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Brief Reports

Art as Agency: Exploring Empowerment of At-Risk Youth

Anne Wallace-DiGarbo, Lancaster, PA, and David C. Hill, Millersville, PA

Abstract

This report describes an art-based intervention program with at-risk youth that was inspired by the Project Self-Discovery model (Milkman, Wanberg, & Robinson, 1996). Twelve middle-school students from a small city in a mid-Atlantic state participated in the program. The program goals included making art in order to empower the participants through self-expression and community building. Complete data were obtained for six of the participants. The probabilities (not chance) that the program produced positive trends in change ranged from 70% to 80%. Two dimensions—attitudes and psychological adjustment—reached the highest probabilities (p = .078). The small sample size and the brief nature of the intervention (10 hours total) limited both the ability to generalize and the statistical power of the analysis.

Introduction

A growing body of evidence documents the power of the creative arts in engaging and redirecting disorganized and harmful behavior of youth (Davis, Soep, Sunaina, Remba, & Putnoi, 1993; Heath, Soep, & Roach, 1998; Mello, 1994; Milkman, Wanberg, & Robinson, 1996; Stone, Bikson, Moini, & McArthur, 1998; Weisel, 1999). Developmental theorists and researchers have long viewed adolescence as a period of identity formation that includes crisis, alienation, idealism, and commitment (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1904; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2001; Marcia, 1994; Offer, Ostrov, Howard, & Atkinson, 1988). Adolescent emotions can drive or disrupt attention and retention skills (Sylwester, 1994). We define empowerment as the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000). In the context of the variety of emotional experience, adolescents must learn to process and compose often times intense experience in the direction of empowering themselves to become self-sufficient agents in creating their world. They must learn to develop forms of self-control in school, home, and other social contexts so that they can manage crises, inspire commitment, express idealism, and mitigate alienation.

Youth at risk present an additional challenge. They are identified as at-risk because of negative involvements and circumstances in their lives that hinder their development. The key risk factors include compromised mental health, school struggle and failure, family disruption, psychoactive substance use, and lawbreaking/deviancy (Milkman et al., 1996; Stepney, 2001). The number and severity of these factors mark the degree of risk, and some adolescents manifest multiple dimensions of risk. When faced with ongoing stressors that affect their general well-being and performance, at-risk youth seek to avoid stress and to enhance pleasure (Stepney, 2001). For at-risk youth like those who participated in the art intervention project, imagining something different from their stressful daily reality could seem like an exercise in futility. Yet imagination and the exercise of flexible, risk-oriented thinking are powerful tools in creating competency (Amabile & Hennessey, 1992; Csikszentmilhalyi, 1997; Heath et al., 1998; Stepney, 2001). Attaching imagination to attainable goals mobilizes diverse internal and external resources (Heath et al., 1998).

The discipline of art increases confidence and raises self-esteem (Grant, 1958; Heath et al., 1998), critical factors in prosocial development (Mello, 1994). Creating art in the presence of a skilled guide offers a safe avenue for exploring life as well as a means of expressing longing and hope (Amabile & Hennessey, 1992; Milkman et al., 1996). Pollack (2000) reported that one student's drawings "evoked the mundane world where [his] psychological pain felt real and inescapable, yet they also evoked an imaginary place where he could feel safe, relaxed, and free" (p. xxi). Given the surge in creativity that occurs during adolescence, art provides a means of self-expression consistent with the complexity and integrity of adolescent experiences (Milkman et al., 1996).

This report explores the question of whether the engagement of at-risk youth in an art intervention program

Editor's note: Anne Wallace-DiGarbo, PhD, CAC, is a psychologist with Behavioral Healthcare Consultants in Lancaster, PA. David Hill is Associate Professor of Psychology at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, Millersville, PA. Grateful acknowledgements go to Carole Frances, Christie Griest, Gerald Simmons and the staff of Arbor Place Teen Center, Blanca Gonzalez of Transition Academy, Debra Vredenburg of Millersville University, Heather Beaudry, and Ivy Wallace for their assistance. Correspondence concerning this study may be addressed to Anne Wallace-DiGarbo at Behavioral Healthcare Consultants, 1755 Oregon Pike, Lancaster, PA.

impacts the participants' sense of self and promotes confidence to act effectively in their world. It was hypothesized that the intervention program would improve the participants' agency in their world as measured by the following dimensions of functioning: (a) family adjustment, (b) psychological adjustment, (c) peer influence, (d) school adjustment, (e) deviancy, and (f) attitude.

Method

The art intervention was a community-based program that wove the acquisition of life skills into the creation of a shared art experience. The process focused on the empowerment of youth participants as active agents of art-making and community-building. The participants collaborated on a number of art activities that culminated in the painting of a mural. The pilot project began in the fall of the school year in a city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a small learning community of the city school district. The school district had established the learning community for 55 truant seventh- and eighth-grade students who had not reached performance levels for promotion to eighth and ninth grades, respectively. The transition program provided a bridge between self-contained classroom learning and mainstream middle-school or high-school classes for students in need of additional academic preparation and support. The program aimed to strengthen skills in reading and math.

All 55 students in the transition program received invitations to participate in the art project. Nineteen students volunteered and gave their written consent, as did their parents or guardians. The volunteers ranged in age from 13 to 16. Twelve participants (11 girls and 1 boy) attended with some regularity. Of these 12, 8 were Hispanic, 2 were African American, 1 was biracial, and 1 was of European descent. All of the participants were considered at risk because of their documented school struggle. Three of the participants experienced a high degree of family disruption (scores above the 50th percentile on the Family Adjustment scale; see Table 1.) Six of the participants completed assessment instruments at all three time periods (baseline, program completion, and 6-month follow-up). By scheduling the program during the school day, the participants avoided after-school conflicts; however, the transition program suspended five students from the art intervention project either because they did not complete academic work or because they did not reach satisfactory levels of progress on academic tests.

Materials

The art materials used in the project included pencils, drawing paper, notebooks, and construction paper for journals; plaster gauze, sand, brushes, and acrylic paint for masks; and primer, acrylic paint, charcoal, brushes, rulers, and a snap line for the mural. Local suppliers donated some of the materials. A state grant for the arts paid for the rest of the supplies. Art intervention techniques derived from several sources (Arguelles & Arguelles, 1985; Cameron, 1992; Dalley, 1992; Jones, 1999; Liebmann, 1986; McNiff, 1992; Milkman et al., 1996; Rhyne, 1984).

Design and Procedure

A local artist facilitated the project assisted by an undergraduate psychology intern from a local university. The artist conducts workshops for youth through the city art museum, college youth museum, the United Way summer initiative, and the Boys and the Girls Clubs. A clinical psychologist who specializes in art therapy and who has taught at-risk youth in schools and in mental health settings supervised the project.

The students met with the artist/facilitator and the intern at the multicultural youth center for a total of 10 sessions over 6 weeks. The first session occurred at the end of the first week, and the last session took place at the beginning of the sixth week. A community reception was held at the end of the sixth week.

Table 1
Family Adjustment at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	10.00	8	5.00	1	5.00	2
2	13	Hispanic	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00	1
3	13	Hispanic	1.00	1	2.00	1	3.00	1
4	13	Hispanic	3.00	1	0.00	1	3.00	1
5	14	Black/His	9.00	7	8.00	6	6.00	4
6	15	Afr Amer	7.00	5	7.00	5	7.00	5
Mean/SD	13.5/.76		5.00/3.87	3.83/2.97	3.67/3.20	2.5/2/14	4.00/2.31	2.33/1.60

Note: Higher scores on family adjustment denote higher levels of risk and disturbance in the family. Participant 1 and Participant 5 demonstrated noteworthy improvement in family adjustment across the three measurement points while the remaining participants showed no consistent change.

In order to accommodate the students' schedules at the transition program, the seventh-graders and eighth-graders met in separate group sessions. The 5 seventh-graders met on Mondays and Wednesdays while the 7 eighth-graders met on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We assessed all of the students as a single sample and did not analyze the data for seventh- and eighth-graders separately. Attendance fluctuated, but 12 students attended with relative consistency across the 6 weeks of the program and were also available for the 6-month follow-up assessment. No one attended all 10 sessions—three students attended 7 sessions, two attended 6, two attended 5, four attended 4, and one attended 3.

In addition to the students' written consent, parents or guardians provided written informed consent. The students and the parents/guardians understood that the students would be involved with art, including painting a mural. In response to the artist/facilitator's inquiry, the participants voiced the following expectations: (a) experiencing respect, (b) learning to exercise leadership, (c) participating in teamwork, (d) having fun, (d) learning new skills, and (e) developing ideas for future careers.

The format included a warm-up exercise; an art task such as mask-making, scribble art, creating a mandala, and designing personal symbols; a group discussion; and time for the students to make entries in their journals, which were termed "creator pages." The students spent the initial session orienting to the format and fashioning journal covers. Three subsequent sessions centered on exploring and making masks as an encounter with self and as an understanding of the situation-dependent degrees of self-disclosure in which one engages. In postsession discussion of their experiences, participants talked about masks as symbols and discussed affect posturing as a type of mask; they also became aware of the choices they made about self-disclosure. The students' masks were hung on the multicultural center wall for all at the center to view.

The supervising psychologist observed that there was give and take in the informal conversations, including teasing. When the banter was inappropriately critical, the artist/facilitator intervened, reminding the participants to offer support to one another. As the process advanced, the participants asked for help on technical problems and they collaborated on solutions, such as determining how to apply plaster gauze over the intricate features of the facial molds. The participants took great care in decorating the masks and expressed very little criticism of the results. Most of the comments were descriptive. Some of the participants even complimented the work of other participants. In the context of meaningful engagement of talents, they practiced mutually enhancing socializing techniques.

A second series of sessions (five) was devoted to the art form of the mandala. To introduce the art form, the artist/ facilitator presented examples from local artists and examples from various cultures. Students discussed images for creating a group mandala and sketched a design for painting a mural. Conversation flowed freely among the participants. The artist/facilitator observed that the eighth-graders were generally more focused than the seventh-graders.

With the guidance of the artist/facilitator, the participants composed a design from the themes they had discussed in the planning sessions. These themes included pride, friendship, freedom, and power, and they were relayed through multicultural images of youth. The center of the mural featured an array of symbols of love, music, nature, education, and faith. The participants painted the mandala on the skate-park wall of the youth center. The group held a reception at the end of the project for parents, community leaders, participants, and friends in celebration of the mural and the project. The local newspaper covered the event and a picture of the mural appeared in the paper the following day.

Two conditions challenged group cohesion and community building among the participants. The first occurred three weeks into the project, when the director of the school-district transition program suspended several participants for not completing schoolwork. Several of these suspended participants returned to the project at a later point in the process. The second was that the art project participants shared physical space with other adolescents who were not part of the art intervention, and this compromised the focus of the participants.

Assessment

The participants completed the assessment instruments at baseline over a 4-day period. The instruments included (a) the Adolescent Self-Assessment Profile (ASAP) (Wanberg, 1991) and (b) the Outcome Inventory (OI) (Wanberg, 1991). The ASAP is a 225-item self-report instrument yielding data on risk factors and measures of involvement, degree of disruption, and associated psychological problems regarding alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD). In the data analysis, we utilized the following 6 of the 20 basic ASAP scales: (a) family adjustment, (b) psychological adjustment, (c) peer influence, (d) school adjustment, (e) deviancy, and (f) attitude.

The participants completed the OI in the last week of the project and at the 6-month follow-up. The OI retests risk factors assessed by the ASAP. Wanberg (1992) reported the following internal consistency reliabilities for specific subscales of the ASAP: (a) family adjustment, .86; (b) psychological adjustment, .88; (c) peer influence, .79; (d) school adjustment, .74; (e) deviancy, .92; (f) attitude, .83; and (g) disruption, .94. Several years later, Wanberg (1999) added two more subscales to the ASAP: the motivation subscale and the prosocial attitudes and behavior subscale, but he did not report reliability information for these two new scales.

Results

Group Results

The analysis of the data revealed no statistically significant changes across the three time periods for any of the outcome variables in this study. However, on the ASAP scales of deviancy, peer influence, school adjustment, and

Table 2
Psychological Adjustment at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	17.00	8	15.00	6	12.00	4
2	13	Hispanic	2.00	1	10.00	3	5.00	1
3	13	Hispanic	7.00	1	8.00	2	6.00	1
4	13	Hispanic	4.00	1	9.00	2	9.00	2
5	14	Black/His	9.00	2	8.00	2	6.00	1
6	15	Afr. Amer	19.00	9	17.00	8	15.00	6
Mean/SD	13.5/.76		9.67/6.32	3.67/3.45	11.17/3.53	4.17/2.19	8.83/3.62	2.5/1.89

Note: Higher scores on psychological adjustment denote higher levels of risk and disturbance. Of the 6 participants, 3 showed improved functioning, one showed a slight amount of negative change, and 2 showed no change.

Table 3
Deviancy at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	1.00	1	0.00	1	0.00	1
2	13	Hispanic	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00	1
3	13	Hispanic	2.00	1	0.00	1	1.00	1
4	13	Hispanic	2.00	1	0.00	1	1.00	1
5	14	Black/His	10.00	6	8.00	4	3.00	1
6	15	Afr Amer	1.00	1	1.00	1	1.00	1
Mean/SD	13.5/.76		2.67/3.35	1.83/1.86	1.50/2.93	1.50/1.12	1.00/1.00	1.00/0.00

Note: Higher scores on deviancy denote higher levels of risk and deviant behavior. Participant 5 showed an important reduction in deviancy across the measurement occasions; the remaining 5 participants showed no change. (Their levels of deviancy were very low to begin with.)

family adjustment, the trend for all of the variables was in the predicted direction (i.e., in the direction of improved functioning and adjustment). The probabilities that these changes were produced by the program variables and not by chance were on the order of 70% to 80%. Of more interest were the results on the measures of psychological adjustment and attitudes, where the statistical trend was in the predicted direction of improved psychological adjustment—Pillai's Trace, $F(2, 4) = 5.16$, $p = .078$—and improved attitudes—Pillai's Trace, $F(2, 4) = 5.05$, $p = .078$. These results indicate that there is less than an 8% chance that the participants' improved functioning on these dimensions was the result of chance. Conversely, there was better than a 92% chance that the improved attitudes and psychological adjustment that these participants experienced in the 6-month period following the program were related to the combination of programs that included the art project. These results are notable because with a very small sample size such as the one represented in this study, the likelihood of finding "statistical significance" is very low. In other words, the statistical power of the test was low, but there was a statistical trend in the predicted direction.

Individual Results

The data analysis shows that the majority of the participants had low levels of risk at baseline, which left little room for change in the hypothesized positive direction. However, for the small number of participants who were at the highest levels of risk, there was change in the positive direction. For example, on family adjustment, Participants 1 and 5 began the project below 80% and 70% of the population, respectively, but ended the project at follow-up above 80% and 60%, respectively. At the beginning, an average of 75% of the population was better adjusted in family environment than were these participants. At follow-up, an average of only 30% was better adjusted on the family environment scale (see Table 1). In terms of psychological adjustment, 80% of the population was better adjusted than Participant 1 at baseline, while only 40% was better adjusted at the end of the intervention. For Participant 6, 90% of the population was better adjusted at baseline, while only 60% was better adjusted at follow-up (see Table 2). In terms of deviancy, Participant 5 showed a reduction across the measurement occasions, beginning the study at baseline in the 6th decile (60% were less deviant) and ending at the follow-up in the 1st decile (only 10% were less deviant) (see

Table 4
Peer Influence at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	1.00	1	0.00	1	0.00	1
2	13	Hispanic	0.00	1	2.00	1	2.00	1
3	13	Hispanic	3.00	1	3.00	1	5.00	2
4	13	Hispanic	3.00	1	0.00	1	1.00	1
5	14	Black/His	9.00	4	11.00	6	11.00	6
6	15	Afr Amer	6.00	2	6.00	2	6.00	2
Mean/SD	13.5/.76		3.67/3.04	1.67/1.11	3.67/3.86	2.00/1.83	4.17/3.72	2.17/1.77

Note: Higher scores on peer influence denote higher levels of negative peer influences.

Table 5
School Adjustment at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	7.00	1	8.00	2	8.00	2
2	13	Hispanic	3.00	1	6.00	1	4.00	1
3	13	Hispanic	6.00	1	9.00	2	9.00	2
4	13	Hispanic	6.00	1	10.00	3	9.00	2
5	14	Black/His	7.00	1	8.00	2	0.00	1
6	15	Afr Amer	9.00	2	9.00	2	8.00	2
Mean/SD	13.5/.76		6.33/1.80	1.17/0.37	8.33/1.25	2.00/0.58	6.33/3.30	2.33/1.25

Note: Higher scores on school adjustment denote higher levels of risk and disturbance (i.e., poorer school performance and adjustment).

Table 6
Attitude at Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Pretest Raw Score	Pretest Decile	Posttest Raw Score	Posttest Decile	Follow-Up Raw Score	Follow-Up Decile
1	13	Hispanic	3.00	4	0.00	2	0.00	2
2	13	Hispanic	7.00	8	2.00	4	0.00	2
3	13	Hispanic	4.00	6	0.00	2	0.00	2
4	13	Hispanic	0.00	2	1.00	3	0.00	2
5	14	Black/His	8.00	9	8.00	9	6.00	8
6	15	Afr Amer	7.00	8	7.00	8	6.00	8
Mean/SD	13.5/.76							

Note: Higher scores on attitude denote higher levels of risk (i.e., more negative attitudes). Participants 2 and 3 showed major improvements in attitude across the three measurement points. The other four participants showed little or no change in attitude.

Table 3).These single-case data demonstrate that the project had its most beneficial effects on the highest-risk participants. At the same time, we recognize that some of the participants produced higher risk scores at posttest and/or follow-up (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest some areas of noteworthy promise and several limitations of the study. All measures suggested some trend toward change in the direction of improved functioning and reduced risk. Notably, these improvements persisted over 6 months after completion of the art project. Two important variables, attitude and psychological adjustment, showed a statistical trend in the hypothesized direction.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study is that it did not have an experimental design. There was no control group and there was no random assignment of participants to control

versus experimental conditions. In addition, the very small number of participants who actually completed the assessment tools weakened the power of the statistical test. The pilot program was part of a number of interventions designed for the students through the youth center and the school district. The observed changes might be due to some combination of programs and not to the effects of the art intervention program alone. The school district Transition Program Coordinator reported that all transition program students moved to the next level of remediation or to the mainstream classes. This overall academic success did not specifically distinguish the art intervention participants from those who did not participate in the project. In fact, the participants spent a total of only 10 hours in the art intervention project. No program can expect to produce major enduring changes with such a small investment of time, although some changes appeared to have continued for at least the 6 months following completion of the project.

We recognize that samples of the participants' artwork are missing from this paper. We sought written consent to include a photograph of the mural that the participants painted. However, we were unable to obtain permission from all the painters and their respective guardians/parents. Respecting the confidential nature of the study, we did not include the artwork in this report.

Qualitative Information

The qualitative information obtained during the study supported some of the positive quantitative analysis. The program facilitators observed that the participants' expectations were partially realized during several events that occurred as part of the art intervention program. The facilitators modeled respectful behavior and language. The facilitators also addressed instances of inappropriate and disrespectful behaviors toward others, thus providing responsible models of openness and acceptance of individual differences. Those students who completed the program exhibited trust in the facilitators. The community members paid respect to the participants at the reception through their attendance and open appreciation of the artwork. One shy participant showed recognizably increased confidence when she began to paint, working unhesitatingly and conversing about details of the work. The participants demonstrated teamwork in sharing responsibility for sections of the mural and in assigning areas to paint.

The participants were all leaders in bringing public art to the youth center. The attitude improvement noted at reassessment on the quantitative measures was in concert with the general tone of fun and pleasant interchange experienced during the accomplishment of various tasks. The participants' minimal resistance to the process and their investment of cooperative planning of the content for the mural suggest that a meaningful engagement of talent helped to build community as well as skill.

The positive changes that occurred during the study, especially in the areas of improved attitude and psychological adjustment, provide an impetus for further research. The fact that the results of the 6-month follow-up assessment supported the initial trend toward improved function and reduced risk is impressive and points to the need for a larger study. The most at-risk participants showed the greatest improvement. The single-case results described in the previous section supported this conclusion. The program was strictly voluntary and capitalized on the students' motivation. Participants struggled most with seeing the worth of the assessment component. Therefore, future studies might benefit from helping students to better understand how researchers use assessment measures to develop, continue, and improve such programs.

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Calendar of Events

November 15-19, 2006
American Art Therapy Association, Inc. (AATA) 37th Annual Conference
Hilton Riverside, New Orleans, LA
Contact: 1-888-290-0878 or e-mail: info@arttherapy.org

November 14-17, 2007
American Art Therapy Association, Inc. (AATA) 38th Annual Conference
Hyatt Regency, Albuquerque, NM
Contact: 1-888-290-0878 or e-mail: info@arttherapy.org

November 2008
American Art Therapy Association, Inc. (AATA) 39th Annual Conference
Cleveland, OH
Contact: 1-888-290-0878 or e-mail: info@arttherapy.org