

Juvenile detention and educational engagement: A sociocultural analysis inspired by Vygotskij

Detenzione minorile e impegno educativo: un'analisi socioculturale di ispirazione vygotkiana

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Abstract

The detention of juvenile offenders poses significant risks to healthy psychosocial development and to a successful transition into adulthood, exposing an already vulnerable population to a range of adverse outcomes. This study addresses the issue through the lens of Vygotskij's sociocultural theory, which offers a conceptual framework for understanding how relationships with significant others and institutional environments shape young people's identity formation and personality development. Specifically, we examine the role of education within juvenile custodial settings. The findings suggest that active engagement in education has multifaceted benefits: beyond its well-documented positive effects on learning, it also reconnects young people to a normative developmental trajectory that may foster processes of desistance.

Keywords: juvenile offenders; Vygotskij's sociocultural theories; school attachment; motivation; desistance.

Sintesi

La detenzione dei minori autori di reato comporta rischi significativi per un sano sviluppo psicosociale e per una transizione efficace all'età adulta, esponendo una popolazione già vulnerabile a una serie di esiti sfavorevoli. Il presente studio affronta la questione attraverso la prospettiva della teoria socioculturale di Vygotskij, che offre un quadro teorico per comprendere come le relazioni sociali e i contesti istituzionali incidano sulla formazione dell'identità e sullo sviluppo della personalità dei giovani. In particolare, il saggio prende in esame il ruolo dell'educazione nei contesti di detenzione minorile. I risultati indicano che un coinvolgimento attivo nei percorsi educativi produce benefici molteplici: oltre ai noti effetti positivi sull'apprendimento, esso contribuisce a ricondurre i giovani verso una traiettoria di sviluppo normativo che può favorire i processi di desistenza.

Parole chiave: minori autori di reato; teorie socioculturali di Vygotskij; attaccamento alla scuola; motivazione; desistenza.

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1. Introduction

Access to the juvenile justice system serving a custodial sentence has a more severe derailing effect than entry into the system as an adult (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). For juveniles, incarceration is more harmful than curative. This sensitive population suffers adverse consequences when they are accommodated in a setting that does not properly tackle existing psychological, behavioural, educational and medical problems and often worsens them. Deprivation of liberty harms social and positive psychosocial development and the move to maturity, resulting in a reduced possibility of social reintegration after imprisonment successfully and with many unfavourable outcomes in adulthood (Lambie & Randell, 2013). Major life events such as obtaining an education, entering the labour market, and starting a family are closely linked, so experiences in youth can have profound, long-term effects on life trajectories during this vulnerable and crucial period (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). In addition, the role of education is of particular importance, as potential successes in education can be significant life events that can contribute to the 'turning point' of ending offending behaviour and desistance.

This is particularly important for young offenders, who, because of a conviction following the commission of a crime, may enter a period in their lives during imprisonment where the consequences of their decisions will affect them throughout their adult lives, for instance because of their success or failure in education.

According to Lev Vygotskij's Sociocultural theories, social interactions and cultural contexts have a fundamental role in shaping cognitive development (De Rosa, 2018). His theory provides a framework for understanding how relationships with key individuals and institutional contexts play a role in shaping the identity and personality of young people, or young offenders as in this study (Miller, 2011).

In our study, we examine the impact of custodial sentences on juvenile prisoners under the age of 18, with a particular focus on education.

Our research questions are:

1. what are the harmful effects of imprisonment on juveniles, and what are the theories behind them?
2. what is the relationship between Lev Vygotskij's sociocultural theories and juvenile offender's learning?
3. what are the educational and learning challenges of juvenile offenders?
4. what are the characteristics of juvenile offenders' attachment to school and motivation?
5. what initiatives can help the reintegration of juvenile prisoners into society?

We answer these questions based on the results of a review of international literature and research, thus providing an insight into the studies on this topic. With this paper, we intend to prepare for research in Hungary, as we plan to use questionnaires to survey juvenile offenders at correctional institutions in Hungary, assessing their attitudes toward education, learning, and the extent to which they bond with their teachers. We are also interested in discovering the relationship between juvenile offenders' attitudes toward education and learning and their sociocultural background, which is why we consider it important to thoroughly understand Vygotskij's theory. Before conducting the research, we aimed to identify, process, and summarize the most relevant international research in this field. For the literature search, we used Ebsco Discovery Service Search Engine and Google Scholar academic search engine in English, searching for the following keywords: "juvenile

delinquency” or “juvenile offenders” or “youth offenders” and “school attachment” or “school bonding” or “sociocultural theories” or “Vygotskij” or “motivation”. In addition to search engines, we also used a snowball-based search method. We primarily searched for literature in English and did not set any time limits. To write this study, we mainly used Western European, American, and Canadian books, studies available in scientific journals, academic reviews, and research summaries.

2. Theoretical background of negative impacts of imprisonment of juveniles

The adverse effects of imprisonment in adolescence are not only short-term but can also have negative consequences in adulthood in several areas. Loss of liberty and incarceration are associated with many adverse results in young adulthood, for example early transition from cohabitation to parenthood, socioeconomic deprivation, instability (marital instability, short working lives, and unwanted pregnancy) and perception of a loss of care and confidence on the part of both peers and parents (van der Put et al., 2007). For young people serving a custodial sentence, the road to adulthood is paved with challenges. Lower rates of school completion, graduation, job placement, and higher education enrollment lead to significant lifelong economic disadvantages (Altschuler & Brash, 2004; Arditti & Parkman, 2011). For young people serving custodial sentences, loss of social relationships and disruption of relationships with important people in their lives is a crucial problem (Biggam & Power, 2002). In addition to the loss of existing social contacts, a further problem in prisons is the high number of contacts with antisocial peers. This contributes to the negative experiences and future life results for imprisoned youths (Gatti et al., 2011). More contact with antisocial youth in prisons is associated with young people often becoming victims of abuse, including physical, verbal, affective and sexual abuse and bullying (Tie & Waugh, 2001). A large proportion of juveniles serving custodial sentences have mental health difficulties, including problems with anxiety, substance and alcohol misuse, suicidal thoughts and depression (Kiriakidis, 2008). The frequency of affective and conduct disorders in juveniles serving custodial sentences exceeds that of the general population (Thomas & Penn, 2002).

One of the explanations underlying the persistent disadvantage and negative influences is that, due to its timing, the imprisonment of adolescents has an impact on a range of crucial aspects of the development process of the young adult adolescent, such as developing independence, identity and practice of love relationships (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Incarceration can also negatively affect human capital and increase the likelihood of future criminality through two potential channels. It does this by providing both an incentive to accumulate criminal capital and an obstacle to the formation of social capital, which helps people find work, thereby reducing the likelihood of employment (Bayer et al., 2011).

There are several theoretical reasons to assume that juvenile arrests negatively affect educational progress and attainment, as will be shown in the next chapter. Our conceptual framework draws on Sampson and Laub’s (1997) theory of cumulative disadvantage, which incorporates theories of social control and labelling. Social control theory assumes that poor attachment to school exacerbates such problematic attitudes as early school leaving. If a student’s incarceration promotes disengagement and weak bonds to the school system, the imprisonment can contribute indirectly to early school leaving (Kirk & Sampson, 2013).

Other reasons include rational choice theory and status frustration. According to rational choice theories, juveniles may leave formal schooling after incarceration simply based on the perception that the stigmatisation of a criminal background is likely to prevent them from achieving their goals, realising the advertised advantages of schooling and realising the long-term added value of education (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997). Arrest can also be followed by drop-out due to the tension of Mertonian status, in which frustration arises in the individual due to the conflict between accepted norms and social reality. A criminal record can complicate the ability of a delinquent juvenile to compare favourably with his or her non-delinquent schoolmates and drop-out can resolve this conflict (Elliott & Voss, 1974). According to labelling theory, people officially labelled as “criminals” change how educational institutions treat students.

A fundamental assumption is that as soon as a person is stigmatised as deviant (by a criminal record), various kinds of disengagement processes are triggered, which facilitate the probability of future involvement in deviance (e.g. dropping out of school or reducing the likelihood of a successful adulthood) (Kirk & Sampson, 2013).

The situation is made more difficult by the fact that young people who are no longer in school age can be excluded from secondary school on the grounds of school safety and stigmatised by segregation in special educational programmes for troubled young people (Kirk & Sampson, 2011). The stigmatisation and segregation of students with criminal records has a negative impact on social contacts, which can lead to the negative attitude of teachers, parents and even positively behaved peers (Lemert, 1951). Sampson and Laub (1997) therefore stressed that formal sanctions act as a turning point. The negative outcomes of criminal behaviour and sanctions by the authorities reinforce the cumulative disadvantage, severely damaging the prospects of the individual. Specifically, the theory assumes a snowball effect: according to this view, criminal behaviour in adolescence and its adverse effects, such as stigmatisation or imprisonment, increasingly mortgage an individual's future, especially in later life chances, which are shaped by education and work opportunities (Sampson & Laub, 1997).

Incarceration is not only detrimental to future educational and employment opportunities, but the stigma attached to offending can also limit the access to a responsible re-entry into the community, making it difficult for young people to become useful members of society again after release (Mears & Travis, 2004). Young people re-entering the society can face a range of difficulties due to criminal records and exclusion from education or work and these negative experiences can also make it difficult to meet the challenges of probation (Christian & Walker, 2020). In addition to barriers to integration at school and at work, the stigma they face contributes to their already negative self-esteem. A previous record can lead to inner tensions and can even lead young people who have previously served a custodial sentence to doubt their ability to lead successful lives when they return to the community (Mears & Travis, 2004).

School, as a key institution for the socialization of juveniles, is responsible not only for developing the cognitive skills necessary for adult social roles, but also for transmitting the normative culture that governs interactions. Its potential influence in controlling juvenile delinquency, a power that has been recognized for long by criminologists (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Dreeben, 1968), cannot be underestimated. Having educational opportunities within penitentiaries provides several advantages, such as success in school, while commitment to learning is linked to a decreased chance of committing a crime and a decreased chance of disengagement from crime (Blomberg et al., 2011; Foley, 2001). Correctional education, if delivered correctly, can be an essential way to catch up on

previous learning shortcomings (Blomberg et al., 2012). Spending more time in correctional schools is correlated with improved school performance (Chung et al., 2011), juveniles with limited freedom are unable to truant from lessons and attend classes regularly and in more controlled, smaller groups (Jäggi et al., 2020).

3. The role of the social context in the juvenile justice system

It is worth examining the role of the social context in the juvenile justice system in achieving and fulfilling pedagogical goals (De Rosa, 2018). According to sociocultural theories, an individual's development and learning are closely linked to their social and cultural environment (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). In the case of juvenile offenders, learning processes are significantly influenced by family background, peer groups, and social norms (Miklósi, 2025).

In Vygotskij's view, society as a whole (though mainly parents and caregivers) contributes greatly to the intellectual development of individuals, and in his sociocultural theory he emphasizes the proactive participation of minors in the environment around them, interpreting their cognitive development as the result of a cooperative process. Jointly performed activities allow children to internalise the structures of thought and behaviour of the society around them, thus establishing a close link between the process of educational formation and socialisation (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978).

Vygotskij introduces the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which refers to the space where a person, through the interaction and assistance of others (caregiver, educator, teacher), can achieve an outcome in ways and at levels that he or she would not be able to achieve alone; it is in contrast to the zone of real development, which refers to the space that limits what a person can do alone (Ferreira & Pedrazzi, 2007, p. 63). In ZPD, adult individuals typically use verbal explanations and role models to demonstrate actions for problem solving and appropriate behaviour. According to Vygotskij, this social interaction provides a form of "scaffolding" (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). However, it is important to recognise that depending on social conventions, the type of scaffolding provided may vary culturally, these conventions being highly dependent on the legal, social and moral systems of a given society (Taylor & Workman, 2019).

Young offenders often lack of a supportive social environment, so their learning is aligned with deviant patterns (Kőszegi, 2013). Domestic violence, poverty, and social exclusion are factors that distort the socialization process (Bolyky & Sárík, 2023). According to Vygotskij's theory, language and communication play a key role in the development of thinking, which is why the development of the linguistic and social skills of young offenders is of paramount importance (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). Learning is not only about acquiring knowledge, but also about internalizing social norms, which can take a negative turn in a deviant environment. The influence of peer groups is particularly strong during adolescence, when identity formation takes place (Miklósi, 2025). If criminal patterns dominate young people's ZPD, their development will be aligned with these patterns (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). According to the sociocultural approach, the success of reintegration depends on young people acquiring new, prosocial interaction patterns. Education and upbringing are key in this regard, as they provide a structured framework for positive social learning (Miklósi, 2025). Vygotskij's concept of scaffolding is well suited to the education of offenders, as it provides gradual support for the development of competencies (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978).

During the learning process, the development of internal speech promotes self-control, which is essential for reducing deviant behavior (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). Sociocultural theories point out that social labeling and stigmatization can further reinforce deviant identity. Pedagogical interventions must therefore address not only cognitive but also social and emotional dimensions (Miklósi, 2025). The learning of young offenders cannot therefore be understood solely at the individual level, but must take into account the social context (Bolyky & Sárík, 2023). Vygotskij's theory helps us understand that learning and development interact with cultural tools and social relationships (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978).

Theories of transformative learning focus on how education can lead to significant personal change. This is an issue that Vygotskij also addresses, in prison education, transformative pedagogy encourages students to reflect on their experiences and assumptions, facilitating personal development and rethinking their future (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). This approach not only improves educational outcomes, but also contributes to reducing recidivism rates by empowering prisoners to imagine a different life after imprisonment (De Rosa, 2018).

Active participation in education helps to reintegrate juveniles into a normative developmental context, diverting them from committing delinquency and facilitating future chances of entry into learning, further education or employment (Cavendish, 2014). There is evidence from a range of research to support this. Research by Blomberg and colleagues (2012) shows that, following release, juveniles who perform better in school are more apt to continue their studies and re-enrol in school and not be arrested again within 1-2 years; those who are arrested again are considerably less likely to be charged with serious crimes. Another study of imprisoned juveniles in the state of Florida by Blomberg and colleagues (2011) found out that young people who successfully completed their education during imprisonment were more likely to be back to school after freedom and more likely to have abandoned their criminal careers. However, Leone and colleagues (2005) found out that the risk of reoffending increases when young people go back to their local environment and communities without the required education, basic, professional and interpersonal skills.

In prison education programmes, the scaffolding process introduced by Vygotskij is key, and can take different forms, such as cooperative learning activities where inmates work together or with a facilitator to solve problems or complete projects. This collaborative environment not only facilitates learning, but also builds social skills and community among participants, which is vital for successful reintegration into society (De Rosa, 2018).

The described improvements can directly counteract the process whereby people deprived of their liberty become accustomed to the negative values of the prison subculture, which become the guiding values in their lives (Harer, 1994). Conversely, inadequate instruction within the institution, or teachers who need to provide more support, can further discourage young people and set them back academically (Reed & Wexler, 2014).

Relationships with teachers can be significant for young people in custody who have few people in their lives who can provide positive social support as they are away from their living environment for longer time periods. Research has shown that relationships with teachers have a strong influence on student achievement in a number of areas. Young people who have better relationships with teachers are more engaged in learning, perform better, have lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992). Vygotskij also discusses the role of prison teachers in detail when he points out that they have the important task of assessing the ZPD of the pupils in order to tailor support and education effectively. This individualised approach helps prisoners to acquire new skills and knowledge that they would find difficult to master on their own, fostering a sense

of achievement and motivation (De Rosa, 2018). The teacher should take into account the learner's development at both levels, actual and potential, to promote levels of development and self-regulation through joint activities. What is essential in this process is not that those who know more transfer their skills to those who know less, but that the collaborative use of mediation forms contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills and cognitive development (Carrillo & Rivera, 2010; De Rosa, 2018; Salas, 2001).

Inspired by Vygotskij's principles, dynamic development integrates teaching and assessment to evaluate learners' potential development. Instructors can use this method in prisons to provide continuous feedback and adjust instruction based on individual development within the ZPD. This responsive approach helps ensure that educational interventions are effective and appropriate to the needs of individual learners.

Several findings from the general population show that solid teacher-student relationships and attachment increase school commitment and improve educational performance, although the relationship with performance is relatively weaker, based on research by Roorda and colleagues (2011). Teachers who are attentive to their students have a stronger sense of attachment to the educational system (Martin & Dowson, 2009). With a strong, supportive teacher-student relationship, teachers are more likely to identify specific indicators that can be warning signs for dropout and recidivism. In contrast, juvenile offenders were more disengaged from school if they felt that a teacher did not pay attention to them. According to Blue and Cook (2004), education that does not value, disregard, or question students' personalities alienates and creates resistance to learning, reducing school attachment. There are many reasons that can hinder the learning process of juvenile offenders, and we will address this issue in the next paragraph.

4. Educational and learning challenges of juvenile offenders

Despite strong empirical proof of the value of high-quality teaching, studies show that young people in prison often receive a lower quality of education than their peers in everyday settings (Blomberg et al., 2011). Prison facilities do not offer the specialised educational services that young people with significant educational, intellectual and behavioural difficulties often need when serving their sentences (Blomberg et al., 2011).

Several studies have shown that juvenile offenders as a group have poorer academic outcomes and higher drop-out rates than their non-criminal counterparts (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Tanner et al., 1999). According to research by Siennick and Staff (2008), criminal youth are significantly less likely than their non-offending counterparts to participate in higher education (76% vs. 88%) and are also less likely to earn a degree if they are enrolled (32% vs. 48%). Venable and colleagues (2005) found out in their article that adolescents who leave school before completing secondary school are three and a half times more likely to be arrested than their peers who finish high school. Failure at school also reduces the likelihood that young people will be successful in other developmental tasks, with effects that go beyond the issue of school achievement (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Due to the specific circumstances, professionals face several difficulties when organizing education for juvenile offenders.

Teachers are tasked with educating a diverse population of young people with a broad variety of learning abilities and prior schooling background. They must also support the learning process of many young people who have tended to experience failure and less success during their years in the formal school environment. A considerable proportion of

them have learning difficulties, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, or may be affected by the fact that they have emotional or behavioural disorders or mental health problems (e.g. depression), and these problems are often undiagnosed, misdiagnosed or inadequately treated (Brazzell et al., 2009). Learning about the educational outcomes and histories of juvenile detainees can help shed light on their prior learning practices and provide guidance on what other educational services can help them become more successful in the face of school challenges (Brazzell et al., 2009).

Teachers have to educate these individuals with limited funding, space, and resources. Like community education programs, many correctional education systems face more funding and resource constraints. In budget cuts, educational programs are often the first to be lost, either because they are not considered essential by correctional administrators or because they must prioritize statutory requirements such as adequate medical care and satisfactory living conditions. Inadequate funding limits the supply of materials for learning, facilities for VET programmes, ICTs, internet access, many other technologies, and even the availability of sufficient numbers of well-qualified trainers (Brazzell et al., 2009). There are ongoing challenges to the continuity of the program, including short detention periods, frequent transfers, and restrictions on the movement of detainees. For security or other reasons, they may be moved to a different institution without prior information, and the other institution might provide a different training programme. Financial difficulties, funding challenges and very frequent staff shortages, high turnover and vacant teacher posts can also disrupt the continuity of the school programme (Brazzell et al., 2009).

Institutional security concerns must be addressed in the organization of education. Prison administrators are responsible for the security of their facilities, and therefore very often limit prisoners' rights of access to different equipment and to prisoners. Seemingly simple things, like accessing to the internet or the provision of specific equipment or materials to students, can become almost impossible in prisons.

For security reasons, it can even be a struggle to get external tutors and volunteers in and out of the building, to get to the classrooms. It is challenging to place inmates in different security classes in the same classroom without problems, and even more complex problems segregated in security classes may require individualized tutoring (Brazzell et al., 2009).

Altschuler and Brash (2004) note for example that reintegration is also hampered if no opportunity is provided to develop the skills needed to navigate prosocial relationships. It is crucial that young people in custodial institutions are involved in developing these competencies, as reintegration into old peer networks has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to reentry into the community and a major obstacle to preventing offending (Abrams, 2006).

This emphasis on developing prosocial skills will make the audience feel engaged and committed to the cause. A flexible, situational approach can ensure a more successful delivery of education. Specific organizational strategies and curriculum adaptations in prison education can consider young people's short-term residence and relatively high rates of mobility.

Education programmes for young people in custody should assess the skills and knowledge of young people to obtain realistic information for further development. In addition, emphasis should be placed on measuring literacy skills and identifying young people with disabilities so that services can be planned for them (Bolson et al., 2004). Presentations and discussions in prison classrooms on a variety of life skills topics should not be overlooked, whether life skills focused on post-release life planning, career guidance, alcohol and drug

abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, citizenship rights and responsibilities, developing pro-social skills (Leone et al., 2005).

In view of the significant learning deficits of young people sentenced to prison, professionals should focus on literacy skills in juvenile correctional institutions, as this is the basis for any further learning process. Teaching in small groups and classes, providing teaching and learning daily are basic elements of effective educational programmes in juvenile correctional institutions (Brazzell et al., 2009). In addition, the curriculum must be aligned with relevant legislation, standards, and regulations. The school in the prison must also establish links with the young person's previous school and plays a vital role in maintaining ongoing contact with parents or guardians.

5. Exploring school attachment and motivation

School attachment is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that “encompasses behavioral, affective and cognitive factors activated in interactions and in the school environment, depending on how bonding of students to education in general, to rules, and to the values defended by the school, as well as to those who compose the school team and peers, is manifested” (Silva et al., 2016, p. 92). Education is one of the critical areas of concern for dually-involved youth; for juveniles, school attendance, school attachment, and school performance are protective against later criminal conduct (Cook & Hirschfield, 2008).

Hirschi (1969) sees crime as a consequence of weak social bonds. This is reflected in weak attachment to others and low participation in conventional social life. The role of schools is vital in this respect. The school is, in Hirschi's words (1969), a “highly conventional” (p. 110) institution, which means that attachment to the school must inhibit deviance.

Bonding theory and social control theory (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993) suggest that children who have strong ties to their school are less likely to be involved in crime; therefore, emphasis on strengthening school attachment is essential. As children become more attached to their school, the likelihood of deviating from social norms may decrease.

However, young people who are affected by the negative side-effects of living in several different social settings (e.g. moving more often, involvement in at-risk youth circles and experiencing stigmatisation), low school participation, increased learning problems and behavioural difficulties, are more likely to be suspended, to higher rates of school dropout and to disproportionate referrals to special education services (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). Addressing these challenges faced by at-risk youth is crucial and should motivate us to find effective solutions. Poor school attachment fosters deviant behaviour, which in turn requires disciplinary action within the institution, resulting in higher drop-out rates and worse student results. These circumstances can result in drop-outs and therefore harm juveniles, who do not benefit from education (Feijó & Assis, 2004).

In research, students' attachment to school is most often measured by their level of agreement with statements like “My teachers care about me” or “The students in my school help each other” (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011, p. 88). Assessing school attachment can be linked to measurable educational and behavioural results. Research has shown a significant correlation between, for example, adolescents' perceived level of school attachment and motivation to study, their propensity to misuse drugs or engage in aggressive or violent

conduct, and their chances of not attending school (Buckley et al., 2011; Chapman et al., 2011).

Problems with school attachment thus reinforce the gradual disengagement of students from school, which, together with other variables (e.g. personal life circumstances or social situation) can lead to delinquency. Delinquent behaviour is understood as a response to problems and frustrations in one's life (Janosz & Le Blanc, 1999).

In addition to examining the issue of school attachment, it is essential to address the issue of motivation. Several studies have confirmed that high individual aspirations are strongly associated with school achievement and that engagement in school motivation not only boosts achievement but also lowers the risk violent behaviour, truancy, dropout and drug misuse (Bryant et al., 2003; Roorda et al., 2011). Juvenile delinquents' success aspirations are strongly associated with future academic achievement (Chung et al., 2011). Moreover, motivation to succeed in school and successful re-engagement in the education system appear in quantitative and qualitative studies as explanations for social return (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002). However, juvenile delinquents report lower educational and occupational motivation levels (Chung et al., 2011), and several studies have focused on examining these aspirations and expectations in explaining the educational deficits of young offenders (Farkas, 2003). Contemporary beliefs about performance incentives do indeed emphasize the importance of achievement-related expectations in influencing performance-motivated decisions and attitudes, and much of the literature suggests that high levels of academic aspirations and feelings of personal effectiveness in relation to educational achievement are predictive of high academic achievement (Bandura, 1997).

Most research points to a correlation between lack of educational aspiration, low achievement and crime (MacLeod, 1987; Siennick & Staff, 2008), with much of the link between crime and education going far wider than the effects of these moral convictions (Tanner et al, 1999). However, commitment to education does not fully explain why delinquent young people demonstrate such poor learning achievement. A full understanding also needs to take into account the system of contexts in which achievement-oriented goals are set and function, or in which they may not be set and function (Chung et al., 2011; Tanner et al, 1999).

From the early years of puberty onwards, the future is an essential element of self-conception, and young people's conceptions of their potential selves in the future often include school performance (Oyserman et al., 2006). The possible self is not just a concept, but a powerful motivational resource that individuals can use to direct their own activities actions – for example, before a student can be supposed to complete high school, he or she must both appreciate the aim and have faith that he or she can achieve it (Bandura, 1997). Young offenders often fail to successfully conceptualise a future-centred or potential self-associated with school and work opportunities, highlighting the intriguing motivational aspects of the study.

Oyserman and Markus (1990) concluded in research that antisocial juveniles did not believe that they would have a career in the future, and only 14-19% expected to have success in education. So far, few research has explored the barriers to self-concept development in young delinquents and little is known about how to support these adolescents in developing a strong self-concept for the future.

Optimism about the future is associated with adolescents' perceptions of their educational performance (Wigfield et al., 2006). Adolescents who have high expectations of success at school and at work also showed better performance six months later, and success

expectations may explain the perceived opportunity structure's indirect effect on school achievement. Such findings indicate that specific education and work-related beliefs (e.g. community members' access to achievements) can be expected to influence the success of future learning by forming young people's aspirations (Mickelson, 1990). In this case improving both educational and employment possibilities for young people may be a highly effective method of increasing motivation in engagement among those at risk of low educational achievement.

These results confirm Oyserman's (2007) view of self-concept as including both personal and social identity. Oyserman argues that social identification is based on group-centred traits, and includes social aspirations about the school performance and occupation of members within the peer group. Thus, young people who value learning believe that they have a greater chance of being successful in education and employment, and that more academic and work opportunities are open in their communities (Chung et al., 2011).

6. Conclusion

The problems experienced by young people serving custodial sentences cause significant lifelong economic disadvantage because they experience disruption in the transition to early adulthood, making it difficult for them to start independent lives. The difficulties are not only linked to finishing school and finding a future job but also leave their mark on the social relationships they already have, while their future life choices are affected by their increased contact with antisocial people. Because of these effects, they become more distant from prosocial participation in society and from the possibility of giving up offending. This is furthermore compounded by the fact that these young people are often victims of abuse and abuse in institutions, have higher rates of mental health problems and are more at risk of suicide or attempted suicide. These circumstances are closely related to the observation, also stressed by Vygotskij, that "the individual is inseparable from the society in which he lives, because it mediates the forms of behaviour and organisation, the knowledge that the subject must internalise; thus, the development of the individual takes place in the society in which he lives" (Ferreya & Pedrazzi, 2007, p. 59). Indeed, the individual is not a passive reflection of his environment but, on the contrary, is always created and exists as a result of the relationship with others, as an integral part of society (De Rosa, 2018).

The application of Vygotskij's theories in prison education offers a solid framework for enhancing adult learning through peer interaction, personalised support and transformative practices. By focusing on ZPD and applying scaffolding techniques, educators can significantly influence the cognitive development and personal growth of prisoners, ultimately helping their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

A large body of evidence suggests that delinquent youth exhibit a variety of low academic outcomes, including poor engagement and high dropout levels (e.g. Moffitt et al. 2002). School failure is associated with significant developmental outcomes, including high risk of reoffending, mental health difficulties, unemployment, and financial fragility in the future (Kasen et al., 1998). It is common knowledge that young people in trouble with the authorities have a variety of problems at all levels of school, including weak attachment. These youth are typically associated with poor bonding with their educators, low academic ambition and poor engagement in school activities as compared to law-abiding youth in the schools (Oliveira, 2002).

A key to tackling this complex problem is to ensure that these young people are appropriately involved in education, as criminologists have long recognized the potential influence of schools in controlling juvenile delinquency and helping young people to stop offending. Active participation in education, in addition to providing young people with possible credentials and skills, helps to re-engage them in a normative developmental context that may contribute to desistance (Blomberg et al., 2012; Cavendish, 2014; Leone et al., 2005). However, the quality of education these juveniles receive is different, as they are associated with higher drop-out rates and poorer academic outcomes than the average population. It is also essential to examine the issue of school attachment because, as Hirschi (1969) noted, delinquency is a consequence of weak social ties. As in the average population, young people with strong relationships with their teachers have better mental health outcomes and fewer risky behaviours, and this is even more true for young people serving time in custody, who have far fewer people who can provide positive social support (McNeely & Falci, 2004). At the same time, it is much more challenging to organize an adequate quality of education in prisons, as many of the limitations presented stem from the fact that the prison is not primarily a school. Most of the prison managers put safety first and foremost. The challenge for teachers in these institutions is working within the constraints this creates. They must also show in their work that teaching activities can contribute to institutional security rather than jeopardizing it. Learning can engage and involve learners who might otherwise spend their time idle, and education can promote pro-social behaviour (Brazzell et al., 2009).

In the post-release period, aftercare programs, comprising involvement in community supervision, are critical to achieving a smooth reintegration and reducing the risk of future involvement in the criminal justice system (Mulvey, 2011). According to Altschuler (2008), transitional services are needed to guarantee the effectiveness of aftercare, including the coordination of aftercare and residential services, ensuring the continuity of care, family engagement and community support planning. This is especially crucial as the demands for success in secure community environments may be different and involve various elements of the environment that influence attitudes differently (Altschuler, 2007).

There are several solutions for addressing the learning problems of juvenile offenders. First, reintegration programs that focus on developing social skills and learning prosocial patterns should be given priority. Second, scaffolding and individual development plans used in education can help reduce learning gaps. Thirdly, social pedagogical interventions and interprofessional cooperation provide complex support that promotes the development of norm-oriented behavior (Miklósi, 2025). Focusing on the educational challenges of juvenile offenders is crucial because these measures help juvenile offenders develop essential skills and behaviors that support successful reintegration and reduce the risk of reoffending.

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