

Art Education in Women's Prisons: Lessons from the Inside

Candace H. Lacey, Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University

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During 2003, 2,225,730 women were arrested in the United States (National Criminal Justice Reference Service [NCJRS], 2004). Approximately one in every 1,613 women was incarcerated in a State or Federal prison at the end of 2003. This translates to 101,179 women or 6.9% of the nation's total prison population, an increase of 3.6% over the previous year (U.S. Department of Justice [USDJ], 2004). Women serving time in the nation's prisons span all ethnic and age groups. Forty-two percent (n=39,100) are White, 38% (n=35,000) are Black, and 18% (n=16,200) are Hispanic (USDJ). However, these numbers can be misleading. In 2003, 185 per 100,000 Black females were incarcerated, 84 per 100,000 Hispanic females were incarcerated, and 38 per 100,000 White females were incarcerated. Almost 82% of the women (n=75,600) were between the ages of 25 and 55 (USDJ).

During fiscal year 2003-2004<sup>1</sup>, 3,338 women were admitted to prisons in Florida with 5,299 serving prison terms during that time. Incarceration rates for females in Florida prisons mirrored national percentages at 6.5% of total incarcerations, and reflected a 10% increase over the previous fiscal year. Similar to the national averages, the majority 52% (n= 2,733) are White, 44% (n= 2,313) are Black, and 4% (n=253) are classified by the State as Other. A little over 79% of these women were between the ages of 25 and 50 (n= 4,201) and 7% were over 50 (n=390). Over 70% (n= 3,724) were serving sentences of 6 years or less (Florida Department of Corrections [FDC], 2004). Many of these women were sentenced under Florida's 85% law which requires that any inmate sentenced for a crime committed on or after October 1, 1995, must serve at least 85% of her sentence.

While these national and local statistics are staggering, the data on recidivism is even more troubling. Female offenders who were released from the nation's prisons in 1994 had a 57.6% rearrest record and 39.9% of these rearrests results in reconvictions (U.S. Department of

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<sup>1</sup> In Florida the fiscal year runs from July 1 through June 30.

Justice, 2002). In Florida, 32.5% of females (n= 1,724) incarcerated during 2003-2004 had previously been incarcerated in the Florida prison system (FDC, 2004). There are no data to indicate if any of these women or the other 3,575 incarcerated women had been previously incarcerated in county jails, Federal prisons, “other” state prisons or in other countries.

Faced with the increasing rate of female incarcerations, rearrests, reconvictions, and reincarcerations it is vital that our prison system explore initiatives that will empower women to break this cycle. One such program is the introduction of art programs in women’s prisons. As Cleveland (1992) notes, the arts are a medium for prevention, healing, and empowerment. In addition, he points to the research indicating that art is both cost effective and personally effective in decreasing violence and recidivism. Studies in four institutions found that when inmates participated in arts programs internal incident rates were reduced between 75% and 81% across institutions making the task of managing prisons more attainable (Durland, 1996; Third, 2000). Research in areas of art and prevention conclude that

“...every person -- no matter their "risk" factors -- possess this inborn capacity to transform his/her experiences through both creative reframing of one's personal narrative and artistic expression, but that we have an inborn need, a "life factor" or "human spirit" that compels us to do just this. Essentially, both fields have arrived at the same essence, no matter what language we use to describe it (Bernard, 1997, ¶ 5).

Offering programs that develop this capacity in female inmates may provide the necessary tool to break the cycle in which many of these women find themselves trapped. Third (2000) provides the best explanation for the need to implement arts programs in prisons when she shares a quote from the California Director of Corrections James Rowland.

The mastery of arts skills requires patience, self-discipline, and long term commitment. These attributes are basic to an inmate's ability to function responsibly upon release...Through [such] programs we have a greater chance of making a productive citizen out of a probable repeat offender. Salvaging one felon means one more person who will commit no crimes, with no future victims and no future economic loss (§ 52).

### ***ArtSpring***

Over the past decade *ArtSpring* has provided arts-based programs throughout Florida to promote self-growth and effective life skills through art-making for underserved and institutionalized women and girls.

*ArtSpring* employs local artists who have teaching experience in community arts-based programs and who are interested in working with this population. These artist/ facilitators must attend four training sessions each year and must provide detailed lesson plans and curriculum that integrates educational standard components of artistic expression along with life and learning skills.

*ArtSpring* offers two major arts in corrections programs: *Inside Out – Expressive Arts Workshops for Incarcerated Women* and *Breaking Free – Expressive Arts Workshops for Girls*. Both of these programs are designed to address the needs of women and young girls living in correctional settings. According to Neal, both programs support the philosophy that arts education can be used to promote inner healing, provide for positive social interactions, promote communication and critical thinking skills, and enhance self-esteem.

Programs are conducted in weekly two-hour workshops over a 12 to 15 week period by two artist/facilitators. Participation is voluntary; however, commitment to the entire workshop session is required of all participants. The workshops incorporate silent meditation, creative

movement, drama, guided imagery, creative writing, drawing, and story telling. These creative tools focus on inward reflection and assist in developing trust, self-confidence, discipline, problem solving skills, the opportunity to work effectively in groups, and the ability to respect and understand individuals from different backgrounds. Ultimately, the goals of both programs are: (1) to use art-making and performance as modes of intervention for young girls and adult women who housed in correctional facilities to assist in exploring issues of self-esteem and to stimulate personal growth, (2) to use art-making and performance as a tool to promote respect, cooperation, and cultural understanding among a diverse group of people within a community, and (3) to present performances that create a bridge of interaction, visibility, engagement, and exchange between disparate communities – those who are incarcerated and those who are not.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of the study was to examine the qualitative data obtained from surveys collected by *ArtSpring* facilitators to determine the participants' perceptions of the program and its impact on their lives.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants in this study were 139 incarcerated women who participated in the *ArtSpring* program during 2002 and 2003 and who voluntarily completed the program surveys. These women were incarcerated in four correctional institutions in Florida: Homestead Correctional Institution (n=82), Hernando Correctional Institution (n=26), Pinellas County Jail (n=19), and Broward Correctional Institution (n=12). One program with 28 women was run entirely in Spanish.

## ***Instrument***

### ***Inside Out Participant Evaluation Form***

This instrument seeks participant responses to four questions: what they enjoyed most about the program, what they enjoyed least, what they learned about themselves as a result of participating in the program, and what other things might they have learned from the program. It also solicited additional comments or insights that the participants were willing to share.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Data were collected by the program facilitator. Participants were encouraged to complete the survey instruments, but were not required to do so. No data were kept on completion rate as it related to program participation.

Using traditional qualitative coding techniques, researcher used Atlas TI to search for themes within each question.

## **Findings**

The following section of this paper presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of the *Inside Out Participant Evaluation Form*. After an overview of the response rate to the questions, findings are reported by question.

### ***Response Rate***

As previously mentioned, women who participated in the program were not required to complete the evaluation forms. Additionally, they were not required to complete all of the questions on the survey. Another caveat involved the distribution of the evaluation forms. Not all program facilitators distributed the forms to participants. So while there were potentially 139 women who could have completed the instrument, only 59 responses were available for analysis. Table 1 shows the number of women who responded to each question on the instrument.

Table 1

*Number of Responses to the Five Open-ended Questions*

Question	Number of Responses
What did you enjoy most about this program?	59
What did you enjoy least?	54
Did you learn anything about yourself through your participation in this program? If yes, what?	58
What else did you learn or experience?	54
Any other comments or insights to share with us?	46

***Question One******“What did you enjoy most about this program?”***

Six responses indicated that participants enjoyed everything about the program. In addition, responses to this question fell into three categories (1) program activities, (2) interpersonal relationships, and (3) self-awareness and personal growth.

***Program Activities.*** The most commonly mentioned program activity was dance. Six of the participants addressed this directly while five others talked about movement and four participants mentioned the connection between dance (movement) and exercise. “I enjoy the open expression of movement. I enjoy the ideas and exercises.” Additionally, being able to work at their own pace and use different types of activities to express themselves was important to the participants. Five participants mentioned they enjoyed the opportunity to perform for others with some citing the actual presentation as their favorite part of the program.

Six women specifically mentioned the work of the facilitators as being the best part of the program. They noted their energy and patience. “At first I didn’t know how to do any movements but they have taught me.” In addition to their technical expertise it is evident in the

trust the facilitators were able to build and sustain was important to these women. As one woman put it, “That eny [any] thing that you do in the class it stays in the class and nothing that we do in the class is rong [wrong] it how you fill [feel].” This was reinforced by another participant who noted that she most appreciated, “The ability to express whatever was on my mind and not be criticized.”

***Interpersonal Relationships.*** The opportunity to share with others was identified by 10 women as the thing they most liked about participating in the program. Some mentioned the bonds which grew out of this sharing. “We shared some heavy stuff with each other and developed some real trust and strong bonds.” The responses indicate that the program offered an opportunity to open channels of communication and create an environment of trust and acceptance. “What I enjoyed more [most] about this program was our effort, team work and our respect for one another. Everyone made decisions together and worked together on one accord.” Other women talked about the total acceptance and ability of the group to come together without reservations. One woman stated that she most liked, “The freedom, the love, the caringness, [caring] attitudes a closeness, and understanding.”

***Self-Awareness and Personal Growth.*** The best part of the program for eight women was learning how to express themselves, their feelings, and emotions by participating in the *ArtSpring* program. One woman stated the best part of the program was, “The opportunity it gave me to express, through the arts, the abuse I have survived prior to incarceration and during my commitment. I have been able to process the abuse, heal from it, forgive my abusers, as well as expressing the joys that are now the central focus of my life.”

Others recognized that the program empowered them to, “do things I never thought possible” and gave them tools to deal with others. One woman saw the importance of the



program as giving her, “Patience dealing with different personalities, not to have stereotyped opinions about myself and others, not to have predisposed ideas of people, talent, art, music, movement, and dance in other words all the changes and facets of this program.” One participant summed up the best part of the program by saying it provided, “Learning that I can.”

### *Question Two*

#### *“What did you enjoy least?”*

Fifteen women noted nothing was wrong with the program. Analyses of the comments from those who responded to this question fell into three categories, (1) program activity issues, (2) time issues, and (3) impact of others.

***Program Activity Issues.*** This category included responses from 11 participants who listed program activities such as meditation, drawing, and writing as their least favorite part of the program. Others commented on not liking the rehearsals and presentation.

***Time Issues.*** As might be expected, time was a big factor for the women. Four of them felt the classes were too short. Two spoke quite honestly about the difficulty of having to return to their dorm when the class was over.

***Impact of Others.*** This category provided insight into the importance the women put in being committed to the program and respecting each other. Women disliked the complaints, disagreements, and lack of understanding that were exhibited by some of their peers. These comments suggest that they felt the program would benefit by a more structured process. One woman summed up the responses in this category when she responded that she did not like, “Participants coming into the class after it was already set up (1 and 2 weeks); short timers, less than 3 mos. left on their sentences, and the ladies that don’t show or come in very late.” The women who are part of this program appear to appreciate the opportunity for interaction and

respect the work of the facilitators. They also see the benefit of the program and are discouraged when they sense others are not committed or give up too easily. “I hated to see inmates (women) not be dedicated, responsible or determined to continue to strive to find themselves and just drop-out.”

### *Question Three*

***“Did you learn anything about yourself through your participation in this program?”***

The women who responded positively to this question provided responses that fell into three categories: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-confidence, and (3) self-expression/talent/creativity.

***Self-awareness.*** Interestingly, four of the women reported that they learned they were shy but through participation in the program they were working on opening up and learning to have fun. Three women talked about learning they could have fun without worrying about being made fun of by others. “I learned that I was braver than ever. I also learned how to have fun and act silly and no one looked down at you for that.”

Five women talked about being able to express emotions. Three women talked about their personal experiences; they learned they could open themselves up to others. “I learned that I can be totally open with others. I do not have to be ashamed of what has happened to me in my life and that I can rely on the support of others as I am not alone in being an abused woman. I learned a great deal of strength.” Others learned to trust. “I’m reemerging as a person. After almost 22 years of incarceration I’ve built strong, thick, high walls. I don’t trust I learned how to open myself and allow others to see me in different situations.” While others learned that they shared common bonds. “I learned to like myself physically and that we all share the same pain and happiness even though it may be on different levels.”

***Self-confidence.*** Self-confidence was expressed by seven women who quite simply stated, “I’m not alone and I am somebody and whatever I put my mind to I can do it.” Self-confidence was also reflected in the comments of women who had developed confidence to perform in front of others. Three women discussed their former self-doubt and fear of acceptance. This had been replaced by increased self-confidence. “I’ve learned to be who I am without hiding from people and putting on a mask to cover who I really was.” Other women discussed their sense of importance, the knowledge that they possessed special gifts and their freedom to be themselves. “I learned that I can be totally open with others. I do not have to be ashamed of what has happened to me in my life and that I can rely on the support of others as I am not alone in being an abused woman. I learned a great deal of strength.”

***Self-expression, talent, and creativity.*** Nine of the participants reported that they learned how to express themselves as a result of participating in this program. Three of the women found this self-expression through dance. One woman put it this way, “...I can express my feelings without saying a word.” For others the physical aspects of the program provided an outlet for positive self-expression and growth. “I’ve learned many exercises and ways to channel my emotions. My times of trouble are now rerouted through therapeutic expression.”

Out of this newfound means of self-expression, four women mentioned an awareness of hidden talent and creativity. “I have learned many many things. I learned and found many hidden talents, abilities, ideas; I found my true calling and creative side. I found me!”

#### ***Question Four***

***“What else did you learn or experience?”***

Four categories emerged from the responses to this question. The responses reflected many of the previous answers and in some cases expanded the response to an earlier question.

The four categories were: (1) the program, (2) trust, (3) acceptance and understanding, and (4) personal growth and understanding. Because of the impact of these women's thoughts and words, the responses are presented verbatim by category.

***The Program.***

- Increase creativity. Decrease shyness.
- I learn that I have talent for acting, and performing
- I learned that I can do expressive dance
- I experience that's its good exercise and its help the body.
- How to be more gracefully.
- I can do movement at my own pace if can keep up with them, all I can do is try
- To bring out more of my inner creativity
- I learn how to express my self by movement.
- I can write creative pieces
- It helps me with myself
- I am experiencing the gift of giving back the things I've learned with the beginning class
- Each class was a new experience or concept. It was not boring but insightful and directed.
- How to not get angry and get in trouble its therapeutic to me better than a psych specialist.

***Trust***

- To trust in my self and others.
- I learned that I had become untrusting and less out going without this program
- Trust
- Freedom, trust, excepteness from others
- Being able to let go and open up
- I learned a great deal of trust. Trusting others is vital and I now know that I can share of myself in a safe environment. This has given me the courage to be able to share with anyone who is a part of my life.
- I learned that if I want to overcome my fear (of others watching) I have to build my confidence and will have to repeat the class several times to get where I wish to be.
- I learned also that if I put my mind to getting in front of different

- people to speak without being afraid then I can do it without being laughed at.
- That I have a lot inside of me that can be shared with others
- I have learn to let my feelings show and not to be afraid in front of people.

### ***Acceptance and Understanding***

- I experienced a new way on how to communicate. How your feelings have a lot to do with your reactions.
- That a group can bring together individual ideas and works and they can combine themselves together as well as complete a program of honest raw emotion and bravery.
- Working with others
- That encouraging one another is vital. Also, comparing opinions and views is beneficial towards cultivating exercises or pieces that bring out the best in all involved. Listening is paramount [paramount].
- Increase interaction with others.
- I learned that there is a lot of talent and creativity in prison, many talented beautiful women inside and out. I believe that people in general if given a chance can experience this transition, only if they choose to.
- Patience with women in worse shape than myself.

### ***Personal Growth and Understanding***

- I learned how to love myself and that I have something to offer.
- I got to know myself better
- How to be comfortable with myself.
- I learned that its okay to be me I don't need to hide behind a mask.
- That I can do it and found my inner peace
- I learned how to put aside shyness and explore my own leadership abilities. I also experienced a non-judgmental attitude from my instructors and how not to be judgmental of others.
- I learned to take chances and be afraid.
- I learn to be myself and I experience a sense of relief and peace at the end of each session.
- I enjoy the self discovery initiated in the program and would like to continue to advance and explore more.

- I experienced a motivation and need to try things I had not or had never tried.
- When I go to class and I'm not feeling my best, I have found that expressing myself through movements puts me in a better frame of mind, its like venting physically instead of verbally.
- To learn more about myself and I love the meditation portion of the workshop it has helped me a lot.
- The meditation – I liked that a lot. I never know it could me you feel so good. I'm going to do it more often.
- How to work under the stress of prison and still maintain focus, a positive attitude and clarity.

### ***Question Five***

#### ***“Any other comments or insights?”***

Most of these responses were kudos for the program. They are presented below as the direct responses provide a keen insight into why this program has such strong support from these women.

- I believe this class was the best thing for the women in prison. Because we can release our pain and anger through dance and writing and not have to worry about getting in trouble for it. It's a very positive way to cleanse the hurt and pain of past mistakes.
- Being apart of this group has restored a part of me I felt I had lost – the child and the woman with in myself. Allowing one of us here to lead the mediation was inspiring!
- This is a great program for those who are shy, have low self esteem, or just feel like they don't fit in.
- I feel this program is a need in my time here. When it stopped I was very disappointed. It's back and I'm so glad. I hope it continues to grow especially in the prison system. It's a good class.
- This is the best program I have participated in and I am a participant of over thirty programs.
- It's a wonderful program and I would love to share it with others on the outside, so as in the institution.

- I really enjoy this program it has work in me.
- This was a wonderful experience.
- I will keep coming back as long as I can
- I would recommend this program to everyone.
- This program has really relaxed me, in ways I never thought how. Even though I am not fond of the meditations they sometimes relax me after a day of turmoil.
- Need more hours a night and keep the groups going.
- I would love to continue attending the inside out class and also I would love to get into more advance dancing.
- I love the ladies who come to us for the program
- The class made me feel like they all cared about me and they encouraged me
- I loved everyone the mentors are awesome
- I love Leslie and crew
- keep on keepin on
- This is a program every woman should try. The experience can be a big step to learning so much about yourself.
- This class has enabled me to tap back into my creativity and is helping me to socialize on a broader scale. Leslie has great energy, patience and is a truly awesome person. I enjoyed working with Celeste and Colleen as well, very much!
- I believe that anyone who put their heart into this class would benefit in a positive way.
- I'm always willing to learn more. I won't be here for the next one but when I'm release I'm gonna try to go to class that I can learn more and become a better dancer in my movements.
- I think it's a marvelous program and very good for self confidence and self-esteem. It's been a great escape every
- It's a good way to relieve stress
- This program can be the very tool that each of us needs to grow and prosper as long as we as individuals are willing to be open and honest with ourself.

- The program gives you many tools you can adapt to everyday living. You don't have to be in class to use what you've learned.
- This program has enabled me to look beyond what the eye may see or the ear may hear, and feel with my heart.
- It's my opinion that this program can become successful in any aspect because utilizing the arts helps one to unfold without even realizing it. I'd like to see intense weekend long seminars, a retreat of pure healthy stuff, like a 13 weeks layout into an all day of fun, laughing, finding, searching of pure learning [sic] behind these walls (Sat or Sun 8:30 –7:00 pm) both day
- This is a wonderful class in that I have gained a deeper sense of awareness of my physical abilities. Physical movement is not just for recreation or exercise but a means to share life in a different perspective. A non verbal means of communication.
- Conquer some fears. Trying new things.
- Well, being blind-folded I truly discovered that I do not trust too well in that area.
- While I'm in this class I honestly forget I'm in prison for 2 hrs. a week.
- I truly thought this class helped me to being back to mind the creativity that was hidden.
- I taught myself more than before; I discover that everybody has a lot of art inside.
- Its enjoyable to get away from the prison life that we have to tolerate on a daily basis.
- I like how we all get along with one another
- The emotional work is far more important than the artistic accomplishments! Serious.
- The openings of each class are very effective and geared to help or teach you how to take yourself to other places especially in times of stress or turmoil. The techniques (music & posture, imagination and breathing) give me positive ways to release the negative so I can focus or refocus on the positive.
- In my incarceration I have went threw many self help programs. If I hadn't already of worked on myself I would of deprived myself of participation in this wonderful class.
- Bring the program in to all prisons, and more out side.



## Conclusion

It is impossible to ignore the impact this program has had on the women who have been able to participate. The healing and empowerment noted in the research by Cleveland (1992) are evident in the words which the women so honestly shared. Their voices offered hope despite their incarceration. They spoke of growing as individuals and as part of the community in which they are incarcerated. Through their words, they echoed the findings of Bernard (1997) as they gave witness to their ability to create a positive experience, a reality of hope, despite their incarceration. Additionally, the women wrote of sharing a bond of mutual understanding, growing trust, and personal growth. Perhaps these attributes grew out their participation in the program. For as Third (2000) reminds us, art program provide the skills that are need to function within and outside of the prison walls.

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