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Improving education for incarcerated children and young people: policy recommendations from three transnational projects in Europe

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this policy piece is to present headline evidence from the equivalent of a decade of research across three projects focused on improving the educational experiences of incarcerated or justice-involved children and young people across 14 countries. The projects demonstrated a positive impact when using the specially designed innovative methods even with disengaged justice-involved children and young people. Each project had a different focus based on the needs of the children and young people, including (re) engaging them with education and learning opportunities re-engaging young offenders with education and learning (RENYO), developing identified social and emotional competencies through sport active games 4 change (AG4C) and developing skills for when transitioning into communities (S4L).

Design/methodology/approach – Each of the three projects designed bespoke interventions and materials based on the focus of the project. Combined, these were piloted across a total of 14 countries with 548 children and young people, 225 educators and 21 youth justice settings (custodial and non-custodial). Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from educators, children and young people to better understand the effectiveness and limitations of the pedagogical approaches, the materials and experiences of the users.

Findings – The findings from across the three projects demonstrated that when custodial settings or youth justice settings have greater access to specifically designed tools and resources, with appropriate training to use them, it is possible to re-engage even the most disengaged children and young people with education and learning (RENYO). It was also possible to show a statistically significant increase in social and emotional competencies (social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills) in participating country settings (AG4C) and to engage children and young people with a Skills4Life Curriculum in preparation for moving back into the community.

Research limitations/implications – Custodial and other youth justice settings vary widely in different jurisdictions with varying levels of resource. Whilst all programmes had success in implementation, this was to different degrees and extents in each of the country contexts. Much of this success will depend on the skills of educators and the willingness of the leadership.

Practical implications – The programmes and interventions in this policy piece can be used in a range of contexts and settings as shown by the wide range of sites they were piloted in. From a practical perspective,



these programmes and interventions have been designed to fit into existing structures and timetables with custodial and youth justice settings, making them easily integrated into business as usual.

Originality/value – Planned and strategically delivered interventions by expert educators in a holistic way means there is real opportunity to better support justice involved children and young people to successful transitioning back into communities, thereby potentially reducing reoffending. This is done by (re) engaging them with education and learning on entry, using the authentic inquiry methodology, developing social and emotional competencies through the active games and sport programme, followed by a tailored Skills4Life Curriculum preparing them for transition back into communities.

Keywords Youth justice, Incarcerated youth, Education in juvenile justice, Engagement in education, Life skills juvenile justice, Sports in juvenile justice

Paper type Research paper

Executive summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 28 – Children and young people have the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability; if they're in detention or if they're a refugee.

The educational experiences of children and young people who come into conflict with the law are poor and unfulfilling. Innovative and alternative ways to engage them when incarcerated are essential to broaden their horizons, illuminate alternative pathways and harness their own agency. Using evidence from three transnational research projects, equivalent to a decade of research and piloted in 11 countries, we show the positive impact of such innovative and targeted approaches for children and young people in custodial settings. Planned and delivered strategically by expert educators, there can be real opportunities to better support these children and young people for successful transitioning back into communities.

Introduction

As many as 9 out of 10 children and young people have dropped out of school well before they are incarcerated (Little, 2016; [ahmed Shafi, 2018](#)). This indicates that they are disengaged from education and learning ([Rumberger and Rotermund, 2012](#)), more likely to drop out of school and become vulnerable to offending activities ([Hirschfield and Gasper, 2011](#)). There is a plethora of evidence that tells us about the disadvantages and learning needs of children who come into conflict with the law. These include structural disadvantages such as poverty which links to other disadvantages such as poor housing ([Bobbio et al., 2020](#)). They may also struggle with alcohol and substance abuse themselves or within their families ([Hughes et al., 2015](#)). Coupled with this they are more likely to have a parent who is in prison ([Nijhof et al., 2009](#)) and are more likely to suffer from emotional and behavioural difficulties as well as language and communication difficulties ([Chitsabesan and Hughes, 2016](#); [Snow et al., 2016](#)). The combination and accumulation of these issues make them more vulnerable to offending and coming into conflict with the law and potentially being incarcerated.

Whilst the number of children under the age of 18 has dropped dramatically in the recent decade and a half from over 3,000 in 2008 to just under 400 in 2024, it does mean that those in custodial settings have some of the most complex problems ([Hughes et al., 2018](#)) and are more likely to be entrenched in the youth justice system.

There is considerable evidence that the educational experiences of incarcerated children have been poor and unfulfilling (e.g. [Cripps and Summerfield, 2012](#); [Little, 2015](#); [ahmed Shafi, 2018](#)). It means that doing more of the same as what happens in mainstream education is not going to work ([Taylor, 2016](#)). We therefore need to use bold and innovative

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approaches to re-engage them with education and learning ([ahmed Shafi, 2018](#)). These must fulfil the following:

- be of high quality, focused and targeted;
- be designed for the needs of these specific children and young people;
- understand the contextual constraints of secure settings;
- understand the skills and experiences of the educators;
- offer learners a greater and direct opportunity for self-development and empowerment; and
- broaden their horizons and illuminate tangible alternative pathways for life back into communities.

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Those who engage with education and learning in custodial settings are more likely to transition successfully back into the community. They are also more likely to find education, employment or training that can steer them away from reoffending ([Lanskey, 2015](#)). Research led by the University of Gloucestershire (UK) has played a key role in exploring, designing and testing such initiatives in secure settings in a range of European countries. These include Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Norway, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Hungary, Turkey and the UK.

Findings from three key research projects

Re-engaging young offenders with education and learning (RENYO)

www.skills4youth.eu

Key findings from this three-year project, piloted in secure settings in Italy, Germany, Spain and the UK used authentic inquiry as a methodology to re-engage children disengaged with education and learning [ahmed Shafi and Middleton \(2023\)](#). It demonstrated that children and young people in custodial settings:

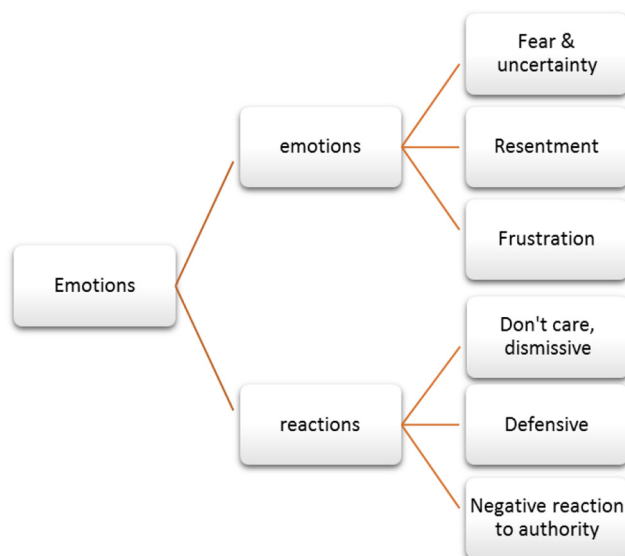
- can be re-engaged with education and learning fairly quickly and easily if the right conditions are fostered within the setting ([ahmed Shafi, 2018](#));
- however, managing the facilitators and barriers to develop those conditions is key;
- had improved learning power results ([Deakin Crick et al., 2015](#)) after the programme ([ahmed Shafi and Middleton, 2024](#)); and
- emotions were most impacted by being locked up compared to other impacts ([ahmed Shafi, 2019](#)) and that these emotions were complex ([Figure 1](#)).

The findings also showed how authentic inquiry was transformative for the pedagogy of educators, meaning that it can also be used for educator development ([ahmed Shafi and Middleton, 2024](#)).

Active games 4 change (AG4C)

www.activegames4change.org

The sport and physical activity within the AG4C programme can provide a non-threatening medium for developing self-regulation skills and expressing and channelling stronger emotions (such as aggression) in a more socially appropriate manner ([Juyal and Dandona, 2012](#)). The AG4C programme was designed to support the development of specific social and emotional competencies through innovative learning design and bespoke materials, resources, tools and training, all tailored with the custodial context in



Source: Created by author

Figure 1. This figure shows the complexity of the emotions that incarcerated children and young people may experience, many of which were heightened because of being locked up

mind. The competencies were identified in the literature based on the CASEL framework and include social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Results from the three-year AG4C programme piloted in seven European countries, namely, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Hungary, Turkey and the UK (ahmed Shafi *et al.*, 2024) are demonstrated as follows:

- A significant improvement in the social and emotional competencies developed through the active games designed by the project. This was the case in all of the partner countries where the materials were piloted, with different degrees for each competency depending on the specific country and setting context.
- The findings showed that the said social and emotional competencies could be developed and have potential for transfer through high-quality tailored programmes such as AG4C.

Skills for life after prison (SAL)

<https://skills4life-project.com/>

The evidence shows that not having the requisite skills to seek, for example, housing, employment or education when released leads to an increase in re-offending (Zakaria *et al.*, 2018). Making a deliberate and coherent effort to support the development of these skills has to be essential to supporting re-integration into the community and meaningful activity. The Skills4Life Curriculum was developed for young people in custodial settings to address this issue.

Qualitative data from 80 young people, who were either in a secure setting or had recently left in the partner countries of Italy, France, Greece and the UK, informed the development of the Skills4Life Curriculum. The data highlighted the opportunities with secure education settings and the difficulties that young people experienced. The

Curriculum developed from the themes that arose (see [Figure 2](#)) from this data consists of a comprehensive programme to develop the personal, social and practical skills needed to transition back into the community.

This Curriculum is currently being tested in nine custodial and other youth justice settings in the partner countries, and early data indicate that the Curriculum is acting as a key factor in a coherent programme supporting re-integration.

Recommendations for action: some solutions

Recommendations to policymakers are for custodial settings to have greater access to specifically designed tools and resources. These need to be evidence-based and designed with the needs of those in secure custodial settings and the context within which educators must work.

Recommendation 1

That the authentic inquiry or equivalent methodology be adopted in secure custodial settings to re-engage learners so they are better able to receive the curriculum on offer within the setting/s. Induction for new entrants is a good space for this methodology and can set the tone for how the education will be “done” at this setting.

That authentic inquiry can also be used to develop educators.

Recommendation 2

That the AG4C programme or equivalent be integrated into custodial settings as a means to develop social and emotional competencies. This makes it easier for the children and young people to engage with other interventions offered at setting/s. There is already space for physical sports and activities at most YOI or children’s secure settings, and AG4C offers the opportunity for structured and engaging learning in what is usually a popular space.

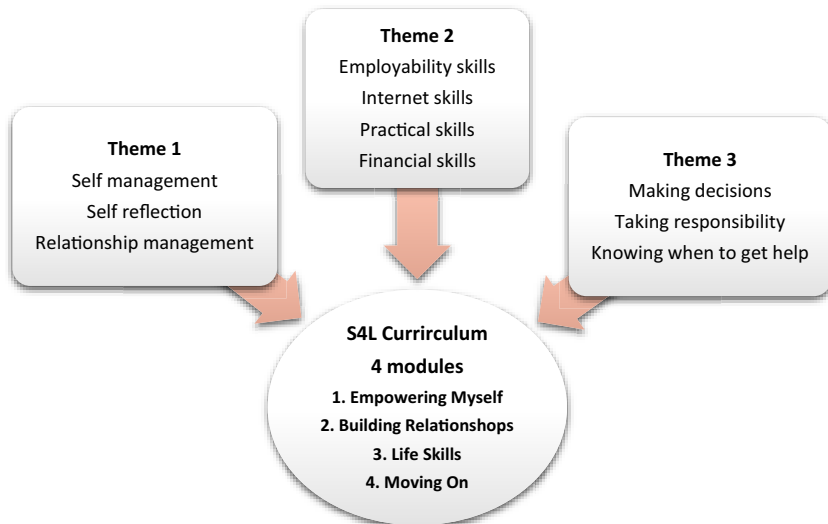


Figure 2.
The figure highlights the key themes highlighted by the young people

Notes: These were then translated into high-quality learning modules for the Curriculum. This was then piloted in secure settings in the partner countries

Source: Created by author

Recommendation 3

That custodial settings have strategic, comprehensive and integrated exit curriculums built into their educational offer for children and young people to prepare them for life back in the community. The activities within the S4L Curriculum are designed to be delivered in a variety of ways, formal and informal making it an ideal programme for integrating into an existing timetable of activities in a custodial setting. To conclude, the combined findings of these research projects (RENYO, AG4C and S4L) offer rich findings and enable recommendations for what policymakers and other decision makers can do to re-engage, develop and prepare children and young people within custodial and youth justice settings for re-integration into their communities.

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Further reading

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