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Walking with the words: Student motivation toward reading and studying Shakespeare’s plays through rehearsal room practices

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ABSTRACT

Educators have long been challenged to support students’ engagement with and comprehension of reading complex texts, including Shakespeare’s plays. Rehearsal room practice (RRP) specifically integrates the rehearsal room processes used by the Royal Shakespeare Company and other ensemble-based theatre companies with active, inquiry-based learning in the classroom. Furthermore, RRP is aligned with a theory of dialogic reading. This quasi-experimental study describes the use and impact of RRPs on high school student attitudes toward reading and perceptions of the value of reading Shakespeare’s plays. Students who experienced RRP while studying Shakespeare’s plays were more motivated, saw Shakespeare’s plays as relevant to their lives, and wanted to read additional challenging texts at the end of the program. Implications for practice are discussed.

In a Grade 9 Midwestern U.S. classroom, a diverse group of students¹ stand in a circle holding a typed copy of the “dagger speech” from Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The teacher and the students read the passage together out loud, while they call out “Stop!” to check for any confusing words and pronunciations, asking for clarification from anyone who has an idea or possible answer. They are encouraged to try out multiple meanings and ways of speaking as they are reminded that they will come back to the text many times to wrestle with the play’s themes and characters’ decisions. Next, their teacher asks students to “walk with the text” (Berry 2001; Royal Shakespeare Company 2011) by walking forward as they read until they reach a punctuation mark. At the comma, period, etc., they are told to stop and walk in a different direction and then start the next phrase or sentence. To an observer, this activity may seem to be a bit chaotic and even pointless as multiple voices rise and bodies turn in different directions crossing the small open classroom space. As they finish walking and gather in a circle, students have a great deal to say about their movement. When their teacher asks, “What did you notice about yourself or the words as you were reading this passage?” One student responds, “It’s one way and then the other. He’s all over the place.” Their teacher asks, “What might that tell us about Macbeth in this...
part of the play?” “He’s confused!” Returning to the text, their teacher asks, “Do you see words that support or oppose the idea of confusion?” Students look through the text for evidence.

In the same school in a classroom across the hall, another teacher also focuses on Shakespeare’s plays. Students sit with opened scripts on their desks and raise their hands to volunteer to perform the roles of Macbeth or Macdonwald to show the action of Act I, Scene 2 of “unseamed from the naïve to th’chops” (Shakespeare 2001). The teacher passes out the parts to willing participants. After students act out the scene, their teacher asks, “What happened in this scene?” and “What might be the consequences of this action?”

Both of these scenarios describe secondary students’ early encounters with the text of Macbeth in a Grade 9 English language arts classroom. In the latter classroom, the teacher uses a more typical pedagogical practice to teach Shakespeare’s plays through a method intended to ensure students understand the meaning of the text as they also experience some of the most exciting and dramatic moments in the stories. The teacher comments that he enjoys showing the “kids what it would look like” to get them engaged and excited about Shakespeare’s plays (C. Brown, personal communication, February 21, 2017). Indeed, his students seem to grow into the opportunity and pleasure of enacting scenes: “in the beginning, it was difficult to get students to volunteer, but by the end, students fought to read for their favorite character” (C. Brown, personal communication, February 21, 2017). In this teacher’s class, students read the entire script from beginning to end and demonstrated their learning through multiple choice tests, followed by a review of the play through viewing a movie adaptation.

In the first classroom, the teacher uses rehearsal room practices (RRPs; Royal Shakespeare Company 2011) informed, in part, by the extensive range of strategies developed by legendary voice coach Dame Cicely Berry (Berry 2001), to facilitate Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) actors’ efforts to achieve ownership over both action and meaning as they spoke and embodied Shakespeare’s words. RSC educators understood that students could also benefit from Berry’s atypical approaches to movement and reading. In this sense, RRP practices position students as actors and directors, exploring the text through movement and vocal approaches as they also discover insights and connections with their lives. The teacher in the first class studied the RSC’s RRP s and had come to value the practices as invaluable ways to shift the purpose of reading and students’ willingness to discover their own meaning: to facilitate student struggle and understanding as it relates to meaning-making in reading. She offered insight into her changing perspective, “I have come to realize that [the students’] interpretations don’t always have to be ‘right,’ and that it’s OK for them to operate under some level of confusion while they try to find their way through the text. Many of my students are still concerned with having the ‘right’ answer, but they have become more comfortable exploring different options and looking to one another for ideas and answers” (Teacher, personal communication, December 2012).

Both teachers’ approaches to reading share similarities insofar as they both engage students in close attention to text and active reading. However, they have different orientations to the text, meaning, collaboration, and use of embodied action. We present an argument based on this study that suggests that even though these methods may share similar modes, they lead to important differences in the ways students perceive themselves as readers and the value of studying of Shakespeare’s plays. We argue these differences may have significant implications for future reading and ways of engaging with Shakespeare’s plays and other complex texts.
We are two university researchers and one classroom teacher who collaborated on this study as part of a larger multiyear, multidistrict research project that investigated the efficacy of the Stand Up for Shakespeare (SUFS) program as a means to teach Shakespeare’s plays in K–12 U.S. classrooms. This program involved three major components: 1) start teaching Shakespeare’s plays at a young age, 2) stand up and do Shakespeare’s plays through RRPs, and 3) see live performances of Shakespeare’s plays. Although there are many complex and rich contemporary texts, schools still tend to rely on Shakespeare’s plays to meet curricular needs. All of the classrooms included in this study already taught Shakespeare’s plays as part of the curriculum. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the implications of the reliance on these plays to meet curricular needs; however, this research study worked within the current demands on teachers and how the current curriculum might be improved through a pedagogical focused program.

For this study, all participants were in Grades 9 and 10 and all participants attended a live performance of at least one of Shakespeare’s plays. Participants differed, however, in how they studied Shakespeare’s plays in the classroom. The classroom descriptions at the beginning of this paper are drawn from two of the four participating classrooms in this study. The four teachers reported that they looked forward to and enjoyed studying and teaching Shakespeare’s plays. All of the teachers are considered successful teachers by the school’s evaluations. Because of the teachers’ frustrations with student motivation, they were excited to participate in research that examined students’ attitudes toward different approaches to teaching Shakespeare’s plays. Our guiding research questions for this study include the following: 1) Does RRP have a positive effect on student perceived competence for learning and relatedness toward Shakespeare’s plays as compared with students in comparison classrooms? 2) Does RRP have a significant positive effect on student motivation toward reading complex texts as compared with students in comparison classrooms? and 3) What are students’ perceptions about their experiences studying Shakespeare’s plays in the RRP and comparison classrooms?

**Conceptual frameworks**

**Reading complex texts**

According to the 2015 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 2015; National Center for Education Statistics 2016) only 37% of 12th-grade students scored at or above the proficient level in reading. The NAEP survey also revealed that students with higher reading achievement said that they read for fun, indicating a positive attitude toward reading overall (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). Given these findings as well as educational research on affective dimensions of the effects on reading (Alvermann 2005; Ivey and Johnston 2013; Solheim 2011), we need to study pedagogies that facilitate the relationship between how students’ feel about reading and its influence on their ability to demonstrate their reading level.

Currently, teachers in over 40 states in the United States are or will be expected to implement the Common Core State Standards or similar standards which have a heightened focus on

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2Historically, formalized instructional standards change some based on the political landscape. At the time of manuscript preparation, Common Core and similar standards were used extensively by states in the United States.
complex text (Reynolds and Goodwin 2016). Complex texts are identified through readability scales that are both attentive to textual qualities and sentence structure (Shannahan, Fisher, and Frey 2016). Given the expectation that teachers will introduce and engage students with ever more complex texts, teachers need to facilitate meaning-making in ways that support and promote student engagement and motivation toward reading. Shakespeare’s plays are considered high in complexity for even the most advanced readers (http://www.corestandards.org/). Not surprisingly, teachers anticipate students’ disinterest in and resistance to the study of Shakespeare’s plays, and their concerns are valid. Most schools require secondary students to study Shakespeare’s plays, a condition that mitigates against students following their preferred reading choices and interests, potentially undermining their motivation toward reading.

Researchers have also documented students’ perception that Shakespeare’s language and cultural references seem too distant from their reality, their desire to not appear “stupid” in front of peers, and their feeling of being overwhelmed by the complex text structures (Almansouri, Balian, and Sawdy 2009; Rothenberg and Watts 1997). In a survey administered to 1,500 UK secondary students, in the United Kingdom, 49% of students thought Shakespeare’s plays were difficult, 50% of students did not think Shakespeare’s plays were fun, and 60% of students did not think Shakespeare’s plays were relevant to their lives today (Strand 2009).

To overcome the obstacles of difficulty and irrelevance, educators suggest integrating film (Semenza 2013; Thompson 2010), using multimodal and new media resources to recreate characters and scenes (Ajayi 2015), and even playing complex card games (Maillet 2013) to reconstruct character decisions and their consequences. These efforts are aimed, in part, at visualizing the plays and modernizing the setting and language—not at differently positioning students in relationship to the text. Although many schools introduce students to Shakespeare’s plays through their involvement with theatrical productions, we are not aware of approaches, similar to RRP, that attempt to bring the theatre-based and process-oriented rehearsal room practices into the classroom so that teachers and students are repositioned as directors and actors who engage and learn about Shakespeare’s plays through a sense of discovery, collaboration, embodied knowing, and personal ownership of meaning.

Rehearsal Room Practices

RRPs may look very familiar to teaching artists and classroom teachers who employ multiple types of drama-based pedagogies (i.e., role-playing, theatre games, and image work) to engage students with and teach the academic curriculum (Dawson and Lee 2018). However, RRP gives specific attention to the translation from the theatre-based rehearsal room practices into the school classroom-based study of Shakespeare’s plays. As one part of the larger SUFS program, RRP were developed over time with multiple scholars and practitioners of education and theatre (Berry 2001; Royal Shakespeare Company 2011) and based in the rehearsal room process used by the RSC and other ensemble-based theatre companies.

As a classroom-based pedagogy, RRP borrows from and builds on practices of the rehearsal room that involve all participants as actors and evaluators who are aiming to generate multiple layers of representations in the service of deepening individual and shared meaning of a focal text. Although performances of selected scenes may be part of a trajectory of lessons, the aim of the rehearsal approach is not to convey a polished representation for an unknown audience. Rather, as in rehearsal processes, a lesson begins with ensemble-building and games that serve as a metaphor for a thematic focus, such as
power in the Who Started the Motion theatre game (Dawson and Lee 2018; Royal Shakespeare Company 2011). Subsequent work involves focused and extended exploration of key scenes and characters, who experiment with varied degrees of intensity, speed, and sound as they notice shifts in character tone, attitude, and relationships of power. The teacher and/or teaching artist might also direct students to describe and enact sensory dimensions of the setting, through experiences such as Soundscaping (RSC 2011). Referencing the text, students may use selected phrases of the text to represent multiple voices of a character’s conscience; or multiple people might represent shifts in a single character’s perceptions. In almost all activities, movement precedes or accompanies speaking, so that language emerges with feeling and action (Berry 2001). RSC educators, teachers, and teaching artists trained in RRP connect these practices with the academic aims of literary reading: for example, perspective-taking, understanding meaning in context, drawing inferences based on textual evidence, interpreting figurative language, identifying and valuing significant details, following character development, recognizing relationships between setting and plot structures, and of course valuing the play and power of Shakespeare’s language (RSC 2011).

**RRP and student motivation**

We acknowledge that many approaches to teaching Shakespeare’s plays may have a positive effect on academic outcomes. However, given the close relationship between affective and academic outcomes in reading, we investigated the possibility that RRP may help students feel more motivated to continue to study or show interest in Shakespeare’s plays (and other complex texts) in the future.

In general, many have noted the decline in adolescent students’ motivation toward reading (Guthrie, Solomon, and Rinehart 1997; Wigfield 2004), which includes the finding that higher student motivation relates to higher achievement outcomes (Hyungshim, Reeve, and Deci 2010; Sbrocco 2009). Studies that examine reading motivation practices, therefore, are important to researchers and educators. According to a leading theory of motivation, self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2008a, 2008b), students are more likely to engage with and sustain interest when they experience perceived competence, support for autonomy, and relatedness. In particular, research suggests that students’ feelings of competence and relatedness decrease during middle school (Anderman & Midgley 1998; Haselhuhn and Gabriele 2007). One study found that students who perceived their classroom to support autonomy and competence had a significantly higher sense of relatedness (Anderman 2003). This holds true when researchers controlled for student achievement. In other words, sense of relatedness and its positive relationship to learning is important for students at all achievement levels. We argue that central features of RRP, like many theatre and drama practices, support students’ experiences of motivation as they embark on the challenge of reading by fostering positive feelings toward and about Shakespeare’s plays, specifically their motivation to continue to learn about Shakespeare’s plays.

**Competence.** As described in the opening sequence of this paper, RRP is not as concerned with students reading every word of a play, as they are with supporting students’ repeated and ever-deepening understanding of complex language, rhythm, and meaning. Thus, a teacher using RRP will focus on excerpts of the play rather than the entire script. As described in the opening of this paper, students also move individually with the words, and again work together to explore the feelings evoked by words and movement. Later,
selected words from the excerpt may become the basis for group image work. Through this cycle, students repeatedly read, hear, and speak the same words as they also discuss new insights about the excerpt and play as a whole. This example illustrates three essential practices with RRP: shortened scene studies, making language familiar, and repeating words in multiple situations. Practitioners and researchers of RRP suggest that the shorter scene study allows time for a deeper understanding of the language and story, as opposed to a thorough beginning-to-end study (Gartside 2013). By learning deeply and slowly a section of the play, RRP may support perceptions of competence among students who, otherwise, may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of reading the full-length play. The aim with RRP, however, is not to “water down” the text, but to make its complexity visible so that students’ competence is premised on more, not less, struggle over meaning.

**Autonomy.** In the rehearsal room, directors expect actors to make multiple choices, just as actors are asked to do throughout their reading and performances. Similarly, in RRP, teachers do not explain the text or reduce it to a contemporary translation. Rather, students, as actors are asked to move with texts, contribute their ideas to group image-making, and select language that expresses characters’ perspectives. By actively inviting and incorporating students’ views, RRP explicitly value and incorporate students’ perspectives in the same way ensemble-based actors and directors work toward a shared meaning of a play. In this way, RRP supports students’ perceptions of autonomy (i.e., their ideas and standpoints matter in the production of knowledge and group experience).

**Relatedness.** In RRP for classrooms, as in staged productions, actors depend on shared trust, spontaneity, and acceptance of risk-taking by inviting choices in meaning-making. When preparing for a formal performance, RSC theatre practitioners use various approaches to create an ensemble that respects and depends on each person as they also build the world of the play for the audience. In the RRP classroom, students engage in ensemble-building theatre games, soundscapes to “hear” the play, and embodiment of characters’ emotions and relationships. As RSC educator Rachel Gartside suggests, when a group becomes able to notice one another’s presence and contributions, they also begin to literally and metaphorically form a circle. This kind of effort to engage every student as individuals is in itself a challenge for teachers. The effort to implement RRP may be worth pursuing, however, because relatedness is essential for sustaining students’ interest in and commitment to learning, especially when the focus of study is perceived to be difficult.

**Research on drama and reading**

Many studies have been conducted on engagement in learning through active and dramatic approaches—a broader term that encompasses the specific approaches of RRP. This research shows that when students use dramatic modes and are able to make their knowledge and perspectives visible and available for further consideration, they develop sophisticated interpretations of and make meaning from complex texts (Wolf and Enciso 1994; Edmiston and Enciso 2002; Wagner 1998). Recent research supports that active and dramatic approaches with literary and informational texts both challenge and support students as they examine details in texts (Gallas and Smagorinsky 2002; Kidd 2011), evaluate possible meanings (Edmiston and McKibben 2011; Smagorinsky and Coppock 1995), and synthesize perspectives (Crumpler 2006; O’Neill 1995). All of these ways of
interpreting and thinking about texts are vital for deep comprehension and motivation for continued reading (Enciso 1996; Olson and Land 2007). Indeed, as three comprehensive meta-analyses of drama-based approaches to teaching and learning have shown, drama makes a significant difference in students’ literacy achievement (Lee et al., 2015; Kardash and Wright 1986; Podlozny 2000).

But the specific approach of RRP is underresearched. Studies of student attitudes toward reading and their relationship to RRP have been based largely on qualitative classroom-based studies and teacher reports. One large-scale study conducted in the United Kingdom (Strand 2009) found RRP to enhance student attitudes toward Shakespeare as well as to correlate positively to student attitudes toward Shakespeare’s plays and engagement in school. Beyond this pre/post within-group research design, no other quantitative analyses have been conducted on RRP. In addition, no known studies have incorporated a quasi-experimental mixed-methods pre/post research design.

Method

In the following section, we describe the context of the research study including the partnership among the university, community, and theatre, as well as the program structure and specific group of participating teachers and students. Finally, we discuss the survey instruments and data analysis process.

Study context: The university-community-theatre partnership

SUFS is a teacher professional development program created in partnership between The Ohio State University and the Royal Shakespeare Company serving teachers in public schools in and around a large midwestern city. SUFS offers intensive training and classroom support for teachers as they study rehearsal room practices and Shakespeare’s plays. The University Institutional Review Board approved this research as described. Teachers were recruited and consented to participate based on their expressed interest in the aims of the program. All students participated in the program; however, only students who gave assent and who had parental consent were included in the analysis. Through their participation in SUFS, teachers and students were supported by University faculty, graduate students, MFA acting students, and RSC educators. In partnership with the RSC and University’s Theatre Department, teachers and students also attended one or more live performances of Shakespeare’s plays.

Across all grade levels, teachers and students studied Shakespeare’s original Early Modern English by working together as an ensemble of actors who read closely, reread, and improvise scenes that contribute to a fuller sense of the plays’ thematic possibilities. The rehearsal room practices are documented in the RSC’s Toolkit (Royal Shakespeare Company 2011) as well as online resources on the RSC site (https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/teacher-resources). The RSC’s approach to teaching Shakespeare is based on pioneering approaches to training RSC actors in the performance of Shakespeare’s plays, and is further grounded in active and dramatic inquiry and learning (Edmiston and McKibben 2011). All of which are intended to invite teachers and students to be more active, more social, and more open to one another’s ideas.
**Program structure**

For the 2010–2011 program year, the SUFS sequence was informed by research on teacher professional development suggesting that short, frequent experiences are more likely to facilitate teacher change (Guskey 2002). Teachers who self-selected into the training attended a one-week intensive professional development in RRP in Stratford-upon-Avon led by the Royal Shakespeare Company Education Department. Following this immersion in RRP, two faculty in Teaching and Learning facilitated four professional development workshops at the University campus. Additionally, students in participating classrooms attended up to three performances of Shakespeare’s plays in their school and at the university. As further support, MFA acting graduate students co-planned lessons with some of the teachers and represented characters in role in the classrooms.

Based on their professional development experiences, the teachers implemented RRP in their classrooms teaching one to three of Shakespeare’s plays throughout the school year (e.g., Macbeth, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Othello, Romeo & Juliet, King Lear). See Table 1 for a summary description of the year’s activities. It is important to note that all (RRP and comparison) classrooms studied Shakespeare’s plays and attended at least one production. The comparison classrooms experienced more typical lessons with Shakespeare’s plays (i.e., scenes read aloud while seated, acting out particularly exciting scenes, independent reading of the entire play, and lessons focused on a discussion of the thematic content of the plays). All classrooms studied Shakespeare’s plays with engaging teachers. However, in the RRP classrooms teachers were more focused on the process of student learning and the meaning-making (e.g., how might students make sense of these situations and characters and relate them to their own lives?); whereas, in the typical classrooms, teachers were more focused on the product of that learning (e.g., did students get the right understanding of the themes of the play and sequence of events?)

**Participants**

The student sample drew from moderate to high poverty schools. Additionally, the sample included students from diverse ethnic and racial identities and gender balance. See Table 2 for specific demographic information. Approximately 1,700 students who were being taught by 38 teachers participated in all aspects of the SUFS program. A similar number of students in comparable classrooms with teachers who were not part of the SUFS

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### Table 1. Program sequence 2010–2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Summer 2010</th>
<th>Fall 2010</th>
<th>Spring 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of PD</strong></td>
<td>Teachers and faculty were introduced to RRP in one week of training lead by the RSC</td>
<td>Teachers attended four full days of professional development workshops in RRP lead by Ohio State University faculty</td>
<td>Teachers attended four full days of professional development workshops in RRP lead by Ohio State University faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional ongoing support</strong></td>
<td>Classroom visits by MFA actors</td>
<td>Classroom visits by Ohio State University faculty</td>
<td>Classroom visits by Ohio State University faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access to RSC website</strong></td>
<td>Access to RSC website</td>
<td>Access to RSC website</td>
<td>Access to RSC website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
program formed a comparison group. For this particular study, we focused on one school with two SUFS classrooms (Grades 9 and 10) and two comparison classrooms (Grades 9 and 10) for a total of 238 students. This allowed for within-school comparisons. Because the major delineation between groups is the implementation of RRP in the classroom, we use the terms RRP classrooms and comparison classrooms to describe the participating classrooms for the rest of the paper.

**Instruments**

In 2010–2011, following the 2009–2010 pilot implementation year, research focused on the relationships between students’ perceived competence for learning, relatedness toward Shakespeare’s plays and toward their peers, and their motivation toward reading. The survey was based on a previous survey created, validated, and used in the United Kingdom by the Royal Shakespeare Company (Strand 2009). Because a comprehensive analysis was not conducted on the prior survey, reliability data are not available.

We administered a triangulated mixed-methods survey that consisted of 32 Likert-type statements and two open-ended questions divided into five sections, including Shakespeare experience in school (four items), what I think about Shakespeare’s plays (11 items), about myself and school (14 items), about myself and reading (one item), and about student experiences and teacher’s practices (two questions). For the first four sections, students selected their level of agreement from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” One question on reading listed five statements and students could select the statement that best described their view of themselves as readers. The final section prompted students with open-ended questions focused on 1) what students like about how their teachers help them study and read Shakespeare’s plays and 2) how teaching Shakespeare’s plays in their classrooms can be improved.

This survey was administered by CITI-trained personnel during September/October 2010 and May 2011. Only the school and class codes were used to identify age/subject of students; no other student identifiers were used. All surveys were collected by Graduate Assistants and returned to the PI.
Data analysis

Principle component analysis (PCA) within SPSS 22 software (IBM Corp 2013) was used to provide interpretable factors that explain variation in the items for statistical analysis and to establish validity and reliability for the survey. All of the Likert survey items for each group at the pretest time point were included in the initial analysis. Through an iterative process of removing items that have complex structures (cross loading on two or more items at greater than .4 on each item) or eigenvalues less than 1 (Kline 2005), we combined the remaining items to create four factors. One factor was retained, with only two items loading; however, the two items were highly correlated and previous research suggests that the factor is stable (Worthington and Whittaker 2006).

To answer research question one and two, we conducted multiple $t$ tests comparing the pre- and post-test means of the RRP and comparison classrooms. Change scores in reading motivation were calculated. The data are matched at the classroom level. Additionally, we used a Bonferroni correction at $p < .01$ as a conservative significance measure to correct for any potential false-positive findings. Using RRP or comparison as a grouping variable, we conducted a $t$ test on the changes in reading enjoyment and desire for challenge. To answer research question three, we double-coded qualitative data from the open-ended student responses. We used a thematic analysis aligned with the identified factors and focused on student perceptions of themselves as readers and their experiences while studying Shakespeare’s plays. We used an ongoing iterative process of independent coding and matching among three coders until all codes for 50% of the data were identical. The remaining half of the data were coded by Bridget Kiger Lee. We highlight where data either converges toward or diverges from the quantitative findings. All research was approved through the university’s Institutional Review Board.

Results

Of the initial 30 survey items, 14 items were retained to make up four factors. The items accounted for 61.88% of the variance in the items. Cronbach’s alpha for reliability for these items was .66, which is relatively low. This is most likely due to the low number of items retained and the small sample size. This suggests the need to further revise and test this survey; therefore, the results should be taken with cautious interpretation. The four components were 1) use of rehearsal room practices, 2) involvement in theatre, 3) perceived competence for learning, and 4) perceived relatedness between Shakespeare’s plays and their lives. Each of these factors is listed with an example question in Table 3. For a full statistical description of the results see Tables 4, 5, and 6. Throughout this results section, we highlight quotes from the qualitative data collected in the RRP and comparison classrooms that represent student and teacher views reported in the open-ended comments dataset. To better align with a mixed-methods design, we discuss both the qualitative and quantitative data under each construct. In general, we state the statistical results and then offer quotes that either converge or diverge from these findings. Additionally, we have made every attempt to equally represent responses from all classrooms participating in this research.
### Table 3. Statements from survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Statement from Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Perceived relatedness between Shakespeare’s plays and my life</td>
<td>I have learned something about myself by learning about Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s plays help us understand ourselves and others better. It is important to study Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare’s plays are relevant to events in the modern world. Things that happen in Shakespeare’s plays can happen in real life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Use of rehearsal room practices</td>
<td>When studying a Shakespeare play, we often act out scenes. In our class I often read aloud from Shakespeare’s plays. During 9th-10th grade, we saw a Shakespeare performance at a theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Involvement with theatre</td>
<td>I often attend a drama group outside of regular school hours. I get involved in school plays or productions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Perceived competence for learning and expression</td>
<td>I feel confident in explaining my ideas/opinions to other people. I know how to be a good learner. I am good at solving problems. I am good at working with other students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Descriptive statistics for comparison and SUFS classrooms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal room practices</td>
<td>Pre Comp</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>9.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre SUFS</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Comp</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post SUFS</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>11.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in theatre</td>
<td>Pre Comp</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre SUFS</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Comp</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post SUFS</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Competence for Learning</td>
<td>Pre Comp</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>14.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre SUFS</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>15.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Comp</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post SUFS</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>15.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness to Shakespeare</td>
<td>Pre Comp</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>14.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre SUFS</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>15.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Comp</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post SUFS</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>15.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5. Results comparing SUFS and comparison classrooms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Pre/Post</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal room practices</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>8.28</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in theatre</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived competence for learning</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness to Shakespeare</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates significance at the .01 level or smaller with Bonferroni correction.
Rehearsal Room Practices

At the pretest, the groups did not significantly differ on their perceptions of their teachers’ use of RRP as measured by the survey. This was confirmed by the qualitative data although student voices indicate greater nuance in their perceptions. The majority of the Grade 9 student responses to the first question suggested that students had little or no experience with studying Shakespeare’s plays. Example responses from comparison and RRP classrooms included, “Teacher hasn’t taught it yet,” or “We have not learned about Shakespeare,” whereas, the 10th-grade students in both RRP and comparison classrooms suggested they had studied Shakespeare’s plays previously in more typical ways. Examples responses from a comparison classroom about the teacher’s interactions included, “Teachers walk-through it with us and simplify it because the way he writes it [is] too difficult to understand on our own.” As a similar sentiment was reported by a student in an RRP classroom, “We get help from teachers on how to understand the language.” Across all the 10th-grade classrooms, a range of responses indicated interest in Shakespeare’s plays, “Shakespeare writes some really good plays” and “We get to learn about old literature.” But responses also included comments suggesting Shakespeare’s plays were “boring” or only slightly “better than studying grammar.”

At posttest, students in the RRP classrooms were more positive than students who were not in the program as indicated by statistical significance on the surveys. This suggests that students in the RRP classrooms perceived that their teachers were using active and dramatic strategies to both engage in the play’s world and support learning, whereas the students in the comparison classrooms did not perceive that their teachers were using active strategies for learning. Once again the qualitative data seems to support this finding but not wholly. Both groups mention acting out plays—although much more often in the RRP classrooms. Interestingly, across classrooms, students differed in the ways they describe “reading.” In the comparison classrooms, students wrote about reading as if the words were somehow detached before they could be reattached to meaning: they describe, “reading the language” or “reading the play and then going over it in class.” In contrast, students in the RRP classrooms referred to reading as what they did not do to learn about the plays: “We act instead of reading,” “It’s more active instead of just reading,” or “This year we did not sit down and read it till our brains went numb.” These pointed statements suggest that even though students in RRP classrooms were indeed reading to interpret and enact language (none of the work included memorization), they did not perceive the activity as reading or perhaps school-based reading.

Involvement with theatre

The RRP and comparison groups did not differ at pretest, but the RRP classrooms were significantly more positive at posttest. This suggests that students in RRP classrooms

Table 6. Results for motivation toward reading comparing SUFS with comparison classrooms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Pre/Post</th>
<th>Comparison/ SUFS</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Δ t</th>
<th>Δ Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation toward reading</td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUFS</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUFS</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p Indicates significance at the .01 level or smaller with Bonferroni correction.

YOUTH THEATRE JOURNAL 81
perceived that they were more involved in the arts by experiencing RRP in their classrooms and/or they were more involved outside of the classroom in arts experiences. It is important to note that the comparison classrooms also attended at least one performance, studied Shakespeare’s plays, as well as acted out scenes in class. As stated earlier, one of the most common responses for the comparison classroom was “acting out the play.” Based on the collected data, however, the comparison students did not perceive that they were more involved in the arts.

**Perceived competence**
At the pretest, the groups did not significantly differ on their perceived competence as indicated by the survey. At posttest, students in the RRP classrooms perceived significantly more competence toward learning tasks than students who were not in the program. Because the qualitative questions were more focused on the RRP practices and Shakespeare’s plays, very little evidence of perceived competence can be gathered from the comments. A few students from both groups at pre and post discussed the difficulty in the language, “It’s not bad to learn but it’s very hard to understand it.” However, difficulty does not necessarily suggest perceived competence or incompetence. Additionally, one student in an RRP classroom wanted the teacher “to give direct answers and not say, ‘it could mean that.’” Again, this may or may not have been an indication of the student’s lack of perceived competence. Focusing only on the quantitative survey results, it may be that RRP is one way to increase perceived competence toward reading complex texts, but this needs to be studied further through qualitative methods.

**Relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays and to peers**
At the pretest, the groups did not significantly differ on their perceptions of the relatedness between Shakespeare’s plays to their lives. Students from both the RRP and the comparison classrooms had only a few responses that were coded as relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays. An example statement from a comparison classroom included, “I get to learn and feel what life was like 400 years ago and to analyze how has it changed and stayed the same since then.” An example statement from an RRP classroom included, “It relates to normal life.”

At posttest, students in the RRP classrooms perceived a significantly more positive view of the relatedness between Shakespeare’s plays and their lives. In the qualitative responses, several students in the comparison classrooms mentioned relatedness. Overall, however, all but one response was about understanding how things have stayed the same or changed in the world in a generalized sense in relationship to the past. For example, students stated, “How [Shakespeare’s play] is connected to modern life.” This is very similar to how students in both classrooms perceived their connection to Shakespeare’s plays at the pretest. However, one student did state, “It helps me learn more about myself.”

Similarly, students in RRP classrooms made comments of relatedness with a broad orientation to the world. Most of the comments, however, indicated relatedness specifically using personalized language such as “our world,” “my life,” or “affects us.” For example, students commented that studying Shakespeare’s plays, “Made me see myself in a whole new light,” and “[Shakespeare’s play] relates to our lives.” Throughout the dataset, there were also indications that some students were confused or feeling distant from the text but these seem to be very few and equally distributed among all classrooms. In other words, nearly all students believed they understand Shakespeare’s plays in ways that could
be connected to their experiences, but these connections were derived through different experience with individual versus group collaborative efforts.

Moreover, in the qualitative posttest data, we noticed a trend among students in RRP classrooms. Their language was more inclusive of the entire classroom’s or their peer’s experiences. For example, “I like how everyone gets to work together” and “That we work together to try to figure it out,” and “Our school is hearing from other members of the ensemble’s opinions.” But when we revisited the data to see if that was similar in the comparison classrooms, we noticed that only two students mentioned the class working together or making meaning together in any of the comments. For example, “We act things out and talk through it together.” This orientation of the RRP classrooms to a more specific connection between Shakespeare’s plays to their lives as well as to their peers may suggest that the teacher’s use of RRP facilitated an ensemble for learning together.

**Motivation toward reading**

The interest with this item is in the change in perception of the students’ reading motivation and desire to improve their grades in reading. Therefore, we tested the change scores for the RRP group as compared with the change scores in the comparison group. The difference in the change in students’ motivation was statistically significant with the Bonferroni correction (See Table 6 for results). It is important to note that students’ motivations in the comparison classrooms actually decreased while the students’ motivations in the RRP classrooms slightly increased, thus making the difference even greater and more meaningful. This evidence suggests that an increase in perceived competence and relatedness (with text and peers) for students in the RRP classroom may have impacted student motivation to read. By the end of the year, the RRP students believed that they read well and wanted to be challenged by reading more often than students in the comparison classrooms. Although we did not specifically address this question in the qualitative data, it is interesting to note that when asked about how to improve the teaching of Shakespeare’s plays, students in RRP classrooms overwhelmingly stated that they wanted more reading. Unfortunately, we were not able to discern if this means they want to read more of the plays that they already studied (because they only read excerpts) or if they want to read additional plays by Shakespeare. Either way, they certainly seemed motivated to continue to read.

**Discussion**

In typical secondary classrooms across the United States, students read Shakespeare’s plays silently, often at home, and aloud in front of peers. They have the opportunity to act out scenes for the class and discuss critical moments in the play. These were typical of practices in the comparison classrooms involved in this study. Additionally, the students in this study attended a live performance of at least one of Shakespeare’s plays. By many accounts, these practices represent good if not excellent teaching. However, despite their many positive experiences with the plays, these students’ perceptions about themselves and Shakespeare’s plays remained the same or more negative at the end of the academic year. In contrast, students who “walked with Shakespeare’s words,” explored multiple meanings of words, positioned themselves as people who could know and interpret Shakespeare’s language, and who could attend at least one live performance.
These students’ perceptions about themselves and Shakespeare’s plays were more positive and they wanted to read more challenging texts at the end of the academic year. Additionally, students’ perceptions of reading and the value of peer contributions seem to have changed. In the following, we briefly discuss each of the findings in this study in relationship to students’ perceptions of their involvement with theatre and students’ perceptions of competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2008a, 2008b).

**RRP and involvement with theatre**

As captured by the quantitative data, RRP does not significantly increase students’ perceptions of being involved in theatre outside of the classroom; however, RRP does significantly increase students’ perceptions of active learning in the classroom. Even though all classrooms reporting “acting out” plays and all students saw at least one production in the qualitative data, only students in the RRP classrooms perceived being more involved in theatre. Because of the nature of RRP, students may view themselves as actors in a rehearsal room, rather than students in a classroom pretending to be like actors. We are unclear why this difference may exist and hope to investigate this further in future studies.

Students reported that RRP approaches had a distinctly different feel for them as they interpreted the plays and created the story worlds. In anecdotal conversations with students, some students believed they had been in a play when they participated in a whole classroom “Whoosh” with the text (Royal Shakespeare Company 2011). They even remember a specific object or character they portrayed months later. The teacher referenced in the opening sketch said that when her students were struggling with understanding a concept from a particularly challenging text (other than Shakespeare’s plays), many times a student would suggest, “I think we need to do drama to figure this out!”

**Perceived competence for learning**

RRP significantly increases student perceived competence for learning. In particular, it is important to note that RRP students’ increases in perceived competence were small; however, students in the comparison groups actually decreased in feelings of perceived competence in the same time frame. This is to be expected, given that much of the research literature suggests that students begin a steady decline in perceived competence for learning throughout adolescence (Aukerman 2007; Greenleaf and Hinchman 2009). RRP may actually be reversing the typical downward trend for student perceived competence toward learning.

**Relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays and to peers**

We did not see a statistically significant difference between the groups in relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays; however, it does appear that something might be happening that was only captured in the qualitative data. In the qualitative data, students in RRP classrooms not only seem to relate to Shakespeare’s plays, but also seem to relate to fellow classmates. According to the NAEP and other federal guidelines for national, state, and district reading programs, reading is solely an act of individual cognition, guided heavily by the
text, and indifferent to current social, political, or contextual concerns, whereas in complex literary texts, such as Shakespeare’s plays, meanings depend on the director’s and actors’ particular interests in and situated social circumstances for drawing out specific language and related themes. Aukerman, “The reader must be in a position of one who knows, seeks to know, and discovers—and who has the authority to make claims about what a text says and means and what s/he thinks of that” (2007). Given the overwhelming evidence of student’s relatedness to the text, it seems that RRP supports the latter orientation toward reading.

Surprisingly, we found throughout the data that students also seem to be developing a relatedness to their peers by experiencing RRP in their classrooms. In the qualitative data, very little data suggested that students in the comparison classrooms described the need to read or study Shakespeare’s plays as a classroom or ensemble; whereas, repeatedly in the RRP classrooms, students described their orientation to the classroom or ensemble doing work together. Although we did not intend to gather data on peer relatedness, this was apparent in the data. Relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays, to peers, and perceived competence toward learning may have led to students’ increase in their motivation toward reading.

**Motivation toward reading**

RRP significantly increases student positive attitudes toward reading challenging literature and participating in school-based reading. This increase in motivation aligns with the research literature in motivational theories. By shifting the perceptions of competence and relatedness, motivation increases. One teacher noted that before she implemented RRP in her classroom, “It was like ‘Bueller…Bueller’ and sagebrush was blowing through my classroom.” But now her most reluctant readers volunteer to read or offer a possible meaning of text. Of particular interest in this finding, the students in the RRP classrooms had the least interest in reading at the start of the program. From the qualitative data, it seems that teachers may be more likely to encourage students’ competencies (giving opportunities for multiple perspectives and meanings to shape learning) and help students feel more connected to one another. This is shaping students’ perceptions of themselves as readers.

**Limitations and closing remarks**

This classroom level research suggests that RRP with Shakespeare’s plays may be a highly active and effective way to engage and sustain motivation. However, the SUFS program required multiple types of resources: time, artistic talent and skill, faculty and teaching artist support, and willingness by the district and teachers to direct professional development time toward RRP. Although this confluence of factors may be very difficult to attain in most school districts in the U.S., many teachers are eager to seek new ways to study Shakespeare’s plays with their students. Many of these practices may

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3This is a reference to a 1986 film Ferris Bueller’s Day Off in which a teacher is taking role call in a lecture-based traditional classroom. In a monotone voice, the teacher calls, “Bueller…Bueller” and no one responds.
be learned through available online and text-based resources (Royal Shakespeare 2011, Dawson and Lee 2018, among others).

Our findings also suggest that a qualitative understanding of the students’ experiences and beliefs in relationship to Shakespeare’s plays shed more nuanced light on the findings comparing the different experiences in this study’s classrooms. Comparison classrooms acted out scenes and attended live performances, but still had a decrease in relatedness to Shakespeare’s plays and motivation to read. This is troubling, given the propensity to study Shakespeare’s plays in a similar fashion. Teaching artists, teachers, and teacher educators need to build upon this way of working with the plays and adopt essential RRP that allow for multiple interpretations, positions the student as one who knows and/or can discover meanings within a text, and encourages students to experience the worlds of Shakespeare’s plays from within the story rather than as mere observers. The world of RRP can offer a new lens to see students and how they make sense of words. As one student from an RRP classroom remarked, “I love how we act things out. I believe it has made our class closer as friends. People aren’t afraid to speak out and say how they interpret things.” This sounds like a classroom where rehearsal, reading, AND students matter.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


