context was the ability to observe oneself while interacting with workshop participants*" (P9, 35 years old, I);

"*It helped that I'm a good observer*" (P8, 30, I).

Another skill highlighted by the study participants is maintaining focus of attention, aiding them in staying engaged with the groups they worked with, and ensuring the effective management of the educational environment.

"*Distributive attention and the ability to focus over a longer period of time and in noisy spaces*" (P7, 30 years old, I);

"*I developed my ability to connect with the present moment; I was 100% here and now while coordinating the workshops, because otherwise I would lose the attention of the participants*" (P8, 30, I);

"*I realized that in interacting with them, we were really more careful, more cautious, like a mother with her newborn. We were looking in all directions, although we ourselves didn't make significant modifications as trainers. Basically, we used the same approaches that we use every time during workshops to win over participants, to raise their energy, and to get them involved*" (P6, 29, FG).

Instructors also underlined the importance of spontaneity and creativity, along with qualities related to the latter such as flexibility and adaptability, as essential skills in coordinating their work.

"*We as trainers always have to adapt to the times and the people we work with*" (P6, 29 years old, FG);

"*Creativity played a vital role in finding innovative solutions to challenges without being like an executioner or policeman that nullifies freedom of expression*" (P9, 35, FG);

"*Flexibility and spontaneity to be able to adapt to any space, any group, any environment, with the idea of not being afraid of anything and to keep in mind that every problem has a solution*" (P8, 30, FG).

Under the category of **professional competences required by the theater instructor,** aspects related to the ability to effectively manage educational activities, acquired through study or work experience, were identified. Consequently, all participants accentuated the importance of customizing the approach to suit the specific needs of the target group.

"*I have noticed that when I let myself be guided by the needs of the group, I can deliver the essential information and knowledge needed*" (P1, 24 years old, I);

"*I paid attention to details and to the needs of the group; I identified them quickly and found solutions*" (P8, 30, I);

"*I think the best strategy is to think that there is no universally valid approach. That's how you always stay open: you're really there to observe the people you work with and adapt to them*" (P9, 35, FG).

Similarly, it is necessary to ensure the conscious and active acquisition of knowledge.

"*It is important to respect the pace and boundaries of those we work with*" (P8, 30 years old, I)

The trainers also highlighted the importance of positioning themselves as equals with the workshop participants. This approach boosted the participants' confidence in their own abilities and fostered an environment conducive to meaningful dialogue.

"*I was open to learning from the participants*" (P8, 30 years old, I);

"*Even if they have certain difficulties, I have learned not to treat them with superiority, because this will push me away from them instead of helping me to establish a relationship with them*" (P4, 26, FG);

"*They looked at us at first as an authority that was harder to reach. We were Mrs. and Mr. Then, they realized that we related to them sincerely and that we saw them as equal dialogue partners*" (P3, 25, FG).

Establishing a proper rapport also entails recognizing the constraints inherent in the role of an instructor when working with at-risk youth:

"*Setting clear boundaries with those I work with*" (P6, 29 years old, I);

"*I have learned to detach myself from the children's problems without being indifferent*" (P7, 30, I);

"*It helped me a lot that we had delineated our role there and that we knew our practice was not therapeutic. This gave me the freedom to realize that I was only there to coordinate theater games, not to heal anyone*" (P1, 24, FG).

Effective communication skills proved valuable in fostering interaction between the workshop facilitators and participants, as well as in promoting collaboration among the instructors.

"*I felt compatibility with all my colleagues and communicated very well, both during and outside the workshops*" (P5, 28 years old, I);

"*Every situation has a solution if communication is effective*" (P1, 24, I);

"*I perceived every day as a new and unique opportunity to learn something new about facilitation and communication*" (P9, 35, I);

"*Some participants said it was the first time they felt genuinely heard when outsiders came to engage in activities with them, asking honest questions about their feelings*" (P3, 25, FG);

"*We created a safe space where we showed them that we were really listening*" (P4, 26, FG).

The facilitators valued their group work skills as essential for the effective collaboration they experienced among themselves.

"*Each center had a specificity to which we were able to adapt quickly because our working group was cohesive.*" (P3, 25 years old, I);

"*The relational dynamics between trainers can be a model of communication for the group. The better their relationship, the more trust and confidence there is that anything can be solved. (...) No matter which team member I was paired with, we worked together, despite the challenges*" (P8, 30, I).

Another point raised by the facilitators was the importance of being transparent and honest with the workshop participants regarding the objectives of the intervention and the challenges encountered during the process.

> "*Honesty: I acknowledged my awkwardness if it came up (I wasn't afraid to normalize it)*" (P8, 30 years old, I);
>
> "*We didn't claim that we knew everything; instead, we suggested that we explore together through exercises to learn new things. We were transparent with them*" (P9, 35, FG).

One of the skills developed during the intervention was the ability to facilitate, which means guiding participants to discover their own answers and solutions to the challenges they encounter.

> "*I learned that asking questions can be very productive: what was that experience like for you, how do you feel now, and what did you do to overcome that moment?*" (P8, 30 years old, I);
>
> "*We insisted, on the feedback, that they honestly share what they feel and what they think about certain situations. In one of the groups, half of the workshop was just feedback; that's how long it took to open up*" (P3, 25, FG).

Setting and adhering to a specific training objective, as well as the capability to design a workshop plan, were cited as factors that assisted instructors in conducting the educational activities.

> "*I know the importance of organizing a work plan according to the proposed educational objectives*" (P8, 30 years old, I);
>
> "*I had a stable lesson plan that gave me some security. Any challenge from outside could not destabilize me; I knew what I had to do*" (P5, 28, I);
>
> "*It helped that the workshops were very carefully thought out in advance. I mean how the workshops were structured—the specific daily themes, the games*" (P9, 35, FG).

Knowledge of educational psychology gained during the study and pre-intervention information about the target group were identified as factors that supported the successful implementation of the intervention.

> "*All the books I read in my master's in pedagogy about child psychology*" (P7, 30 years old, I);
>
> "*I had enough knowledge of theater pedagogy at hand*" (P5, 28, I);
>
> "*Theoretical knowledge about the target group mattered; we had not all worked with at-risk groups before, but we had read articles and books, talked to the psychologist before starting the activities, and shared our previous experiences*" (P9, 35, FG).

Efficient time management skills were also recognized as valuable for organizing activities effectively, especially when considering the unique characteristics of the target group.

> "*Organizational skills to use time effectively*" (P1, 24 years old, I);
>
> "*In all groups, in all cities, there was a question of timing, and we were focusing on the most important games. There were days when we managed to do all the exercises*" (P6, 29, FG).

Within the **methodological difficulties** category, various challenges related to the structure of the activities were identified. One of the challenges highlighted by the instructors was the mixed workshop on the fourth day, where the institution's staff participating in the workshops were divided between the two groups of children and (pre)adolescents:

> "*All three of us instructors put up a united front to get the teenagers to come, because we thought that if they heard adults were participating in the workshop, only about three*

of them would come. Two or three boys said they didn't want to come when they heard it was a mixed workshop" (P8, 30 years old, FG);

"*When we were going to have the mixed workshop day, I was afraid they would make all kinds of excuses to miss it. We told them that we knew we were just getting used to each other and that it seemed inappropriate for adults to join in. We went ahead as planned and set some rules so they would feel more comfortable*" (P3, 25, FG).

An unexpected challenge arose during exercises involving balloons when some participants became frightened by the noise of them being popped. Consequently, the activity had to be adapted to accommodate their needs.

"*It never occurred to me that children might be scared of balloons. They were so scared that they would blow up in their faces.*" (P9, 35 years old, FG);

"*There were two people who were really afraid of balloons. When the others saw that the two were attracting attention, it perpetuated the desire to be noticed, and half of the group ended up being scared of balloons.*" (P3, 25, FG);

"*I asked who was afraid to pop balloons, and no one answered. I made them close their eyes and ask again. Two or three raised their hands, so we just played with the balloons instead*" (P8, 30, FG).

Modifications were made to other exercises in order to maintain the educational objective, necessitating adaptations, replacements, or eliminations of activities due to time constraints:

"*It was the 'emotion collage' exercise, and they were encouraged to speak with each other. The group's need was not to talk at all but to listen to music, and then they abandoned the activity*" (P3, 25 years old, FG);

"*In the first group, it was really an adaptability exercise for us because there were very young participants and we had to reduce the difficulty of the exercises*" (P6, 29, FG);

"*We didn't manage to do everything as planned because we didn't have enough time, and we chose the exercises that seemed most relevant to them at the time*" (P7, 30, FG).

The facilitators noted the challenge of prioritizing the needs of the target group, even if this meant foregoing certain educational objectives:

"*The target was not reached in a straight line; the trajectory had its ups and downs, but the important thing is that it was reached*" (P2, 24 years old, I);

"*I gave up on the idea of getting what I had set out to achieve at the end of the workshop. Due to a strong desire to impart knowledge, I found myself inadvertently steering them in what I believed was the best direction*" (P8, 30, I).

The intervention's format played a pivotal role in facilitating the activities, with the trainers believing that the absence of specific components (the psychologist's presence for information and counseling, the time spent together on travel and the introductory performance) would have hampered the overall productivity of the process.

"*The fact that we also had the psychologist with whom we met a couple of times after the start of the intervention was a huge plus. (...) I honestly don't know if the process would have worked as effectively if there had not been a psychologist to provide validation from time to time*" (P9, 35 years old, FG);

"*It was useful that we could talk to each other, especially because we all lived together on travel. It helped a lot. Even on the way from the workshop to the accommodation, when I was finding out what the others had been up to, we learned from each other's experience, and it took away the pressure of having to find solutions on our own in a very short time. It created a connection between us and helped us balance our work*

more. I think back to the first workshops, which we found much more difficult because we didn't have that time to talk to each other; we would come to the workshop and we would go our own way at the end" (P8, 30, FG);

"*I initially underestimated the show at the beginning of the intervention that featured the three abuse situations. (...) The funny thing is, every time it seemed to me that they weren't paying attention, that's when it had the biggest impact on them. Afterwards, they would come and tell us separately that they resonated with a certain character or situation*" (P3, 25, FG).

The **practical difficulties** identified encompassed both concerns from the viewpoint of the facilitators engaged in the intervention and the young individuals they were working with. In this context, certain instructors encountered secondary traumatic stress as a consequence of their empathetic responses to emotional disclosures made by the young participants during the workshops. During the workshop, there may be sensitive disclosures made by the participants, such as expressing the desire to die, as was the case in the present research. In response to this type of situation, the theater instructor team should prioritize the immediate safety and well-being of the individual, involving mental health professionals and emergency services if necessary, by creating a safe and supportive space during the workshop and adapting the content to explore themes related to mental health, resilience, and coping strategies.

"*Those of us with less experience working with vulnerable children have been quite affected by the problems they face*" (P7, 30 years old, I);

"*Although I had undergone some psychological training beforehand, their stories stirred something in me. It was like an internal struggle not to react in a very shocked way and not have the desire to save them. It was different and more difficult than working with typical children and young people. For example, at a workshop, a 12-year-old girl came to me, looked me in the eye, and told me with all her heart that she wanted to die. It helped me to hear again from the psychologist that I need to establish a clear boundary between me and the participants to prevent emotional exhaustion*" (P3, 25, FG);

"*I learned to let go of the rescuer syndrome because it was hard for me to manage the interaction with the participant who confessed to me during the workshop break that she was a victim of sexual abuse. I still felt it was my responsibility to make her happy during the workshop*" (P6, 29, FG).

The absence of proper professional boundaries between certain instructors and the recipients of the intervention led to a situation where some young people engaged in persistent online interactions, seeking continued contact with the instructors after the intervention had concluded.

"*The biggest challenge was the participant I got attached to and gave my Instagram account to, and then I didn't know how to handle the situation because she was texting me a lot*" (P7, 30 years old, FG);

"*I was very careful not to give out my personal details, because I knew there was a risk that vulnerable teenagers could get attached very quickly and not understand that we were only with them for a very short period of time. Maybe I wouldn't be so careful about that detail with a group of kids who aren't at risk, meaning I wouldn't be afraid to give them my Instagram. To avoid this kind of dependency, I think it helps to set the framework from the beginning: who we are, how long we stay, what we do, so that they don't create other expectations*" (P8, 30, FG).

Revealing the vulnerability of the trainers facilitated a connection with the workshop participants, encouraging them to embrace their own vulnerabilities. However, this approach posed a challenge for some coordinators:

> "*Even for me, it is difficult to let go of the 'mask' and be really vulnerable and honest in front of a group of people, regardless of their ages*" (P2, 24 years old, I);
>
> "*Being honest and open about one's own imperfections and insecurities in an appropriate learning environment is not a weakness but a good example for those struggling with low self-esteem*" (P9, 35, I).

Facilitators also noted instances of intrusion during the workshops by specific institution employees associated with the young people involved. In response to this behavior, the solution was to lock the doors of the rooms in which the activities were held in order to physically safeguard the participants and to offer them the intimacy needed to work during the workshops. Feedback regarding the behavior of the youngsters was delivered at the end of the workshop to the caregivers (social workers, maternal assistants, and educators) in order to provide them with assurance that the activities undertaken were going well.

> "*The ladies had anxieties about young people's behavior—they might run away; they might behave inappropriately... Even though we told them everything was fine, they still didn't trust us and were constantly checking on us*" (P3, 25 years old, FG);
>
> "*They came in a lot, not just at the beginning; they kept opening the door. We couldn't even create an atmosphere where young people felt safe enough to open up. You can't really relax when there's always someone at the door*" (P8, 30, FG).

The physical space either facilitated or hindered the progress of activities, depending on its appropriateness for the specific tasks at hand.

> "*The space was not the most suitable because it was outdoors and sunny; we had no privacy*" (P3, 25 years old, FG);
>
> "*When the space was right, it was very easy to carry out the work. When the space was not suitable, it was terrible*" (P8, 30, FG);
>
> "*I remember the workshop in the bedroom, which belonged to one of the girls in the group. She didn't attend any more workshops afterwards. I felt I had invaded her privacy*" (P7, 30, FG).

Facilitators also encountered challenges related to the behavior exhibited by the young people they were working with, pointing out the importance of instructors having adequate psycho-pedagogical training and thorough pre-intervention briefings.

> "*That girl, who was initially very shy and came accompanied by her mother, then ended up using licentious language, didn't really get involved in the activity; it was more like sitting on the sidelines. I didn't know how to approach her*" (P9, 35 years old, FG);
>
> "*Some of them were not very cooperative at first. Then, once they saw what the exercises were like, they accepted us. It wasn't easy; we had to pass a few trials*" (P4, 26, FG);
>
> "*At first, they seemed to hide behind a wall; they were not very open and showed avoidant behaviors. By the end of the show, it was obvious that they paid attention because they would come up to us and tell us which characters they empathized with*" (P3, 25, FG);
>
> "*I noticed in them a kind of verbal and physical violence, which was a bit different, in the sense that it seemed to be the way they showed affection to each other*" (P8, 30, FG);
>
> "*I noticed resistance, insecurities, and skepticism on their part, which made us more vulnerable because we were looked at with suspicion*" (P5, 28, FG).

Finally, the facilitators noted that the activities were most successful when there were minimal variables involved, as any changes tended to affect the dynamics of the entire group.

> "*I think we need as few variables as possible. You need to have many certainties and clearly established activities in advance, because the risk group brings a lot of unexpected elements anyway. If you don't have a clear structure behind it, like we had—we were aware of the exercise schedule, we were familiar with our team, we knew what language to use, we established our own rules—all sorts of uncertainties and challenges can arise*" (P3, 25 years old, FG);
> "*I think the first group we all felt was the hardest because everything was new to us. There were many unknowns: colleagues I had never worked with before, a new working situation, the risk group, and the fact that new participants kept coming every day*" (P8, 30, FG).

Table 1
Competences and difficulties encountered in working with at-risk youth

Established Categories	Identified Aspects
Psychological Competences	*emotional intelligence* *personal intelligence* *patience* *firmness* *joviality* *non-judgmental mindset* *generosity* *observational acumen* *focus* *spontaneity* *creativity* *flexibility* *adaptability*
Professional Competences	*individualized and accessible approach to implementation* *facilitating the deliberate and active acquisition of knowledge* *establishing an equitable relationship with participants* *recognizing the constraints inherent to the role of an applied drama/theater facilitator* *effective communication capabilities* *proficiency in group dynamics (compromise and collaboration)* *sincerity in interactions with participants* *facilitation skills* *formulating and pursuing training objectives* *ability to design a workshop plan* *knowledge of psycho-pedagogy* *efficient time management competences*

Established Categories	Identified Aspects
Methodological Difficulties	*hybrid workshop: combining young people at risk and adults responsible for them* *resource-related challenges (balloons)* *modifying, substituting, or omitting specific exercises based on the needs of the target group* *flexibility in terms of educational goals based on the target group's unique characteristics* *features of the intervention format*
Practical Difficulties	*secondary traumatic stress* *inappropriate online interactions initiated by members of the at-risk group determined by the context of the intervention* *manifestation of instructor vulnerability* *intrusion by institution staff members responsible for the at-risk group* *inadequate workspace determined by the context of the intervention* *problematic behaviors displayed by specific participants* *presence of numerous variables*

Discussions

The current study has highlighted that applied drama- and theater-based interventions for at-risk youth encompass several challenges that can be effectively addressed by facilitators who possess specific psychological and professional skills and are under the supervision of experts (psychologists, socio-dramatists etc.), ultimately fostering resilience in the process. These findings align with the perspectives of other authors who have undertaken similar initiatives (Hartley, 2012; Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, 2013). The focus of drama and theater activities lies in the human being and its constituent elements, which encompass thoughts, emotions, and actions. The specialized professional skills inherent to a theater educator's role, encompassing communication, facilitation, group dynamics, and personalized guidance, must be supplemented by specific psychological attributes. These qualities enable effective management of both intra- and interpersonal aspects when engaging with workshop participants. Notably, these attributes encompass observation, focused awareness, patience, and a jovial demeanor. The responsibilities and expertise of the applied drama/theater practitioner are delineated by the boundary where drama intersects with psychotherapy, transitioning into dramatherapy, which necessitates additional professional qualifications (Bailey, as cited in Kramer & Freedman, 2017). At the same time, it is advisable that the vulnerable group be approached in an integrated way, within a multidisciplinary team of specialists (theater instructor, psychologist, drama therapist, social worker), because the expertise of each member of the team increases the effectiveness of interventions.

The ethics of working with and researching vulnerable people are also important. In addition to limitations in obtaining informed consent (from participants who are minors or have a reduced capacity to consent), there are also issues relating to the effective psychological protection of participants. This will be ensured both through compliance with already established ethical

frameworks (through international and national guidelines) and through the design of an intervention/research protocol and an environment that ensures reliable protection, in which maximum benefit and non-maleficence are the ends of the activities carried out.

Based on the feedback from the survey participants, it appears that the pedagogical approach to working with young people at risk closely resembles that used in activities with young people from the general population. The enjoyable and engaging atmosphere in the workshops was attributed not only to the playful exercises but also to the instructors' jovial demeanor. When an individual is willing to play, it becomes easier to facilitate change and transformation. The instructor's playfulness influences the participants, creating a positive atmosphere and encouraging a shift in perspective, a concept also found in the theory put forth by Prentki (in Freebody, Balfour, Finneran, & Anderson, 2018, p. 169). While the intervention in this study was meticulously planned, there were situations where the plan had to be adapted. This adaptation was prompted by the identification and prioritization of other needs within the working group. In such instances, the trainers' abilities in listening, observation, attentiveness, and flexibility played a crucial role. These skills allowed them to seize learning opportunities as they emerged, ensuring that the process effectively addressed the needs and interests of the targeted young people, which is similar to recommendations put forward by other studies (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Hartley, 2012). Some of the study participants also noted that they refined their ability to facilitate during this experience. Facilitation involves asking open-ended questions to encourage those they work with to reflect and find their own solutions to problems. This approach has not only prevented instructors from imposing their own ideas during exercises but has also allowed them to effectively manage group dynamics, ensuring that discussions are not dominated by specific individuals, a perspective consistent with observations made by other authors in similar contexts (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, 2013).

The variation in approach stemmed from the unique characteristics of the working group, particularly the disclosures made by the young people to the trainers, which were enabled by the creation of a safe and supportive environment. Dung and Zsolnai (2022) and Ormiston et al. (2022) described teaching as a "helping profession" because educators provide care and support to those they work with, and this role carries a significant level of stress. The exposure, sometimes unintentional, to the life experiences of at-risk youth led to the emergence of secondary traumatic stress in trainers. This phenomenon has also been noted by other researchers who have explored the effects of working with vulnerable individuals (Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021; Oberg, Carroll, & Macmahon, 2023). The practitioner in applied drama or theater must establish clear boundaries regarding their scope of action and enhance their socio-emotional competencies. This ensures that their emotional engagement respects healthy boundaries, a point also highlighted by Sextou and Karypidou (2018). These skills concern both the ability to cope with working with vulnerable groups without interfering in their personal lives and the ability to withstand stress and/or recover from difficult, emotionally charged interventions. By this way, it ensures a safe frame for drama activities.

In conclusion, it is advisable for a social intervention team working with at-risk groups to comprise individuals with diverse areas of expertise, such as psychology and pedagogy. It's important for trainers to share a common vocabulary and complement each other. Besides the mutual support that instructors provide each other in reflective sessions, they should also receive proper information and emotional management support, an observation consistent with previous research (Hartley, 2012; Ferguson, 2017; Tumwesigye, 2021).

Furthermore, instances of resistance, inconsistency, and disruptive behaviors from some young people, as well as practical challenges like inadequate space, necessitated adjustments to the working dynamics. These circumstances demanded adaptability, flexibility, creativity, and spontaneity from the instructors in order to find effective solutions, which is similar to the theories of other authors who have explored the resilience of the applied drama/theater practitioner (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009). Nevertheless, the capacity to adapt does not exclude the need for a well-planned context of investigation, as illustrated by the findings of other researches (Novak et al., 2021).

This research has highlighted essential psychological and professional competencies for trainers working with at-risk groups. These competencies are instrumental in helping them navigate and address the challenges encountered in this context.

It is important to note that this study does have some limitations, including a small participant pool, a relatively brief intervention period, and the involvement of instructors who had limited prior experience working with vulnerable or at-risk groups despite their longer overall experience in theater pedagogy.

Conclusions

This research has catalogued potential difficulties encountered in applied drama and theater activities with at-risk young people and linked them to various psychological and professional competences that can assist facilitators in addressing these challenges. Among the identified psychological competences are emotional and personal intelligence, which help in managing one's own emotions during human interactions, as well as fostering empathy and emotional support. Additionally, non-judgmental thinking, adaptability, observation, and maintaining focused attention are highlighted as crucial for providing effective guidance to the group.

Among the professional competences, communication skills, the ability to work within a group, individualized approaches, and sincerity in creating a safe space for participants are emphasized, as well as understanding the boundaries inherent in the role of an instructor.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that further research be conducted with a larger and more experienced pool of participants, particularly those with longer histories in pedagogy and interacting with at-risk individuals. This expanded research could identify additional psychological nuances and professional skills necessary for working effectively with this group while considering the professional limitations associated with applied drama and theater.

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Annex 1 – Interview Questions

- Why did you choose to participate in this intervention?
- What was your experience like during the workshops? Did you observe any changes in yourself, your colleagues, or the group you were collaborating with?
- What skills did you possess prior to this intervention that you believe were the most valuable in facilitating the activities?
- What have you gained from this experience? Please provide specific examples of the knowledge and skills you've acquired and how you plan to apply them in the future.
- What aspects or practices have you decided to let go of as a result of this intervention?
- If you had to encapsulate your experience of this intervention in a single word, what would that word be?

Annex 2 – Focus Group Questions

- How does your interaction with the at-risk young people compare to your previous experiences with different groups?
- What difficulties have you encountered in your work?
- What factors contributed to the smooth execution of your tasks?
- What methodological insights have you gained from this work experience?
- How has your experience with this intervention influenced your approach to your work?
- What are the necessary requirements for drama instructors to effectively work with at-risk individuals?
- What steps can be taken in the future to address the training needs of drama instructors working with at-risk youth?