

Indiana Prison Writers Workshop: The Power of Group Cohesion and Creative Expression among Incarcerated Individuals

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Abstract: *Objective: The present study describes the development of the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW), a creative writing workshop, based in group theory and designed for incarcerated settings. Methods: Quantitative evaluation data from IPWW workshops conducted from 2023-2024 were analyzed using IBM SPSS V. 29. Prior to the workshop, 149 men responded to questions on class expectations and goals, and 115 men responded at workshop conclusion. Open-ended qualitative responses from post-workshop data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results: Quantitative data demonstrates the effectiveness of IPWW in teaching writing skills and reflects participants' agreement that the workshops provide opportunities to share their work and receive feedback from peers and the facilitator. Five themes emerged from the qualitative data: 1) self-expression, 2) skill development, 3) self-reflection, 4) perspective, and 5) therapeutic. Conclusions: We discuss how these results influence group cohesion among incarcerated men and explore implications for future research and IPWW program development.*

Keywords: *creative writing; prison-based arts programs; incarceration; group cohesion*

Introduction

Prison arts programs have expanded over the years to provide individuals with educational, rehabilitative, and therapeutic opportunities while incarcerated (Cheliotis & Jardanoska, 2016; Kalouptsi, 2022). The incorporation of arts into correctional settings dates back to the early 20th century, with the recognition of art's potential to reform and rehabilitate (Hart, 1986). Over time, structured programs emerged, supported by research indicating the psychological and social benefits of arts engagement in correctional settings (Gussak, 2009; Gussak, 2019). Art-based programs in prison settings were created to provide incarcerated individuals with relevant engagement opportunities and to enhance community building, self-reflection, and artistic expression (Hart et al., 2023; Winsor & Sheppard, 2023), while also helping them process their trauma, promote healing, enhance communication, and foster effective skills development (van der Meulen & Omstead, 2021).



The present study discusses the evolution of arts-based programs over the years, the main components of arts-based prison programs, and the development and preliminary evaluation of a creative writing program, Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW). Although IPWW's mission to improve the lives of those incarcerated through creative writing and expression aligns with many other arts-based programs in the literature, IPWW aims to add new insights through the infusion of strengths-based and group theories to technical writing development. Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to describe the innovation in applying group and strengths-based theories to arts-based prison programs, and 2) to evaluate preliminary data from pre- and post-workshop evaluations. This paper will outline how IPWW differs from other arts-based programs based on its theoretical orientations and interdisciplinary facilitation style. We will discuss how strengths-based and group theories help facilitate safety among members, allowing them to engage more fully in the creative process while in the challenging context of an incarcerated setting. Preliminary evaluation data will be analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methodologies, with implications for future research and practice discussed.

History of Arts-Based Prison Programs

The historical context of arts-based programs in correctional facilities reveals a progressive journey from early initiatives to formalized therapeutic interventions. In the early 20th century, prisons began incorporating art activities as part of their rehabilitation efforts, providing incarcerated individuals with opportunities for creative expression, skill development, and personal growth through painting, drawing, and sculpture (Brown, 2017; Kartikaningsih et al., 2023). This laid the foundation for the emergence of art therapy in the mid-20th century, where trained art therapists worked with incarcerated individuals to address their psychological and emotional needs (Masters, 2018).

Research over the years has highlighted the positive impacts of these interventions, demonstrating improvements in incarcerated individuals' mood, self-esteem, coping skills, and socialization (Atherton et al. 2022; Cohen, 2019). This growing recognition of the benefits of arts-based programs has led to an expansion and diversification of programs to include music, drama, dance, literary arts, and creative writing, providing a broad spectrum of expressive outlets for incarcerated individuals (Schwan, 2011; Stickel, Kaiper-Marquez & Prins, 2020). The expansion of arts-based programs in incarcerated settings underscores their crucial role in promoting mental health and personal growth, illustrating the significance of creative expression in the rehabilitation process (Atherton et al. 2022; Brewster, 2014; Soape et al. 2022).

Components of Creative Writing Programs in Incarcerated Settings

Creative writing programs provide incarcerated individuals with a means of self-expression, reflection, personal growth, and skill development. These programs often follow specific components or models designed to facilitate the creative writing process within the unique context of prisons (Cheliotis, 2012; Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). Kalouptsi (2022) provides a framework of a prison-based creative writing program comprised of six components: 1) workshops and classes, 2) personal storytelling and writing prompts, 3) peer feedback and collaboration, 4) publication opportunities, 5) therapeutic writing, and 6) community engagement.

Workshops and Classes: Creative writing programs in prisons typically involve workshops and classes facilitated by experienced writers, educators, or volunteers who provide incarcerated individuals with guidance, feedback, and support in developing their writing skills. Workshops offer a structured environment for participants to explore different genres of writing, receive constructive criticism, and engage in writing exercises that stimulate creativity and self-expression (Brewster, 2014).

Personal Storytelling and Writing Prompts: Structured writing prompts and exercises are often used to get writers engaged and spark their creativity. Prompts can be thematic, visual, or based on specific writing techniques. Writing prompts and exercises encourage participants to explore innovative ideas, perspectives, and writing styles.

Peer Feedback and Collaboration: Peer feedback sessions and collaborative writing activities are common components of creative writing programs in incarcerated settings. Incarcerated individuals share their work with peers, provide feedback, and engage in group discussions. Peer feedback promotes a sense of community, encourages constructive criticism, and fosters a supportive environment for writers to develop new skills. Collaboration allows incarcerated individuals to co-create stories, poems, or scripts, enhancing teamwork and creativity (Grompanopoulou, 2021).

Publication Opportunities: Many prison-based creative writing programs offer publication opportunities for participants to highlight their work. This may include creating anthologies, literary magazines, or organizing public readings. Publication opportunities provide validation and recognition for incarcerated individuals' creative efforts, boosting their self-esteem and motivation. Sharing their writing with a wider audience can also promote empathy and understanding among readers.

Therapeutic Writing: Therapeutic writing components focus on using writing as a tool for self-reflection, healing, and emotional processing. Incarcerated individuals may engage in journaling, memoir writing, or poetry therapy as part of the program. Therapeutic writing helps incarcerated individuals explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, leading to increased self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal growth.

Community Engagement: Incarcerated individuals may participate in community-oriented writing initiatives, workshops, or events, encouraging connections and dismantling barriers between incarcerated individuals and the broader society.

Evaluations of Art-Based Programs in Incarcerated Settings

Research on prison arts programs has demonstrated positive outcomes in self-expression and reflection, communication skills, empowerment, empathy, and cognitive development, while also decreasing recidivism rates (Littman & Sliva, 2020). Noted benefits of prison arts programs are their ability to provide a non-verbal outlet for emotional expression and well-being, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Cohen, 2019; Kartikaningsih et al., 2023; van der Meulen & Omstead, 2021). The programs foster self-exploration and empowerment, increasing self-esteem and self-awareness, and enhance behavioral management and rehabilitation by decreasing disciplinary infractions and aggressive behaviors (Brewster 2014; Gussak, 2020). Participants of art-based programs develop artistic skills and creative problem-solving abilities, which contribute to personal growth, while also developing a sense of community through social interaction (Harkins et al., 2011; Soape, 2023)

Brewster (2014) aimed to evaluate the impact of prison arts programs on incarcerated individual's attitudes and behaviors, particularly through structured initiatives modelled after California's Arts-in-Corrections program. The findings revealed significant positive changes in incarcerated individuals' attitudes, including improved time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence. The study also reported increased participation in educational and vocational programs, as well as a significant decline in disciplinary reports (Brewster, 2014).

Additionally, Soape et al. (2022) explores the development and impact of an art therapy program for youth offenders in four state correctional institutions. Notwithstanding the initial delays and challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift to remote services using workbooks, the program demonstrated potential benefits as participants reported some relief from anxiety, fear, and boredom. However, the full impact on disciplinary actions and educational focus could not be measured due to inconsistent contact and rising pandemic-related stress. The program reported assurance in assisting incarcerated individuals in developing emotional regulation and social skills despite challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several studies have consistently reported positive outcomes related to emotional well-being among incarcerated individuals participating in art-based programs, including promoting positive social interactions among incarcerated individuals, fostering a sense of community, collaboration, and mutual support within the prison environment. Findings from the study on 9-week arts program in a Canadian women's prison revealed that participants reported feelings of happiness, joy, and fun, which disrupted the typical prison routine and enhanced their lives (van der Meulen & Omstead, 2021). The engagement in arts equipped women with new skills and fostered a sense of worth through their artistic creations, thus contributing to self-expression and collective works. The study demonstrated significant benefits in improving inmate well-being and fostering a supportive community, underscoring the value of arts programming beyond conventional penal rehabilitation goals (van der Meulen & Omstead, 2021).

Kartikaningsih et al. (2023) conducted a pilot study on how expressive writing and storytelling program impacts ex-offenders. The authors evaluated a 6-week expressive writing and storytelling intervention

with nine ex-offenders attending a peer support group. Results shows a significant increase in psychological recovery, revealing that the program provided a safe space for processing and expressing feelings, facilitated connections and peer support, and encouraged adjustments in thinking patterns. These findings suggest that the program can enhance psychological recovery and equip ex-offenders with crime desistance skills and effectively serve as peer support workers.

Art programs in incarcerated settings play a role in preparing incarcerated individuals for successful re-entry into society post-release by enhancing vocational skills, communication abilities, and self-confidence. Gussak (2013) noted that participants may gain transferable skills, build a portfolio of work, and develop a sense of purpose and identity that can support their reintegration into the community.

The Present Study: Indiana Prison Writers Workshop

The Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW) began in 2018 at Plainfield Correctional Facility in Indiana and has grown to nine workshops in three states. The vision of IPWW is that formerly incarcerated individuals and those affected by crime can strengthen their communities as law-abiding citizens. With this vision in mind, IPWW aims to advance justice by changing the narrative of how society perceives incarcerated individuals. IPWW helps extend literacy opportunities to incarcerated individuals through a 12-week workshop model that includes the six components outlined in Kalouptsi (2022): workshop structure, personal storytelling, peer feedback, opportunities for publication, therapeutic writing, and community engagement. IPWW differs from other creative writing programs through its development in group and strengths-based theories which inform the creative process in the prison environment.

Theoretical Frameworks Informing IPWW Group Development

Literature on group formation and cohesion in prison settings describes a colonial-authoritarian approach often used in the facilitation of groups in prison settings, where power is centralized in the hands of correctional officers and facilitators (Le, Plourde & Dueck-Read, 2023). Le, Plourde & Dueck-Read (2023) describe how a colonial-authoritarian approach can lead to the further dehumanization of incarcerated individuals, with power dynamics further causing stratification, conflict, and dismantling of groups (Juda, 1984).

As group cohesion can be challenging to attain in prison settings, IPWW was designed with group theory in mind. Tuckman (1965) coined the Stages of Group Development to explain group dynamics, which includes five stages: 1) forming, 2) storming, 3) norming, 4) performing, and 5) adjourning. Although Tuckman's theory often applies to group therapy or business settings, we apply it to IPWW through the way we conceptualize the group formation process among justice-involved individuals.

As facilitators, we are mindful of the logistics related to our workshops. For example, we have worked with prison administrators and program directors at each of our sites to reserve space for our workshops in more welcoming environments within the prison, such as defined classroom settings or larger visitation halls that provide the space to sit in a circle. Simple facilitation techniques like arranging the room in a circle lessens the power dynamic between the facilitator and participants. We are also mindful of the interaction correctional officers have with participants while engaging in the writing process. For some sites, the correctional officers stand nearby, but not inside the classroom setting, which we believe creates more trust among those in the group.

During the forming stage, facilitators serve in more direct leadership roles, providing the history of the program, establishing specific objectives for the workshop, and discussing member expectations to be successful. Facilitators explain one workshop goal is to practice writing more often. While members may have different levels of educational attainment or writing ability, everyone's contributions are welcomed and celebrated. In the forming stage, facilitators lay the foundation for members to feel confident in sharing their work with the group.

Given the prison environment, the storming stage where interpersonal conflict can arise may seem expected. During this stage, there may be differences in points of view or power struggles. Facilitators help acknowledge differences to resolve conflict, encourage effective listening, and promote both the giving and receiving of feedback. Facilitators have noted challenges related to perspectives on race, religion, and gender

that have influenced group dynamics. Facilitators work to redirect and reframe these conversations as they challenge participants to engage in healthy and productive conflict resolution.

During the norming stage, the group develops cohesion and begin to share leadership and autonomy over the workshop. As the workshop progresses, the facilitator promotes team interaction, provides feedback and support, and creates less structure to empower group members to gain independence over their collaborative creative experience.

In the performing stage, participants begin to better understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, and provide constructive, individualized feedback to other members. In this stage, facilitators often see confidence increase, tight bonds emerging among men, and personal development growth. During this stage, participants offer each other positive reinforcement and support, while the facilitator provides less direction on their creative journey.

In the adjourning stage or final sessions of the workshop, facilitators guide reflection and team efforts are recognized and rewarded through a formal graduation ceremony. At the ceremony, participants are given an anthology of their works to signify their accomplishments in the workshop.

A strengths-based perspective overlays the group formation process, in which facilitators empower participants to identify their strengths, rather than their challenges or deficits. The strengths-based approach was coined by Weick et al. (1989) to "amplify the well part of the patient." We believe this is important for prison education as the environment often focuses on the deficits of the individual, rather than the strengths or resources that may have to improve their lives.

Curriculum Development

Currently, there are three workshop models: 1) beginner, 2) advanced, and 3) post-advanced. The workshops are facilitated by volunteers from interdisciplinary educational and professional backgrounds, including English, criminal justice, and social work. Having an interdisciplinary facilitator team allows for different points of view on facilitation to be shared. The diversity of thought creates a stronger facilitator team. IPWW introduces groups of 12-15 incarcerated writers to diverse voices and genres of writing, such as poetry, fiction, and non-fiction works. Further, participants engage in writing prompts designed to facilitate self-reflection, curiosity, and imagination. A sample writing prompt for the beginning curriculum is "What is the sound of silence and when did you last hear it? What was missing?" A main focus of the beginner curriculum is learning how to incorporate vivid imagery and description into their writing by showing more and telling less. Facilitators provide structured feedback to participants each week to guide their learning process. Main themes of the beginner curriculum cover rejection, memories, silence, perseverance, spirit, trust, aging, lessons, and goals.

In the advanced curriculum, a sample writing prompt is: "Write about a time or a way you have processed grief. What did that look like?" During the advanced workshop, writers learn more technical skills regarding sentence structure, tense, and organization of their work. Participants share and workshop their ideas more with each other and provide an outline for a longer piece of work that they focus on throughout the duration of the workshop. Themes of readings and writing prompts cover core childhood memories, hope, regret, safety, innovation, the future, and pride.

To keep participants engaged in the creative writing process, participants have the opportunity to join a post-advanced workshop where they continue to brainstorm ideas with peers and further develop past or current works. The post-advanced workshop includes longer stories to discuss as a group. Themes discussed include individuality, boundaries, vulnerability, denial, grief and loss, nostalgia, and humanity. Through intentional sharing of their writing, writers work to build empathy and connection while also receiving constructive feedback from peers to improve their work.

Methods

The present study is a secondary analysis of de-identified evaluation data collected at the beginning and end of IPWW workshops starting in summer 2023 and ending in spring 2024 across nine correctional facilities in three states. Pre and post workshop evaluations were developed to evaluate technical writing skills

gained during the process, as well as relational needs, such as having the opportunity to share with others or receive feedback from peers.

Pre-Workshop Evaluation Questions: Ten items were developed by the Director of IPWW with the support and input of facilitators, related to individual's feelings about writing, desire to learn more about writing, writing skills, and willingness to share with peers. Items were ranked on a 7-point scale, with 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. A sample item includes: "I am able to say things through creative writing that I can't say any other way." Participants were given space to provide optional comments to each item, were given a checklist of items regarding what they were hoping to get out of the class and had space to write about any other goals they had for the class, concerns, or comments they wished to share with their facilitator.

Post-Workshop Evaluation Questions: Ten items were developed related to skill development, workload, feedback, and safety and were ranked on a 7-point scale with 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. A sample item includes: "I feel I have the tools I need to continue with my writing after this class." Participants had space to fill out optional comments after each item and at the end were instructed to provide any other comments they wished to share with the facilitator about the class.

Analytic Plan

Based on the preliminary nature of our data, quantitative questions were analyzed with descriptive statistics using IBM SPSS V. 29. Qualitative responses from evaluation data were analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) including: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining themes, and 6) writing up the data. Initial codes were reviewed to come to a consensus and subsequent themes were reviewed and further developed as a team.

Results

Quantitative Data

Prior to participating in IPWW, 149 men from nine facilities responded to 10 questions regarding their feelings about writing prior to the workshop. Overall, mean scores for all 10 items were above 4.50 on a scale of 1 to 7, indicating above average agreement with each item. The lowest mean score was 4.77 (SD=1.61) in response to the question, "I engage in creative writing even when I don't feel inspired to write." The highest mean score was 6.18 (SD=1.11) in response to "I would like to write on a more regular, structured basis." See Table 1 for detailed quantitative results.

Table 1

Pre-Course Data

Variable	N	Mean (SD)
1. Writing is important to me.	149	6.13 (1.15)
2. I make discoveries about myself when I write.	149	5.60 (1.24)
3. I make discoveries about others when I write.	148	5.26 (1.45)
4. I am able to say things through creative writing that I can't say any other way.	148	6.15 (1.32)
5. Writing brings me joy.	149	5.99 (1.34)
6. I engage in creative writing even when I don't feel inspired to write.	146	4.77 (1.61)
7. I would like to write on a more regular, structured basis.	147	6.18 (1.11)
8. I frequently read for pleasure.	147	5.87 (1.50)
9. I frequently read to understand how writers structure their stories, essays, or poems.	146	4.90 (1.69)
10. I would like to share my writing with others.	146	5.64 (1.53)

At the end of the workshop, 115 men from six facilities responded to 10 questions regarding the content, workload, feedback, and knowledge gained in the course. The lowest mean score was 6.15 (SD=1.08) in response to, “I regularly completed my assignments for this class.” The highest mean score was 6.93 (SD=0.26) in response to “The feedback I received from my instructor in class was specific and helpful.” See Table 2 for detailed quantitative results.

Table 2*Post-Course Data*

Variable	N	Mean (SD)
1. This class has taught me concrete ways to be a better writer.	115	6.77 (0.46)
2. The workload for this class was about right.	115	6.53 (0.73)
3. I regularly completed my assignments for this class.	115	6.15 (1.08)
4. The feedback I received from my instructor in class was specific and helpful.	115	6.93 (0.26)
5. The written feedback I received from my instructor was specific and helpful.	115	6.90 (0.36)
6. I feel I have the tools I need to continue with my writing after this class.	112	6.54 (0.78)
7. I felt safe expressing myself in this class.	112	6.60 (0.85)
8. I was able to give feedback during workshops.	112	6.57 (0.93)
9. I was able to receive feedback during workshops.	112	6.73 (0.48)
10. I am a better writer as a result of this class.	112	6.73 (0.68)

Qualitative Data

Themes that emerged from the open-ended qualitative responses at the end of the workshop included: 1) growth in self-expression, 2) skills, 3) self-reflection, 4) perspective, and 5) therapeutic. These themes are described in more detail below.

Self-Expression

We found that IPWW provides a safe space for participants to explore and articulate their thoughts and emotions. One participant reflected, “...Creative writing turned on a light that otherwise rested in the off position. It allowed me a newfound freedom to express ideas and stories of life that heretofore laid dormant. To me, the creative writing class means new life and new hope.” Through creative writing, individuals can communicate experiences they may have previously kept hidden. The ability to express oneself freely develops personal growth and confidence. Another participant stated, “It helped me to open up and be more willing to express myself in a group setting.”

Skills

IPWW workshops not only serve as an outlet for self-expression but also help participants develop valuable skills. Many individuals in the program report improvements in their writing abilities, as well as increased confidence in public speaking. These skills empower participants to communicate effectively both within and beyond the prison walls. One participant commented, “The workshop helped me improve my public speaking skills like tone and pace.” Another participant reported, “I have learned so many things about writing: character development, poetry, and screenplay structure.”

Self-Reflection

The writing process often stirs deep introspection, allowing participants to examine their past experiences and emotions. A prison setting can be a challenging space to do this but during the 12-week workshop trust is formed and participants feel comfortable being vulnerable and processing their past. Engaging in self-reflection through writing can lead to personal insights and emotional healing. One participant responded, “I appreciate this creative writing class and the prompts we write about. They make me confront myself in a way I have never done before. Thank you again for challenging my thought process.” Many participants recognize this aspect as an essential component of their rehabilitation journey. Many participants commented on the reflective nature of the course with one participant stating, “...I never knew writing could reveal so much about myself. Thank you for helping me get rid of the pain I held inside.”

Perspective

Engaging in creative writing allows participants to explore different viewpoints and reframe their own experiences. One participant responded: “This class has helped me get away from prison life. In reading other people’s stories, I’ve gained different perspectives.” By reading and listening to the stories of others, individuals expand their understanding of the world and gain new insights. This shift in perspective can be transformative, leading to empathy and a renewed sense of purpose. Another participant responded saying, “This workshop is the best thing that has happened to the prison system in a long time; it changed the way I looked at and perceived the situation I was in. Very happy to see that it is still flourishing.” Beyond seeing and writing from a different perspective, one participant commented, “I’m reading from a different perspective. This class has opened up a new way of looking at literature.”

Therapeutic

The process of writing can serve as a therapeutic outlet, helping participants cope with stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges. Participants frequently say they experience newfound freedom in the class that they never imagined having. Many reported they now find comfort in putting their thoughts on paper, using writing to process emotions and gain mental clarity. One participant stated, “Writing helps me with my mental health.” The therapeutic benefits of creative writing are widely recognized among participants. Participants also noted the therapeutic nature of the workshops and the writing prompts. “This class has not only helped me become a better writer but has also helped me combat the symptoms of my depression and has given me strength to open up and be more expressive.” Another participant reported, “Writing has become therapeutic for me, and it helps relieve stress.”

Discussion

At each stage of group development, IPWW facilitators are reinforcing group cohesion while simultaneously working through creative writing curriculums. Overall, participants indicated positive results related to skill development, perspective taking, and self-reflection after participating in IPWW. At the beginning of the workshop, participants expressed strong agreement that writing was both important to them and brought them joy. Participants agreed that they make discoveries about themselves and others when they write. Future research should delineate these discoveries further by administering standardized measures related to empathy and other prosocial behaviors, such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980). The IRI measures four subscales of empathy: perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. Incorporating the IRI would provide more insight into how participation in IPWW facilitates growth in empathy and how different forms of empathy influence better outcomes upon re-entry.

Participants also reported a desire to write on a more regular basis and to share their writings with others. Participants agreed that they both read for pleasure and to better understand how writers structure their work. This was evident in the workshop setting as participants shared favorite stories while also engaging with diverse authors and forms of writing to expand their literary repertoire. As one participant noted in the qualitative data, engaging with diverse literature can expand perspective. In future evaluations, we hope to have a more in-depth qualitative study exploring how shifts in perspective change long-term outcomes.

After participation in IPWW, participants reported learning concrete ways to improve their writing and evaluated themselves as better writers compared to when they started the workshop. Related to the workload and assignments, the majority of participants reported the workload was feasible and they were able to complete their assignments on time. Participants rated both oral and written feedback received from their facilitator as being specific and helpful. Participants reported agreement that they gained tools to improve upon future writing. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of IPWW in teaching writing skills and supporting future writing development.

Related to classroom environment, participants reported feeling safe and that they could both give and receive feedback during the workshops. Assessing both physical and felt safety of participants is important in the prison environment and requires more qualitative research to determine promoters and barriers of safety for participants that they can openly share and critique each other's work. As we continue to refine our evaluation measures, we plan to ask more direct questions related to how group cohesion influenced safety outcomes. Themes of the qualitative data highlighted the unique nature of the workshop in improving participants' confidence in expressing themselves with one another, giving them tools and skills they need to continue developing their technical writing skills, allowing them to dig deep into their own stories to practice self-reflection, and expanding their perspective of others' life stories and experiences. Participants also noted the therapeutic nature of the workshop in providing an outlet for them to relieve stress. The qualitative responses provide insight into new questions to ask participants at the beginning and end of each workshop including standardized mental health measures, coping strategies, and peer support to see how their outcomes change over the course of involvement with IPWW.

Beyond the technical skills learned, the qualitative themes contribute meaningful insights to our understanding of group cohesion in the prison setting. Related to self-expression, when individuals feel safe to express their thoughts, emotions, and identities within a group, trust and mutual understanding can be built. Open self-expression fosters authenticity, reduces barriers to connection, and strengthens cohesion; all of which is rare in prison environments where authenticity is often viewed as a weakness (Morse and Wright, 2019). Further, encouraging self-reflection helps members recognize their own behaviors, biases, and emotions, which can lead to more constructive interactions and empathy toward others. Research demonstrates that groups that promote self-reflection tend to have members who are more mindful of their impact on the collective dynamic (Rania et al., 2021).

Perspective taking, or exposure to different viewpoints within the group fosters respect, adaptability, and deeper connections. Perspective taking helps reduce misunderstandings and increases empathy, making the group more cohesive despite individual differences. Research suggests perspective taking positively influences intergroup relations, strengthening social bonds and working relationships (Todd and Galinsky, 2014). Among incarcerated individuals, Martinez et al. (2014) found that those with higher levels of perspective taking had lower levels of criminal behavior post-release.

Limitations

This data was cross-sectional, and we were unable to match individual responses from pre to post test, limiting our ability to analyze effects of the workshop at an individual level over time. Further, we were unable to collect basic demographic data or history of the individuals, including their crime, history of incarceration, and current sentence which may provide unique insights into subgroups of incarcerated individuals who find IPWW most effective. Future evaluations of IPWW will incorporate additional outcomes of resilience, recovery, behavioral concerns, and successful release to determine how IPWW influences reentry and recidivism rates.

Conclusion

IPWW advances justice by working to change the narrative of how society perceives incarcerated individuals, acknowledges their inherent dignity, and empowers them to use their creativity for positive reintegration and lifelong success. Although preliminary, results demonstrate that IPWW was effective in teaching incarcerated writers' concrete ways to hone their writing skills and provides them with tools to continue writing once the workshop ends. Feedback from the facilitators and other peers in the class illustrate the collaborative

nature of the workshop and safety of the participants in sharing their stories aloud. Future research should incorporate standardized measures related to qualitative themes, such as measures exploring group cohesion, mental health or self-esteem to assess more nuanced changes through participation in IPWW. Implications of this work include intentional partnership and planning between incarcerated individuals, facilitators, researchers, and prison administrators to collect more rigorous empirical data to support the expansion and funding of prison-based arts programs, such as IPWW across the nation.

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