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CRITICAL CROSSROADS

Youth, Criminal Justice and Literacy

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DISCUSSION PAPER

“Reading is the single most important skill that helps youth succeed in life academically, socially, and vocationally.”¹

“Society views education as the pathway to a promised future, but the research indicates that the pathway for those with a history of incarceration is fraught with barriers.”²

“If we believe that all youth should reach age-appropriate social and academic milestones and make successful transitions to post-secondary education, employment, and adulthood, collaboration and communication across the agencies and professionals working with these youth is essential.”³

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“Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.” – UNESCO, 2005

Why discuss literacy and youth in conflict with the law?

Because youth crime has long-term negative consequences for individuals and society; because low literacy is a contributing factor to criminal involvement; and because raising literacy levels can improve outcomes for youth in conflict with the law, their families and communities, and the country as a whole.

In 2008, over 191,000 criminal charges were laid against youth in Canada.⁴ Youth who engage in criminal behavior are at increased risk of bypassing the education, employment, community and family opportunities that will allow them to lead healthy and productive lives. Each incarcerated youth who fails to reintegrate into mainstream society represents Canada’s loss of an engaged and contributing citizen, not to mention a potential employer, entrepreneur, leader or role model. These issues are particularly pressing among Aboriginal youth, who are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system.⁵

Economically, too, the toll is significant. The cost of incarcerating a youth is approximately \$100,000 per year⁶ and it is estimated that an individual with long-term criminal involvement beginning in youth will cost Canadians \$2 million⁷ in legal and judiciary services, community supervision, incarceration, policing and property damage.

Among the many intersecting factors that characterize youth in conflict with law, and impact their ability to successfully reintegrate, literacy has been shown to play an important role. Studies demonstrate that youth in conflict with the law commonly have challenges with literacy.

The good news is that studies show literacy programming can be a successful component in preventing criminal involvement for youth, for reducing criminal involvement for youth already involved in crime, and for increasing employment and reducing recidivism in offenders. It is in the belief that literacy is a vital part of

Language problems and behavioural problems appear to be interconnected;⁸ children with language difficulties are at risk for antisocial behaviour as they get older, and are more likely to be involved in crime as youth and adults.⁹

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In the UK, 51% of incarcerated youth scored below Level One on the Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment, and 57% of young offenders released into the community also scored below Level One.¹⁰

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In the US, young offenders generally read below their expected level, typically at grade levels ranging from one to six.¹¹

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While insufficient data is available for youth in conflict with the law in Canada (see “Challenges” on page 4), we do know that two-thirds of adult federal offenders in Canada did not complete high school, and that 70% of them read below the grade 8 level.¹²

transformative change for youth in conflict with the law that this discussion paper is presented.

Getting the discussion started

This paper is intended to ignite critical discussion and future planning for effective and measurable literacy programming for youth in conflict with the law in Canada. To support this discussion, the paper presents an overview of:

- existing programming
- available research and research gaps
- measurements of programming success; and
- promising practices.

It is hoped that by encouraging a critical lens and constructive dialogue, we might enhance holistic and coordinated services and programming for criminally involved youth in Canada, whether before, during or after incarceration.

This discussion paper complements a separate extensive review of the Canadian, British and American literature on the interconnected topics of youth, justice and literacy, which is available to readers who seek more detail.



What do we mean by Literacy?

Defining literacy is an ongoing and evolving task. UNESCO offers a good starting point, defining literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.”¹³

What do we mean by Youth?

Canada’s *Youth Criminal Justice Act* defines a young person as at least 12 years old and younger than 18 years old. However, many non-profit and government services that support youth in conflict with the law use a broader range to define youth, from 12 years old to some point in the twenties.

“The jury is in on the relationship between corrections education and recidivism. Every student that graduates from high school, learns vocational skills, and learns to learn, represents one person less likely to return to some type of correctional setting.... We simply cannot afford to leave these students out.”¹⁴

Challenges

Factors that have impeded or frustrated literacy programming for youth in conflict with the law in Canada, the UK and the USA include the following:

Although literacy programming in a correctional institution can increase literacy levels for youth, removal from family, community and school is a disruption that can slow or block learning.¹⁵

Disruptive institutional routines may also diminish the effectiveness of literacy programming.

Young offender centres may have inadequate resources to offer effective programming.¹⁶

Academic records may be difficult to obtain for youth in conflict with the law, creating bureaucratic obstacles.

Emotional and behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, and other disabilities are common amongst youth in conflict with the law and must be assessed and accommodated.¹⁷

Many youth in conflict with the law have experienced violence, which is a complicating factor known to affect and create resistance to learning.¹⁸

A significant number of youth in conflict with the law may have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, but little research or programming documentation addressing this issue is available.

Uncoordinated efforts by multiple agencies create fragmented, less effective support for youth.¹⁹

Supports in the community after incarceration are vital to continued literacy and employment success,²⁰ but many youth may lack these supports, hampering their ability to reintegrate into the community.²¹

Gaps in research on literacy and youth in conflict with the law in Canada also present challenges to the development of holistic and coordinated literacy programming.

- ✚ Many years, geographies, populations and programs have not yet been documented. US and UK literature can illustrate opportunities for further research in Canada.
- ✚ Existing Canadian research is in the form of statistical surveys and local project reports. These sources do not rely on uniform collection or interpretation methods, making it impossible to compare data in a standardized manner.
- ✚ Aboriginal youth and other minority youth are overrepresented in the criminal justice system,²² but there is a significant gap in research that focuses on literacy and criminal involvement among these populations.

Promising directions

We know that effective literacy programming can help youth in conflict with the law build the learning and life skills that allow for reintegration into the community and prevent recidivism.²³ We also know that there are significant challenges to delivering such programming. But existing research and proven best practices also point out several promising directions.

- 1) Employment training is an important element in literacy programming for youth in conflict with the law. It creates more incentive to participate and leads to employment opportunities and decreased recidivism.²⁴ Embedding literacy activities within vocational training can be an effective strategy.
- 2) Cooperation of all services is vital to holistic success for youth interacting with these services.²⁵ Anecdotal evidence shows that case conferencing appears to be a strategic way to coordinate services and supports for youth in conflict with the law in a timely manner.
- 3) Successful interventions are strategic, tailored to each individual learner's needs and circumstances, and account for the self-direction of the learner.²⁶ Initial assessment to determine each individual's reading level, abilities, strengths and interests, as well as weaknesses and needs, allows for effective individualized instruction.



Promising directions, cont'd

- 4) Response to Intervention (RtI) is a specific measurement tool gaining in popularity among educators. It involves screening all students to identify those who need specific interventions, providing increasingly intensive interventions to those who need them, and regularly evaluating each intervention for its effectiveness.²⁷ This can be considered a framework for decision-making in which students can be identified as needing more intensive academic instruction or a behavioural intervention.²⁸
- 5) Short term, intensive literacy programming can be effective. This is encouraging for young offender centres and open custody group homes where youth may be only resident for a matter of days, weeks or months.²⁹
- 6) One-on-one and small group (less than five participants) instruction appears to be an effective way of teaching reading skills.³⁰ Teaching assistants or tutors can complement traditional instruction, providing valuable one-on-one support. Peer tutoring can be effective for reading practice.³¹
- 7) The Corrective Reading Program, designed for students with low reading levels, and focusing on decoding and improving comprehension skills, appears to be a useful reading intervention for youth in conflict with the law who struggle to read at their grade level.³²
- 8) Young offenders may be from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Educators in correctional settings can use a literacy framework that is culturally responsive and that helps students make connections between what they already know and what they are learning.³³
- 9) Measurement of outcomes is an important part of successful literacy programming so that educators, funders and policy-makers can measure the success of programming. Measurements of outcomes are often not well documented or not documented at all for literacy programming for youth in conflict with the law. Reading interventions should be evaluated for success using empirically based research methods. This ensures that the programming is evaluated for success rather than ease or fashion.³⁴

Plotting a roadmap:

Literacy solutions for youth in conflict with the law

Critical Crossroads: Youth, Criminal Justice and Literacy, convened in June 2012 by Frontier College, brings together experts and professionals in the intersecting fields of education, social services, corrections and community development.

Together, forum participants across the country will envision and explore:



- a holistic literacy strategy that supports at-risk youth and those involved in the criminal justice system to build their skills and capacities, and become full members of society;
- the features and characteristics necessary to the success of such a strategy;
- the key gaps and challenges in the current literacy landscape for at-risk youth and those who are criminally involved; and
- ways the justice system, schools, governments, police, communities and others can work together and complement each other to leverage literacy as part of a coherent solution to this issue.

Starting from the position that literacy is critical to both the reduction and prevention of criminal involvement for young people, this discussion paper is a call to action for **holistic and coordinated services and programming** for criminally involved youth in Canada, whether before, during or after incarceration.

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¹ Leone et al., 2005, p.239

² Alfred & Chlup, 2009. p.246

³ Leone & Weinberg, 2010, p.48

⁴ Milligan, 2010, p.5

⁵ Prison Justice Day Committee, 2011, p.2

⁶ Boys and Girls Club of Canada, 2009, p.4; St. Thomas University Centre for Research on Youth At Risk, 1998

⁷ Boys and Girls Club of Canada, 2009, p. 3

⁸ Van Daal et al., 2007; Sanger et al., 2007; Benner et al., 2002

⁹ Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000 and Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2004

¹⁰ Hurry et al., 2009, p. 261

¹¹ O'Cummings et al., 2010, p.2

¹² Boe, 1998

¹³ UNESCO, 2005, p.18

¹⁴ Kolhoff, 2002, p. 45

¹⁵ Wilson, 2010

¹⁶ Coulter, 2004, p. 322

¹⁷ Leone et al, 2002; Drakeford 2002; Harris et al., 2009

¹⁸ Horsman, 2004

¹⁹ Leone & Weinberg, 2010

²⁰ Hobley, 2002; Cole, Price & Patterson, 2006; Conlon et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2010

²¹ Leone & Weinberg, 2010, p.17

²² Murphy, Chittenden, & The McCreary Centre Society, 2005; Prison Justice Day Committee, 2011; Foss & Latimer, 2004

²³ Brunner, 1993; Leone et al., 2002; Powrie & Spruck Wrigley, 2006

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²⁸ Nelson et al., 2010, p.73

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