

# Articles

## Art Making as a Component and Facilitator of Resiliency With Homeless Youth

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### Abstract

*Homelessness among youth is a serious societal problem in the United States. Treatment efforts have approached the problem from a damage model that focuses on pathology and deficits instead of strengthening coping skills and resiliency. This study utilized both quantitative (N=212) and qualitative (n=3) measures to examine the function of creativity and art making with respect to resiliency in homeless youth who were attending a drop-in art center. Quantitative methods identified a strong correlation between an individual's engagement in creative activity and his or her life achievement. Individual stories derived from interviews and drawings illustrate how participants valued the role of art in making healthy lifestyle choices. Creativity may be a critical component of resiliency in the lives of homeless youth.*

### Introduction

Homelessness, especially among youth, is an alarming and ever growing phenomenon in the United States. Many attempts to rectify this child welfare issue have failed (Panter-Brick, 2002). Most research in this area approaches the problem using a damage model that focuses on pathology and attempts to rescue the youth from their plight rather than exploring ways to strengthen and encourage them. This emphasis on risk factors may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies for youth, especially because "only a minority of such children actually experience unusual difficulty" (Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 371).

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The study of resilience uses a health-oriented approach or *challenge model* to address sociological phenomena such as homelessness (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Resiliency and strength-based models provide a balance against solely focusing on pathology and have gained momentum in recent years (Benard, 1997; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Vasquez, 2000). Wolin and Wolin identified seven resiliency "strengths": insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Many homeless youth likely have developed some of these traits in order to survive and thrive. Many are homeless because they have chosen to escape harmful situations, especially abuse.

Creativity is an important attribute to nurture because it is a component of resiliency and it strengthens and facilitates resiliency's other aspects. Creativity can boost one's self-esteem, increase coping skills, and help address existing concerns. Creative activity also provides a distraction from dealing with painful circumstances and the opportunity to reshape reality as well as to formulate future goals and changes.

Solid research has been done in the field of resiliency (Benard, 2004; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993) that has contributed to a greater understanding of how people cope with stressful life circumstances. Recently, a discussion on the impact of art therapy with adolescent trauma survivors and disaster relief programs has put forth a view that also supports resiliency (Chilcote, 2007; Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, & Spiegel, 2006). The research on art therapy and homeless youth, however, is limited to two studies (Feen-Calligan, 2008; Gonzalez, 1997). More research specifically demonstrating the longitudinal relationship between creativity and resiliency would be beneficial to the field of art therapy. The study presented here furthers art therapy research by investigating the role of creativity in resiliency.

### Review of the Literature

#### Population Profile: Homeless Adolescents

Homelessness among youth in the United States is a disturbing trend; estimated prevalence is at least five per-

cent for ages 12 to 17 (Robertson & Toro, 1998). According to a 2000 report from the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 1.35 million U.S. children are homeless. NCH defines “homelessness” as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. A closely related trend is that more than 2.8 million youth living in U.S. households report a runaway experience during the prior year (Greene, Ringwalt, Kelly, Iachan, & Cohen, 1995). The U. S. Conference of Mayors (2001) reported that children under the age of 18 accounted for 25% of the urban homeless population in 2001. Most visible in major cities, youth appear to be at greater risk for homelessness than adults. Homeless youth constitute a large and diverse group with multiple overlapping problems (Robertson & Toro, 1998). However, research data on this population and its mental health needs are limited.

Many factors contribute to youth homelessness. A recent survey conducted in Seattle, WA polled youth living in shelters or transitional housing and identified the following reasons for homelessness (in order of frequency):

- abuse
- transience
- forced removal from the home (e.g. being “kicked out”)
- decision to run away
- economic issues
- oppression (racism, homophobia, etc.)
- family crisis
- decision to move out of the home
- domestic violence
- eviction or displacement

(Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless, 2002).

Homeless youth often experience severe anxiety and depression, poor health and nutrition, low self esteem, problems stemming from conduct disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (NCH, 2008a). Approximately 22% of homeless youth suffer from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2001). In Los Angeles, 64% of a sample of homeless youth met the criteria for depression provided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (Unger, Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, & Johnson, 1997). This rate is alarming compared to the finding of clinical depression in seven percent of adolescent samples taken from the general U.S. population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2001). Homeless youth are also at greater risk for HIV infection, pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and school and learning difficulties.

Due to high levels of stress and ineffective or compromised coping skills, homeless youth often develop maladaptive behaviors such as substance use. Three national samples found that the highest rate of substance abuse occurs among homeless youth living on the street, and the next highest rates are found among youth living in shelters, youth who have run away from home, and finally youth living in their family homes (Robertson & Toro, 1998). Homeless youth

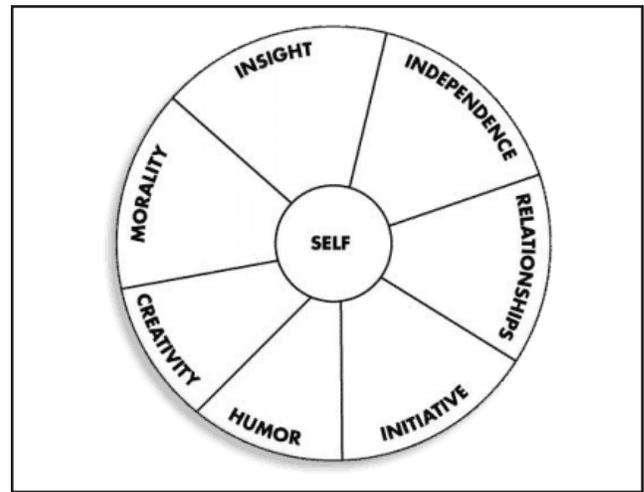


Figure 1 Wolin and Wolin's mandala of resiliency

face many insurmountable barriers and have few options in addiction treatment, recovery supports, and mental health care (NCH, 2008b). They also face difficulties attending school and therefore may not obtain an education or develop the ability to support themselves.

### Resiliency and Creativity

Resiliency and the creative process are reciprocal: Not only is creativity an aspect of resilient behavior; it also fosters resilience. Wolin and Wolin (1993) described resilience as “the capacity to channel your pain rather than exploding” (p. 165). Resilience research tends to emphasize protective factors rather than risk factors as being determinants of outcome.

Resilience is a particular necessity in the survival of homeless adolescents. As Wolin and Wolin (1993) discussed, “[the] news is good; while early hardship can cause enduring pain, often it is a breeding ground for uncommon strength and courage” (p. vii). Their model identified seven areas of strength in resiliency: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality (Figure 1). Bell's (2001) research described additional components of resiliency, such as the conviction of one's right to survive, the ability to remember and to invoke images of good and sustaining figures, and having a goal to live for.

Creativity is a strength that contributes to resiliency (Vasquez, 2000). Malchiodi (1998) defined creativity as “the ability to bring something new and unique into existence; as a union of opposites, impressions, ideas, and concepts that initially seem unrelated; or as giving birth to a new idea” (p. 65). She posited that creativity as a function of art therapy helps people to achieve personal growth, self-understanding, change, and rehabilitation. Regarding resiliency, Wolin and Wolin (1993) understood creativity as a haven of the imagination, “where you can take refuge and rearrange the details of your life to your own pleasing” (p. 163). Desetta and Wolin (2000) asserted that because “everyone has imagination,” creative activity can provide a “safe haven” for all people in times of stress (p. 111). People who tap into their creativity can not only change the ugly,

cruel things in life into beautiful and satisfying works of art, but also can use creativity in planning for the future.

In an investigation of creativity and the ability to cope with stress, Flach (1988) found that creative people tend to have strong coping skills and other inner resources such as flexibility, high ego strength, responsibility, tolerance, self-control, intellectual efficiency, and openness to new experiences. Benard's (1997) research found that creativity contributes to other aspects of resiliency, such as social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose.

Creative thinking is important in effective problem solving. Malchiodi (1998) observed that creative people tend to be "more independent, autonomous, self-sufficient, emotionally sensitive, assertive, self-accepting, resourceful, adventurous and risk-taking" (p. 65). Involvement in creative activity can help clients achieve these qualities as well as enhance their resiliency skills. Art making can "stimulate feelings of pleasure and increased self-esteem that arise from our biological natures" (Kaplan, 2000, p. 62). Sylwester (as cited in Kaplan, 2000) posited that creativity bolsters serotonin levels in the brain, which in turn positively impact self-esteem and reduce irritability and impulsivity.

The art product "validates and empowers the uniqueness of a person; making an object out of an idea puts a powerful tool in the hands of a person who feels fragile and unworthy" (Franklin, 1992, p. 80). As further emphasized by Wolin and Wolin (1993), creativity can address the stress and loss that may accompany homelessness:

All creation is really a recreation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self... [It] is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life. (p. 165)

Flach (1988) asserted that when stress disrupts a person's life, he or she may learn to reintegrate new information with the old in order to create a stronger, revitalized whole. Likewise, art may be considered to be a process of reformulating the self through the active formation of an object, which is of particular importance during adolescence (Kramer, 1993). Thus, art may serve as an important treatment modality by fostering resilience in adolescents who are homeless.

## Method

This study utilized both quantitative ( $N=212$ ) and qualitative ( $n=3$ ) measures to examine resiliency as a function of creativity among homeless youth attending a drop-in art center specifically designed for the needs of this population. Quantitative methods were designed to look at the overall function of creativity with respect to the relationship between engagement in creative activity and life achievement. The inclusion of a qualitative measure allowed for deeper examination of the individuals' experiences and the common themes that emerged. In this report, we present the quantitative findings first, followed by the qualitative component of the study.

## Participants

The participant population consisted of male and female homeless youth (ages 13-25) of various ethnicities, including African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, and Caucasian. Exact demographic data were not tallied due to the drop-in nature of the center. To simplify the sample size, only those participants who attended the art center four or more times over the 5-year period of the study were considered—this totaled 212 (over 600 youth attended at least once). Of these 212 participants, 64% were male and 36% were female. This gender ratio closely represents the homeless population in Seattle (76% male and 24% female, according to Levine, 2001). The art center compiled its own statistics on those who attend: among the 25% of homeless youth who are "frequent visitors" and attended 15 sessions or more, 48% found a job or entered a work program, 44% enrolled or continued to be active in school, and 52% obtained housing within a six month period (Sanctuary Art Center, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, 3 individuals who attended the art center consented for an interview and art making session for the qualitative measure of the study.

## Quantitative Methods

### Measures

In order to quantify attendance and life achievements, we utilized data found in the art center logs, which spanned the period of 1999 to 2004. The art center logs recorded both attendance and progress. The attendance record showed who attended the art center, as well as when and how often they attended. In the progress log, volunteers at the art center recorded daily activities, behaviors, and personal information shared during the art sessions. From the progress log, we sought to identify the following life achievements:

- Secure housing: Obtaining housing that is more permanent than a shelter (e.g. transitional housing or an apartment).
- Substance cessation: Ending alcohol, cigarette, or illegal drug use
- Return to school: Returning to high school, applying for college or a vocational training program, or obtaining a general education diploma (GED).
- Employment: Getting a job or otherwise receiving regular compensation for work.
- Pro-social skills development: Performing positive social acts towards others, such as apologizing, making gifts, doing volunteer work, showing appreciation for and interest in others, and helping or working well with others.
- Taking initiative: Attempting to find a job, housing, treatment, or schooling.
- Art sales: Selling art for monetary compensation.

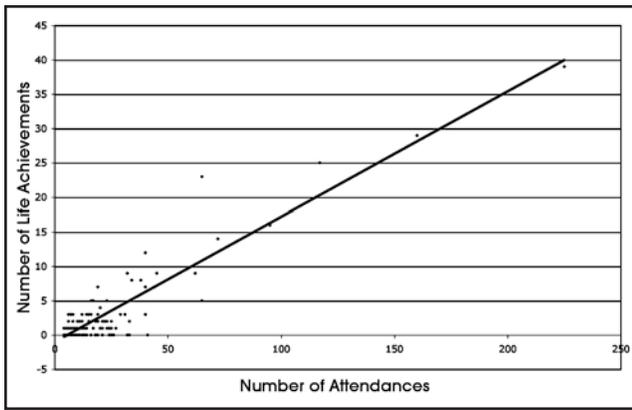


Figure 2 Relationship Between Attendance and Life Achievements (per person)

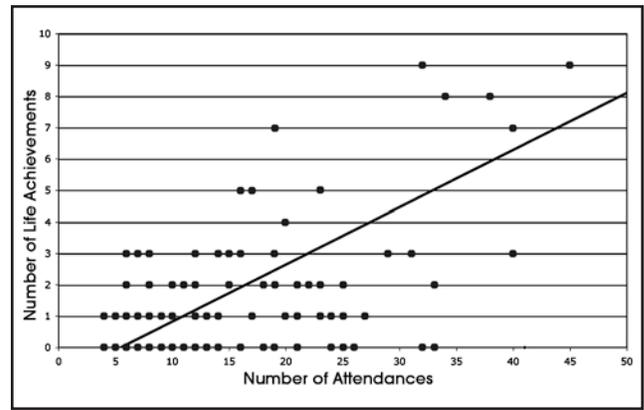


Figure 3 Relationship Between Attendance and Life Achievements (per person) (Detail)

**Data Analysis**

Data from the attendance and progress logs were tabulated for total attendance and life achievements. To maintain consistency and reliability, the progress log was divided up; each section was read and analyzed by two researchers, and the entire research team discussed points in question. The number of life achievements was tabulated per attendee; the scatter plot in Figure 2 illustrates these data. The mean, median, and mode of the total data were also tabulated both for attendance and for life achievements (Table 1). Pearson’s *r* analysis (Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient) was performed to examine the correlation between attendance and life achievements.

**Quantitative Results**

The data demonstrate that there is an upward trend: as attendance in the drop-in art center increases, so does the number of the homeless youth’s life achievements (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows a magnified view of those individuals with fewer than 50 attendances. Total number of life achievements ranged from 0 to 39 and the number of attendances ranged from 4 to 225. The mean, median, and mode analyses are shown in Table 1. Pearson’s *r* analysis found an impressive score (for the group as a whole) of .92. The closer the Pearson *r* score is to 1.00, the stronger the correlation. What the data suggest, therefore, is that individuals who attended the art center more regularly had a

significantly higher number of life achievements. For example, those who attended regularly had a higher incidence of ending drug usage, obtaining housing, finding employment, engaging in academics (attaining a GED or completing a vocational training program), improving social skills, and so on.

When considering these data, it is important to note the manner in which they were gathered and the meaning of the measurements. There were seven life achievements explored in this study but some may carry more weight in an individual’s success, such as finding housing or a job, or ending reliance on drugs. Therefore, once one of these more significant life achievements is attained, the youth may no longer attend the art center because he or she may no longer be homeless or have available time. Having as few as two or three life achievements may be very valuable, depending on the nature of the achievements. It is also important to note that the data gathered were limited to information disclosed by the youth. Other data that were not gathered may have shown an even higher rating of life achievements.

**Qualitative Study**

**Procedure**

The researchers interviewed 3 art center attendees who volunteered to participate in an art directive and to tell their stories of homelessness, resiliency, and the role of creativity in their lives. The participants each completed a

Table 1

Number of Total Attendances (per person)	Total Number in Group	Rate of Attendance			Life Achievement Rate		
		Mean	Median	Mode	Mean	Median	Mode
4-5 times	55	4.5	4	4	0.1	0	0
6-10	66	7.4	8	6	0.6	0	0
11-15	30	12.5	12	12	1.0	0.5	0
16-20	21	18.1	19	19	2.7	3	3
21-25	15	23.0	23	21	1.8	1	1
26+	24	59.4	40	40	9.7	7.5	0

drawing of a bridge, answered a questionnaire, and were interviewed. Consent was obtained for recording the interviews and photographing each participant's artwork, in accordance with the university's institutional review board standards for research with human subjects.

### Bridge drawing

Setting goals is an important aspect of resiliency and can be demonstrated in a bridge drawing. Hays and Lyons (1981) created the bridge drawing as an art directive that may allow a person to articulate transitions in his or her life's journey, including the present, the past, and the future. Stepney (2001) utilized the bridge drawing with adolescents who explored their sense of transition between childhood and adulthood, and their identity and independence. In our study, we integrated the medium of magazine photo collage into the bridge drawing directive because we hoped that it would give the youth the opportunity to have some control over the selection process and lessen inhibitions around art making (Landgarten, 1993).

Each participant was given an 11" x 14" sheet of white paper as well as oil pastels, colored markers, a glue stick, scissors, and pre-cut magazine images. Participants were asked to draw or create a bridge spanning two places, using the materials provided. When the individual had completed the drawing, he or she was asked to "place an arrow showing the direction of travel, and then place a dot on the picture to show where you are." When finished, participants were asked, "Can you tell me about your drawing?"

### Resiliency questionnaire

The resiliency questionnaire was created to explore the seven components of resiliency established by Wolin and Wolin (1993). The questionnaire also obtained demographics of age, gender, ethnicity, and length of time spent homeless. Some of the questions in the resiliency questionnaire were:

- How is it that you became homeless?
- What strengths have you gained from being homeless that you would not have otherwise?
- What are some plans and goals you have for yourself over the next year? In five years?
- What are some things you have done that make you proud?
- Do you take time to reflect on your life experiences?
- When you feel upset or in trouble, to whom do you turn for help?
- Do you feel that you are part of a community?
- What are your best qualities?
- Do you consider yourself creative?
- How has art making contributed to your life?

The participants were asked to answer as many questions as they felt comfortable; a choice between written answers or verbal responses was allowed.

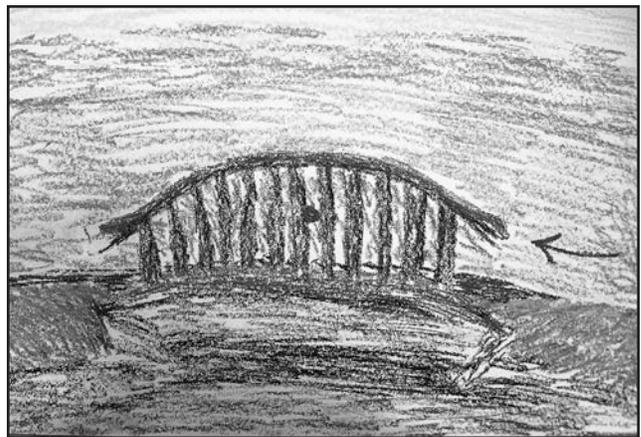


Figure 4

## Qualitative Results

### Participant Interview

In the interest of brevity, only one of the qualitative interviews will be described here. Jade (pseudonym) had been homeless for about 3 months and identified herself as a male-to-female transsexual. She revealed that she had been giving a false age in order to attend the art center; in actuality she was 25. She said that her bridge drawing showed a bridge in her hometown (Figure 4). She put the dot representing herself at the center of the bridge; her direction of travel was right to left. Jade said that through the course of her lifetime she had witnessed the building of this bridge as well as its weathering away; she described its cracking paint and subsequent repairs and explained that, like herself, the bridge had been through a lot. She did not agree that a bridge was a metaphor for passage over obstacles; her personal experience was that a bridge was a place for refuge and reflection.

Numerous themes emerged in our interview with Jade. Being without a home had taught her a great deal. She had learned to not take things for granted and to appreciate all that she had; she was proud of the fact that she survived without committing a crime. Art had consistently been an important part of Jade's life and she had always found solace in it. She discussed how art making had kept her off of drugs and away from committing suicide. She described art as a friend that was always there. She recalled turning to art for solace at various times in her life, saying "Art is like being in your own little world...you can get everything out—happiness, sadness, anger." Her goals for the future were to go to college, get into low-income housing, and complete her process of gender transition.

### "Creativity at Every Turn" Mandala Thematic Analysis

The rich experiences that the 3 participants shared in the art directives and interviews had a number of common themes that we found were best understood using a mandala. Expanding on Figure 1 (Wolin & Wolin, 1993), we created the "Creativity at Every Turn" mandala (Figure 5)

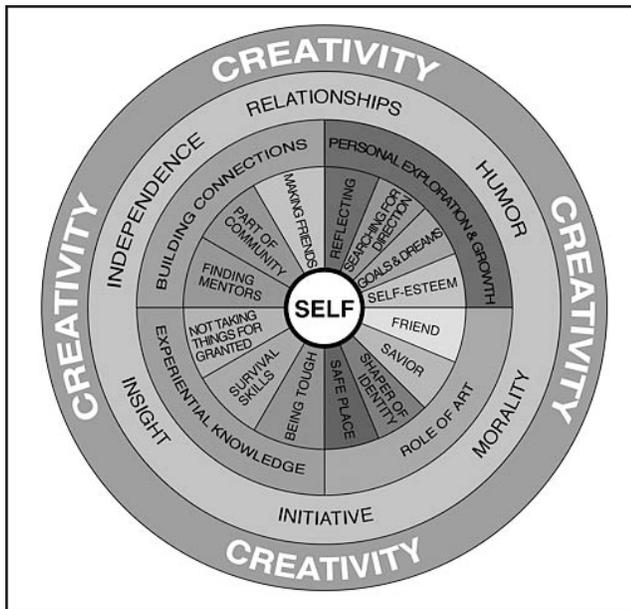


Figure 5 "Creativity at Every Turn" Mandala

that addressed four main themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis: "Personal Exploration and Growth," "The Role of Art," "Making Connections," and "Experiential Knowledge." Each main theme had subcategories that corresponded in many ways with Wolin and Wolin's (1993) seven aspects of resiliency. However, they overlapped in many different areas as well and distinctions were not always clear. For this reason, there are no divisions between the seven themes in our model. Despite the fact that the mandala is very fluid, the "Self" remains at the center. We believe that each theme interacts with many other themes, as if each ring of the mandala could rotate independently of the others. Additionally, we felt that creativity permeates all themes on the mandala because creativity provides a holding environment for resiliency; it encourages resiliency in its own right as well as facilitating other resiliency strengths. For this reason, "Creativity" is the outer, all-encompassing ring on the mandala.

### The Role of Art

During the three interviews, participants described the importance of art; one even felt that people without art were "oppressed." There were four sub-themes that emerged with respect to art: (a) *art as a friend*, and having an attribute of availability; for example, one participant noted that "people can't always help" but art is always there for you; (b) *art as a savior*, often rescuing its maker from a life of drugs, self-cutting, and suicidal ideation; (c) *art as a shaper of identity*, which performed a crucial role for the participants, all of whom identified themselves as creative individuals interested in careers as artists; and (d) *art as a safe place* to escape and to express strong and sometimes difficult emotions. One participant stated, "It helps me cope in a way, instead of doing dope or cutting, and it lets me get away from the drama and the bull--." Because art

played a role akin to a friend or savior, shaped their identities, and provided a safe haven, art was an essential component in their lives.

### Personal Exploration and Growth

The participants were very insightful about what they had learned from being homeless. Sub-themes in this category were: (a) *the art of reflecting* on their lives and experiences—for example, one stated, "With painting, you can also reflect... I use it to reflect on myself or my problems"; (b) *searching for direction*, such as one participant's experience of preferring the road less traveled because he had witnessed so many people making poor decisions; (c) *having future goals and dreams*, including applying for jobs or housing, going back to school, or abstaining from drug use; and (d) *maintaining self-esteem* through a number of things that they were proud of, such as one person who said she "never gave up" on herself, and another who was proud of the hard work he had put into his art show.

### Building Connections

An important component to survival on the streets is a support network. Specific elements that emerged from the data were: (a) *making friends*, which for street youth means the crucial survival skill of selecting people who can stand by you in times of need and maintaining relationships with them; (b) *belonging to a community* that may provide support and safety, although one participant who was part of a "street family" felt she had become jaded with its lifestyle and wanted to move on; and (c) *finding mentors*, who may foster growth and provide guidance, friendship, and support. A relationship with a mentor, which many participants found through the art center, may be crucial for accomplishing life achievements.

### Experiential Knowledge

The experience of being homeless can provide an education unlike any other. Sub-themes in this category were: (a) *not taking things for granted*, a seemingly universal experience of the participants, given that their housing, safety, or sustenance could be gone at a moment's notice; (b) *survival skills* such as attaining food, shelter, and support, that usually necessitate making difficult choices such as living on the streets rather than "dying" in a harmful home environment; and (c) *being tough* to ensure survival, including using common coping strategies such as coarse language or actions. Many of the participants came to know more about themselves while living on the streets. Often they altered their values as they learned new survival skills. In some instances, being homeless had solidified their desires to get their lives back in order.

### Discussion

This study's mix of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for an intimate view of the participants' experiences as well as providing a larger statistical context for the

population of homeless youth who attended the art center. Strengths of the study's quantitative component include the large sample size, the accurate demographic representation of the general homeless population in Seattle, and the considerable time span of the data collection. The most notable result of the study's quantitative component was the strong correlation found between art making and life achievements. The study also measured seven different variables with respect to life achievements. To increase validity and consistency, the data were analyzed and reviewed by multiple researchers.

The project was not without its weaknesses. Because volunteers recorded much of the data, there may have been some omission of important life achievements. The difference in impact between the various life achievements also could have been interpreted accordingly. For example, an attendee may have only had one life achievement, such as "getting housing," that nonetheless could be critical and affect continued attendance at the center. Some life achievements have bigger impact on an individual's life, safety, and success. Future research might take this into account by either weighing life achievements differently or measuring them by category.

In response to the quantitative findings, the art center staff members have made some important changes in how they gather information on the attendees. They now use a computer program to track the progress of their participants through life achievements and other information. This new protocol will allow for easier follow-up research. Another significant change, that recognizes the importance of art therapy, is that the staff has increased the age limit for attendees from 13-21 years to 12-25 years. Attendees also will have the opportunity to become "lifetime members" at the center, which allows them to become mentors.

The study's qualitative component was valuable in that it gave voice to the individual experiences of the participants. Qualitative data led to the development of the "Creativity at Every Turn" mandala, a new way of conceptualizing the value of art making. The decision to portray the qualitative information in a mandala was influenced by Wolin and Wolin's (1993) study of resilience. With their backgrounds in art and art therapy, the researchers felt that creativity played a much larger role than Wolin and Wolin described in their model. This supposition was confirmed by other studies in the review of literature.

Although the qualitative data were demonstrative, they could have been stronger had more participants been involved. Due to the nature of life on the streets, it was sometimes difficult to arrange follow-up sessions with individuals. As a result, a participant check could not be performed.

Although Wolin and Wolin's (1993) model cites seven different strengths of a resilient person, we believe that our model demonstrates the holistic nature of creativity; creativity encourages cohesion and strength in the different parts of self, rather than simply being a part of the whole. Many people do not consider art making to be valuable because it often does not lead directly to monetary gains. However, this study found that art fosters and improves skills necessary for scholastic, social, and career success.

Specifically, art has a particular therapeutic value for those populations that have experienced abuse and neglect.

## Conclusion

There have been few studies that have specifically addressed homeless youth, much less homeless youth and art making. In an age when national funding for art, education, and social services is dwindling, such research is essential. This study is a contribution to both the art therapy field and society at large. The results not only are important to art therapists, but to all those who work in social services, education, and the arts. Art therapists may intuitively and experientially know the benefits of art, but this study gives both numerical and narrative evidence for the power of art making and creativity. Findings may be used to propose funding for art therapy programs in treatment facilities, schools, community art studios, and drop-in centers. Indeed, the relevance of this study is not limited to homeless youth; the rewards of art making can extend to many populations.

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## Call for Papers

### New Directions in School Art Therapy

*Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* is seeking submissions for a special issue on art therapy in schools, residential and alternative settings, and community-based education. What are the unique contributions of art therapy to the school environment? How do art therapists in the schools navigate the child-centered intersections of class, race, culture, ethnicity, gender, family, ability, and other challenges that exist? As schools change, how have art therapists adapted or re-configured the practice of school art therapy? The Journal invites original research and clinical/educational reflection on these and other concerns.

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