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# Improving Self-esteem through Art for Incarcerated Youth

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# *Improving Self-Esteem Art for Incarcerated Youth*

By April Murphy, Jeff Beaty and James Minnick

Emanuel Martinez

Youths paint a mural titled, "Positive Perspectives Create Better Choices," at the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center in Albuquerque, N.M.

# From Through Youths



In 2010, there were more than 70,000 juveniles in some type of residential placement (i.e., committed, detained, diversion) across the U.S.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, a majority (68 percent) of these juveniles were “committed,” or already placed in a facility as a result of a court ordered disposition, while 29 percent were awaiting a court hearing and classified as “detained.” Two percent were categorized as “diversion,” which indicated that he or she was voluntarily admitted without formal adjudication as part of a diversion agreement.<sup>2</sup>

There are a myriad of reasons why these youths end up in a juvenile detention center, such as familial history<sup>3</sup> and substance abuse,<sup>4</sup> among others. Adolescents in juvenile correctional facilities are often forgotten and looked upon with contempt by individuals in society, which has led to them being commonly classified as “America’s Forgotten Youth”<sup>5</sup> by those working with these youths. One of the foundational issues present among incarcerated youths is low self-esteem. When put behind bars as a juvenile and forgotten by those who see them only as delinquents, it is no surprise that his or her self-esteem is damaged. Therefore, it is imperative to implement interventions aimed at improving the self-esteem of these youths if they are to have the confidence to be successful when acclimating back into society. Self-esteem has been shown to result in higher academic aspirations and achievement<sup>6</sup> as well as reduced delinquent behavior<sup>7</sup> and criminal involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Art is one medium that has been effective in reaching these individuals; allowing them to see who they are and who they can be. Take for example, Noah. Noah (whose name was changed to maintain anonymity) was at a residential treatment facility in Calhoun, Tenn. He was a very angry young man who had shut himself off from the world and everyone at the facility. He was diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorder resulting from a background of mistreatment. Several attempts were made to talk to Noah and get him to open up about what was making him so angry, but Noah refused to talk. One day, his counselor decided to try a different approach. She gave him some colored pencils and a piece of paper and asked him to draw his life’s story. As Noah began to draw, guns and other images appeared that painted a dark past. This gave the counselor a window to begin asking Noah about these images. Slowly, he began to open up and share the meaning of the images and disclose details about his traumatic past. The door of communication between Noah and his counselor was now open, allowing the counselor to help Noah work through some of his issues. This may not have been possible without the introduction of art. What if the counselor had given up on Noah? What if she had never thought to incorporate art in his treatment? Would Noah have ever been able to face his past?



A mural titled, "The World is Our Classroom," located at Eastman Youth Development Campus in Eastman, Ga.

## *The Emanuel Project*

One example of a program trying to reach youths in juvenile correctional facilities by using art is the Emanuel Project. It was started in 2011 by Louisa Craft-Jornayvaz, a portrait artist from Denver, as an extension of the Art for Kids Program — another program started in Colorado by Craft-Jornayvaz. She came into contact with James R. Minnick, Ph.D., and began implementing art supplies provided by Art for Kids in his classroom at Sumter Youth Development Campus (YDC) in Georgia. After seeing positive results in behavior, understanding of academic concepts and the beautiful murals airbrushed on the walls of the vocational building by youths at Sumter YDC, Craft-Jornayvaz discussed with Minnick the possibility of expanding the program nationwide in an effort to provide at-risk youths with other learning opportunities through art. This nationwide program became known as the Emanuel Project.

Emanuel Martinez joined the team as the project's mural artist and art director. Craft-Jornayvaz named the project after Martinez, her art teacher and mentor. Martinez began drawing as a youth with matchsticks in his cell during his incarceration for more than a year. Martinez has since grown into an adult with compassion and empathy for young men and women who are faced with the same fate as he was several years ago. As part of the Emanuel Project, Martinez goes into facilities to paint "murals of hope" with juveniles. He is the only individual painting murals with the youths, who are chosen by the facilities based on their behavior, scholastic standing or special needs. This is offered as an incentive program for each facility to encourage youths. The juveniles complete 80 percent of the painting of the mural on their own. While they only paint murals with Martinez as part of the incentive program, each facility is provided with training for their teachers and some of the students, who are then given art supplies to use in their

classrooms along with activities that complement the National Core Curriculum. Through interaction with Martinez and through the ownership of creating these meaningful murals, the youths experience self-worth and value from something that is a benefit to the facility and a constant reminder of what they can become.

Ultimately, the Emanuel Project positively helps at-risk youths nationwide by providing creative learning materials for the classroom and art therapy, support and supervisory staff through the proper use of the materials, displaying inspirational art in central locations and offering motivational and incentive programs. The aim of the project is to improve the self-esteem of youths who are incarcerated in order to achieve the ultimate goal of keeping them out of the adult correctional system. When 20 incarcerated youths were asked about protective factors, or what they thought would keep them out of the adult system, recurring themes included: self-love, self-esteem, positive self-talk and believing in oneself.<sup>9</sup> This is essentially what the Emanuel Project set out to do — and preliminary results suggest that it is effective.

## *Preliminary Results*

To date, 25 murals of hope have been painted in eight states, with a self-esteem study completed in five states: Georgia, Kentucky, New Mexico, Tennessee and Texas. Murals were already completed prior to the study period in both Indiana and Colorado; therefore, surveys were not administered in these states. The third state in which a survey was not completed was California; this mural was in progress and not complete at the time of this article's publication.

Prior to the commencement of the study, participants were asked to complete a brief survey assessing their self-esteem and attitude toward art. Self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale,<sup>10</sup> which has been shown to have relatively high reliability and validity.<sup>11</sup> Attitudes toward art were assessed utilizing five assertions: Art has encouraged me to cooperate with others as a team; working on art projects helps to keep me calm and focused; art has given me confidence to complete my schoolwork; working on art projects has given me a sense of self-worth; and taking part in art projects has helped build my confidence and self-esteem. Participants were then exposed to the Emanuel Project intervention for 2-4 weeks, depending upon the facility. Following the completion of the mural, participants were again asked to complete the survey.

A dependent sample test was conducted in order to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in self-esteem scores from pre- to post-test. Preliminary data indicate that, of the 55 youths who participated in the mural project, and who completed both the pre- and post-surveys, self-esteem increased 2.5 points from pre- to post-test ( $t = 4.441$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, 100 percent of the individuals who classified as having "low" self-esteem (i.e., score less than 15) pre-test showed an increase in self-esteem post-test. More specifically, juveniles in the "normal" range on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale pre-test had a 1.6 point increase from pre- to post-test while juveniles in the "low" self-esteem group showed an increase of 7.4 points from pre- to post-test.

## *Discussion*

Self-esteem is a major factor to consider when working with youths in juvenile detention facilities. Self-esteem has been tied to increased academic achievement<sup>12</sup> and reduced recidivism.<sup>13</sup> The results presented here indicate that art may be one way to improve self-esteem for adolescents currently residing in juvenile detention centers. However, the sample included here is relatively small and needs to be expanded. Additionally, future research should focus on whether these improvements in self-esteem are sustainable over time as well as whether utilizing art has any impact on recidivism.

This is just one project, but one that should not be ignored. The use of art in juvenile correctional facilities is making a difference, especially among those youths with low self-esteem. In order to help these youths to get out of the juvenile system and to help them stay out of the adult system, corrections professionals must invest in their futures. One simple way to invest in their future is by using art to meet them where they are, rather than where society wants them to be. Efforts are under way in two other states, California and New Mexico, to determine the impact of the Emmanuel Project on youth self-esteem. Additionally, there is a push within the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice to pilot a complete art curriculum in all of Georgia's juvenile correctional facilities in order to improve self-esteem and academic outcomes. These youths cannot be forgotten and left to idly waste their time in juvenile correctional facilities. Their future depends on society's commitment to and investment in them as individuals with hopes, dreams and a future.



"The Spirit of Education," a mural painted by youths at the Muscogee Youth Development Campus in Columbus, Ga.

Chris Jervis

## ENDNOTES

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