

Poetic Justice:

Juvenile Justice alternatives and the road to a Poetic Criminology

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Poetic Justice:
Juvenile Justice alternatives and the road to a Poetic Criminology

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that incarceration is ineffective in rehabilitating justice involved youth (Save the Kids, 2013) (Rubenstein, 2014). On the other hand, alternatives to incarceration have shown promise in their ability to reduce delinquent behavior among youth (Nocella, 2014). Alternatives to incarceration that incorporate the arts in some form may be an especially important part of rehabilitating juvenile justice-involved youth. In this research, programs that use poetry are identified and then reviewed to determine if they show promise in aiding in the rehabilitation of juvenile justice involved youth. These programs vary in their methods, but often ask youth to write, evaluate, synthesize, and analyze poetry. The term "poetic justice " refers to the potential for juvenile justice involved youth to be rehabilitated through engaging in the arts, and more specifically poetry.

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Section I: Introduction

a. Introduction/Problem

Many Juvenile-Justice-Involved youth lack healthy social bonds, pro-social peers, and quality education.¹ These socially strained youth are at-risk for engaging in delinquent behavior. When youth become involved with the juvenile justice system as a result of their delinquent behavior, it is imperative that the system is focused on their rehabilitation, not punishment. Research on incarcerated youth has shown that such youth are more likely to reoffend than their delinquent peers who were processed using alternatives to incarceration (JJDP, 2008).

Given that alternatives to incarceration show promise in rehabilitating juvenile justice involved youth, it is vital to learn more about programs that focus on rehabilitation. Programs that incorporate the arts to inspire change in juvenile delinquents have shown promise in their ability to reduce delinquent behavior (JJDP, 2008). For example, programs that focus on having delinquent youth write and listen to poetry have inspired youth to change their behavior by creating trauma healing spaces, and places for youth to redefine their past through poetry (Nocella, 2014). This approach may work by improving the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-determination of Juvenile Justice –Involved youth (Bazemore, Stinchcomb, & Leip., 2014).

b. Purpose of Research

While research has shown that some rehabilitation programs for youth that incorporate poetry are promising, an evaluation of which programs work and why has not yet been established. In this paper, youth programs that use poetry education, writing, and performing as alternatives to youth jail and probation are reviewed to examine their potential efficacy in rehabilitating youth. The research will conclude by identifying the elements of programs that involved poetry that seem to be effective in rehabilitating juvenile justice involved youth.

c. Contributions to the field

Poetic Justice is a literary non-carceral alternative for Juvenile Justice-Involved youth for non-sexually based crimes. Writing is a tool of artistic expression and a way to share stories with the community at-large. Poetic Justice stimulates the value of formerly incarcerated youth's experience through the literary reading, writing and learning process. This work creates a safe opportunity and alternative for JJI-involved youth to transform themselves through cathartic healing justice, and peace-making (Appleman., et al, 2014).

Poetic Justice would help participants redefine themselves through re-storying of their negative self-efficacy and personal thoughts of brokenness. Further research and progression of Poetic Justice seeking to lay the foundation to create a poetic criminology that advances the ethnographies of JJJ-involved youth. Poetic Justice expands the criminological imagination by researching programs surpassing the Juvenile Justice-involved youth carceral experience (Jacobsen, 2014).

d. Methodology

Primarily, existing literature will be used to evaluate juvenile justice programs that use poetry to rehabilitate youth. This research reviewed eight programs from around the United States that incorporated writing or poetry to aid in the rehabilitation of JII-involved youth. A description of each program is provided along with any research results that focused on program effectiveness.

e. Outcome anticipated

Poetic Justice is a literary measure to form peer bonds, eliminate youth trauma, and forge literary expression of Juvenile-Justice involved youth (Li, 2004). Findings may show that when JJI-involved youth are provided opportunities to better understand themselves and the world through writing, they are less likely to engage in delinquent acts than those who are not provided with this opportunity. Research of the Poetic Justice models and programs will encompass the start of a new pedagogy of Poetic Criminology. There is not a “Journal of Poetic Criminology.” to guide and reference towards further Poetic Justice programs. Hopefully this research will be a start to create Poetic Criminology to both promote Juvenile-Justice-Involved youth writings, and Poetic Justice programs (Jacobsen, 2014).

Section II: Program Literature Review

There are many programs that use poetry to create positive changes for JII-youth. Programs differ slightly in demographics, methodology, structure, and resources. While this study does not include all programs, it includes eight programs located country wide. This section includes descriptions of these programs and reviews internal findings, and external research about their efficacy when possible.

a.Girl Time

Girl Time is a writing program for formerly incarcerated girls ages 14-17 in a post-incarceration setting. Girl Time participants express themselves through writing, reading, and creating poetry for the use of playwriting. Poetry is used in brainstorming activities for the creation of plays, acting cues, and the performing of theatre. Girl Time tries to have participants redefine their pre-incarcerated and post-incarcerated lives. Like many Poetic Justice programs, Girl Time has the transformative foresight to confront issues about gender, sexuality, racism, white privilege, and heteronormative patriarchy within both in and outside the prisons (Winn, 2019).

For formerly incarcerated girl participants, emotions and uncertainty can be expressed in the writing. Girl time participants describes creative work as a 3-D location, because "writing was also the place where formerly incarcerated girls could confront anger, disappointment, and fear as well as anticipate next steps (Winn, 2011, p. 133)."

"Throughout the program participants find solace from their criminally involved experiences through their writing. Participants become the person within the margins of the paper. The participants become accountable and find reasons to create self-efficacy and self-esteem. One

participant says that she writes poetry to “put what I been through without saying it or without the telling of the whole story. I write poems and write them on my Myspace page (Winn, 2019, p. 101).” Because of the immense literary talent, Girl Time organizers are constantly in bewilderment why justice-involved girls are detained. The program has seen so many formerly incarcerated participants as closeted writers till they came to the program (Winn, 2019).

c. Dramatic Healing, Trauma-Informed Musical Theatre

Dramatic Healing, Trauma-Informed Musical Theatre, is a program for formerly incarcerated girls to create scripts for produced plays. The program directly deals with formerly incarcerated girl trauma through theatre. Writing poetry is to help performers brainstorm as well as to help with their inner voices but the program uses the poetic process as culture-creation (Palidofskyi & Stolbach, 2012).

To perform poetry and put a voice behind the words is essential:

Discussing, writing, and performing their experiences and translating them into a single, communal dramatic arc helped the girls to safely process the events and to see the similarities in their stories. As the girls reenacted these events, they came to understand the connections between their past experiences, emotional responses, and choices (Palidofskyi & Stolbach, 2012, p. 156).”

Dramatic Healing: Trauma-Informed Musical Theatre program organizers see the links between the mental health, depression, anxiety, acting out of anger, and trauma connecting to drug abuse. What was needed was positive influence with peer socialization though culture creation. “The integration and mastery of trauma, formerly incarcerated girls can imagine a

future in which they have choices rather than being controlled by the past (Palidofskyi & Stolbach, 2012, p.256).”

Unlike many Poetic Justice programs, in Dramatic Healing there is internal self-evaluation regarding participant progress. Long-term work includes JJI-youth taking their “emotional temperatures” day-to-day. There are daily games to develop sense of learning and of extra-curricular playing. When the group is at a ready emotional positive place, then can the cultural creation start. Combination of cognizant self-evaluation of internal emotions and pre-creative activities helps JJI-youth’s artistic ambitions. These ambitions are key to help with trauma, health, and quantify treatment goal-reaching (Palidofskyi & Stolbach, 2012).

d. Arts-based

Arts-based is afterschool program that supplies youth training in multi-faceted art genres. The program has supplied a great framework for Poetic Justice. Along with many Poetic Justice-spotlighted programs, Art-based is supervisory in a safe environment. Different from the other Poetic Justice models, the research was a conceptualization of the program supplying information on how the program worked or did not worked.

Arts-based supports finding new skills, peer positive, competencies, working out attitudes towards future positive factors. Impacts include improved self-esteem, improved self-efficacy, and increased interest in healthy activities. Long term goals include increased community involvement, increased academic success, reduced problem and delinquent behaviors (Clawson, & Coolbaugh, 2001).

Intermediate Outcomes include participants change of attitudes to peers at school (Clawson, & Coolbaugh, 2001). Arts-based stresses “Reduced alienation from others,

improved self-esteem, improved self-efficacy, increased interest in healthy activities, increased community involvement, increased academic success, reduced problem and delinquent behaviors (Clawson & Coolbaugh, 2001, p. 2).”

e. Pongo Youth Writing Project

Pongo Writing Project is a program that leads to sharing, reading, posting, and publishing incarcerated youth writings in both an incarcerated and non-incarcerating setting. Pongo creates therapeutic, healing, from the support by peer-driven practices that are a template against militarization, rehabilitation, and restorative justice models. Poems are quick to write for short term and long-term projects. Program organizers say that poetry "is a skill that people can use to help themselves over and over again through a lifetime (Gold, 2014, p. 13).”

Pongo does its own internal outcome research. Pongo’s surveys 2005 and 2012 with 726 youth overwhelming say that Pongo writing program creates a sense of pride in formerly incarcerated work. As per the Pongo Writing website, writing is a tool to regulate emotions(pongoteenwriting.org). Many participants are afraid of failure, because they have been socialized to think only negatively while incarcerated. It is during the Pongo Writing Project that JII-youth find out a, "discovery of own choices and that develops their resilience” (Gold, 2014, p.23).

f. InsideOUT

InsideOut Writers is a writing program that works with incarcerated youth in Los Angeles. There is a sign on the wall of the program that have the words of Victor Hugo: “He who opens a door to a school, closes a prison (Hugo cited in Rubenstein, 2014).” IOU lets juvenile-justice involved youth take charge of their own life with something positive through

their writing. “One by one the students begin to open up with each other, thinking about their lives, while working through understanding their emotions and actions. Building self-trust lies at the root of every piece of writing” (Rubenstein, 2014).

InsideOUT Writers promotes self-efficacy for formerly incarcerated youth to “find something to be good at” so they can be the person they want. While in InsideOUT program, many participants gain self-esteem and social capital to know that culture creating is a great self-actualization. A student cited in Rubenstein says that “[s]ometimes I feel that I’ve been a failure so long I can’t succeed, but I know I have to let that pressure out, and not hold it in” (Cited in Rubenstein, 2014, para, 4). A participant writes that “[w]riting makes me not want to care about the bad things anymore” (Cited in Rubenstein, 2014, para 5).

InsideOUT advisors say that the participants change dramatically positive with the program. The advisor reminisces onto see them discover ways that they themselves can change the world and to become the best version of themselves, it’s incredible to see that happen. The transformative process through InsideOut writers has been seen by advisors to the program (Rubenstein, 2011).

One advisor writes that:

“When I was transferred to state prison, the one thing that I always share with people is that I really give credit to InsideOUT Writers as being my salvation, my way to survive prison and not have to resort to any type of substance abuse, suicide attempts, or anything like that” (BJA, 2011, para 5).

The Bureau of Juvenile Assistance observed that “[t]here are so few programs like InsideOut Writers that are happening in juvenile centers across the nation that I think this is a case study of

what is successful and I'm hoping that other systems will look into investing in similar programs" (BJA, 2008, para 8).

g. Street Poets

Street Poets harnesses the healing power of poetry and music to save lives, create community, and transform culture in Los Angeles. Street Poets uses Juvenile Justice Involved-youth voices through writing, performing, and creative works to break at-risk youth violence. Street Poets' work towards systematic change, individual change, that focuses on struggles that "celebrates healing". Street Poets creative process is a force for individual and community transformation (streetpoets.org, 2020).

Street Poets uses healing as their mantra for poetry, music, to transform participants and community. This group uses poetry and music in workshops, performances, open mics, and mentoring events. Unlike all the Poetic Justice groups in this study, Street Poets, has a Poetry in Motion Van. The Poetry Motion Van is to be used as transportation as a both delivery service for poetry and a mobile recording service. The Street Poets vehicle issues transformative and peace-making justice to creatively connect community to where it is needed. This directly empowers the marginalized youth to express themselves (streetpoetsinc.com, 2020).

As per the Street Poet's Vision, the group connects with youth geographically. Street Poets also heavily discusses healing and trauma:

"Street Poets' outreach has extended from prison cells to public school classrooms, Street Poet work has changed from prison, public school classrooms, inner-city projects to indigenous lands and even internationally. "Street Poets operates with the understanding that if we are to restore balance to ourselves and to the world, we need to be able to step through our fears to the gifts

that too often lie dormant beside our deepest wounds. If we're afraid to explore or even acknowledge these wounds, we condemn ourselves to the same tired cycle of addictive consumption, violence and despair. We become like modern machinery, slaves to a system propelling us toward our own destruction" (streetpoetsinc.com, 2020).

Street Poets methodology incorporates an eclectic assortment of variables. These contain using personal transformation, restorative justice, initiation and rites, awareness in different genre of poetry, vocalization, and history and use of the griot. Street has recordings of their participants reading their poems on their website (streetpoetsinc.com, 2020).

h. Poetry Behind the Walls

The national group Save the Kids has an activist poetry programs that is based on the hip-hop medium, poetry slams, and publishing. These actions have shown to have great interest to JII youth. Transformative Justice is based on abolition of police, prisons, and capitalism. Transformative Justice stresses that capitalism creates victimizations, revictimizations, traumatic stressors. Capitalism in turn revictimizes the victim and turns the offender into state victim though the convoluted and contradictory nature of the criminal justice system. "Social justice activists often identify the oppressor as the enemy. While this is understandable, transformative justice actually challenges this perspective: No one is an enemy; instead, everyone needs to be involved in a voluntary, safe, constructive, and critical dialogue about accountability, responsibility, and the initiative to heal (Nocella, 2014, p.216)."

Nocella (2014) writes the difference between the youth being blamed for being criminal actors and just youth actions:

“We make a clear distinction between actions and kids; actions can be bad, but not kids. We are committed to helping youth because they are our future, and if we do not help them, we will not have one. We believe in respecting all no matter what their gender, ability, race, economic status, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, health, age, or nationality” (Nocella, 2014, p. 45).

Poetry Behind the Walls focuses on recognizing incarcerated youth poets and making sure their voices are published. Getting published helps with self-efficacy, self-esteem, and is something to put on a resume. The books *Life behind the barbed Wire* (2015) *Why America Why?* (2018) and *Let me live* (2013) published by Save the Kids are books of collection of incarcerated youth poetry (Nocella, 2009). One poem by “Serena” makes note of their poignant feelings while incarcerated: “Lonely/Hurt/Lost/ And Destroyed/ People messing with my feelings... (Save the Kids, 2016, p. 130).” In the same book in a poem by “Gerelle” discusses the need for somewhere to discuss emotions.

“Feelings, coming from a family like mine, we don’t usually know how to express our feelings or anger, so we hold them in so it’s like people on the outside will never know we feel on the inside.I’m in JDC all because I feel like I never knew how to express my feelings and when I do express my feelings, they don’t come out as a normal person’s would, they come out in a rage of anger, but when everything’s over, all I feel is regret (Save the Kids, 2016, p.230).”

Hip hop poetry has also been published by Poetry Behind the Walls and is regarded as a great poetic outlet. Hip Hop poetry to program organizers is “spitting poetry on a train” (Nocella 2014). Potter (2015) wrote that hip hop feminism writes” popular culture, especially hip-hop, was a major source for mobilizing contemporary youth to organize around social injustice issues (Clay cited in Potter, 2015, p.65).” Both forms recognize that poetry for JJI-youth to act out emotional distress is an important part of a participant's well-being.

i. Review of Programs' Qualities

The programs that have been presented in this research are examples of how poetry can help JII-youth. Each of them incorporates de- traumatization, mentorship, and social bonding for JII-youth. Many programs use poetry in different ways such as for creative writing, the finished product, and/or as a brainstorming technique. These programs also take the opportunity to challenge participants to learning about sexism, racism, white privilege, and gender oppression. Many of these programs have peer-peer solidarity as the form of mentorship. Some programs have formerly incarcerated people serving as mentors as well as poet ambassadors through their work as alumni.

Also, many of the programs provide opportunities for JII-involved youth to promote their voices in the public sphere. For example, some programs use literary publishing, zine, poetry readings, public production of theatre, and a van to physically connect youth to their community. Publishing either online or by creating a hard copy of JII-youth poetry, JII-youth can show their healing, defragmentation, self-efficacy, and transformative progress to teachers, program mentors, and possible employers. JII-youth published poetry is tangible evidence that transformative justice process has promoted something uniquely positive.

Section III: Poetic Justice Evaluation

a Poetic Justice Application

Poetic Justice JJI-youth participants become readers, writers, and interpreters of literature. Poetic Justice enables JJI-involved youth to self-reflect and practice their writing and performing styles. Poetic Justice does not replace the public school system but helps youth to interrupt the metaphorical pipeline from school to prison which contributes to youth detention (Appleman, Caligiuri, & Vang, 2014).

Youth need to embrace their need for imagination and expression as rehabilitative diversions. These diversions will not include the historical models such as restorative justice and traditional carceral forms of rehabilitation. Poetic Justice as “diversion involves using programs outside the juvenile justice system to reduce or eliminate offenders’ contacts with the system” (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992, p.35). A transformative alternative literary program that tries to create and further JJI-youth self-efficacy is the best way to move from carceral systems.

Poetry is a way for formerly incarcerated youth to describe imperialist oppression in many of its forms. Marx wrote how poetry can be a weapon against ruling class oppression “The indignation which creates the poet is absolutely in place to describe these horrible conditions” (Marx cited in Solomon, 1973, p. 134). In the words of Engels, poetry is the circulation of information and knowledge (Engels cited in Solomon, 1973, p. 128).

Programs that use poetry for JJI-youth show how through poetry youth can become the people that they want to be. Student Records show that SPI (Student Press Initiative) molds great self-esteem, creating social connection with families, and helping probation officers and teachers (Winn, 2019). Student Press Initiative publishes the poetry of incarcerated youth on Rikers Island.

Poetry can be used for people to control their own history:

“These youth are learning to trust their own stories, and insisting that no one else can tell their stories for them.....All children and youth need to develop a sense of the unique capacity of human beings to shape and create reality in solidarity with others and in concert with conscious purposes and plans” (Ayers cited in Save the Kids, 2018, p., 23).

The following poem by JJI-youth describes ways of achieving redemption (Thompson, & Defreitas, 2014, p.1).

A poem by “Palu” says “We broke the code of cool”

By undressing our souls,

Discarding robes

Of vanity and pride.

With aging bodies

Entombed

Like pyramid mummies,

Our crippled spirits limp

Along the winding path

To *redemption*

b. Healing, defragmenting, and de-traumatization

JJI-youth need non-carceral methods to help with their healing, internal fragmentation, and trauma. They need to focus on historical trauma as it includes racism, gender, sexual orientation, and class discrepancies. Kids who are insecure, self-harming, and conflicted are at-risk youth for recidivism and adult criminality (Wachowiak, 2016). Traumatized youth put everyone at risk and keeps the criminal justice system full of victims. With the use of writing

prompts, healing occurs through inner-rectification processes. JJI-youth for the first time in their lives are allowed mental-space to freely depict their own sense of ethos and measure of woundedness.

An administrator at the DOJ's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention argued that "[w]e need to tailor our responses to heal that which has been harmed" (OJJDP, 2020, page, 23). Programs must have the "responsibility, and the initiative to heal" formerly incarcerated youth (Nocella, 2014, p. 214). The "juvenile justice and mental health systems must create environments that are sensitive and responsive to the trauma-related histories of youth" (Skowrya & Coccozza, 2007, p. 145).

c. Poetry and Healing

For many centuries, incarcerated poets have used writing to create ways to positively give back to society through their anguish and experience. Poetry is a place "for youth to express their thoughts, feelings, emotions" (Heitzeg cited in Save the Kids, ed. 2013, p 2.). Making poetry a part of juvenile justice-involved youth's itinerary would be valuable for self-actualization. Juvenile-justice involved youth have written about internal strife regarding their own socio-economic background, family, education, and jail experiences. "Literary education's an essential way to help heal and transform the incarcerated and to provide them with the sense of potential and respect that so many of them richly deserve" (Appleman et al., p.35). Connecting healing and poetry means that incarcerated youth "write about difficult feelings" (Gold, 2014). A Juvenile Justice-involved youth poet writes that:

While others system-involved youth expressed them-selves through other forms of visual art, the written word was the only expression I had to say something that might move

tangibly into the hands of someone else who wasn't tortured by the same things that tormented me. In time, it started to become a re-humanization process by which I started to re-conceive my own humanity and self-respect. (Appleman, Caligiuri, & Vang, 2014 p. 123).

Poetic Justice lets JII-youth give meaning to their lives and lets them criticize the criminal justice system. One participant describes how writing helps express their frustration with the system (Appleman, Caligiuri, & Vang, 2014):

While others expressed themselves through other forms of visual art, the written word was the only expression I had to say something that might move tangibly into the hands of someone else who wasn't tortured by the same things that tormented me. I was fortunate enough to have educators who came in, told me what I was doing was relevant, and encouraged me to keep going. In time, it started to become a re-humanization process by which I started to re-conceive my own humanity and self-respect. (p. 34).

After expressing past trauma, frustration, and mental distress, a writer can feel part of a broader social justice movement beyond their physical selves. The participant may see connection with others in the system (Appleman et al., 2014):

Writing has become an essential part of who I see myself to be. Being a writer means I can speak for myself. I am also able to speak for those in similar situations and express themes in the world that are perplexing or unjust or that support notions of those whose voices don't get listened to or acknowledged. It has also meant my inclusion within a body of human existence that has been around forever, that framed the world in terms people could see as something other than what existed in their time. I have joined people

that have written and rewritten over and over because they cared about what it was, they created. Writing connects me spiritually with people in gulags and concentration camps and personal exiles who wrote without knowing if they'd be killed or wither away somewhere unheard, who found ways to get their words. (p.20).

Writing is an "essential way to help *heal* and transform the incarcerated and to provide them with the sense of potential and respect that so many of them richly deserve" (Appleman et al., 2014, p. 193).

Through the transformative goals set forth by a Poetic Justice program justice-involved youth may gain the self-esteem the need to make it through life's hardships. Traumatized by their backgrounds and prison life, now they create the person they want to be in their writing. Poetry "provides safe and private experience, with individual control over the outcome" (Gold, 2014, p. 57).

d. Mentorship and Outreach

Peer-driven practices enhance participant's work, guidance, and self-esteem through horizontal mentorship (Ali, 2019). The act of writing and sharing poetry with a mentor supplies a safe experience where trust can be set up, and a positive relationship can be built (Ali, 2019).

The Free Minds program cycles new mentors out of its JII-youth membership for its own program. Free Minds describes having poet ambassadors as former juvenile justice participants. Poet Ambassadors are the experts working towards positive solutions feeling a sense of pride and purpose. They take their written works to try to stop youth becoming victims and victimizers (Free Minds, 2015).

Mentoring and organizing Poetic Justice programing requires little poetic training in Poetic theory and literary genre. Poetic Justice is not about having a writing degree or about content, but simply about writing. Program group work creates confidence building, socializing, and peer- peer connection. Connecting youth and peer role models create positive social bonds that can have long-lasting impacts on youth's self-efficacy (Smangs, 2010).

Section IV: Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper found that using poetry to help heal JJI-youth is a radical, but promising measure to eliminate the use of incarceration, and an alternative to sending juveniles to youth camps or juvenile detention centers. The success of poetic justice programs as an alternative to incarceration, will depend on how invested various non-profits, probation, and police are in using the arts as a method of rehabilitation. Poetic justice programs should include various check-ins and writing prompts that will help cultivate youths' self-worth. Different writing prompts through daily free writing exercises should be part of the routine (Tannis, 2014). At Poetic Justice events, a plethora of engaging posters, notebooks, writing and drawing equipment, spinners, snacks, and other anxiety diverting stimuli is recommended. InsideOUT organizers says that in addition to poetry, the program must have snacks and overall enjoyment, when it comes to learning and engagement (Ali, 2009). Lastly, poetic justice program participants should be offered the opportunity to do "speak outs" at schools, in part, to create awareness for Poetic Justice as an alternative to incarceration.

More evaluation of programs that use poetry for JJI-youth are needed. This paper will hopefully bring about further discussions of using the arts, especially poetry to help heal JJI-youth.

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