

Christian Based Adult Education for Justice Involved Individuals

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential for the transformational adult development of justice-involved individuals through the application of Christian principles combined with the transformative learning, spiritual, and narrative learning theories noted in Merriam (2020). Additionally, the study addresses literacy deficiencies within incarceration systems, their link to crime and recidivism, and possible educational tools to improve these deficiencies. The study probes first-person narratives and independent studies of justice-involved individuals suffering from a lack of resources which resulted in corrosion of moral decision making and fostered criminal and antisocial behavior, which ultimately caused their incarceration. It examines the process of transformation, both educational and spiritual, within the lives of these individuals and the decisions they made to withdraw permanently from criminal behavior and become contributing members of society.

Additionally, this study examines the issues surrounding illiteracy within incarceration systems and its possible relationship to recidivism. Based on the research, this study proposes that these problems could be significantly reduced using diagnostic testing and innovative education programs and that the social cost for not providing alternative educational programs outweighs the cost of implementing quality educational programs within incarceration facilities.

Introduction

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Faith in Christ

Merriam acknowledges the importance of spirituality in education and a variety of pathways to build spirituality into our lives.

It distinguishes spirituality from religion with the following "Spirituality, however, is more personal belief and experience of divine spirit or higher purposes, about how we construct meaning, and what we individually and communally experience and attend to and honor as the sacred in our lives" (Merriam, 2020, pp. 246-247). This study explicitly examines Christianity as the foundation for transformative living both spiritually, professionally, and in educational growth.

Christianity, primarily based on the first five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), has been the spiritual, political, social, and constitutional foundation for Western Europe and the Americas for the last millennium. It remains the world's largest religion "with approximately 2.5 billion followers" (CountryMeters, 2022). The Ten Commandments and other major tenants of the Bible have been the backbone of the United States Constitution, our laws, systems of capitalism, our jurisprudence, and social structures. The most important of these commandments, born from Jewish wisdom literature, is to:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:5, NIV),

and,

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving

you today for your own good? To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. (Deut. 10:12-22, NIV),

and

In all things in life place the love and worship of God first before all earthly things, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Col. 3:2, NIV)

Christ, The Son of God came to forgive the sins of mankind through Grace, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17, NIV), and "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4, NIV). This system of governance has helped create one of the most powerful countries in the world, the United States of America. These principles guide Christian servant leaders working within prison ministry as they seek to assist those who have fallen through healing and transformation.

Incarceration In the U.S.

There are presently 6.34 million people in the adult correctional population, which is down from 7.34 million in 2007 (Statista, 2022). The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Many of these statistics are poverty, lack of resources, gangs, mental illness, and addiction. Most crimes involve substance abuse issues. More troubling is that 89% of all justice-involved individuals will return to prison within nine years of their release. The financial cost to society is high. "Based on F.Y. 2020 data, the average annual COIF for a Federal inmate in a Federal facility in F.Y. 2020 was \$39,158 (\$120.59 per day)" (Prisons Bureau, 2021). Incarceration often leads to divorce, which splits families apart, leaving the children of those incarcerated more vulnerable. Within these statistics lies a more disturbing finding: many prisoners suffer from illiteracy. In a 2000 study done by K. C. Moody, et al, *Prevalence of*

Dyslexia among Texas inmates, "Approximately 80% of prison inmates are reported to be functionally illiterate" (p. 69). Within this percentage sits another striking statistic demonstrating that nearly 48% of those incarcerated had Dyslexia. "We found that 47.8% of the inmates were deficit in word attack skills" (p. 69). UNESCO defines illiteracy as a person who cannot "with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life," and "a person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (UNESCO, 2022). If an illiterate individual is imprisoned without addressing the illiteracy, they will, at bare minimum, be released back into society with the same problems and therefore have a higher tendency to be re-incarcerated.

Concurrently, there exists a misperception within the American culture that immigration increases crime levels. "For example, the 2000 General Social Survey reported that approximately 73% of Americans believe immigration causes higher crime rates (Alba et al., 2005), whereas the 2015 Gallup poll showed that 39% of Americans' worry a great deal' about illegal immigration (McCarthy, 2015)" (Wolff, Intravia, Baglivio, & Piquero, 2018, p. 1272). However, this concern is unwarranted and may be due to cultural portrayals of immigrants in American culture. "The consensus that immigration is unrelated or inversely related to crime has been found in studies examining adults, adolescents, and reoffending behavior among delinquent youth (Kubrin & Desmond, 2015)" (pg. 1272). In Kevin T. Wolff's and Jonathan Intravia's study *The Protective Impact of Immigrant Concentration on Juvenile Recidivism: A Multilevel Examination of Potential Mechanisms*, we learn that within the cultural traits of immigrants lies a natural protectant against incarceration and delinquent youth. "The consensus that immigration

is unrelated or inversely related to crime has been found in studies examining adults, adolescents, and reoffending behavior among delinquent youth (Kubrin & Desmond, 2015)" (p.1272).

It is also worth noting that recidivism in youth is reduced due to a two-parent family structure and low divorce rates (Wolff et al., 2018, p. 1279):

Scholars highlight that immigrants are more likely to have two-parent households and lower divorce rates, which reduces family disruption – a well-known correlate of criminal behavior (Kubrin & Desmond, 2015; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009). Furthermore, intact family structures (i.e., two-parent households) may correspond to stronger family cultural orientations emphasizing hard work and educational attainment (Portes, 1995).

Prison systems have recently adopted digital tablets, enabling prisoners to study various subjects, including digital skill training, coding, and finance. However, if a justice-involved individual is functionally illiterate, they will first need to address the causes behind the illiteracy. This intervention could be done through tablet technology but has not to date been deployed. Two educational theories examined in Merriam's book *Learning in Adulthood*, that have shown success in incarceration systems and would benefit from tablet technology are transformative learning and spiritual and narrative learning. These theories combined with Christian ethics and principles have led to reformative outcomes among justice-involved individuals, as we will see later in this study.

Transformational Theories, Narrative Learning and Christian Principles

In Christian Bolden's book, *Out of the Red: My Life of Gangs, Prison, and Redemption*, we observe the turning point of a man invested in a life of gangs and crime toward a life of Christian living. This transformation includes turning to Christ and utilizing narrative storytelling and critical thinking skills to proceed through that transformation. "Mezirow defines

learning as 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (2000, p. 5). He differentiates between types of meaning structures, including frame of reference, habits of mind, and points of view" (Merriam, 2020, p. 169). Christian Bolden narrates his story transparently and painfully. Bolden begins with his upbringing and life of crime, his time in Texas prisons, and his transformation to becoming a productive member of society and a leader and mentor to others. Looking back on his childhood and life of poverty, he states, "I would eventually find that I was no match for the socio-environmental factors arrayed against me" (Bolden, 2020, p. 7). The constant battle between financial resources and being shuttled into slow-learner classes took its toll on him.

He dealt with his status failure by joining a gang at 14. Eventually, Bolden was imprisoned after leading a drive-by shooting revenge scheme. Luckily no one was killed - only injured. He received an eight-year prison sentence, one year for every shot he fired, and he fully believed his life was over.

Once inside, Bolden learned that prisons are the corporate stronghold of gangs. Bolden writes (2020, p. 100):

Most of the incoming prisoners were very young, 17to 19-year-old violent offenders with extremely long sentences. Many of these kids, who were just like me, would never be free again. Even if their sentence was short enough for them to have some hope of getting out, it seemed just as likely that they would not make it, as prison gangs would swallow them up.

Bolden joined a gang in prison. Inside these tin Texas warehouses, without air-conditioning, violence and riots were a daily occurrence. After suffering through countless prison

raids and apocalyptic gang wars, Bolden finally saw the banality of violence and turned toward Christianity's peace. He wanted to "understand why terrible things happened, and what, if anything, I could do about them" (2020, p. 101). Through the faithful and dedicated help of Christian prison ministry staff and volunteers, he learned how to reinterpret his life in gangs and move forward. However, after five years of incarceration Bolden states that despite his transformation to a Christian, he lacked many of the appropriate skills needed to be successful in society (p. 157):

One of the things that gets lost in the drive to punish is that the incarceration of youth may arrest their psychosocial maturity. Becoming an adult meant competently mastering participation in society, having the appropriate social skills to create and maintain healthy relationships, having a positive sense of self-worth, and having the competence to independently set and attain personal goals. This was a tall order for someone who had reached the age of maturity in the Texas adult prison system.

Bolden would eventually serve his sentence and spend three years on parole with an electronic monitoring bracelet. Reentry is difficult for justice-involved individuals, but Bolden persevered and gained an M.A. in Sociology, becoming a teacher. Merriam states that "transformative or transformational learning is about change-dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (2020, p. 166). It is clear that Bolden's life story is an example of that transformative learning process in which he brought together Christian principles of Grace, love, and forgiveness and employed a narrative approach through his book, writing *Out of the Red: My Life of Gangs, Prison, and Redemption* to gain a new perspective on his former life of gangs and his new life as a Christian teacher. Faith-based prison

programs provide opportunities for the justice-involved to turn their and their family's lives around for good (Leary, 2018, p. 3):

Johnson (2011) reviewed 273 studies published between 1944 and 2010 investigating links between crime/delinquency variables and religiosity variables, finding that 90% of the studies revealed an inverse relationship between the two variables – leading him to conclude that a "faith-based program combining education, work, life skills training, mentoring, and aftercare ... [can] influence in a paradigm-shifting way the prisoner reentry process ... with the expectation that this approach will substantially enhance achieving the secular and correctional goal of rehabilitation" (pp. 116, 121).

Merriam states that "To the extent that spirituality is about meaning-making, it can be argued that it has a place in adult learning" (2020, p. 251).

Bringing the principles of spirituality, critical thinking, and transformation together "Participants...are transformed in terms of how they see the world, how they see their own identities, and how they see their role in the world" (Charaniya, 2012, p. 238, as cited in Merriam, 2020, p. 251).

Transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in one of our beliefs or attitudes (a meaning scheme), or a transformation of our entire perspective (habit of mind) (Mezirow, 2012). Transformative learning, says Mezirow, is "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22) (*italics in the original*). Through transformative learning, we are freed from uncritical acceptance of others' purposes, values, and beliefs. (Merriam, 2020, p.169)

Bolden also employed critical thinking skills as he continually faced problems during incarceration and upon release. The parole process itself is fraught with opportunities for failure. Kathy Boudin states in her study *Critical Thinking in a Basic Literacy Program: A Problem-Solving Model in Corrections Education*, "Inmates in correctional facilities face a multitude of problems that begin with the decisions and acts that led to their incarceration. The choices they made or did not make, the consequences they face, their own internal world, and their social reality all become part of the need for critical understanding" (1995, p. 141). Mezirow states the following regarding the transformation process, "The learner must critically self-examine the assumptions and beliefs that have structured how the experience has been interpreted. This sets in motion a revision of "specific assumptions about oneself and others until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 8, as cited in Merriam, 2020, p.169). Bolden used critical thinking to sort through the myriad problems he faced once he became incarcerated and through the countless obstacles he faced upon his release. Similarly, in a particular example, Jonah, a prisoner who attended Wheaton College, a Christian-based college offering a superior selection of services, training certificates, and degrees for correctional ministries, was able to attend Wheaton College through their prisoner scholarship program. He makes this statement about his experience (Leary, 2018, p. 6):

And so over the course of those years at school I learned how to love people. And I think that was probably the most important thing that I took away from it, that I was able to learn to love people and to let people love me in return. And to let it be genuine without thinking that there was some strings attached, which in my former community [the drug subculture], there was always something attached to it.

Illiteracy Issues in Incarceration

Illiteracy poses a problematic feature to incarceration and its relationship to recidivism. Elizabeth Tighe, Deborah Reed, Lee Branum-Martin, and Nonyé A. O. Nwosu (Israel) state in their study *Examining Correlates of PIAAC Literacy and Passage Comprehension Performance Among the U.S. Adult Prison Population*, that "roughly 44 million people could be expected to struggle with understanding basic vocabulary and identifying single pieces of information in short texts typically encountered in daily life. In practical terms, these adults would have difficulty reading medicine or nutrition labels..." (p. 3). Additionally, they point out that (p. 3):

As sobering as the picture of literacy is for U. S. adults in general, those who are incarcerated tend to fare worse. About one-third of participating inmates performed at or below a Level 1 proficiency on the PIAAC Literacy assessment, a proportion that did not differ between those taking the test while incarcerated for the first time or after having recidivated (Rampey et al., 2016).

With 89% of prisoners returning to prison within nine years of release, we as a society need to look at the potential causes of these failures. While prisoners may be rehabilitated and fully transformed through faith-based mentoring programs, they will likely fail in open society if they cannot read.

Digital skill sets are now a requirement in almost all fields, and until very recently, these skill sets were out of reach of prisoners. Tighe et al.'s study states (p. 36):

According to Patterson (2019), approximately 87% of state and federal prisons have some type of educational program (e. g., adult basic education, high school equivalency courses); however, a very small percentage of inmates are actually enrolled in educational programming. Thus, it is imperative to increase participation in prison

educational programs, as evidence suggests that correctional education helps reduce recidivism rates and increase the likelihood of post-incarceration employment (e. g. , Davis et al., 2013; MacKenzie, 2006).

Dyslexia is one such learning disorder. There is a disproportionately high percentage of Dyslexia in prison populations. And yet, (p. 424):

One significant personal risk factor that has been consistently related (casually or correlatively) to antisocial or criminal conduct in adolescence and adulthood is learning disabilities (L.D.; Zabel & Nigro, 2001).

L.D. negatively affect reading comprehension, writing skills, organizational skills, time management, arithmetic, perception, and problem solving (Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000). Inadequate or lack of sufficient educational and emotional support for learning-disabled, intelligent individuals and/or incorrect diagnosis of L.D. may create pessimistic attitudes in learning disabled persons toward reading (Richek, List, & Lerner, 1989) and school (Lazarus & Callahan, 2000), as well as negative stigmatization and harassment by non-learning-disabled peers (Seeman, 1999). These scenarios may consequently initiate a long and repeated process of failures (mainly in school) and result in feelings of frustration and low self-esteem (Einat & Einat, 2006).

There is also a correlation between learning disorders such as Dyslexia and dropping out of school early. Dropping out of school is often a springboard into early lives of crime. (Einat & Einat, 2015, p. 433):

Explicitly, a more significant percentage of participants with L.D., compared with those without L.D., dropped out of school early and began their criminal activity at a relatively young age. A similar correlation was found between low education level and the onset of

criminal activity, indicating that those who dropped out of school early also began their criminal activity at an earlier age.

The tragic loss of lives and productivity resulting from these oversights is expressed well in the following statement. (Einat & Einat, 2015, p. 439):

I., a 27-year-old inmate, serving a 6-year term of incarceration, illustrates this state of affairs:

I am positive that my life would have looked different ... would have looked thousand times different than today if I would have studied. If I achieved today ... with all my ideas and potential ... 1 out of a million of what I could have achieved in life, then think what I could have done if I only knew how to read and write. I believe I would have become a professor or a lawyer ... I am smart enough, I have a good head (clever) on my shoulders ... I have all these thoughts. I would have become something completely different. But then, no one taught me how to read and write ... no one helped me. I did not have the tools ... so I dropped out.

Former prisoner Dirk van Velzen proactively started the Prison Scholar Fund to assist prisoners with education inside and outside prison (Ishisaka, 2022). Partnering with new funders, he has started an offshoot called Coding Dojo. This "Prison Scholar Fund is sending formerly incarcerated students to a full-stack development boot camp, free of charge, to gain skills in computer programming. (A full-stack developer focuses on both the client and the server-side of an application)" (Ishisaka, 2020).

Taylor, one of the participants of this program states "for every \$1 spent on education for incarcerated people, there is a \$20 savings in return and that given nearly all people are

eventually released, it just makes sense – for everyone – to provide training and job opportunities" (Ishisaka, 2021). Taylor's life was transformed. He states:

It's really about realizing that people can change and turn their lives around, and that these individuals who are in prison will be coming back into our communities, they will be our neighbors, and so the more we can do to ensure that they are successful and contributing members of our communities, then the better off we all will be.

Personal adult transformation success stories show that interventions work when done correctly and early. Einat's and Einat's study states that prison systems (2022, p. 442): Should develop and administer a screening assessment process to identify inmates with L.D. In addition, it should provide education programs designed to meet the specific needs and characteristics of prisoners with L.D., as well as intensive training and professional cooperation with prison staff on working with inmates who have L.D.

In a final statement from a student at Wheaton College's program prison scholarship program, Jonah states (Leary, 2018, p. 6):

I have an understanding of [God] because someone else helped me get it, so ... I think I'll die trying to help other people get a better understanding of ... ultimate truth ... Maybe I will go out one day and minister to a homeless guy and he'll remove himself from the streets, and become a disciple and then go disciple ... It's far-fetched, but it's like, when people have purpose, I just think their response is different, and you need educated people to actually give it to them – the blind can't lead the blind.

Summary

As discussed in this study, there is a strong link between illiteracy, crime and recidivism. Additionally, there is a clear link between transformative and embodied spiritual learning in

incarceration systems and success stories. Prisoners can learn to turn away from the influences and temptations that led to their incarceration and, through the use of narrative learning and self-directed learning techniques (SLD), begin to rebuild their identities based on Christian faith and become productive members, if not leaders in society. Prisoners transformed through their hard work, and the Holy Spirit working through dedicated faith-based volunteers, have succeeded in freeing themselves from their lives of crime and the stigma of imprisonment. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;" (Eph. 4:22, NIV)

Moody notes that the costs involved in implementing corrective programs for prisoners are high, but "building more prisons, hiring more police, and toughening our laws have still failed to prevent crime" (2000, p. 74). Back in 2000, when Moody's study was written, she believed there were no "shortcuts" to teaching people to read. However, with the onset of remote education, and the inclusion of tablets within prison populations, that shortcut may have arrived in the 21st Century. App development and A.I. can be leveraged to reach out and into prisons remotely using tablets that could be used to diagnose, teach, the skill sets required to become an educated and valuable member of society. Apps such as Speechify written by a person with Dyslexia can assist prisoners who cannot read. The use of new technology holds great promise for delivering the much-needed diagnostic tools and teaching programs that have hitherto been financially unfeasible.

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