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# Reducing Recidivism in At-Risk Urban Youth Through Lyrical Expression Therapy: A Qualitative Program Evaluation

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## Presentation Content

**1. Title:** Reducing Recidivism in At-Risk Urban Youth Through Lyrical Expression Therapy: A Qualitative Program Evaluation

**2. Relevance:** *Explain how the proposal relates to one or two of the five H strands.*

### [Strand II. HEART: Social and Emotional Skills]

Because this study aims to evaluate The Motivational Edge’s lyrical expression therapy program objective—which is to positively impact urban youth participants’ lives in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic domains— a qualitative assessment of the program’s impact in terms of participating youths’ goal-oriented motivation, self-efficacy and identity, interpersonal communication, and sense of control over the future was conducted. Open-ended interviews with a group of recently incarcerated teenagers—who completed the lyrical expression program as part of their daily curriculum at a Miami-based secure day treatment facility, AMIkids of Miami Dade— revealed that 100% of youth participants who completed TME’s lyrical expression program experienced an improvement in their abilities to express both positive and negative emotions; 75% of interviewed youth demonstrated matured insight regarding their responsibility to make functional decisions in order to change their lifestyles in the future, as well as an increased sense of resilience in terms of their beliefs that they *could* control the future by establishing concrete goals for themselves. More than half of the interviewed youth strongly expressed the importance of the father-son-like bond that they formed with the program’s instructors, and all of the youth reported that the program instructors established an environment in the classroom that fostered non-judgmental, open communication as well as collaborative and interactive learning amongst all peers. Additionally, the program’s curriculum required the participating teens to write lyrics detailing their personal vocational and academic goals for the short and long-term future.

### [Strand III. HANDS: Safety and Violence Prevention]

Because the ultimate therapeutic goal of The Motivational Edge’s lyrical expression program is to empower recently incarcerated youth with inter- and intrapersonal skills that foster positive reintegration into their communities, thereby lowering their risks for reoffending, the proposed research project presentation is relevant to the topic of juvenile justice programs. The presentation and explanation of the peer-collaborative and non-judgmental learning environment established by TME’s program instructors will provide insight and implications useful to the topics of conflict resolution, creating safe spaces, and peer mediation. While “gang intervention” is not an explicit objective of the evaluated lyrical expression program, the program instructors encourage the youth to write lyrics reflecting on the self-defeating and dysfunctional effects of gang involvement, making the proposed presentation relevant to the topic of gang intervention as well.

### **3. Brief description:**

This presentation examines a hip-hop-based lyrical expression intervention program as a mechanism of recidivism reduction, particularly for minority youth offenders. Analyses of qualitative data indicate that the program empowers at-risk minority youth to make positive life changes while using the familiarity of hip-hop subculture to establish a comfortable learning environment. Attendees interested in juvenile justice will benefit from this presentation.

### **4. Summary:**

Research indicates that despite a steady decline in juvenile incarceration rates over the past few years Black youth remain twice as likely to be arrested as their white counterparts, and for certain crimes racial disparities among arrest rates are even larger (The Sentencing Project, 2014). Racial disparities begin with arrest but exist at each stage of the juvenile justice system, affecting the lives of youth far beyond the completion of their sentences. According to the National Reentry Resource Center (2015), 84 percent of all juvenile offenders will reoffend within five years following their release. Of these youth, Black male adolescents are the most likely to reoffend; they are 16 percent more likely to reoffend than are their White male counterparts (Sentencing Guidelines Commission, 2008). These racially disproportionate recidivism rates are exigent justification for the development of reentry programs tailored specifically for minority youth offenders.

Presenters will detail the preliminary findings of a qualitative study designed to assess the impact of an urban youth reentry program. A crucial and distinctive component of this particular music-based reentry program is its use of hip-hop as a background for teaching lyrical expression to urban youth. A series of semi-structured individual interviews with participants revealed several themes indicating specific domains of impact on youth, including 1) personal growth, 2) vocational and academic motivation, 3) positive identity formation, 4) effective communication and 5) mature emotional expression. Findings will be discussed in terms of the program's impact on multiple areas of well-being as well as broader implications for an under-studied but promising avenue of recidivism reduction: hip-hop based reentry programs. This proposal offers audience members a model for an innovative approach to education for at-risk populations, juvenile justice and recidivism reduction.

### **5. Evidence:**

While music-based therapies are not particularly common in the curriculum of youth reentry programs, they do exist (e.g., Irene Taylor Trust's 'Music in Prisons' scheme, 2006; Australian Children's Music Foundation, 2006). More specifically, existing reentry programs based on the constructs of hip-hop culture are similar in their objectives to foster creativity and a sense of cultural belonging, and to provide youth with mechanisms of productive self-expression (e.g., Baker & Homan, 2007; Baumstark, 2016; Hartnett, Novek, & Wood, 2013). These objectives are similar those of The Motivational Edge's lyrical expression program: to provide youth with

a mechanism to describe and understand “who they are and where they came from” (The Motivational Edge, 2016).

Although the theoretical justification behind hip-hop based reentry programs is evident, the literature empirically examining their success is limited (Baker & Homan, 2007). Baker and Homan (2007) conducted a promising evaluation of a hip-hop based reentry program, Genuine Voices, which yielded results supporting the efficacy of the program. While Baker and Homan acknowledged limitations of time and security constraints, they argue that future research should provide a more in-depth examination of similar programs. The current research project provides additional evidence through utilization of open-ended interviews both with the lyrical expression program staff and with urban youth participants of the program. Preliminary findings align with those of Baker and Homan’s (2007) and therefore, contributes converging and critical evidence for the effectiveness of innovative educational approaches, with specific learning objectives, for a specific population of at-risk youth.

## **6. Format:** Poster Presentation

## **7. Biographical Sketch:**

Margaret Goldman is a current student enrolled at the University of Miami (UM), majoring in Psychology and minoring in Human Social Development. She is currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Kohn-Wood, a Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Psychological Studies at UM. Margaret’s current research examines the crucial impact that hip-hop-based lyrical expression therapy could have in reducing recidivism rates for urban youth, particularly of minority backgrounds. As part of her research, Margaret interns at The Motivational Edge, a 501(c)(3) youth development agency that uses culturally relevant arts as a motivational platform to lower reoffending rates in urban youth. Margaret’s future plans include Doctoral programs that focus on reentry programs tailored specifically for at-risk minority youth.

Dr. Kohn-Wood is currently a Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational and Psychological Studies (EPS) in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami (UM). She also serves as the Faculty Master of Pearson Residential College. Dr. Kohn-Wood’s research program *Race, Ethnicity, Culture and Promotion of Strengths* (RECAPS) focuses on race, ethnicity and culture in relation to the experience of psychological phenomena among diverse populations, with an emphasis on race-based protective factors and the promotion of positive coping and mental health among African Americans. She has also studied the relationship between mental health and violent behavior among youth, and she has examined gender, race and ethnic differences in response to mental illness and mental health service utilization. Dr. Kohn-Wood has conducted extensive community-based participatory action research and intervention projects with community and faith-based organizations in urban areas such as Detroit, (Michigan) and Liberty City (Miami, Florida), including the development of a successful collaborative service-learning program for undergraduate students.

**8. Contact Information:**

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