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To cite this article: Danielle Maude Littman & Shannon M Sliva (2021): “The walls came down:” A Mixed-Methods Multi-Site Prison Arts Program Evaluation, Justice Evaluation Journal, DOI: [10.1080/24751979.2020.1853484](https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2020.1853484)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2020.1853484>



Published online: 07 Jan 2021.



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"The walls came down:" A Mixed-Methods Multi-Site Prison Arts Program Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Considerable research has linked participation in arts programs to a constellation of positive social emotional outcomes for incarcerated participants. This article describes and evaluates a set of semester-long University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) workshops. Through a pretest-posttest evaluation design inclusive of 22 quantitative and three qualitative items, we measured a range of outcomes for DU PAI participants (N = 119). Quantitative findings support prior work which associates participation in prison arts programs with social emotional outcomes such as community connection, skill attainment, and self-efficacy. Qualitative findings offered insight into participants' experiences of the workshops, including: learning, growth, and discovery; opening up; authentic self-expression; empathy and perspective taking; belonging and connection; creative collaboration; joy and freedom. We also identified facilitator qualities which foster participant growth, including: safety, caring and respect, participation, and emotional involvement. Our findings suggest that prison arts programming may transcend skills-based and social emotional outcomes to invoke liberatory experiences for participants. There is a need for additional research to more clearly explore the effects of contextual factors and further concretize the unique role of arts programs in carceral spaces.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 July 2020

Accepted 17 November 2020

KEYWORDS

Correctional education;
evaluation research; prison
arts; prison theatre;
university-prison
partnerships

The arts have a long history in prison settings. As early as the 1800s and early 1900s, incarcerated people across the U.S. organized peer-led arts programming, such as music, performance, storytelling, and creative writing. In the 1960s and 1970s, incarcerated artists danced, sang, wrote alongside the Black arts movement, co-creating "a dialectic between free and unfree spaces for poor people, people of color, and revolutionaries alike" (Meiners & Ross, 2019, p. 26). Today, incarcerated artists are creating powerful art problematizing mass incarceration and elevating the human experience of isolation and punishment (Fleetwood, 2020). The prison arts movement has also been linked to the acceleration of critical consciousness through liberatory education, entangling with degree-granting and non-degree-granting liberal arts programs. University-community partnerships are common across today's prison arts programs,

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such as The Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, the Iowa Prison Writing Project at the University of Iowa, and the subject of this evaluation, the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative.

While prison arts practices and programs have been prevalent for over a century, a more limited body of research has documented the specific outcomes associated with prison arts programs for participants. Our own work (authors, under review) has analyzed this body of work; we find that there are four main domains of outcomes associated with participation in prison arts programs: social emotional outcomes, educational and vocational outcomes, disciplinary outcomes, and community and policy outcomes. There is compelling evidence that participating in prison arts programs is associated with self-efficacy and self-esteem outcomes among participants. Participants who engaged in prison arts programs have reported significant increases in self-confidence, time management, self-efficacy, motivation to change, self-esteem, and task completion after the completion of arts programming (Brewster, 2014; Harkins, Pritchard, Haskayne, Watson, & Beech, 2011; Miner-Romanoff, 2016). Participants also evidence social emotional outcomes such as social connections and relationships, such as building trust with one another and trusting environments (Marie Heard, Mutch, Fitzgerald, & Pensalfini, 2013, Dunphy, 1999), empathy between other incarcerated individuals and community members (Albertson, 2015; Miner-Romanoff, 2016), and developing communication and collaboration skills (Tett, Anderson, McNeill, Overy, & Sparks, 2012; Marie Heard et al., 2013). Increases in mental health in wellbeing have also been documented among prison arts program participants, such as decreased hopelessness and anger (Blacker, Watson, & Beech, 2008; Stephenson & Watson, 2017), and increased wellbeing, joviality (Cohen, 2009), emotional stability and control (Brewster, 2014), as well as the development of coping skills to manage stress and complex emotions (Caulfield & Wilson, 2010; Daykin, de Viggiani, Moriarty, & Pilkington, 2017).

Promising evidence also suggests that participation is associated with educational and vocational (Baker & Homan, 2007; Brewster, 2014; Ezell & Levy, 2003; Halperin, Kessler, & Braunschweiger, 2012; Smitherman & Thompson, 2002; Tett et al., 2012) and disciplinary (Brewster, 2014; Ezell & Levy, 2003; Moller, 2011) outcomes. Evidence is mixed regarding community and policy outcomes: while non-incarcerated community members have reported feeling more connected to incarcerated individuals after participating in arts programming (Lazzari, Amundson, & Jackson, 2005; Nugent & Loucks, 2011; Miner-Romanoff, 2016), recidivism data post-participation in arts programming is varied, with one study (Giles, Paris, & Whale, 2016) finding that Australian participants who participated in arts programming were more likely to be re-incarcerated after three years, and another study (Ezell & Levy, 2003) finding that six-month recidivism rates for juvenile offenders were lower after engaging in arts programs.

This body of knowledge about the outcomes of prison arts programs demonstrates some critical gaps. For instance, it is heavily reflective and has infrequently documented longitudinal changes at multiple points in time. It has relied largely on unstandardized instruments developed by teaching artists rather than researchers or evaluators. It has been based on small homogenous samples, speaking little to the likely transferability of any outcomes across context. Seeking to strengthen the body of evidence about the impacts of prison arts programming on incarcerated people, this evaluation presents a

longitudinal mixed-methods analysis of programming in eight sites delivered by the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) in the fall of 2019.

Program and Evaluation Context

Program Description

The University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) was founded in 2017 at the University of Denver in partnership with the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC), and currently offers programming at 11 CDOC facilities. Currently, the program offers a variety of programs and workshops in facilities ranging from minimum to maximum security, including: semester-long arts-based workshops, a newspaper program, family events, full-length production processes, and a podcast. Ashley Hamilton, one of DU PAI's founders, imagines DU PAI spaces as "a space [for participants] to express and explore their feelings and thoughts in a healthy way" and to "learn how to be healthy in a group, how to support each other, how to take care of each other" (Hurst, 2020, para. 21).

DU PAI programs are facilitated by faculty members at the University of Denver in the Departments of Theatre and English, as well as DU PAI affiliate faculty who have extensive arts training in a variety of disciplines. Arts disciplines offered include theatre, creative writing, music, literature, movement and dance, as well as cross-disciplinary workshops. The workshops described in this manuscript were largely weekly workshops which lasted 12 weeks in Fall 2019. Most workshops were being offered for the first time. Some facilities were engaging with DU PAI for the first time while others had previously hosted DU PAI workshops.

Evaluation Context

DU PAI's partnership with the CDOC has taken root in conjunction with "normalization" efforts by the department statewide. Normalization, inspired by Scandinavian prison systems, imagines that offering opportunities for individuals to live *inside* prisons as similarly as possible to living *outside* prison will help incarcerated individuals prepare for life after prison (Dukakis, 2019). Dean Williams, the Executive Director of the CDOC, has stated that "we've made prison a place of starkness, idleness, a place without purpose. Then we're confused where people get out and they don't make it. I think that's on us" (in Healy, 2019, para). Present normalization efforts center around building meaningful opportunities in prison and fostering relationships with prison staff that are generative rather than adversarial. DU PAI programs have been identified as one avenue for normalization. One Warden of a prison complex in Denver stated that DU PAI programs "knock down those walls and let [incarcerated participants] be who they are" (Hurst, 2020, para. 19).

Our Relationship to DU PAI and this Work

Social science research and evaluation increasingly embraces positionality statements to acknowledge and account for the potential dangers "seen, unseen, and unforeseen"

within our work (Milner, 2007, p. 388). We are thus including a brief positionality statement to illustrate the lenses through which we conducted our analysis and presently share our findings.

First, we are two evaluators who work with DU PAI to evaluate the impacts of participating in arts programs for incarcerated individuals across Colorado. We designed the evaluation in partnership with DU PAI program facilitators, who then administered the evaluation surveys to program participants. We thus hold a dualistic insider/outside perspective when conducting this evaluation: while we are not involved in program activities, we hold a shared investment with DU PAI staff to build upon program evaluation results to ultimately improve program delivery.

It is also critical to acknowledge our perspective on this work in light of some relevant identities we hold: we are white women rooted in academic social work training. One of us has years of artistic experience, and the other has a longstanding movement practice. These perspectives inherently impact our approach, analysis, and sharing of our evaluation. As white women, we work at the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities. We recognize that whiteness has been wielded against research and evaluation participants for generations; we cannot and should not escape this fact within our work. As social work scholars, we are attentive to social context of individual experience and view prisons as contested spaces wherein individual experiences commingle with complex contexts. As arts practitioners, we carry our own perceptions about the transformative power of the arts. While we seek to reduce bias in our work whenever possible, these lenses inherently shape how we conducted our evaluation and how we interpret the findings of this work.

Evaluation Aims and Methods

The DU PAI program aims to generate “creative and collaborative learning experiences that enrich the lives of incarcerated people,” and “build collaborative communities that serve as spaces for therapeutic healing and innovative thinking” (DU Prison Arts Initiative, 2020, para. 1). In an evaluation planning session with program staff, we prompted staff to clearly identify the anticipated outcomes of DU PAI’s workshops. In these conversations, we identified several core program aims:

1. to strengthen participants’ artistic identities;
2. to improve feelings of connection to others in the class and in their community;
3. to support the development of skills such as public speaking and problem solving; and
4. to contribute to socio-emotional growth in areas such as improving one’s self-concept, engaging in increased perspective taking, and finding a purpose or meaning.

In alignment with an evaluation research approach, our work uses systematic methods to assess whether and how this aim is realized (Weiss, 1993). Therefore, the purpose of this evaluation is to understand the impacts of participating in Fall 2019 DU PAI programming for incarcerated individuals across eight CDOC facilities with a

particular focus on artistic identity, connection and community, skill attainment, and social emotional growth. Given that this is the first systematic evaluation of DU PAI programs, we used an exploratory approach, administering pretest-posttest evaluation within a mixed methods convergent design (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). The questions guiding this evaluation include both questions answered through quantitative and qualitative methods through a pretest posttest evaluation design. Quantitative questions include: *Who participates in DU PAI programs? What quantifiable changes across evaluation aims are reported from pretest to posttest?* Qualitative questions include: *What do participants hope to experience through DU PAI programs? What do participants report experiencing through DU PAI programs?*

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

Between September 2019 and December 2019, DU PAI offered programming at eight sites in the Colorado Department of Corrections. Incarcerated students are chosen to participate in DU PAI programming through an application process and at the discretion of the facility based on their recent behavior within the facility and confirmation of GED attainment. After workshops are advertised in each facility, incarcerated students complete an application which is reviewed by DU PAI staff and DU PAI group leaders (incarcerated students who have gone through programs and been selected for leadership roles) who make preliminary acceptance decisions. Between 30-100% of incarcerated students are accepted into the program, based on how many individuals apply, how many spots are available for the workshop, previous art experience (which is not required), and bolstering diversity of experiences across students. Finally, staff approve weigh in on final acceptance decisions based on logistics (scheduling, program location in facility).

All DU PAI students during this time period were offered the opportunity to participate in the program evaluation. Our IRB made the determination that this inquiry was classified as program evaluation, not human subjects research. DU PAI program facilitators administered self-report surveys to all present students at two time points: the pretest on the first day of the workshop, and posttest on the last. DU PAI program facilitators explained to participants that the survey was completely voluntary, and the purpose of the survey was to collect information about the various ways that participating in the arts program affected them, as well as to adapt program elements in the future using their feedback. Facilitators urged participants to be honest in surveys, and affirmed that individual answers would not be shared with the CDOC. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions about the survey, and were told that they could skip any questions or stop at any time. The survey took roughly 20 minutes to complete. The final sample for this program evaluation (N = 146 pretest; N = 117 posttest) was established based on incarcerated students who were (a) available to take the pretest and posttest surveys and (b) voluntarily opted into taking them. The evaluation sample constitutes 81.6% of the students who were present on the first day of the workshop, and 93.6% of participants present on the last day of the workshops.

Measures

Surveys included 22 quantitative items repeated at pre and posttest, along with three qualitative items at pretest and four different qualitative items posttest. We generated original quantitative items to measure expected program impacts based on the existing literature base related to prison arts program outcomes (such as social emotional growth and skill attainment), as well as DU PAI-specific program goals like building community and supporting perspective-taking. The survey comprises an original scale developed for use in DU PAI program development and has not yet been validated.

Artistic identity was measured using the question, “do you consider yourself an artist? (someone who has an artistic practice or background)” with a five-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. Connection with other participants was measured through the question, “looking around the room, I feel connected to...” with five response options ranging from *none of the people* to *all of the people*. All other quantitative questions were measured using a five-point scale which asked participants to rate how much they agree with the following statements (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) or how often the following statements are true to them (ranging from *never* to *always*). Domains of inquiry included the development of an artistic identity (i.e., “I use art as a way to process what I am thinking and feeling,” “I consider myself an artist”), feelings of connection and community (i.e., “I consider myself a leader in this facility,” “I feel like a community member of DU PAI”), skill attainment (i.e., “I feel comfortable speaking in front of a group,” “when things don’t go as planned, I am able to problem solve”), and socio-emotional outcomes including self-concept (“I affect other people in positive ways,” “I am deserving of others’ trust”), perspective-taking (i.e., “I can imagine what other residents at this institution must be thinking and feeling”), and meaning and purpose (i.e., “I feel like I have a sense of purpose in my day to day life”),

Qualitative items at pretest asked participants to describe first their hopes and then their concerns related to their participation in the workshop, and invited them to add anything else they would like for their facilitator to know. Qualitative items at posttests prompted participants to share their experience in the workshop, how their interactions with peers in the workshop compared to those taking place in other prison programs, what feedback they had for their facilitator, and what else they would like to share.

Data Analysis Procedure

Quantitative Analysis

There were 146 participants who completed the pretest survey, and 117 who completed the posttest. These discrepancies can be attributed to participant absences, the optional nature of the surveys, classroom factors such as distractions, and attrition. This attrition is notable ($n=29$; 19.86%), but relatively common across prison-based research and evaluation and in other ‘hard to reach’ contexts, where participants often enter, leave, and move between facilities (Crisanti, Case, Isakson, & Steadman, 2014; Western, Braga, Hureau, & Sirois, 2016). Participants were not required to include any identifying information at pre or posttest due to program respect for confidentiality in

a setting where facilitators would be directly collecting the evaluations. While some participants shared their Department of Corrections number, about half did not; thus surveys were unable to be matched at a sample level, and we decided to move analysis forward without matched data. With less than 3% of responses missing and data missing, listwise deletion was used to account for missing values. Multicollinearity was examined through correlation tables; no correlations were over the absolute value of 0.7. Because surveys were unmatched, we used independent (unpaired) sample *t*-tests to analyze the differences between the mean values on each question at pretest and posttest, as shown in Table 2.

Qualitative Analysis

We analyzed qualitative textual responses using conventional content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Conventional content analysis is applied to textual data when the aim is to describe a phenomenon and there is not a clear theoretical frame or preconceived set of constructs being employed. Researchers engage in inductive category development by first immersing themselves in the data, deriving an initial set of codes that seem to capture key constructs directly from the text, then conduct an iterative process of category development that results in a primary set of clusters bearing labels that “are reflective of more than one key thought” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).

Accordingly, we conducted an initial thorough review of the data to gain understanding of its content and scope. We then conducted an initial round of coding, striving to identify codes directly connected to the text. For instance, many participants used the words “open,” “opening,” or “openness” to react to their experience, and these were initially coded *in vivo* as “open.” We separately created short memos to record our impressions of the codes and then worked together to develop consensus on the meaning of the codes and the relationships between them, ultimately deriving a final list of constructs represented in the text. During this process, the code “open” was discovered to have captured multiple meanings: one related to participants’ minds opening to new information and experiences, another related to participants’ feeling they could share openly with others, and a third more specifically relating to participants’ ability to be open with who they really are. In the final list of codes, these themes were categorized as “learning, growth, and discovery,” “opening up,” and “authentic self-expression.” These constructs are presented in the results section in clusters, suggesting a relational organization between coded data, along with typifying quotes. We have changed obvious spelling errors in quotes, but have retained other eccentricities of grammatical structure which typify short handwritten responses.

Mixed methods analysis

We present our findings using a contiguous mixed methods approach (Fetters et al., 2013), wherein quantitative and qualitative findings are reported upon separately. We then weave together these findings in our discussion, with a particular focus on convergence and divergence between the quantitative and qualitative stories which emerged.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of DU PAI participants at Pretest (n = 119) in comparison to CDOC overall population* (N = 19,202).

	DU PAI Participants		CDOC Overall Population	
	N	%	N	%
Age				
20–29	17	14.29	4367	22.74
30–39	46	38.66	6684	34.81
40–49	35	29.41	4235	22.05
50–59	18	15.13	2522	13.13
60+	3	2.52	1343	6.99
Gender				
Male	101	84.87	17327	90.24
Female	18	15.13	1875	9.76
Ethnicity				
Caucasian	65	54.62	8811	45.89
African American	28	23.53	3382	17.61
Hispanic	19	15.96	6011	31.30
Native American	6	5.04	749	3.90
Asian	1	0.84	247	1.3
Time Incarcerated**				
	29	24.37		
3–4.9	14	11.76		
5–9.9	26	21.84		
10–19.9	29	24.37		
20+	21	17.64		
Sentence Length (years)				
	6	5.04		
3–4.9	3	2.52		
5–9.9	15	12.61		
10–19.9	16	13.44		
20–39.9	19	15.96		
40–59.9	14	11.76		
60+ (“virtual life”)	13	10.92		
Life with Parole	13	10.92	278	1.44
Life without Parole	20	16.81	806	4.19
Facility				
Buena Vista	17	14.29		
Denver Reception and Diagnostic Center	8	6.72		
Four Mile Correctional Facility	12	10.08		
Fremont Correctional Facility	19	15.96		
La Vista Correctional Facility	18	15.13		
Limon Correctional Facility	18	15.13		
Sterling Correctional Facility	9	7.56		
Territorial Correctional Facility	18	15.3		
Workshop Type				
Literacy	12	10.08		
Movement & Creative Writing	35	29.41		
Music	19	15.96		
Theatre	53	44.54		

*CDOC Population at end of year 2019

**Time incarcerated in current sentence does not reflect total time served over one’s lifetime.

Results

Quantitative Results

Who participates in DU PAI programs?

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of DU PAI participants at pretest (n = 119), as well as the available demographic characteristics of Colorado Department

Table 2. Pre and post DU PAI workshop survey values, and independent samples *t*-test results (*n* = 143 pre; *n* = 117 post).

Item	Pre-workshop				Post-workshop				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD		
Do you consider yourself an artist (someone who has an artistic practice or background)?	1	5	3.98	1.15	1	5	4.07	1.11	-0.63	0.53
Looking around the room, I feel connected to ...	1	5	4.34	1.14	2	5	5.09	0.99	-5.89	0.00***
I feel like I have a sense of purpose in day-to-day life	1	5	4.27	0.94	1	5	4.45	0.82	-1.70	0.09*
Other people put trust in me	2	5	4.17	0.67	1	5	4.19	0.68	-0.033	0.74
People in this prison see me as more than my crime	1	5	4.15	0.83	1	5	4.17	0.82	-0.28	0.77
I feel like a community member of this institution	1	5	3.80	0.99	1	5	4.17	0.89	-3.14	0.00***
I feel like a community member of DU PAI	1	5	4.00	0.85	3	5	4.57	0.58	-6.65	0.00***
I have ways to process what I am thinking and feeling	1	5	4.26	0.70	1	5	4.39	0.73	-1.73	0.09*
My life has meaning to others	1	5	4.23	0.89	1	5	4.33	0.77	-0.97	0.33
I am deserving of other peoples' trust	1	5	4.31	0.68	1	5	4.40	0.67	-1.20	0.23
I feel comfortable speaking in front of a group	1	5	3.92	1.03	1	5	4.36	.84	-3.56	0.00***
I am confident in my ability to deal with conflict in a healthy way	1	5	4.21	0.78	2	5	4.38	0.66	-1.91	0.06*
When things don't go as planned, I am able to problem solve	1	5	4.36	0.56	3	5	4.37	0.60	-0.45	0.66
I am skilled at working with others to accomplish a goal	2	5	4.34	0.60	2	5	4.42	0.66	-0.97	0.33
I consider myself a leader in this facility	1	5	3.86	1.03	1	5	4.18	1.05	-2.16	0.03**
I affect other people in positive ways	2	5	3.80	0.62	1	5	4.03	0.64	-2.66	0.01***
I can imagine what other residents in this institution are thinking and feeling	1	5	3.36	0.75	1	5	3.41	0.72	-0.79	0.43
I can imagine what correctional officers must be thinking and feeling	1	5	3.05	0.83	1	5	3.15	0.71	-0.96	0.34
I feel heard by other residents	1	5	3.27	0.81	1	5	3.45	0.80	-1.63	0.11
I feel heard by correctional officers	1	5	2.96	0.92	1	5	3.09	0.99	-0.99	0.33

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Item	Pre-workshop				Post-workshop				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD		
I use art as a way to process thinking and feeling	1	5	3.64	1.09	1	5	3.75	1.03	-.076	0.44
I have a sense of hope for the future	1	5	4.32	0.91	1	5	4.46	0.86	-1.19	0.23

*indicates significance at the .10 level

**indicates significant at the .05 level

***indicates significance at the .01 level

of Corrections (Colorado Department of Corrections, 2020), which includes all individuals under the supervision of CDOC. While our sample was elective (participants opted into programs) and should not be construed as statistically representative, it closely mirrors the characteristics of the CDOC population. Our sample is slightly more representative of White and Black individuals, males, and those older than 30 and younger than 60 than the overall CDOC population.

While sentence length statistics are not available for all individuals under supervision by the CDOC, we know that individuals sentenced to life without parole make up 4.19% of the overall CDOC population, and those serving life with the opportunity for parole make up 1.44% of the population. Conversely, the largest group of Fall 2019 DU PAI participants were serving life without parole (16.81%), with an additional 10.92% of participants serving life and 10.92% serving “virtual life”. In our data, we distinguished between life with parole, life without parole, and “virtual life” sentences as follows: life with parole and life without parole are sentence designations reported upon by the CDOC, whereas “virtual life” is a designation described by Villaume (2005) as “a sentence that markedly exceeds the prisoner’s probable expected life span” (p. 267). We designated “virtual life” among this population as any person with a sentence longer than 60 years, assuming that the youngest someone enters the CDOC as an adult is age 18, and the average life expectancy is 78.6 years (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2017).

There were eight facilities in Fall 2019 which offered workshops, each with between eight and 19 participants who took the survey at pretest. Workshops offered included Theatre, Movement & Creative Writing, Literacy, and music. According to anecdotal reporting from DU PAI program facilitators, only a handful of participants had taken prior DU PAI workshops, and the vast majority were first-time participants.

What quantitative changes are reported by participants from pretest to posttest?

Table 2 shows the minimum and maximum values, means, and standard deviations for each question from pretest to posttest, as well as the results of the independent samples *t*-test (*t* values and *p* values). Given the exploratory nature of this research, significance values were flagged for any mean changes which were significant at the 0.10 level, 0.05 level and 0.01 level.

Mean values of all questions increased between pretest to posttest. Highest mean scores at pretest included responses to “when things don’t go as planned, I am able to problem solve” (mean = 4.36; SD = 0.56), “looking around the room, I feel

connected to ...", (mean = 4.34; SD = 1.14), "and "I am skilled at working with others to accomplish a goal" (mean = 4.34; SD = 0.60). Lowest mean scores at pretest included responses to "I feel heard by correctional officers" (mean = 2.96; SD = 0.92), "I can imagine what correctional officers must be thinking and feeling" (mean = 3.05; SD = 0.83), and "I feel heard by other residents" (mean = 3.27; SD = 0.81).

The analysis revealed positive directional changes on all 22 items, and statistically significant increases on nine items between pre and posttest. Survey items which yielded statistically significant increases at the 0.10 level included "I feel like I have a sense of purpose in my day-to-day life" ($t=1.70$; $p=0.09$), "I have ways to process what I am thinking and feeling" ($t=-1.73$; $p=0.09$), and "I am confident in my ability to deal with conflict in a healthy way" ($t=11.91$; $p=0.06$). The item which demonstrated significance at the 0.05 level was "I consider myself a leader in this facility" ($t=-2.16$; $p=0.03$). Items which were significant at the 0.01 level were, "looking around the room, I feel connected to ..." ($t=-5.89$; $p<0.00$), "I feel like a community member of this institution" ($t=-3.14$; $p<0.00$), "I feel like a community member of DU PAI" ($t=-6.65$; $p<0.00$), "I feel comfortable speaking in front of a group" ($t=-3.56$; $p<0.00$), and "I affect other people in positive ways" ($t=-2.66$; $p=0.01$). Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the importance of directional changes that might be overlooked when researchers rely only on effect sizes or significance tests to derive meaning (Thomas, 2017).

Qualitative Results

What do participants anticipate experiencing through DU PAI programs?

At pretest, participants were asked three questions: *What are your hopes for this workshop? What are your concerns or fears about this workshop? And, Is there anything else you'd like the facilitators to know?* Participants responded through freeform answers; answers ranged from one word to several sentences. Participants' *hopes* centered largely around expansion - expansion of oneself and one's own perspective, expansion of relationships through collective experiences, as well as hope for an expansive cultural shift spurred by the integration of arts programming at their institutions. In reflecting upon their hopes for the workshop, one participant wrote: "[I hope] to go beyond my limitations to push myself into places I've never been going, or doing things I never thought I'd try. To learn more about others as I learn more about myself." Participants also hoped for opportunities for self-improvement, including self-expression, self-confidence, and skill building (both in terms of emotional coping and arts skills). When speaking about hopes for themselves, participants often spoke about their hopes for self-improvement in light of collective and relational growth. One participants' response illustrates how intertwined self and group improvement seemed to be for many participants: "[I hope this workshop will] help me open up as a human and relate to others better."

One of the most prevalent *concerns* expressed by participants was a concern about opening up. One participant expressed this sentiment: "The only fear I have is more on my side ... truly opening myself up to other people, letting them see the true me and not the prison mask that I wear. I have been working on this for a while but it is

Table 3. Frequencies of posttest qualitative responses (n = 117).

Theme	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Learning, growth, and discovery	62	0.17
Opening up	85	0.23
Authentic self-expression	42	0.11
Empathy and perspective-taking	11	0.03
Belonging and connection	55	0.15
Creative collaboration	11	0.03
Joy, freedom	27	0.07
Course and facilitator qualities		
Safety	23	0.06
Caring and respect	19	0.05
Participation	26	0.07
Emotional involvement	12	0.03
Total	373	

a scary proposition.” One of the central *fears* echoed across many participants was a fear that the program would end prematurely or leave the institution abruptly. Participants were very aware of the transient nature of many prison programs, and that programs could leave at any time for many reasons, from “a change in governors or administration” to prison management teams eschewing “how progressive it is.” Lastly, one participant urged facilitators to “pay attention to the needs of the people, there are lots of hurting people in this facility that need to know someone really cares about their wellbeing.”

What do participants experience in DU PAI programs?

At the conclusion of each DU PAI workshop, participants responded to open-ended questions asking them to reflect on their experiences in the workshop, their interactions with others in the workshop compared to other programs they had participated in, and what feedback they had for their facilitator. Their responses converged around several common content areas, including *learning, growth and discovery, sharing and expression, authentic self-expression, empathy and perspective taking, belonging and connection, creative collaboration*, and *joy and freedom*. In addition, many participants mentioned course and facilitator qualities to which they attributed the program’s benefits. These include *safety, caring and respect, participation*, and *emotional involvement*. The frequencies and relative frequencies across qualitative posttest responses are reflected in [Table 3](#).

Learning, Growth, and Discovery

Across posttest responses, over 60 responses signified *learning, growth, and discovery*. Given that each DU PAI workshop uses an arts curriculum focused on either ensemble theatre, improvisation, creative writing, or movement, the acquisition of artistic skills and practices was one program aim. Participants described learning new ideas and skills. For instance, one creative writing student reflected, “I have a notebook full of new poems I wrote and a really wonderful experience to reflect on.” However, participants more frequently described skill acquisition as secondary to or commingled with deeper benefits of the program, such as learning “to work well together,” and learning “how to improve real life situations while inside.” Participants described being

intellectually engaged, gaining confidence, and feeling a sense of accomplishment or purpose. One student shared, “My experience [in the creative movement workshop] was very uplifting in that it gave me confidence and belief that I can be creative in areas that weren’t known.”

Another recurring theme among DU PAI workshop participants reflecting on their experience was *growth* and *discovery*. These comments extended past learning a skill or gaining confidence, as participants described discovering things about themselves, others, and the world around them that helped them to grow or changed their perspective. One creative writing student shared, “This really opened up my mind to working through life in an artistic manner.” Similarly, a literature student wrote, “[This course] opened my mind up. The different books we read - Overall it changed my paradigm on different aspects of life.” A student in a creative movement class talked about the experience of *self-discovery* as vulnerable and connective: “I spent my whole life avoiding dance, convinced I couldn’t do it. My time here was like rediscovering who I was. And sharing that vulnerable experience with others brought us together.”

Opening Up

The most common word used to describe DU PAI workshops in participant reflections was “open” – 85 participants echoed this sentiment. Participants described “opening up” in myriad ways, not only in terms of their growth and discovery, but also in terms of their ability to *express* themselves and *share* themselves with others. One literature student wrote, “It was a place where I felt as if I can open up and share my thoughts and feelings.” Another participant reflected on the group learning enabled by such openness: “People were open with each other and learned from each other the different ways our minds could go.” Participants also wrote about their ability to be “let loose.” One theater student reflected, “I was able to let the clutch out a little in the class, because it required it.” Another theatre student shared, “I was able to do silly things I would never have done elsewhere and NOT feel silly doing them. This program in comparison to others was more self-expressive and freeing. It made me more alive.”

Authentic Self-Expression

A closely related theme to *opening up* was *authentic self-expression*. Students across workshops (n = 42) wrote about experiencing a sense of honesty or genuineness, as well as the ability to “be real” or “be my true self” versus other spaces or programs in the facility. One theatre student reflected on the irony of this: “It was a lot more real than other programs, and I didn’t feel like I had to act, ironically, in the class.” Another theatre student wrote, “I was able to be myself and not who I always try to be.” Students further reflected on the ways that DU PAI workshops allowed them to explore and experiment with their conceptions of self. One theatre student wrote, “Self expression was so cool and allowed me to tap into the creative part of my brain.” Another theatre student spoke about finding new versions of himself: “DU PAI is unique in that it is the only program that recommends participants to be who they want to be, and practice who they want to become.”

Empathy and Perspective Taking

While only 11 participants talked about empathy and perspective taking, these sentiments were complex and warrant illumination. Participants largely described their experiences of authentic self-expression as dyadic: their comfort in expressing their true selves was connected with feeling heard, seen, and understood. As one literature student shared, "I found that people were more willing to look at others' point of view in this setting." A student in a creative writing workshop reflected on their experience by saying, "I felt like I could be myself. I felt that I was understood for my uniqueness that I have. I felt welcomed and felt like I belonged." A theatre student wrote, "My experience was profound in the sense of self-realization and my importance to others."

Similarly, DU PAI students reflected on seeing and understanding their classmates differently after taking arts-based workshops. One theatre student spoke to being able to understand others' motivations: "We were more in tune with the *why* of each other. That's what mattered" [emphasis added]. Another theatre student wrote that after the class, "I was able to see others as individuals not as products of society." One student participating in a literature workshop wrote, "It changed my whole viewpoint of the people I live with. A true game changer!" Overall, a number of participants expressed gratitude for the opportunities to see and be seen differently through the arts-based work. One summed it up by saying, "Art is the window of the "true soul" of incarcerated people. Thank you."

Belonging and Connection

Given increased experiences of sharing and perspective taking, it is not surprising that workshop participants spoke frequently ($n = 55$) about experiencing a sense of *belonging and connection*, or even improving their relationships during the class. One creative writing student stated simply, "I feel a sense of belonging and acceptance when in here." A theatre student wrote, "I was amazed at how connected everyone was and how they opened up to each other. It has been very positive." Participants used words like "community," "family," and "brotherhood" to describe the bonds formed with their classmates during the workshop. One theatre student wrote, "One of the greatest things about this workshop was the community that formed through it." Further, many participants spoke of forming connections outside of their current circle – a rare circumstance in prison. One theatre student characterized this by noting, "People in this group formed unlikely friendships." A creative movement student summed up this idea by writing, "The walls came down, the smiles came out, we came together—a rare and beautiful thing in prison."

Creative Collaboration

Several workshop participants ($n = 11$) described the connections experienced during the class in terms of collaboration, mutuality, and "synergy" – especially in comparison to other programs or spaces in prison. One creative writing student wrote, "It wasn't a competition - we were able to work toward one goal together instead of individually working on a goal separately. We were able to get to know each other that way." Another - a theatre student - shared "[It was] life changing in the aspect that we were

all equal and together for the whole process.” Participants also reflected on the unique experience of getting to create together: “I believe this was an experience where most other programs just go about what they are, we created something from nothing. Amazing!” A creative writing student wrote, “Many people have very different ways, but when we all come together we can create something amazing.” Participants emphasized that this experience was different from other experiences they had been exposed to in prison. “[The movement workshop] was completely different. The focus of creativity, expression, community, & humanity is not a common combination in prison.”

Joy, Freedom

Again and again, participants (n = 27) spoke about their experiences in DU PAI workshops as fun and joyful. They wrote things like, “I enjoyed it very much and had an amazing time, lots of laughs, and learned some new things along the way,” and, “the joy I have when I see [the facilitators] is beyond words.” A related theme among the reflections of DU PAI students was that of freedom. Beyond merely enjoying their coursework, participants expressed a sense that their experiences in the workshops were humanizing and liberating. A theatre student wrote simply, “The experience I had at DU PAI made me feel free.” A number of other students reflected on feeling “normal” during the workshop, “alive, if only for a moment,” or “like people, human beings, rather than caged animals.” Others wrote about feeling temporarily released from the daily oppression of imprisonment. One student in a theatre workshop wrote, “This was a breath of fresh air in a stagnant swamp.” One creative movement student spoke about art as a liberatory practice beneficial not only to people in prison, but to all people:

We’re all in prison. For me it’s concrete and steel, for someone else it might be work and routine. But art is the pathway back to our humanity, an inward journey we share with others, reconnecting to ourselves and the world around us.

Course and Facilitator Qualities

While participants of DU PAI workshops were not asked specifically “why” or “how” they believed that workshops were impactful, many students reflected on qualities of the courses or the facilitators that were important to them. These included: *safety, caring and respect, participation, and emotional involvement*. These themes are addressed only briefly here, though some were quite prevalent throughout the post-workshop reflections.

Safety. A number of participants (n = 23) directly described feeling safe in DU PAI workshops. Participants wrote things like, “I felt safe in this class,” and “I feel more comfortable with this class than with many others.” They also noted feeling trust, non-judgment, and acceptance from the facilitators and their peers: “This workshop brought in an atmosphere of acceptance from the onset which has carried throughout the whole process.”

Caring and Respect. Participants also frequently ($n = 19$) commented on the caring of the facilitators or feeling respected and cared for generally throughout the class. Participants made comments such as, “People were very invested and respectful,” and, “The kindness and energy were out of this world.” Many students named how much this stood out for them in the prison context. One wrote, “I felt listened to. Most officers are only looking to get rid of you, but [the facilitators] took time to listen and I appreciated that.” A theatre student spoke directly to their facilitators in the evaluation, saying, “You made me feel human after 22 years of not feeling real or that we matter.”

Participation. Students ($n = 26$) noted at length the participatory and interactive nature of the workshops. One theatre student commented that there was, “Much more interaction, much free-er interaction because of the “vehicle” it was presented in.” A literature student observed how the voluntariness of participation influenced the atmosphere: “I liked the environment created by the fact that everyone volunteered for this. In all my years people didn’t do this stuff and the moods in the other classes were not as open and honest as the conversations we had.” Participants also commented on the role of their facilitators in encouraging engagement, saying things like, “The workshop “facilitator” created an atmosphere of inclusion, regardless of one’s shyness, abilities,” and “[The facilitator] was amazing. She didn’t force us. She didn’t go by a plan. She was free flowing and she let us create. I always wanted to do that.”

Emotional Involvement. Finally, several participants in the sample ($n = 12$) described their coursework as going beneath the surface, involving them at a deeper emotional level, or even verging on therapeutic. One student in a theatre workshop reflected, “This was a unique experience. I am involved with a number of programs here, but this one made me feel emotionally involved.” Another theatre student pondered, “This program touches on my needs more without directly focusing on them which is nice. It’s like I’m being tricked into being better.” A literature student observed, “I felt this class had dual purposes for me. Yes, from an academic standpoint it was stimulating, but the class also served as a very calming and therapeutic experience.”

Discussion

The quantitative findings of this evaluation demonstrate improvement on all measured social-emotional constructs from pre to posttest. Nine survey items measuring self-efficacy, community connection, and skill attainment showed statistically significant improvement between pretest and posttest, across a range of social-emotional domains (Table 2). Qualitative results suggest that DU PAI participants experience learning, growth, and discovery; opening up; authentic self-expression; empathy and perspective taking; belonging and connection; creative collaboration; joy and freedom, and point to program mechanisms which fostered meaningful participant experiences, including participation, caring, respect, and emotional involvement.

While the focus of these workshops was the arts, skills participants described attaining through these workshops were largely social-emotional. In the quantitative survey,

participants evidenced significant growth in a range of skills such as their comfort speaking in front of a group, considering themselves as leaders in the facility, and identifying ways to process what they were thinking and feeling. Through qualitative responses, participants briefly spoke of the arts skills attained, but often linked those arts skills to deeper growth and discovery about themselves, and even a changed “paradigm on different aspects of life.” In alignment with prior research, our findings point to the role of prison arts programs in fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem beyond generalized skill attainment (Brewster, 2014; Harkins et al., 2011; Miner-Romanoff, 2016 to name a few). While prison arts programs offer arts skills, they also offer a range of social-emotional skills which can be applied to circumstances and contexts well beyond the workshop setting.

Our findings offer compelling evidence of the social connections and relationships built through DU PAI programming; of the nine quantitative items which showed significant improvement from pre to posttest, five speak to relational and community experiences. Participants reported feeling more connected to others in their workshop, feeling like community members of their institution and of DU PAI, feeling more like they affect other people in positive ways, and more confident in their ability to deal with conflict in a healthy way. Our qualitative findings support and further nuance these quantitative results; participants speak of belonging and connection experienced through DU PAI workshops, and describe the deep sense of community formed in the workshops, often in tandem with creative collaboration. Participants’ sense of community was not monolithic - but one of “unlikely friendships” between people who may not normally connect in prison. Participants recognized that this feeling of belonging was rare in prison, and only possible because the “walls came down” between participants during the program. In other words, the literal and metaphysical walls constructed between people fell away during DU PAI workshops, and thus connection was possible. These findings align with prior research that shows prison arts programs support development of communication skills and help build relationships through shared experiences (Marie Heard et al., 2013).

Prior literature has also shown that prison arts programs offer meaningful relational experiences for participants, including fostering trusting environments and relationships (Dunphy, 1999; Marie Heard et al., 2013) and bolstering empathy and social perspective taking (Albertson, 2015; Blinn, 1995). While our participants did endorse overall growth on quantitative survey items asking about trust and empathy between the pre and posttest, these changes were not statistically significant. Our qualitative findings, however, tell a more compelling story. Participants spoke about *opening up* and *authentically expressing* themselves. They described that facilitators fostered emotional safety through an “atmosphere of acceptance from the onset.” While these experiences do not explicitly name trust, they illustrate an environment which fosters authenticity and safety – vital ingredients of trusting relationships and spaces. Our qualitative findings also point to *empathy and perspective taking* between themselves and other participants. Participants spoke of this in a dyadic way - they felt seen by others, and saw others for who they are. We often speak of empathy and perspective taking as seeing others for who they are – and our quantitative questions leaned on

this trope. Yet our participants remind us through their qualitative responses that empathy is dyadic: in order to know others, you also have to feel known.

Participants used notably symbolic and descriptive language when discussing participation in DU PAI workshops in comparison to other programs and spaces in their institutional settings. They described feeling like *human beings rather than caged animals*; like they could take a *breath of fresh air in a stagnant swamp*; like they were *alive, if only for a moment*. These images evoke a sense of liberation often unheard in carceral settings, and in doing so, invoke the work of Augusto Boal, who advocated for using art to galvanize social transformation and counter hegemonic practices (Boal, 1979). Prior research has supported this notion that the arts inspire liberatory experiences by bolstering participants' ability to ask critical questions and interrogate social conditions (Chappell, 2005). We do not want to overstate the extent to which our evaluation speaks to liberatory experiences, yet participants' qualitative responses suggest the need to interrogate the liberatory potential of artistic practices in prison.

But what is the role of a liberatory space within a constrained milieu? Case and Hunter (2012) have proposed the construct of "counterspaces" as settings which promote resilience among oppressed groups in oppressive contexts. Through narrative work, acts of resistance, and relationship building with others who share experiences of marginality, individuals are able to access a sense of personal and collective worth in counterspaces. In a constrained and often inhumane prison milieu, arts programs may serve as counterspaces which make people feel human. Prior research has shown that "offender-labeled" individuals (Case and Hunter's term designating involvement with the justice system) have found utility in participation in counterspaces. After participating in a 6-month community action program, "offender-labeled" youth who had prior contact with juveniles justice systems found that narrative storytelling and working together on community action projects allowed participants to reimagine their individual and collective identities beyond the "offender" label and understand their broader role in society (Case & Hunter, 2014). In our own work, participants echoed this sentiment - one shared, "I felt like a normal person, not just an inmate." Limited empirical or evaluative research has explored the role of arts-based programs as potential counterspaces in carceral contexts; the present inquiry sheds light upon the potential value of arts programs as counterspaces which promote resistance narratives and healing for incarcerated participants and invites deeper more focused research on this topic.

Implications for Practitioners & Communities

Our evaluation suggests that participants in DU PAI programs experience improved social connection and relationships. We know from prior research that social support is a protective factor in resilience against posttraumatic symptoms, and contributes to overall wellbeing (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes, & Southwick, 2015). Given the high rates of trauma exposure individuals experience before prison and while incarcerated (Briere, Agee, & Dietrich, 2016), programs which foster social support thus offer a viable opportunity to cultivate meaningful and rewarding relationships for incarcerated participants. Educators who work in correctional spaces, such as teachers and teaching

artists, may consider social and relational development as key aims of their programming across arts programming and a wide range of subject areas.

Our evaluation points to several course and facilitator qualities which make prison arts programs impactful, including *safety, caring and respect, participation, and emotional involvement*. While our evaluation does not use an intervention design to identify specific mediators which facilitate change, we can view these qualities as potential *mechanisms of action* which reflect the sequential and/or temporal processes through which change occurs in a program or intervention (Kazdin, 2007). Prior research has looked at the mechanisms of action which foster “new possible selves” among incarcerated individuals who participate in restorative justice interventions; such research has found that certain group norms and behaviors which stood in contrast to participants’ prior experiences prompted individuals to test out and act upon new possible selves (Armour & Sliva, 2016). Our work echoes this prior research by suggesting that certain group norms, such as safety, caring, and respect, foster group participation and emotional involvement among incarcerated participants. While future empirical research should further explore these potential mechanisms of action, prison arts program facilitators may consider building in intentional routines and practices which foster safety, caring and respect, participation, and emotional involvement if they want to support participants in feeling connected and generative.

Growing evidence links a positive prison climate to enhanced safety in prisons (Bennett & Shuker, 2018). Our evaluation offers some evidence that arts programs may improve prison culture, including relationships between incarcerated participants as well as a sense of community within the carceral institution. Our participants spoke explicitly about the safety they felt within the DU PAI program, and this sense of safety may expand beyond the program and into the prison culture at large. While we did not explore disciplinary outcomes such as instances of violence or disruptive behavior in our own evaluation, prior research on prison arts programs has found that participation in arts programs is associated with reduced disciplinary infractions among participants (Brewster, 2014; Ezell & Levy, 2003; Moller, 2011). Thus, prison arts programs may have the capacity both to improve relationships and wellbeing among incarcerated participants while also reducing harm in prison settings. Prison administrators who are working to build safer prison cultures and climates should consider arts programs, along with other programs which utilize similar mechanisms of action, as partners who can support and actualize this aim. Prison arts programs may in fact support “dynamic security” in carceral facilities (Parker, 2007) wherein positive relationships between prison staff and incarcerated individuals support a culture of safety for all inside.

Many prison-based programs are designed around the premise of “rehabilitation,” or more specifically, preparing prisoners for release and re-entry. However, a majority of DU PAI participants are serving sentences exceeding 40 years, and over 38% are serving life sentences (including “virtual life,” life with parole, and life without parole). We have identified the role that DU PAI may play in offering participants a deeper sense of liberation, hope, and purpose when creating meaningful lives for themselves inside prison as well as out. However, it is important for prison-based arts practitioners to understand and articulate the scope of their programming and to consider what it

may mean for participants when a workshop – or entire program – ends. In our own state, program shifts often follow shifts in leadership at the state or facility level. DU PAI participants articulated this very fear through their pretest qualitative responses – many expressed gratitude for the program while simultaneously fearing its imminent end. Practitioners who facilitate programs like DU PAI, wherein outside teachers or teaching artists enter facilities for a defined time then leave, should consider how to safely and supportively conclude their meaningful and humanizing interactions with incarcerated participants.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This evaluation offers evidence that arts programs may facilitate a constellation of positive outcomes for participants across the internal, relational, and community spheres. There are inherent limitations of the pretest posttest design used in our evaluation, as we did not use a comparison or control group and could not match participants pretest to posttest due to the optional nature of identifying data on surveys. Given these realities, we are unable to assume that the DU PAI program is the sole facilitator of the witnessed positive changes (as we described early on, there is a department-wide change initiative ongoing), and we cannot suggest the generalizability of our findings across groups with similar or dissimilar characteristics. While all DU PAI workshops share an overarching aim, each workshop was unique and each facilitator brings their own expertise to their teaching practice. As we did not conduct fidelity checks across workshops, we are unable to analyze the unique experience of participating in each distinct workshop. Future evaluation research should engage comparison groups, and also examine experiences and outcomes across facility context, workshop characteristics (course content and format; facilitator experience, identity, and approach), and participant characteristics (race, gender, prior life experiences and experiences in prison), as well as the interactions between them (e.g., facilitator race and participant race). Furthermore, understanding attrition patterns better would help us to interpret unmatched pre-post data.

Our survey instrument was generated for the purposes of evaluating our program in relation to its aims and has not yet been tested for reliability and validity. A variety of original – and a few validated – instruments have been used across prison arts program research, yet there is not a shared instrument which has been used broadly across many program evaluations. We see value in working towards developing a validated survey instrument measuring prison arts program outcomes as a standardized measure for program evaluation. While our evaluation suggests a variety of positive short-term impacts associated with participation in arts programs, we also suggest that future research examine long term outcomes of participation. For participants who will experience release from prison, this may include post-release outcomes such as recidivism rates, vocational, and educational outcomes. However, we are perhaps more interested in learning more about the ability of arts programming and practices to inspire continued arts practice, improve relationships, and offer an ongoing sense of meaning and purpose that contributes to the personal resilience of incarcerated

artists, many of whom may face life sentences or who will face continued challenges upon release.

Finally, this evaluation offers ample evidence that DU PAI programs meaningfully improve the lives of participants. However, if the arts is “a window to the soul of incarcerated people,” as one of our participants suggested, it is worthy to investigate the effects of arts programs and practices on their witnesses as well. Might the arts indeed be a pathway to connection and communication between the “free and unfree spaces”? (Meiners & Ross, 2019, p. 26). This evaluation points to many remaining questions about the liberatory potential of the arts in carceral spaces, along with the personal, relational, and collective impacts of programs which open doors to arts practice among incarcerated people.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Apryl Alexander and Dr. Jeffrey Lin for formative work in the development of this evaluation. We would also like to thank Dr. Ashley Hamilton and Julie Rada of the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative for providing important background about the program aims and design and reflecting on practice implications of this evaluation from the perspective of the teaching artists in prison.

Declaration of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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