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Research Report: The Academic Wellness and Educational Success of Juvenile Offender Learners in a Gauteng Correctional School

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Why this Study?

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) embarked on a social justice campaign by focusing on education as one element that might transform the lives and the behaviour of juveniles who are incarcerated. There are formal registered schools in correctional centres in South Africa. Programmes offered by the DCS are Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Levels 1–4. These are aimed at preparing offenders for Grades 10–12. Higher education and training, vocational skills, computer skills, and basic occupational skills are also offered (DCS, 2012). According to the DCS, these programmes are designed to equip prisoners with the necessary skills to facilitate effective living in society after release. South Africa is following in the footsteps of countries like Norway, Serbia, and Cuba where education for prisoners has been made compulsory (Jovanic, 2011; Manger, Eikeland, Diseth, Hetland, & Asbjørnsen 2010). Most officials dealing with juveniles in correctional centres are not trained to deal with juveniles (Muntingh & Ballard, 2012). For a successful educational programme to take place there is need for a conducive environment, innovative programmes, and better-trained staff (Jovanic, 2011). If these are lacking, then the educational programme cannot be effective for social change.

There is a need to explore how South African correctional schools are run and how teachers enhance the wellness dimensions of juvenile offenders so that upon release they are smoothly reintegrated into society. The attainment of wellness dimensions in an individual is crucial as they enable him or her to recognise the importance of interdependence, working together, and creating harmony in his or her society (Schaffer, 2000). As an academic involved in teacher training programmes, I was interested in seeing how juvenile offender learners' academic wellness is. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners in a correctional school in order to find ways in which learners' academic wellness can further be supported and enhanced.

The research questions for the project were:

- What is the context that might support the academic wellness and educational success of juvenile offender learners?
- How can one intervene in supporting teachers in enhancing the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners?

What Theory Did I Use to Explain my Findings?

The study is theoretically underpinned by Hettler's (2000) wellness model. The wellness model has six dimensions, namely, physical, academic, emotional, social, career, and spiritual. These dimensions are interlinked and while one may influence the other dimensions, the current report focuses only on the academic wellness dimension. Academic wellness focuses on one's abilities and performance. The model has enabled me to study the context that might support correctional centre schools so that their wellness and educational successes are enhanced. I also used an African lens of ubuntu in looking at how academic wellness is enhanced. Muntingh and Monaheng (1998, p. 13), Oduro (2006), and Regoli and Hewitt (1994, p. 144) pointed out that African families took collective responsibility for one another and, in some rural areas, this is still happening. For social change, the lens was appropriate in ensuring that I explored how juvenile offenders attain educational success and how teacher educators from University of South Africa (Unisa) can help teachers apply ubuntu to support learners in their teaching. During data collection, I wanted to find out if academic wellness and educational success would be achieved if ubuntu was used in teaching and learning engagements.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Phase 1

The study is embedded within an interpretive paradigm (Henning, van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004) because it is concerned with the meaning of the lived experiences of the correctional teachers and juveniles (Creswell, 2007; Henning et al., 2004). The research design of the study was qualitative. I used action research as an approach, which requires cycles of action and reflection (Reason & Bradbury, 2009). Ethical clearance was sought and granted from the University of South Africa, the Department of Correctional Services, and the research site, which was a correctional centre school in Gauteng province. Sampling was purposive because only teachers and juveniles participated. Only five teachers and 11 juvenile offender learners participated in the study. The analysis of data collected from the interview process of the teachers and juvenile offender learners was by coding, compiling similar information into cluster groups, and categorising information by identifying similarities, differences, and recurring regularities into emergent themes (Creswell, 2007; Henning et al., 2004).

What Did I Find Out?

Research Question 1: What is the context that might support the academic wellness and educational success of juvenile offender learners?

The correctional school in Gauteng had inadequate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and books were carried from one class to another. This created a problem when it came to homework completion. There were no teaching aids on the walls of classrooms and this was a challenge for juvenile offender learners in ABET Levels 1 and 2 in particular, because most of them could not read or write. Although the library had materials for learners to read, juvenile offender learners identified a lack of books with information on different careers. Some days, schools started at 8:30 and by 11:00, juveniles were sent back to their cells, whereas other days classes would be held from 8:30 to 14:00. The learners who loved to be at school, aspired to have longer school hours.

The school had teachers who were overloaded due to a shortage of qualified teachers. Two teachers were security guards who loved to teach juvenile offender learners. Because the teachers were overloaded, the teaching was compromised in most subjects and teaching hours were reduced.

Findings indicated that there was a high dropout rate. Teachers said that bad influences emanated from the cells where learners meet offenders who do not attend school. Juvenile offender learners lacked motivation to attend school. For 2 years, the school had had a 0% pass rate in Grade 12 due to lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and other factors. It was clear from the findings that teachers had the zeal to support juvenile offender learners and that they always showed ubuntu by, for example, giving incentives like deodorant or bath soap for a good performance—but the limitations were there. The academic wellness and educational success of juvenile offenders were not attained even though educators showed ubuntu. The findings prompted the researcher to intervene in supporting teachers in enhancing the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners.

Phase 2

Research Question 2: How can one intervene in supporting teachers in enhancing the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners?

Based on the findings regarding the academic wellness and educational success of juvenile offender learners, I decided to engage in discussions with the school personnel, department of correctional services officials, and academics from Unisa in order to find ways in which we could further support and enhance the academic wellness of learners in the correctional school. The purpose of the intervention was to respond to some of the issues learners and teachers identified for enhancing the academic wellness of learners. The academics used the ubuntu principle in supporting teachers in their teaching and pedagogic content knowledge. The academics addressed the tuition part and paired themselves with teachers of certain subjects from ABET Levels 1–4 and Grades 10–12. The intervention team visited the correctional school once a month and were in classrooms from 9:00 to 14:00. Some lessons were offered by lecturers from Unisa in the presence of teachers from the correctional school. Teaching methods used by teachers at the correctional school were adjusted and the use of teaching aids was suggested. On some days, teachers would teach in the presence of lecturers after which there would be some discussions. In addition to usual teaching, subjects like life orientation included group counselling sessions with a qualified educational psychologist from the Unisa team who taught juveniles about self-awareness and other topics that were geared toward change of behaviour and attitude. There were also some motivational sessions about the importance of education. The exercise was carried out for 2 years. The principal, together with the teachers, decided on involving parents in the education of juvenile offender learners and parents days were held once a year where parents visited the classrooms and viewed learners' work in the presence of subject teachers and lecturers from Unisa. Teachers phoned Unisa lecturers for assistance so that their teaching would improve. At the end of the second year, the pass rates of Grade 12 learners at the correctional school centre improved significantly from 0% to 100%.

Significance for Social Change

The ubuntu principle applied by Unisa staff members was a major contribution over a period of 2 years in changing the atmosphere at a correctional school. The teachers, principal, and juvenile offender learners were willing to receive support in the teaching and learning activities. It was a sacrifice for the Unisa team that every month they should spend approximately five hours at a correctional school to address the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners. Although the focus was on teaching and learning, other wellness dimensions were indirectly addressed through group counselling where issues of self-awareness, anger management, study skills, and time management were addressed. The involvement of parents contributed positively to the endeavours extended by the Unisa team to the correctional school. Parents were forgiving to their children and appreciated the changes they saw in the learning of their children. Ubuntu calls for collective support and oneness in the community. In promoting academic wellness, teachers needed the support of academics and parents to support the juvenile offender learners. Although it took 2 years to see an improvement in the academic wellness of juvenile offender learners, it is pleasing to note that

ubuntu and the support rendered through collective effort brought a change in a correctional school. The 100% Grade 12 pass rate encouraged learners that even though they were incarcerated it was possible to do well and conquer past failures in life. Success academically is a positive element for social change within the correctional centre context. Some juvenile offender learners were encouraged to study further with tertiary institutions. The chances are high that there will be social change, and the cycle of reoffending broken, if one is succeeding educationally. Positive academic wellness may be one way of bringing social change in contexts where people were the perpetrators of crime.

Conclusion

The study clearly revealed that for a correctional centre school to attain academic wellness and educational success, partnership is necessary with other stakeholders who have the know-how of dealing with learners in various contexts. The ubuntu element shown by teachers in a correctional school and academics from the University of South Africa yielded positive results after a period of 2 years where all the Grade 12 candidates managed to pass. Academic wellness and educational success is dependent on several factors that will enable an individual to learn and achieve the set goals. For social change to occur, especially in correctional settings, networking with relevant stakeholders is a key factor. Society at large should support correctional personnel and offenders to enable a smooth reintegration into the society upon release. The ubuntu principles of the teachers in a correctional school and the ubuntu shown by Unisa staff efforts to teach once a month, demonstrated willingness to support an initiative for social change for those who regard themselves as social outcasts. More still needs to be done in career guidance, because it is critical to ensure that teachers are adequately trained in facilitation skills and that learners are guided appropriately to curb recidivism.

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