

PROMISING PRACTICE

GED Completion, Philosophy, and Learning Support: A Holistic Approach to Juvenile Correctional Education

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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A university held an event that focused on local community activism. One dialogue covered assistance programs for juveniles who are incarcerated or paroled. A local juvenile detention center leader approached a philosophy graduate student at the university, and plans for a philosophy-focused learning support pilot for juveniles began. We, as members of the philosophy department and in conjunction with the juvenile detention center, developed and led the pilot with a goal of (a) reducing recidivism and (b) increasing program completion and college interest.

Rationale

Studies have found that educational credential attainment could reduce recidivism—committing a criminal offense after being released from incarceration—by a significant amount (Davis et al., 2013; Lee College, 2019; Northwestern, 2020). Therefore, we needed to create a program that would increase high-school-equivalency certification (GED, HiSet, etc.) attainment. The study of philosophy has

shown high correlation with improved test scores and higher averages for writing and quantitative/verbal reasoning (Topping & Tricker, 2007; see also Education Testing Service, 2020, Table 4A).

Personal development, empowerment, and increased self-esteem have all shown importance for correctional education completion for both vocational and postsecondary degrees (Baranger et al., 2018; Roth et al., 2017). Literature also suggests that success with an academic task and continued interest in a subject might relate to confidence and value perception (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; Simpkins, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006). Some interventions may even succeed at helping students reappraise values related to academic tasks and increase interest in a subject to accomplish future goals (Acee & Weinstein, 2010). Philosophical discussions on identity development (Brison, 1999; Locke, 1935), empowerment, self-esteem (Boxill, 1976), and the importance of education (hooks, 2003; Rich, 1977) might foster students' motivation to complete their correctional education programs. Practice with self-reflection, journaling, critical thinking, and reading were thought to increase student beliefs regarding correctional education success. Example scenarios for student to analyze, particularly involving ethics and identity, served as an intervention that might increase academic interest and value perception of education.

Program

The pilot program ran for two semesters. The Fall semester had 10 students, all required to take GED/HiSet classes as part of their parole. The Spring semester had six students who were required to take HiSet classes and were incarcerated and living on site. Classes took place at a secured location inside the facility with a guard present.

Development

We developed the program with input from facility administrators and to serve as support for the GED/HiSet classes in which juveniles were enrolled. Administrators asked the program team to help reduce recidivism by covering ethical theory-based

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strategies for choice making, self-regulation, the importance of education, intellectual freedom, and interpersonal relationships. Administrators believed these topics could help students make academic and personal progress. Other academic targets pertained to students' interest in reading/writing, critical thinking, confidence about schooling, and interest in college or technical schooling.

We underwent background checks and took safety training before teaching juveniles alongside their GED/HiSet instructor. Training included de-escalation techniques, detention center procedures, banned classroom items, and what incidents might occur during the team's time at the facility.

Implementation

Class sessions occurred weekly with all program team members and the GED/HiSet instructor present. To promote engagement, administrators asked that all instructors be present during each class. We assigned readings on moral theories/ethics, dialogue exercises, reflection exercises, and identity cultivation, and we provided students with relatable case studies. Assignments emphasized reflection on the students' personal lives and problem-solving tools that could assist them.

Part of the GED/HiSet curriculum promoted reading comprehension and analysis, so we gave students passages to read aloud in class and asked them to reflect on the material together. We assigned homework weekly, and their GED/HiSet instructor supervised the workload to ensure it would be rigorous enough to promote growth while not shifting focus away from their GED/HiSet assignments. We prioritized significant feedback and encouragement with each returned assignment.

We ensured a holistic approach via dialogue, and nearly all the ethical case studies were accompanied by deeply personal group discussions that illuminated students' problems with education, confidence, or gang/criminal activity. Occasionally, we decided to cancel in-class assignments in order to follow a discussion more thoroughly and pursue personal growth.

The spring semester saw a shift away from multiple readings to a single paperback novel due to stapled handouts being disallowed inside the secured facilities. Administrators made special accommodations for book possession, and they had to approve the book's subject matter. The team chose *My Ishmael* by Quinn, because of its focus on dialogue, argumentation, self-reflection, and philosophical topics that related to course outcomes, such as intellectual freedom, choice making, self-regulation, and the importance of education. Students read aloud, discussed chapters in class, and analyzed case studies from the text.

Discussion and Observations

There were challenges in exercising the full potential of the program. Obstacles included the following: limited class hours due to juveniles' center-assigned chores, limited space, and facility lockdowns. Difficulties starting on time due to security and overlap between other programs were common, and guards would interrupt dialogue to scold students for slouching or other minor infractions. By class time, students had been awake and working for twelve hours, which meant they were sometimes too exhausted to engage rigorously. Finding meeting spaces was problematic because guards or rooms could not always be spared (we once utilized a hallway as a classroom).

The success of the pilot was difficult to assess. Issues arose mostly from students being released from parole or incarceration during the course. In one instance, a student was rearrested and removed from the program. Students who were released from the program early or entered the program late could not benefit from the full course. However, one silver lining was that peer-to-peer instruction allowed for more seasoned students to internalize course material more effectively by tutoring newcomers. Peer instruction also permitted us to see what strategies and material students thought had the most utility based on what they passed to newcomers most often.

Some students were fond of sharing class information with juveniles outside of the program. One student would use designated computer time to watch videos on moral theories and lecture other incarcerated juveniles—whether they were interested or not—on the academic and personal values of the theories. Students largely transitioned from poking fun at peers for having reading difficulties to helping them sound out words or define terms. The team observed a marked improvement in some students' reading abilities, most notably two students in the detained population who began to regularly volunteer to read and assist others.

Regarding interest in schooling, nearly all students were reluctant to participate in the program initially. However, students began to engage when the team asked students about their thoughts on topics and readings. Students informed the team that they were not interested in school or that they dropped out because they felt devalued by teachers. Students were refreshed by the team's interest in their thoughts.

The team members made it salient that most of the course material, including *My Ishmael*, were utilized in the college courses they taught. Some students were reluctant to attempt the work because they did not perform well in high school; however, many students embraced the challenge once they saw their peers performing well. One student had been incarcerated for six months and refused to take any examinations for the GED/HiSet despite having attended all necessary GED/HiSet classes. During the midpoint of the pilot program, the student informed

the team that he had taken, and passed, all of his examinations the prior week. Administrators informed the team that the student was more confident from completing college work in the pilot. In fact, all 16 students completed their GED/HiSet exams, some ahead of schedule. All spring semester students successfully acquired vocational skill certification. One student sent college applications during the Fall semester course, and two spring students mentioned looking into a community college or a university upon release.

Regarding recidivism, it is difficult to tell if any impact was made. There was no baseline to compare against because communication between parole officers, juveniles, and facility administrators break down once the juveniles are released. However, three of the sixteen students were rearrested within the next year. Nevertheless, guards and administrators would often comment on changes they noticed in the demeanor of pilot students, and students would occasionally come into class and mention the ethical theory strategies that they used to make better choices during the previous week as they learned to link strategies with self-improvement goals.

Conclusion

Juvenile detention centers are under-resourced, particularly in smaller counties, and it is imperative that support programs of all kinds find their way into the juvenile justice system. Research has already shown that correctional education programs reduce adult recidivism rates, but more research for juvenile programs is needed. The pilot program outlined here shows personal and academic growth amongst students, and it brought about interest in college education for some. Without baseline data, which is difficult to procure given the unique structure of the juvenile justice system, any positive results denoted are anecdotal. However, the program team hopes that personal testimony might be enough to inspire interest in developing research-based learning support programs and best practices for the juvenile justice system. With more research and program development, perhaps the juvenile correctional education system can ensure a stronger path toward postsecondary attainment credentials and further from recidivism.

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