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Juveniles and College: Inside Outside as a Way Forward

Anne M. Nurse

Sam was a particularly bright and motivated young man I met fifteen 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 six weeks, however, he dropped 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 ten 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 paper, I describe some of the significant personal and structural barriers that make the college transition hard for incarcerated youth. Based on six years of teaching Inside Outside classes in a juvenile facility, I argue that the I-O Program—with a number of modifications-- can be a powerful way to provide youth with the support and cultural capital they need to overcome these challenges. The last section of the paper outlines some best practices, designed to help prospective teachers think through adjusting the I-O 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 money 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 I-O 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 fifty unique state systems. They 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 show remarkable 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.

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 percent), although the female population has been increasing gradually over the last twenty 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 percent of incarcerated males and 12 percent 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. 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 three years below grade level (Rider-Hankins, 1992, p. 2). 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 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

¹ Meisel et al. (1998) suggest that the number could be as high as 70 percent 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).

was.” The creation of this kind of self-narrative appears to offer important psychological support to people trying to maintain a non-criminal 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 youths’ incarceration can put them on a trajectory of self-doubt and failure. Unfortunately, most prison classrooms are not designed to help them get off this path. Virtually every juvenile correctional center in the US 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 educations, 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 lack 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 (Nurse, 2010). In school, they do not want to look stupid nor too interested in the academic material. 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 lifecourse (Elman & O'Rand, 2004). Studies also show that academic programs are one of three types of interventions that reduce recidivism and increase post-release 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 even conclude that, under certain circumstances, working increases youths' delinquent behavior. This is partly a result of selection bias (at-risk 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 (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Ploeger, 1997; Wright, Cullen & Williams, 1997). 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 where they can reap the most benefits from it. Although the rates of people 25 or over attending college have increased notably over the last thirty years, the majority of college students are still between the ages of 18 and 24 (US 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 twenties 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 Inside Outside Model to Juveniles:

As other articles in this special edition show, I-O 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 (Scott & Steinberg, 2008; Milner, 2004). Additionally, incarcerated juveniles have a different outlook from adults. Virtually all residents of juvenile facilities are released within several years and 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 way I-O is taught. Here I draw upon the literature as well as my own experiences to offer some best practices for teaching I-O 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 I-O class that has the same level, content, format, and style as classes given outside prison walls. Every year I teach I-O, 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 Inside Outside 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 I-O 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 I-O 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 invite 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 pre-screening 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 Outside 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 I-O 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 I-O 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 most of the inside students have 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 a lot of first and second year outside students

I recruit as many outside students who are in their first or second year of college as possible. 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 around first years and sophomores than around 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 I-O 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 Inside Outside 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 “back in the day” 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 I-O course from a prison classroom where misbehavior is one way to appear to be cool in front of their peers. As a result, it is easy for them to slide into this type of behavior in an I-O 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. It is easy to think that college is just college. If students do not understand the differences between schools, however, they can arrive on a campus only to discover that the school cannot meet their needs and interests. I-O 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 vs. private but also community, liberal arts, on-line, 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) and what problems might arise. We also talk about how many and what 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 like sign up to take six classes each 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 four 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 college courses as well as work fulltime. 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 I-O 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 percent (Juvenile Justice Digest, 2006; Texas Youth Commission, 2003; Ohio Department of Youth Services, 2008). 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 have difficulty transitioning to college because of events and life circumstances that precede their incarceration. The educational system in prison does not help matters as it fails to help residents develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed. Inside Outside 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 I-O 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, I-O 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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