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The Potential of a Library Media Program on Reducing Recidivism Rates Among Juvenile Offenders

Abstract

There are currently an estimated 1.1 million juveniles involved with the juvenile justice system. Of that steadily-climbing number, a high percentage will be rearrested, readjudicated, or recommitted to a facility, program, or group home. Although many researchers have studied the factors influencing juvenile criminology and recidivism rates in general in order to reduce these numbers, little is known about the possible influence that an active and thriving library media center may have on these adolescents. Therefore, this literature review will examine the possible connection between having a library media program available during a juvenile's incarceration and reducing juvenile delinquent recidivism rates.

Keywords

juvenile, delinquent, criminology, recidivism, library, librarian

INTRODUCTION

A serious societal issue that is often overlooked by educational researchers despite its marked effect on individuals, families, schools, and communities alike is juvenile delinquency, which, for the purposes of this article, is defined as juveniles who commit criminal acts or offenses. Juvenile delinquency, overall, carries with it societal stigmas that may diminish juveniles' quality of life as well as weaken educational experiences they might have otherwise had; but recidivism, or reoffending, in these same youths is an even more pressing issue. Recidivism needs to be more extensively examined primarily because, as Methvin (1997) explains, troubled juveniles tend to have 10 or 12 contacts with the juvenile justice system, and likely many more that went undiscovered, before they receive adjudication from a judge. This repetition of behavior alludes to a system that is not working. Since the juvenile justice system, unlike the adult system, is more focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment, the need for further research on recidivism is blatant; the number of juveniles reoffending should be decreasing, not increasing, and support for the prevention of recidivism, such as the presence of library media centers and full-time library media specialists, need to be closely examined as well.

Unfortunately, the National Center for Juvenile Justice (2014) explains that estimating the recidivism rates among juvenile offenders is nearly impossible because

there are a number of decision points, or marker events, that can be used to measure recidivism, including rearrests, re-referrals to court, readjudication [the act of being judged to be delinquent again], or reconfinement [and] the resulting recidivism rate can vary drastically, depending on the decision point chosen as a marker event. (p. 111)

Nonetheless, taking a look at the general arrest rates for juveniles can illuminate just how harrowing the situation has become. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2015) estimated juvenile arrest numbers were roughly 3,008 arrested per 100,000 juveniles from the ages of 10 to 17 in the residential population of the United States. This figure does not include an estimated number of the majority of minor offenses that are handled off the record and go unreported. In other words, Furdella and Puzanchera (2015) explain, an under-estimated 1.1 million youths are currently involved with the juvenile justice system and, out of this number, Sickmund and Puzanchera (2014) conclude, "there is no national recidivism rate for juveniles" (p. 112). To be blunt, the lack of a standardized method across states to determine recidivism rates, and the additional lack of concrete numbers, can make determining effective interventions an almost

insurmountable task. Nevertheless, juvenile delinquents are still an underserved population in educational research, and this needs to be addressed. While there has been extensive research concerned with influencing factors of juvenile criminology and recidivism, little is known about the potential of a library media program or a full-time library media specialist on reducing recidivism rates in juvenile delinquents since recidivism, in essence, is almost impossible to track, let alone study. However, because of this lack of knowledge, a review of the available literature on incarcerated youth, the correlation between library media programs and student success, and the effects of library media specialists on regular student populations are important areas to investigate; doing so may help ascertain the possible importance of a library media program as an influencing factor for deterring recidivism.

INCARCERATED YOUTH

Statistically speaking, incarcerated youth are the most educationally underserved population in the United States; an issue that often goes ignored by educational researchers and reformers alike simply because the juvenile justice system is as hard to navigate as current educational law. When describing incarcerated youths, Biddle's (2010) take on the situation is understandably bleak. He points out that when juveniles end up in any correctional facility, the probability of them receiving treatment for what brought them to the facility in the first place or having a reasonable expectation of receiving a high-quality education while incarcerated is highly unlikely. The bulk of the research surrounding juvenile delinquents, recidivism rates, and risk factors all support his claim. In fact, Thielbar (2011) claims that most of the population in a detention center or facility is "disproportionately male, minority, poor, and disabled" (p. 4). An example of this, Biddle (2010) continues, is that "thirty percent of the incarcerated youth surveyed by the U.S. Department of Justice were diagnosed as being special education cases" (para. 7) and their needs often go ignored in correctional facilities. A further look into dedicated research on incarcerated youths, say Leone, Meisel, and Drakeford (2002), shows "most incarcerated youth lag two or more years behind their age peers in basic academic skills, and have higher rates of grade retention, absenteeism, and suspension or expulsion" (p. 46). This is backed by the findings of Leone, Krezmien, Mason, and Meisel (2005), who teamed up to perform a study on empirically based literacy instruction on incarcerated youth, and state "the demographic and educational characteristics of incarcerated youth place them at extreme risk for school failure that begins well before their confinement in correctional facilities and is itself a significant risk factor for delinquent behavior"

(p. 89). They go on to say that one of the significant deterrents for recidivism is obtaining an education, which can also be supported by research, but incarcerated youth are in desperate need of effective instruction in order to successfully address their unique needs; this simply is not happening.

Regrettably, if juvenile offenders do not receive the necessary educational supports for their unique needs, statistics are not in juvenile delinquents' favor, as

more than 60% of all prison inmates are functionally illiterate and penal institution records show that inmates have a 16% chance of returning to prison if they receive literacy help, as opposed to the 70% who receive no help [and return]. (Literacy Statistics, n. d., para. 4)

Biddle (2010) also points out that studies that have been conducted in Florida, New York, and Virginia that estimate while 55% of incarcerated youths will likely be rearrested, 56% of juvenile offenders will end up back in front of a judge before they reach adulthood and “a mere one out of every eight juvenile prisoners will likely graduate from high school” (para. 1). In other words, youths who are involved in the juvenile justice system have low literacy rates, high dropout rates, and little in the way of projected success rates. This idea is also expanded by the article *The Importance of Literacy for Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System* by O’Cummings, Bardack, and Gonsoulin (2010) and put forth by the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk (NDTAC). The article shows a correlation not only between low literacy rates and continued involvement in the juvenile justice system, but also explores the effectiveness of reading interventions during incarceration. O’Cummings et al. (2010) additionally point out that the majority of incarcerated juveniles will not return to their regular schools, earn a diploma or the equivalent during their incarceration or within a month of their release, and there is an obvious need to improve both the transitional and educational services in these facilities; two areas in which libraries and library media specialists can provide much needed support.

Not only are incarcerated youths underserved by receiving a subpar education from the onset and little to no support for their individual educational needs, they are also the ones who could possibly benefit most from the presence of a library media center and a highly-qualified library media specialist—and the first ones to go without the presence of both (Thielbar, 2011). Examining the role of the library media program and the library media specialist in regular educational settings, then, may help shed some light on the importance a library media program and a library media specialist could have in a correctional facility setting.

THE IMPACT OF LIBRARY MEDIA PROGRAMS ON STUDENT SUCCESS

When it comes to the impact libraries have on student success, the literature is overwhelmingly positive in favor of libraries. Mojapelo and Dube (2014) point out that “school libraries help support the school curriculum by providing learners and teachers alike with access to a wide variety of information resources, exposing learners to diverse ideas, experiences and opinions,” but “access to information by teachers and learners is a daunting challenge in the majority of schools” (p. 8) if the presence of an endorsed librarian is missing; this is an even a bigger issue in correctional facilities. Interestingly enough, at least one impact study involving a school library has had to be conducted every year since 2000 to re-establish the valid connection between student success and the presence of a library media program (Dow, 2013). In fact, most school administrators, when faced with budget cuts, look first to the library as the place to start, assuming that the integration of technology is making library media centers and library media specialists obsolete. Dow (2013) adds to this by asserting that “site-based management and the absence of a federal mandate for school libraries and librarians make school library positions especially vulnerable” (p. 78).

Still, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) completely disagrees with the assessment that library media programs and library media specialists are becoming obsolete. ISTE (n.d.) insists that libraries and library media specialists play a critical role in the implementation of educational technology because not only do they “support the use of technology throughout the school by working closely with the school’s technology coordinator or fill the role of technology coordinator when a separate position does not exist,” but that libraries also “address educational technology and information literacy skills instruction embedded in the curriculum” (p. 2); both components have been linked to student success. Lance and Hofschire (2011) support this claim with a correlation analysis they performed between librarian presence and student achievement. Not only did they discover that an increase in librarians was significantly and positively linked to an increase in reading scores, they were also able to show that when the available number of librarians increased, the reading scores increased for *all* students—poor, Hispanic, or English language learner. With such a significant finding, librarians and the library media center should not be excluded from the educational toolbox. Not only does the research support the connection between student success and the presence of a library media program, it also shows that the presence of a full-time library media specialist and designated time in the library every week has a significant effect on increasing student state test scores. In fact, Dow (2013) highlights a study that demonstrated “the number of student visits to the school

library significantly impacted...scores” (pp. 81-82) and “schools with at least one full-time endorsed librarian averaged better reading scores” (p. 81). Even at the collegiate level, when students should be more independent in their learning, research still shows a “statistically significant relationship between library activity data and student attainment” (Stone & Ramsden, 2013, p. 546). Still, libraries are consistently undervalued and are often seen as nothing more than flotsam that can be easily removed from educational settings with little to no impact on the educational experience students are receiving; correctional facilities are no exception.

LIBRARIANS AND THEIR POSITIVE IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Not surprisingly, the literature addressing the effect of library media specialists on student achievement is also overwhelmingly in favor of the presence of a full-time library media specialist in order to improve student success. Like the research on the effectiveness of library media programs overall, Gretes (2013) says studies have consistently shown that “higher test scores result when school librarians are involved with instruction and the correlation is positive, especially regarding disadvantaged students who often do not have access to resources and computers” (p. 3). Yet, even though the majority of juveniles committed to a correctional facility consistently come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and are often considered to be special education students, the correctional facilities that actually have libraries may not see these libraries as a possible means to discourage recidivism. This is despite numerous research studies that support the diverse educational experiences a library is capable of providing to its student population. The space itself is either shared with an instructional teacher, lacks technological components such as computers, or is a haphazard collection of materials thrown together more by donations than assembled by a critical eye towards building curricular supports for students and teachers alike. A designated librarian in a correctional facility is almost nonexistent—the position is usually filled either by a line staff or a general education teacher with little or no training in library media. Gilman (2008) even goes so far as to explain that it “is clear from both anecdotal evidence and a review of professional library literature that the primary focus of library services in detention centers is on providing recreational reading materials and encouraging literacy” (p. 59). He goes on to state that while “promoting literacy is a core value of every librarian as well as an important step in rehabilitating teens and preparing them to be productive community members, library[ians] have much more to offer teens and [juvenile detention centers]” (p. 59). This is supported by a Pennsylvania study by Kachel (2011) which “adds to the evidence that all K–12

students need quality school library programs with full-time certified staff to achieve academically” and suggests that “staffing libraries with certified librarians can help close achievement gaps among the most vulnerable learners” (p. 6). As mentioned previously, those learners are often found in a juvenile correctional facility. Biddle (2010) summarizes the issue perfectly by asserting that “it isn’t enough to just focus on American public education; the juvenile justice systems also need attention” (para. 13), and this includes research on the potential for library media programs to help reduce the recidivism rates in juvenile delinquents.

CONCLUSION

In order to gain a complete understanding of the effectiveness of a library media program on reducing recidivism rates among juvenile offenders, it is necessary to conduct a thorough study that would examine all aspects of having a library media center on juvenile delinquent recidivism rates. Although there is very little research in regards to whether or not having a library media center has any impact on the reduction of recidivism rates in juvenile delinquents, it is still possible to assume library media centers can play an integral role in keeping juveniles from recidivating based on the findings that link student success to having a library media center and access to at least one full-time, endorsed librarian, as evidenced by this review of literature. Having a library media center has not only been linked to student success but also with higher literacy rates—an area in which most incarcerated youth are falling behind and in desperate need of individualized educational supports. Nevertheless, there is no research directly linking a library media center to reducing the recidivism rates of juvenile delinquents, and that needs to be studied in order to best serve the youth involved in the juvenile justice system. This research may help in addressing the major societal issue of juvenile delinquency and juvenile recidivism rates in delinquent youth. Only by thoroughly exploring the individual parts that impact the recidivism rates in juvenile delinquents can the serious issue of recidivism in juvenile delinquents be understood and, hopefully, improved. In the words of Ellingson (1998, p. 53), “The time is ripe for librarians to take a leadership role in identifying literacy providers, forming partnerships, and developing networks within their communities.”

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