

**Using Experiential Problem-Solving and Interactive Community Building to Increase  
Access to Workforce Readiness Skill-Building When Using  
ACT Tesseract Workforce:  
A Case Study of Nine Returning Citizens in Bridgeport, Connecticut  
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Author Note

Dr. Tina M. Manus is an independent researcher and public school educator located in the Greater Bridgeport area. She is also a member of the CT ACT Leadership Council. This research was supported in part by a grant from the *Fairfield County Community Foundation*, along with free pilot resources and support provided by ACT.

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### **Abstract**

Mass incarceration is an issue of concern in America today, especially among individuals 18-26 years of age. However, even more concerning is the lack of support many returning citizens (of any age) receive upon reentry. The research detailing the “school-to-prison pipeline” has outlined the many challenges facing practitioners attempting to facilitate various reentry programs. While many current reentry programs work to collaboratively deliver “wrap around services,” few focus primarily upon the social and emotional learning of returning citizens. While research has been conducted regarding the application of social and emotional learning strategies in various prison settings, little research exists regarding the application of these effective instructional strategies to deliver reentry programming. In response to the lack of research surrounding this topic, the researcher designed a pilot for returning citizens using ACT Tessaera Workforce. A participatory action research case study methodology was chosen, with a grounded theory approach. The researcher described how experiential problem-solving and interactive community building instructional strategies could be used along with ACT Tessaera Workforce to make skill-building activities within the program more accessible for returning citizens, regardless of their academic abilities. The researcher used pre-test and post-test assessments, as well as exit surveys to collect data. When these instructional strategies were applied, skill-building was more accessible for participants. Further, increased levels of resilience were observed among all participants, and especially among 18-26 year olds. Future research should include a larger sample and/or more cohort groups, including women. In addition, future research should include participant follow-ups to describe any long-term impact on employability among participants.

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## **Introduction**

Finding effective programming to support the needs of returning citizens is a popular topic currently being researched across America (Alper & Durose, 2018; Cook et al., 2014; Farabee et al., 2014; Hughes & Wilson, 2018; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Weigand et al., 2015). While many reentry practitioners and researchers have worked to build high-quality programs to service the needs of returning citizens, high rates of recidivism continue to be a universal area of concern (Alper & Durose, 2018; Hughes & Wilson, 2018; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Recidivism is fueled by many factors facing returning citizens, including a lack of employment opportunities (Alper & Durose, 2018; Farabee et al., 2014; Hughes & Wilson, 2018; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Weigand et al., 2015). Therefore, identifying workforce readiness programming that meets the needs of returning citizens in order to give them a competitive edge when seeking employment, has become a nationwide focus (Alper & Durose, 2018; Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Cook et al., 2014; Hughes & Wilson, 2018; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018 ), especially among individuals who are 18-26 years old.

As a result of the national focus upon the field of reentry, a number of nonprofits and state agencies across Connecticut have made advocating for reentry programming that offers multiple services to their clients their mission (CT Reentry Collaborative, 2018). Leading agencies in the field have worked collecting data and offering “wrap-around services” (i.e., addressing homelessness, food security, workforce readiness, counselling, etc.) to countless individuals throughout Connecticut in collaboration with the American Jobs Centers, state parole

and probation offices, and with the financial support of the federal *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA). However, chronic recidivism is related, in part, to employability skills and the lack of opportunities for employment that are available to returning citizens (Alper & Durose, 2018; Cook et al., 2014; CT Reentry Collaborative, 2018; Farabee et al., 2014; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Weigand et al., 2015) continues to hinder the efforts of community stakeholders as they work to support returning citizens.

## **Background**

This pilot program was proposed by the researcher, after she attended a *Project Safe Neighborhoods* meeting held at Bridgeport's *US District Court* in January 2019. Upon meeting and speaking with community stakeholders present, as well as both parole and probation officers who were leading the meeting, concerns were shared from all community stakeholders regarding the lack of work readiness skills among many returning citizens, as well as genuine concerns regarding other social issues facing returning citizens such as food security, homelessness, child-rearing, and substance abuse (CT Reentry Collaborative, 2018; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Weigand et al., 2015). Practitioners also shared how they were attempting to address these typical and challenging components of reentry as both individual organizations and collectively as a reentry network.

There were many programs mentioned by stakeholders that were in place which focused upon various skills related to work readiness and successful reentry such as counselling services, job placement, and other social services. However, no program mentioned offered a research-based, strategic learning sequence where the primary focus was social and emotional learning, as it related specifically and directly to workforce readiness skills. Therefore, after this,

and many other individual conversations and meetings with community stakeholders specializing in reentry, the researcher, who is also a part of the *CT ACT Leadership Council*, decided to investigate the possibility of offering interested Bridgeport returning citizens a pilot of ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019), a measure of social-emotional skills relevant to success in the workforce.

### **ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019)**

ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) is a research-based work-readiness program that assesses and builds social-emotional skills through immediate feedback, as well as strategic and explicit learning exercises designed for each of six workforce readiness domains. These domains include: work ethic, collaboration, creativity, resilience, leadership, and integrity. Results of the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment are reported to individuals with a score of one to four stars in each domain assessed, with an explanation of each scoring level for individuals to review in a report. Further, a roster with all participants' scores listed is also available for facilitators.

Upon completion of the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment, the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019) is provided to individuals. This resource is divided into the six domains assessed by the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment and can be used in a group training session or independently by an individual in a self-paced course. The ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019) is available in a traditional workbook format electronically and includes activities using online videos, graphic organizers, informational articles, and other reading materials to support employees as they work independently to further develop workforce readiness skills.

### **Anticipating Barriers to Access**

ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) is designed for adult learners across various professional fields, but not as a reentry program or with the large adult English language learning community which is a community characteristic of Bridgeport, CT. It includes assessment questions written in English and a workbook with academic reading, also written in English. This pilot is the first time the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019) was used to deliver instruction to returning citizens. Based upon this, the researcher anticipated possible participant engagement and learning challenges (Leone et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 2007; Mizrahi et al., 2016; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018) when attempting to access the full scope and sequence planned within the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019). Concerns were raised to ACT by the researcher primarily because the program relies heavily upon academic skills in reading and writing to complete most activities. To incentivize participation, one community partner offered to fund a stipend of \$100 per individual for individuals who participated in the program and another offered dinner for participants each day. However, while those incentives offered some way to entice participants into attending, food and a monetary stipend did not negate the possible barriers to learning that using the practice materials in their original form presented.

To plan accessible instruction for all, the researcher requested and received permission from ACT to differentiate the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019) and to adjust the scope and sequence as necessary to meet the needs of participants. This included adding appropriate experiential problem-solving (EPS) and interactive community building (ICB) instructional

strategies that supported the development of the six domains assessed by the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment. The types of learning activities designed to apply these effective instructional strategies (Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Marzano, 2017) were selected by the researcher. However, while research exists examining these strategies as they have been applied when teaching in prisons (Anderson, 2015; Anderson & Overy, 2010; Irwin, 2008; Reuss, 2002) and within other educational settings (Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Marzano, 2017), little published research exists regarding the impact or even the application of these strategies as part of any kind of reentry programs, especially those programs intended to develop work readiness skills among returning citizens.

### **Research Question**

How does using experiential problem-solving and interactive community building instructional strategies increase opportunities for returning citizens to develop workforce readiness skills measured by the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment?

## Methods

A participatory action research methodology (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; McNiff, 2010; Pine, 2009; was applied for the research design of this case study (Klonoski, 2013). In addition, a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2009) was applied by the researcher when analyzing the qualitative data collected and the specific daily intervention activities chosen (Halaweh et al., 2008). The researcher volunteered to lead the pilot and selected the activities presented to participants. The researcher is a CT certified educator with over 20 years of urban classroom teaching experience. She had worked with adults in the past, but never specifically with a reentry population. A representative from the local community who specialized in the reentry field was also present on-site for all sessions to offer additional support to participants, including other programming and services available to them. In addition, various community partners and stakeholders visited the program to encourage and meet participants as well. Further, one participant expressed the desire to serve as a mentor to other younger participants. He worked to contact individuals and helped to support them as needed. He also served as a liaison between the researcher and participants.

Rather than plan out activities far in advance, the researcher chose to remain present and responsive to the individual needs and requests of learners (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Pine, 2009), while engaging creatively (Charmaz, 2009; Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Marzano, 2017) to design learning activities that addressed the individual needs of participants. This involved identifying activities from her own teaching practice, being open to new opportunities as they arose, and also researching to find other activities that met the needs of all learners.

### **Population/Sampling Strategy**

ACT granted the researcher a pilot for up to 25 returning citizens in April 2019. Fliers created by the researcher were distributed by hard copy and electronically by all partners with a focus upon recruiting returning citizens who fell between the ages of 18-26 years old, as this is an identified underserved group (Alper & Durose, 2018; Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Cook et al., 2014; Hughes & Wilson, 2018; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018), currently being focused upon by all stakeholders at the state and national levels. Voluntary participation was open to both men and women. Participants were recruited during the month of May by community partners and included different government and non-profit agencies that support returning citizens in Bridgeport, as well as parole/probation officers.

The flier distributed is shown in Figure 1. Photos used for the flier were chosen by the researcher based upon visits made to the *Project Safe Neighborhoods* meetings and input from partners. Choosing photos that represented the majority of returning citizens currently receiving services in Bridgeport was an important consideration made by the researcher. The intention was for the photos to be both inviting and positive representations of African-American and mixed-race men who were within the target age demographic, but did not represent a traditional “white-collar” or “blue-collar” stereotype. In addition, all community partners were listed with their logos to illustrate the collaborative effort being put in by all partners to make the program a success as well. Further, the researcher’s biography and photo were included in order to increase transparency regarding the researcher’s race and background (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018) among prospective participants and those recruiting individuals into the program.

Figure 1

Recruitment Flier

**BECOME SOMEONE**

**EMPLOYERS CAN'T WAIT TO WORK WITH!**

**MARGARET E. MORTON GOVERNMENT CENTER**  
**MONDAY - FRIDAY**  
**JUNE 3RD THROUGH JUNE 14TH**  
**4:30-7:00PM**  
**\*INCLUDES DINNER PROVIDED BY PAPPAS PIZZA**

**ASSESS**  
 FREE online  
 ACT Tesserera Workforce  
 Assessment

**DELIVER**  
 Interactive classes to  
 develop 21st century skills  
 using the ACT Tesserera  
 Workforce Playbook

**★ RECOGNIZE ★**  
 Awards night, City of Bridgeport &  
 ACT certificates of completion,  
 recommendations, possible  
 referrals for employment, & prizes!

Ongoing support &  
 mentorship from trusted  
 providers: MIRA, Project  
 Safe Neighborhoods &  
 Career Resources

**ACT**

This 10 day pilot program will first assess participants' work readiness skills in **collaboration, integrity, leadership, creativity, work ethic, and resilience** through a NEW online assessment called, *ACT Tesserera Workforce*. Next, participants will engage in interactive group sessions that practice, hone, and develop these skills as they relate to the 21st century workplace. Participants will have multiple opportunities to reflect on their learning, while building high-quality relationships with one another, mentors, and other various community stakeholders present.

**DR. TINA M. MANUS, PHD**  
**FACILITATOR**  
 Dr. Manus is a Connecticut certified educator with over 20 years of urban classroom experience. She proposed this pilot program to leaders at MIRA, after visiting a Project Safe Neighborhoods' meeting where she recognized a need for socio-emotional workforce readiness among re-entry citizens there. Working cooperatively with ACT, she secured a free pilot of Tesserera Workforce exclusively for Bridgeport re-entry citizens, and coordinated efforts with all partners listed to bring this unique opportunity to life.

Fairfield County's  
 Community  
 Foundation  
 TOGETHER WE THRIVE

**The Workplace**  
 Think it forward

**CAREER RESOURCES**  
 Preparing Workers for Life

**MIRA**  
 Mayor's Initiative for Re-entry Affairs

**Project SAFE**  
 Neighborhoods

This is a FREE opportunity for re-entry citizens ONLY. Space is limited to 25 people.

## Study Variables

The independent variables for this research design were “experiential problem-solving” and “interactive community building.” While the terms can be used interchangeably at times (Kreiner, 2009; Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005), both were referred to separately for the purposes of this research, using the definitions below.

**Experiential problem-solving (EPS).** These instructional strategies are characterized by emotional stimulation and physical expression that engage the learner in a physically, mentally, and emotionally stimulating multi-sensory experiences where they must work with others or alone to solve a problem (Clark & White, 2010; Gamwell & Daly 2017; Kolb, 1984; Kompf & Bond, 2010; Kreiner, 2009; Marzano, 2017; Senge, 2013; Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005). These activities include role- playing, hands-on learning, team-building, etc.

**Interactive community building (ICB).** These instructional strategies are characterized by mental stimulation and verbal expression focused upon building group consensus or community (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Bork, 1980; Donovan et al., 1999; Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Kreiner, 2009; Marzano, 2015; Michel et al., 2009; Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005). These activities include group discussions, social media communications, examining case studies, etc.

The dependent variables were defined in the introduction of the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019) and are based upon the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2009). According to this personality model, there are six broad domains under which behaviors are categorized: Honesty-Humility (H), Emotional Regulation (E), Extraversion (eX), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness (O). Those domains are categorized in Figure 2, copied directly from the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019).

**Figure 2**

*ACT Tessera Workforce Skill Alignment to HEXACO Domain*

<b>Tessera Workforce Skill</b>	<b>ACT Behavioral Framework Domain</b>	<b>HEXACO Domain</b>	<b>Essential Skill Definition</b>
<b>Integrity</b>	Acting Honestly	Honesty /Humility	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate honesty, sincerity, fairness towards others, and modesty at work
<b>Resilience</b>	Maintaining Composure	Emotional Stability	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate stress management, emotional regulation, a positive response to setbacks, and poise
<b>Leadership</b>	Socializing with Others	Extraversion	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate assertiveness, influence, optimism, and enthusiasm
<b>Collaboration</b>	Getting Along with Others	Agreeableness	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate the ability to work on teams, empathy, helpfulness, trust, and trustworthiness
<b>Work Ethic</b>	Sustaining Effort	Conscientiousness	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate persistence, goal striving, reliability, dependability, and attention to detail at work
<b>Creativity</b>	Keeping an Open Mind	Openness	The extent to which a person's actions demonstrate ingenuity, flexibility, open mindedness, and embracing diversity

**Intervention**

After reviewing the initial ACT Tessera Workforce (2019) online assessment results, the researcher selected and delivered activities to extend and develop those learning tasks outlined in the ACT Tessera Workforce Playbook (2019) that addressed the areas for growth indicated on the pre-test for each participant. Special focus was given to those domains where participants scored a one or two on the pre-test assessment. While special focus was given to areas in need of

growth, activities were chosen that built upon and leveraged the areas of strength individuals displayed on the pre-test as well.

### **Instruments and Procedures**

The researcher designed ten, 90 minute, in-person interactive sessions that were offered consecutively over a ten day period, at a centrally-located government building, which also had a computer lab. The computer lab was used to conduct a quantitative pre- and post-intervention ACT Tessa Workforce (2019) online assessment at the start and end of the pilot program. The community rooms within the government center were used to deliver the in-person sessions privately to participants as a group. The researcher transcribed participants' responses during in-person sessions and collected data via audio-visual recordings and in photographs. Further, the researcher kept a private journal and made a brief entry each evening during the 10 day program. In these entries, the researcher captured additional thoughts, made plans to clarify participants' responses, and/or shared general feelings regarding the program's progression over the 10 day period. All participants were provided with a copy of the ACT Tessa Workforce Playbook (2019), as well as a copy of their individual results on the initial assessment. Initially, dinner was offered to participants each night free of charge by a community partner. In addition, a positive letter of recommendation from the researcher, an employment reference, and certificates of successful completion were offered from ACT and a community partner at the conclusion of the program when \$100 gift card stipends were provided to participants.

Additional data used to triangulate the results (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) of pre- and post-test data was collected using an exit survey developed by ACT to measure participants' perceptions on the final day of the pilot program. On day eight, participants were given a copy

of a bar graph of group performance for each domain and led by the researcher in an interactive discussion regarding the data collected from the group. The purpose of this activity was for participants to compare their individual performance in each domain in reference to the overall group. The researcher also took a pre-test in order to anticipate what participants would experience when they took the assessment. However, later the assessment was taken as a post-test by the researcher to assess what, if any, impact the experiences during the 10 day session had upon her own work readiness skills.

**ACT Tessera Workforce (2019).** The ACT Tessera Workforce (2019) online assessment is an untimed assessment that measures workforce readiness skills. Responses on a Likert 5-point scale are collected from individual questions presented to participants in an online format. The assessment takes approximately 40 minutes to complete. For this research, the ACT Tessera Workforce (2019) online assessment was used as both a pre- and post-test of participants' and researchers' work readiness skills. ACT Tessera Workforce (2019) reports the following correlations shown in Table 1 between scores within given domains, according to findings collected within the field test used to develop the assessment instrument.

**Table 1**

*ACT Tessera Workforce (2019) Field Test Correlations Between Domains*

	Collaboration	Leadership	Work Ethic	Resilience	Creativity	Integrity
Collaboration	1					
Leadership	0.235	1				
Work Ethic	0.599	0.268	1			
Resilience	0.362	0.453	0.331	1		
Creativity	0.501	0.528	0.452	0.360	1	
Integrity	0.691	0.233	0.632	0.283	0.401	1

**Exit survey.** The exit survey consisted of 21 questions designed to collect participants' general perceptions of the program itself and knowledge of each of the six domains assessed by the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment on a Likert 5-Point Scale. The exit survey included questions regarding how agreeable participants were to given statements and how confident they felt regarding their individual understanding of each of the six domains.

**Qualitative data.** Qualitative data was collected in videos and in pictures taken by the researcher with a hand-held device. In addition, participants' responses were transcribed by the researcher during sessions and probed to clarify, if necessary, during or after the session. Further, questions were inserted by the researcher, after appropriate questions on the exit survey in order to probe more deeply into the perceptions shared by participants on the Likert 5-Point Scale.

### **Analysis**

At the conclusion of data collection, all data collected was coded by participant number 001-009 to maintain anonymity and make cross-analyses possible among multiple data points. The researcher analyzed participant responses on the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment to find both the median and mean of group responses. Individual and group data was also compared to the correlational analysis that was collected as part of a previous ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) field test. Qualitative data collected by the researcher from participants was also analyzed using content analysis to further describe the impact of experiential problem-solving and interactive community building activities upon the work readiness skills of returning citizens. Qualitative responses, along with others recorded/transcribed by the researcher anecdotally from participants throughout the pilot, were also coded and analyzed

using content analysis. The quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test assessments, as well as the qualitative data collected within the exit survey was triangulated (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) to increase confidence in the overall findings of the research.

At the conclusion of the analysis of the data overall, an analysis of an ad-hoc subgroup of the four participants who were part of the target demographic, ages 18-26, was completed. This data was compared to the overall data collected using comparative analysis and any notable similarities and/or differences were reported in findings. Later these similarities and differences were discussed in reference to the overall research collected.

## **Results**

In total, 11 men were recruited to participate. Of the recruited participants, eight were referred directly from parole/probation officers, one from the local government agency, and one from a non-profit partner via email. Another participant reached out to the researcher online after seeing a post regarding the program in an online forum. He asked to participate and act as an informal mentor. Names, birthdates, and contact data were collected in an online enrollment form created by the researcher. Of the participants recruited, six individuals (54.54%) were in the target focus population of 18-26 years old.

### **Participants**

While the program was open to both men and women, all participants were male. Three participants identified as Hispanic and six identified as African-American. One participant came with a referral from a non-profit partner, one participant came with a referral from the local government agency, another came from an online request, and the other six came with referrals directly from parole/probation officers. Of the nine participants, four (44.44%) individuals were in the target focus population of 18-26 years old.

Of those individuals that participated, five attended all ten days. Two participants did not attend the first session and were assessed on the second day. They completed the first day's community building activity of six word autobiographies, but missed the group session on integrity. Another participant had a family emergency and missed the fourth day, which was an outside community building activity. In addition, a fourth participant missed the second day for no stated reason and missed working to create the social contract and name our group. Further,

all participants were provided with informed consent and video release forms before initiating the research. All data remained confidential and was coded to maintain anonymity.

**Table 2**

*Recruitment & Attendance*

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Date of Birth</b>	<b>Recruited by</b>	<b>Days Attended</b>
001	12/4/96	local government agency	10
002	5/28/77	parole/probation officer	10
003	12/4/94	parole/probation officer	10
004	2/27/76	online request	10
005	8/2/98	parole/probation officer	9
006	11/7/87	parole/probation officer	9
007	3/24/78	non-profit agency/partner	10
008	3/23/89	parole/probation officer	9
009	11/3/98	parole/probation officer	9
010	7/7/94	parole/probation officer	0
011	10/2/98	parole/probation officer	0

**Key Findings Overall**

The most significant finding in the research is shown in Table 3 below. The difference in the group average responses on the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment in the domain regarding “Resilience.” In this area, responses had a noticeable difference in regard to other areas. However, the scores in “Work Ethic,” “Creativity” also increased by the same amount as “Resilience” when examining the median of group responses. The data illustrates positive increases in scores observed among the group in these areas.

**Table 3**

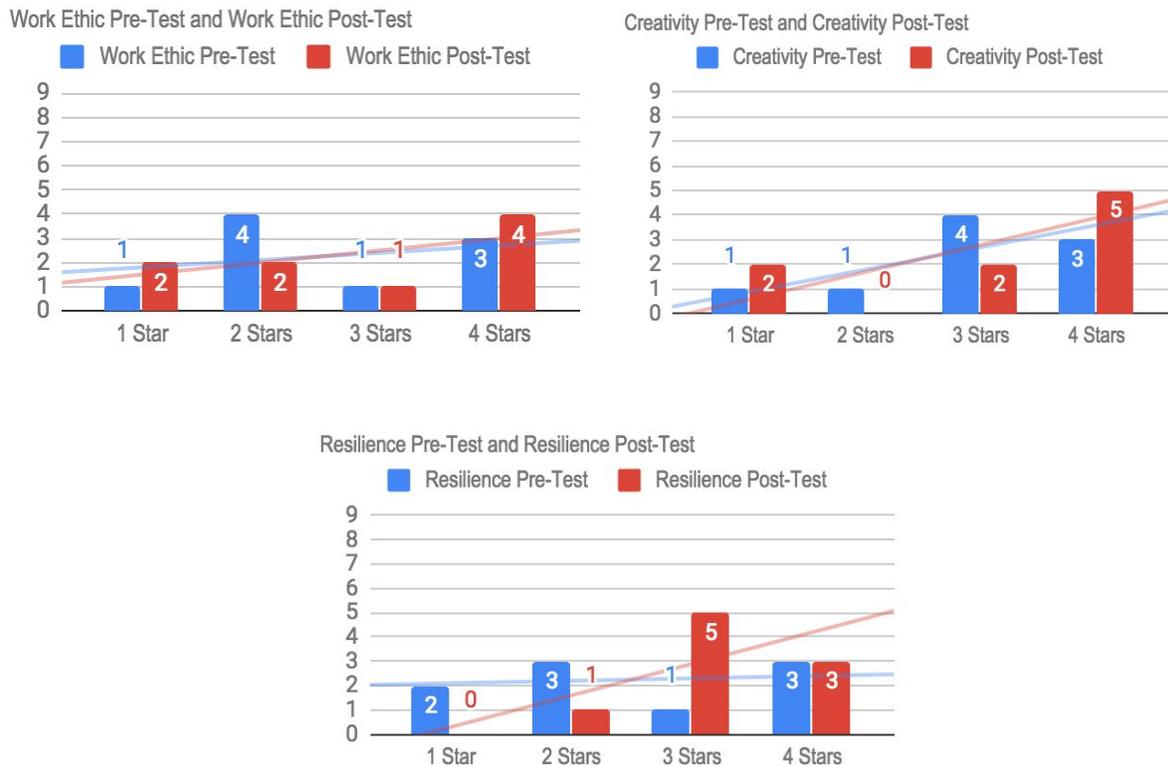
*Pre- and post-test Change in Responses on ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) Online Assessment*

	Work Ethic (WE)	Collaboration (CO)	Creativity (CR)	Resilience (R)	Leadership (L)	Integrity (I)
<b>Mean Star</b>	+0.11	-	+0.11	+0.67	+0.22	+0.11
<b>Median Star</b>	+1	-	+1	+1	-	-

Figure 2 below illustrates participants' individual scores with trend lines. Figure 2 illustrates how scores changed from the pre- to post-test in domains with median increases.

**Figure 2**

*Pre- and Post-test Findings for "Work Ethic," "Creativity," and "Resilience"*



According to pre-test assessment data collected, “Resilience” was the lowest mean score for the group at 2.56. However, it was the highest mean score at 3.2 (+.67) when the post-test data was analyzed. Table 4 below gives a full list of all group means and median scores by domain for both the pre- and post-tests.

**Table 4**

*Group Pre- and Post- Test Mean and Median Scores by Domain*

	<b>WE Pre</b>	<b>WE Post</b>	<b>CO Pre</b>	<b>CO Post</b>	<b>CR Pre</b>	<b>CR Post</b>	<b>R Pre</b>	<b>R Post</b>	<b>L Pre</b>	<b>L Post</b>	<b>I Pre</b>	<b>I Post</b>
<b>Mean Star</b>	2.67	2.78	2.78	2.78	3	3.11	2.56	3.22	3	3.22	2.78	2.89
<b>Median Star</b>	2	3	3	3	3	4	2	3	3	3	3	3

Additionally, “Work Ethic” was the next lowest scoring domain on the pre-test assessment.

“Work Ethic” increased by a group mean of +.11 on the post-test assessment. However, scores also increased by +.11 in “Creativity” and “Integrity” as well. The group mean in “Leadership” increased by +.22 from pre- to post-test as well.

**Exit survey.** When reviewing the means of answers to exit survey questions, the lowest mean scores were 3.67, for the question “Do you know what integrity means?” and 3.77, for the question, “Can you identify actions that show work ethic?” While, both domains had a mean increase of +.11, only “Work Ethic” had a median increase of one star overall. The question with the highest mean at 4.44 was “Do you know what resilience means?” This is consistent with post-test findings regarding increases in “Resilience.” However, when participants were asked, “Can you identify actions that show resilience?” the mean score dropped to 3.89, one of the third lowest means calculated. It is important to note that the Hawthorne Effect (Adair,

1984) might impact scores because the survey was done in person with the researcher present, and while responses were coded, answers were not anonymous. Additionally, EPS was mentioned nine times by participants when probed further regarding their exit survey answers and ICB activities were mentioned three times. Table 5 illustrates the means for all 21 exit survey questions.

**Table 5**

*Exit Survey Question Means*

<i>Exit Survey Questions Asked...</i>	<b>Mean</b>
I enjoyed the lessons.	4.11
The lessons helped me learn something valuable.	4.11
These lessons taught me skills I can use throughout my whole life.	3.89
How confident are you that you know what work ethic means?	4.11
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show work ethic?	3.77
How confident are you that you know why work ethic is important?	4.22
How confident are you that you know what teamwork means?	4
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show teamwork?	4.11
How confident are you that you know why teamwork is important?	4
How confident are you that you know what resilience means?	4.44
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show resilience?	3.89
How confident are you that you know why resilience is important?	4.11
How confident are you that you know what creativity means?	4
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show creativity?	3.89
How confident are you that you know why creativity is important?	4
How confident are you that you know what leadership means?	3.89
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show leadership?	4.33
How confident are you that you know why leadership is important?	4.33
How confident are you that you know what integrity means?	3.67
How confident are you that you can identify actions that show integrity?	4.22
How confident are you that you know why integrity is important?	4.11

**Domain Focused Areas of Growth**

When the initial assessment was given, the researcher was given a class roster with all scores listed by ACT. The researcher reviewed those scores and flagged the domain number of any participant with only one or two stars in any given domain. Of the 21 individual domain scores identified as areas in need of growth, 67% increased one or two stars on the post-test. Overall, 38% of individual domain scores went up at least two stars. Further, each participant had at least two areas or more where individual domain scores increased at least one star, with 89% increases at least two stars in at least one domain area.

**18-26 Year Old Ad-hoc Subgroup**

The ad-hoc subgroup of those participants ages 18-26 years old revealed results that sometimes contradicted the findings of the overall group data analysis. Table 6 lists the median and mean scores for both groups for comparison.

**Table 6**

*Pre- and Post- Test Change Comparisons of All Participants with 18-26 Year Old Participants*

	<b>WE</b>		<b>CO</b>		<b>CR</b>		<b>R</b>		<b>L</b>		<b>I</b>	
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>18-26</b>										
<b>Mean Stars</b>	+0.01	+0.05	-	+0.25	+0.01	<b>-0.50</b>	+0.67	+1.25	+0.22	+0.75	+0.11	+0.50
<b>Median Stars</b>	+1	-	-	+0.5	+1	<b>-1</b>	+1	+1.15	-	+1	-	+1

The results shown in Table 6 indicate a decrease in mean (1.50) and median (-1) in “Creativity” overall among 18-26 year olds. However, there are increases in mean scores in all other areas. Further, there is a mean (1.25) and median score (+1.15) increase in “Resilience” which is much higher than the overall increases observed among the scores observed for the whole group. In addition, increases in “Work Ethic” and “Creativity” were the lowest median

increases for this subgroup overall at “no change” and “-1,” respectively. These were the highest median increases besides “Resilience” in the overall data.

**Exit survey.** The mean scores of 18-26 year olds matched the mean scores of the overall group to most answers on the exit survey. However, there was an increase in the mean scores of participants in the ad-hoc subgroup answers on certain questions on the exit survey. Table 7 shows those questions and means..

**Table 7**

*Mean Score Increases Among 18-26 Year Olds When Compared to Overall Group Means*

<i>Survey question asked...</i>	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>18-26 Mean</b>
How confident are you that you know what teamwork means?	4	4.25
How confident are you that you know why teamwork is important?	4	4.25
How confident are you that you know what creativity means?	4	4.25
How confident are you that you know why creativity is important?	4	4.25

In addition, when reviewing probing questions asked of participants regarding their answers to the exit survey, while EPS was mentioned nine separate times by participants, three (30%) of those responses were from 18-26 year old participants. Further, while ICB was mentioned 3 different times by participants, two (66%) of those responses came from 18-26 year old participants.

**Participant focused areas of growth.** Of the four participants in the target 18-26 year old ad-hoc subgroup, 85.71% of the domain areas identified for growth belonged to them. Skills in “Work Ethic” and “Resilience” were identified areas in need of development for all four participants, and all four showed increases of one (75%) to two (25%) stars in “Resilience,” and all but one participant showed a one (25%) to two (75%) star increase in “Work Ethic.”

### Researcher Pre-test and Post-test Results

The researcher's results on the pre- and post test assessments are shown in Table 8 below. They indicate an increase in all areas, with a large increase in "Integrity" (+3) overall.

**Table 8**

*Researcher Pre-test and Post-test Scores*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Pre-test Score</b>	<b>Post-test Score</b>	<b>Change</b>
Work Ethic	3	4	+1
Collaboration	2	4	+2
Leadership	4	4	-
Resilience	3	4	+1
Creativity	4	4	-
Integrity	1	4	+3

## **Discussion**

Upon probing further into the qualitative results, it was noted that one participant, who had scored highly in the pre-test in all areas, scored lower in every area on the post-test, except “Creativity” where he scored the exact same score. He explained to the researcher that he was “feeling tired” on the day of post-test assessment and was “not ready to do this again.” Due to the small sample size, his performance greatly impacted overall mean and median results. However, he did not impact the results among the 18-26 year old ad-hoc subgroup, as he was not a member. This additional information and the observation of this participant moving from a “4” to a “3” in “Resilience” makes the overall increases illustrated in Figure 3 in “Resilience” for the group even more notable.

Upon review of the pre-test assessment data, both “Work Ethic” and “Resilience” were highlighted by the researcher as areas for growth for the group and the focus of most intervention strategies applied. While all domains were addressed throughout the 10 days, these two domains were the main focus of all EPS and ICB activities on days two through nine. In addition, the researcher designed and selected activities that used participants’ identified strengths to support the development of new skills with informal input from participants as well. For example, after deconstructing “The Marshmallow Challenge” activity in a group discussion on Day Three, one participant stated, “I need to work more on patience. I get anxious and want to get started right away. Then, I make mistakes.” Using this information, the researcher identified and planned for

another experiential problem-solving activity, “Crocodile River”<sup>1</sup> which identified “building patience” as an intended learning outcome hoping to provide the learner with an additional opportunity to build this skill related to developing ACT Tessa Workforce (2019) work readiness skills in “Resilience.” Further, another participant who had scored four across all domain on the pre-test, suggested the group make a video to promote themselves to the wider community. Accepting his idea in order to support the development of the ACT Tessa Workforce (2019) readiness skills in both “Leadership” and “Creativity” for the group, and knowing “Creativity” was a group strength, the researcher adjusted the session schedule to accommodate time for the participants to organize and execute this self-directed and authentic learning experience. The participant later shared that video footage shot was then edited and shared in an online public program called, *CT Zone* to promote the program and participants. This was celebrated by the group participants and five participants shared they had also seen it broadcast.

One participant, who also happened to be the youngest participant in the group, refused to participant most of the sessions, but did start to participate after the ICB activity when we attended the “Males of Color” event. At this event multiple stakeholders from the community were there and the participant was able to see the facilitator interact with them. The participant stayed beyond the session hours to participate in a special break-out session as well. He hardly spoke at all before this event, but shared his ideas in the breakout session (without prompting) and also worked as a “helper” to the session leader carrying her items back to the main room before leaving.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://toolbox.hyperisland.com/crocodile-river>

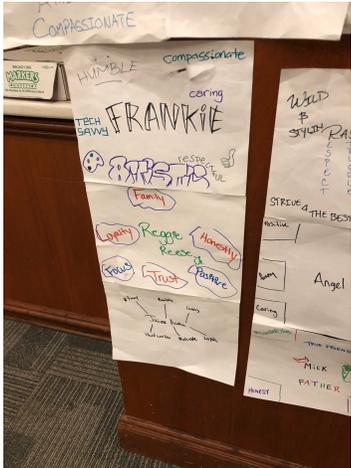
Throughout the 10 day session, interventions were built, revised, and implemented based upon the input and identified learning needs of individual participants. On day six, one participant, who was also a part of the 18-26 target demographic the researcher who designed the pilot was hoping to reach, who was struggling with an issue related to his release, laughed out loud when the “Procrastination” video was played. He walked through his own steps regarding procrastination in a think-aloud with the group. He explained how getting a cell phone was his first concern upon release, instead of registering for a state program that he only had 10 days to complete after release. He explained challenges included a lack of transportation, and “it just wasn’t a priority.” As a group, the researcher referred participants to the activities regarding urgency and prioritizing in the ACT Tessaera Workforce Playbook (2019). We spoke about the issue objectively and the participant ranked the urgency and priority of the issue. While other participants ranked this issue as a high priority right away, this participant did not see how high a priority it was until he worked through the activity aloud. The following day he returned and announced that he had taken care of the issue. The other participants were visibly relieved and shared that they were anxious and worried for him with regard to this issue as well. The group celebrated the participant’s new found ability to prioritize. The group spoke together and decided this showed “Leadership” and a good “Work Ethic.” One participant who was outside the target group of 18-26 year olds, referred to the name chosen by the participants together for the group, “The Incredible CT Leaders” or “ICTL” for short. He said, “Now you can say you are ‘ICTL,’ because you took responsibility and got it done for yourself. You showed what you can do when you want to.” Having older individuals who were exemplary models themselves, was helpful in situations like this one, especially when working with the target 18-26 year olds.

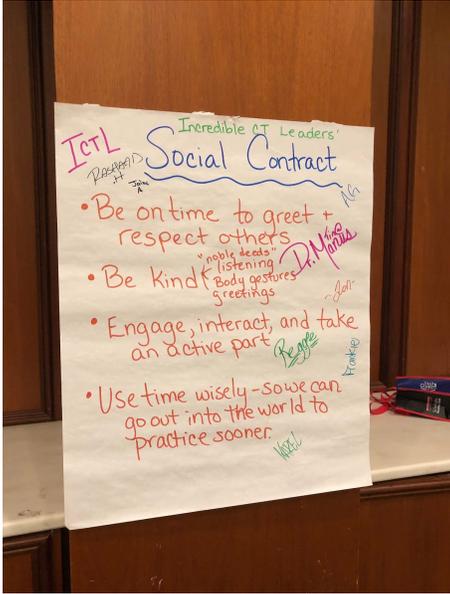
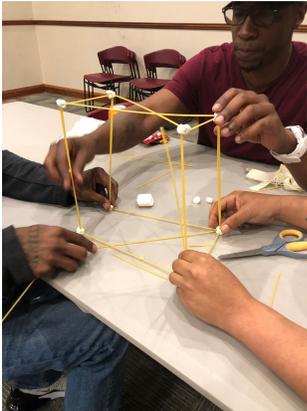
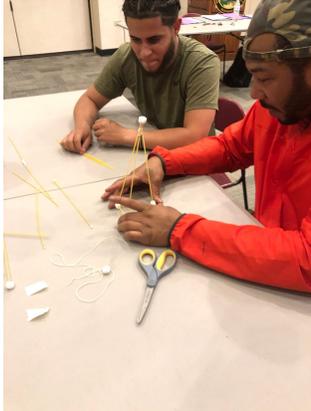
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Table 9 lists the activities delivered each day. EPS and ICB activities were chosen by the researcher that delivered content verbally, socially, and kinesthetically, as those were strengths observed by the researcher within the first two meeting days. The ACT Tessa Workforce Playbook (2019) was used as a reference for skill development, for checks for understanding, and discussion questions asked throughout the sessions as well.

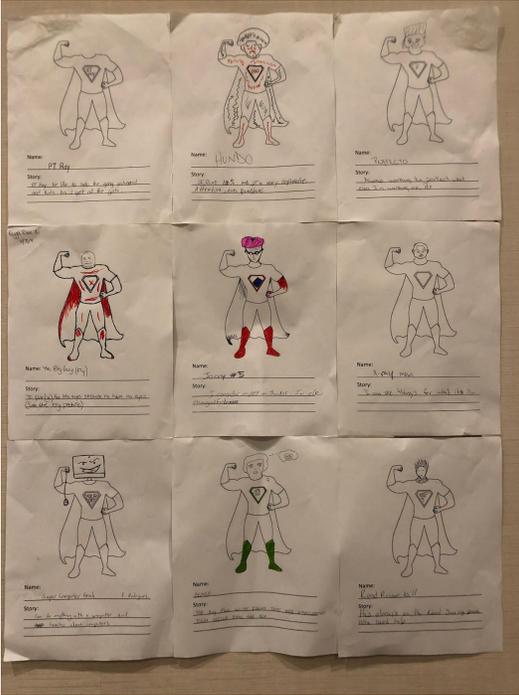
**Table 9**

*EPS and ICB Learning Activities*

Day	Activities	Description	Activity Type
1	6 Word Autobiographies	<p>Using markers, on 8x11 paper create a sign with your name that has 6 words that describe you.</p> 	ICB
2	Social Contract	Group discussion to set group norms and name the group.	ICB

			
<p>3</p>	<p>Marshmallow Challenge<sup>2</sup></p>	<p>Work in teams of 3-4 people using 20 spaghetti sticks, 6 small marshmallows, 1 yard of tape, 1 yard of string, use 18 minutes to build the tallest structure to support one large marshmallow.</p>   	<p>EPS</p>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.leadershipchallenge.com/resource/challenging-the-process-with-the-marshmallow-challenge.aspx>

<p>4</p>	<p>Males of Color</p>	<p>Visit and participate in a public community event with breakout sessions to devise ways to support males of color in the Bridgeport Public School System.</p> 	<p>ICB</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>Super Heroes</p>	<p>Using a 2D form and markers, create your superhero with a “special power” you bring to the workplace.</p> 	<p>ICB</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>Procrastination<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Interactive discussion and Smart Goal review after watching Tim Urban’s Ted Talk video.</p>	<p>ICB</p>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/tim\\_urban\\_inside\\_the\\_mind\\_of\\_a\\_master\\_procrastinator?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_urban_inside_the_mind_of_a_master_procrastinator?language=en)

<p>7</p>	<p>Crocodile River<sup>4</sup></p>	<p>Team-building activity using 8 20cmx10cm wood with 2-3cm thickness to get 9 participants across a 6-8 meter area. Participants need to get across using blocks, before “Crocodile Rock” by Elton John ends, and without “falling in the croc infested water.”</p> 	<p>EPS</p>
<p>8</p>	<p>Grit<sup>5</sup></p>	<p>Interactive discussion of Angela Lee Duckworth’s Ted Talk video as it relates to ”Work Ethic” and “Resilience.”</p>	<p>ICB</p>
<p>9</p>	<p>Meditation</p>	<p>Group experience in meditation, led by an <i>Eight Point Meditation</i> practitioner and local librarian.</p> 	<p>EPS</p>
<p>10</p>	<p>Celebration</p>	<p>Community stakeholders in reentry to meet, congratulate, and offer further support to participants. Question and answer session, followed by certificates of completion and recognition.</p>	<p>ICB</p>

<sup>4</sup> <https://toolbox.hyperisland.com/crocodile-river>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance?language=en)

			
	<p>Remind 101<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Opportunity for all participants to remain connected to one another and the facilitator via digital social networking platform for job alerts, community events, etc.</p>	<p>ICB</p>

### The Researcher’s Own Work Readiness Skills

When the researcher began the pilot, her work readiness skills, as assessed by ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019), also had areas in need of development. The researcher had read the curriculum before taking the pre-test as well, and still had identified skills’ deficits to address. Due to the participatory nature of the pilot, the researcher was able to learn new skills through engaging with participants in different activities, listening, and designing coherent instruction to meet their needs (Gamwell & Daly, 2017; Marzano, 2017; Paul, 2011). Further, the researcher saw tangible improvements to her own behavior with regards to “Integrity,” an area that had been scored at only one star on the pre-test.

The change in behavior was observed when the researcher was asked in her daytime position to complete a letter of recommendation for a colleague she supervises. She had forgotten to do it, and received an email reminder from the university where her colleague was

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.remind.com>

planning to attend to please submit the recommendation letter. Instead of writing the recommendation letter and pretending that she had not forgotten, the researcher went to her colleague and explained that she had forgotten, had received a reminder, and would complete the letter that afternoon. The colleague was not concerned, but immediately the researcher realized that this would not have been something she would have done in the past. The researcher was reminded of conversations had with participants in “ICTL” who shared their own commitments to integrity and holding themselves accountable for mistakes in the past and the present.

### **Main Findings Supporting Previous Research**

Upon review of the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment correlational field test data shared earlier in Table 3, all domains except “Resilience” had at least one correlational relationship  $>0.5$ . However, the strongest increases in mean and median among participants was within the field of “Resilience” which had no correlational value  $>.05$  with any other domain. If the research conducted revealed only notable findings in the domain of “Resilience,” it would be consistent with the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) field test correlational results which indicated strong relationships between other domains. Because there was no similar increase in any other domain, the researcher argues that the findings of this research are consistent and activities applied in sessions have not adjusted the previously observed correlational relationships between domains. Further research would be needed to identify what instructional strategies, if any, applied within the sessions has a positive impact upon the domain of “Resilience.”

When observing the strongest ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) field test correlations of {Collaboration, Integrity = 0.691}, {Work Ethic, Integrity = 0.632}, {Work Ethic, Collaboration

= 0.599}, {Creativity , Leadership = 0.528}, and {Collaboration, Creativity = 0.501}, there was no median increases observed in either domains in any of the pairs. However, there was an increase in both group means for {Creativity, Leadership = 0.528} at +.22 and +.11, respectively and for {Work Ethic, Integrity = 0.632} at + .11 for each. However, because the sample size was so small, these increases can be explained also by the Hawthorne Effect (Adair, 1984). More research and a larger sample size would be needed to reinforce the correlational findings of the ACT Tessa Workforce (2019) field test in order to understand how the application of ESP and ICB instructional strategies may or may not have influenced these increases.

The correlation between “Work Ethic” and “Integrity” is the second highest correlation at .632. However, both group means and medians had little change from pre-test to post-test. Means on the exit survey regarding “Work Ethic” were slightly lower overall (-.11) than questions regarding “Integrity.” The only correlation higher is between “Work Ethic” and “Collaboration” at .691. Supporting this correlation, all questions on the exit survey regarding collaboration, referred to as “teamwork,” scored a combined mean of 4.03 which matched the combined mean of all questions asked regarding “Work Ethic.”

While post-test scores in “Resilience” increased, scores in “Work Ethic” and “Collaboration” did not at the same rate. The ESP and ICB strategies used promoted team-building and problem-solving that required collaboration, but collaboration and team-building was not explicitly taught as part of the activity. Perhaps more explicit instruction in “Collaboration” would have yielded better results in “Collaboration? Or a combination of “Work Ethic,” “Integrity,” and “Collaboration” together might have worked to leverage the correlations between domains to build skills? However, “Resilience” has weaker correlations to

“Integrity” (.283), “Work Ethic” (.331), “Collaboration” (.362), and “Creativity” (.360) and is therefore difficult to influence when working to raise skills in other domains. Interestingly, this was the one domain measured which showed marked increases from pre-test to post-test scores.

**18-26 Year Old Ad-hoc Subgroup.** When separating out the mean and median scores on the pre-test and post-test for participants ages 18-26 years old, there appeared to be a strong increase in scores in “Resilience” especially among this particular subgrouping. In addition, skills in “Leadership” had a greater increase than the group overall. However, two older members had “4” in this domain already, so their change rate was “0.”

The decreases in mean and median for “Creativity” are somewhat discouraging, but this subgroup had tremendous gains overall and seemed most engaged in EPS and ICB activities. When reviewing exit surveys participants from this subgroup mentioned specific activities added to the in-class sessions in their probed answers. For example, when one participant was asked what lesson he liked best, he responded, “Deciding on the group name.” Another responded that “Crocodile River shows teamwork” and “The Marshmallow Challenge shows creativity.” These responses were similar to others captured during discussions and at other points during the sessions as well.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Proposed policy implications for this research is to add to the current research being done regarding reentry and to encourage other practitioners to experiment with EPS and ICB instructional strategies. In addition, it might be helpful for practitioners to share effective instructional practices beyond programming and collaborative “wrap around services.” Identifying the instructional practices that are most effective would allow other practitioners to

use this information to develop and engage returning citizens within their own programs. The impact upon practitioners/classroom facilitators who gather to share best practices could have a positive impact on the field as well.

As for the impact of ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) upon the researcher, the results support earlier findings (Paul, 2011) regarding the impact of teaching upon the learning of teachers themselves. Therefore, a program that incorporates a participatory component to sharing new content will improve the knowledge of practitioners as well. This is important as reentry programs continue to build mentorship opportunities for returning citizens and/or employment opportunities in under-served communities. Through teaching the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) program, an instructor can show marked improvements in his or her work readiness skills. This makes better employees who are modelling exemplary behaviors for returning citizens to imitate as well.

**Future Programming.** It is suggested that this program be run independently through probation/parole where direct recruitment is possible or through the local government agency dedicated to reentry efforts. While this program could be run out of any nonprofit provider, because returning citizens tend to travel from one provider to the next, a central hub for this kind of social and emotional skills profile might be helpful in preparing better supports through other service programs offered. For example, the ACT Tessaera Workforce (2019) online assessment might be the intake given to returning citizens before attending other programs. If so, facilitators in these programs would have a better idea of the strengths and areas for growth each returning citizen brings forth as a learner with regard to work readiness skills. Another example is to use this program as a “first stop” for returning citizens to help them to frame their own reentry

journeys and build a plan of action using community resources available for themselves. Either of these suggestions might provide a more strategic and research-based reentry pathway for returning citizen and possibly better outcomes overall.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were many strengths to this research. The many partners that supported this pilot was a major strength of the pilot. In addition, the recruitment efforts by those working with returning citizens already was critical. Further, the help of an on-site person working in reentry helped to make helping participants with challenges beyond the scope of the pilot easier.

The research also had limitations. Due to the amount of artifacts of learning used and the sequential nature of the program, a single training location dedicated to the purpose of this program would be helpful. Breaking down materials each day and moving rooms made transitions difficult. Further, the Hawthorne Effect (Adair, 1984) may have played a role in the increases seen in the pre-test and post-test results, due to the large amount of attention and special visits the pilot and participants received from stakeholders.

A lack of academic stamina was definitely a limiting factor as well. Participants were not excited to take the post-test assessment. In addition, many complained about the length of the assessment overall. Further, only one participant brought his binder with the ACT Workforce Playbook (2019) home each day. Others left their binders in the session, where the facilitator stored them each day. The pilot included no diagnostic of academic or reading abilities among participants either. It is unclear if issues with stamina were due to deficits in academic skills or resulted from a general lack of motivation overall.

Another limiting factor that was not foreseen was that the pilot had the dinner sponsor rescind his offer upon selling his business and having an emergency with his family. This was unknown until the first day of the program and no sponsor could be found to replace him. However, the facilitator negotiated with participants to release them at 6:00 PM each day and eliminate dinner. Further, light snacks were provided each day as a courtesy by the facilitator and/or other community partners.

While receiving time back instead of dinner was a benefit to participants, being on-time in general was a challenge. There was no built in feedback regarding on-time behavior in the pilot. Initially, the stipend could have been used to reward on-time behavior, but with the fluid nature of the program and lack of full recruitment, a change was made to ensure that the nine participants continued to come each day so the pilot could continue.

The lack of strong recruitment to fill the pilot was also another limitation that made planned activities difficult to facilitate with smaller numbers of participants, especially the fact that no women participated in the pilot. However, low recruitment and participation rates could have been due to a change in city personnel two weeks before the program began or the fact that women were not included in photos chosen by the researcher for the flier itself.

### **Perspectives for Future Research**

Future research is needed on this topic with larger sample sizes; however, cohort groups should remain small. Nine participants allowed for high quality discussions. Had 25 participants been recruited, it is unclear whether or not these results would be replicated. Further, a longitudinal study with planned follow-ups might be helpful in determining what, if any, long term impact the program had in the work readiness of participants and/or their abilities to find

and maintain employment. While participants that signed up for Remind 101 have been engaged, the use of this tool overtime and its effectiveness at building work readiness skills is unknown.

**Incentives.** Because “lateness” was a pervasive problem among all group members, more research is needed to investigate the level of reward necessary to improve on time behaviors. Perhaps a larger reward is needed or something that is more immediate? While \$100 gift card incentives were viewed as a benefit by participants, dinner was only seen as a benefit to one person. Participants overwhelmingly preferred leaving one hour early over having dinner provided. This is important to note for future research because overall the concept of “time” was observed by the researcher to be an important factor to these returning citizens. More research is needed to observe “time“ and its relationship as a concept to other returning citizens as well. Perhaps, a hyper-focus on “time” could be a behavioral condition learned during incarceration or a symptom signaling a fight to gain autonomy/control over one’s life who is returning to society from incarceration? Whatever the reason, more research is suggested into this phenomenon, as it relates to returning citizens and developing better methods of supporting them on their individual reentry journeys.

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