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The Imperative of High-Quality Education in Juvenile Corrections: An Introduction to the Special Section

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Education is the foundation for successful life experiences. Its importance in creating pathways to adulthood cannot be overstated. Although all youth have potential, incarcerated youth—among the least academically developed among their age-mates—too frequently receive abysmal education services, which compromise their potential. Evidence shows that incarcerated youth are disproportionately male, children of color, and children with disabilities (Gagnon & Barber, 2010). Children living in poverty and children in the foster care system are also disproportionately found among those in detention and commitment facilities (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021).

While incarcerated, with the proper instruction and support, children can further develop emerging literacy and numeracy skills, earn credits toward high school graduation, and complete requirements for diplomas and certificates. There is consistent evidence that academic and career and technical education for incarcerated students is associated with positive outcomes; education is the most cost-effective means of reducing recidivism and ensuring successful community transitions for formerly incarcerated children and adults (Aos et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2013).

The publication of “Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Setting” in 2014 by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice was a seminal event for those concerned about education opportunities for all young people. For the first time, two federal agencies established guidelines for education in juvenile facilities. The principles are designed to ensure that incarcerated youth have the opportunity to further develop skills and take steps toward reaching their potential.

The articles in this special section examine the research literature since the publication of the guiding principles. Gagnon and his colleagues carefully document the dearth of quality research that would enable educators, policy makers, and program administrators

to develop high-quality education services for youth. In Article 1, Gagnon, Ross Benedick, and Mason-William (2021) focus on Principle I and research related to, “The provision of a safe, healthy facility-wide climate that . . . encourages the necessary behavioral and social support services” (U. S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2014, p. iv). As such, the authors report on a review of mental health interventions for youth who are incarcerated. With one exception, all studies utilized a group design and focused on reducing symptoms, improving functioning, personal growth, or a combination of these two areas. While the studies rarely included treatment integrity, some positive outcomes can be tentatively acknowledged related to trauma-focused and cognitive behavioral interventions.

In the second article of this Special Section, Gagnon, Ruiz, et al. (2022) also address Principle I in their literature review of behavioral interventions for incarcerated youth. Within the 10 intervention studies, there is a frequent focus on behavioral and cognitive behavioral interventions to improve youth compliance. Almost all studies employed a single-subject research design (SSRD). In terms of research progress related to the promotion of a safe, healthy facility-wide climate, the authors noted that the established effectiveness of behavioral and cognitive behavioral interventions were effective within the juvenile correctional facility (JCF) context. The authors also highlighted an almost complete absence of a measure of treatment integrity within the studies reviewed.

Hunter et al. (2022) focus their literature review on curriculum, instruction, and promoting college and career readiness for incarcerated youth. Eight studies are reviewed with two in each of the following: group design, SSRD, qualitative studies, and descriptive studies. Of note, the studies were limited to literacy and instruction, and there was an absence of research focusing on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The authors also recognized the rarity that reviewed studies included youth identifying as female.

In the final article of this Special Section, Gagnon, Ross Benedick, and Mason-William (2021) detail the overarching search procedures from which all of the literature reviews emanated. In addition to a brief summarization of Principles I and IV, the authors also discern that no studies related to Principle II emanated from the search procedures. Moreover, because there were insufficient numbers of studies under Principles III and IV, the authors summarize the limited research within this final article. Concerning Principle III, only two studies were identified that focused on education

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staffing in JCF. Salient points include the importance of providing an adequate salary and benefits, offering professional learning opportunities, and the critical need for research related to teacher recruitment, retention, and working conditions. With regard to Principle V, the search procedures produced three descriptive studies, a qualitative study, and one intervention study. Given such limited research, recommendations for practice are not warranted.

In the final article, Gagnon, Ross Benedick, and Mason-William (2021) also summarize data on quality indicators for studies across all of the principles and articles in the Special Section and provide implications for research, policy, and practice. In terms of study quality, the authors conveyed the infrequency of treatment fidelity, as well as the lack of reporting if student participants had mental disorders or disabilities. The need for high-quality research, particularly on incarcerated youth that identify as female and in STEM, was identified. In terms of practice, the authors noted that given the lack of high-quality research, practitioners must look to the “best available evidence” to guide their work with incarcerated youth (also see Gagnon & Barber, 2015). Finally, the authors declared the need to tie research funding with high-quality JCF research.

Conclusions

Taken together, the articles in this Special Section provide an important update on the research conducted since the publication of the Guiding Principles. Noteworthy, is the overall need for additional research and the particular urgency of research related to funding (Principle II), recruitment, employment, and retention of teachers (Principle III), and ensuring students effectively reenter school, community, and the workforce upon exit from JCF (Principle V) and reach their potential. A significant commitment is needed to fund quality research in JCFs and a willingness of state-, local-, and facility-level education and correctional administrators to allow such research and actively promote education in JCF.

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