

**The Effects of the Writers in Residence Program  
for Incarcerated Youths on Literacy Skills and Dispositions**

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## Key Findings

1. This research study reveals significant improvements of the study group's writing disposition: persistence, passion, and confidence. The study group showed a greater understanding of the writing process and the amount of time and energy necessary to produce writing. In short, the study group realized the demands of being a writer through WIR's program.
2. The largest and most positive shift occurred with the study group's confidence. Many of the questions from the Writing Disposition Scale (WDS), specifically the confidence category increased several standard deviations. The data reflects that the study group felt more comfortable with themselves as writers.
3. The study group enjoyed WIR's program, specifically receiving feedback on their creative writing. Although, they were initially wary in the beginning, question #23 under the confidence category of the WDS points out a positive shift of 2.25 standard deviations after completion of WIR's program.
4. In their final interviews, the study group reflected on how WIR's program changed their perception of themselves and their situation as a whole, not just as writers. Their interviews affirm that adjudicated youth who were offered the opportunity to write experienced personal growth by self-reflecting.
5. Not a single adjudicated youth who participated in this research study was read to as a child. This finding is significant because research has long indicated that early reading experiences are critical to success in school (National Research Council, 1998; Hart & Risley, 2003). There is some evidence, as well, that shows the role of early reading experiences in children's social emotional learning.



## **Introduction**

The United States suffers from many socioeconomic injustices and mass incarceration is one of them. The US leads the world for the most individuals incarcerated with 2.2 million American locked up behind bars according to The Sentencing Project. When we hear this commonly used yet still jarring statistic, we oftentimes forget about the 46,000 youth under the age of 18, or legally referred to as juveniles who are incarcerated in America's public and private jails and prisons (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, Sladky, and Kang, 2020). Out of all 50 states, Ohio ranks fifth in the nation for the highest population of juveniles, totaling up to 2,200 across its three major cities and 88 counties (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, Sladky, and Kang, 2020).

Writers in Residence (WIR) teaches creative writing to youth who are incarcerated to empower their voices and assist in their re-entry. WIR facilitates creative writing workshops for juveniles at juvenile detention facilities and juvenile correctional facilities across Ohio as a skill-based, alternative educational intervention program.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research study was to determine if WIR exemplifies an impactful alternative educational intervention program and to discover the literacy levels and recidivism rates, writing dispositions, and writing achievements of adjudicated youth who participated in WIR's creative writing workshops twice a week for 12 weeks at a juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio. The questions below informed this research study:

1. What are the youths' literacy levels and reading dispositions? Do their literacy levels and dispositions toward reading and themselves as readers increase after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?
2. What are the youths' recidivism rates? Do their recidivism rates decrease after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?
3. What are the youths' writing dispositions? Do their writing dispositions change after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?
4. What are the youths' writing achievements? Do their writing achievements change after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?

## **Methodology**

The methodology section of this research study will explain the research design, study group population, data collection tools, procedure, and data analysis.



## Research Design

This research study's design was descriptive. This research study produced results by administering the pre- and post-assessment data collection tools, demographic and self-evaluation surveys. This research study also generated results by analyzing the study group's creative writing artifacts and their interviews with the primary investigator (PI). The literacy data was collected with the use of an Interview Schedule (Misheff, 1989), the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6), and the Test of Reading Comprehension (TORC). The PI maintained the field notes log and administered the pre-assessment data collection tools to the study group:

- Writing Disposition Scale (WDS)
- Demographic Survey (DS)

Then, the research study's co-investigator (CI) administered the Qualitative Reading Inventory – 6 (QRI-6) individually to the study group in a privately monitored room similar to the creative writing workshops for an assessment of the study group's literacy rates. An outline of every creative writing workshop appears below:

1. Writing Exercise
2. Discussion > Textual Analysis
3. Writing Prompt
4. Sharing > Positive Critique
5. Conclusion

In the middle of the research study, the PI individually interviewed the study group. A year later, the CI administered the TORC assessment in the same testing environment to deepen the understanding of the study group's literacy levels.

## Study Group Population

The study group population for this research study included adjudicated youth at a juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio. These youth participated in two creative writing workshops for two hours for 12 weeks. The following table illustrates the study group's demographics.

Youth	Age	Grade Level	Race/Ethnicity	Times Incarcerated	Current Sentence Length	Estimated Release Date
1	19	College freshman	White/European American	4	3 Years	6/18/2020
2	18	11	Black/African American	14	Believed to be finished but was still in the program in March 2020	9/27/2019
3	17	11	White/European American and Native American/Indian	1	6 Years	2/27/2023



			American/Alaska Native			
4	19	12	White/European American and Black/African American	3	4 Years	5/13/2020
5	17	11	White/European American	2	2 Years, not consecutive	7/2019
6	18	9	White/European American, Hispanic/Latinx, and Indian American	Over 35	1 Year	8/2/2019

Table 1

### *Data Collection Tools*

This research study will use the following eight data collection tools:

- Writing Disposition Scale (WDS)
- Writing Achievement Test (WAT)
- Demographic Survey (DS)
- Self-Evaluation Survey (SES)
- Interview Script and Questions with the Study Group Population
- Qualitative Reading Inventory – 6 (QRI-6)
- Reading Interview Schedule
- Test of Reading Comprehension (TORC)
- Primary Investigator’s Field Notes Log
- Study Group Population’s Creative Writing Artifacts

### *Procedure*

Before February 4th, 2019, the primary investigator emailed the volunteer coordinator to recruit adjudicated youth at a juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio that they believed would be suitable for WIR’s creative writing workshops based on their professional knowledge and discretion of the adjudicated youth at the juvenile facility. The initial recruitment email that the PI sent to volunteer coordinator also had a flyer attached for them to hand out to any of the interested adjudicated youth so they may learn about and sign up for WIR’s creative writing workshops and research study.



The start date included on the flyers was weeks in advance from the actual start date of the creative writing workshops to inform the adjudicated youth about the WIR's creative writing workshops and research study, specifically creating time to acquire informed consent and assent documents from the adjudicated youth and their legal guardians as well as administer the pre-assessment data collection tools to the study group. Then, on the actual date included on the flyers, the PI visited the juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio, escorted by a corrections officer to a small classroom decorated with educational posters, lined with computers in glass cases, and filled with two semi-circle tables and chairs. This classroom was this research study's primary research environment staff at this juvenile facility determined otherwise for any particular reason. A correctional officer always escorted the PI and co-investigator (CI) to the primary research environment and supervised every interaction with the study group from a reasonable distance.

Next, the PI introduced himself, WIR's creative writing workshops, and the research study attached to the study group. The PI asked the adjudicated youth who was interested in participating in WIR's creative writing workshops and research study, explicitly explaining that their participation was completely voluntary and would not affect their compensation nor their parole. The PI handed out and read through the research study's "Research Study Introduction Script," "Research Curriculum," and "Informed Consent/Assent Documents" with the adjudicated youth. If an adjudicated youth was a minor and wanted to participate in the research study, then the volunteer coordinator contacted that adjudicated youth's legal guardians, sending them all of the research study's documents including the "Informed Parental Consent Document" to grant the underage adjudicated youth the permission to participate in the research study. However, if an adjudicated youth did not have or could not complete the necessary documents to participate in this research study, then that adjudicated youth's data for this research study was not collected. Also, that adjudicated youth could still participate in WIR's creative writing workshops without any penalties including compensation.

During the same week, the PI visited the juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio again to collect the informed consent and assent documents from both the adjudicated youth and their legal guardians. The PI also administered several of the pre-assessment data collection tools to the study group. The PI prepared the field notes log on the table and administered the pre-assessment data collection tools to the adjudicated youth:

- Writing Disposition Scale (WDS)
- Demographic Survey (DS)

Once the study group completed the pre-assessment data collection tools, the PI collected the pre-assessment data collection tools and explained the role of Dr. Sue Corbin, the research study's CI, who would administer the Qualitative Reading Inventory – 6 (QRI-6) individually to the study group in a privately monitored room similar to the creative writing workshops for an assessment of the study group's literacy rates. The CI completed this task before the start date of the creative writing workshops. The creative writing workshops started on February 18th, 2019, and the PI facilitated the creative writing workshops that followed this outline below:



1. Writing Exercise
2. Discussion > Textual Analysis
3. Writing Prompt
4. Sharing > Positive Critique
5. Conclusion

The PI facilitated the creative writing workshops until May 6th, 2019. However, in the middle of the research study, the PI individually interviewed the study between March 25th and April 5th, 2019.

Finally, at the end of the research study, the PI and the CI collected the study group's creative writing artifacts and administered the post-assessment data collection tools to the study group identically to the manner in which they administered the pre-assessment data collection tools to the study group. The following list below details all of the data collection tool used for this research study:

- Writing Disposition Scale (WDS)
- Writing Achievement Test (WAT)
- Demographic Survey (DS)
- Self-Evaluation Survey (SES)
- Interview Script and Questions with the Study Group Population
- Qualitative Reading Inventory – 6 (QRI-6)
- Reading Interview Schedule
- Test of Reading Comprehension (TORC)
- Primary Investigator's Field Notes Log
- Study Group Population's Creative Writing Artifacts

## Results

Research Question #1 - What are the youths' literacy levels and reading dispositions? Do their literacy levels and dispositions toward reading and themselves as readers increase after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?

The major assessment that was administered to answer the first research question was the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6). The QRI-6 is an informal reading inventory that allows the administrator to investigate readers' sight word knowledge, word identification strategies, and comprehension on various levels of understanding. Questions include those having to do with vocabulary knowledge, the ability to identify main ideas and supporting details, inferencing skills, and critical thinking skills. The study group was also asked to respond to items on a reading interest survey that was based on the researcher's doctoral dissertation (Misheff, 1989). This survey was useful in exploring the study group's perceptions of reading and of themselves as readers. It was also used to interpret the pre- and post-assessment results.



A reader's background knowledge and their ability to predict text contents from initial cues in the passages are integral parts of the assessment that provide important information about the role of the reader's prior experiences in their understanding of the text. Research into the role of background knowledge (Alfassi, 2004; Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Guthrie, 2008; Marzano, 2004; Oakhill & Cain, 2016; Stahl, Hare, Sinatra, & Gregory, 1991) is clear. In order for readers to comprehend texts, they need a foundation of schema, or background knowledge, upon which to build their store of information.

In the initial assessments, the study group was asked to read a list of sight words that were presented out of context in list form. As they read, the administrator recorded miscues in word identification. These miscues were studied in order to determine the extent of the readers' abilities to use graphophonic, or sound-symbol correspondence, and morphemic (syllables, roots, and affixes) cues to identify words.

The study group was then given a passage to read that was estimated to be at a middle grade level. The study group was expected to successfully read the passage based on their current grade placement in high school at the juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio. This method of assessment is based on Padak and Rasinski's (2005) research in analyzing a reader's strengths and needs in an efficient yet effective manner. In this approach, the reader is presented with a text that is approximated to be written at the reader's estimated reading instructional level. The results may then be examined to determine whether or not the reader is performing at, below, or above their grade level. The middle grade passages were used in this initial assessment to accommodate the circumstances of the adjudicated youth in the research study whose instruction in school has been disrupted by at least one experience of incarceration.

Before reading the first passage, the study group was asked questions that would reveal their understanding of the topic and their ability to make predictions about the passage based on their prior knowledge. They then read the passage silently without being timed. The idea was to allow them to read at their own pace and at a rate that was comfortable for them so that they could focus on comprehension. After the reading, they were asked to tell what they recalled from the passage while the CI recorded their answers. Finally, the CI asked targeted questions related to the readers understanding of literal details and their ability to read inferentially by noting relationships among the details.

Next, the study group was presented with a second passage that continued the topic from the first passage. They were again asked questions about their background knowledge and to make predictions about the text's contents. This time, the administrator led them in a think-aloud strategy that required them to stop at key points in the passage and to explain what they were thinking as they were reading. The think-aloud protocol is standard in qualitative research, particularly in studies that seek to probe a subject's thinking strategies as they engage in an activity such as reading (Charters, 2010; Eccles & Arsal, 2017). Think-alouds are valid approaches in literacy assessment that allow the researcher to find out what the reader is focusing on, what the reader thinks is important, what questions the reader might have, how the reader is processing the information, and whether or not the reader is able to make connections between their background knowledge and the new information. After reading the second passage, the study group was again asked to retell what they could recall from the passage and to answer targeted comprehension questions.



For the post-assessment, the study group was presented only with reading passages. The sight word miscue analysis was not necessary to answer the research question, and not enough time had passed between the pre- and post- assessments to reliably find an increase in the kinds of miscues that were gleaned from the initial assessments. The reading survey was not administered as it had served its purpose in the initial assessments to provide a qualitative basis for interpretation of the results of the post tests. The methodology was the same with the passages on the post-assessments as they were for the pre-assessments; however, in order to determine a level of progress, passages on the high school level were used instead.

Table 2 presents an overview of the study group’s responses to the reading interest survey questions (see Appendix A).

<b>Youth</b>	<b>Books enjoyed</b>	<b>Enjoy leisure reading</b>	<b>Previewing strategies</b>	<b>Were you read to as a child</b>	<b>Attitudes about school reading experiences</b>	<b>Perception of yourself as a reader</b>
#01	Books on different perspectives	Yes	Read first 2 pages	No	Wanted to choose his own	Positive
#02	<i>All Understanding</i>	Yes – books he can relate to	Look at the cover	No	Neutral; “they taught me to understand”	No – is nervous reading aloud
#03	Science fiction	Yes	Smells the pages	No	Neutral; positive if the books were interesting	Yes because he can “escape into different worlds”
#04	<i>Relentless</i>	Yes	Reads the back first to see if he’ll like it	No	Felt like he was forced to read the books and he wanted more choice	Yes, he “understands it”



<b>Youth</b>	<b>What makes a good reader</b>	<b>Comp. strategies</b>	<b>Monitoring strategies</b>	<b>Visualize during reading</b>	<b>Study strategies</b>
#01	Dive into the book, not just read the words.	Stop, reread, make connections	Stops and then reflects on the reading after an hour	Yes	Doesn't study beyond repetition of facts.
#02	Someone who reads a lot	Ask someone, write it down if alone, use dictionary	Stops to summarize	Yes, makes a movie in his mind	Read, take notes, make up possible test questions
#03	Someone who "really gets into books"	Reread, use context clues	Thinks of things as he reads	Yes, imagines he is in the book	Glances at notes, memorizes "bits and pieces"
#04	Doesn't know anyone who is a good reader	Ask someone, write it down and ask someone later if he is alone	Reads a chapter and then stops to think about it	Yes	It's difficult for him because he has test anxiety

Table 2

Each adjudicated youth responded to the questions with no hesitations. Even though they were instructed that they need not answer every question, they cooperated fully in the survey. An analysis of the responses shows a group of young men who engage in reading and enjoy reading as a leisure activity, particularly books that were relatable (Youth #02).

They all had different ways of previewing books; however, their previewing techniques were not as comprehensive as they might be since none of them described reading the titles and subtitles, asking questions, reading the introduction and conclusion, or making connections to the text as suggested by study skills experts (Robinson, 1946; Manz, 2002; Langer, 1981).

An important finding was revealed in the question concerning whether or not they had been read to as children. Every one of the adjudicated youth replied with a "no." This is significant because research has long indicated that early reading experiences are critical to success in school (National Research Council, 1998; Hart & Risley, 2003). There is some evidence, as well, that shows the role of early reading experiences in children's social emotional learning. A recent study by Child Trends researchers (Murphy, Warner-Richter, Anderson, & Hirilall, 2018) explored the impact of a Reading Partners program with children in California. The results proved that children who were read to and engaged in dialogue with an adult "demonstrated significant improvements in early literacy, reading, and SEL skills (reading engagement, social competence, persistence, and self-control) across the year." The aspects of social competence, persistence, and self-control are important for considering the implications of WIR's program. It may be that had the study group participated in read alouds in their homes with caring adults, their social-emotional learning may have been positively impacted in life-changing ways.



Each of the adjudicated youth had neutral or negative feelings about the reading that they did in school. They reported feeling positive about the texts that were read in class as long as they were interesting. Two adjudicated youth said that they would have liked to have had more choice in the books that they read. These findings are supported by research conducted by Iyengar & Lepper (1999), and Guthrie & Wigfield (2000) in which choice of reading material was shown to be a critical aspect of students' motivation and persistence in reading.

All but one perceived himself to be a good reader. Youth #03 declared that he gets nervous when he has to read aloud because he struggles with pronunciation. This was verified when he read the sight words and volunteered to read portions of the second comprehension passage aloud in the post assessment session.

The study group's perceptions of what it takes to be a good reader were of importance as they reflected the adjudicated youth's own experiences. Two young men stated that the ability to fully experience a book is a critical component of good reading. One noted the importance of reading a lot, and another stated that he didn't really know anyone whom he considered to be a good reader. This last response indicates a lack of role models in literacy. While the question of how much reading the adjudicated youth have done during their incarceration as opposed to the amount of reading they did before was not a part of this study, it may be of benefit to explore this in future research. Increasing their time immersed in books along with quality writing instruction that promotes more time writing may be strong compounding factors in the study group's literacy improvements and their social-emotional learning, making the possibility of returning to confinement less real.

When the adjudicated youth were asked about their reading strategies, they appeared to be consciously aware of how they approach reading. They use evidence-based techniques such as rereading, using outside resources, making intertextual and intrapersonal connections, and using context clues to comprehend while they read. It is unclear if the adjudicated youth were taught these strategies or if they discovered them on their own; the important thing is to realize that in spite of their lack of early reading experiences, they have a strong sense of what they need to do in order to understand a text. Further, when asked how they monitor their comprehension, three of the adjudicated youth responded that they stop to think and summarize as they read. The study group said that they visualize what they are reading which is a vital part of deep understanding when reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

It is of interest to note that the adjudicated youth did not indicate as much enthusiasm for studying as they did for leisure reading. This is not unusual for teenagers under any circumstances, but their responses to the question concerning what they do when they are studying for school mirror their neutrality about the reading that they do in school where the texts are assigned and there is little motivation to read. Their study skills lack organization in general and reflect inefficient ways of retaining information. The only adjudicated youth who reported using an evidence-based strategy was #02, who, interestingly, is the lowest reader among the four. He takes notes and makes up his own test questions which is an excellent way to approach any study situation. One of the adjudicated youth said that he experiences test anxiety and so it makes him nervous to study.

Finally, when the adjudicated youth were asked a qualitative question concerning their perceptions of themselves as readers, their answers revealed the deep level of their understanding of the reading process and their part in it. Adjudicated youth #01 said that as a result of WIR's program, he reads more and analyzes what he reads more carefully. He said that he looks for specific concepts and asks "why" questions as he reads in order to understand the implications of the text. Adjudicated youth #02 believes that he has become a better reader



because he understands words more now and he is more willing to ask for help when he comes to something in the text that he does not know. Adjudicated youth #03 said that writing has helped him learn to break words into “chunks” (i.e., syllables, roots, affixes) in order to identify unknown words. He also believes that WIR’s program helped him to understand words more. Adjudicated youth #04 said that he thinks more and reads more as a result of WIR’s program. He believes that because of this increase in thinking and reading that he has become a better reader.

In summary, the adjudicated youth’s responses to the survey questions reveal a level of engagement in reading that contradicts what many might expect from incarcerated youths. They have favorite books and genres; they know effective reading strategies, including fix-up schemes to use when comprehension breaks down; and they have positive feelings about themselves as readers. What they are lacking are strong foundations in early reading experiences, better study skills, and the opportunity to have more choices in their academic reading so that they may be more motivated to learn.

The sight word assessment from the QRI-6 indicates the grade levels attempted, the number of words that were recognized automatically (WRA) within 5 seconds, and the total number of words (TI) that were identified within and without the 5-second timing. The miscues that were analyzed were those having to do with prefixes and suffixes (affixes) (AM), root words (RWM), inflectional endings (IEM), short vowel sounds (SVM), long vowel sounds (LVM), and r-controlled vowel sounds (RCVM). The number of words that required “teacher” assistance (TA) were also recorded. Using the leveling chart from the QRI-6, the approximate proficiency levels (IL) were then determined for each grade list attempted (Independent = Ind, Instructional = Ins, Frustration = Fr). Table 1 shows the quantitative data that was collected for each youth.

**Word Identification Data**

Youth No.	GL	WRA	TI	AM	RWM	IEM	SVM	LVM	RCVM	TA	IL
#01	6	16	17	1		1				1	Ins
	UM	16	16		2				2		Ins
	HS	10	12	2	5			1		1	Fr
#02	2	18	18		2						Ind
	3	10	13	3							Fr
	4	6	6								Fr
#03	3	20	20								Ind
	4	19	19			1					Ind
	5	20	20								Ind
	6	18	18	1		1					Ind
	UM	16	16				1		3		Ins
	HS	15	17			1	2				Ins
#04	3	20	20	1							Ind
	4	20	20								Ind
	5	19	19					1			Ind
	6	20	20								Ind
	UM	16	17						1	1	Ins
Total				8	10	3	3	2	6	3	



Table 3

The evidence from the miscue analysis of the sight word data indicates that the greatest majority of miscues were in the more sophisticated aspects of morphology involving affixes and root words. Basic phonological awareness of vowels and consonants did not pose a problem for any of the adjudicated youth, but it provides insight into their current stages of word identification. Normally, youths who are in high school or are high school age as the study group was at the time of assessment would not struggle so much with roots and affixes (Ehri, 1999). These difficulties would place them at a middle school level of word identification.

One of the adjudicated youth (Youth #01) placed at the instructional level for high school, meaning that he could be expected to read high school material with some assistance. None of them were independent for high school. Two adjudicated youth were not administered the high school level word lists because of their difficulties with the lower leveled lists. Three adjudicated youth placed at the instructional level for upper middle school, approximately 3-4 years below their current grade level. Two adjudicated youth were reading independently at the 6th grade level. Youth #02 struggled the most with an independent level of 2nd grade followed by frustration levels at grades 3 and 4. For him, word identification is a major factor in his reading difficulties as he is approximately 9-10 years below grade level.

The quantitative data from the comprehension portion of the assessment is found in Table 2. Each adjudicated youth read a passage first, following the typical pattern of previewing, reading, retelling, and answering questions (Typ). They then read the next passage on the same level and topic but stopped throughout the passage to participate in a think-aloud strategy (TA). The youths were scored for their level of familiarity with the topic (Fam/Unfam); their ability to answer explicit, literal-level questions through recall (ER) and through looking back at the text (ELB); the ability answer implicit, inferential-level questions through recall (IR) and through looking back at the text (ILB); their ability to retell main ideas (RMI); and their ability to retell details (RD). Finally, using the charting guide in the QRI-6, proficiency levels were assigned for each youth.



**Comp. Data**

Youth No.	Typ	TA	Fam	ER	ELB	IR	ILB	RM	RD	Level
#01	x		83%	80%	100%	60%	NA			Ins
		x	100%	100%	NA	90%	NA	1	1	Ind
#02	x		41%	50%	NA	70%	NA	0	1	Fr
		x	92%	40%	NA	80%	NA	1	3	Ins
#03	x		100%	80%	NA	80%	NA	0	0	Ins
		x	92%	80%	NA	80%	NA	1	3	Ins
#04	x		42%	50%	NA	90%	100%	0	0	Ins
		x	92%	90%	NA	90%	NA	2	2	Ind

Table 4

Data from the comprehension passages shows patterns of improvement when the adjudicated youth were engaged in the think-aloud strategy. Table 3 indicates the differences for the typical passage and the think-aloud passage for each youth in the level of explicit, or literal level, comprehension.

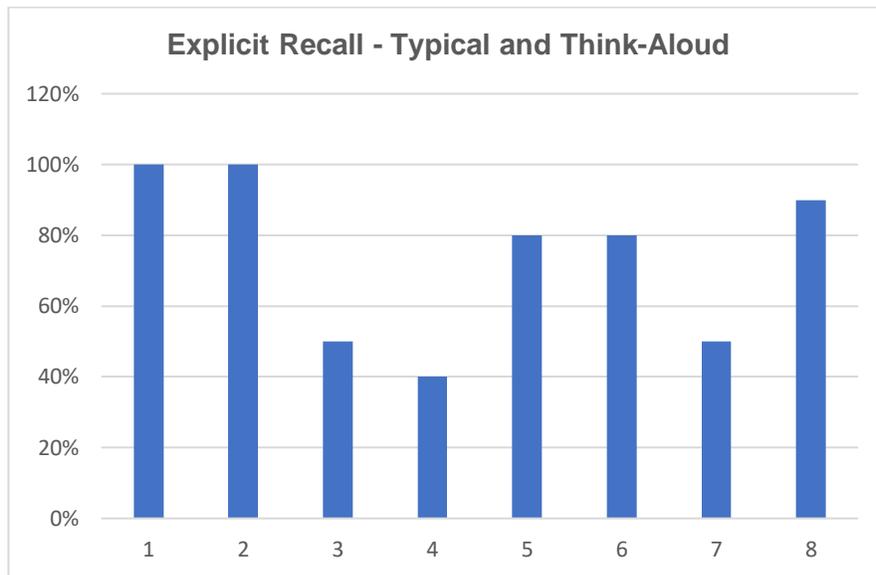


Table 5

Bars 1 and 2 represent adjudicated youth #01; bars 3 and 4 represent adjudicated youth #02; bars 5 and 6 represent adjudicated youth #03; and, bars 7 and 8 represent youth #04. Improvement was significant for adjudicated youth #04. Youth #02 decreased his comprehension slightly in the think-aloud. He stated that he found the stopping to think and discuss distracting, and this is likely the reason for this finding. Adjudicated youth #03 remained constant in his comprehension of the two passages whether or not he stopped to think aloud during the reading. With the exception of youth #03 whose proficiency level remained the same (instructional at upper middle level), each adjudicated youth’s proficiency level increased by using the think-aloud method when all factors were used to determine proficiency. The study group was assessed on their ability to use their background knowledge to comprehend the text,



as well as to use context and stopping to summarize, ask questions, and make connections with the text.

Table 4 shows the youths' comprehension on the implicit level for both the typical passage and the think-aloud passage.

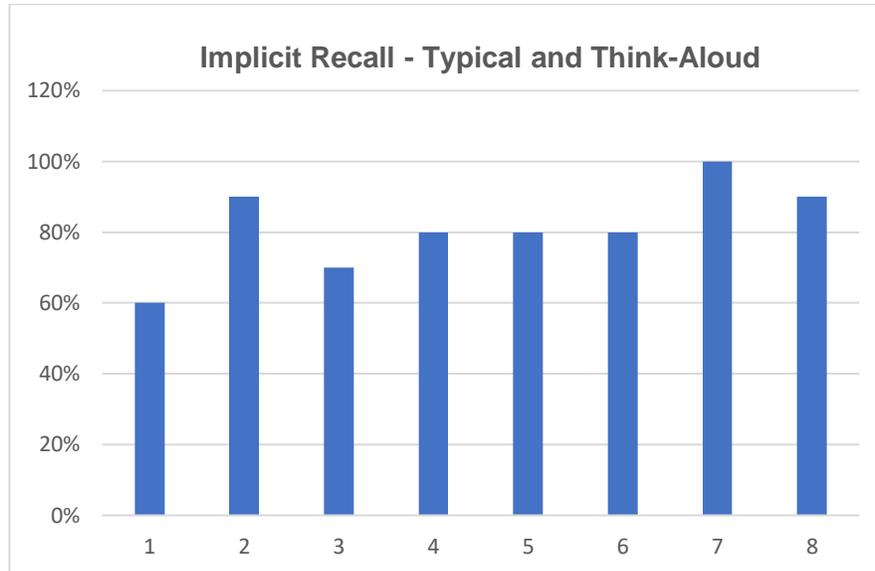


Table 6

Adjudicated youths #01 and #02 were able to answer implicit (or inferential) questions better during the think-aloud passage. Adjudicated youth #03's scores remained the same, and adjudicated youth #04 answered implicit level questions better on the typical passage, although only by a slight decrease in the think-aloud activity.

A brief summary of each adjudicated youth's abilities to negotiate meaning in text appears as follows:

Adjudicated youth #01 comprehends words better when they are presented in context. He is able to articulate definitions of vocabulary words using higher level vocabulary. His ability to answer explicit questions better than implicit ones. He comprehends better when he has a higher degree of familiarity with the content, and he is successful at stopping throughout a passage to summarize. He does not need to look back often to answer questions. The Think Aloud indicated the following strengths:

1. Summarizing
2. Reporting prior knowledge
3. Noting understanding
4. Identifying personally with the text



Adjudicated youth #02 comprehends words better when they are presented in context. He is below grade level in terms of vocabulary knowledge, and has a limited knowledge of Tier 2 words, or words that appear in more formal, academic language. He is highly dependent on people to help him with words; he has a narrow repertoire of word identification strategies and either asks someone or goes to an outside reference if he comes to an unknown word. He had difficulty retelling the passage after the typical passage and did not attempt to look back for answers. He comprehends better with more familiarity and stopping throughout to summarize. His implicit comprehension is higher than his explicit which indicates his use of background knowledge and practical sense to think beyond the text. Word identification issues slow him down and he lacks confidence in his ability to pronounce words; however, his ability to read the upper middle level passage on an instructional level given the accommodations that the think-aloud strategy provided indicates a much higher than expected reading ability than his sight word assessment indicated. The Think Aloud indicated the following strengths:

1. Questioning that indicates understanding
2. Noting understanding
3. Identifying personally

Adjudicated youth #03 has a good vocabulary background and articulates his thoughts well. His vocabulary and comprehension are both instructional at middle school level. His implicit comprehension is higher than the explicit. He is not able to completely retell the passage, but he was able to use background knowledge to comprehend the passages. The Think Aloud indicated the following strengths:

1. Identifying personally
2. Noting understanding
3. Summarizing
4. Questioning that indicates understanding
5. Reporting prior knowledge

Adjudicated youth #04 comprehends words better when they are presented in context. He has some difficulty articulating vocabulary definitions. He comprehends passages better when he reads in context, and his implicit comprehension is higher than the explicit. He does not look back to the text often to answer questions. He comprehends better when he is more familiar with the topic and when he stops throughout to summarize. The Think Aloud indicated the following strengths:

1. Summarizing
2. Reporting prior knowledge
3. Noting understanding
4. Identifying personally
5. Questioning that indicates understanding



The post-assessments were comprised of passages from the high school level. This level was used in anticipation of improvement after the adjudicated youth's participation in WIR's program. The only assessments that were necessary were the comprehension passages, including the evaluations of background knowledge, the ability to make predictions, the ability to comprehend and answer explicit and implicit questions, and the ability to retell the passages. Again, the adjudicated youth were presented with two passages with one being read using the typical method and one being read using the think-aloud strategy. A final interview question asked the youths to explain whether or not they had become better readers as a result of WIR's program, and, if so, how. Table 4 indicates the comprehension data for all four youths.

Youth No.	Typ	TA	Fam	ER	ELB	IR	ILB	RM	RD	Level
#01	x		92%	60%	NA	80%	NA	1	4	Ins
		x	100%	80%	NA	60%	NA	1	4	Ind
#02	x		58%	0%	NA	60%	80%	1	1	Fr
		x	42%	20%	NA	80%	NA	0	7	Ins
#03	x		100%	70%	NA	90%	NA	1	1	Ins
		x	100%	60%	NA	%	NA	0	5	Ind
#04	x		100%	80%	NA	%	%	0	0	Ind
		x	83%	%	NA	60%	80%	1	1	Ind

Table 7

Table 5 shows the pre- and post-test scores for the explicit (or literal) comprehension of the study group where Series 1 indicates pre-test scores and Series 2 indicates post-test scores of the two typical and think-aloud passages. Columns 1 and 2 represent adjudicated youth #01; columns 3 and 4 represent adjudicated youth #02, columns 5 and 6 represent adjudicated youth #03, and columns 7 and 8 represent adjudicated youth #04.

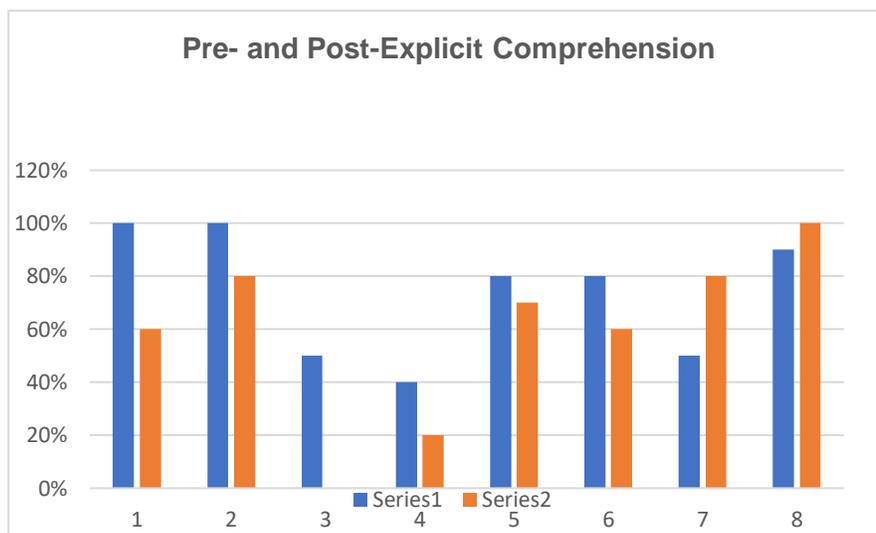


Table 5



There is a noticeable difference between the scores on the first passage and those on the second. The first passages were about immigration and were taken from a middle school level text (MT). The second passages were about viruses and were taken from a high school level text (HT). The HT was more concept dense and required a high level of background knowledge for effective comprehension of the text. Adjudicated youth #01, #03, and #04 had 92-100% familiarity with the science concepts while adjudicated youth #02 had 58% familiarity. These results mirror the familiarity levels of the study group on the social studies passages in terms of which adjudicated youth had higher levels of background knowledge; however the study group was overall more familiar with the science concepts than they were the social studies concepts.

The results in Table 6 indicate that adjudicated youth #01 significantly increased his explicit recall score on the HT passages in the post test; adjudicated youth #02 made similar gains since his pre-test scores decreased during the think-aloud passage while the post-test scores increased during the think-aloud; adjudicated youth #03 had a slight decrease in explicit recall on the post-test think-aloud passage; and adjudicated youth #04 increased his explicit comprehension on the post-test think-aloud. It is evident that the HT passages were more difficult, given the nature of the science concepts, for adjudicated youth #01, #02, and #03 but that adjudicated youth #04 performed on a higher level with the science texts.

Table 7 indicates the pre- and post-scores of the study group's ability to comprehend text on a more sophisticated inferential level. Again, adjudicated youth #01 is represented by columns 1 and 2; adjudicated youth #02 is represented by columns 3 and 4; adjudicated youth #03 is represented by columns 5 and 6; and, adjudicated youth #04 is represented by columns 7 and 8. The pre-test results are indicated in Series 1 and the post test results are in Series 2.

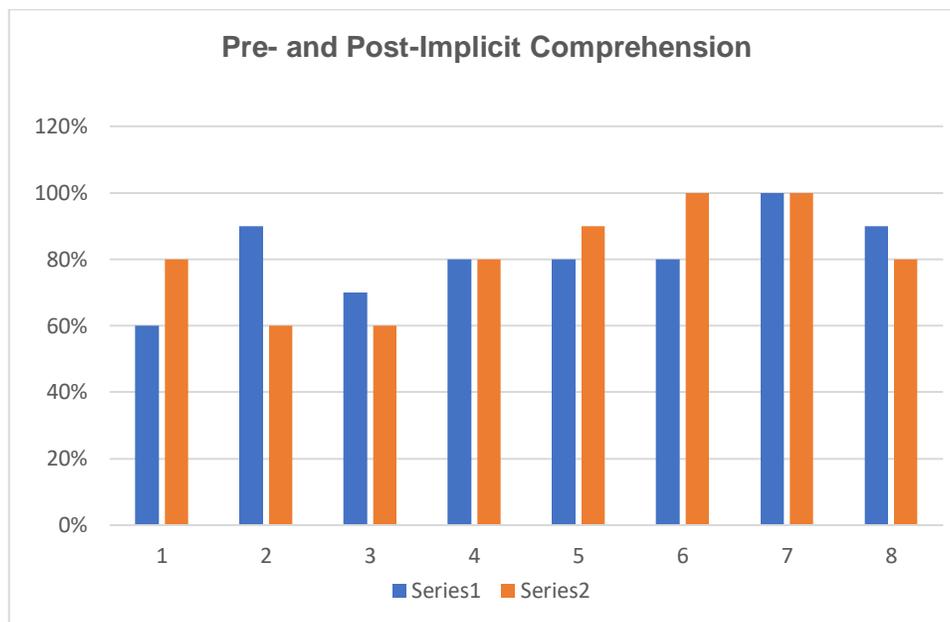


Table 9



These results show the impact of the study group’s substantial background knowledge of science concepts that enabled them to make connections among the literal details in the science passages and think on a critical level. Adjudicated youth #01 and #04 scored higher on the typical reading than during the think-aloud while adjudicated youth #02 and #03 performed better on the think-aloud passage. In general, taking both the typical and think-aloud passages into consideration, the study group functioned between a 60% and 100% level on the HT. Since this same scoring pattern was evident on the MT, an increase in reading level is evident, especially for adjudicated youth #01 and #03 where their scores were higher on the science passage than on the social studies passage. An important finding here is that the study group is able to read high school level material at least an instructional level. Adjudicated youths #01, #03, and #04 are all on an independent reading level for high school texts, and adjudicated youth #02 can handle high school material on an instructional level if he is allowed to use look-backs and engage in think-aloud activities while he reads.

Each adjudicated youth uses their background knowledge to think through texts. They question the text as they read and make personal connections to the concepts. They make predictions and read to verify them. These are all characteristics of strong readers, and the evidence shows that participation in WIR’s program provided a way for the study group to experience reading and writing in meaningful ways that made a difference in their literacy skills.

As a final exploration into the study group’s literacy skills, the TORC assessment was administered by the CI to the final two youths who were available and able to participate in the research study. Each of them had scored as reading instructionally at the high school level at the end of the research study. On the TORC assessment, they scored at the following levels:

<b>Subtest</b>	<b>Youth #1</b>	<b>Youth #2</b>
<b>Relational Vocabulary</b>	Grade equivalent = 10.2 Percentile = 37	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 99
<b>Sentence Completion</b>	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 95	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 98
<b>Paragraph Construction</b>	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 63	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 63
<b>Text Comprehension</b>	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 84	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 91
<b>Contextual Fluency</b>	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 84	Grade equivalent = college Percentile = 84
<b>Reading Comprehension Index</b>	115 = Above Average	131 = Very Superior

Table 10

These results show an extraordinary level of competence in the major components of reading ability. The relational vocabulary test indicates the reader’s ability to identify categories of words rather than simple definitions. This is a higher order thinking skill. The sentence completion test measures the reader’s ability to use context clues and make meaning out of text. Paragraph completion requires the reader to sequence the sentences in a five-sentence paragraph. Text comprehension measures the reader’s ability to identify major ideas and details in short passages. Finally, the contextual fluency requires the reader to read a passage of connected text that is presented in all capital letters with no punctuation. The reader must be able to indicate where one sentence begins and the other ends. All of these measures are important aspects of reading proficiency and comprehension and are particularly important for



independent adult readers to master. The total of all of the subtests' scores reveal a "Reading Comprehension Index" which is comparable to a test of cognitive ability. It is striking that both of these adjudicated youth are considered to be above average with one being "very superior." These results lend more credence to their heretofore unrecognized cognitive strengths.

Further research into the amount of reading that adjudicated youth did before and during their incarceration in conjunction with tests of reading ability such as the one conducted here would be useful to determine the extent that reading time has on the study group's skills. It is also of interest to further explore the impact of early reading experiences, particularly being read to as children, on adjudicated youth's social-emotional learning and literacy.

**Research Question #2 - What are the youths' recidivism rates? Do their recidivism rates decrease after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?**

The duration of this study did not allow for this question to be answered. However, Ohio's Department of Youth Services (DYS) agreed to track the recidivism rates of the study group and deliver information about their recidivism rates to the researchers once the state agency reports their entire adjudicated population's recidivism rates from a 1-year, 2-year, 3-year approach.

**Research Question #3 - What are the youths' writing dispositions? Do their writing dispositions change after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?**

The data indicates that there were positive changes in the study group's writing dispositions by the end of the research study. The following information in this section presents an overview of all of the disposition data from the Writing Disposition Scale (WDS).

As mentioned earlier, before and after the creative writing workshops, the PI administered the WDS to the study group. Carolyn L. Piazza and Carl F. Siebert (2008) developed and validated the WDS as a "self-report instrument for measuring affective stances toward writing" divided in three categories: persistence, passion, and confidence. Piazza and Siebert define the three categories below:

- **Persistence:** "reflects the writer's willingness to spend time writing and expend effort continuously. Matters concerning persistence include specifying time, duration, and frequency."
- **Passion:** "has been reflected in the literature as a writer's intense drive or desire to write, a strong commitment to writing, and a repeated enjoyment of writing over time."
- **Confidence:** "reflects faith or belief in an individual's ability to write and a certainty about his or her effectiveness as a writer."



The study group ranked 31 statements from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA) within the three categories of the WDS. At least 10 of the statements identify negatively or oppose the definition of the category. The researchers highlighted these statements in pink. The researchers coded the Likert Scale from 1 to 5; 1 represents SD and 5 represents SA. Then, the researchers calculated the averages of each statement within the three categories of the WDS to discover significant differences, which would reveal a change in the study group's writing disposition either negatively or positively. Finally, the researchers bolded any of the statements with at least a .5 difference.

Persistence is the first category of the WDS. Table 11 reveals some of the significant changes within this category, implying that the study group's persistence toward writing increased as a result of their participation in WIR's program. The study group felt more inclined to write even if that required them to devote more time and energy to their writing. For instance, Q2, Q11, Q13, Q18, and Q31 point out that the youth realized that writing is a long, explorative process, which requires adequate time and attention. However, Q3 and Q4 oppose the previously mentioned implication because some of the adjudicated youth may believe that their creative writing artifact cannot be developed further, especially if the adjudicated youth believes that their creative writing artifact achieved its ultimate version.

<b>Persistence</b>		
1	I will continue practicing writing until I get good at it.	0
2	I see no reason to rewrite a paper.	<b>-0.75</b>
3	I usually write more than one draft of a paper.	<b>-0.5</b>
4	I frequently re-read my writing to examine my thoughts.	<b>-0.5</b>
5	I am determined to complete difficult papers.	<b>0.75</b>
6	When I get stuck on my writing, I don't give up.	0.25
7	I am only willing to complete easy papers.	0
8	I take extra time to review my writing before I turn it in.	<b>0.5</b>
9	I put a lot of effort into my writing.	-0.25
10	I sometimes continue on my writing for several days to make it better.	0
11	I try to figure out the problem if ideas are not working in my paper.	<b>1</b>
12	In school, I have trouble concentrating on writing for very long.	<b>-1</b>
13	Writing is hard for me because I have to plan and revise.	<b>-0.75</b>
14	I usually spend more time on my writing than the teacher requires.	0.25
15	I give up when I run into a problem with my writing.	-0.25
16	I don't mind starting over when I'm not pleased with my writing.	0
17	I wait until the last minute to complete a writing assignment.	0.25
18	I take time to try different possibilities in my writing.	<b>0.75</b>
19	Even if I were doing poorly in writing class, I would refuse to give up.	0.25
20	I am willing to start over if someone doesn't understand my work.	0.25
21	I will continue to work on a piece beyond the usual writing time.	0.25
22	I am willing to spend time on long papers.	0
23	I often request extra time in class to improve my writing.	<b>0.5</b>
24	I write quickly so I can do other things.	0.25
25	I never stop trying to become a better writer.	0.25
26	I often choose to continue my writing at home so I can make my paper better.	-0.25
27	I take time to solve problems in my writing.	-0.25
28	I usually have too much time for writing.	<b>-0.75</b>
29	I give myself plenty of time to write a good paper.	<b>0.5</b>
30	I often work quickly so I can be among the first to turn in my writing.	-0.25
31	My first draft is usually the final product.	<b>-1</b>

Table 11

Passion is the second category of the WDS. A comparison of tables 12 and 11 determine that each category's averaged differences actually expose many inconsistent discrepancies. For example, Q9 highlights the largest averaged difference yet the statement contradicts the averaged differences examined within the persistence category with Q2, Q11, Q13, and Q31. Although, Q2, Q5, Q12, and Q25 affirm the implication that the study group enjoy writing as a



fun exercise to the extent that the adjudicated youth prefer thinking about and looking forward to the activity of writing itself.

Passion		
1	I love writing.	0
2	Writing is my favorite subject in school.	0.5
3	I get upset when it's time for writing class.	0
4	I like to read my writing to the class.	-0.5
5	I think about my writing during other parts of the school day.	0.75
6	Writing makes me feel good.	-0.5
7	I hate writing.	0
8	I write every chance I get.	-0.5
9	I avoid writing.	1.25
10	I write more often than other kids in my class.	-1
11	When I am writing, I'd rather be doing something else.	0.25
12	Writing is fun for me.	0.5
13	The only reason I write is to get a good grade.	0.5
14	Writing is boring.	-0.5
15	I like different kinds of writing.	0.25
16	If I have choices during free time, I usually select writing.	-0.5
17	I think of myself as an author.	0.5
18	I would write even if the teacher didn't assign writing.	-0.25
19	Writing is important to me.	0.5
20	I put a lot of myself in my writing.	0.25
21	I wish I had more time to devote to writing.	0
22	It is important for me to like what I've written.	-0.5
23	Writing is a waste of my time.	0.5
24	I would consider writing as a career.	0.5
25	I always look forward to writing class.	0.5
26	I write because it is something you are forced to do in school.	0.25
27	My writing gives me great satisfaction.	0
28	I like putting thoughts down on paper.	0.25
29	I do only what I have to do when given a writing assignment.	0.5
30	I would like to write more in school.	0.75
31	I am not interested in knowing more about writing.	0.5

Table 12

Confidence is the third and final category of the WDS. Compared to the previous two categories, the confidence category showed the largest averaged differences. Q13, Q15, Q19, and Q25 suggest that the study group's confidence increased as a result of their participation in WIR's program. The adjudicated youth believe in their ability to write and learn new writing techniques to better their writing. However, the most dramatic averaged difference appears in Q23, which implies that although the study group feels confident in their ability to write and learn new writing techniques, they also welcome feedback from an instructor or facilitator. This practice will boost the adjudicate youth's confidence even further.

To summarize the research data results for research question #3, the study group's disposition toward writing and themselves as writers increased, specifically clarifying that the adjudicated youth's willingness to spend more time and energy on their writing rose as well as their intrinsic belief that they can write and write well too.

Next, evidence from the interviews and field notes add more qualitative data related to this research question. Again, the results are positive. The study group's solicited and unsolicited responses to questions reveal the depth of their experiences and the deep meaning that they discovered as writers in WIR's program. The following summaries are their statements.



### Youth #01

He stated that he appreciated the freedom of being able to say what he wanted to say and not what others “wanted to hear.” He felt that he expanded his range as a writer and that he could feel authentic when he wrote with the group. One important statement was that he felt as though his writing had “evolved; as I grew my writing grew with me.” This young man had been slandered in news articles that did not show him as he is today. He stated that he was concerned that his writing would “fall off” after leaving the facility, and requested that workshops be created for released youth to maintain the momentum and the bond. One final critical statement was that he felt that if there had been a similar program for him when he was in high school, that might have prevented him from going to jail and prison in the first place.

### Youth #02

This adjudicated youth was the lowest-ranking reader in the original group and was generally reticent to talk in assessment sessions. Although he was quiet and introspective, it was evident that he could think on a deep level from his writing. He stated in his interview that he felt that he had “better flow and rhythm” to his writing as a result of his participation in WIR’s program. One of his favorite artists is Tupac, and he said that he may consider the career path of rapping and singing now. He said that he felt that the workshops helped to “center [his] world” and he expressed some interest in the fact that he had “surprise[d] people” with his writing abilities. He felt that the creative writing workshops might help to reduce the recidivism rates of incarcerated youths because it gives them something to concentrate on. He feels now as though he wants to “help [his] community” and work with “boys’ and girls’ programs” after his release. He plans to continue to write and to look into college admission as well. These changes in attitude coupled with his increased abilities in reading and writing, exhibit the potential that the WIR’s program has in changing adjudicated youth’s lives both during and after their incarceration.

### Youth No. 3

This adjudicated youth proved to be highly capable in reading skills by the end of the program, and his confidence in himself grew as a result of his participation. He described himself in the interviews as “self-aware” and “more sociable.” After looking over his work throughout the 12-week period, he could clearly see his growth in writing and his use of more “personal themes and complicated words.” He claimed to be more intent on “telling [his] own story” now, and he believes that participation in a creative writing workshop could help others to think more “maturely” and to “see the big picture.” He has been in the justice system since he was 15 years old and will not be released for another three years. While he has paid a high price for his previous behavior, he believes that being part of WIR’s program has given him insight on how to live more independently.

### Youth No. 4

This adjudicated youth had a deep sense of himself as an author and storyteller. He stated that he wanted “people to understand me,” and that he got “a sense of relief from these creative writing workshops” and “learn[ed] empathy through” them. He described his writing as “passionate, real, raw, emotional, traumatic, reflective.” After participating in the program, this adjudicated youth said that he had “learned that life is about choices” and that the creative writing workshops had given him “tools for some of the choices [he] has to make.” Further, he said that the creative writing workshops had given him ways to deal with the difficulties in his life (he has no parents and has only a brother to help him); this is critical for him because he



believes that being incarcerated is safer than being at home. He will leave the juvenile correctional facility with a commitment to “give back and help others.”

The other two original adjudicated youth were not available for the interviews by the end of the research study and creative writing program. It is, however, clear that these young men got far more from their time in WIR’s program than the ability to read and write better. Their most important take-aways appear to have been in the area of social-emotional issues. It may be that their growth as independent human beings will do as much or more to help them succeed outside of the justice system than their increased literacy skills.

Research Question #4 - What are the youths’ writing achievements? Do their writing achievements change after the youth participated in the creative writing workshop twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks?

Similar to the second research question, the duration of this study did not allow for this question to be answered; however, it is the researchers’ intention to engage in further research in this area with a new study group.

### **Limitations**

The list below describes the limitations that this research study encountered:

- The study group population shrunk from six to two adjudicated youth because of several different variables outside of the researchers’ control including transfers to different juvenile correctional facilities and restrictions to engage with some of the adjudicated youth because of staff discretion asserted by the adjudicated youth’s reprimanded behavior. Therefore, the sample size was very small.
- The study group population were only young adult males. A young adult female juvenile correctional facility in Ohio does not exist.
- This research study operated alongside WIR’s creative writing program that occurred twice a week for 2 hours for 12 weeks. Because WIR’s program prioritized building relationships and producing creative writing, there was little time to conduct formal writing achievement assessments.
- As a result of this research study running for 12 weeks, there was no opportunity to gather the study group’s recidivism rates because most of the adjudicate youth’s release dates were set far in the future when this research study was being conducted.



## Conclusion

Several adjudicated youth at a juvenile correctional facility in northeast Ohio participated in a 12-week creative writing workshop offered by Writers in Residence that improved their reading skills, their dispositions toward writing, and their perceptions of themselves as readers. This research study also reveals significant gains in their reading levels, persistence, passion, and confidence for writing. Their increased sense of self-efficacy is an important outcome as previous research has shown that a belief in oneself increases motivation, a will to continue working past obstacles, and engagement in the work (Bandura, 1994; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Walker, 2003). These qualities are ones that the researchers may only hope that they take with them once they are released from incarceration and re-enter society.

## Implications

It is incredibly difficult to conduct a research study in a juvenile correctional facility for a number of reasons. The adjudicated youth volunteer to participate in volunteer-led programs and, as teenagers can do, they do not always agree to meeting on any given day or time. They are mostly alone and dealing with a range of emotions that are not easy for them to manage. Because of their behaviors, the adjudicated youth may be barred from participating in the research study in the middle of data collection, or they may be released before the research period is completed. The researchers of this study, however, believe that the effort is worth it.

As Writers in Residence examples across Ohio, there are more individuals who will work with the adjudicated youth during the organization's creative writing workshops that they know will help them. From the creative writing artifacts that the residents produce and publish with organization, it is clear that their involvement in WIR's program serves to give them a purpose and an assurance that individuals care about them. They look forward to the creative writing workshops and continue to write outside of the sessions as a way to release their feelings. WIR's work remains critically important and continues to impact more adjudicated youth.

Based on the results of this research study, there are a number of implications for working with adjudicated youth and for further research.

First, it is clear that the researchers need to follow the adjudicated youth in this initial research study as they are released from incarceration and re-enter their communities again. It will be of interest to see if their new sense of self-efficacy and confidence in themselves as readers and writers will make a difference in their ability to stay out of the justice system. The probabilities of this happening are not particularly positive, as evidenced by similar research studies, such as that of Kristine Pytash (2013) with incarcerated teenaged girls. In her conclusion, she states that "too often the life experiences of incarcerated adolescent girls can prevent the transformation that literacy can provide" (p. 72). As evidenced by the study group's responses to the interview questions, however, it may be the combination of higher literacy levels and increased self-efficacy that can pull them through their challenges after their release from incarceration.



Second, researchers in general need better data concerning the adjudicated youth's writing abilities so that researchers may chart their progress in writing conventions and in producing clear, cohesive, and impactful prose and poetry. Their voices have been heard through the poetry and prose that they have created in WIR's program and it will be important going forward to monitor both reading and writing progress to measure their ability to meet the standards needed for successful college and career options.

Third, WIR needs to continue to publicize the creative writing artifacts of the residents so that individuals outside of the justice system understand the vast potential of these adjudicated youth. Too often, they are forgotten and relegated to the bottom of educators' priority lists because of the stereotypes that have been associated with them. The results of this research study clearly proves that adjudicated youth may excel in literacy activities if they are given the opportunity to read and write in ways that are meaningful to them. If they are given the right support, the adjudicated youth possess the necessary competence to successfully re-enter into society. Every single one of them is worth the time and effort.



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