


Juveniles and College: Inside Out as a Way Forward

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Abstract

In this article the author argues that the Inside Out model is ideally suited to help incarcerated juveniles considering enrolling in college postrelease. The transition to college can be extremely difficult for such youth who may lack the cultural capital needed to succeed in higher education. This is unfortunate as research suggests that college can have a range of positive effects, including reduced criminality and increased earnings. With some adaptations to its curriculum, Inside Out classes can provide students with much of what they need to succeed. Best practices are described at the end of the article.

Keywords

juveniles, higher education, incarceration

Sam was a particularly bright and motivated young man I met 15 years ago while working on a research project for the California Youth Authority (now called the Division of Juvenile Justice). Sam had recently been released from a CYA correctional center and volunteered to help me with some of my data collection. Over the course of the project, he frequently talked about his desire to go to college. I was pleased when he successfully applied to a community college and began classes. After about 6 weeks, however, he dropped

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out of school. When I asked him why he left, he confessed that he did not feel comfortable in college and was close to failing all of his classes. Over the next 10 years, I watched a number of other youth leave correctional institutions and begin college. Many appeared to have the drive and intelligence to succeed but, all too often, they “flunked out” or simply walked away. It became clear that the transition from prison to college was an extremely difficult one, even for those with academic ability and motivation.

In this article, I describe some of the significant personal and structural barriers that make the college transition difficult for incarcerated youth. Based on 6 years of teaching Inside Out (IO) classes in a juvenile facility, I argue that the IO Program, with a number of modifications, can be a powerful tool to provide youth with the support and cultural capital they need to overcome these challenges. The last section of the article outlines some best practices designed to help prospective teachers think through adjusting the IO model to a juvenile corrections setting. Although the article discusses many barriers college-bound incarcerated youth face, it cannot be considered a complete description. Notably missing is a discussion of the important financial and legal barriers youth can confront. A lack of funding for tuition or a drug conviction that disqualifies a youth for a loan can make college impossible. Such barriers are complex and deserve a separate discussion. They are also difficult to address through the IO model.

Background on the “Juvenile Correctional System”

In the United States, the term “juvenile correctional system” is really a misnomer as there is not one unified system. Instead, there are 50 unique state systems that differ from each other in many ways. For example, some states provide all juvenile justice services, while others split the responsibility with counties. States also differ in their mix of public and private service providers and in the conditions under which they house incarcerated youth. Because states have quite different demographics and sentencing structures, the populations of youth in custody exhibit marked variation. For example, some states keep youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system until the age of 25; others mandate 21 as the maximum age, and a few hold youth only until the age of 18 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

The diversity in state-level juvenile justice policies and practices makes it difficult to draw a representative portrait of the nation’s incarcerated youth. We do know that on any given day there are over one hundred thousand residents of our nation’s juvenile detention centers (Livsey, Sickmund, & Sladky, 2009). As in the adult system, poor and minority youth are disproportionately

represented in juvenile correctional centers (Nurse, 2010; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Most incarcerated youth are male (about 85%) although the female population has been increasing gradually over the last 20 years (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 206). Juveniles can be detained for a wider range of offenses than adults. Among these are status offenses, acts that are criminal only by virtue of the age of the accused. The most common status offenses are truancy, liquor law violations, and running away (p. 192). While most states try to avoid placing status offense cases into custody, in 2003 about 5% of incarcerated males and 12% of incarcerated females were imprisoned on such charges (p. 210). The rest of incarcerated youth are there for criminal or delinquent behavior, or for technical violations of their parole.

Why Is College So Difficult for Formerly Incarcerated Juveniles?

It is important to recognize that many of the problems formerly incarcerated youth experience in their transition to college preexist their stay in custody. For example, because correctional populations tend to be drawn from the poorest sections of our society, a large number of imprisoned juveniles have spent time in academically deficient community schools. Some have not been able to concentrate on their schoolwork as they have had to work to help support their families (Nurse, 2002). Perhaps the most significant barrier, however, involves negative educational experiences prior to incarceration. The link between academic problems and prison is so strong that some scholars refer to it as the “school to prison pipeline” or the “prison track” (Wald & Losen, 2003). Research indicates that, on average, incarcerated youth function 3 years below grade level (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Youth fall behind when they drop out of school, are held back due to poor academic performance, or bounce in and out of schools. Many youth also struggle with learning disabilities that make it difficult for them to stay on track with their education (Meisel, Henderson, Cohen, & Leone, 1998).¹

A history of negative educational experiences can affect college performance in a number of different ways. In some cases, it can lead students to doubt their abilities and become resistant to risking failure again. This is a particular problem when students are labeled—in subtle and overt ways—as not teachable or as hopeless (Ferguson, 2001). Because this labeling has often happened in the recent past, it may be particularly hard to overcome. Maruna (2001) offers a possible explanation for this. He finds that most people who successfully desist from crime develop a self-narrative that frames past criminal behavior as inconsistent with their true selves. For example, a desistor might say,

I am not a bad person. I committed crimes because of external circumstances (like my family, economic need, etc.) but now I have control of my life and I am going to be the good person I always knew I was.

The creation of this kind of self-narrative appears to offer important psychological support to people trying to maintain a noncriminal lifestyle. It is likely that a similar process needs to occur with education. People who have struggled in school must begin to attribute past failures to outside forces and recognize that they now have the ability to succeed. Because juveniles have experienced academic failure so recently, however, it may be particularly difficult for them to have the perspective to construct this kind of narrative.

Negative educational experiences prior to youth incarceration can put them on a trajectory of self-doubt and failure. Unfortunately, most prison classrooms are not designed to help them off this path. Virtually every juvenile correctional center in the United States offers high school and GED classes to residents who are under the age of 18, but the quality of these classes tends to be very low (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Youth from many different grade levels are grouped in a room together and work independently on computers or on worksheets. Most youth do not try very hard as there are few rewards and the work is generally not interesting. Additionally, taking notes is not required, nor is reading anything besides textbooks. If students are asked to write papers, they are usually not longer than a page or two—or sometimes no longer than five paragraphs. Although some youth genuinely appreciate the chance to finish their high school education, many complain that they are simply doing busy work to pass the time (Nurse, 2010). Prison-based education does not generally provide the kind of training or cultural capital a college student needs to succeed. Incarcerated youth, who already doubt their own abilities, arrive at college completely unprepared for what they will face and can become embarrassed and discouraged. This leads them to drop out.

In addition to lacking important academic cultural capital, many incarcerated youth have limited knowledge about proper behavior in a college classroom. Prison classrooms tend to be chaotic spaces. In a review of the literature, Rider-Hankins (1992) found that while teachers are concerned about preparing youth for life after release, they lack the ability and training to control their classrooms. As a result, students learn that minor misbehavior (chatting in class, passing notes, etc.) is normal and acceptable. This is made worse by strict impression management standards in the prison. To survive their daily lives or to gain status, youth must put on a tough act that makes them look like they are in control and not afraid of authority. In school, they do not want to look stupid and, at the same time, they do not want to look too

interested in the academic material (Nurse, 2010). This can be extremely problematic in a college setting where students are required to take intellectual risks.

Why Is College an Important Option for Incarcerated Youth?

As the previous section makes clear, incarcerated youth who get into college face complex barriers to academic achievement. Because of this, it may be tempting to decide that efforts to help them are too difficult or too expensive. At the same time, there is a growing body of research suggesting that increasing the college success of incarcerated youth would be worth the cost and effort. We know, for example, that a college degree leads to higher wages and more job stability across the life course (Elman & O'Rand, 2004). Studies also show that academic programs are one of three types of interventions that reduce recidivism and increase postrelease employment (the other two are vocational training and substance abuse treatment) (Petersilia, 2003; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Notably, research indicates that high-quality programming in these areas is more effective with juveniles than with adults (Aos, Phipps, Barnoski, & Lieb, 2001).

In addition to its positive effects on recidivism and long-term wages, education may also help youth delay their entrance to the full-time labor force. At first glance, this may appear to be a harmful effect as studies suggest that employment is linked to successful outcomes for formerly incarcerated adults (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall, 1995; Sampson & Laub 1993). Uggen (2000) suggests, however, that employment does not have the same positive effects for juveniles. He studied the relationship between employment, recidivism, illegal earnings, and age. Using data gathered by the National Work Demonstration Project, he examined whether low-wage employment served as a turning point in criminal involvement. His conclusion was striking—work was associated with lowered recidivism and illegal earnings, but only for people over the age of 26. It appears that marginal employment (the type most young parolees obtain) does not encourage youth to desist from crime. Surprisingly, some studies (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Ploeger, 1997; Wright, Cullen, & Williams, 1997) even conclude that, under certain circumstances, working increases youths' delinquent behavior. This is partly a result of selection bias (delinquent youth being more likely to want or need to work than their less delinquent peers), but it also appears that employment can lead to delinquency through decreased social support, reduced school commitment, and increased exposure to delinquent peers. Given that employment does not appear to be a path to success for juveniles, making higher education

feasible and attractive is one way we can encourage them to delay their entry into the labor force.

A final reason why it is important to encourage incarcerated youth to attend college is that they are at the age for reaping the most benefits. Although the rates of people 25 or above attending college have increased notably over the last 30 years, the majority of college students are still between the ages of 18 and 24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Probably because it is the normative age, it appears to be easier for young people to transition to college. Research suggests that while students who return to school at later ages tend to be very motivated, they experience more problems with stress, identity confusion, and self-esteem (for a review of this literature, see Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001). Additionally, life course theorists argue that the timing of significant life transitions has an effect on other transitions and on long-term outcomes. In other words, the age at which a person goes to school is likely to have an important effect on subsequent life changes. It appears, for example, that obtaining a degree has a greater impact on later earnings when it is completed at a normative age. Elman and O'Rand (2004) found that people who complete a college degree in their early 20s see greater earning gains than people who return to school to complete a degree at a later age. Although adults should also be encouraged to consider college, juveniles are in a unique moment where the decision to work toward a degree can be particularly beneficial.

Adapting the IO Model to Juveniles

As other articles in this special edition show, IO is a powerful model for providing education to both inside and outside students while increasing self-confidence and tolerance. Adapting the program to younger inside students is not difficult, but it does require the recognition that juveniles are significantly different both developmentally and socially from adults. For example, psychologists have found that adolescents tend to be less able to use reason under stress. They are also more susceptible to peer influence, more tolerant of risk, and more concerned with issues of status (Milner, 2004; Scott & Steinberg, 2008). Additionally, incarcerated juveniles have a different outlook from adults. Virtually all residents of juvenile facilities are released within several years, and it is likely that they have a much more temporary mind-set about prison than do adults. Because they are so young, many juveniles will return home to live with their parents and may be under less pressure to support themselves financially. Youth are also different from adults because they are still struggling with forming their identities (Nurse, 2010).

All of these differences can be incorporated into the manner in which IO is taught. Here, I draw on the literature as well as my own experiences to offer some best practices for teaching IO with incarcerated juveniles.

Best Practices

Teach a more traditional college class than you might in an adult institution. Because many incarcerated juveniles plan to attend college after they are released, they are particularly interested in taking an IO class that has the same level, content, format, and style as classes given outside prison walls. Every year I teach IO, the most frequent question the inside students ask me is, “Is this class like your other courses at Wooster?” This question suggests that they see the IO class as an important bridge to college—a way to obtain some of the skills that they need and the confidence to go forward. For this reason, I teach basically the same criminology course at the juvenile prison as I do at my home campus. I draw from the standardized IO curriculum as well, but I do not use it as the primary guide for the class.

Be selective about participants. As described, some of the youth in correctional facilities come from very disadvantaged educational backgrounds and are simply not prepared for college-level work. Some youth are not able to read above a grade school level, others have profound difficulties writing more than their names and basic information (Rider-Hankins, 1992). It is not fair to these youth, or to the class, to accept them as students. One of the beauties of the IO model is that it can allow students to see that learning and doing well can be fun and rewarding, and that succeeding in an academic class is cool. Students who are so disadvantaged that they are unable to work at the college level are much less likely to experience these positive effects. Instead, they could potentially suffer embarrassment, low self-esteem, and emotional upset. This is particularly problematic in the prison environment where showing any sign of weakness or failure opens a youth to harassment from others (Nurse, 2010). Allowing academically weak students in a class can also tempt instructors to “dumb down” the level. When a teacher has promised students that he or she will teach a “real college class,” it is imperative that they hold to their word and not bring the level down below that of an introductory college class.

Given the importance of enrolling students who can handle college-level work, instructors need to devise a clear selection plan. I work with a staff team at the correctional center to identify students who have expressed an interest in college, have either a GED or high school diploma, and who meet the institution’s criteria for participation. I also ask the staff to think carefully

about the academic skill level of the potential students. Do they have the ability to read a fairly complex text? Can they write an essay? This method of selection is somewhat problematic because it opens the possibility that staff members will be biased in their selection. This bias could involve race, crime type, or some other characteristic. I do not have a good solution to this problem, but I do talk with staff about being broad-minded in their selection. To this end, the staff goes back over the list of academically qualified youth who—for one reason or another—they originally decided to reject. On this second round, they sometimes decide to “take a risk” on a few youth they had characterized as too unmotivated or disengaged to be active participants in the class. Interestingly, several of these youth have turned out to be star students; their previous disengagement was simply a result of boredom with the other activities in the prison.

After the list of potential class members has been created, the staff invites the selected youth to talk with me about the class. In these individual meetings, I give them information about the course, answer their questions, and ask about their educational backgrounds and abilities. The staff prescreening generally ensures that these youth are academically qualified for the class but—as is the case with any group of students—some have stronger educational backgrounds than others. Sometimes after talking with me about the class, the weaker students decide to opt out. Others, however, are very motivated and are willing to put in the extra effort that will be required. I offer all the inside students the option of taking the class without a grade. Students who choose this option receive extensive comments on all their work, but no letter grades. This gives them the benefit of the program without the pressure of grades—an especially attractive option for students who may be struggling to master the material. It also takes pressure off me as I am not tempted to lower the academic level of the class.

Consider the college-credits issue carefully. When the Inside Out Program began at Temple University, inside students were not given college credits. Today, some instructors have found ways to provide them. While I think there are some real benefits to this, not offering credits has some advantages as well. Many juveniles aspire to college but worry about having a low grade on their record. They appreciate the IO class as a way to practice and gain necessary skills for when they enroll in a college. Also, there are a number of structural barriers that can preclude some inside students from doing well in an IO class. Most incarcerated youth have jobs and structured activities that fill up most of their waking hours. Sometimes they are locked up without access to their books or they are told to study in loud and chaotic environments. This makes it difficult for some to get assignments done well or on

time. Not giving credits eases stress in a highly stressful environment. I do provide inside students with comments and a grade (if they so desire) at the end of the course. I also give all students a letter showing that they audited the class and I write college recommendation letters for those who request them.

Provide the cultural capital the inside students need to succeed. Because many of the inside students have only been through the prison high school, they do not have basic information about how a college class works. For example, very few have ever taken notes on a lecture before. Before the class starts, I meet once with the inside students and teach them very basic skills so they can get through the first day without embarrassment. I include information about how to read a syllabus, fundamentals of note taking, and some advice on approaching difficult reading. I also talk about norms in a college classroom—about raising hands, what to call me, and the kinds of discussions that we have.

As the class progresses, I continue to teach basic academic skills to everyone. For example, I work with the students on citations, use of academic language, and paper-writing skills. One area in which I have been less successful involves helping inside students to do well on essay tests. Most have never taken one before and have no idea how many words they should write or how detailed their answers should be. I've tried various methods to help them such as giving out practice questions and sample answers. I also give out a list of essay questions a week before the exam and then choose the exam questions from that list. These solutions have not been entirely successful, but I am happy to say that I have seen improvement in essay answers over the years I have offered the course.

Accept mainly first- and second-year outside students. I recruit as many outside students as possible in their first or second year of college. This means that the inside and outside students are at a similar level and have many of the same questions. It is clear to me that the inside students are less intimidated by younger students than by seniors. First-year college students also benefit more than upper class students when an instructor spends a little more time on basic skills.

One reason that IO courses are ideal for juveniles is that the ages of the inside and outside students are basically the same. There are challenges associated with this but there are also significant advantages. One of the goals of IO is to introduce the outside students to the idea that “criminals” are people a lot like them. In my classes, the inside and outside students look basically the same, have many of the same interests, and share the same popular culture references. Consequently, it is easier for the outside students to see the inside students as “us” rather than as “other.” Additionally, as the inside and

outside students come to know each other, the inside students begin to tell stories about their experiences with the criminal justice system. When the outside students listen to them, they are confronted by the fact that there are injustices happening in the system right now. In adult facilities, it is easier for outside students to say that bad things happened in the past, but not now. The similar ages of the inside and outside students also make the inside students more able to imagine themselves in college. They love to hear about the outside student's lives and they get excited about the possibility that they too could have a college experience.

Head off behavior problems from the beginning of the course. As described, many inside students enter an IO course from a prison classroom where misbehavior is one way to appear "cool" in front of their peers. As a result, it is easy for them to slide into this type of behavior in an IO class. Unfortunately, outside students are sometimes tempted to go along with them because they want the inside students to like them. To avoid this problem, it is important to do some up-front work with both groups of students. When we meet separately on the first day, I talk to them about the problem. I explain to outside students that they will need to model proper college classroom behavior during the first few weeks of the class until everyone is used to it. I make it clear that they are not just doing me a favor (although it does make my job a whole lot easier), but that they are giving the inside students a gift for their future. I talk to the inside students about their prison (and community) school experiences and explain the ways in which a college classroom is different. We talk about obvious things like raising hands and not chatting, but we also talk about more subtle aspects of the college classroom. For example, many students who have come through the prison high school are unfamiliar with the idea that it is acceptable to disagree with the teacher. We talk about how students can appropriately disagree with a professor or with other students in a college class. Finally, I ask the inside students to help me make the outside students feel welcome on the first day. This gives them some ownership of the class and allows them to see that they are not the only people who are nervous and want to impress their peers.

Teach about college. Many inside students are first generation college students and some of their families are not able to provide them with help in the college application process. One of the areas where the students lack knowledge involves the different types of colleges. When they do not understand these differences, they can arrive on a campus only to discover that the school cannot meet their needs and interests. IO cannot serve as a college admissions support group, but it can be used to provide basic information. Each semester, I spend one session talking about the different kinds of colleges (public or

private, community, liberal arts, online, state schools, etc). I ask both inside and outside students to talk about what one needs to do to apply to college (like filling out a FAFSA, the federal student aid application) and what problems might arise. We also talk about the number and types of courses one might take during the first semester. Too often, an inside student will go to college and assume that their high school education can be a guide. This can cause them to do things such as sign up to take six classes during a term. I always put this informational session toward the end of the class when the inside students have become confident and comfortable and know that the outside students are there as students, not mentors.

Be realistic. Not every student has the desire or ability to go to college. While I never tell anyone to give up their dreams, I talk about a range of possible paths. For example, I encourage the inside students to test the waters at community college before jumping into a 4-year college. This is particularly important because youth have a lot of living to do when they are released from prison. They want to spend time with family and friends and often want at least a part-time job. I have watched many students get out of prison and, in their enthusiasm to change their lives, they sign up for four or more college courses as well as work full-time. I have also watched students apply to colleges and not get into any of them because of low high school grades. I talk to the students about how getting good grades at a community college can help to lessen the impact of poor grades in high school. Finally, we talk as a class about the financial realities of college and what options there are for funding a college education.

One of the powerful features of an IO class is that it allows the inside students to see what college is really like in a safe (and cost-free) setting. Every year I have a few inside students who decide that they do not like academic work and would rather concentrate in other areas. While I encourage them to try another teacher or class sometime, I also suggest that they think about other options. What do they enjoy doing? What type of education would such a path require?

Conclusion

Although there are a number of extremely encouraging signs in juvenile corrections, most state and local systems remain mired in problems. These include overcrowding, lack of health and educational services, and violence (Sickmund & Snyder, 2006). It is clear that they are failing in their objective of rehabilitating youth as many states have recidivism rates as high as 50% (Juvenile Justice Digest, 2006; Ohio Department of Youth Services, 2008;

Texas Youth Commission, 2003). One of the major problems facing juvenile correctional institutions is the lack of strong academic programs. As described, such programs have been linked to lowered recidivism, decreased criminal involvement, increased employment, and higher wages (Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985).

Formerly incarcerated youth often have difficulty transitioning to college because of events and life circumstances that precede their incarceration. The educational system in prison does little to address this situation, as it fails to help residents develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed. IO is a powerful model for helping incarcerated youth prepare for college. It can provide key cultural and social capital that many incarcerated youth lack—and that the correctional system is currently unable to offer. Of course, there are other laudable goals for IO classes and some instructors may decide that they do not want academic preparation to be the primary focus of their classes. For those who want to help youth address the gap between their college aspirations and their knowledge and skills, however, IO offers an exciting place to start. As instructors plan classes for juveniles, they should keep in mind both the unique challenges and the unique opportunities this population presents.

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1. Meisel et al. (1998) suggest that the number could be as high as 70% but it should be noted that there is some debate about the true scope of the learning disabilities problem as researchers have found that teachers and administrators sometimes inappropriately apply the “disability” label to youth—especially poor Black males—when they are perceived to be problem students (Ferguson, 2001).

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