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Mapping the Field: Highly Cited Articles in the Journal of Correctional Education

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the ten most highly cited articles published in the Journal of Correctional Education (JCE) to identify and understand the most dominant themes, trends and research topics shaping the field of correctional education. Using a citation-based sampling strategy and qualitative content analysis, this literature review highlights the main focus of highly cited research on reducing recidivism, improving academic and vocational outcomes, and supporting personal development among incarcerated individuals. The findings reveal that correctional education is consistently associated with positive outcomes for incarcerated individuals, cost savings, and enhanced reintegration prospects. Guided by the research questions - What are the dominant themes or topics explored in the ten most cited articles in the Journal of Correctional Education? and - To what extent do the most cited articles engage with practice, policy, or theoretical development in correctional education? - this study provides insights into the scholarly contributions that have most significantly influenced the field.*

Key words*: Correctional education, education, incarcerated individuals, literacy.*

1. Introduction

The *Journal of Correctional Education* (JCE), published by the Correctional Education Association (CEA), is a cornerstone of scholarly discourse in the field of correctional education. The CEA, founded in 1945, is a longstanding non-profit professional association dedicated to supporting researchers, educators and administrators working with incarcerated individuals in education. It is the largest affiliate of the American Correctional Association (Correctional Education Association [CEA], n.d.-a;).

This publication traces its roots back to the first issue, which was published in 1949, the journal has evolved through several iterations - including a mid-1980s relaunch - and remains a quarterly, peer-reviewed publication distributed as a core membership benefit of CEA (CEA, n.d.-b). Through this rich history, JCE has established itself as the most widely cited and influential journal in this particular discipline, reflecting its prominence among both academic researchers and practitioners engaged in correctional education in supporting some of education's most vulnerable and marginalized populations (CEA, n.d.-b; JSTOR, n.d.).

Given these significant scholarly contributions to this important field, examining the 10 most cited articles from JCE offers a valuable lens into the major themes and intellectual currents that have shaped this unique field. This study uses citation impact as a guiding metric to illuminate which topics have attracted sustained attention and influence within correctional education scholarship. In this context, the central research question - "What are the dominant themes or topics explored in the 10 most cited articles in the *Journal of Correctional Education*?" - aims to trace the contours of academic and practical significance in the field and better understand these major themes found within this leading journal.

Conducting a literature review of the most cited articles in a scholarly journal offers a valuable insight into the intellectual development and influential conversations within a field that includes highly vulnerable

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populations of students. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, a literature review is foundational in understanding the "major findings, themes, and methodological approaches" that define and understand a body of research (p. 30). Focusing specifically on highly cited articles allows researchers to identify works that have significantly shaped the discourse, informed policy, and guided future studies for researchers but also directions for professionals. This form of review not only synthesizes the existing knowledge base but also helps uncover prevailing gaps, biases, or silences in the literature (Boote & Beile, 2005). By analyzing the most cited articles in the *Journal of Correctional Education*, this review highlights the key themes and trends that have resonated most with researchers and practitioners, providing a benchmark for understanding both the history and current trajectory of correctional education scholarship.

2. Research Questions

1) What are the dominant themes or topics explored in the 10 most cited articles in the *Journal of Correctional Education*?
2) To what extent do the most cited articles engage with practice, policy, or theoretical development in correctional education?

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of the 10 most cited articles published in the *Journal of Correctional Education* (JCE). The purpose of this analysis is to identify and synthesize the dominant themes or topics represented in these highly influential works. A citation-based sampling strategy was used to prioritize articles with the highest impact in the field, as determined by frequency of citation.

4. Data Collection

The 10 most cited articles for this study were identified using the *Journal of Correctional Education* overview page on SciSpace (https://scispace.com/journals/journal-of-correctional-education-cvojwlty), a research platform that aggregates and ranks scholarly articles by citation count. This resource provided a clear and replicable method for identifying high-impact publications within the journal. On Monday, September 15, 2025, I reviewed the ranked list of articles and selected the top 10 based on total citation count, as displayed on the platform. For each article, key metadata including title, author(s), publication year, and citation count were also recorded (see Table 1).

To enhance the reliability of the selection process, the citation data obtained from SciSpace was cross-referenced with Google Scholar and Scopus to confirm the accuracy and ensure that the selected articles were indeed among the most cited in the journal. Full-text versions of the articles were retrieved through institutional library access. This process ensured a consistent and systematic approach to the data collection, supporting the study's goal of identifying the most dominant themes within the 10 most influential literature in the field of correctional education.

It should also be noted that the publication dates of the ten most highly cited articles are an important factor in understanding their influence within the field of correctional education. Citation counts naturally accumulate over time, meaning that older publications will likely have had more opportunities to be referenced in subsequent research, policy reports, and practice-oriented literature (Tahamtan et al., 2016). As a result, newer articles may not appear among the most highly cited despite offering innovative and important perspectives, simply because they have not yet had sufficient time to circulate within these scholarly networks. This temporal dimension highlights the importance of interpreting citation data with caution and care, recognizing that while citation counts reflect impact, they are also shaped by the longevity of a publication in the academic conversation.

5. Introduction

A literature review is a vital element of the research process because it allows scholars to situate their work within the broader academic space. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that reviewing the literature helps researchers identify and understand what has already been studied, recognize trends and patterns, and uncover literature gaps that warrant further exploration and research. This process not only refines research questions and guides methodological approaches but also demonstrates how a study contributes to existing knowledge.

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In this way, a well-developed literature review ensures that research is original, purposeful, meaningful and firmly anchored in scholarly discourse given a specific topic.

Understanding these highly influential articles in this field is important for advancing both research and practice. In the field of correctional education, highly cited articles represent the studies that have shaped conversations, guided policy, and influenced program development over time. By examining and understanding these works, researchers can identify the dominant themes, methodological trends, and theoretical frameworks that have received the greatest attention in the field. This process answers the "so what" question by demonstrating that reviewing highly cited literature is not only about organizing or cataloguing past research but also about mapping the intellectual terrain that continues to define correctional education. Such an analysis provides insight into where scholarly consensus exists, where gaps remain, and how future research can build on established foundations to address ongoing challenges given this research area.

Researching correctional education presents unique barriers that complicate access and knowledge production. Scholars note that restrictive institutional policies, limited access to incarcerated populations, and ethical considerations often make it difficult to conduct robust research studies (Wakai et al., 2009; Esperian, 2010). Correctional settings are further shaped by safety concerns and administrative priorities that can restrict data collection and influence research agendas (Wakai et al., 2009). These challenges contribute to gaps in the literature and highlight the importance of carefully examining the research that has been successfully published in order to understand the state of the field.

Table 1. Articles reviewed.

	Title	Author(s)	Year of Publication	Number of Citations
1	Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison.	James S. Vacca	2004	288
2	Post-secondary correctional education and recidivism: a meta-analysis of research conducted 1990-1999	Cathryn A. Chappell	2002	174
3	The Impact of an Intensive Program To Increase the Literacy Skills of Youth Confined to Juvenile Corrections.	William Drakeford	2001	105
4	Choral Singing and Prison Inmates: Influences of Performing in a Prison Choir	Mary L. Cohen	2009	91
5	The Impact of Career and Technical Education Programs on Adult Offenders: Learning behind Bars.	Howard R. D. Gordon, Bracie Weldon	2003	91
6	The Effect of Prison Education Programs on Recidivism	John H. Esperian	2010	83
7	The Effect of Earning a GED on Recidivism Rates	John Nuttall, Linda Hollmen, E. Michele Staley	2003	80
8	Humanizing Prisons with Animals: A Closer Look at "Cell Dogs" and Horse Programs in Correctional Institutions	Christiane Deaton	2005	79
9	The Effectiveness of Adult Basic Education and Life-Skills Programs in Reducing Recidivism: A Review and Assessment of the Research	Dawn K. Cecil, Daniella A. Drapkin, Doris Layton MacKenzie, Laura J. Hickman	1999	69
10	Does Correctional Education Have an Effect on Recidivism?	Mitchell Jancic	1997	64

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6. Literature Review

Since 1990, research has indicated that incarcerated individuals who participate in educational programs during incarceration are less likely to return to prison upon release (Vacca, 2004). Effective programs address various skills such as social skills, artistic development, and emotional regulation, while also incorporating academic, vocational, and social education (Vacca, 2004). Program success is influenced by institutional attitudes, overcrowding, and funding, while literacy-focused, student-centered approaches that recognize diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds can enhance participation and rehabilitation outcomes (Vacca, 2004).

Post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) has been linked to reductions in rates of recidivism, as demonstrated by a meta-analysis of studies from 1990 to 1999 (Chappell, 2002). The findings reveal a statistically significant positive correlation between PSCE and reduced rates of reincarceration, with program completion, length of follow-up, and use of control groups serving as moderators that strengthen this effect (Chappell, 2002). These results support the continued funding and implementation of PSCE programs as a strategy for lowering recidivism (Chappell, 2002).

Participation in prison-based choirs has also been explored as a method to improve incarcerated individual well-being, comparing incarcerated individuals who sang with those who did not (Cohen, 2009). While composite well-being scores did not differ significantly between groups, subscale analyses revealed improvements in emotional stability, sociability, happiness, and joviality among participants performing outside the correctional facility (Cohen, 2009). Qualitative reflections also suggested a growing sense of well-being linked to choir participation, highlighting the potential therapeutic benefits of these creative program opportunities (Cohen, 2009).

Educational programs during incarceration appear to reduce recidivism rates, as evidenced by data from Huttonsville Correctional Center (Gordon & Weldon, 2003). Vocational program completers had a recidivism rate of 8.75%, combined vocational and CED participants had a rate of 6.71%, while non-participants had a rate of 26% (Gordon & Weldon, 2003). These findings suggest that correctional education, particularly when combined with career and technical training, contributes to rehabilitation and public safety, emphasizing the need for adequate funding and quality educational offerings (Gordon & Weldon, 2003).

Investing in prison education has financial and social benefits, as demonstrated by a study examining GED and degree attainment at the College of Southern Nevada (Esperian, 2010). Education programs were found to reduce recidivism dramatically, suggesting that states can achieve cost savings by funding incarcerated individuals education instead of long-term incarceration (Esperian, 2010). This shows the need to invest in educational programs for incarcerated individuals can provide sustainable financial benefit to the community at large (Esperian, 2010). This provides strong evidence for the economic and rehabilitative advantages of correctional education in general (Esperian, 2010).

GED attainment has been linked to lower recidivism rates in the New York State Department of Correctional Services (Nuttall, Hollme & Staley, 2003). Incarcerated individuals who earned a GED while incarcerated returned to custody at significantly lower rates within three years compared to those who did not (Nuttall, Hollme & Staley, 2003). This study showed the effect being particularly significant for offenders under age 21 at release (Nuttall, Hollme & Staley, 2003). These findings reinforce the importance of providing educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals as a means of reducing future incarceration (Nuttall, Hollme & Staley, 2003).

Alternative correctional education approaches and programs, such as animal-assisted programs, aim to address incarcerated individuals' human needs while offering vocational training (Deaton, 2005). Programs where incarcerated individuals train service dogs or work with horses demonstrate therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits, impacting the incarcerated individuals, the institution, and the broader community (Deaton, 2005). These initiatives highlight the potential for correctional education to support personal development beyond academic and vocational skills (Deaton, 2005).

Adult basic education (ABE) and life skills training programs have also shown promise in reducing recidivism among offenders, although the methodological rigor of studies varies (Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie & Hickman, 1999). Evaluations meeting minimum standards indicate that ABE can positively influence post-release outcomes, while life skills programs teach essential competencies for everyday functioning (Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie & Hickman, 1999). Continued rigorous evaluation is necessary to determine the full

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effectiveness of these commonly offered correctional programs (Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie & Hickman, 1999).

Correctional education consistently demonstrates an effect on recidivism across multiple studies and settings (Jancic, 1997). GED completions, participants in academic and vocational programs, and post-secondary students all recidivated at lower rates than non-participants, highlighting the rehabilitative value of education in various correctional contexts (Jancic, 1997). These findings emphasize that investing in incarcerated individuals' education provides both societal benefits and cost savings compared to confinement without intervention (Jancic, 1997).

Intensive literacy programs in juvenile detention centers have been shown to produce positive gains in oral fluency, grade placement, and attitudes among participants (Drakeford, 2001). A multiple baseline study with African-American adolescents indicated measurable improvements, suggesting that targeted educational interventions can support academic and personal development in detained youth (Drakeford, 2001). These results highlight the potential for focused literacy programs to contribute to rehabilitation and skill-building within correctional settings (Drakeford, 2001).

7. Discussion

The analysis of the ten selected studies reveals several dominant themes in correctional education research studies. A primary focus across the literature is the impact of educational participation on recidivism reduction. Multiple studies indicate that incarcerated individuals who engage in educational programs, including adult basic education, GED attainment, vocational training, and post-secondary education, demonstrate lower rates of return to custody compared to non-participants (Vacca, 2004; Chappell, 2002; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Nuttall, Hollme & Staley, 2003; Jancic, 1997; Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie & Hickman, 1999). The literature emphasizes not only academic learning but also the development of social skills, emotional regulation, and vocational competencies, suggesting that education programs serve a dual function of skill development along with the rehabilitation benefits (Vacca, 2004; Deaton, 2005).

Another significant theme is the diversity of educational modalities and interventions within correctional settings. Studies highlight traditional academic programs, literacy-focused interventions, life skills training, choir participation, and animal-assisted programs as avenues to enhance incarcerated individual well-being, engagement, and personal development (Cohen, 2009; Deaton, 2005; Drakeford, 2001). These findings underscore the growing recognition that correctional education encompasses both cognitive and psychosocial dimensions, which may interact to improve post-release outcomes.

The literature also addresses practical and economic considerations in correctional education. Programs are identified as cost-effective, particularly when considering the reduced financial burden associated with lower recidivism rates (Esperian, 2010). Studies suggest that investment in incarcerated individuals' education can generate both social and economic benefits, which is critical for informing policy and funding decisions. This emphasis reflects the connection between research evidence and applied policy discussions regarding resource allocation within correctional systems (Esperian, 2010; Gordon & Weldon, 2003).

In terms of theoretical engagement, most of the studies reviewed adopt an applied, empirical approach with limited explicit theoretical framing. Research primarily situates itself within rehabilitation and human development frameworks, emphasizing the potential for education to transform offender attitudes, skills, and societal reintegration prospects (Deaton, 2005; Vacca, 2004; Jancic, 1997). While theoretical discussion is less prominent than practical evaluation, the findings contribute indirectly to theories of offender rehabilitation and learning within institutional contexts by providing evidence of education as a mechanism for behavioral and social change.

Overall, the ten most cited articles in the *Journal of Correctional Education* demonstrate a clear focus or orientation toward evidence-based practice, emphasizing measurable outcomes such as recidivism, academic achievement, and personal development. Policy implications are evident in discussions of funding, program implementation, and the societal benefits of education for incarcerated populations. The research also collectively supports the notion that correctional education is both a rehabilitative tool and a practical strategy for improving public safety and incarcerated individuals' reintegration.

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8. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper consistently demonstrates that correctional education has a positive impact on reducing recidivism, enhancing personal development, and promoting successful reintegration into society. Programs that combine academic, vocational, and social-emotional learning not only can equip incarcerated individuals with employable skills but also foster emotional regulation, social competence, and a sense of purpose which is obviously very important (Vacca, 2004; Deaton, 2005; Cohen, 2009). To better support these incarcerated populations, it is essential to prioritize student-centered, individualized education programs that acknowledge diverse learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and individualized needs, while also ensuring adequate resources are available such as funding, staffing and other resources and opportunities (Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Esperian, 2010). Expanding access to a variety of interventions, including literacy, life skills, creative, and therapeutic programs, can further enhance rehabilitation outcomes and facilitate smoother transitions to society from being incarcerated. Overall, a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to correctional education represents a critical pathway for promoting rehabilitation, public safety, and meaningful and successful social reintegration (Chappell, 2002; Jancic, 1997).

Furthermore, with the examination and analysis of these articles, it is clear that a rehabilitative approach to supporting incarcerated individuals is prominent throughout all of these pieces of scholarly research. This shows a clear positive in these findings that we, as researchers, educators, and others who are in contact with incarcerated individuals, must take an approach of support and skill-building to make impactful and positive changes for incarcerated individuals. Adopting a Rogerian, person-centered approach further reinforces this perspective by emphasizing empathy, unconditional positive regard, and respect for the inherent worth of each individual (Rogers, 1951). By focusing on understanding incarcerated individuals' unique lived experiences, strengths, and needs, educators and practitioners can foster a supportive learning environment that promotes self-efficacy, personal growth, and meaningful rehabilitation outcomes, aligning closely with the rehabilitative goals highlighted across these studies.

This review of highly cited articles in the *Journal of Correctional Education* highlights the foundational themes that have shaped this important field, but it also underscores the important areas that require greater scholarly attention in the future of research in this area. The topic of correctional education serves some of society's most vulnerable populations, yet research in this context remains constrained by potentially limited access, resources, and various institutional barriers as previously discussed. To move the field forward, researchers should not only continue to examine the effectiveness of educational programs within these unique contexts but also explore issues of equity, accessibility, and long-term support for incarcerated students and learners. Finally, a greater investment in resources and sustained research efforts are essential to ensuring that correctional education can fulfill their potential in rehabilitation and education to provide meaningful opportunities for growth and reintegration.

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