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### Voices From Inside: Preliminary Results of a Transformational Justice Art Program for Incarcerated Youth

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# Voices From Inside: Preliminary Results of a Transformational Justice Art Program for Incarcerated Youth

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## Abstract

Few art programs for incarcerated juveniles exist; however, results of assessments indicate decreased recidivism and behavior problems for those involved in such programs. This paper reports on a preliminary study, part of a longterm study based on the concept of restorative justice, of an ongoing art program for incarcerated adolescents with community exhibits and sale of their work, with proceeds to a youth-oriented foundation. The Voices from Inside project, a partnership between Franklin University and the Ohio Department of Youth Services, has sponsored two exhibits, in 2012 and 2013, with the third planned for fall 2014. From 18 youths’ art contributions in 2012, for the 2014 exhibit 100 pieces are projected. At the 2013 exhibit, two quantitative instruments were administered to the youth and community attendees. Results of the youth survey (response rate 47%, 16 of 34 exhibitors), showed that 81% cited as benefits the ability to cooperate with others, ability to complete a task, and increased self-esteem from public recognition and sale of their art. Results of the community survey (response rate 29.5%, 59 of 200 attendees) showed positive attitude changes toward juvenile offenders, from 40% to 53%. Positive qualitative responses supported the quantitative results. For the 2014 exhibit, data collection instruments and methods will be refined. Results to date indicate the need for further study of juvenile offenders’ art productions and exhibits for personal rehabilitation and restorative justice. Results also point to the power of art to transform and how university-community partnerships may implement transformative and innovative approaches to art programs for juvenile offenders.

## Materials and methods

Two instruments were administered. The first was the *Youth Exhibitor Survey*, administered to the juvenile offender artists. The second was the *Community Attendee Survey*, administered to community attendees at the exhibit. The Youth Exhibitor Survey consisted of a total of nine questions. Seven were short-answer questions on a Likert-type scale asking about the effects of the art and exhibit on participants’ social skills, art skills, self-esteem, ability to cooperate, and ability to complete a task. Two questions were of a more qualitative nature, in which respondents were invited to add their perceptions of positive results of the sale of their art to the foundation and additional benefits from their participation. The Community Attendee Survey consisted of 10 items, which were designed to determine the knowledge, attitudes of those attending the exhibit on juvenile incarceration and the effect that the exhibit had on those attitudes.

## Results

### Youth Exhibitor Survey: Quantitative

The most often cited benefits were participants’ responses to questions 5, 6, and 7, the ability to cooperate with others, the ability to complete a task, and the public recognition increasing self-esteem, with 81% of the participants pointing out each of these benefits. The least often cited benefits were participants’ responses to questions 1, 3, and 4, increase of social skills, improvement of art skills, and increase in self-esteem from participation, with 68% noting these benefits. Thus, the majority of the respondents felt the exhibit provided positive outcomes in terms of the emotional, behavioral, and logistical impacts of creating and exhibiting their art. Further, respondents had no negative responses to questions 2 and 5 on healthy means of expression and ability to cooperate with others.

The youth exhibitors’ responses to questions 8 and 9 indicated their views on the benefits of participating in the exhibit. Question 8 described the youth-focused charity recipient of the silent auction proceeds of the art (Appendix A). Exhibitors were asked to record their views on their charitable contribution. Participants overall had positive responses to the sale of their art. More than the majority pointed out a sense of accomplishment, followed by pride in their work. Finally, participants noted that the sale of their work and contribution to the charitable organization gave back to the community.

### Youth Exhibitor Survey: Qualitative

Question 9 asked youth participants to respond with any additional benefits from their participation in the art class, exhibit, or silent auction. Fewer youth responded, and seven explained other benefits. *“I felt good just to know I had a art project that someone else brought and liked. [sic]”*

### Community Attendee Survey: Quantitative

The preponderance of attendees were students, 31%. Students were followed by staff, 24%, and faculty, 16%. A total of 10% were community members, 5% criminal justice professionals, and 14% others, such as students’ family members and other invited guests. Attendees were also asked about their reasons for attending the exhibit. over a third each of attendees did so to view the art and hear the debate on a related subject, the death penalty debate and social justice, 36% each. The next most popular reason was to bid on the art, 13%.

Prior to attending the event, close to half (40%) favored the rehabilitative approach and slightly over a third (34%) were neutral. After attending the event, over half (53%) were encouraged to some extent to think about juvenile offenders in a different manner, and a fifth (21%) were encouraged to think differently to a great extent. The exhibit impacted over a third (37%) to some extent and under a fifth (17%) to a great extent, with a fourth (25%) remaining neutral.

### Community Attendee Survey: Qualitative

In addition, in response to item 9, the open-ended item, of the 59 attendees, 33 (56%) wrote comments. These revealed several major themes. They were as follows: (a) Appreciation of the exhibit, (b) Impressed with youths’ talent, (c) Recognition of their difficulties, (d) Recognition that they need help, (e) Exhibit gave another perspective, and (f) Art heals and transforms. Below is one example:

*“The Restorative Justice Model encourages the partnership of justice professionals, community, juvenile offenders and victims/survivors. This event and Art Exhibit is one of the best examples of that philosophy I have witnessed in my thirty plus years of experience. It brought it ALL together.”*

## Conclusions

The results of this preliminary study yielded important information that indicates much future study. For the youth exhibitors, the results were almost entirely positive. The results reflects these in terms of increased social skills and art skills, a healthy means of expression, improvement of self-esteem from the art classes and exhibit, and ability to cooperate with others and complete a task. These outcomes concur with those of previous studies of offender art (Ezell & Levy, 2003; Lazzari et al., 2005; Oesterreich & Flores, 2009). Further, many of the youths voiced a sense of personal achievement and pride they had either rarely or never before experienced.

More informally, the youth discussed how working on this project had given them a powerful method of self-expression and valuable tool for managing complex emotions. These outcomes too supported previous findings (Bode et al., 2013; Oesterreich & Flores, 2009; Rosenbaum & Spivack, 2014). These results affirm the working hypothesis that art classes combined with public exhibition would produce positive outcomes for participating youth. Although a small number of youths completed the survey, their responses indicate the positive and salutary possibilities of art curriculum and community exhibits for incarcerated youth.

For the attendees, the results of the surveys were less definitive than those of the youth surveys. Prior to attending the exhibit, close to half the attendees (40%) favored a rehabilitative approach. Thus, it might be expected that their attitudes would not change greatly. The results after viewing supported this expectation, although the exhibit encouraged attendees to think about juvenile offenders either to a “Great Extent” (21%) or to “Some Extent” (53%). Moreover, slightly over a third of surveyed attendees reported that the exhibit impacted their attitudes toward juvenile offenders “To Some Extent” (37%, Appendix B). Thus, prior to viewing the art, viewers were more likely to favor rehabilitative approaches to justice than punitive ones. The exhibit may have supported their favor of rehabilitative approaches but not changed their attitudes significantly.

