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## The Case for Reflective Practice in Alternative and Correctional Education

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## The Case for Reflective Practice in Alternative and Correctional Education

### Abstract

Most alternative and correctional educators have not had systematic access to relevant knowledge of their field, its history and literature, or parallel programs in other jurisdictions. As a result, they tend to accept whatever strategies happen to be current at their site. This problem is associated with the lack of teacher education programs specific to the field of alternative and correctional education. The purpose of this article is to prompt reflection regarding key principles of teaching, learning, and education service delivery structures. Axiomatic application of any principles can lead to misconceptions that reflective practice can help correct. The theme of the article is that most educative principles can be useful when applied in moderation or in response to identified needs or contexts—but a “one size fits all,” or “this is always correct” orientation is usually not appropriate.

### Keywords

reflective practice, correctional education

### Author Statement

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## **The Case for Reflective Practice in Alternative and Correctional Education by Dr. Thom Gehring and Dr. Randall Wright**

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### **Abstract**

Most alternative and correctional educators have not had systematic access to relevant knowledge of their field, its history and literature, or parallel programs in other jurisdictions. As a result, they tend to accept whatever strategies happen to be current at their site. This problem is associated with the lack of teacher education programs specific to the field of alternative and correctional education. The purpose of this article is to prompt reflection regarding key principles of teaching, learning, and education service delivery structures. Axiomatic application of any principles can lead to misconceptions that reflective practice can help correct. The theme of the article is that most educative principles can be useful when applied in moderation or in response to identified needs or contexts—but a “one size fits all,” or “this is always correct” orientation is usually not appropriate.

### **Introduction**

The College of Education has embraced a conceptual framework based on studies of wisdom and exemplary teaching. Wise educators possess rich subject matter knowledge, use sound professional judgment, demonstrate a practical knowledge of context and reflect on professional practices and their consequences (Arlin, 1990, 1999). In prisons and alternative settings teachers are often unprepared to teach in prison. This fact, coupled with the prison and alternative school culture, challenges teachers' abilities to reflect on their experience and the context in which they work. Teachers usually “fall into” teaching in prisons and as a result, many suffer and never fully recover from the disorienting and often debilitating experience of “culture shock” (Wright, 2005). These initial experiences limit teachers' professional development; some remain forever strangers, marginals, outsiders, tourists, sojourners or rebels. (While these are important identity positions in any oppressive environment they also, like any entrenched identity, limit possibilities for institutional collaboration for the benefit of students and teaching staff.) Without formalized professional development programs and systematic access to relevant knowledge of their field in these alternative settings, teachers adopt a survivor mentality seeking and absorbing any advice that will lead them out of the confusion; they tend to accept whatever strategies happen to be current at their site. For teachers who do survive and therefore demonstrate a practical knowledge of the context, their understanding is often limited. They are highly prone to the “groupthink” of other teachers who readily—and perhaps narrowly—prescribe the social, task or procedural norms for “making it on the

inside” (Wright, 2006a). For security reasons, they dare not go against the norms of veteran teachers who also have learned to survive without professional support from the “outside.” Their practical knowledge of the institutional context therefore, may be of disservice because it reflects the taken-for-granted principles of others which limit and prescribe professional norms. These assumptions arise in prisons and alternative settings (such as juvenile halls) in a culture characterized by the attributes of vigilance, insecurity, power, surveillance, control and fear that provides little opportunity for the novice and even veteran teacher to reflect on their professional context. As a result, local knowledges are bestowed with the status as “the state of the art,” thereby robbing teachers of their agency as producers as well as consumers of their professional cultures.

Nevertheless, teachers do not simply reproduce the cultures in these settings—they create resistant subcultures in these setting—schools often are an “island of sanity in a storm of psychosis” (Reagen and Stoughton, 1976, p. 28). Moreover, it is fair to say that teachers experience and exercise more freedom than we might suspect. Some (Muth, 2006, Yantz, 2006, and Wright, 2006b) have argued that teachers live in the social and professional borderlands created along the edges of inmate and official culture, the prison and the community and by the constantly negotiated occupational roles as guards and teachers. This borderland experience is accentuated by a divided loyalty to the initial professional practices and affiliations that contributed to their professional accreditation in university and public schools for example, and their current work in the prison and alternative settings. Because of who and where they teach, they realize there is a gap in their professional training. These settings appear to require different skills and practical knowledge. For some, their marginality results in hybrid professional practices that are innovative, empowering and transformative (Wright, 2005). However, many teachers are not so resistant to the local disciplinary cultures, groupthink phenomena and so unknowingly, they adopt principles that underscore—and thereby perpetuate—the unreflected and prevalent social and cultural dynamics of their schools.

This article attempts to uncover some of the principles that shape the professional consciousness of teachers in these settings so as to promote reflection on their professional practices and their consequences.

The six principles addressed herein are that (a) practice is useful and theory is useless, (b) students benefit only from “hands on” learning, (c) incremental classroom experiences that enhance student success and self concept are the only way to meet student learning needs, (d) the best way to structure teaching and learning is consistent with a “what works?” or “model programs” perspective, (e) correctional education is so unique that theories and practices developed in related settings are highly suspect, and (f) heroic teachers, who always demonstrate a “can do attitude” and are willing to do what is required for the program, should be assigned to work with the neediest students. The article ends by recommending that reflective practice can lead to education that is individualized and contextualized, rather than unidimensional or dogmatic. The authors hope reflection and dialogue about these principles will prompt consideration of how we would like to see the specialized field of alternative and correctional education develop and mature.

## Definitions of Terms

Alternative and correctional educators are vulnerable to many pressing constraints: resource inadequacy because our students do not represent a powerful constituency, institutional anti-education hostility, a public that sees inmates as victimizers without recognizing that they are also victims, and so forth. These problems are exacerbated by the lack of appropriate training for alternative and correctional educators, their resultant unfamiliarity of the history and literature of their own field, and lack of professional networking opportunities. Teachers are often mired in the demanding immediacy of front-line teaching. Daily problems are compounded by the bustle of open entry-open exit programs, competition with other correctional programs for students, and school closures in response to institutional or enrollment crises. These problems can be partially mitigated by practitioner reflection—though we lack useful professional infrastructures, we are free to think our way through everyday problems.

The reflective practitioner is an important concept for the field of correctional education, given the working conditions we just described. This model recognizes how we can become mired in practice—often retold in the “war stories” of prison teaching. Such stories, while often insightful, burden practitioners by repetitive storylines told without insight into their general application. In the reflective practitioner model there are four stages. The first stage begins in the concrete experience; the second consists of observation and reflection; the third is when we form abstract concepts and generalizations (theories) which are then applied in the fourth stage, to old and new situations (Schall, 2005). This reflective process enables us to consider and challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions, freeing us from some of the shackles of our own practice.

To facilitate the process, Figure 1 displays commonly held perceptions of six targeted ideas that are often popular among alternative and correctional educators. The authors’ rationale is that, if the Figure 1 interpretations are accepted without reflection as frameworks for teaching and learning, alternative and correctional education programs may be unnecessarily restrictive for students and the communities they represent.

**Figure 1: Some Interpretations of the Terms Addressed in this Article**

<b>TERMS</b>	<b>INTERPRETATIONS OFTEN EMBRACED IN OUR FIELD</b>
Theory and Practice	The disdain of (useless) theory and the exaltation of (useful) practice should be evident in our teaching and learning activities.
Hands On Learning	Students need to see how classroom content is connected to real world applications; learning is always best pursued through concrete experiences (tactile, psychomotor, visual, and so forth).
Incrementalism	When students experience the immediate, positive reinforcement of success, they will feel good about themselves, and be motivated to learn more.
What Works?	The best way to structure programs is to systematically identify proven, successful

	or model exemplars, and then replicate their elements locally.
We Are Unique	The theories and practices developed in other domains, sometimes even in other institutions, do not apply because our school or what we do is totally unique.
Heroic Teachers	The students with the most needs (for example, embittered learners, with educational disabilities, who have dropped out or been excluded from the local schools) should be assigned to work with the best teachers (those with a “can do” attitude, who are always willing to prioritize the program, regardless of any personal sacrifices that may be required).

### **A Closer Look at the Six Targeted Principles**

Our purpose is not to suggest that these six principles should be negated or discarded. Rather we propose that, like any principles, they should be applied in ways and contexts that enhance student learning. Our point is that, like anything that is worthwhile, the principles should be nuanced or contextualized, applied in an individualized way aligned with identified student learning needs, and not in a “this or that,” lockstep manner.

### **Theory and Practice**

Perhaps our national obsession with the practical, and rejection of the theoretical, began with Benjamin Franklin at the origin of the nation. However, Franklin was also known for his ability to see the “big picture.” Today, many persons from other nations characterize Americans as “cowboys,” ready for action while the best thinkers in their own nations are still engaged in reflection. This proclivity for action supports their “ready, fire, aim!” criticism of Americans. Obviously, thoughtful consideration of issues can enhance success. We urge the students in our classes to acquire the habits of rational decision-making and goal setting. Could we be accused of a double standard in this? Many alternative and correctional educators harbor anti-intellectual sentiments, are reluctant to pursue their own educational needs, and think universities are bastions of “ivory tower academic absent-mindedness.” But such anti-intellectual, anti-university, and anti-credential attitudes come close to being anti-educational. These antithetical positions can only be reconciled with twisted logic. A more balanced approach would be that theory should inform practice (as in praxis—the “think globally/act locally” strategy), to make alternative and correctional educators less vulnerable to program detractors.

MacCormick, the founder of the modern correctional education movement, maintained that “In all fields of education, theory is in advance of practice” (1931, p. xii). Our struggle is to access theories that will inform our practice and facilitate problem-solving, so we can help students learn despite all the challenges that they, and we, must overcome.

### **Hands On Learning**

Many—perhaps most—alternative and correctional teachers accept without question the principle that students learn best when they are learning “hands on.” Gardner’s 1993 work on multiple

intelligences suggests this may be a way of knowing and learning. However, Piaget's sequence of development posits that the emphasis on concrete objects is usually transcended later by a more mature approach (Ornstein and Levine, 2006, pp. 149-151). Formal operations is an ability to abstract things and concepts, to grasp them in our minds and then work with the concepts instead of always being required to touch (smell, taste, see, etc.) tangible things. The danger inherent in the "hands on only" approach is that, without proper scaffolding for maturation, students might get stuck in one of Piaget's lower developmental levels. In this way the "only" part of the "hands on only" formula could be debilitating rather than habilitating. We need to treat students like whole persons, capable of learning their way through their own problems—and in part that means developing some degree of independent abstraction.

### **Incrementalism**

Most alternative and correctional educators accept without scrutiny the idea that, because of their previous negative careers in the local schools, the students in our classes need immediate feedback and reinforcement. In teaching and learning, this principle is often expressed through incrementalized learning content that is structured so students will constantly experience success. However, when applied in a wholesale or unidimensional way this approach can actually make student problems worse. Can anyone experience constant success? And is that the best way to prepare for life? Since some of the students in our classes have already earned reputations for being bullies/predators/victimizers, can we always help them reconstruct their self-esteem without endangering the victims of their potential future crimes? An alternative approach would be to allow students to fail periodically, instead of unnaturally protecting them from failure. The idea central to progressive housing, indeterminate sentences, and parole is that (re)habilitation consists not only of planning to enhance success, but also of learning how to cope during difficult times. We need to rethink our constant efforts to protect students from failing, and perhaps allow some of them, some of the time, to realistically reconstruct their lives.

### **What Works**

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One useful idea is that the best way to improve service delivery is to identify and replicate model curricula, exemplary programs, and proven models. However, that strategy may reveal more about its advocates' lack of knowledge than they would intend. From the standpoint of modern paradigm change as articulated by Kuhn (whose model is the paradigm of paradigm change), it means that the advocates of the "what works?" strategy have absolutely no clue about what works. According to Kuhn (1970), practitioners during normal (or effective) puzzle solving periods never ask "what works?" because they already know—the paradigm works. It is only during periods of crisis (or confusion), when the paradigm is questioned, that the "what works? or what are the best practices and model programs?" question makes any sense. So the question itself suggests that, rather than searching for program elements from one context that might not be appropriate in another context,

it might be time for the questioner to personally reflect on what is wrong and how to fix it. In sum, the “what works?” inquiry means reflective practice is needed.

### **We Are Unique**

This perception leads some to think that even the practices and theories which work in other institutions cannot be applied in one’s own. This is anti-educational in its underlying orientation and leads to professional isolation as teachers identify with their institution and ignore what is happening next door. Furthermore, one of the tragedies of correctional education is that we suffer from a collective amnesia, not only with regard to our own correctional education history and the exemplars of our field, but also the history of practice in local school education. Correctional educators must address the intensity of our situation (learning disabled students with behavior management issues, the security environment). However, similar constraints are increasingly evident in many inner city and traditional schools which are becoming more prison-like in their operations. Where this form of binary thinking or paradigm passion exists, it isolates us personally and culturally from our colleagues. Not only is the We Are Unique approach detrimental to our professional knowledge base—professional isolation is a factor in teacher burnout (Wright, 2005).

### **Heroic Teachers**

Often alternative and correctional systems facing compound organizational difficulties search for the most able and willing teachers to solve all their problems. Thinking that begins “only teachers of heroic ability can succeed in this terrible setting” often becomes rationalized as “the best teachers should be assigned to work with the worst students.” While enthusiasm and a “can do” attitude will always help to facilitate student learning, it is unfair and ineffective to assign these teachers the lion’s share of the work simply because others do not seem capable and motivated for the assignment. In order to overcome the negative effects of this heroic attitude a supportive infrastructure should be developed for all teachers, offering (a) helpful supervisory classroom observations, (b) meaningful teacher professionalization plans, (c) useful personnel and program evaluation procedures, and (d) realistic curriculum development opportunities. Perennial personnel approaches dominated by the quest for heroic teachers often indicate that systemwide curriculum and instructional support is needed. Whenever the administrator’s role in instructional improvement is neglected, the quest for heroic teachers is tantamount to blaming the victim—but that relationship sometimes appears vague without reflecting on the various roles involved.

We all have roles to fulfill in the teaching and learning community, specific functions in the school’s division of labor. The student’s role is to learn. The teacher’s role is to facilitate and monitor student learning. The administrator’s role is to support teachers with human and material resources, so teachers can facilitate student learning. One way of summarizing the overemphasis on teachers is to explain it as a retreat from the administrator’s fair share in this division of labor. Once the quest for heroic teachers is an accepted part of the organizational climate, the administrator’s helpful support of teaching and learning is diminished, and unfair expectations are placed on instructional staff. The

implementation of safe and effective learning depends on meaningful commitments from students, teachers, and administrators, not from teachers only. In this case, careful reflection enhances the view that while teachers must carry through on their part of the bargain, it is a mistake to dump expectations on teachers that are so high that only superheroes can measure up.

### Conclusion

Figure 2 displays “pros” and “cons” regarding the six principles discussed in this article, six cases in point about the need to inform our work with reflection. We hope that by applying a reflective approach to important ideas in the field of alternative and correctional education, we can negotiate, overcome, or transcend some of the misconceptions that have flawed past practice. In summary, we propose that the unreflective application of any principles can lead to problems. Instead, we should aspire to apply guiding principles in a flexible way, dictated not by dogma but by individualized contexts.

**Figure 2: Pros and Cons of the Six Principles Introduced Above**

<b>PRINCIPLE</b>	<b>USEFUL ASPECT</b>	<b>NEGATIVE OR INACCURATE ASPECT</b>
Theory and Practice	Practical problem-solving techniques are always useful.	Practitioners who neglect theory are especially vulnerable to pervasive, anti-education hostility.
Hands On Learning	Many learners can benefit from hands on learning.	A tendency to learn with one’s hands may be a level of development that we should help students move beyond—as well as a style of learning.
Incrementalism	Some tentative learners need to be “spoon fed” to enhance their self-esteem.	If there is a “little Hitler” bully in class, it may be a disservice to always enhance that student’s self-concept or self-esteem.
What Works?	Program elements that are proven and replicable may be precisely what is needed.	The search for what works is by definition an admission that the searcher does not understand the paradigm.
We Are Unique	Correctional education has a history and practice that is informed by specific institutional conditions. This specificity must be acknowledged.	Isolating ourselves from “traditional” teaching theory, practice, and professional associations removes us from professional resources and supportive networks that enhance our knowledge base and reduce burnout.
Heroic Teachers	Enthusiastic, able, and willing teachers always help students learn.	Although teachers may be heroes, systems should also live up to their responsibility to provide useful infrastructures that support teaching and learning.

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