Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison

Journal of Correctional Education, Dec 2004 by Vacca, James S

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 lockdown, 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).