

## **Art-ternative to School Suspension**

(working paper)

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**(IN FINAL PREPARATION)**

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**by**

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In California, over 300,000 students are suspended annually. In Florida, the number exceeds 200,000 students, while Texas surpasses the 300,000 mark.<sup>1</sup> Over one-half million students in just three states are suspended annually. Nationally, more than one in nine students received out of school suspension by the time they graduate high school

The reasons for suspension vary from the mundane, such as a bad haircut, like the kindergarten student suspended for a Mohawk-styled cut<sup>2</sup>, to the very serious, including assaults on a student or teacher.

As a group, suspended students are more likely to drop out and end up in the juvenile justice system than students who are not suspended<sup>3</sup>. For many students, once the disciplinary process has begun, they continue in the punitive system for the remainder of their school career<sup>4</sup>.

Other research has demonstrated how suspension may be counterproductive for positive student outcomes. The costs to the community for addressing the needs of the students so they

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<sup>1</sup> Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P. III, and Booth E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. New York, NY; College Station, TX: Council of State Governments Justice Center; Public Policy Research Institute of Texas A&M University. [http://justicecenter.csg.org/files/Breaking\\_Schools\\_Rules\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://justicecenter.csg.org/files/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.daytondailynews.com/news/news/local/haircut-keeps-kindergartener-at-home/nXDqS/>

<sup>3</sup> Willoughby, B. (2012). Suspending Hope. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review*, 78(3), 54-58.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Xitao, F. (2011). High Suspension Schools and Dropout Rates for Black and White Students. *Education & Treatment Of Children (West Virginia University Press)*, 34(2), 167-192.

are less likely to drop out or enter the juvenile justice pipeline are much less when addressed earlier in the student's life than later<sup>5</sup>.

What happens to students when they are suspended? While some students may show improved behavior in the near term, for others it increases behaviors that may lead to more punitive actions. What is the impact on the academic performance of the student? Does anyone really think that keeping students out of school will improve academic performance? In fact, the more often a student is absent from school the worse the outcomes for the student<sup>6</sup>.

The use of alternative programming has emerged in an effort to lead to better outcomes for students than suspension.

One program assessed for efficacy is the Positive Alternative to School Suspension (PASS) that was implemented in three middle schools. The students who took part in the program had a history of past suspensions, infractions, and disruptions. In fact, the program was designed as an alternative to adjudication as at the time of the program's design, the district's zero tolerance policy criminalized disruptive behaviors.

Students participated in the program for eight weeks in two 90 minute sessions a week. The art chosen for the program was *Capoeira*, which is a Brazilian form of martial arts and dance, although other iterations of the program, in other settings, also used visual arts and music. In addition to the dance movements, youth who were reluctant to dance learned play the percussive instruments used in this art form. Capoeira was a good option as it was an energetic

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<sup>5</sup> Maryland State Department of, E. (2010). Report to the Maryland State Board of Education on the Provision of Educational Services to Long-Term Suspended and Expelled Students in Maryland Public Schools. *Maryland State Department Of Education*,

<sup>6</sup> Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Xitao, F. (2011). High Suspension Schools and Dropout Rates for Black and White Students. *Education & Treatment Of Children (West Virginia University Press)*, 34(2), 167-192.

art form. After sitting in classes all day, many of the students were ready to release their pent up energy.

The classes were taught by artists who were trained in this type of intervention programming. They were taught ways to infuse core skills into the art programming. These skills, identified in the research as being central to resilience, were anger management, communication, and problem solving. In addition to infusing those skills in the art lessons, direct instruction in the core skills was part of the warm up and cool down exercises. These exercises we found to be an important part of the transition that student makes from a classroom frame of reference to a non-academic after school program.

Why art, whether it is performing or visual? Does it offer any advantages over other activities that are commonly used as structured programming to youth development, such as sports? This is a question that deserves some attention and while the data are not definitive, there are logical reasons that make art a useful means to effect personal change. Beyond the simple question of choice and preference - not everyone likes sports or has the abilities to play a sport effectively, or without embarrassment - there are rationales that seem inherent in the process of creating art itself.

Art, by its nature, values diversity and individuality; conformity is not well regarded. If 20 people were asked to draw a picture of their home, we expect and want 20 different images. We would be quite surprised if there were even a handful of images that matched each other. The instructors in the PASS program were taught how to encourage this individuality and to facilitate its expression. This focus on the individuality is an important distinction between *arts intervention programming* and *art classes*. Art classes teach

technique to the end of creating skillful art. Arts intervention programming, on the other hand, teaches expressiveness without concern for the quality of the product. Techniques are taught, but only marginally is it geared towards skill building. It is nice but not essential, if skillful art were produced. Meaningful art is the focus.

Social interactions with other students and with the instructor are a key component to the programming. It is through these conversations that problems are introduced along with a process for resolving them. Problems typically crop up all the time, but ‘planned’ problems could be identified through the process of creating thematic art. For instance, a visual art teacher may instruct the students to draw an image of someone being bullied, or if a performing art, to act out that scenario. He or she facilitates the conversation and the problem solving aspects by asking a series of directed questions such as: How does the victim feel? How does the bully feel? What are some bystander reactions? How can you express the different feelings? These questions are designed to model a systematic process of understanding a situation. The instructions than may ask people to draw a picture (or act out a scenario) of solving the problem.

However, the facilitation cannot stop there. Communication is one of the skills that are important for the youth to learn. The drawing or painting provides an opportunity for exploration of the scenario, but it is only through describing it to others in a non-judgmental environment, that youth learn to ‘own’ their understanding of the issue and their own views. This creates a means for self-reflection which is seen as important to the learning process in general.

What has the research shown us to date? As an advocate I am disappointed to have to report that the field still awaits more definitive research. The research has shown promise and,

across studies, the reports indicate positive change in social skills, behavior, and in student's mental health. From the science point of view however, there still need to be large scale studies that use random assignment - the gold standard of research. Disappointment aside, the list of positive indications is impressive and includes among other changes significant improvements in problem solving and communication skills<sup>7</sup>, reduction in irritability, aggressive behavior, and rule breaking<sup>8</sup>.

In terms of actual benefits to society and to individual, one can look at the Prodigy program, which the in school PASS program was based on. Prodigy was designed as an alternative to adjudication for youth who had been arrested. The 12 month recidivism rate for these juveniles was among the lowest in Florida at less than 10%<sup>9</sup>.

## **Summary**

Structured art programming that is aimed towards meaningful experiences and that facilitate the learning of social skills appear to offer positive alternatives to punitive actions. The research, even though currently non definitive, indicates improvements in social and emotional skills and in mental health. More definitive was the relationship between those who participated in art programming as an alternative to adjudication, upon being arrested. Those participants experience a recidivism rate under 10%, compared to the norm 15% in the state.

Schools are where youth spend most of their time outside the home. How these students do in school and beyond are important issues of us as a society. Do we want to exasperate the

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<sup>7</sup> Rapp-Paglicci, L., Stewart, C., & Rowe, W. (2009). Evaluating the effects of the Prodigy Cultural Arts Program on symptoms of mental health disorders in at-risk and adjudicated youths. *Best Practices in Mental Health, An International Journal*, 5 (1), 65-73.

<sup>8</sup> Rapp-Paglicci, L., Stewart, C., & Rowe, W. (2012). Improving Outcomes for at-risk Youth: Findings from the Prodigy Cultural Arts Program. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 9 (5), 512-523.

<sup>9</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. 2009-2010 Comprehensive Accountability Report. <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/reports/car>.

issues with student misbehavior and non learning or is it worth the effort to create structure interventions that keep the students in school while teaching them the skills necessary to function well? Art programming, that has a structure to it and that is oriented towards meaningful activity, not artistic skills, continues to offer significant promise in being able to achieve those goals.