

## **Narratives and Perceptions of Visual Art Education: A Case Study at Mdantsane Maximum Correctional Centre in the Eastern Cape**

**Siphe Potelwa**  
Senior Lecturer and Head  
Fine Arts  
University of Fort Hare  
Alice, South Africa  
**ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6450-7324**


### **Abstract**

Visual art education in correctional facilities should be given priority for the development of creative skills to prevent recidivism. To learn more about the experience, qualitative research was conducted with male offenders and correctional officials, but not with females. Data was collected in the Maximum Correctional Centre in Mdantsane, which incarcerates only males in the Eastern Cape Province. The research was a qualitative study that investigated the narratives and perceptions of male offenders who participated in a visual art education program in relation to rehabilitation and personal development. The findings revealed that the visual art education narratives program had a positive impact on self-worth, reduction, and recidivism.

**Keywords:** Art education; Correctional centre; Offender; Rehabilitation; Personal development

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study is an inquiry into how visual art education encourages offenders to tap into their creativity and create works that become doorways through which there can be a greater understanding of their thoughts and perspectives. According to the White Paper, adult learners should feel empowered by adult education, which will enable them to become driven, develop creative abilities, and be productive (37). The creative art portfolios of the offenders and transcriptions of their narratives about their artworks on the cell walls were observed before the study interview questions were collected in the correctional centre. This was accompanied by educational programs regarding the pedagogy and curriculum being implemented by the visual art education program.

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It was this body of data that was subject to analysis in this study toward understanding the level and nature of the impact that visual art education has on offenders incarcerated within the South African correctional system.

This article clarifies why, while being specified in current policies and legislation on education in correctional facilities, visual art instruction is not considered a vital subject area by the Department of Correctional Services.

### **IMPETUS FOR THIS STUDY**

The motivation to carry out this study was based on seeing many kinds of writing and images on numerous correctional centre walls. To be quite literal, the researchers appreciated that it was self-expression written on the walls of correctional centres because of the storytelling given by offenders during data collection (Johnson 10). Paintings and drawings on cell walls have been, and continue to be, seen by Correctional Service staff in a negative light (Gussak 18). These images are viewed as vandalism or symptomatic of a disobedient disposition among offenders. In this study, offender artwork is seen as a visible sign that exhibits the drive for creative expression among the offender's population. It begs the question: why is visual art education not implemented by the Department of Correctional Service?

Art materials such as pencils, charcoal, and paints for offenders could go a long way toward "helping [adult learners] to become motivated, acquire creative skills, and be productive" (Gussak 18). Resources that would be needed in an arts education initiative in the South African correctional system would include instructors who could help members of the incarcerated population tap into their artistic potential and express themselves in a constructive manner that enables offender's life storytelling to take on a material form as a means of self- and environmental analysis as well as a vehicle for catharsis. Johnson claims, "Prison is intended to strip power and deliver pain; art empowers and delivers happiness" (15). Thus, this study, based at Mdantsane, Eastern Cape, advocates for a change of perceptions about and recognition of the visual art education narratives of adult male offenders as a path to personal transformation and reintegration into civil society. The purpose of the study is to help correctional officials recognize the importance of visual arts education as a tool for rehabilitation and personal transformation.

## **AIM, OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study is to help correctional officials recognize the importance of visual arts education for self-expression, rehabilitation, and personal transformation. In addition to conducting an inquiry into the value of implementing a visual arts education program in a correctional facility,

- To ascertain if both adult male offenders and correctional officials alike recognize the importance of creative expression by the offender's means of assisting the strategy toward self-expression, rehabilitation, and personal transformation of such an offender as seen within the scope of this study.
- To determine what visual arts educational strategies may be effective at helping members of the correctional population engage in storytelling, illustrate these life stories or narratives, and express themselves fully and effectively.

The research questions are:

- How was the visual arts education program regarded by offenders as an important tool for self-expression, rehabilitation, and personal transformation?
- Why are visual arts education narratives not promoted or encouraged as storytelling and the visualization of narratives through creative expression in the correctional center?

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

The significance of this study is that it seeks to develop new perspectives on why visual arts education narratives remain clear as a significant resource to develop personal change and encourage and promote happiness among adult offenders in correctional centres. Gussak states that artworks on cell walls can be seen as an external manifestation of inner boredom and frustration on the part of inmates, which may be alleviated—quite simply—by the provision of a lack of visual art education resources such as papers, canvases, paints, lead pencils, and charcoal (31). While the results of this study focus on the therapeutic benefits of visual arts education, which contributes to a more successful reintegration of adult male offenders into civil society, there are additional benefits that may result from such educational programs (Gussak 45).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

When conducting the literary landscape for this study, this article reviews relevant studies that stated that there was little art education and art therapy literature that examined creativity and

self-expression for prisoners (Johnson 20). Gussak stated that creating artwork has physical health benefits as well as emotional, educational, and psychological benefits (30). In South Africa, adult basic education, and training (ABET) and further education and training are provided freely to all citizens. According to Morgan (68) and Schiff, McKim, and Patron (6), adult learners may master creative expression and material usage through visual arts education. The provision of educational resources to people who are or were incarcerated is important.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF VISUAL ART TO OFFENDERS**

Introducing an art program in correctional centres will help to develop tolerance in offenders incarcerated to be unable to cope with the uncertainties that they have to face (Johnson, (1)). According to Khan, visual art is an art form like drama, performance, and dance (67). Visual art helped adult offenders develop their self-esteem, promote confidence, and show respect for others (Johnson 19). Khan further stressed that visual art enhances cognitive skills and perceptions (68–70). According to Gussak, art education may prepare offenders to re-join society and find jobs (68).

According to the Department of Education Macro Indicators Report, “the majority of South Africans had the most limited access to visual art education through the formal schooling system; education and training in the arts for black South Africans relies largely on the efforts of community arts organizations” (175). Limited access certainly applies to inmates in correctional centres as well. The contribution of visual arts education has been a neglected area of learning in many correctional facilities, even though literature emphasizes art as an important subject for the rehabilitation of offenders.

### **OFFENDERS’ ARTWORK NARRATIVES/STORIES**

According to Toolan, stories told by offenders through their visual art were perceived as a sequence of connected events that involved offenders’ experiences (10–12). The motive for the offenders to narrate or tell stories through visual art is to display their expression through artwork on canvas and seek forgiveness from society. Toolan promoted the idea of visual art narratives being used to help offenders learn how to address or express their feelings and moods, which can change an offender’s state of mind (10). Narratives and life stories composed by offenders are crucial if there is to be positive "emotional" support for their personal identity and development (Gussak 110).

Gussak and Fleming affirmed that offenders learn through adult education what is expected of them and what they should expect from the world (40) and (1). Offenders' artwork narratives may help the world outside of the prison understand the personal experiences of offenders—the arch of their personal development and the transformation undergone by those held within the prison walls (Efland 76). Narratives caused offenders to reflect on personal experience and helped them see if they were willing to transform their lives (Kampylis & Berki 6).

### **CONTRIBUTION OF ADULT LEARNING IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES**

Before European-derived systems of education were introduced, adult learning already existed in the African context, with initiation institutions such as the Xhosa institution of *Ulwaluko* (circumcision) serving as a vehicle for the transfer of information and wisdom to future generations (Mangaye 33). Fasokum, Katahoire, and Oduaran stated that before colonialism, Africans had ways of imparting or transferring knowledge, skills, attitudes, aptitudes, interests, and values from one generation to the next (172). European colonial powers in Africa were historically classified as literacy, salvation, and functional (Morgan, 111). Therefore, it is a topic that merits more investigation, just like every other component of the study of indigenous African criminal justice systems.

Visual art education has the potential to enhance problem-solving, rehabilitation, and self-awareness, as well as improve the moods and feelings of offenders through visual art (Gussak 30). Hetland, Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (66) stressed that artwork can be metaphorically sad, loving, or agitated through its mystifying lines, shapes, textures, and composition. In addition, Brewster found visual art narratives in correctional facilities to be a creative process that helps offenders develop the "right brain" and build self-esteem, self-expression, and confidence (19).

Brewster stated, "Research shows that people of any age can feel a sense of emotional satisfaction when involved in a creative process. This satisfaction came from having control over art material" (17). The element of satisfaction provided a crucial insight into the role and benefits of visual art education in practice for self-discipline, self-management, and self-correction. Brewster found on occasion that not all offenders, however, benefit from art education (17–19). Brewster, furthermore, found that certain adult offenders lacked the motivation to learn and express themselves through their narrative artwork (19–20).



According to Kamyliis and Berki (28), the transformation of the offender takes place through “correctional education programs and activities offered with the intent of assisting offenders with two aspects: to help them better adjust to correctional life and enhance their knowledge” (Johnson 24). By developing oneself while confined behind the walls of the cell, one is better prepared to integrate into society and give back to the community following incarceration.

### **CORRECTIONAL BENEFITS FOR OFFENDERS’ PERSONAL IDENTITY**

The theory of personal identity, according to Schultz and Schultz, was “the state of being a person; it is everything about you that makes you what you are—a unique individual who is different in large and small ways from everybody else” (1). These scholars stressed that personal identity is how you respond to the trials and tribulations of life, including everyday aspects such as the ending of important and non-important relationships. Moreover, positive personal identities, according to Idowu, “entail people that are ready to learn something when it will help them in real-life tasks or problems” (160); in short, it is how a person relates to how they regard themselves. When criminals are given the opportunity to express their feelings and emotions via art programs, Johnson found that offenders develop their personalities through painting and sketching (19). The author emphasized that adults develop an ever-increasing learning reservoir because of their experience. Both Idowu and Taylor noted that most offenders are reluctant to talk about deep feelings and emotions; hence, the current researcher focuses on the positive contribution of visual art and its positive personal stories to the offender’s self-worth and self-fulfillment (236) and (132).

Adult learners had richer experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 96) because they could play a more influential role regarding “what they learn” and “how they learn it” (Idowu 160). In addition, Idowu 196 and McAree 8 pointed out that everyone has human rights, needs, dreams, wishes, and desires tied up with feelings and emotions. In support of the above claims by Idowu 196 and McAree 8, the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (15) deemed rehabilitation to be an offender’s right in correctional facilities across South Africa. It could be argued that these institutions uphold the law and the right to dignity outlined in the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 16), which implies that all offenders should receive therapy or rehabilitation rather than simply experience incarceration as a form of punishment (McAree 8).

Despite the volume of material on this subject regarding visual arts instruction in prisons and jails that has already been highlighted, this study just scratches the surface.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher in this section employed a qualitative approach. Walliman states that sample and sampling “are techniques used to do research; they represent the tools of the trade and provide the ways to collect, sort, and analyze information so that the researcher comes to some conclusions” (22). This research employed a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insight into the significance of visual art education narratives and storytelling in the context of offenders at Mdantsane Correctional Facility, Eastern Cape Province. This study was structured and semi-structured interviews with observation; open-ended and closed questions were conducted only on male adult offenders and correctional officials in correctional centers.

The methodology underpinning this study is the phenomenological approach, which is “a design of inquiry from philosophy and psychology in which the research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell 13). This approach blended the constructivist paradigm and the postcolonial indigenous research paradigms, as outlined (Creswell 14 and Chilisa 10). Colonial constructs and objectives were challenged to reconstruct a body of knowledge that carries hope and promotes transformation and social change.

This study’s participants were adult male offenders and permanently employed male correctional officials. The group was selected by seeking an in-depth understanding of the offender’s storytelling through art on the walls instead of papers or canvases. Yin defines purposeful sampling as a “selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study problem and research questions” (11). The total sample size was six (6). Out of this initial sample group, the interviewees who were included in the study consisted of only three (3) male offenders and one (1) male correctional official, resulting in the total number of interviewed sources being four (4). The Research Ethics Policy of the University of Fort Hare guided the ethics of this study. The researcher was granted ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Fort Hare and obtained ethical approval from the Department of Correctional Services and the facility in which the research was conducted. Participants signed an informed consent form before they

were interviewed. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without needing an explanation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were named by gender, facility, and number, for example, male Correctional Facility (MCF/1) in order to protect their identity. This study was conducted at the Maximum Correctional Centre for adult male offenders at Mdantsane in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

## **FINDINGS**

After gaining permission to conduct the study from the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), adult educators organized the interviewees, who were tense and concerned. The researcher believed this based on the observation of offenders that were coerced to participate in the study, but after introductions were made, they were calm. Observation was employed as a method of data collection. While sitting in on an actual class session, it was observed that an adult educator who was teaching the prisoners had no apparent curriculum in place, no textbook to read about art history, and no art materials. The place where the lessons were held was not sufficiently equipped to allow the offenders to practice their art. For example, painting stands and drawing desks were not available. The library only had two visual art educational books on the shelves, and the art material offered by the facility was limited to stationery.

There were no signs of misbehavior, and the correctional service exhibited dedication as well as a cooperative attitude towards connection with the educator.

According to the manager of the female correctional facility:

Since we do not have a person in charge of sports, recreation, art, and culture in our school, we lack understanding of those offenders who are drawing, crafting, and painting. This visual art education, to me, will bring about discipline. I have noticed in the offender's practice of art that visual art has the discipline of rehabilitating them (Respondent 1, MFCF/1).

Respondent (MCF/1) stated:

I found this visual art as an expression, a tool for me to pass messages.

Respondent 2 (MCF/2) stated:

Art has changed me a lot. I had an attitude when I arrived here; now I have changed and transformed my mood. I draw something if I am in a bad mood and other offenders ask me about my drawing. After that, I felt better and more confident.

During the interviews with the participants, enthusiasm was very high when talking about their creative skills. They acknowledged the support they received from the officials, including their educators, as being a source of strength. Observing and interviewing adult offenders with such



positive responses and attitudes was rewarding. These results revealed that offenders experience many challenges. The art they produced and the stories they tell about the art provide a lens through which to gain insight into their perceptions (Creswell 28). Offenders in this correctional service facility were bottled up with frustration and boredom because they had limited opportunities to exercise the creative skills offered to them. Those who were doing visual art as part of their education program asked their families to provide them with art material to help ease their boredom (Gussak 38).

Efland stressed that offenders feel better if they are productive and occupied, for example, by telling their stories through artwork (79). When the participants in this study found out that they were part of an academic study, offenders were surprised and excited about a researcher taking visual art education into cognisance as a rehabilitation program and a tool that can contribute to offenders' expression, development, personal gain, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-fulfillment.

One offender said:

It is my first time learning visual art in a correctional facility. I never studied or thought I knew how to draw. I started it here, through self-direction and boredom, and got motivation from other offenders who were doing visual art (Respondent MCF/1).

A similar view was expressed by MCF/2, who inspired the above offender (MCF/1). He said:

I got to use the visual art program inside and learn about art techniques. To me, the visual art program was the only program that I thought I could express myself freely without putting more frustration on me with other subjects that are provided by the correctional center. When I started visual art inside, I remember the lady who was a visual artist in my village. I was very close to her and used to watch her paint and read art books. Sometimes she will tell stories about her artwork to her visitors. I used to browse her art books, just looking at the pictures. But immediately, I was arrested; all those times or memories came back, and I thought it was my time to paint and draw. Yes, I used to draw at an early age like any other child at primary school (Respondent MCF/2).

It was found that offenders had reasons to value their creative skills. Offenders are inspired by small things. Respondent MCF/2 pointed out that visual art education "made me rehabilitated because visual art changed and transformed my attitude, mood, and self-esteem". Participants mentioned that when they were in visual art classes, they felt confident. Through their stories and narratives of their artwork, they felt free and forgot about the fact that they were incarcerated.

Adult offender MCF/1 had this to say about his use of past experiences:

Today, chief, I can use the knowledge of experience to express my feelings through my drawings. I used to draw for no reason, but now, through visual art, I know my reason for learning more about visual art: to share about my past experience, seek support, and have the opportunity to share my past experience with another offender and society through my paintings on the walls and displays (Respondent MCF/1).

Manganye confirmed that rehabilitation was “a process that improves personal responsibility for criminal behavior and its results” (88). In addition, Kampylis and Berki stress that rehabilitation is a focus of many correctional facilities in democratic states for the purpose of correcting offenders from their past experiences without forcing them into any program (27). DCS provided different skills that could rehabilitate them. Scholars write that rehabilitation for offenders makes them ready to reintegrate into civil society (Kampylis & Berki 28; Cheliotis 26).

Respondent MCF/1) claimed:

I do artwork for people living a better life in correctional facilities because sometimes we are asked by officials to draw them for their children. By doing that, I get something in return, and I wish they could sell or market my artwork outside the correctional facility.

Respondent MCF/2 stated:

As we grow, we do not know what we are capable of. The artwork I am having has made me confident but has not yet shown the public, which I wish I could one day share with them.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research was a process of incremental steps that began with a pressing issue and unfolded into an assessment of the current state of the knowledge on the subject, which was further fleshed out through observation and interviews. This study sought to help correctional officials recognize the importance of visual arts education as a tool for rehabilitation and personal transformation. The interviews were successful in enabling offenders to voice their feelings about the art they had produced and their experience of visual art education.

It was apparent, based on observation and interviewee feedback, that the arts make a positive impact on the lives of incarcerated people at Mdantsane. According to what was said by the offenders, the act of making art and engaging in creative activities is something that benefits them on a deeply psychological level. These activities are seen as something that helps to alleviate problems experienced within the correctional center. What is also interesting is the way creative activities are also seen by members of the prison population to build the skillsets needed to function after being released from Mdantsane.

Having observed and interviewed people within the correctional centre during this study, it was clear that there are still challenges in this area. A lot of these challenges take the form of a shortage or lack of physical resources. For offenders to create works of art more effectively, it was apparent that they needed more workspace. While there were a couple of books about art and art history at the facility, to be able to incorporate an art historical component into visual arts education, there would either need to be more art history books or some other type of resource that would be provided for the offender.

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