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Easing Reentry through Employability Skills Training for Incarcerated Youth

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When incarcerated youth face the prospect of reentering the community, they have many obstacles to overcome. There are often employment requirements in the terms of their parole or aftercare and if they fail to obtain and maintain employment, they may reenter the justice system instead of successfully reentering society. While research shows employment matters significantly for a successful transition from incarceration back in to the community, there is limited information on which programs or supports positively impact post incarceration employment. Practitioners have the challenge of locating and choosing curriculum, interventions, or supports with little to go on as to which are the best choices for their population in terms of teaching employability skills. This article focuses on services and supports for teaching employability skills at each of the stages of the juvenile justice process – before, during, and after incarceration. The psychological damage to youth resulting from incarceration is examined as well as the impact on obtaining and maintaining employment post incarceration. Resources are provided for practitioners to find evidence-based interventions and supports for the youth with whom they work. Calls for future research are detailed in the areas of programs and practices, desistance and recidivism, and community-based alternatives.

Keywords: reentry, transition, juvenile delinquency, juvenile detention, juvenile justice, employability, employability skills, incarceration, incarcerated youth

INTRODUCTION

Beyond ensuring public safety, the intent of the juvenile justice system has historically been to rehabilitate youth engaged in delinquent behavior. It can be argued that for many youth the issue is one of *habilitation* rather than *rehabilitation* [emphasis added]. Many justice-involved youth never had the nurturing and direction needed by all children and youth, and so the purpose with these youth is to provide them with access to positive, pro-social experiences and opportunities to develop new skills. (Liddell, Clark, & Starkovich, 2014, p. 360)

The obligation of the juvenile justice system is far more complex than that of typical schools or even adult correctional facilities. Beyond security, juvenile justice facilities have the added pressure of educating and raising what, for all intents and purposes, are still children. This responsibility must be taken very seriously. In response to debate over the structure of the

juvenile justice system and punishment versus rehabilitation in Oregon, family court Judge Nan Waller said, "it's far, far better to save a child than deal with the aftermath of imprisoning an adult" (Bernstein, 2014, para. 10). This quote stresses the importance of creating unique and sensitive services specially designed for children. Burrell (2014) explains the impact on the youth and community, stating that having been incarcerated increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school and becoming chronically unemployed. "This in turn lowers wages and income, ultimately reducing tax revenues and hurting the economy. It also increases the chances that the person will need public benefits to survive" (para. 5).

The long-term impact of short-term incarceration must be carefully considered. Youth who enter the justice system face a long list of challenges. To make matters worse, once they initially exit the system, they are often primed for failure. Those unable to meet the employment requirements of their parole or aftercare often reenter the justice system instead of successfully reentering society.

Research shows employment post incarceration significantly increases successful transition from incarceration back into the community. However, limited information is available about which programs or supports positively impact post-incarceration employment. "The lack of research on critical issues and effective practices, coupled with limited access to usable and effective risk-prevention programs and policies, can increase the potential of harm to youth, staff, and the public" (Dunlap, 2014, p. 1). Practitioners have the challenge of locating and choosing curriculum, interventions, or supports without a strong research base to guide their decision-making. There is a dearth of information at each step of youth delinquency and incarceration.

Three distinct time periods frame the juvenile justice process: before, during, and after incarceration. This article focuses on services and supports at each of these critical stages, specifically regarding employability skills. These skills, although supportive of, are different than vocational skills. Beyond specific trade skills, employability skills include at a minimum: effective communication, problem solving, taking responsibility, and teamwork. These skills are important in many areas in addition to employment, but they are perhaps most essential to obtain and hold a job.

Thus, in this article, the psychological damage of youth incarceration is examined as well as the impact on obtaining and maintaining employment post incarceration. Existing programs and supports for employability skills are explored for before, during, and after incarceration. Finally, resources for practitioners are provided and the needs for future research are discussed.

The Importance of Employability Skills

Of all factors that impact the success or failure of reentering society post incarceration (hereafter referred to simply as *reentry*), employability skills are paramount. In summarizing critical areas for reentry programming, Liddell et al. (2014) listed employment as an "essential element" of any reentry or transition plan and stressed the importance of building upon "youths' strengths and assets to promote pro-social development" (p. 389).

The reasons for the value placed on employability skills are evident throughout most research about recidivism and reoffending by formerly incarcerated youth (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong, 2010; Berg & Heubner, 2011; Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002; Bushway & Apel, 2012; Justice Policy Institute, 2007). Because almost all incarcerated youth are released, improving post-incarceration success and employment rates among formerly incarcerated youth should not be considered an individual issue (Burrell, & Moeser, 2014). The success or failure of these individuals affects all of society.

Research findings indicate that public safety is directly related to increased employment and wages, and communities with lower unemployment rates also have lower crime rates (Justice Policy Institute, 2007). Additionally, studies show employment post incarceration decreases repeated offending (Bahr et al., 2010; Berg & Heubner, 2011; Bushway & Apel, 2012). For example, the Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in Community Settings (TRACS) study found immediate work or return to school upon release had a significantly positive impact on reentry and decreased recidivism (Bullis et al., 2002).

Despite the importance of employment, few incarcerated youth have the skills needed to develop and maintain employment post incarceration. “The skills lacking among youth in confinement settings range from basic communication to more advanced anger management and problem solving” (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 371). It is important to note that since youth are able to have their criminal records expunged, the difficulty in obtaining employment is not the result of having a record (Jacobs, 2013). Employability skills must be taught in order to help youth achieve positive outcomes. For these reasons, employability skills, among all possible factors affecting reentry, are the primary focus of this article.

Psychological Damage

The very experience of incarceration is a significant factor in leading youth to future criminal offending and further incarceration (Kirk & Sampson, 2012). When youth enter the justice system, they are removed from schooling, family, and community, further alienating them from their typical or non-incarcerated peers. Juvenile arrest frequently leads to school dropout and sustained unemployment (Kirk & Sampson, 2012). “It is tragically ironic that juvenile justice facilities are one of the most difficult environments for traumatized youth – yet their traumatic histories often play a major role in the delinquent or violent behavior that gets them there” (Boesky, 2014, p. 405).

The psychological damage youth incur from any time spent incarcerated increases the importance of helping youth transition back to life in the community. Transition planning services are often not at a sufficient level to meet existing needs, however.

Without a sound philosophical approach and attention to reintegration as the key mission of short-term facilities, it is shortsighted at best, and negligent at worst, to ignore the impact of short-term removal on youthful offenders and believe that short-term facilities are simply a ‘time out’ from the youth’s normal development. (Burrell & Moeser, 2014, p. 652)

Trauma-Informed Care

Recognizing the psychological damage youth experience within the juvenile justice system, as well as the compounding nature of trauma the same youth experienced prior to entering the system, a focus on rehabilitation necessitates a consideration of significant mental health concerns (Wasserman, McReynolds, Schwalbe, Keating, & Jones, 2010). “It is clear that trauma is a core issue for many youth entering residential treatment, and is likely a major contributor to their emotional disturbance including trauma-related mental health problems” (Hodgdon, Kinniburgh, Gabowitz, Blaustein, & Spinazzola, 2013, p. 680). In fact, over 76% of youth entering the system qualify for mental health diagnoses and services (Skowyr & Coccozza, 2007). Substantial psychiatric needs among incarcerated youth have resulted in trauma-informed care initiatives within secure care facilities (Dierkhising, Ko, & Halladay, 2013; Hodgdon et al., 2013).

Trauma-informed care is a long-term focus of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, providing skills-based training throughout the juvenile justice system (Dierkhising et al., 2013). “The juvenile justice system, specifically, has been an essential service system to target in light of the strikingly high prevalence of trauma exposure and traumatic stress among justice-involved youth” (Dierkhising et al., 2013, p. 1). Incarcerated youth have unique needs in addition to the unique circumstance of being in a secure care setting. Trauma-informed care within the juvenile justice system recognizes the importance of working with youth in their specific situation to provide them “ongoing support in their day to day interactions with the world” (Hodgdon et al., 2013, p. 680). Such efforts are vitally important for youth who will be transitioning back in to the community.

Employment Post Incarceration

Following the psychologically damaging experience of incarceration, reentry is a substantial challenge for most, if not all. “These adolescents tend to display maladaptive behaviors that seriously impair their abilities to work, live, and function successfully in society” (Todis, Bullis, Wainstrup, Schultz, & D’Ambrosio, 2001, p. 119). Arditti and Parkman (2011) found that because of their criminal background, employment upon release was “out of reach” for the young men they studied. Social exclusion, commonly experienced by formerly incarcerated youth, plays a role in restricting job opportunities, as well as limiting conditions of some state and federal assistance for improving vocational skills or educational achievement (Arditti & Parkman, 2011).

Compounding this challenge, employment is a frequent requirement of probation or parole (Arditti & Parkman, 2011; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2015a). Youth who have spent their formative years imprisoned have not developed the psychological, emotional, social, and general life skills and relationships like that of their non-incarcerated peers. Instead, they have developed characteristics that make employment and independence considerably more challenging (Arditti & Parkman, 2011). Yet, if the young offender does not meet the terms of their parole, probation, or aftercare, they may be recommitted to juvenile detention, thereby perpetuating a cycle of recidivism (OJJDP, 2015). These requirements, though, are well intentioned and empirically justified. As Schindler (2014) explains,

(t)he research on justice-involved youth shows that lack of employment is one of the biggest predictors of justice system involvement and unsuccessful re-entry. And research has shown that access to employment and job-training opportunities can help youth avoid a lifetime of negative justice-related consequences. (para. 9)

In a recent study conducted by the University of Chicago's Crime Lab (Heller, 2014; Ingmire, 2014) and as a "powerful idea" in a recent documentary by Academy Award winner, Feida Lee Mock (Mock, 2012), the notion that "nothing stops a bullet like a job" has become "conventional wisdom." This concept is also the guiding principle of many community service agencies working with youth who are reentering society after incarceration. For example, Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest and most successful rehabilitation and reentry program in the United States, has found that employment is roughly 80% of "what these folks need to redirect their lives" (Homeboy Industries, 2014, Why Homeboy Industries Works section, para. 1). Through employment and social supports, recidivism statistics are inverted from 70% of ex-offenders reoffending to 70% avoiding future incarceration and becoming productive members of society (Mock, 2012). Homeboy Industries is a striking example of the power of employment for formerly incarcerated youth.

Conceptual Framework

Arditti and Parkman (2011) attribute the cause and effect relationship of negative outcomes post incarceration to *life course theory*. "Life course studies relate lived experiences (in this instance incarceration and reentry) to developmental processes" (Arditti & Parkman, 2011, p. 205). The opportunity for growth and rehabilitation works in conjunction with two influential factors: (1) experiencing vulnerabilities through compounding challenging circumstances, and (2) being at a critical stage of development in transitioning from delinquent youth to young, productive adult. Figure 1 illustrates this process. These coinciding influential factors are, quite possibly, the exact right impetus for substantial life change (Arditti & Parkman, 2011).

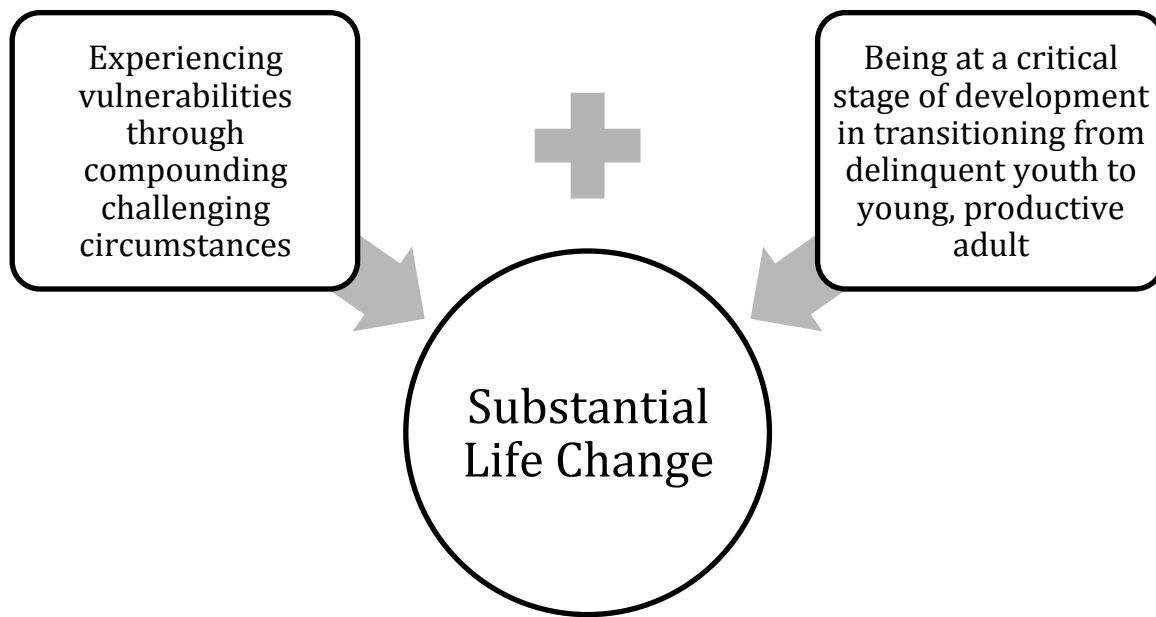


Figure 1. Life course theory: The process of life change.

Life course theory looks closely at significant life transitions, their timing with what else is happening in the environment, and the meaning associated with these transitions by both the individual and society (Elder, 1994). Arditti and Parkman applied this theory to incarcerated youth who are reentering society (2011). Their work stands on a foundation of previous research using life course theory as applied to criminal behavior and delinquency (Elder, 1994; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1997; Sampson & Laub, 2005).

As with the studies described above, this article demonstrates the consistency of difficult events or circumstances during key developmental timeframes that make individuals vulnerable to decisions associated with significant consequences. Individual agency is heavily influenced by environment, development, and many additional factors. This further supports the need for protective factors (OJJDP, 1998) of employability skills training being included in instructional programs.

Instructional Programs Targeting Competencies for Employability Skills

Research is examined for the distinct timeframes of before, during, and after incarceration. The specific purpose is to understand what current programs exist to teach employability skills to at risk, incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated youth with or without disabilities. Further, this research is evaluated to determine which of these programs are successful. Employability skills supports or training are discussed for each stage of the juvenile justice process.

Before Incarceration

Interventions early in a child's academic career have long been recognized as vital for a child at risk of future failure. Walker and Sprague (1999) identified the trajectory by which a student experiencing early school difficulties can progress down a pathway to delinquency. Their *path to long-term negative outcomes* (Walker & Sprague, 1999) is similar to the *dynamic cascade model of development* created by Dodge, Greenberg, Malone, and the Conduct Problems Prevention Group (2008) in which difficult experiences and environments during the developmental process lead to negative outcomes. Similarly, Mallett (2014) named this phenomenon the "learning disability to juvenile detention pipeline" in comparison to the school-to-prison pipeline. In each of these studies, disabilities and academic challenges were found to lead to undesirable behavior and future criminal offending (Mallett, 2014).

Thus, interventions *before* a youth begins down a negative pathway, as early as academic challenges are identified, are vital. Early intervention can help set struggling youth on an alternative path to positive life outcomes. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention advises that any intervention should address risk factors that could lead to delinquency *as well as* protective factors that could help children cope with those risk factors (OJJDP, 1998). Such protective factors include interventions on employability skills.

Employability skills. Several high schools in Arizona, Oregon, and New York have adopted the Youth Transition Program (YTP) that works in partnership with Vocational Rehabilitation Services. The YTP personnel work with students who are identified as having a disability or needing any additional supports in the academic setting. They provide students with career coaching, job shadowing, interview skills, work experience, and more. The goal is to improve students' opportunities for a successful transition from school to community, all based on each individual student's interests (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009). Staff, Osgood, Schulenberg, Bachman, and Messersmith (2010) found beyond simply obtaining a job, the *type* of employment mattered in keeping youth from delinquency. While they found all manner of employment correlated to lower rates of delinquency and substance abuse, the more the work aligned with preferences for employment, the greater the outcomes (Staff et al., 2010). Thus, programs like YTP built around a youth's own interests and goals are more likely to have positive long-term results.

Another option is for students to take advantage of vocational programs in their neighborhood high school or to attend a career and technical or vocational high school. In these programs or schools, workforce readiness is encouraged alongside or over college readiness. Students graduate with a high school diploma, professional certification, work experience, and often a job (Bidwell, 2014). Despite debate over "tracking" students to the workforce instead of college, students who themselves choose career over college find vocational schools are often a good fit (Bidwell, 2014). Vocational skills also prepare students for college, not only the workforce (Hanford, 2014). In other words, the "track" is not limiting.

Heller (2014) also recognized the value of employment. High rates of violent crime in the city of Chicago and its surrounding neighborhoods prompted her to seek interventions that could interrupt the trajectory toward a criminal future (2014). On the notion that nothing stops a bullet like a job, Heller provided Chicago youth with a summer employment program. Findings

demonstrate that when youth are given a summer job and an adult job mentor to help develop employment skills, they are more likely to avoid violent crime arrests. In Heller's (2014) study, violent crime arrests were reduced by 43%.

Missed opportunities. Many of the interventions for before incarceration are geared toward youth considered to be at risk of future failure. Interventions are not for students maintaining status quo in the general curriculum. As a result, some students are able to “fly under the radar,” and their needs are not noticed until it is too late. For example, Smeeding (2002) examined poverty rates for children internationally, finding the United States to be among the worst. Children experiencing poverty may not struggle academically or be diagnosed with a disability, but they have substantial obstacles and little supports or resources (Smeeding, 2002). In her book *Many Children Left Behind*, Meier (2004) explains many factors impacting a child's educational success or failure and the missed opportunities that exist throughout their school years. It is for the students who have compounding challenges and are less noticeable that extra effort must be made to keep them from entering the juvenile justice system.

During Incarceration

Time *during* incarceration should be used for rehabilitation, education, and personal growth. As previously mentioned, the experience of incarceration can be damaging for youth who are already facing compounding challenges. To avoid causing harm or further psychological damage, the time during a youth's incarceration should be carefully managed. “Youth in confinement facilities are some of the nation's most troubled and troublesome youth. The time they spend in confinement and what they do during this time are crucial” (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 390).

The goals during incarceration can and should be accomplished through effective programming. “Even unexceptional and limited programs serve to reduce the number of problems youth experience in confinement” (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 361). As Liddell et al. (2014) imply, any and all effort is of value, yet using evidence-based practices and programs is highly recommended.

Employability skills. Housed under the auspices of transition services, the teaching of employability skills is an important part of any program for incarcerated youth. In the *Desktop Guide to Quality Practice for Working with Youth in Confinement*, a collection of “promising and effective practices that are rooted in theory and tested by research” has been assembled as recommendations for juvenile facilities (Dunlap, 2014, p. 2). Several of these practices and programs either focus on or include skills necessary for obtaining and maintaining employment.

Griller-Clark, Mathur, and Holding (2011) provided enhanced transition services at two juvenile detention facilities for 68 incarcerated youth with disabilities. A transition specialist helped youth create a portfolio that included a vocational assessment and resume in addition to educational and general information and resources. The addition of these employment-related items to the basic transition portfolio received in the control group was determined to positively impact post-release outcomes for participants. Formerly incarcerated youth with disabilities were 64% less likely to reoffend if they received the enhanced transition support (Griller-Clark et al., 2011).

Burrell and Moeser (2014) assert “(v)ocational and interest inventories should be performed routinely ... at institutions where youth will have a prolonged stay, and job preparation and job readiness can be part of the transition planning that occurs in every youth confinement facility” (p. 657). Facilities, unfortunately, are typically lacking the supports needed for vocational and interest inventories to be immediately useful, however. For example, vocational training to get the identified job skills of interest before they are released or arrangements with employers in the community who will hire formerly incarcerated youth in their fields of interest are rare among juvenile justice facilities. This is especially true in short-term facilities. In other words, learning from a vocational interest inventory that one has people-skills and would be good in customer service is of little short-term value to this group in this setting and should be taken in to consideration.

Unmet need. The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) project monitored the impact of 16 different programs across four juvenile detention facilities to determine whether the needs of these students were being met (Hawkins, Lattimore, Dawes, & Visher, 2010). In their study of 337 incarcerated male youth, Hawkins et al. (2010) found two of the top five services offenders reported needing prior to release were job training and help finding a job. Yet, the same respondents reported that they did not receive these or related services while incarcerated (Hawkins et al., 2010). Training of competencies for employability skills for incarcerated youth clearly remains an area of need.

After Incarceration

As mentioned previously, almost all those who are incarcerated are eventually released back in to the community (Burrell & Moeser, 2014). Therefore, valuable services aid in easing reentry through aftercare supports for formerly incarcerated youth. “Jurisdictions have invested in these services to allow for some level of post-release supervision of youth, with the goal of increasing the likelihood of safe and successful transitions of youth back into their homes and communities” (Clark, 2014, p. 76). Examples of these services may include: independent living programs that provide varying levels of support with life skills; employment support; and social skills training (Liddell et al., 2014). Unfortunately, because these important skills are not the target of instruction during incarceration, basic instruction is often necessary after release.

Employability skills. As previously described, Homeboy Industries provides a collection of services and supports to help formerly incarcerated youth. Their evidence-based model includes providing jobs in-house and partnering with felony-friendly employers to help ex-gang members who have been incarcerated as either youth or adults become productive members of society (Homeboy Industries, 2014). The conceptual framework that governs everything at Homeboy Industries is their Impact Theory, part of which includes teaching job readiness and job specific skills (Leap, Franke, Christie, & Bonis, 2011). Homeboy Industries provides job training and work experience in their own businesses, regularly promoting from within, and moving employees around to different positions and types of jobs to build their resumes with varied experience (Homeboy Industries, 2014). These businesses include: Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Café, Homeboy Café, Homeboy Silkscreen, Homeboy Merchandise, and graffiti removal and maintenance services (Choi & Kiesner, 2007). They also have job counselors to help these same employees when they are ready to transition from Homeboy Industries to employment in the community, helping them make connections, interview, and get a job (Leap et al., 2011).

A similar program is Encompass Community Services in Santa Cruz, California. Among other supports, Encompass provides transition services to youth on probation. These supports can include various types of skill building to increase success of reentry and self-sufficiency (Encompass, 2015). The mission of Encompass is to “support and empower youth in making a healthy transition into successful adulthood” (Encompass, 2015, para. 1). This transition is accomplished by helping formerly incarcerated youth find and maintain employment, providing life skills coaching, and linking them with additional community supports (Encompass, 2015).

Needs remain. Baltodano, Mathur, and Rutherford (2005) reviewed ten intervention and descriptive research studies about the transition outcomes of youth with disabilities from secure care settings back into the community. Findings revealed the importance of being engaged in work, school, or community upon release. Multiple studies they reviewed determined formerly incarcerated youth who were engaged productively post incarceration were dramatically less likely to reoffend (Baltodano et al., 2005). They called for an increased focus on transition services beginning as soon as the youth is incarcerated and following through with mentoring post release (Baltodano et al., 2005).

Clearly, formerly incarcerated youth are not prepared well enough for successful adult lives. Larson and Turner (2002) recommend a focus on social and vocational skills to decrease reoffending by giving formerly incarcerated youth opportunities to learn these skills post reentry. These supports should be available in the communities in which these youth reside if they are to impact positively the individuals who most need them (Stenhjem, 2005).

The Necessity of Further Research and Development

“In the end, our work lives its ultimate life in the lives that it enables others to lead” (Eisner, 2005). From this perspective, the onus is on researchers, practitioners, and anyone involved at any stop along the three stages of incarceration discussed in this article. Eleanor Roosevelt poignantly asked, “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?” (1946, para. 3).

Resources for Practitioners

Even with the intent of rehabilitation, little evidence exists about what really *does* work and what *does not*. While it would be inappropriate to discontinue unproven interventions that appear to have positive results, at the same time it is essential to determine which programs and supports attain the desired results. Success for such interventions is most often measured by recidivism (Griller-Clark et al., 2011). More specifically, “Successful reintegration includes achievement of positive youth outcomes (e.g., educational achievements, employment, civic involvement) and increased public safety (e.g., reductions in recidivism)” (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 388). Very few studies of employability skills programs include data on recidivism and long-term post-incarceration outcomes. As already noted, successful reentry is in the community’s best interest as well as the individual’s. Knowing this, providing effective programming to ease reentry is a goal, which must be understood.

Interventions must continue where they are currently successful and expand or adjust where they are still needed in order to continue to work toward this goal. The resources for incarcerated youth are not abundant compared to those for their typical peers. They do, however, exist. For example, *The Desktop Guide to Quality Practice for Working with Youth in Confinement* (Boesky, 2014; Burrell & Moeser, 2014; Clark, 2014; Dietch, 2014; Dunlap, 2014) mentioned and referenced throughout this article provides suggestions on the use of evidence-based practices in juvenile justice settings. The guide is available at www.desktopguide.info. Additionally, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's *Model Programs Guide* may be found at ojjdp.gov/mpg. This guide provides an online searchable database of evidence-based interventions and programs for reentry (OJJDP, 2015b). "It is a resource for practitioners and communities about what works, what is promising, and what does not work in juvenile justice, delinquency prevention, and child protection and safety" (Liddell et al., 2014). Another resource is The National Reentry Resource Center at www.csgjusticecenter.org. The Center "provides education, training, and technical assistance to states, tribes, territories, local governments, service providers, nonprofit organizations, and corrections institutions working on offender reentry" (Liddell et al., 2014).

Though these resources are few in number, they are valuable. Continued research will expand these resources for practitioners, giving a clearer answer to the question of what works and what does not.

Future Research

The following additional research is recommended based on the findings in this article. Research is proposed in three areas: the effectiveness of programs and practices, the impact of these programs on desistance or recidivism, and the effect of community-based alternatives on employment outcomes.

Programs and practices. Employability skills must be a major focus of transition planning for reentry. The current resources provided for teaching employability skills are a helpful starting point for practitioners. Continued research will broaden this knowledge base and find the most effective interventions for incarcerated youth, both with and without disabilities. Such studies are the only way to broaden the knowledge base of which programs are truly evidence-based.

Desistance or recidivism. Accurate tracking of the youth who participate in each intervention is a necessary component of future research to follow their employment post incarceration. It is only through these long-term follow-up studies that effectiveness of programs can accurately be measured through recidivism (reoffending) or desistance (discontinuing criminal behavior) of past participants. Current statistics concerning recidivism with rates at 84.2% within three years of release in California, for example, (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2012), stress the importance of monitoring the possible impact of instructional programming. In this regard, it is imperative to know about these vulnerable students' employment experiences. Time to employment, ability to maintain employment, progress toward improved employment circumstances, and future goals are all key factors in the enjoyment, fulfillment, and success of work-life post incarceration for these youth.

Such studies, however, take several years to complete, but useful information is needed now. Tracking the youth who participated in particular programs for any time post incarceration, certainly for years on end, is extremely difficult, but necessary in the long-term. Until solutions are found for these complex challenges, scholars and practitioners must rely on proximal outcomes with a hopeful impact on a distal outcome of employment as a significant factor in reducing recidivism. For this reason, results from short-term studies should be made available regarding evidence-based programs with the potential of long-term analysis to follow later. For now, studies can focus on the efficacy of programs designed to teach competencies in employability skills.

Community-based alternatives. As incarceration falls out of favor and community-based alternatives are more often used for lower-risk youth (Clark, 2014; Deitch, 2014), research is also needed to understand the impact of community-based settings on transition and employability post release. Juvenile justice experts recognize that low-level, non-violent offenders are not a risk to public safety. Thus, supervision in the community instead of incarceration is a more appropriate option, as well as less expensive (Clark, 2014). “Community supervision is also less disruptive to family life, to participation in educational and other community-based programming, and to sustaining employment for those youth who have been able to find a job” (Clark, 2014, p. 72).

The value of community-based alternatives is considerable because they may provide the ability to maintain existing employment or have the option to gain new employment. As discussed previously, employment has a significant effect on preventing future criminal offending (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong, 2010; Berg & Heubner, 2011; Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002; Bushway & Apel, 2012; Justice Policy Institute, 2007). Thus, the effect of community-based alternatives on employment and reoffending needs to be further explored.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the importance of employment post incarceration was discussed. The significant psychological needs of youth entering the juvenile justice system are being addressed with trauma-informed care. Viewing incarceration as a time of rehabilitation rather than punishment for youth is promising. As life course theory explains, the transition from incarceration back in to the community may be the opportunity for substantial life change these youth need. It is, therefore, essential the time spent during incarceration is focused on teaching the skills necessary for successful reentry.

Programs and practices for employability skills were discussed for the three stages of delinquency – before, during, and after incarceration. The importance of these skills cannot be overstated and must be a major focus of transition planning for easing reentry. The resources provided are helpful for practitioners, yet continued research is necessary to find the most effective interventions for incarcerated youth in regard to employability skills. Additionally, the impact of these programs must be evaluated in the long term to understand the effect on desistance or recidivism. Community-based alternatives show great promise in increasing employability of justice-involved youth. Much remains to be examined in these areas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taryn VanderPyl is a doctoral candidate at Claremont Graduate University. She is in the process of completing her dissertation on employability and social skills training for incarcerated youth for the purposes of easing reentry. Prior to joining the PhD program, Taryn was Assistant Director of the iTeachAZ teacher preparation program and on the faculty at Arizona State University. Her earlier experiences as a high school special education teacher and consultant, as well as a foster parent, have contributed to her research interests in the intersection of disability and juvenile justice. Taryn's work on affecting the outcomes of youth in the juvenile justice system has led to participation in numerous academic, behavioral, and reintegration programs in both juvenile and adult correctional facilities. While working toward earning her PhD, she continues to raise awareness on the treatment of youth in the juvenile justice system through national presentations, publications, and social media campaigns.

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