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A Re-Imagining of Evaluation as Social Justice

A Discussion of the Education Justice Project

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Critical Education Special Series

Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison

Abstract

While efforts to increase access to higher education for incarcerated populations are laudable, the prominent discourse, rationale, and examined outcomes are narrowly defined. Too often program evaluations, especially those within criminal justice contexts, implicitly prescribe values and condone oppressive policies, while claiming neutrality through methodology. What is needed are evaluation frameworks and theories born in opposition to the current 'gold standard', which currently fails to consider conditions linked to the many structural inequities of society, and misses the opportunity to advocate for social justice. This paper presents a restorative justice approach to evaluation, conceptualized to address the complex socio-political and cultural dynamics of educational programs within prisons, and as way to bring stakeholders together to generate new meaning and understanding. Vignettes are utilized to illustrate what a restorative justice approach to evaluation might look like within the case example of the Education Justice Project, a higher education program within prison.



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Broadening one's methodological perspective does not necessarily entail lowering one's standards nor abandoning rigor. (Leeuw, 2005, p. 253).

Program evaluation is the systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to determine program worth, value, and merit (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). By helping program stakeholders to understand and evaluate implementation, effectiveness, outcomes, and impact, evaluation can play an important role in higher-education-in-prison programs. Since the 1980s, the dominant focus in criminal justice evaluation, as in many other federally-funded program domains, has been on evidence-based practices principally grounded in the use of scientific methods (Farrington, Gottfredson, Sherman, & Welsh, 2006). Within these methodological parameters, randomized control trials (RCTs) are designated as the 'gold standard' in the criminal justice field (Braga & Weisburd, 2014; Tilley & Clarke, 2006). As such, most program evaluations of higher education in prison are outcome-driven, with great emphasis placed upon recidivism rates.

Higher-education-in-prison programs require evaluation frameworks born in opposition to the current 'gold standard' approach. Randomized control samples fail to consider conditions linked to the many structural inequities of society and the objectification of vulnerable populations. Importantly, solely using randomized control studies to assess the impact and outcomes of higher education in prison misses the opportunity to advance social justice and the implicit mission of higher education in prison (House, 1990; Thomas & Madison, 2010). In this paper, I argue that evaluations conducted within the higher-education-in-prison context should be positioned as a social, cultural, and political force to address issues of inequity, while still maintaining methodological standards and rigor. Program evaluation can and should embody the values of a more just society, and there are ways to engage robust evaluation designs to achieve these goals. Therefore, efforts to reimagine and reengage educational theories, rationales, and practices described in this volume should be explored in tandem with the promotion of innovative evaluation theory and practice that align with the rationale and values of those engaging such programs. Specifically, I propose advocacy, relationship development, inclusion of underrepresented voices, and stakeholder education to engage an evaluation with a social justice focus.

I begin this paper with an introduction to program evaluation and a brief overview of criminal justice evaluation literature, with a specific focus on the evaluation of higher-education-in-prison programs. I then introduce the Education Justice Project, a model college in prison program for men incarcerated at the Danville Correctional Center in Illinois, to serve as a case example. To illustrate my point and in conjunction with an overview of the program and process, I utilize a vignette to reflect upon and illustrate what an evaluation with a social justice focus looks like through the evaluation of the Education Justice Project. I conclude with final thoughts and a clarion call for those working within the prison context to demand evaluations that have parallel epistemologies and goals to the important purposes of the work of higher education within prison.

Evaluation of Educational Programs in Prison

Program Evaluation

The field of program evaluation is relatively young, emerging just over 60 years ago from the practice of applying social science methodology, namely psychology, to the specialized study of social programs (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). In recent years, escalating social, health, and educational commitments, including an 1) increased focus of STEM education (National Science Foundation, 2016a), 2) support for low-income and

students with disabilities (US Department of Education, 2016), and 3) programs to prevent and control diabetes, heart disease, and obesity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017), has markedly expanded the need for evaluation and qualified program evaluators. Heightened accountability demands (Chouinard, 2013) have further spurred the field of evaluation's significant expansion by ensuring increased resource allocation for evaluation. Scriven (1991) contends that all evaluators desire to have their work contribute to societal improvement by determining program merit or worth. However, there is a lack of consensus surrounding the ways to achieve this goal (Greene, 2005). Due to the field's methodological origins, evaluators initially endeavored to conduct value-free, objective, pseudo-experimental evaluations (Campbell, 1969). Today, literature increasingly links evaluation to social justice, and many evaluators aim for nuanced, pluralistic, and responsible methods to evaluation that fall outside of a post-positivist paradigm (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2015). While all evaluators should attend to the social, ethical, political, cultural, and value dimensions of any evaluation context (Chouinard, 2016), like so many other fields of social inquiry, experimental design remains the dominant method and is considered the 'gold standard' form of social inquiry (Patton, 2014, pg. 95). This is especially true of evaluations conducted within the criminal justice milieu, because many are supported with federal funds (Farrington, Gottfredson, Sherman, & Welsh, 2006). Experimental methods are not necessarily a problem. However, methodological dogma and lack of attention to equity, culture, and institutional racism are of particular concern in the context of higher education in prison.

Evaluation of Higher Education within Prison

In my review of 22 evaluations of higher education programs in prisons in the United States, Canada, and Norway, most used quantitative measures, with a primary focus on recidivism (rate of rearrests within a particular time frame, often three to five years) and/or post-release employment-related measures as outcomes. While the focus on recidivism rates remains consistent over the years, the research and evaluation methods have evolved. The majority of evaluations prior to 2000 utilized surveys, interviews, and experimental designs (see: Anderson, 1995; Chase & Dickover, 1983; Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Gaes, 2008; Gehring, 1997; Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007; Perry, 1982; Rosenfeld, 2006). Post 2000s gave rise to a few critical studies and meta-analyses, with questions about how outcomes were being defined and measured (see Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Chappell, 2004; Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie, 2000). Growing concerns about methodological rigor and reliability include flaws in experimental design and data analysis (Wilson, 2000), lack of specificity about the program itself (Brazell et al., 2009; MacKenzie, 2008), and inflated effect sizes (Hui Kim & Clark, 2013). Currently, the most commonly used methods of evaluation for college-in-prison programs include the measurement of outcomes in randomized experiments, statistical matching techniques and regression discontinuity designs in quasi-experimental evaluations, and/or other controlled evaluation methodology and statistical modeling for a number of outcomes, including participation in gang violence, rearrest, received citations, and recidivism (Braga & Weisburd, 2013).

While some evaluations of educational programs within prisons have examined individual outcomes of self-esteem and self-efficacy (see: Batiuk, Moke, & Roundtre, 1997; Harer, 1995), in-prison behavior (Fine et al., 2001), and acculturation to prison subculture

(Harer, 1995), the dominant focus on recidivism and post-release employment remains¹. This emphasis presents a predicament as recidivism should not be the only outcome examined, as it is a flawed measure (citations). For example, recidivism has been simply defined as reincarceration, or the amount of time a person has remained out of prison (Brewster & Sharp, 2002). It has also been explained as including not only reincarcerations, but also new arrests and convictions (Steurer & Smith, 2003). While some scholars have attempted to operationalize recidivism to be “reincarceration for a new offense or a parole violation, and a conviction on a new criminal charge” (Bautiuk, Moke, & Rountree, 1997, p. 171), others have found that, broadly, there remains a lack of consensus in how recidivism is defined and measured (including statistical and methodological issues; Wade, 2007). Purposes of higher-education-in-prison programs include goals above and beyond recidivism, including: development of interpersonal and technical skills, reconnection with estranged family members, exploration of creative skills, production of scholarship about prison education, and cultivation of self-reflection (Education Justice Project, 2011).

Social-Justice-Focused Evaluation

Method choice is a political decision, whether we consider it as such. Strict adherence to quantitative experimental/quasi-experiential approaches by definition precludes the multiplicity of stakeholder voices, perspectives, and ways of knowing. The privileging of RCTs cannot capture the challenges that participants of higher education programming within prison face, nor account for the political connection among prison and ethnicity/race and class/social economic status. Incarceration, race, educational access, poverty, and disenfranchisement are undeniably intertwined as the U.S. prison population is largely drawn from the most marginalized and disadvantaged in our society. Most of those incarcerated are men under 40, poorly educated, and disproportionately racialized minorities (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014), with over 60% either African American or of Latino descent (Hudson, 2015). More striking, Black men with no high school education are now more likely to be in prison than in the workforce (Amos, 2010; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2017).

The process of social inquiry results in knowledge that is, in and of itself, a cultural product. I believe it is imperative that program evaluators understand this. Historically, “communicentric bias,” the tendency to make one's own community, often the majority class, the center of conceptual frames that constrains all thought, has resulted in negative consequences for minoritized populations (Gordon, Miller, & Rollock, 1990). Further, social science knowledge of minoritized populations has demeaned characteristics, distorted interpretations of conditions and potential, and remained limited in its capacity to inform efforts to understand and improve life chances of historically disadvantaged populations (Johnson et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000). A fresh evaluative perspective where evaluators take individual, institutional, and societal racism and its intersections with knowledge production into account (Scheurich & Young, 2002) is needed. Taking a social justice orientation will encourage evaluators to “interrupt the operation of critical auto load of default settings because they result in trust-eroding inaccuracies, truncated understanding, and twisted representations” (Symonette, 2004 p. 97). Given the magnitude of the issues to be considered within the higher-education-in-prison context, it seems shortsighted to ignore other methodological possibilities merely on the contested grounds that they are not rigorous, scientific, objective, nor solely focused on program impact. This is simply not true.

¹ Employment is measured in a variety of ways including job placement rates, types of jobs received, and length of unemployment.

Evaluations of higher–education–in–prison programs should assess implementation, development, impact, and social issues like systemic racism and other forms of bias (Thomas & Madison, 2010).

I choose the Education Justice Project (EJP) as a case for this paper because the organization’s values align with social justice, and the EJP leadership advocate for the very changes in discourse called for in this volume. From 2011 to 2014, I was part of a volunteer evaluation team for EJP. During that time, I was a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, studying Educational Psychology with a program evaluation specialization. The volunteer evaluation team was comprised of me, my faculty advisor, and another doctoral student. As a team, we developed an evaluation plan; recruited for and met with multiple advisory groups; and collected, analyzed, and reported on evaluation findings.

In the remainder of the essay, I illustrate what an evaluation with a social justice focus can look like. What would be some evaluation questions and data collection methods? How should evaluators interact with stakeholders, including incarcerated students? I will ground this illustration in the evaluation process of the Education Justice Project (EJP), a comprehensive postsecondary educational program for men incarcerated at the Danville Correctional Center in Illinois. To that end, I begin by introducing my role within the EJP evaluation team and the EJP program itself. Then, I present the EJP evaluation methods. Next, I present a vignette that illustrates the evaluation team’s interactions with students. I conclude with final thoughts.

The Education Justice Project

The Education Justice Project (EJP) is a comprehensive, higher–education–in–prison program founded in 2008 for men incarcerated at Danville Correctional Center, an Illinois state prison 35 miles east of Urbana–Champaign. EJP was founded in 2008 and is located in the Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership within the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC). The EJP unit has a director, a director of academic programs, an operations manager, and dozens of volunteer members—graduate students, faculty, undergraduate students, staff, and community members whose in–kind contributions amount to many hundreds of hours each year. The Education Justice Project is guided by the vision of a more humane and just society sustained through education and critical awareness. The mission of the Project is to build a model college–in–prison program that demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their family members, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society (Education Justice Project, 2015).

The core of EJP’s program is upper–division UIUC courses, which are taught at the prison by University faculty and advanced graduate students. EJP students can currently earn a certificate in Educational Studies, but the program is not degree–granting. EJP also offers a range of intellectual activities within the prison, including a theatre initiative, a writing and research center, science and math workshops, a guest lecture series, anti–violence education, a library workers program, tutoring, a mindfulness discussion group, Language Partners, and the EJP radio station. This comprehensive, higher–education–in–prison program also functions outside of the prison, providing continued support to its alumni. EJP also recognizes the multiple impacts of prison education upon incarcerated students’ families and communities, and, thus, hosts programs throughout the region, including in Chicago, IL, where many EJP students’ families reside, to support their educational goals and efforts in navigating the challenges of being a loved one of an incarcerated person. During an EJP

convocation, one EJP student spoke about the role EJP has played in his family's life, particularly in facilitating a renewed relationship between him and his daughter:

I struggled thinking about how to capture a piece of redemption from the high crime of absence in her [his daughter's] life. This program, you guys, provided me with a representative, a type of presence of me in a space where my family and friends could appreciate it, thereby allowing me a tiny window of redemption to my people. So thanks to you for throwing me a life preserver, for rescuing me, for however brief a moment, from mentally drowning in the debt of absence I owe to her. (Education Justice Project student)

EJP is also concerned with public education around issues of incarceration, social justice, and criminal justice, and frequently hosts town halls and events on the UIUC campus and within the Urbana–Champaign community to increase awareness of these topics. EJP supports fundamental, humane change of the current system of incarceration. The program engages in discussions and debates around mass incarceration and criminal justice, especially those related to higher education in prison. The program values and prioritizes the cultivation and broadcasting of voices of EJP students and alumni, and advocates that their experiences should be central within correctional education. Currently, the EJP program collects data on recidivism and a number of other outcomes measures. Distinguishing features of a social justice oriented evaluation extend beyond examining outcomes above and beyond recidivism and aligning the evaluation with similar values to the program evaluated. Key features include advocacy, inclusion of underrepresented voice, education of stakeholders, and relationship development. While the primary focus of this discussion is the evaluation of EJP in relationship to its mission, the work has broader implications for higher–education–in–prison programs across the country, because many higher–education–in–prison programs have similar missions and/or programming. Next, I discuss the evaluation of EJP and how it is one example of an evaluation with a social justice focus.

Evaluation Framework of the Education Justice Project

In this section, I provide an overview of the main components of the evaluation framework including context, values, audience and purpose, key question, criteria/metrics for determining program quality, and instruments utilized. I can and will discuss how the evaluation was enacted, but I do not have permission to share evaluation results.

Evaluation Context

When I began as a volunteer evaluator for EJP, little systematic data were available on the activities and outcomes of the EJP. Needs for data on program activities, experiences, and outcomes were all high. At that time, data needs were highest with respect to providing credible evidence on program outcomes for use in future funding proposals, in publicizing the EJP story, and in countering anticipated arguments against public funding for higher education of incarcerated people. Most importantly, the evaluation team believed that thoughtful data on program outcomes could inform the EJP leadership, instructors, tutors, and others regarding the particular character and dimensionality of the differences EJP was making in students' lives.

However, unlike the typical longitudinal outcomes of post–release behavior and recidivism measured in criminal–justice–centric evaluation, the phase of the evaluation in which I was involved endeavored to capture the immediate and short–term outcomes of current EJP students resulting from participation in the EJP program. The focus was on the progress and accomplishments of becoming an “educated man,” a concept initially developed

by EJP students prior to the initiation of the evaluation process. The evaluation team was tasked with operationalizing this concept, and resulting dimensions included: skills/knowledge, critical thinking, confidence/efficacy, relational responsibility, commitment to social justice, and citizenship responsibility, among others.

Evaluation Values

The evaluation team endeavored to conduct their work in keeping with the stated EJP values of consensus, openness, flexibility, debate, trying new things, social justice, gentleness, unconventionality, research-driven, critical approach, applying our moral principles, transparency, and food (EJP, 2011). Furthermore, the evaluation team decided, in consultation with EJP leadership, advisory groups, and social justice evaluation literature, that the evaluation should place a strong emphasis on “being educative,” though the concept of the “educated man.” The evaluation team sought guidance from three EJP evaluation advisory committees: an EJP student evaluation advisory committee, an EJP leadership evaluation advisory committee, and an EJP community advisory committee². Members of the student evaluation team were all incarcerated at Danville Correction Center [DCC], had volunteered, and had been selected to participate in the student evaluation advisory committee. Evaluators met the student evaluation team four–five times throughout my participation on the evaluation to seek feedback on evaluation instruments, get suggestions on moving forward, and involve students in the interpretation of initial findings. Furthermore, the evaluation team attempted to be transparent, educate, and inform all EJP students about the evaluation by placing an evaluation bulletin board in the classroom, providing books about evaluation, and meeting with students to provide updates throughout the evaluation. The first phase of the evaluation placed an emphasis on including perspectives and opinions of the student evaluation group, because they were the least well–heard in this context. The evaluation team had less access to the other two advisory committees, but still met with them twice to discuss instrument development and initial findings.

Evaluation Audience, Purpose, and Key Question³

The major purpose of this phase of the evaluation was to better understand the character and magnitude of both intended and unintended program outcomes for EJP students, individually and collectively. The term “EJP students” refers to both current and former students, including those who have returned to the community. The major evaluation question was: *To what extent and in what ways is EJP contributing to students’ acquisition of a college education and to their development as “an educated man?”*

Criteria/Metrics for Evaluating Program Quality

The evaluation team followed standard program evaluation guidelines and worked with advisory committees to develop criteria for quality. The following are the key dimensions that formed the criteria for judging program quality in this evaluation:

² To recruit advisory committee members the evaluation team worked in consultation with EJP leadership to publicize the opportunity to EJP students and the local community. All community members who volunteered were selected. Evaluators worked with the EJP director to choose students who volunteered based on availability for meetings due to work schedule and participation in other EJP groups.

³ Evaluation questions and metrics are drawn directly from the evaluation plan.

EJP students will:

- Gain upper-level university course credit (external credential).⁴
- Make progress toward becoming an “educated man” (internal credential).
 - Demonstrate self-confidence and self-esteem.
 - Demonstrate critical-thinking skills.
 - Demonstrate effective self-expression.
 - Demonstrate commitments and behaviors as an agent of positive change in the environment in which the student lives (i.e., within the correctional center and, for those released, within their home communities).

At the Danville Correctional Center:

- The EJP classrooms are experienced as safe and supportive environments for students.
- The EJP students demonstrate collectively good performance on standard incarceration, behavioral, and recidivism statistics compared to students not participating in EJP (which were assessed in phase two and three of the evaluation).

Evaluation Design and Methods

This phase of the evaluation used a mixed-methods design for purposes of developing a more complete understanding of the phenomena being studied—namely, the short-term outcomes of EJP participation. Two primary methods were used: a student survey and student interviews.

Student survey. EJP students were invited to complete an anonymous *EJP Student Experience Survey* in March 2012. Surveys were sent out through the DCC mail system to each EJP student, and students returned completed surveys to the EJP folder in a classroom bulletin board. Students did not put their names on completed surveys. While the survey was primarily close-ended, 12 open-ended questions were distributed throughout the survey, inviting students to elaborate on their responses. The survey response rate was 64% (48/75). In addition to gathering information about the ways and the extent to which students participate in EJP, the survey was developed with items from 1) the University of Illinois Instructor & Course Evaluation System (ICES) surveys and 2) the Rosenberg (1965) Self-

⁴ There is no degree offered as a result of taking EJP courses. Students take advanced “undergraduate” courses, but it will not lead to a terminal degree from the University of Illinois.

Esteem Scale (RSE). The survey contained eight sufficiently reliable scales designed to capture the experience and outcomes of EJP participation, including satisfaction with availability of EJP activities, satisfaction with quality of EJP activities, experience, responsibility, skill development, and self-esteem. Skill development and self-esteem were measured in two parts; one part asked if students perceived themselves to have certain skills or aspects of self-esteem, and the second part asked them to indicate the extent to which participating in EJP contributed to the presence of that skill or feeling of self-esteem. The scaled data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and correlations, and each scale achieved satisfactory internal consistency. Individual items within the scales that were particularly salient to our description of an educated man were also examined. These items included: Satisfaction with Availability of EJP activities, Satisfaction with Quality of EJP activities, Experience, Responsibility, Skill Development, Skill Development as a Result of EJP, Self Esteem, and Self Esteem as a Result of EJP.

Student interviews. Interviews were conducted with six EJP students on Friday, July 20th, 2012, and Thursday, July 26th, 2012. The evaluation team was interested in meeting with students who had participated in a variety of EJP experiences, but who were not always the most enthusiastic and overzealous about the program. Back in 2012, the program had been in existence for a mere four years; however, at that point, many of the programs and courses offered were brand new. As such, the sampling strategy for the interviews included the following criteria:

- Involvement in EJP for five or more semesters (does not have to be consecutive and includes the summer programs) and;
- Participation in five or more EJP programs, committees, or co-curricular activities.

Seventeen (from those who completed the survey) EJP students expressed a willingness to be interviewed; six students who met our criteria and were available on our scheduled interview dates were selected by the on-site coordinator to be interviewed. Additionally, these men were not considered to be overly enthusiastic or zealous men that one might see “every time you turn around” in EJP. It was important to the evaluation team that those interviewed were students who were often not the first to raise their hand so that a variety of voices, especially those least well-heard in this context, were chosen. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants were asked questions related to their involvement in EJP, expectations, EJP experiences, benefits of participation, and interpretation of interesting survey findings. Students interviewed were encouraged to share positive and constructive feedback about the program. To ensure data validity and credibility, the three independent volunteer evaluation team members from the University of Illinois were the only interviewees present during the interviews.

My time as a volunteer evaluator ended following this first phase, and I did not participate in the second phase of this evaluation. The focus of that phase was the impacts that EJP had on students’ families. In the next section, I present a vignette of an interaction that took place between the evaluation team and the student evaluation advisory committee to illustrate the key features of social-justice-oriented evaluation in the carceral context.

Illustration: A Social Justice Evaluation of the Education Justice Project

Evaluation professional guidelines encourage evaluators to reflect on their practice for multiple reasons. The Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards point to reflection as a way to ensure that the core standards (i.e. utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability) are being met in an evaluation and as a way to generate learning that informs high-quality evaluation (Yarbrough, Shulha, Caruthers, & Hopson, 2010). Reflection similarly can be used to deepen evaluators' understanding of and engagement with the American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Guiding Principles (AEA, 2004). Further, AEA's Cultural Competence Statement includes reflection as a way for evaluators to be aware of their own and others' cultural assumptions and biases and conduct more culturally responsive evaluations (AEA, 2011). Evaluation scholars Cousins and Chouinard (2012) have described the emergence of reflective case narratives as an increasingly prevalent mode of empirical research on evaluation. To that end, this essay answers the call for more scholarship where evaluators systematically reflect and disseminate knowledge gained (Becker & Renger, 2017). In this section, I reflect upon my experience as an evaluator for EJP and present a vignette to illustrate a few lessons learned from our attempt to employ a social-justice-oriented evaluation.

This vignette is based on reflection drawn directly from reflection and memory. This particular meeting stands out in my memory because immediately after it took place, the whole evaluation team got together to debrief, specifically to discuss how stereotypes and our naïveté could impact the evaluation of a group committed to social justice. Furthermore, themes from this interaction were enlightening to all evaluation team members, so much so that we presented lessons learned at a conference that included these and other interactions we had with our advisory committees, especially the EJP student led committee (Greene, Gannon-Slater, & Tillman, 2012). This vignette took place in early 2012 during a meeting prior to data collection and was located within the prison while another evaluator and I met with incarcerated EJP students on the student evaluation advisory committee. I present the vignette as a dialogue because it is important to me that this conversation is presented in the way that the event exists in my memory: as an encounter between me and the other graduate student evaluation team member and EJP students. To the best of my ability, I can confirm that I have not embellished the conversation in any way. I use my own name in the vignette; however, the second evaluator and EJP students have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Setting the Scene: Meeting Prior to Data Collection

The evaluation has been underway for less than two months, and EJP volunteer evaluators have decided to include multiple advisory councils to ensure that all relevant stakeholder voices are incorporated. At the beginning of the evaluation, three advisory councils were established that included the following stakeholders: current EJP students incarcerated at the Danville Correctional Center, EJP directors and volunteers, and community and EJP students' family members. During monthly meetings, the evaluation team discusses and receives advice about evaluation development and implementation. The student advisory council, comprised of seven incarcerated men who are also EJP students, shapes the types of data collected and defines a range of appropriate outcomes including increased self-esteem, reflection, and critical thinking skills. In the following vignette two of the evaluators are meeting with the student council. Two evaluators, Tasha and Ayesha, sit in a small classroom within the prison for a meeting with a few members of their student

evaluation advisory council. Today Tyler, Hakeem, and Anthony, incarcerated men and students in the EJP program, are present to discuss the collection of student data the selection of program outcomes.

Tasha: Ok that is really useful feedback. Now I would like to turn to program outcomes. We were thinking we would collect data to understand outcomes that help us understand the impact of the program. Most evaluations of programs like this look at recidivism and employment.

A student raises his hand

Tyler: That is aight, but what about those of us who ain't about to be getting out of here no time soon? Some of us gonna be in here a long time, a real long time.

Ayesha: You are exactly right! We want to also collect additional information about some of the outcomes that help us understand your experience, and other outcomes that are inclusive of all EJP students. What about behavior? Maybe we could collect data about how you spend your time away from the classroom and infractions received?

Hakeem: Information about how we spend our time would be a useful indicator. I know that since I became an EJP student I spend all my free time reading.

Anthony: I still see you playing cards every now and then!

Everyone laughs

Hakeem: Ha, yeah that is true, but not like I used to! I don't think that data on infractions are going to be valid though. I mean, not in my opinion.

Tasha: Really? Do others agree?

Tyler: Yea he is right. You can get an infraction from having an attitude, or if a guard has an attitude. Sometimes folks wanna pop off and then they deserve one, but that is just not always the case.

Ayesha: Ok that is helpful. We appreciate you guys being willing to share your thoughts and perspectives with us as we shape the evaluation framework. So what type of data and outcomes should we look at?

Anthony: We the students, we have this idea that we are trying to become 'educated men'. We all talk about it informally and congratulate each other on our progress. Maybe the evaluation can operationalize and measure that?

Ayesha: Ok, ok I like where this is going. Tell me more.

Anthony: You know, men who are about something. About thinking critically, about doing the right thing, about being somebody. Because he is educated, he has confidence, high self-esteem, and he tries to be better, and make others better. All of that.

Tasha: I really like the idea of an ‘educated man’. We wanted to also collect focus group data in addition to the upcoming interviews. *Pauses*

Ayesha: However, we were concerned about what would happen if someone in the group expresses dissatisfaction with some aspects of the program.

Anthony: What do you mean?

Ayesha: Well, we thought they might get beat up or something like that.⁵

There is an uncomfortable silence.

The room erupts with laughter from the student advisory committee members.

Hakeem: You guys have been watching way too many TV shows like *Locked up* and *Prison Break*!

Anthony: Yeah, we love the program, but everyone is welcome to state what they like and don’t like. No one is going to physically hurt anyone else. EJP students respect each other and the program too much to do something like that.

Ayesha: Wow. Ok that is a relief. Honestly, we just didn’t know. We want to make sure that we don’t do anything to put anyone in danger. However, it is apparent that we still have some misconceptions about prison. We appreciate you all setting the story straight.

Tasha: We are out of time. Ayesha and I will take our notes from today and work on an evaluation plan and then we will be back next month to talk over everything with you all. Based on our conversation today, we will incorporate the idea of educated men and focus groups into the plan. Again, thank you so much!

Discussion

Relationship Development

Through the development of relationships, evaluators worked to provide a space that aimed to redistribute power and provide incarcerated EJP students opportunities to contribute to and shape the evaluation as members of a student advisory committee for the evaluation. Overall, the relational focus to the evaluation was important because the evaluators attempted to build on the ethos of EJP, and therefore privileged a collaborative approach grounded in

⁵ However At the time of this comment, I had no previos interactions with men currently incarcerated. I now understand how very problematic, uninformed, and classist this comment was.

relationships between and among stakeholders and evaluators. Together evaluators and the advisory committees made decisions about evaluation purpose, data collection methods, and ultimately the construction of knowledge. This level of collaboration, while not completely novel, is revolutionary for an in-prison context. In my review of evaluations of higher education within prison programs, none utilized an advisory group comprised of program participants that were incarcerated (see Evaluation of Educational Programs in Prison section).

Advocacy

Given the predominance of scientific approaches in criminal justice, the need for advocacy is essential. We defined advocacy as identifying whose needs and interests will be given priority during a program evaluation. As such, we made it a priority to work with EJP students to redistribute power by ensuring that their voices and perspectives were included in the design of the evaluation. As evaluators, we sought to understand what factors EJP students thought were important about the program. We also attempted to be responsible for meaningfully engaging misconceptions and unique contextual complexities, all of which are often overlooked in evaluations of educational programming within prisons. For example, I stated concerns that evaluation team had that students who expressed negative comments about EJP would be in physical or emotional danger because many EJP students are fiercely protective of the program. As it turned out, the evaluation team was being overly sensitive. However, we just were unfamiliar with the context and didn't know if our concerns were valid. We brought our concerns to the student advisory team, and even though they found them to be naïve, the discussion helped to build trust because we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable as evaluators to the EJP students about concerns of violence in prison, and this paved the way for future conversations.

Underrepresented Voices

It was challenging to reframe the evaluation to focus on criteria other than recidivism rates. As previously mentioned, during my time on the evaluation team this included students' transition to an "educated man," as a result of their participation in EJP. Continuously moving between personal narratives of stakeholders, and the long-standing requirements of collecting outcome data about recidivism and job placement was difficult. However, we felt that those least well-represented, whose voices are historically absent, must be given additional space to proclaim and educate other stakeholders about their experiences and views about data they felt was important and represented their experience. Some EJP students and volunteers felt that recidivism rates did not alone capture the purpose, nor all of the intended outcomes of the program. Which is why we sought to understand what types of outcomes stakeholders felt were valuable and useful. We believed the inclusion of those voices ultimately increased the validity of our findings (Kirkart, 2010) such that they were useful to the EJP director and broader EJP community. In the vignette above EJP students play a large role in determining what type of data should be considered valid, useful, and relevant to their experience. For example, one student interviewed stated:

When I first got incarcerated I had a ninth-grade education. I had a limited vision of the world. I had a 'ghetto mentality,' a 'get-them-before-they-get-you' type of attitude. I didn't know it at the time, but I had handicapped myself. ...[EJP] broadens your horizons. Instead of being stuck in tunnel vision, it opens this world up for you. (Education Justice Project alumni)

While we did collect recidivism data in the first phase of the evaluation, the majority of our efforts were focused on operationalizing the concept of an “educated man,” then we sought to examine the extent to which EJP students became educated men and what role EJP played in that transformation. Ultimately, we collected many different types of data, and recidivism was one component of a broader, more intentional effort in knowledge construction.

Education

An important component of social justice is education. Working in a context where program participants are among the most demonized in our society requires an explicit and vocal commitment to education. As such, spaces must be made to educate all stakeholders, including the evaluation team, who themselves are not free from bias or stereotyping. The vignette above depicts incarcerated students taking the opportunity to educate evaluators and evaluators in turn appreciating students’ knowledge and expertise. The students playfully remind and ‘call-out’ evaluators misconceptions about those incarcerated and life within prison. Ultimately, employing social justice values requires evaluative engagement that is deeply relational, educative, and strength-based. This approach is also community-focused and should be contextually meaningful to all interested stakeholders.

Conclusion

While efforts to increase access to higher education for incarcerated populations are laudable, the prominently examined outcomes of reduced recidivism and increased employment are narrowly defined. As such, I have proposed a social justice orientation to evaluation within the higher-education-within-prison context based upon my experiences as part of a research team that engaged in just this kind of social justice evaluation. A social justice orientation to evaluation has advocacy, relationship development, inclusion of underrepresented voices, and education as key intertwining tenets. With this approach, evaluation is positioned as a form of social inquiry that has the potential to be a force socially, culturally, and politically in addressing issues of inequity, power, and privilege by utilizing alternative methodologies to investigate outcomes above and beyond recidivism. The overarching aim is to broaden existing evaluation practice, specifically focused on higher education in prison, recognizing that epistemological and methodological pluralism and appropriateness, especially narrative inquiry in this context, should replace ‘gold’ as the new ‘platinum standard’ (Patton, 2014, p. 95). From this critical perspective, evaluation carries with it the potential for transformative change, both locally within communities and more broadly in terms of its potential for addressing complex socio-political issues and challenges.

Prison is an ecology filled with its own norms, rules, and relational tensions, which often mask deep-seated antagonisms and conflicts. Evaluators who implement a social justice approach would have to navigate through this context with patience, cautiousness, and dedication. Evaluators should advocate for narrative approaches within evaluations that can capture and portray stakeholders’ lived realities in ways that others can hear. For example, in the evaluation of EJP, we purposely chose to interview students to better understand their experience with the program instead of simply relying on surveys. Further, spaces must be created to allow dialogue and discussion surrounding the many tensions associated with providing educational access for those incarcerated.

This essay builds upon a growing body of knowledge that calls for evaluators to engage in relationships above and beyond those that are causal, to assign program value and quality on more than just quantitative outcomes, and to aspire to be advocates and change agents who can reconcile multiple political and social agendas (Boyce, 2017; Boyce &

Chouinard, 2017; Chouinard & Boyce, in press; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Cram & Hopson, in press; Greene, 1997, 2005; House, 2016).

I conclude by offering a few next steps. First, educators and community advocates working within the field of higher education in prison should be aware of and demand evaluation practices that align with their own epistemological and methodological values, and not those of the status quo. Second, researchers and evaluators should continue to explore additional outcomes metrics for success for higher-education-in-prison programs. Finally, higher-education-in-prison practitioners should seek evaluators and evaluation metrics that include voices of those often underrepresented, especially incarcerated program participants.

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