

The need and value of correctional education – why it is important

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of successful correctional education efforts, both from a modern and historical perspective. It addresses questions of what is needed to support prison education efforts.

"The difference between being conflicted and having unity of purpose is a state of mind." (Gehring, 1993).

Introduction

Critics of correctional education have offered many reasons for why it has no value—from the fact that “those” people do not deserve to receive an education, to the extreme cost of it, to the belief that such programs take away from our children’s education. Almost every political campaign includes dialogue about a need to “get tough on crime,” where any possible supports to prisoners is considered being too soft. We are racing to take more and more away from prisoners; from weight rooms, to air conditioning, to education. In 1996, the United States eliminated access to postsecondary education to prisoners, in the form of Pell grants for low-income adults. It seems we are in such a conservative trend that anything seen as remotely coddling prisoners is enough to anger the public.

Correctional educators are constantly bombarded with the accusation that we cannot prove that education reduces recidivism, and, because we cannot point to a specific percentage, we must not be doing anything. It is interesting that we look only to the educational part of a prisoner’s programs for reduction in crime. We do not typically say that the religious efforts should reduce recidivism, or that food services should reduce recidivism, or even that other programs in the prison are responsible for such results. I was a correctional educator in Virginia during the late 1970s, when the legislature determined that education was the one thing that could reduce crime, and a great deal of additional funding was allocated to increase programs. Three years later there was a series of hearings to determine the reduction of recidivism related to funding increases. When we could not point with clarity to a statistic, the legislature systematically eliminated all the programs it had funded. We were given less than three years to change Virginia society. This is the inherent difficulty with proving how effective correctional education is. Although we know what we do makes a difference, we cannot always point to a statistic, or be allowed to suggest correctional education as inherently a good thing, as we do with K-12 education.

But, we do have evidence that education does make a difference in prisoners' lives, and in their ability to function in society. We know that from the research, and we know it from our experiences as teachers.

Evaluation and effectiveness

We continue to have a problem proving to the public that correctional education really works. We have labored under the Martinson criticism that “nothing works” since the 1970s. Much of the research that followed contained flaws in methodologies and design. This is always a problem with social research that investigates current problems. From recent research, we have evidence that correctional programming does have positive results. Hopefully this body of research can address issues with fewer biases.

In a 1991 meta-analysis study (Andrews, et al), suggested that no matter what the focus of the treatment program, it would not be successful without the use of appropriate services and comprehensive evaluation to determine the participant needs. In the groundbreaking work by Ross and Fabiano (1992), the study of a series of programs—deemed successful and unsuccessful—there was a central control issue. They found that programs that focused on interpersonal skills, rather than impersonal skills, would be more likely to experience success. This is something most correctional educators understand at the most basic level. Another study found that programs must be sensitive to the needs and characteristics of their clients (Palmer, 1992). Again, this is no surprise to correctional teachers.

In the recent three state recidivism study completed by the Correctional Education Association, there was empirical evidence that participation in education programs, even for a portion of a prisoner's sentence, helped reduce reoffending. Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio participated in the study, and although there were some differences, the results were similar (Steurer, 2003).

International perspectives on correctional education

When one first comes in contact with systems for correctional education delivery in another country, the differences can be startling. We tend to think of ourselves as unique, with separate problems. Even within each country, institutions tend to be isolated and autonomous. It is almost as if we are afraid to share what is going on, or it will be taken away if broadcast.

In North America, particularly the United States, security and safety drive all programming, and the most common approach to crime is placement in some form of “closed” institution. The United States incarcerates more of its juvenile and adult citizens than any other country in the world. In some European countries, most notably the Nordic countries, efforts are concentrated on “open” placements, where a prisoner goes out of the institution for daily work or study. This is an alien concept to North Americans, where we cannot even imagine such an idea. This in spite of the fact that many more people are on probation or parole than are in facilities, so we do have examples at the end of sentences.

In Denmark, for example, a solution to overcrowding has been to send a convicted person home until a bed opens up. Once the space is available, sometimes a year later, the person

is contacted, and expected to serve the sentence. This seems unbelievable to North American audiences. It perhaps would not work in larger country, but such an example proves that we can change our way of thinking in certain areas. There are solutions we have not yet considered.

Finnish prisons, although not luxurious in design, include saunas for prisoners. Each prisoner may take a weekly sauna. This would be considered an extreme indulgence according to most countries' standards, but it is a basic right in Finland, a part of the culture.

Institutional programs in various countries seem very different in some aspects. Upon detailed investigation, however, the similarities emerge. There are problems with non-native speakers in almost every prison in Europe. In Austria, for example it is not uncommon for 20 or more languages to be represented. Having staff that speak all the languages in the population is almost impossible. In addition, addressing the needs of different cultures is very difficult. The staff often represent dominant culture. Correctional education in most countries does not address multicultural issues to the extent it should.

Another similarity institutional programs share across countries is the increasing difficulty with drug related crimes and sentences. The spiraling numbers of prison inmates with long sentences due to drug related crimes has changed correctional institutions, perhaps forever. Although the drugs and sentencing varies from country to country, most institutions are wrestling with the problem of developing appropriate programming for younger, drug-impacted prisoners. We can learn from each other to solve these problems.

There continues to be a deficit in programming options for women prisoners in most places. The percentage of female incarcerates seems to be fairly consistent across countries, ranging from about five to 10 percent of the institutional population. Because this is such a small percentage, women's special issues often get overlooked. It is not uncommon for programs for women in institutions to be a relative repetition of programs for males, or to concentrate on what I call "pink collar" employment.

Most countries are facing financial crises. Often we consider our own economic programs unique; first as individuals, and then as members of a certain society. But the truth is that many countries are experiencing fiscal problems, and institutions are being looked upon as a major drain upon the economy. In California, for example, the state budget has more allocated for prisons than it does for public education. We can learn from each other about how each system is addressing these problems.

Trends in correctional education

One way we need to learn is to find out where we come from. There is a rich history and literature in correctional education, of which most of us are unaware. We need to know more about our field in order to move beyond being isolated presenters of information. There are many major historical figures who contributed to correctional education, and made it a part of the broader social milieu. Learning about these early contributors and patterns makes us feel more closely tied to something larger than ourselves. This makes us stronger, and better able to sustain ourselves in an environment that can be harsh.

Very few correctional teachers grew up planning to be correctional educators. Most of us "fell into" correctional education after preparing for other work. This is a problem, because we were not properly socialized into the field. Instead, we tend to come into institutional teaching identifying as a reading teacher, math teacher, or trade instructor. What this means is that we do not share a world view, knowledge base, or agreed assumptions about what and how we should teach. In most disciplines, there is a shared world view, which everyone who trained in the field at least understands, if not agrees.

Although this may not seem relatively important at first glance, consider the shared base that most teachers take into the classroom. Elementary school teachers share the foundation belief that content should address the developmental levels of children. Classes that train teachers to work with children address this world view. Elementary teachers have shared experience and training which allows them to take the basic tenets of the discipline into any classroom setting.

In the correctional classroom, however, teachers bring differing educational ideas, because they may have been trained in any number of areas. The teacher in the classroom next to you may not approach teaching the way you do. That teacher may not have even been trained as a teacher, at all. This disconnect enhances our feelings of isolation, confusion, and lack of professionalism. It is important that we know more about our field in order to better identify with it.

It is important to recognize that correctional education is relatively new because prisons are relatively new. Prisons did not obtain their current focus until the last few hundred years; before that law breakers were killed, maimed, or sent away. The idea of holding a person in a prison where they could have a time of quiet reflection and repentance is a largely Quaker concept. Indeed, the term "penitentiary" comes from the concept of repentance. Once we had prisons, however, we had abuses, and struggles to determine exactly how they should be operated. Programs and education were not the first consideration.

There have been several patterns in correctional education over the decades. The Sabbath School was the first CE trend, begun in the late 1700s, in which chaplains came into the prisons to teach. "Meritorious Convicts" were taught reading so they could read the Bible and be saved for Christ. Chaplains came to the prison after their other duties were completed, and literally "taught between the bars." The Bible was the only text used; the education had a clear religious definition and focus (Gehring, 1995).

One of the most important foundations we should study is the development of the reformatory prison discipline movement, not only because it was truly an international movement, which it was; but also because it forms the basis of modern correctional education efforts. This is the reformatory prison discipline movement, which actually originated at Norfolk Island, off the coast of Australia, in 1840. Started by Alexander Maconochie, the superintendent, it was replicated in England, Ireland, and the United States. Maconochie tried out his methods at the penal colony in which "doubly convicted" prisoners were housed, those who had broken laws in the other penal colonies (Barry, 1958; Hughes, 1987). Maconochie achieved the impossible—making the most dangerous, most difficult of prison colonies into an institution run by reformatory ideals.

The concept of reformatories was based on the development of an educational institution where prisoners could improve their lot at the institution through a “mark system” of improved levels. The concepts of parole, early release for good behavior, housing levels for behavior, even correctional education, have their foundation in early reformatory ideas. Prisoners received better food, clothing, vocational and academic education, and freedoms in the prison based on their behavior. They had a real say in activities of the prison. Maconochie was so successful in implementing this program that he got fired.

The reformatory ideals were taken to England, where they were briefly attempted through the work of Matthew Davenport Hill. They really took off in a practical way when Sir Walter Crofton implemented them in Ireland. It became known as the “Irish System,” and began in the 1850s. (Carpenter, 1872). Crofton developed the prison system along reformatory ideals, where young, first offenders could “work their way out of crime.” They were given a trade to learn, and academic instruction. Interestingly, quite a great deal of instruction centered on how valuable emigrating to other places might be, especially Australia. Toward that end, prison schools were filled with courses on the flora, fauna, and geography of Australia, ship travel, including learning sailing knots, and how successful they would be in Australia. The Irish System flowered during the times of the potato famine, when there were such large numbers of prisoners. It was never recognized for how very successful it was, due to the English bias against the Irish improving on something they had tried.

Reformatory prison discipline took another turn with the next great experiment in the United States. The U.S. is often credited with developing the reformatory movement, although what it really did was expand it and make it more practical. Elmira Reformatory, opened in 1876 in Elmira New York, was the first adult male reformatory in the United States, and was led by Zebulon Brockway (Brockway, 1969/1912). This effort expanded and advanced the system to the United States and beyond. At its heyday, Elmira Reformatory had 40 different vocational trades available, and academic instruction from preliteracy to postsecondary.

The reformatory efforts were hugely significant, and as important to us today as when they were first formulated. They speak to the importance and relevance of correctional education in several ways. First, reformatory prison discipline provided real education and training for prisoners, which gave them the tools to a lifestyle beyond the criminal. It was real education, useful for basic, marketable, and developmental skills. In addition, it was real correctional education, where teachers were expert and certified in the instruction they were providing. Correctional educators were recognized as critical to the management of the prison, but also to success on the outside. Correctional educators were professionals, and took training to improve their skills. So, what do we do today about ensuring this continuation and expansion of our profession?

The successful educator

What makes an educator successful in prison teaching? This lies at the heart of the question of professional identity because it is this that should define us. Although we have over the decades identified with one or another discipline in our teaching, correctional education should ultimately be defined by what we do well. There has been some research done to try and find out what the skills and characteristics of successful correctional teachers are, a question which continues to have relevance today.

The skills and characteristics of successful correctional educators include two distinct concepts. Skills, like particular teaching methods or strategies, can be taught through a course of instruction. Characteristics, on the other hand, are intrinsic to the individual, and are acquired from maturation. They can develop, but only through the individual's determination to change. As education professionals, we can only directly address the skills portion of the formula, while obliquely determining characteristics. And yet, both are very important. How difficult it would be if a teacher inside the prison had all the paper credentials, had learned the skills to be a teacher, and yet hated prisoners! This person might possess all the skills but none of the characteristics. With the limited access that a prisoner has to teachers, this might be the only teacher the student has. Although skills and characteristics are important in any teaching endeavor, these become critical inside the prison, where each student has one or two teachers, at best. In addition, the education program in the prison is often the last formal educational experience the prisoner has. It is critical that the teacher be a help, not a hindrance.

There is a project which has led to a multi year effort designed to determine the skills and characteristics of successful, veteran correctional educators (Gehring, et al, 1992). The research has centered in the United States and Canada, and included a series of surveys directed to working correctional educators, asking what they consider the salient skills and characteristics of successful teachers. Correctional educators from adult, juvenile, state, and county facilities were asked, in a series of several "rounds," what skills and characteristics successful correctional teachers ought to possess. Included in the survey rounds were teachers, administrators and supervisors, in academic, vocational, and postsecondary settings.

In the various survey cycles, it was found that there were a number of areas identified by the recipients which were skill based, and others which were based on characteristics. Through a process of elimination and combination, an agreed upon list of skills and characteristics was determined. Then additional surveys were developed in an attempt to assign performance indicators to the measures. There are currently some correctional systems which use the skills and characteristics as part of the annual evaluation process for teaching staff.

Contained in the list of skills and characteristics were several salient factors, such as, "the ability to sustain a high level of energy over a prolonged period, even in a setting that can be harsh." Some of the others included:

- Ability to relate well with others.
- Ability to stimulate interest in learning and growth.
- Ability to maintain own professional development.

Although these have not been widely implemented, they provide some foundation for understanding the exceptional needs of correctional teachers. Although good teaching is good teaching anywhere, there are factors which make the correctional teacher unique, with special challenges and demands. These should be the factors we search for in hiring, and the factors we use to evaluate success.

Correctional teacher preparation

There have been some formal efforts to train correctional teachers over the years. A few models have emerged in the patterns of program development. These schools of instruction can be identified by their development, or "generations" of focus (Eggleston, 1992).

The first generation of correctional education teacher preparation programs was developed to meet locally identified needs. Prisons and local universities got together to develop a training program which would address a specific deficit area, such as correctional counselors, with parameters established by local decision makers. In this stage professional identity centers on being an institutional employee. The role of correctional education within the institutional program is emphasized. The teacher preparation is for recognized teaching jobs in the area.

The problem with this type of program is that there is no coherent, coordinated effort between correctional teachers. People trained in this model identify with their bosses, not the discipline. Non educators can be in charge of the process.

A second generation has been identified as correctional/special education, which in the U.S. was influenced by Federal special education funding opportunities. In this stage professional identity is centered on the related disciplines, such as special education, elementary education, or with a particular subject matter. Known special education strategies are applied in the facility, and correctional education is seen as institutional special education.

The problem with this effort is that programs are generally dependent upon external funding, which can be eliminated as easily as it appeared (this has been the case in the U.S., with the conservative trend in Washington). University professors apply for program grants, but may not have a real commitment to CE. But perhaps the worst problem is that special education is not the same as correctional education. There are certainly students in prison who have special education needs, but there are also gifted as well as normal learners. It is arrogant for us to assume that all prison students are students with disabilities. And special education professors who have spent one Saturday visiting a prison do not know everything there is to know about prison work.

There is a possibility of a third generation for correctional education teacher preparation. Although it does not yet fully exist, the major focus is on an identification with correctional education. It combines the best of US and Canadian practices. The US model of correctional education tends to focus on basic and marketable skills, and in Canada many correctional educators have at least experimented with developmental approaches to correctional education. There has been an attempt to use cognitive approaches in addition to behavioral, trying to focus on community needs in addition to basic skill needs, and on social maturation in addition to job skills. This stage, or third generation, is still in development, but is what we are trying to do at the Center for the Study of CE. In third generation teacher preparation, there is a focus on the unique dimensions of teaching inside. Student learn their specific content areas, such as reading or special education, but that content is designed to be offered in a format similar to the spokes around a wheel, where the center of the wheel is the core correctional education content. The spokes of the wheel are the specific content areas. The third generation of teacher preparation is part of an international, connected movement.

The third generation is what is being developed for correctional education programs, to meet both staff development (inservice) and masters, and potentially doctoral, level programs. These principles are also being applied to pre-service models for student preparing to become teachers. Included in the curriculum is emphasis on the real differences of teaching inside, the unique institutional challenges, and ways of sustaining ones' self over the long term. In addition, students learn about the rich history and literature of the field.

Summary

Correctional teachers do some of the most important work on the planet. For too long that work has been accomplished in a vacuum, with individual victories going unnoticed by others. We need to develop into the kind of teachers who can make a contribution over a sustained period, and be willing to share our successes with others. To do that we must prepare ourselves adequately, through a continued process of professional development and increased professionalism. We owe it to ourselves and to our students.

"A small number of persons are doing yeoman work I an alien environment.

"Corrections is designed for custody and control. Education's purpose is freedom, growth, and self-actualization. The correctional educator must, at the minimum, maintain an island of sanity in a storm of psychosis." (Reagen & Stoughton, 1976, p. 28).

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