



## Improving Education in Juvenile Correctional Facilities: A Path to Better Outcomes

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Incarcerated youth often face significant academic and behavioral challenges that hinder their educational progress. New research from Joseph Calvin Gagnon, Ph.D., professor and department chair of Special Education, and colleagues published in the *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* sheds light on the instructional approaches and student engagement in a juvenile correctional facility (JCF) school in the southeastern United States. The findings highlight the importance of effective teaching strategies and the need for tailored educational programs to support these vulnerable students.

Many students experienced patterns of academic failure, with at least 75% failing a course and up to 40% entering the JCF with few or no high school credits. Reading skills were particularly problematic, with incarcerated youth performing about four years behind their publicly schooled peers on reading achievement tests. These challenges were compounded by emotional and behavioral difficulties, with approximately 61% of incarcerated youth diagnosed with conduct disorder.

Given the characteristics of incarcerated youth, Dr. Gagnon and his team observed and coded teacher-student interactions for 733 fifteen-minute classroom reading sessions involving seven teachers and 40 students to understand how instructional approaches and teacher behaviors influence student engagement and response behaviors, particularly for students with disabilities. Results showed that incarcerated youth faced significant academic and behavioral difficulties.

JCF teachers utilized opportunities to respond (OTRs), directives, and praise statements as their instructional procedures. OTRs, which provide prompts or questions to elicit student responses, were most frequently used. However, there was a relatively low usage of teacher praise, which is a powerful tool for promoting appropriate student behavior and engagement.

"To improve academic and behavioral outcomes for incarcerated youth, it is crucial to increase the use of effective instructional strategies, such as OTRs and praise statements," Dr. Gagnon said. "Additionally, teachers should receive training on how to provide precision directives and use behavioral momentum to promote appropriate student responses."



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Interestingly, students with disabilities were more likely to respond appropriately to teacher directives compared to their peers, suggesting that tailored instructional approaches may be particularly effective for specific student populations in JCFs.

The findings of this study underscore the need for better coordination between the juvenile justice and educational systems. By implementing effective instructional strategies, JCFs can help ensure continuity of education for incarcerated youth. This includes addressing the highly transient nature of students in JCFs and improving teacher training and the quality of available educational programming.