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Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison

James S. Vacca

Abstract

Since 1990, the literature has shown that prisoners who attend educational programs while they are incarcerated are less likely to return to prison following their release. Studies in several states have indicated that recidivism rates have declined where inmates have received an appropriate education. Furthermore, the right kind of educational program leads to less violence by inmates involved in the programs and a more positive prison environment. Effective Education Programs are those that help prisoners with their social skills, artistic development and techniques and strategies to help them deal with their emotions. In addition, these programs emphasize academic, vocational and social education. The inmates who participate in these programs do so because they see clear opportunities to improve their capabilities for employment after being released. Program success or failure is hampered, however, by the values and attitudes of those in the authority position, over crowded prison population conditions and inadequate funding for teaching personnel, supplies and materials. In addition, recent studies show that most inmates are males who have little or no employable skills. They are also frequently school dropouts who have difficulties with reading and writing skills and poor self-concepts and negative attitudes toward education. Literacy skills in learner-centered programs with meaningful contexts that recognize the different learning styles, cultural backgrounds and learning needs of inmates are important to program success and inmate participation. Inmates need education programs that not only teach them to read effectively but also provide them with the necessary reinforcement that promote a positive transition to society when they are released. Efforts in this direction would help stimulate better participation of inmates in all prison education programs and will go a long way to help the prisoner rehabilitation process.

Prisoners who attend education programs while they are incarcerated are less likely to return to prison following their release. Since 1990, literature

examining the return rates of prisoners, or recidivism, has shown that educated prisoners are less likely to find themselves back in prison a second time if they complete an educational program and are taught skills to successfully read and write. The "right kind" of education works to both lower recidivism and reduce the level of violence. Moreover, appropriate education leads to a more humane and more tolerable prison environment in which to live and work, not only for the inmates but also for the officers, staff and everyone else (Newman et al. 1993).

In 1991 Clark investigated the success of inmates enrolled in twenty-one prison college level education programs. This study generated data that answered the question whether completing a college degree during a period of prison incarceration reduced the likelihood that participants would return to prison following their release. Clark found that inmates who earned a diploma returned to prison custody at a significantly lower rate (26.4%) than those inmates who did not earn a degree (44.6%).

Clark's findings were similar to those findings reported by Allen in 1988 at the University of Oklahoma. This study showed that 25 % of the inmates who received vocational training in prison returned to prison following their release. This was compared to a 77 % recidivism rate for the general population in the state of Oklahoma. Both the Clark and Allen studies suggest that working toward and earning a degree while in prison is positively related to the success that inmates experience when they are released to society.

Furthermore, the literature shows that in Ohio, while the overall recidivism rate was 40 percent, the recidivism rate for inmates enrolled in the college program was 18 percent. In addition, Ohio statistics show that inmates graduating from the college program reduced the rate of recidivism by 72 percent when compared with inmates not participating in any education program (Batiuk, 1997).

Canadian statistics supported this result by showing that inmates who completed at least two college courses had 50 percent lower recidivism rate than the norm (Duguid, 1997). In New York, 26.4 percent of the inmates who earned a college degree returned to prison compared to 44.6 percent of the inmates who participated in college education programs, but did not graduate (Clark, 1991).

As a teacher of literacy in the college degree program at Great Meadow Correctional Facility in New York State for ten years, I saw firsthand the benefit of prison education programs. Most of the inmates who graduated with four year degrees from the college program provided by Skidmore College's

University Without Walls academic program did not return to prison once they were released. When inmates do not return to prison, the correctional education programs produce a national savings of hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

Effective Education Programs

Ripley (1993) believed that recidivism rates drop when the education programs are designed to help prisoners with their social skills, artistic development and techniques and strategies to help them deal with their emotions. Ripley further stressed the importance of teaching moral education as well as critical thinking and problem solving skills. The work of Harold Herber and Benjamin Bloom has fostered the importance of teaching critical thinking and reasoning skills to all learners, especially those that are considered to be at risk.

Gerber and Fritsch (1993) evaluated the outcomes of the adult education programs in prison. They distinguished among academic, vocational and social education and concluded that prison education programs lead to a reduction of criminal behavior, continued education after release from prison and fewer disciplinary problems in the prison setting. In addition, inmates who choose to participate in these programs have lower recidivism rates than those who do not participate.

In 1994, this educational research project examined more than sixty studies on prison education. The project focused on the relationship between prison education and offender behavior, the effects of prison control strategies on prison education programs and the effects of academic and vocational program participation on inmate misconduct and reincarceration.

The findings of the project present outcomes about what effective prison education programs do and why they are successful at reducing recidivism. For example, inmates exposed to education programs have lower recidivism rates than those who do not participate. In particular, most vocational programs in prison reported lower recidivism rates, lower parole revocation rates, better release employment patterns and better institutional disciplinary records for participants than for non-participants. Why the vocational programs are successful is because the programs are kept separate from traditional prison routines, and they provide follow-up services for inmates when they are released, attracting a target population of potential learners and providing marketable training skills.

The Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control conducted a study to determine the uses and usefulness of prison literacy and vocational

programs of 65,000 inmates in the Federal Prison System. The data were first collected from a survey of the prison staff and review of selected inmate case files and other data to determine if the Federal Bureau of Prisons had reliable information on inmate participation in these programs. Secondly, data were collected from a survey of federal prisoners and prison staff on incentives for encouraging inmate participation and on the usefulness of the prisons' vocational training and industry work assignments in providing marketable employment skills.

The results of this study showed that inmates reported that they were more inclined to participate in programs when they saw clear opportunities to improve their capabilities for success after being released. In addition, ex-prisoners who participated in employment and vocational education programs in prison had a better chance of maintaining employment and earning slightly more money than similar ex-prisoners who had not participated in the programs.

The factors that determine the success of prison education programs were studied by Blake and Sackett (1975). The authors found that the success of a prison education program is influenced most by the values and attitudes of persons in authority positions. More specifically, the attitudes and values of prison's governing officials (including corrections officers, prisoners and instructors in these programs) determine whether or not the prison should be considered as a place of punishment or rehabilitation. Kerka (1995) maintained that in many prisons there is a conflict among authorities regarding the beliefs on the goals and purposes of corrections: security, control, punishment or rehabilitation.

Two other factors that are essential to the success or failure of prison education programs are prison overcrowding and inadequate funding for teaching personnel, supplies and equipment. According to Jenkins (1994) prison overcrowdedness was particularly evident between 1980 and 1992 when the prison population increased by 160 percent. With the increase in prison population, however, prison educators have witnessed decreases in program funding for teaching staff, supplies and material Paul (1991).

In addition, most of the maximum-security prisons are populated with males having little or very few employable skills (Gendron and Cavan, 1988). More than half of the adults incarcerated in American federal and state prisons can neither read nor write, and they have less than an eight-grade education. Many adult prisoners are school dropouts; and given probation do not finish high school or return to school. According to a report to the New York State Senate, a majority of state prisoners have no high school diploma and a

majority of them cannot read. Many prisoners are likely to have poor self-confidence and negative attitudes about education because they viewed their early experiences as being negative (Paul, 1991). To prevent a recurrence of these negative outcomes, all the key players--policymakers, corrections officers, and instructors--should support effective programs and treat prisoners as whole people who have value and who have potential to improve literacy.

Educational Background of Inmates Attending Prison Education Programs

Stephens (1990) studied 220 male prisoners at a New York State Maximum security prison and found that seventy nine percent of the total inmate population were high school dropouts. Their reasons for dropping out of school included a greater rate of grade retention, school transfers, misbehavior, poor attendance and poor grades. Inmates also experienced less time in extracurricular activities and very little time with a school counselor during their time in school. Most inmates blamed poor socioeconomic conditions and poor role models as major reasons for their dropping out of school and for their criminal activity. These findings clearly support the need for positive prison role models who believe in the value of academic and extracurricular activities that support prisoners' growth and development.

The New Jersey Department of Corrections reported that its prisons grew from 6,000 inmates in 1975 to more than 25,000 in 1997. An estimated 70 percent of these offenders were functioning at the two lowest literacy levels. In addition, the department reported that of the \$25,000 spent yearly on each inmate, only about 2 percent of this cost is spent on education. The Department's Corrections Education Task Force recommended that the significant savings gained from reduced recidivism could usually offset those modest increases in educational spending. The Task Force further maintained that expanded and improved educational opportunity for inmates reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Certainly, effective education programs need funding for filling gaps in inmates' vocational and academic backgrounds, thus reducing recidivism and its related costs and also increasing inmates' potential to lead productive lives.

The prison population includes a disproportionate number of adults who are economically poor or disadvantaged. Inmates who are released from prison are frequently unable to find jobs because they either lack experience and/or literacy skills. With the high cost of incarceration and the large increase in the prison population, it seems that mastery of literacy skills may be a proactive

way to address the problem of reincarceration. Literacy skills are important to prisoners in many ways. Inmates need these skills to fill out forms, to make requests and to write letters to others in the outside world. In addition, some prison jobs require literacy skills and inmates can use reading as a way to pass their time while they are behind bars (Paul, 1991). Thus, education programs initially should stress practical applications of literacy so that prisoners can use newly gained skills and insights.

Implications for Successful Literacy Programs and Future Challenges

Successful prison literacy programs are learner centered and they should be tailored to the prison culture (Kerka, 1995). They recognize different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and multiple literacies (Newman et al. 1993). The programs are participatory and they use the strengths of the learner to help them shape their own learning. Literacy should be put into meaningful contexts that address the learners' needs (Kerka, 1995). Instruction should involve engaging topics that motivate and sustain the inmates' interest. It should also use literature that is written by prisoners because it provides relevant subject matter as well as writing models. Most of all the programs must enable inmates to see themselves and be seen in roles other than that of prisoners (Paul, 1961).

The challenge ahead for educators is that many prisoners lack self-confidence and have a negative attitude toward school. Exacerbating these problems are prison environments that are not rich in verbal and sensory stimuli (Paul, 1991). In addition, correctional educators have difficulty providing a program that has any continuity. Almost daily they have to deal with the uniqueness of the prison culture with such routines and disruptions as lock-down, head counts, and inmates' meetings with lawyers (Shethar, 1993). Furthermore, educators and students are frequently locked in rooms that are monitored by prison guards and the inmates often face peer pressure where achievement and attendance in school are discouraged (Haigler et al. 1994).

Finally, the literature points to some difficulty with the use of recidivism as an outcome measure (Kerka, 1995). The problem include the following: (1) a universal definition is lacking; (2) it is indirect and measures law enforcement activity and not education; and (3) it is too simplistic, similar to using retention as the outcome for success in Adult Basic Education Programs (Porporino and Robinson, 1992).

Figure 1. Guidelines that Promote Successful Literacy Education Programs in Prison

- I. Prison literacy programs should be inmate learner centered and designed to meet the needs of the prison culture.
 - The programs must recognize the different learning styles of inmates.
 - The programs need to recognize the cultural diversity of inmates.
 - The programs must meet the individual needs of inmates who have a wide range of literacy ability levels.
- II. Prison literacy programs should encourage inmate participation and use their learning strengths to shape the academic outcomes of the programs.
 - The programs should use instructional materials that meet the needs of the inmates.
 - The programs should use instructional materials that are presented in meaningful contexts to the inmates.
- III. Prison literacy programs must emphasize instruction that includes engaging topics that motivate and sustain the inmates' interest.
 - The programs should use literature that deals with subject matter that is relevant to the academic needs of the inmates.
 - The programs should be taught, when possible, with literature that is written by inmates to serve as effective models for reading and writing skills development.
- IV. Prison literacy programs should provide opportunities for inmates to see themselves in roles other than that of prisoners.

Advocating for Effective Prison Education Programs

In conclusion, the United States incarcerates more people than any other industrialized country in the world. For a period of fifteen years, 1975 and 1990, the number of inmates in state and federal prisons increased by almost 200 percent. By 1998, one in every 150 U.S. residents was incarcerated. In 2000, the number of incarcerated men and women reached 2 million. Inmates need education programs that not only teach them how to read effectively but also provide the necessary reinforcement that helps promote a positive transition to society when they are released. The Figure provides guidelines that support this direction. Perhaps these efforts will help stimulate better participation of inmates not only in literacy programs, but also in the Adult Basic Education,

Vocational and college level programs. Certainly, these efforts could go a long way toward helping the prisoner rehabilitation process.

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Biographical Sketch

JAMES S. VACCA is the Chair of Special Education and Literacy at C.W. Post College in Long Island. Prior to teaching at C.W. Post, he taught graduate courses in Literacy at Adelphi University, Iona College, Russell Sage College, and the State University of New York at Albany. In addition, for more than ten years he taught Developmental Reading and Writing Skills courses to college level inmates for the Skidmore College University Without Walls Program at Great Meadow Prison, a maximum security prison in Comstock, New York. Dr. Vacca was also a school teacher and administrator in several New York Public schools and residential treatment centers for more than thirty years.

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