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A snapshot of education behind the fence: Supporting engagement in education of incarcerated youth in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Incarcerated youth often have complex needs. Past researchers have reported that these young people have high drop-out rates and early disengagement from school. This study adds to the limited research on the ways both education and juvenile justice personnel support the engagement of incarcerated youth in education 'behind the fence'. The authors analysed the educational provisions for incarcerated youth in juvenile justice centres in New South Wales, Australia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 employees of juvenile justice and education sectors. The interview transcriptions were analysed using an inductive content analysis. Findings suggest that the education units were employing practices that promote student engagement, and recommendations include formal self-advocacy skills development and supporting students in developing intrinsic motivation.

1. Introduction

Young people engaged in the juvenile justice system usually do not complete their secondary education (The Council for State Governments Justice Center, 2015). In fact, the process of disengagement with education can start as early as primary school (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011). This is not surprising, as incarcerated youth typically have a history of learning and behavioural disabilities (Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010), and of poor school outcomes (Blomberg et al., 2011). These young people are often several years behind their classmates academically, and have often had experienced numerous school suspensions and expulsions (Wang, Blomberg, & Li, 2005). The progression from frequent suspensions, to school dropout, and to involvement with juvenile justice system is often referred to as the "school-to-prison-pipeline" (Leone, 2015, p. 91).

These factors have a profound impact on the future outcomes of incarcerated youths, especially opportunities for further education and/or employment (Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, & Yamamoto, 2009). However, educational success can lead to a decreased likelihood of re-offending (Blomberg et al., 2011) and future success in employment (McCracken & Murray, 2009). Therefore, there is an urgent need to find ways to effectively support incarcerated young people in engaging in education while in custody (The Council for State Governments Justice Center, 2015).

Education provided within the juvenile justice system can present an opportunity for incarcerated youth to address any learning deficits. Classes are usually small (Tobin & Sprague, 2000), and dropping out of school is not an option for school-aged youth (Blomberg et al., 2011). Sustained attendance provides opportunities for academic success, which improves educational engagement in the juvenile justice setting, and beyond. Blomberg et al. reported that youths released from juvenile justice settings in Florida (USA), who completed more English, math, and science courses whilst in custody were significantly more likely to return to school, and committed less serious offences post-release.

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Although specific research into effective teaching and engagement methods in juvenile justice settings is limited, utilising well-known cognitive, social-emotional, effective instructional methods have been advocated (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). For example, activating students' prior knowledge should be the starting point to instruction (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010), coupled with matching instruction to students' functional level (Jolivette, Houchins, Waller, Hall, & Nomvette, 2008). Assessment can assist matching, as well as identifying any disabilities (Burrell & Warboys, 2000). Further, building positive teacher-student relationships and classroom climate are known to enhance the learning and engagement of young offenders (Sander, Sharkey, Olivarri, Tanigawa, & Mauseth, 2010).

The research literature on the ability of educators to engage or instruct youth in juvenile justice centres (JJCs) is not all positive. Researchers in the US have identified issues pertaining to the quality of education while incarcerated (Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2011), the ability of teachers to meet the heterogeneous needs of students (Gagnon & Barber, 2010; Houchins, Puckett-Patterson, Crosby, Shippen, & Jolivette, 2009), inadequate provision of individualised education programs for students with disabilities (Leone & Weinberg, 2012), unrealistic curriculum (Houchins et al. 2009), and the impact of security measures (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). Coupled with poor student motivation (Houchins et al., 2009), the challenges appear significant.

In Australia, Cuneen, White, and Richards (2015) identified a number of challenges for educators in JJCs, including the composition and cultural diversity of the detainee population, patchy school attendance, and short sentences of around three months on average (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2015). Cuneen et al. further noted that educational programs must meet the needs of youths that are grappling with "forced institutionalisation and institutional life" (p. 295).

2. The Australian context

In Australia, in 2015, a small proportion (16%, $n = 885$) of young people who committed criminal acts were detained awaiting trial or serving custodial sentences (AIHW, 2015). These low numbers are explained by the preferred use of diversion practices for all but the most serious young offenders. In 2015, the majority (66%) of detained Australian youths were aged 17 or under (AIHW), and therefore would be required to attend school or training full time (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009). In 2016 in New South Wales, on average, 135 young people were serving a custodial sentence averaging 115 days (NSWDJJ, 2016).

State or territory education departments provide schooling in JJCs (e.g., NSWDJJ, 2016). The schools deliver curriculum 5 days per week over 40–41 weeks, drawn from the Australian National Curriculum, or senior vocational programs that lead to an Australian Quality Training Framework (Queensland Government, 2014). In terms of education, these students are educated as 'students attending a Special School' (NSWDET, 2010).

Many young people in custody have a disability (Indig et al., 2011), and are eligible for educational adjustments under the Australian Department of Education's *Disability Standards for Education* (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2005) and support by the New South Wales Department of Education *Disability Action Plan* 2016–2020 (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities [NSWDEC], 2013) and Every School Every Student policy (NSWDEC, 2014). These policies require that these young people are able to access quality education on a equal basis to students without disabilities through curriculum and environmental accommodations and modifications. These accommodations and modifications are ideally documented in individualised education programs, known locally as personalised learning plans (PLPs). Youths from an Aboriginal background who are performing at or below the minimum standards as assessed by NAPLAN (the National Asssessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy) also receive Norta Norta funding to support individual tutoring in literacy and numeracy if they are in Year 8 or 10 (NSWDEC, 2015).

3. The present study

This article reports the educational experiences of incarcerated youth from the perspectives of personnel employed in both the education and juvenile justice systems. It is part of a larger study on the transition planning and processes of youth transitioning from juvenile custodial environments in New South Wales (Australia) back to the community. The research question guiding this study was: What aspects of schooling at JJCs support the engagement in education of incarcerated youth?

4. Theoretical frameworks

According to Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008), there is a strong connection between "engagement, achievement, and school behaviour across levels of economic and social advantage and disadvantage" (p. 369). Thus, self-determination theory (SDT) is employed here as the most suitable way to explore and understand incarcerated youth issues when it comes to engaging with education and schooling. Proponents of SDT seek to explain what motivates humans. Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that humans are motivated by both inner (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic) sources. SDT theory also focuses on personal volition, wellbeing, and performance quality. Motivation and persistence are influenced by an individual's psychological perception of their sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If these three needs are not socially fulfilled, motivation and wellbeing can be negatively impacted. Conversely, when these needs are met, motivation and wellbeing are increased.

Goal Contents Theory is a mini-theory that arose from SDT, which explores the difference between a person's needs satisfaction and wellbeing in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Kasser and Ryan (1996) suggested that goals that aim to secure tangible, monetary, or social success (e.g., popularity) are viewed as being extrinsically motivated. Intrinsically motivated