The Challenges of Reintegrating Young Offenders Back to their Communities: The Caseworkers Perspective.

Glenn Dawes: School Arts Social Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville.

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Abstract

In Queensland, young people who have interacted with the juvenile justice system are often required to complete court based orders under the supervision of professionals employed by Youth Justice Services. In addition to assisting young people to complete these orders caseworkers and youth workers employed by the service have a role in working with young people so they desist from crime and successfully reintegrate back to their communities. However the greatest challenges to achieving this goal lies in working with young people who have reoffending histories. This paper is based on the research outcomes of a two year longitudinal study with the professionals who were employed by one regional Youth Justice Service in Queensland. The study identified a number of challenges encountered by caseworkers such as working with involuntary clients, attempting to engage the families of some young offenders, providing culturally appropriate and sustainable programmes for individuals and encountering resistance from institutions due to effects of labeling young people as criminals. The paper concludes with a number of proposed initiatives to assist young people to successfully navigate the transition back to their communities.

Key Words: Reintegration, Reoffenders, Programmes, Labelling, Crime, Youth

What Works? Studies on Young Reoffenders and Reintegration

In recent years there has been an increased interest in offender re-entry back to their communities. The reintegration of offenders from correctional facilities or youth justice services takes on a whole new meaning when the offenders are adolescents. During adolescence young people are in the midst of various transitions such as the developmental transition from childhood to adult status which spans physical, cognitive, emotional and social conditions. Experimentation, risk taking, rebellion, impulsiveness, insecurity and moodiness often characterize this critical period of time (Altschuler & Brash, 2004). In addition to developmental transition, adolescent young offenders must contend with additional challenges associated with re-entering the community after completing custodial sentences or court based orders under the supervision of youth
justice services. The challenges that arise from these dual transitions are multifaceted and formidable.

The term “reintegration” therefore conveys a broad meaning in that it focuses on the individual’s ability to function in society in terms of their interactions with family members, peers and institutions such as schools. If this experience is to be successful there needs to be consideration around the challenges and strategies that can be employed to ensure young offenders do not return to the juvenile justice system.

In recent years there have been a number of studies conducted which have identified the barriers to successful reintegration, particularly for young people who have reoffending histories. For example, one study of juvenile recidivist offenders in the United States identified seven factors which may impede young people from making successful reintegrations back to their communities (Altschuler, 1998; Altschuler & Armstrong, 2001). These factors include: family and living arrangements; peer group influences; mental behavioural and physical health; substance misuse; vocational training and employment; leisure recreation interests; education and schooling. According to this study, re-entry therefore may be positively or negatively affected depending on the degree of support young people receive in relation to each factor. For example while some youth may return to supportive family environments, others may have no family or their home environment may be unsatisfactory due to violence or other risks.
There have been a number of responses across juvenile justice jurisdictions aimed at reducing the numbers of young people who reoffend. In the United Kingdom for example governments have allocated huge amounts of resources towards interventionist strategies based on the ‘what works’ framework for at risk youth and their families. The “what works” framework is based on a number of meta-analytic reviews conducted in the 1980’s and 1990’ and was derived from reanalysing data from individual studies on offender treatment programmes in order to record changes from pre-test to post-test results expressed as standard deviation units. The outcomes of the analysis resulted in the formulation of five core principles which were seen as being effective in reducing offending. These principles were based on providing interventions which were appropriate to the levels of risk, tackling the criminogenic need of the young person, programmes were community based and appropriately resourced with highly motivated and professionally trained staff (McGuire, 1995).

An example of this approach in practice is a longitudinal study in England funded by the Home Office which used the concept of reintegration as a metaphor for a journey where young people arrived at either “desirable” compared to “undesirable” destinations. This study focused on “at risk” students who had left detention and attended community based alternative education initiatives (AEI) in their communities (Kendall, Kinder, Johnson, Fletcher-Morgan & White, 2005). The cohort of 162 students had previously experienced exclusion from mainstream schools and possessed histories of re-offending behaviours. An overall aim of the research was to determine the effectiveness of the education initiatives in terms of its success in returning the students to mainstream education and
reducing their offending behaviours. To this end the study focused on the cohort during the year they attended the AEI as well as the following year when they had reintegrated back into their communities.

A major finding of the research was that offending behaviour reduced while students were attending the AEI but increased during the following year. A further outcome of the study found a correlation between “undesirable” destinations, for example, unemployment and custody, and levels of recorded re-offending. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of students with undesirable destinations reverted to re-offending behaviour compared to the third (38%) of students who arrived at desirable destinations, employment or a continuation with education, and did not re-offend. A major recommendation of this study was that a coherent package of permanent and stable pastoral support with sustained training/educational opportunities is required for young people when they leave the alternative education units and reintegrate back to their communities.

In a similar vein a number of state juvenile justice systems across Australia have embraced the “what works” evidence based framework. For example, agencies in Victoria have been evaluated to determine the effectiveness of their programmes for reintegrating young offenders (Day, Howells & Rickwood, 2004). This evaluation concluded that the greatest strength of “what works” is that it provides a model of differentiated case management whereby those young people who are at greatest risk of re-offending are given the most intensive individualised programmes. Day, Howells and
Rickwood argue that this approach maximizes the effectiveness of programmes and provides juvenile justice agencies with a justification for allocating resources.

Other large-scale studies in the Australian context supported the guiding principles contained within the “what works” framework. For example, a major review of the literature on youth justice crime prevention by the Australian Institute of Criminology (2002:36) concluded that intensive individualized programmes were effective. The review concluded that; “it is important to consider the targeting of programmes and how they are placed within a holistic case management approach for individuals”.

Additionally, other research focused on the effectiveness of community-based interventions for reducing juvenile re-offending. Several studies indicate that upon release from detention placing offenders in community-based intervention programmes can help reduce re-offending if the services are matched to the specific needs of young people (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Izzo & Ross, 1990). This finding is important because by engaging a variety of community-based agents in the intervention process, community-based programmes have the potential to address the risk factors that may result in young people re-offending (Spencer, & Jones-Walker, 2004).

However, more recent research indicates a growing skepticism about the “what works” framework. In an evaluation of the Scottish juvenile justice system McAra and McVeigh (2007) argued that meta-analyses are only as good as the quality of the data derived from the individual studies which were examined. The researchers stated that; “what works
principles taken up by policy-makers has been based on over-optimistic assumptions about what specialist programmes will be able to deliver in terms of crime reduction. Even the best and most rigorously conducted meta-analysis studies only ever claimed that re-offending could be reduced by a small amount” (p317). An additional criticism of this approach is the assumption that measures which appear to work in one system or jurisdiction can be successfully transplanted to another context. This overlooks the need to consider distinct cultural and social contexts within which such measures are to be implemented.

What Works in North Queensland?
From this discussion it would appear that interventionist approaches based on a meta-analysis of data such as “what works” may have some limitations for explaining how individual juvenile justice agencies adapt these frameworks to suit their specific cultural and social contexts. Furthermore it could be argued that the individual studies which contributed to the meta-analysis were exclusively quantitative in terms of the recorded changes to offenders based on the results of the pre-test and post-test components. By comparison there is little qualitative data which has attempted to capture the perceptions of key stakeholders who work on a daily basis with young offenders to ascertain the challenges they face in assisting youth to desist from crime and what they do to reintegrate them back to their communities.

This paper attempts to address some of these limitations by presenting the outcomes of a small-scale qualitative study about the challenges faced by twenty caseworkers who were employed in a North Queensland youth justice service. This youth justice service has a
jurisdiction which covers a wide area of Northern and western Queensland including the Indigenous community of Palm Island and other remote communities to Mt Isa. The young clients of the service are predominantly either of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent making up 65% of the total casework load of the service. The casework team consisted of 17 females aged between 22 and 30 years of age and three males. All of the caseworkers were Anglo-Saxon and had worked at the service on average for 4 years. The focus of the interviews was to ascertain the challenges they faced when working with predominantly Indigenous males who had reoffending histories.

This data is derived from a larger two year study which evaluated the youth justice service by also interviewing 10 youth workers and the manager of the service. In addition the larger research project focused on forty young people who had reoffending histories. Of these youth thirty-three were of either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. The young people were interviewed when they were the clients of the service and again after they had left the service to determine the factors which assisted or impeded their reintegration back to their communities.

Challenges in Working with Reoffenders: The Caseworkers Perspective

The perceptions of the caseworkers were couched within the “what works” framework and focused on two broad themes. The first related to the challenges of engaging at risk young people while the second examined the provision of appropriate community based programmes which were aimed at assisting young people in the process of reintegration.
Engaging At Risk Young People

The major challenge for the majority of caseworkers was engaging Indigenous young people who had reoffending histories and had spent a considerable amount of their lives interacting with the juvenile justice system. Caseworkers identified that a major difficulty in attempting to engage these youth was that they were working with involuntary clients who possessed ingrained views about the juvenile justice system and had little motivation or desire to re-engage with community based education or training programmes. There was a common view that many of these young people had self-labeled themselves as criminals and accepted that a significant part of their lives would be spent in the juvenile justice system. One case worker summed up the problems she encountered in working with young involuntary clients:

The biggest problem in working with some young people is that they are involuntary clients and do not necessarily want to engage in programmes such as education or preparing them for work. Breaching orders is not a big deal to some of them and talking to police or going to court is not a big deal because they have been there so many times.

Members of the casework team identified an additional challenge in attempting to engage some of the families of young people. There was overwhelmingly agreement among staff that unless the family was supportive the young person had less chance of desisting from crime and an increased possibility of returning to the juvenile justice system. There were a number of accounts where caseworkers described making visits to the homes of young people to encounter families which failed to provide basic standards of support such as safety, food and clothing for their children. In other cases there appeared to be a breakdown of basic rules and values and few positive adult role models who could mentor the youth into productive lifestyles as seen in the following interview:
Alcohol, yandie, there’s kids, young as ten smoking yandie over there. They also
don’t have any coping skills, any coping strategies whatsoever. I’d go into
families homes over there to talk to the parents, whatever, and you’d see young
ones you know two years old running around the back yard and they’re playing
but the way they play is they pick up rocks and throw them at each other or they
pick up a piece of wood and belt the house with it or, and that’s how they play.

A key response to engaging young people, their families and communities was to modify
the services existing framework to provide alternative strategies which were culturally
appropriate in order to enhance communication and cooperation between the service and
Indigenous communities. The majority of caseworkers acknowledged that they did not
possess the inter-cultural skills to communicate effectively with some Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander families. In addition gender was an issue for some female
employees who often found that their Indigenous male clients were more at ease in
communicating with Indigenous male employees.

One successful strategy for enhancing communication and trust with Indigenous
communities was achieved by the utilizing the services Indigenous youth workers to
liaise with the families of the young people. Youth workers provided transport for the
youth to attend the various programmes and often accompanied caseworkers when they
visited the homes of the young people. This produced a positive outcome for caseworkers
in their bid to re-engage the young people through direct contact with their families:

    I mean it makes it a lot easier if you take along somebody from an Indigenous
    background who knows the family or knows the community that you’re going to
    and you can just sort of you know they do your introductions for you because the
    family will often talk to them but also to you rather than just sort of ignoring you.
    Once you’ve got your foot in the door then you can sort of become more familiar
    to the family and that sort of thing so I think that’s been a big learning thing.

More experienced caseworkers who worked in Indigenous communities like Palm Island
observed that the service manager gave them a degree of autonomy in delivering the
service within a more flexible framework. This consisted of having additional time to consult with the community and gain their trust acceptance in order get an in-depth knowledge of family networks and develop appropriate programmes for the young people who lived on the island:

I mean if I had to put that back into the department framework, I’m sure I could but it would be a big squish. Working on Palm, I took the approach of letting the kids I worked with take me into the community, I didn’t go in there and say ‘this is who I am, this is what I’m doing, blah, blah, blah’, I let the kids lead that way for me. It takes a long time, yeah and like I said it wasn’t something I rushed because the community I feel had enough issues of their own to deal with. I was there to do a specific job, I went over there, done what I had to do, met people, deal with who I had to deal with and left. I didn’t stick my nose into the community business, I yes, I think that’s one thing too that the community respected me…

Locating Appropriate Community Based Programmes

There was a strong commitment among staff to provide appropriate and relevant community based programmes for the young people as a means of assisting them to successfully reintegrate back to their communities. A common problem encountered by the casework team was attempting to re-engage young people back into mainstream education. There were a number of accounts where young people encountered negative reactions from school principals and teachers based on their past interactions with the education system which included high levels of absenteeism, resistant behaviours and eventual exclusion from school. The difficulty in navigating a pathway for these youth back into mainstream education meant that these youth either failed to return to education or were forced to seek entry into other forms of education or training as summed up by one caseworker:

In one small town there’s only one state high school. So I’ve found that a lot of the young people out there, once they’ve been suspended or expelled from the state high school, they’ve really burnt their bridges in terms of re-engaging back into that system. We’ve had some young people who’ve gone through the TAFE option but I’ve found that, generally, once they have disengaged, they done so when they’re you know twelve, thirteen and just getting the motivation back into them to try and re-engage is often quite difficult. And getting the community to want to give those young people a second chance as well is often quite difficult. It’s the remote communities that we struggle with.
To address the challenge of re-engaging young people back into education or training programmes the service responded by creating additional pathways beyond mainstream schools which would allow young people to experience some success by enrolling in community based alternative education programmes. One successful initiative was the establishment of a partnership between the service and Education Queensland which culminated in the establishment of a school for young people who were completing their court based orders. The school was staffed by Education Queensland staff and service provided transport for each young person so they could attend. In addition an Aboriginal home liaison officer was employed to visit the homes of the young people and encourage family participation in the school. The positive outcomes of this initiative for a number of youth were described by a caseworker:

The programme has increased the self-esteem of these young people. They know now that they can finish maths or English and get a year ten certificate out of it. Its sometimes difficult to make these kids believe that they can do it, but the small classes with switched on teachers who don’t care about the kids past makes this place a better environment.

In addition to education and training initiatives the caseworkers believe that more community based programmes need to be developed to support young people as they prepare to complete their orders and re-enter society. A number of staff suggested that young people could be supported through the establishment of community-based support initiatives such as a mentoring support scheme where young people were matched with a supportive role mode in their community. The role of the mentor would be to meet regularly with the young person after they had completed their time at the service and assist them in overcoming any potential hurdles for making a successful transition back into society. An additional consideration was the employment of a community-based transition officer who would work with young people after they had completed their orders with the service to ensure they had access the accommodation, employment, training, education or agency support for drug and alcohol rehabilitation.
Conclusion
To conclude, this research presented the perceptions of caseworkers who worked with predominantly at risk Indigenous youth who had reoffending histories. The major challenges identified by these professionals was reengaging with the young people and their families to assist them to reintegrate back to their communities. A number of challenges also existed in reattaching these youth back into education or training programmes within their communities. It was recognized by the majority of interviewees that issues such as the behaviour and attitude of the individual needed to be addressed in order to encourage these young people to desist from crime and to experience success through the provision of culturally appropriate and relevant community based programmes.

To achieve this end the youth justice service has responded to earlier critiques of the “what works” framework by adapting it to suit the specific cultural and social context of northern Queensland. This framework is more flexible and it has evolved after a process of consultation with Indigenous communities resulting in the employment of Indigenous people to liaise with the families of young people. An outcome of this approach is the development and adoption of alternative strategies for maximizing young Indigenous people’s participation in key areas such as education and training. Additionally this framework is designed to short-circuit the cycle where Indigenous reoffenders are caught up in the juvenile justice system and label themselves as a criminal. In place of this, caseworkers are endeavoring to maximize the opportunities for these young people to experience success and increase their motivation and self-esteem.

The youth justice service has endeavored to liaise with community agencies to support the young people as they attempted to re-enter their communities. The casework team agreed that successful reintegration relies on the provision of community based support structures which dovetail with the programmes offered at the youth justice services. Programmes such as mentoring programmes, the provision of community based transition officers and additional alternative education and training settings are required
to offer support to young people particularly in the early stages of transition when they
are most vulnerable and likely to reoffend.

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Author: Glenn Dawes

Affiliation: School Arts Social Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, 4814.

Contact Details: Phone: 07-47814218
Email: Glenn.Dawes@jcu.edu.au