

Reflecting on the Delivery of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (IOPEP) encompasses university (outside) students and incarcerated (inside) students undertaking a university course alongside each other behind the walls of a prison. In the Australian IOPEP, students are taught *Comparative Criminal Justice Systems*. In 2020, the IOPEP was moved online halfway through the course delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the potential of transmission in prisons. In 2021, in adherence to COVID-19 safety regulations and restrictions in prisons, the IOPEP delivery was also modified by reducing the number of outside students coming into prison. This paper presents Haozhou Sun's reflection of his 2021 IOPEP's learning experience. Although Sun was not able to have the same level of interaction traditionally obtained by IOPEP students, it is clear that the majority of the program's aims were still achieved despite changes in delivery.

WHAT IS THE IOPEP?

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (IOPEP) "is a blended learning program where university (outside) students and incarcerated (inside) students come together as equals in the university context to learn with and from each other, in prison, whilst undertaking a university subject" (Van Grundy et al., 2013 as cited in Martinovic et al., 2018, p. 437). The program was implemented by Dr. Marietta Martinovic from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in collaboration with Corrections Victoria (Department of Justice and Community Safety) (Martinovic et al., 2018). IOPEP is currently being delivered across six Victorian prisons.

IOPEP was developed in 1997 by Lori Pompa of Temple University and a lifer named Paul Perry at Graterford prison (King et al., 2019). It was subsequently expanded into a training package to enable other higher education providers to facilitate the program (IOPEP Centre, 2017). Up until 2022, over 2000 IOPEP classes have been taught, with more than 60,000 students participating in classes across the USA, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, and Norway (Inside-Out Centre, 2022).

Students undertaking the Australian IOPEP are taught *Comparative Criminal Justice Systems* (Martinovic et al., 2018), which examines criminal justice systems (CJS) worldwide. All students, inside and outside, are subject to the same learning expectations per university policy and guidelines, including writing three short reflections, preparing and delivering a group presentation on the CJS of a country of their choice, and a major reflective assessment (see Antojado, 2022 for an example). These assessments are then graded as per the standard university marking criteria (Martinovic et al., 2018).

PURPOSE AND IMPACT OF IOPEP

King and colleagues (2019) suggest that IOPEP allows both student groups to critically explore their own beliefs and identities to foster social change and overcome social barriers. Whilst engaging in higher education is the purpose for which students come together in the IOPEP, the aim is much broader, that is, to challenge the stereotypes embedded in society, and start a dialogue which will change policies and thereby improve the CJS. The program also sparks conversations, discussions, and opportunities which challenge deeply embedded societal stereotypes that impinge effective reform efforts. In other words, during the course, outside students see inside students as humans, challenging mainstream stereotypes.

Long and Barnes' (2016) comprehensive evaluation of IOPEP found that all students were able to improve critical thinking skills and were able to critically engage with learning materials. Similarly, other IOPEP related research has shown that when inside students learn with outside students, they increase their ability to engage with educational material (Allred et al., 2013; Hilinski-Rosick and Blackmer, 2014; Hyatt, 2009; Werts, 2013). They are therefore better able to better negotiate their own values and beliefs against the backdrop of growing punitive sentiment in society (Conti, et al., 2013; Hilinski-Rosick and Blackmer, 2014; Martinovic and Liddell, 2019; Antojado et al., 2023).

The IOPEP's pedagogy is based on transformative-dialogic learning, which is reliant upon participants sharing their knowledge and experiences. Dialogue allows active participation as all students self-reflect, explore, and develop an understanding by sharing ideas, critiquing material, and reconciling differences (Butin, 2013). This brings a richer understanding of the complexities faced by people experiencing the criminal justice system

(Pompa, 2002). Furthermore, students begin to reflect on their own values and biases and recognize the inaccuracies of mainstream ideologies within their communities and broader society (Conti et al., 2013; Hilinski-Rosick and Blackmer, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2021; Wyant and Lockwood, 2018). "Walls to Bridges" in Canada, a social justice iteration of the USA's IOPEP program, has very similar purposes and outcomes identified in this section (Pollack, 2019; Pollack and Mayor, 2023).

DOING THE IOPEP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In 2020, the IOPEP was moved online halfway through its delivery due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the potential of transmission in prisons. In 2021, following COVID-19 safety regulations and restrictions, the IOPEP was also modified to lessen the risk of COVID-19 transmission. As a result, only five outside students attended the prison learning with 15 inside students simultaneously, whilst the other 10 outside engaged in learning through the online learning space, rotating every three weeks. Despite these modifications due to the pandemic, all 15 outside and 15 inside students met weekly during a semester, enabling students to build rapport and professional relationships with each other. Research has indicated that inside and outside students quickly create a positive and collaborative learning environment that induces knowledge-building through conversations, discussions, and debates (see Martinovic and Liddell, 2020; Martinovic et al., 2018). Inside students share stories about their experiences with the criminal justice system, allowing outside students to gain a deeper understanding of their criminal justice involvement. On the other hand, outside students provide inside students with theoretical knowledge and perspectives that help inside students better understand the system they are first-hand experiencing (see Martinovic and Liddell, 2020; Martinovic et al., 2018).

Martinovic and Liddell (2019) found that students graduating from the IOPEP engendered more compassion and empathy towards those entangled within the criminal justice system. IOPEP facilitated students' change in perception, quashing their preconceived ideas about prisoner stereotypes. Stereotyping prisoners into one homogenous group can have deleterious effects on the efforts of the penal estate in carrying out its rehabilitative objectives, particularly when these stereotypes impinge on a practitioner's

ability to carry out its duties professionally without bias (Martinovic et al., 2018). As outside students graduate and enter the criminal justice field professionally, they need to understand the complexity of criminal justice involvement, not just from knowledge derived through academic theorizing, but also from the lived experiences of potential future clients (see Martinovic and Liddell, 2019).

The modified structure of the program in 2020 impacted the dynamics of the student group, mainly as outside students attended the prison in small groups and only for three sessions throughout the entire course. Students had to repeat the process of getting to know each other every three weeks. This process of the program is perhaps the most awkward and anxiety-provoking period for all students (Martinovic et al., 2018). Outside students usually come into the prison espousing preconceived ideas about prisoners, often in an unpropitious light. Inside students enter the program space expecting to be embarrassed or stereotyped (Martinovic and Liddell, 2019). The process of undoing the prejudices both outside and inside students espoused as a consequence of negative public discourses about prisoners takes time, usually a few sessions. However, by the time both student cohorts felt comfortable, outside students returned to the online learning environment, while inside students were reintroduced to a new outside student group. Thus, it is likely that both student cohorts were less willing to vocalize their views and opinions and share their experiences of the CJS.

Despite its modified structure, the offering of the IOPEP was still beneficial to both inside and outside students, as is evident in the reflection of Haozhou Sun below. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way prisoners live in prisons, generally in ways which exacerbate the experience of subjugation. For example, solitary confinement is used as a measure to isolate incoming prisoners, as well as those believed to have contracted or be in contact with a person believed to have been exposed to the coronavirus. The detrimental effects of solitary confinement to those held in custody (particularly on mental health) are well established in the literature (e.g. Metzner and Fellner, 2010). However, it seems that COVID-19 will remain in our society for quite some time, including its less desirable features requiring people to abstain from close interaction. IOPEP will therefore need to continually adapt to prisons' highly transient and bureaucratic nature, whilst still trying to ensure fidelity to its objectives. This is a difficult task and one that may well need a few trials to perfect.

HAOZHOU SUN'S REFLECTION OF DOING THE IOPEP

The IOPEP has challenged my understanding of the CJS, particularly the function of its three arms: police, courts, and corrections. My participation in this program has also pushed me to think critically about contemporary issues related to the criminal justice system. I learned a great deal about restorative justice and alternative sentencing approaches – things I did not even know existed. I also now understand the importance of therapeutic sanctions which help facilitate one's reintegration back into society, which is quite difficult for many released prisoners.

When I first arrived at Ravenhall Correctional Centre, I was pleasantly surprised. The jail was depicted as a scary, dark, evil place when I watched it on television. Movies and television shows regularly featured iron bars and solitary spaces. However, when I entered this jail for the first time, I saw a big oval with colourful buildings all around. I almost thought I had arrived at a university or high school campus. I felt amazed at how this place is so different compared to my initial perception. During my first interaction with the outside students, they had the same curiosities as I did when they first arrived here. They were inquisitive about our accommodation, the level of freedom we were provided, and the type of food/cuisine given to us by the prison. I was glad the outside students showed interest in better understanding the "real life" conditions of prison, something they would not have otherwise been exposed to had they not been a part of IOPEP.

At Ravenhall prison, individuals can choose to participate in various educational courses and rehabilitative programs. I think that this is a very humane and efficient way to focus on a prisoner's rehabilitation. Some of the main reasons people come to jail are because of complex needs, mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, and anger management problems. Providing treatment for these mediating factors to crime is therefore relevant in a person's rehabilitation pathways and, in some ways, IOPEP provides this through normalized dialogue with people outside the criminal justice space. Education is a great way to develop an openness to future pathways and possibly gain employment. It can also decrease the reoffending rate by providing criminalized people with employment opportunities that reduce the likelihood of future criminal involvement. I have seen a lot of men in this prison who have a positive motivation to change but do not know how. I always encourage them to sign up for some of the programs and courses

provided at this prison. However, to break one's cycle of offending, more is needed – that is, making social changes, such as access to suitable housing and enabling individuals to meet certain economic necessities which protect them from criminal propensities. Rehabilitation programs often do not focus on the specific strains which are behind an individual's motivation to engage in crime. The IOPEP has taught me to reflect on this, something I would not have been able to do had I not participated in the program. I could not be as reflective about broader criminal justice issues, which is something I can use to reflect on my own offending.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian court system was overwhelmed, which resulted in a sudden increase in the unsentenced population. Due to strict gathering restrictions and social distancing guidelines, people were not able to attend court, which increased the backlog of cases remaining unheard and unresolved. Trials usually took about one to two years to be heard pre-COVID, but now it takes about anywhere from three to five years for a case to be scheduled for a hearing. I am currently on remand as I have not been yet found guilty of a crime. I feel very depressed when I think about this. I did not think it would be this easy to lock someone up while they wait for their trial date and are not yet found guilty of offending.

As part of my group assignment, we analyzed Singapore's corrections system. In Singapore, the Prison Service provides prisoners with only a straw mat and a blanket with no pillows. No drinking water is available outside of mealtimes. Prisoners are not allowed television or radio, and even pens and papers are banned. After hearing about these inhumane rules, I felt comparatively privileged and lucky to experience prison in Australia. With that said, there are many things that we can learn from Singapore. Singapore's reoffending rate 20 years ago was similar to Australia today, but has since dropped by half, while ours has remained the same. Singapore's prison service focused on rehabilitation by creating community awareness so that ex-prisoners get a chance to live normal lives in society without the burden of their criminal record. I think Australia has a lot to learn from Singapore in this respect. Singapore also has employment orientations, and 97 percent of prisoners find employment post-release. If people are working, they have a stable source of income and will, therefore, be less likely to participate in criminal activities.

Importantly, when the outside students first attended Ravenhall, they reminded me of myself before my incarceration. They assumed that the

prison was an awful place full of dangerous and violent people. Throughout the IOPEP, they learned the truth — meeting the inside students ‘humanized’ prisoners and the prison experience for them. I hope that when they graduate and become professionals in their own right, they remember the plight and experiences of the inside students. Moreover, I hope that they treat the person before them like they treated us – with kindness. This program has been one of the most life-changing things I have ever done. When I go back to China, I want to make this type of change to the systems there – and I believe I can do it. Lastly, this program has given me confidence and inspired me to pursue university education.

In conclusion, the IOPEP has been an enlightening experience for me. It has allowed me to think about my imprisonment from an entirely different perspective. First, I have learned to critically analyze all aspects of the CJS and appreciate the complexities inherent in it. For example, every time I watch the news now and victims of crime are pushing for stricter sentencing laws, which often results in the government legislating mandatory sentencing laws, I understand why this occurs even though I may disagree with the government’s decision. My learnings regarding policing, courts, and corrections have also allowed me to see my experience as potentially useful for the future improvement of the criminal justice system.

DISCUSSION

Despite the modified delivery of the IOPEP due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear in Haozhou Sun’s submitted reflection that many of its aims were still met. Most notably, the way in which IOPEP encourages inside students to interrogate their preconceived ideas about their criminal justice interaction. Further, IOPEP provided inside students with a purpose and a goal in what is frequently reflected as being “dead” or “wasted time” for those who are incarcerated. That is, the time in prison is referred to or experienced by many as a temporary “freeze on their life”.

Another important outcome, not previously documented by Martinovic and colleagues (2018), which perhaps warrants further investigation, is the ability for inside students to view their circumstances of incarceration and experiences of disadvantage through a justice lens and scope. There are also strong reflexive themes which emanate from the reflection of Haozhou Sun, not merely describing the direness of his plight whilst incarcerated

but composing it with the view to interrogate the way in which COVID-19 has brought about further injustices. Indeed, it is beyond the scope of this paper to further examine specifically the drivers of this thought, but it may be appropriate to speculate here that giving students a worldview of criminal justice systems gives inside students a yardstick to compare and contrast their experiences against the experience of others in different parts of the world. Despite Haozhou Sun conceding that although the Australian system provides material resources to lessen the physical deprivation experienced by others, for example in Singapore, there are still symbolic and tangible instruments which position incarcerated people in Australia as being subjugated. There is also further potential here to examine the way in which subordination whilst incarcerated is relative; that although being imprisoned in Singapore is unfavourable in the opinion of Haozhou Sun, he is critical of the Singaporean system as being an outlier and not the ideal, referring his circumstance back into the accepted standards of the broader Australian social landscape.

It can also be seen in Haozhou Sun's reflection that through his participation in the IOPEP, he has been able to critically reflect and thus challenge the stereotypes embedded in society, specifically identity constructions of how the "offender" is portrayed by broader society and mainstream discourse. The way in which he speaks of the injustice of the situation, describing his prolonged period on remand, is an example of dialogue which challenges current criminal justice policies. Whilst he is still incarcerated, there is real potential for Haozhou Sun to act on his reflections, and echo the results of other IOPEP evaluations (e.g. King et al., 2019).

A final theme that has been illuminated by Haozhou Sun is his reflection on the IOPEP forging an egalitarian learning community. This outcome has been well documented by evaluators of the IOPEP, most notably by Martinovic and colleagues (2018), along with King and colleagues (2019). A great example of this is the inquisitive nature of outside students in trying to understand the experience of incarceration through dialogue and conversation. Indeed, this type of learning experience can also be understood as being based on Freirean dialogic principles whereby learning is achieved through dialogue and a mutual appreciation of stakeholders within dialogue as knowledge-bearers. The philosophy of IOPEP is built on dialogic principles, taking away formal and traditional methods of pedagogy, and substituting it with experience and applied knowledge (Martinovic and Liddell, 2020; Antojado et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Haozhou Sun's reflection shows that although the delivery of IOPEP was modified to coincide with relevant pandemic regulations, it still allowed students to reflect on their experience as part of the wider, global criminal justice domain. The IOPEP has allowed Sun to be encouraged to pursue other ambitions within the correctional education space upon completion of the program. Most importantly, it has empowered Sun to become a part of criminal justice discourse, using his lived experience as a focal-point for future advocacy and insight. Although the pandemic did not provide Sun the same interaction with inside/outside students prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an emergent theme in his reflection highlights the power of IOPEP to give meaning and purpose to those incarcerated whilst subject to the harsh prison conditions during this period.

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