*Research Article*

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# Examining the Black Box of Prison Education Programs: A Descriptive Study of Statewide Correctional Education Practices

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## Abstract

About half of the incarcerated individuals in state prisons reported participating in educational or vocational programming (Harlow, 2003). These programs serve as a way to fill a disparity gap since the prison population tends to have literacy, education, and employment needs. Participation in education programs can positively impact reentry outcomes (e.g., reduced recidivism and increased employment outcomes) (Bozick et al., 2018). However, effective education programs' characteristics remain a black box regarding instructional strategies and classroom practices. This study examined the characteristics of over 200 literacy, general education, vocation/apprenticeship, and college courses across 28 prisons in one state. Interviews, observations, and staff surveys were used to gather data related to leadership, classroom management, and quality assurance practices in prison-based education departments. The results revealed substantial differences across programs and facilities. Implications for future research and opportunities to reduce social disparity through prison education are discussed.

Keywords: Prison education, rehabilitation, corrections

## Introduction

Investing in effective, practical opportunities and activities within a correctional facility communicates a message to the individuals living and working there. The availability of prison-based education programs is one example of a persevering, rehabilitative initiative.

Educational opportunities have existed in prison since the early efforts to *reform* individuals (Gehring & Eggleston, 2007). Additionally, the efforts to educate incarcerated individuals have lasted through the "get tough" era (Phelps, 2011). Prison education represents a cost-effective strategy that can improve the circumstances for individuals and potentially remove some barriers to reentry (Aos & Drake, 2013). Educational opportunities can help individuals attain degrees, gain skills, and learn trades.

There are few widely available programming options for individuals housed in state facilities. Basic education programs are available in most prisons across the U.S. (Harlow, 2003). Prison-based education programs represent a vital opportunity and provide essential skills for incarcerated individuals. Many individuals enter prison with low educational attainment, few employment skills, and, for many, the inability to read and write (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Delaney & Smith, 2019; Greenberg et al., 2007). For some individuals, access to college courses is a benefit only attainable in facilities. Research examining the effectiveness of prison education programs has

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demonstrated that participation may be associated with reduced misconduct and reoffending upon release (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013). Prison-based education programs have the potential to help with reentry and serve as a form of social justice for individuals who have many needs.

**Rehabilitative Focus of Prison Education**

Many state facilities across the U.S. are called "correctional" facilities due to the push for increased rehabilitative efforts in corrections. Additionally, the public supports rehabilitation for individuals involved in the criminal legal system. Public opinion surveys have demonstrated that most U.S. citizens support restoration as a goal for incarcerated individuals (Cullen, 2013; Thielo, 2017). Prison education is a fundamental component of rehabilitation in facilities.

Access to education is a challenge for many individuals inside and outside prison. Some scholars argue that access to education is a right and institutions represent a unique setting where individuals deserve opportunities to educate themselves (Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019). Incarcerated individuals have lower literacy rates than the general public (Greenberg et al., 2007). They tend to enter prison having completed less formal education than the general population (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2007). Finally, incarcerated individuals report higher rates of learning disabilities than the general public. In a national survey, 31% of incarcerated individuals reported having a learning disability, and 43% reported participating in special education classes before incarceration (Gonzalez et al., 2016). These numbers range from 12-22% for the general public (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Prison-based education programs represent an opportunity to reduce some of these disparities and assist with the major needs of a population that will most likely return to their communities.

In addition to filling educational needs gaps, correctional education can potentially increase human capital. Programs that assist with degree attainment and teach new skills can benefit justice-involve individuals in multiple ways. First, education programs provide opportunities to learn, build self-efficacy, practice self-control, and receive feedback for improvement. Additionally, when facility programs work to teach individuals useful skills and trades (e.g., welding, carpentry, commercial driving), this may assist with the reentry process and build opportunities for the future of the unconfined. Many of the individuals returning to their communities struggle with attaining gainful employment upon release. When about 93% of incarcerated individuals likely return to their communities, rehabilitative efforts must focus on bridging the gap between the facility and community returns (Petersilia, 2003). The degrees earned, and skills obtained in prison may contribute to an improved reentry process.

Given the benefits of prison education programs, these programs serve as one opportunity to enhance social justice—relative to mass incarceration—for a population that has experienced many challenges in terms of educational opportunities. Incarcerated individuals tend to enter prison with less formal education than the general public. Only 64% have a high school diploma or equivalency compared to 82% of the general public (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2007). Many incarcerated individuals experienced significant barriers to maintaining the pathway to completing school (e.g., via juvenile incarceration, suspension/expulsion). One example of a barrier to formal education is what is often referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline." This phenomenon is when disciplinary practices used in school systems can push youth out of school, resulting in long-lasting involvement in the criminal legal system and, specifically, incarceration at the juvenile or adult level (Skiba et al., 2014). Efforts to prevent this pattern should be in place to avoid unnecessary placement in prison. However, prison education programs are one way the field can manage some of this disparity after sentencing decisions.

**Existing Research on Prison Education**

Multiple meta-analyses have found that participation in prison education programs is associated with reduced reoffending (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013). Additionally, these programs may be correlated with promising behavioral outcomes (e.g., lower likelihood of engaging in misconduct) while incarcerated (Duwe et al., 2015; Lahm, 2009; Pompoco et al., 2017). The benefits of prison-based education participation may also extend post-release. Some studies have found that participation is associated with increased success with post-release employment outcomes (Saylor & Gaes, 2001; Tyler & Kling, 2007). There are very few studies examining the characteristics of effective education programs. Research in this area has mostly examined the use of technology to assist in prison classrooms (Batchelder & Rachal, 2000; Diem & Fairweather, 1980).

If prison education can serve as an attempt to increase employment opportunities, help with reentry, and reduce disparity among justice-involved individuals, it is important to examine prison education practices. Exploring these programs' characteristics can help us better understand the mechanisms behind a cost-effective, rehabilitative effort. The field should build upon existing programs to identify and expand on effective strategies for reducing recidivism. The area of criminal justice must work to understand the characteristics of prison education. There is a major gap in the foundational knowledge of the challenges/barriers faced by educators, the motivators

for incarcerated individuals, the gaps in services, the investment strategies, the support (or lack thereof) from other prison staff/administrators, and the educational tools implemented for effective programs. The current study adds to the literature examining the specific features of prison education programs.

## Methodology

This study used data from a larger primary source project to explore the impact of participation in prison programs available in one Midwestern state. This study included the education programs and traditional program evaluation procedures (Duriez et al., 2018), which guided data collection efforts. The research question was:

1. What are the similarities and distinctions between the types of prison-based education programs?

## Data

Data collection for the current study lasted between 2011 and 2012. The research team visited each facility for two to five days, depending on the size and scope of programming available. Data was collected through material reviews, direct classroom observation, and interviews with leadership, teachers, and participating incarcerated individuals[1].

The data reflects education programs operating from December 2011 through November 2012. The prison programs included in the current study do not represent all education programs available within the facilities. The programs included in this study were only those that were running at the time of the site visits. The sample consists of data from 25 literacy programs, 65 general education programs, 127 vocation or apprenticeship programs, and 44 college courses.

The facilities where education programs took place included two pre-release centers, one medical center, one maximum security facility, one supermax facility, and 23 facilities housing a range of security levels. Two facilities in the state housed only females, and the medical facility housed both males and females. The remaining 25 facilities housed males only.

Within these facilities, the education departments offer a range of programs. Many facilities provided literacy courses and general education courses. Most general education courses are meant to prepare individuals to take their GED exam. Depending on their level of educational attainment at intake, incarcerated persons possessed, and their score on an assessment exam (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems or CASAS), they were placed into an appropriate general education course (e.g., literacy, ABE, pre-GED, GED). All facilities in the state offer a range of vocation and apprenticeship programs, and they could vary substantially in their procedures. However, some vocational programs have consistent regulations and requirements across the state (e.g., barber, cosmetology, HVAC, CDL). Finally, the college courses are offered by local colleges and universities. Individuals must have a high school diploma or an equivalent to begin taking college courses while incarcerated.

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[1]As a research project overseen by the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board (IRB), consents for participation in the research study were also used.

**Measures**

    The data collection form for the larger study contained five sections, including leadership and support (39 items), staff characteristics and training (35 items), student assessment (13 items), educational practices (76 items), and quality assurance (27 items). This data collection process included over 190 data points (see Pompoco, 2021 for full data collection tool). The leadership and support section provided information related to the leadership, staff supervision practices, ratings of support for the program by various departments in the facility, funding patterns, and resource availability. The staff characteristics and training section includes measurement items related to staff education and experience, hiring practices, staff meetings, performance evaluations, and initial/ongoing training practices. The student assessment items for the subjects include information about the program's eligibility criteria, risk assessment information, and needs and responsivity assessment protocol. The educational practices section is the largest component of the data collection tool, and it includes items related to enrollment numbers, methods/procedures for non-English speaking students, instructor efforts, participation requirements, rules and norms for the classroom, integration of materials, lesson planning, behavior management practices, and skill training. The final section, quality assurance, captures efforts to observe groups and provide feedback, satisfaction surveys, and criteria for program completion. For the current study, a small number of items from each section are included to compare the study variables across programs.

**Results**

T he variation across programs may be due, in part, to the school system regulations related to some classes. For example, literacy and GED prep courses may have more flexibility and discretion over how they run their classes than some vocational courses. Some vocation and apprenticeship programs have specific criteria for completion or hours of supervision for certification (e.g., HVAC). Most instructors have considerable discretion over their classroom (e.g., teaching style, behavior management, activities, lesson plans).

**Table 1**
Program Characteristics: Program Leadership & Support

| Characteristic | Literacy (N=25) | General Education (N=65) | Vocation/ Apprentice. (N=127) | College (N=44) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Funding adequate/operating as designed | 40% | 63.3% | 67.6% | 72% |
| Aides/tutors available for individuals with special needs | 60% | 40% | 9.4% | 18.2% |
| Access to materials/resources | 72% | 84.6% | 46.5% | 75% |

## Program Leadership and Support

The results (Table 1) for the three items from the program leadership and support section demonstrate the variation in program features across literacy, general education, vocation/apprenticeship, and college courses. For example, fewer literacy programs (40%) self-reported adequate funding compared to the other education programs in the sample. Related to the availability of aides or tutors to assist students, this was available in over half of the literacy programs (60%). Still, less than a quarter of vocation/apprenticeship (9.4%) and college courses (18.2%) had this support available. Most of the literacy, general education, and college course reported that they had access to materials and resources for the class. The only exception to this pattern was the vocation/apprenticeship programs. Only 46.5% of vocation/apprenticeship programs reported having access to materials.

## Staff Characteristics and Training

There are quite a few similarities across all prison education programs related to the items in the staff section. First, 85% and 96% of staff in these programs have four or more years of experience working with justice-involved individuals (Table 2). Staffing may, however, reflect hiring and retention patterns across the state's school system. Perhaps this type of experience is important when hiring new instructors in the facilities. Additionally, more than half of the instructors across all kinds of programs reported significant input in the program.

**Table 2**
Program Characteristics: Staff Characteristics & Training

| Characteristic | Literacy (N=25) | General Education (N=65) | Vocation/ Apprentice. (N=127) | College (N=44) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Staff experience with justice-involved individuals | | | | |
| Three years or less | 8.7% | 14.5% | 10.4% | 3.8% |
| Four years or more | 91.3% | 85.5% | 89.6% | 96.2% |
| | | | | |
| Staff's ability to modify the program | | | | |
| No input | 4.3% | 3.2% | 8.5% | 7.1% |
| Limited input | 8.7% | 16.1% | 12% | 21.4% |
| Moderate input | 17.4% | 14.5% | 17.9% | 14.3% |
| Significant input | 69.6% | 66.1% | 61.5% | 57.1% |
| | | | | |
| Staff evaluations completed | 91.3% | 95.1% | 82.7% | 46.2% |
| | | | | |
| Staff receive initial training on de-escalation techniques | 52.6% | 48.1% | 45.7% | 34.8% |

This further demonstrates these instructors' discretion and flexibility over their classes' characteristics. The college courses had somewhat different results than the other programs regarding evaluations and initial training. Less than half (46.2%) of college instructors reported

completing annual evaluations (Table 2). Additionally, only 34.8% of college programs included any initial staff training on de-escalation techniques prior to working in the facilities.

**Student Assessment**

Regarding student assessment practices, most programs reported consistency regarding using eligibility criteria for new students (Table 3). A range of responses to the item reflected matching the student's needs to the program. For example, almost half (45.8%) of the literacy programs reported matching the student's needs to the program. This statistic was the case for only 27% and 23.3% of the general education and college courses, respectively. Only 6.5% of

**Table 3**
Program Characteristics: Student Assessment

| Characteristic | Literacy (N=25) | General Education (N=65) | Vocation/ Apprentice. (N=127) | College (N=44) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eligibility criteria established and followed | 87.5% | 75.8% | 70% | 90.6% |
| There is a match between the program and individual needs | 45.8% | 27% | 6.5% | 23.3% |
| Program aware of individual's risk level upon referral | 0% | 5.7% | 7% | 0% |

the vocation/apprenticeship programs reported the ability to match the individual's needs with the program services available. The vast majority of education programs were completely unaware of the risk level of the individuals in their classes. At the state level, reception centers and facilities must regularly administer an actuarial risk assessment tool measuring each individual's risk of reoffending. However, this assessment information is not shared with the education departments. This is an important finding given the research related to risk levels and the impact of mixing individuals who score at the various levels of risk (Lowenkamp et al., 2006).

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**Table 4**
Program Characteristics: Educational Practices

| Characteristic | Literacy (N=25) | General Education (N=65) | Vocation/ Apprentice. (N=127) | College (N=44) |
|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participants are actively involved in the class | 68.2% | 71.4% | 85% | 71.1% |
| Instructors regularly assign homework | 8.7% | 19% | 49.1% | 73% |
| Classroom rules are established and followed | 70.8% | 78.1% | 78.8% | 68.4% |
| Instructors routinely integrate materials into class | 62.5% | 71.4% | 65.7% | 75.6% |
| Lesson plans developed for each class | 59.1% | 63.3% | 76.7% | 80.8% |
| Rating of rewards/incentives | | | | |
|     Rewards not used | 4.3% | 4.8% | 11.8% | 8.3% |
|     Rewards used sparingly | 47.8% | 23.8% | 25.2% | 27.8% |
|     Moderate use of rewards | 34.8% | 47.6% | 48.7% | 44.4% |
|     Liberal use of rewards | 13% | 22.2% | 14.3% | 16.7% |
| Rating of sanctions | | | | |
|     Sanctions not used | 4.8% | 3.4% | 2.5% | 13.9% |
|     Liberal use of sanctions | 4.8% | - | 1.7% | 2.8% |
|     Moderate use of sanctions | 33.3% | 27.6% | 22.7% | 5.6% |
|     Sanctions used sparingly | 57.1% | 68.9% | 73.1% | 77.7% |
| Students feel the instructors have good rapport | 78.3% | 78.3% | 85.8% | 76.9% |

## Educational Practices

The educational practices section captures several specific teaching styles and classroom management practices across programs (Table 4). The educational practices were similar across program types for some items, while other classroom practices differed substantially across programs. For example, most education programs reported various efforts to keep their students engaged and actively participating in class. However, the reported use of homework assignments varies substantially across the types of programs. Only 8.7% and 19% of literacy and general education programs reported regularly assigning homework to students. About half (49.1%) of vocation/apprenticeship programs and 73% of college classes reported regularly giving homework to their students. Most education programs reported establishing and following classroom rules and reported that they routinely integrated materials into their classrooms. Over half of the literacy programs (59.1%) reported using lesson plans, while 80.8% of college classes created lesson plans for each class.

There are specific rules and procedures related to the use of rewards/incentives and sanctions in each facility but instructors do have some ability to encourage or sanction behaviors in their classrooms. For example, some instructors might have a star chart and when a student completed

their homework assignment they would receive a star on the chart. Related to sanctioning or disapproving of behavior, there may be certain privileges available in the classroom that one might be ineligible to participate in due to misbehavior. The items in Table 4 reflect those rewards and sanctions that are incorporated into the classroom and do not necessarily reflect the facility's response to prosocial and antisocial behavior. For the rewards and incentives used in the program, 47.6% of general education and 48.7% of vocation/apprenticeship programs reported moderate use of rewards. Most of the programs reported using sanctions sparingly. About a third of the literacy and general education programs reported moderate use of sanctions. Finally, related to the item on student-instructor rapport, over three quarters of all programs reported that the students felt the instructors maintained good rapport with them.

**Table 5**
Program Characteristics: Quality Assurance

| Characteristic | Literacy (N=25) | General Education (N=65) | Vocation/ Apprentice. (N=127) | College (N=44) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The class observed by leadership once or more per year | 72% | 73.8% | 63% | 63.6% |
| Student satisfaction captured | 26.1% | 27.3% | 50% | 72.4% |
| Completion criteria outlined by the program | 56.5% | 57.9% | 57.3% | 70.6% |

**Quality Assurance**

The final table (Table 5) reflects efforts to monitor program quality and measure completion objectively. In terms of annual observations from leadership, this was reported in 72% of literacy programs and 73.8% of general education programs. Less of the vocation/apprenticeship programs and college courses reported annual class observations, 63% and 63.6%, respectively. Student satisfaction surveys were reportedly conducted in half of the vocation/apprenticeship programs and 72.4% of the college courses, and only about a quarter of the literacy and general education programs reported capturing student satisfaction upon completion of the program. Over half of the literacy, general education, and vocation/apprenticeship programs reported having completion criteria outlined. About 70% of college courses reported that completion criteria were outlined for students to understand how and what was required to complete the course.

**Findings**

Overall, there were many similarities across the prison-based education programs included in the analyses. A majority of the staff had experience working with the incarcerated population and many reported that they had significant input into how the programs operate. Additionally, most programs had established eligibility criteria and reported that criteria

were consistently used to identify appropriate participants. Across all program types and facilities, few of the staff were aware of the risk level of those participating in the programs. Most of the staff reported that their students were actively participating in the classroom, they routinely integrated new materials, and felt they had appropriate rapport with the participants. These findings suggest that prison-based education programs in the state have several similarities across literacy, general education, vocation, and college classes.

The programs were also unlike one another in multiple ways. For example, tutors were available for individuals with special needs in about half of the literacy and general education programs while less than a quarter of the other programs incorporated this type of support for participants. In addition, staff evaluations were completed less frequently for staff teaching vocation and college courses. In terms of assessment practices, very few of the general education and vocation programs reported appropriate efforts to match individual needs to services. Additionally, homework assignments were frequent in college courses (73%) while less than 10% of literacy programs assigned homework. Finally, about one quarter of the literacy and general education programs captured student satisfaction while half to three quarters of vocation, apprenticeship, and college courses surveyed students.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest some consistency and many differences across the characteristics of the sample of education programs. The results demonstrated similar findings for staff experience, staff input in the program, eligibility criteria, student participation efforts, the rapport between students and instructors, and completion criteria. Literacy and general education programs appeared to have more tutors and aides available to assist students than vocation/apprenticeship and college programs. Staff evaluations and initial training topics tended to vary across the different programs. Additionally, student assessment practices differed substantially across the education programs, with the literacy programs reporting the best match of services to student needs. Homework assignments, classroom rules, and lesson planning varied across the education programs.

One of the results of the current study prompts a larger conversation about the potential overlap between the evidence-based practices for treatment programming and education efforts for justice-involved individuals. The fact that the vast majority of the education programs in this study had no information about individual risk level brings up intriguing practical and theoretical questions. Assessment and subsequent procedures related to the risk level of justice-involved individuals is important for treatment and classification purposes (Andrews et al., 1990). Currently, there are no systems in place to share basic information (beyond education level or reading/writing assessment scores) to instructors or even administrative staff in the education departments in the state. There is no evidence related to the relationship between the principles of effective treatment programs and education procedures for justice-involved individuals. An additional example

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is the result from the student assessment section related to matching individual's needs with services. The matching of an individual's specific criminogenic needs to appropriate services within a prison setting is an important component of "what works" to reduce recidivism (Chamberlain, 2011). Future research should examine these questions in order to enhance educational services in facilities.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when discussing the findings and developing plans for future research. This is a descriptive analysis of a small sample of programs based in only one state. Future research could be expanded across other statewide prison education systems and this may shed light on how these programs may vary across the country. Additionally, there are many items on the data collection form that were not included in the current study.

The results of this study represent some of the early descriptive data on classroom practices in prison. This is a key step in the field of correctional education and efforts to improve some of the disparity for individuals in prison. With increased understanding of prison education programs, scholars and practitioners can identify the areas for improvement and support, areas of strength, and ways to expand the programs for incarcerated individuals. The research supporting the effectiveness of prison education is extensive but there is little known about the mechanisms behind these programs. Few studies have examined the characteristics of prison education programs. Future studies could examine which characteristics are correlated with recidivism and workforce outcomes. Additionally, future research may improve the understanding of how these programs help individuals adjust to incarceration and re-enter communities.

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Prison education programs serve as a low-cost strategy to achieve the rehabilitative goals of correctional facilities. These programs also serve as a small mechanism to help bridge the gap of social disparity and justice. These programs serve individuals who often lack access to quality education or experience significant barriers to achieving academic milestones. When facilities offer educational programming to incarcerated individuals, they are working to improve efforts of social justice.

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