

The Effect of Rock and Roll Academy on Incarcerated Youth

Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Ellis Unit, Huntsville, TX

**ROCK
AND ROLL
ACADEMY®**

An innovative partnership between the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Windham School District (WSD), and Rock and Roll Academy (RRA) resulted in a three-week music program implementation in the Youthful Offender Program (YOP) located inside the O.B. Ellis Unit in Huntsville, TX. The YOP is currently comprised of 16- and 17-year-old offenders. The program was administrated by WSD, a non-geographical school district that serves TDCJ, and implemented in conjunction with TDCJ's Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD).

In an effort to understand the needs of the program it was essential to identify any potential challenges. The YOP program was offered inside a maximum-security prison, therefore access to the Internet was not an option. Consequently, the RRA learning process was adapted to the setting. Additionally, in the beginning of the program, behavioral issues from the week prior caught up with several key members of the group who were subsequently placed in lockdown and unable to continue. Once more, the process was adapted to accommodate the programs' needs.

The partnership was envisioned by Dr. Clint Carpenter, Superintendent of WSD, to serve as a "hook" to reengage YOP students in an educational experience and create an incentive for positive behavior. Dr. Carpenter tapped Travis Henderson, Operations, WSD, to oversee implementation. Mr. Henderson reiterated Dr. Carpenter's vision, "Going into this program we wanted it to be an incentive. We wanted the guys to be there, we wanted the guys to *want* to be there, we wanted them to behave so they *could* come, and do what they needed to do to be able to come to this class."

Kelly Strong, Senior Warden of the O.B Ellis Unit, had similar goals for the program, "One of our programs here is our Youthful Offender Courage Program and through our music treatment program, collaborating with Windham and RPD, we hope that this is an outlet for our students and our offender population to release some of their emotional issues that they have had during their

lifetime. We hope that the Rock and Roll Academy changes their hearts, minds, and their offender behavior, that it takes them away from the criminal element and we see their true hearts and souls.”

Early feedback from participants in the program indicate progress in this direction. One student participant emoted, “Well, I found something beautiful. Miss Makala showed me how to play a basic note and when I played it, it attracted my peer’s attention and they fed off of me. It got the basses’ attention and it fed off of them and so we all went around, and we just harmonized. And it was just so beautiful.” Another stated, “I learned I could contribute to certain good, instead of always doing something bad. I learned how to be positive and know how to cooperate with people.”

After observing classes for five days, Mr. Henderson reflected on WSD’s original goal that RRA would provide an incentive for positive behavior on the part of YOP students. “I think we saw that this week,” Henderson stated, “We saw people that behaved extremely well in the class. Several of the staff said that they looked like they were getting along better; they had built relationships that they hadn’t built outside of the class before.”

Officer Crocker, who works YOP Education Ellis Unit, echoed Henderson’s comments, “I see them coming together, actually, harmonizing; joining together with the music. The music has drawn them together; those who separate usually in class, have come together with the music.”

“We hope to see those relationships carry through to life outside the class,” Henderson concluded, “because they’re with each other 24 hours a day, and to see them build them relationships, get along, and not have any issues with one another.”

Observations from student participants point to successful outcomes. One YOP student shared, “It’s a bonding experience for us. Before, I probably wouldn’t have talked to some of these people in here. But now with this, we’re all communicating, smiling, having a good time. All with music.”

As part of the program, participants participated in a pre-survey, to better understand how having a music program might impact their daily lives inside a prison. Of those surveyed, 57% of whom reported having been in a similar facility before, 100% reported they felt that having music as part of their day would allow them to better manage their emotions and daily challenges inside prison.

RRA’s social emotional learning, music-based program, designed to develop communication & relationship skills, cultural & social acceptance, autonomy & self-expression was provided to participants four hours a day, five days a week, for three weeks. Instruments in the program included: electric guitar, keyboard, drums, bass guitar, vocals with microphone, drum machine, and beat making software. WSD provided five iMacs installed with Garage Band.

The facilitated hands-on learning experience consisted of moving through the 18 Units of the RRA Learning Cycle. Provided here is an overview of the first 5 Units:

1. **Set Up an Atmosphere** Social emotional strategies to establish boundaries, trust, listening, unconditional love; components that make up a *Shared Learning Environment*
2. **Explore the Space** Through guided Free Play, students develop confidence and autonomy exploring what it is to be in an environment of acceptance while being allowed to touch and play new instruments. This is also an exploration of social dynamics and trust.
3. **The Band Is Your Teacher** As students play instruments in the same room with each other, observe each other, and feed off their own social energy, leaders emerge (often through humorous attempts at singing or playing) and a learning context -a band - is formed.
4. **Making Choices** Participants select a song and, once chosen, choose instruments for that song. The first direct instrumental instruction follows these choices, empowering students.
5. **Get the Song In The Room** Staying connected to the emotion of the student chosen song, the song is played continuously while the trainer moves about the room teaching the simplest part on each instrument that allows students to participate with the band immediately.

The class itself was delivered by grad and undergrad music therapy students from Sam Houston State University, trained in the RRA Method by a RRA trainer over the course of a week. Music

Therapists were provided with the RRA Learning Cycle and introduced to the Four RRA Facilitator Modes – the non-verbal proximal teaching techniques of the RRA Method. The RRA trainer modeled the classroom techniques, following the Learning Cycle. As the student learning process unfolded the therapists would identify Units of the Learning Cycle, often exclaiming, "Ah ha! We've just moved to Learning Unit 2! Explore the Space!"

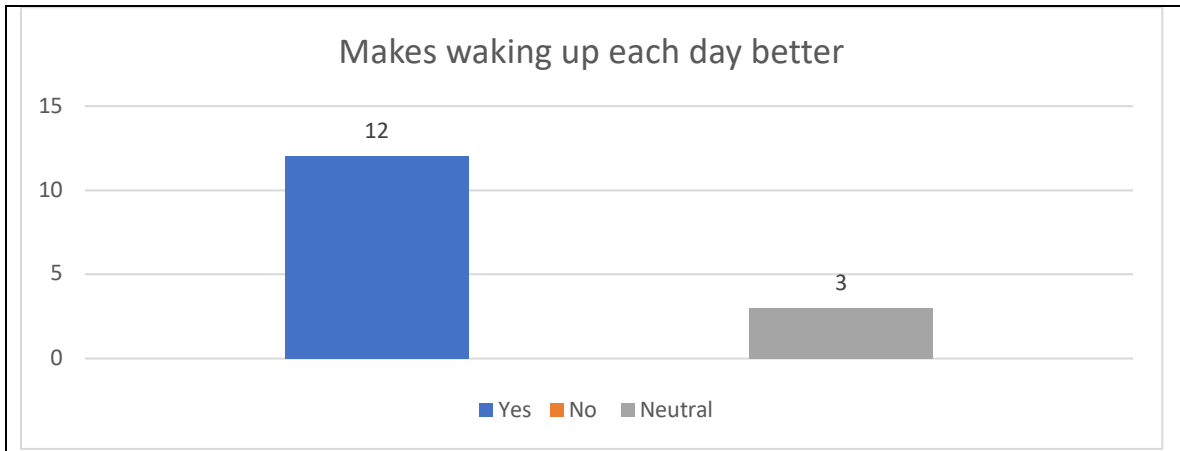
The music therapists proved a good fit for the RRA Method as they understood music to be a modality for developing a *therapeutic* relationship built on shared trust and were comfortable providing the needed space for the learner to come to the process in their own time and way.

Direct instruction on the instruments followed the social process, play, exploration, and sense of ownership students demonstrated. Students were first taught simple parts that enabled them to immediately play along with the group. More advanced techniques were introduced as the week progressed. RRA holds that it is initially more important for students –who may well not have had success in previous class settings—to participate and *play*, than it is for them to play correctly.

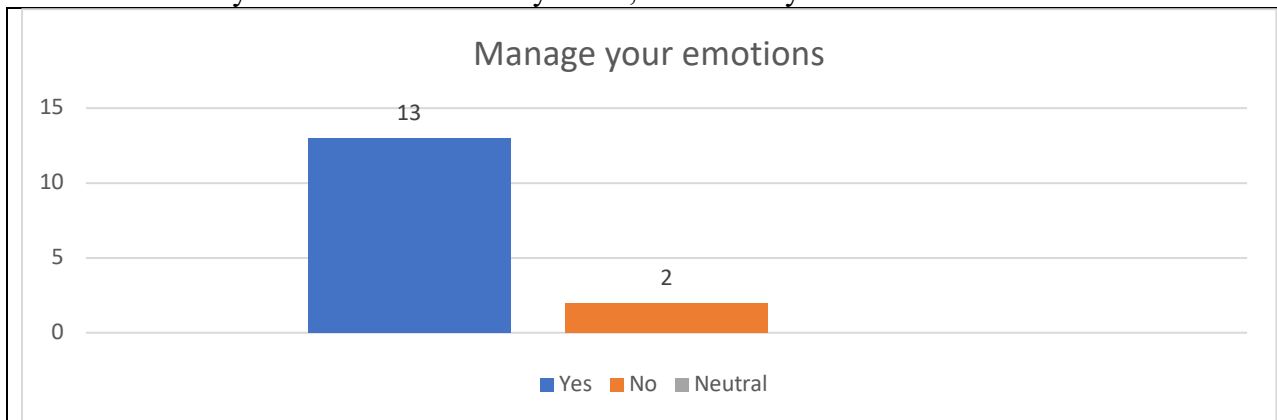
Participants were asked to complete a survey at the end of the program, to assess how they viewed the time spent. The results overwhelmingly support the use of an effective social emotional, music-based curriculum in a prison setting. Overall, the participants reported their participation in Rock and Roll Academy as having impacted their ability to be a better community member within the facility.

Survey Questions

- Has your experience with Rock and Roll Academy changed the way you feel about waking up each day here in the Ellis Unit? If so, in what way?

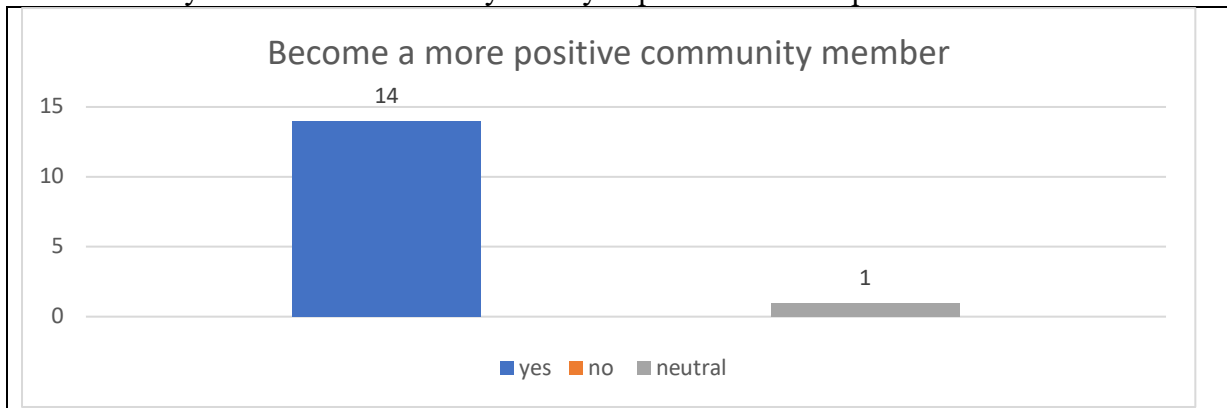


- It gives me more positive things to expect
 - It helps me to forget the bad memories and think of good things
 - It showed me that there's something I can do to stay out of trouble
 - I never thought I'd be so excited of waking up in prison and I also never thought that while I'm in prison I'll be looking forward to another day in here. I didn't think I would have this opportunity.
 - I feel good waking up coming and having fun with y'all.
 - I feel like I'm doing something positive
 - It motivates me to wake up and go to school every morning
 - It gives me happiness and it gives me the thought to behave better, so I can participate. I love this program.
 - Waking up looking forward to play music. It's something positive to do.
 - It's great and a good opportunity to have a good experience with instruments
 - The music class has changed the way I feel about waking up.
 - It gives me something to look forward to
 - It gives me something useful to look forward to
- Has your experience with Rock and Roll Academy helped you become a more positive community member of this facility? If so, in what way?

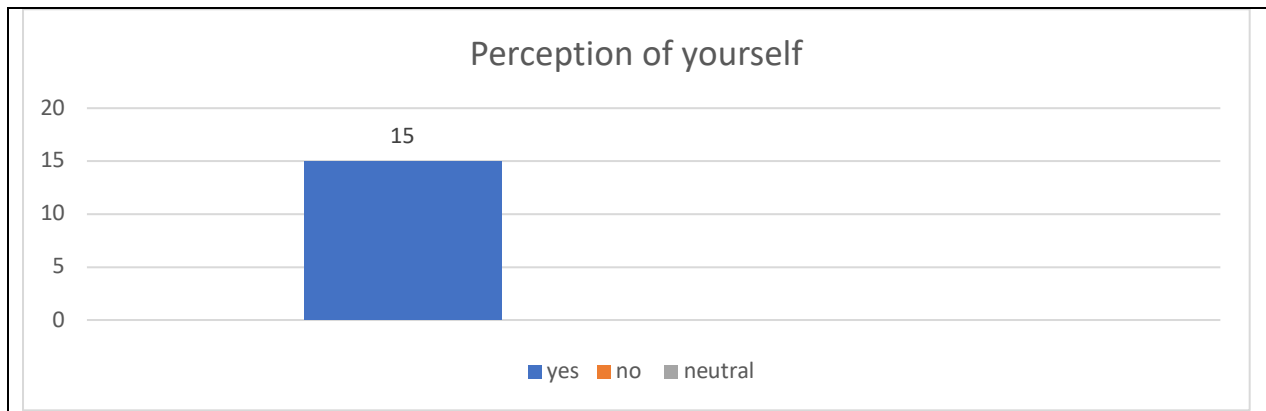


- I feel like I am in control
- I am happier and happier with others
- It helps me express myself better
- In a positive way. It allows me to be and act like the real me

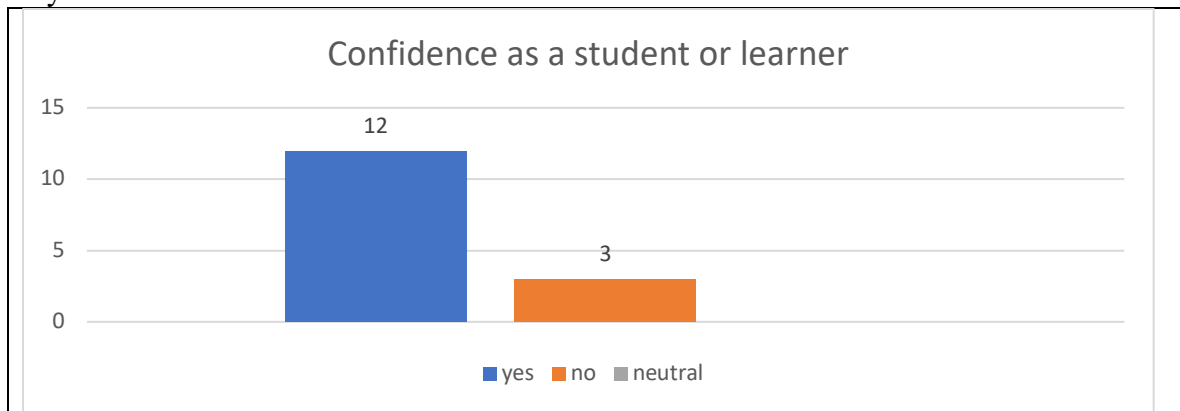
- I know how to take my anger out on something else than people
 - I feel like I have more happy days
 - I don't know if managing my emotions but definitely made me realize that music is life and definitely helps me control my patience
 - It took me out of my comfort zone. They made me open up, something I never do, so they gave me confidence
 - In a way, keeps me thinking it's never too late
 - Not really
 - The music calms me down
 - It just distracts me from my emotions (the music)
 - I can express myself in a musical way
 - A little. Sometimes it is hard, like it was before
- Has your experience with Rock and Roll Academy helped you become a more positive community member of this facility? Can you provide an example?



- I don't focus on all the other stuff, because I can focus on the music
 - I help out
 - It helps a lot
 - The people who are afraid of trying something new, I encourage them to do different things
 - To do something better when I get out. It's never too late
 - I been getting in less trouble
 - Helping me manage my patience
 - One of my peers wanted to just say f it so I talked to him. I put positive in his ear I brought up the program
 - It keeps me positive and it might help me stay out of trouble in the free world
 - More helpful to others
 - I've changed my attitude since I been here
 - Helped me get along with others
 - Gives me more to think about, like how I can help people
 - I think about the consequences before I do something
- Has Rock and Roll Academy changed your perception of yourself as a person and what you might be capable of?

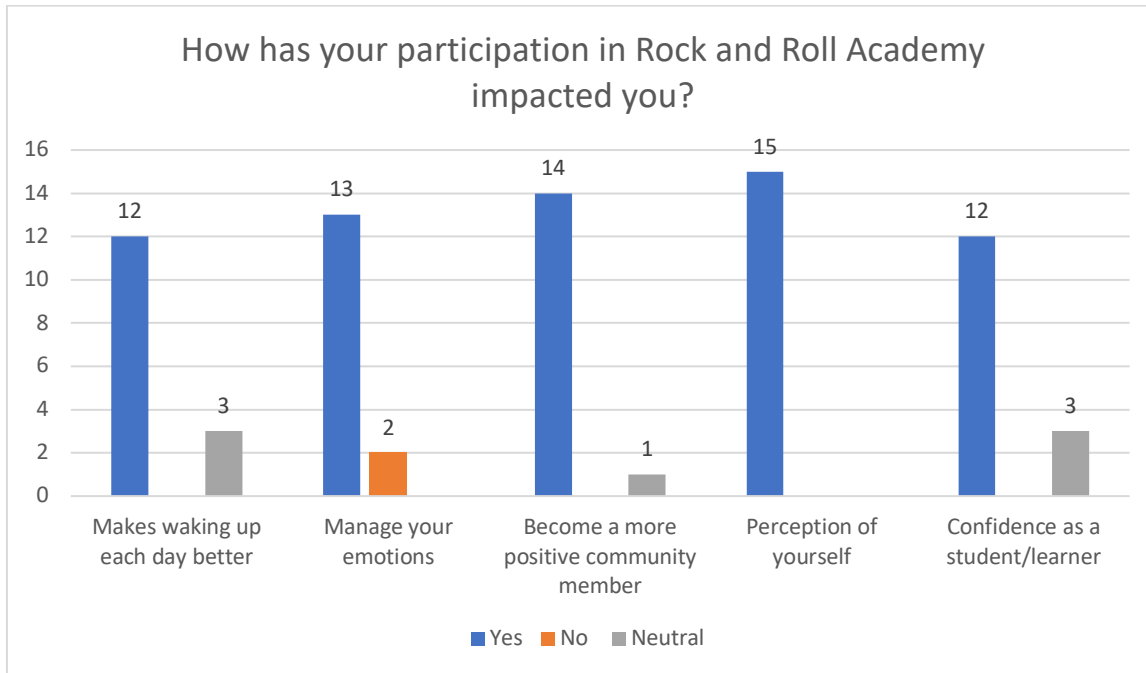


- [Many participants simply replied yes]
 - It shows moves and skills I never got to show myself
 - I feel like if I can do this, I can accomplish anything I put my mind to in life
 - It taught me how to do something positive
 - I feel like I'm able to do more stuff that I thought I couldn't do
 - I should love myself like I love these instruments
 - I can see I can do whatever if I put my mind to it
 - A lot. I didn't know I was good at what I've accomplished
 - I expanded my way of expressions
 - I could be a pianist
- Has Rock and Roll Academy increased your confidence as a student and learner? How and why?



- I know I can do better now
- There are obstacles in life and I can overcome them
- I like to sing in front of people
- Never in my life I thought I'd play any type of instrument and I played all of them
- It taught me not to be shy
- I have learned to play multiple instruments
- This boosted my confidence all the way up because now I'm ready for anything. Not just in music but in life
- I can learn anything, just try
- Taught me to always try something new

- I've learned to be more open minded to new ideas
- I'm open to try new things without being nervous



Note: 15 total participants

Conclusion

Overall, this short three-week program highlighted the outcomes that are possible through delivering an effective social emotional learning, music-based curriculum in a prison setting. Students expressed a positive change in their day to day life, their self-perception, and in their ability to manage their emotions, develop healthy relationships, and respond better to the things going on around them.

The chart below further details the enthusiasm of the participants to continue using this program.

