

Why Educate Inmates?

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Author's Note

The question “Why educate inmates?” was especially helpful because it required that I reconsider the changes in North American correctional education during the last 18 to 20 years. The question itself reveals what philosophers of science would call a normal science orientation, as opposed to the extraordinary science orientation currently experienced in North America. During normal science qualified professionals would take terms such as “educate” and “inmates” for granted—they would expect that all members of the relevant community, in this case correctional educators, would agree on the meanings of the terms. Further, their daily professional practice would be rooted in the paradigm, in the general principles that regulate everyday activity throughout the field. By contrast with the language of the question, North America’s correctional education community is definitely not in a period of normal science. Instead it is in a period of extraordinary science, a time of crisis when the paradigm rules no longer seem to apply, difficult anomalies take up everyone’s time (problems that the paradigm cannot solve), and when any and all interpretations of general principles and terms are perceived as being equally valid.

From within this crisis/extraordinary science (U.S.) perspective, the question “Why educate inmates?” itself would reveal an anti-education bias—one that was obviously not intended, since it was posed as part of a conference dedicated to the pursuit of correctional education. On the other hand, from the paradigm/normal science (Australian) perspective the question is meaningful and entirely appropriate. To address the question adequately in this essay, according to the perception revealed in its very language, I had to retrace the concepts that applied in North America during an earlier period. As a result, some of the sources used were from the late 1970s and early ‘80s. When I offer my remarks at the upcoming conference, I plan to briefly review the content introduced in this essay, and then address issues relevant to the same question that have been emphasized in the U.S. since the North American correctional education community shifted into crisis in the mid to late 1980s. Both the normal and extraordinary science perspectives are correct, and coherent (they have no internal contradictions), and both are interesting to consider—they are just very different. My hope is that, of the two responses, the current paradigm-oriented essay will be most useful in print, because it will help practitioners in the perpetual task of defending, expanding, and improving correctional education programs.

Abstract

Society derives specific benefits from correctional education. These benefits can be organized in the following categories: (a) survival and coping skills for life in modern society, (b) an alternative to prison idleness, (c) community reintegration, (d) socialization, (e) a more productive citizenry, (f) reduced recidivism, and (g) a proving ground for educational

innovations. Although this material was prepared recently, it is indicative of the arguments that propelled correctional education into a new limelight during the 1930s. The essay includes a brief biographical sketch of the author, and a References section that may help interested readers

(a) Survival and coping skills for life in modern society

The ability to survive economically, without breaking the law, results largely from basic skill development. People who do not communicate in a socially acceptable manner are not usually effective in earning their own living. Essential reading, writing, speaking, and computation skills are important for coping in any cultural setting, and each offender needs a foundation in these areas. Driving, shopping, interviewing for a job, buying insurance, and using credit are concrete examples of everyday tasks which reflect these necessary skills.

In the U.S., “It is...estimated that the typical inmate functions 2-3 grades below the level completed in school.” Illiteracy is estimated at 1.2% nationwide in the U.S., but 10-20% in the prison population (Coffey and Gehring, 1983, p. 1-4). The overall entry level of academic performance for Federal Bureau of Prisons inmates is between the 6th and 8th grades (McCollum, 1973, p. 32). In Virginia, committed delinquents typically score between grades 5-7, overall; confined felons between grades 6-7 (Gehring, 1979, p. 25).

Yet studies show that prison populations possess normal intelligence, and that criminals are as capable of learning as anyone else (Gehring, 1985, 2nd page). MacCormick summed up the issue:

To what extent lack of education is a cause of crime and to what extent merely an accompanying circumstance we do not know....We do know, however, that men and women in prison are as a rule undereducated and, however high or modest our hope for the result, we should remove that deficiency as we should remove adenoids. (1931, p. 3).

(b) An alternative to prison violence

The lack of correctional education programs is a major problem faced by institutional superintendents. Prison “idle time” often results in violence and escape plans. Education is a self-help, low cost, wholesome, supervised program that helps offenders become better community members.

One of the founding principles of the American Correctional Association addresses this issue.

Education is a vital force in the reformation of fallen men and women. Its tendency is to quicken the intellect, inspire self-respect, excite to higher aims, and afford a healthful substitute for low and vicious amusements. Education is therefore, a matter of primary importance in prisons, and should be carried to the utmost extent consistent with the other purposes of such institutions. (Wines, 1871, p. 542).

In many of the American states, correctional education was established in response to a lack of effective institutional programs. This lack is known as “the warden’s bane.” Who would want to manage a population of (1) asocial, nonsocial, or antisocial offenders, who (2) already demonstrated their ability to coerce, manipulate, or otherwise victimize others, and (3) are

confined to live in cages stacked on top of each other—without providing transformative programs that would keep them busy? No one would, and that is one of the greatest reasons for maintaining and expanding correctional education programs.

Successful wardens know that there is no turfdom issue about good institutional management. Correctional education is structured according to the principle that school rules cannot conflict with rules and regulations relating to security adopted by the institutions. There is no viable alternative to low cost, high visibility programs, of which correctional education is the best example.

Education is associated with personal development; its pursuit is an important ideal of Western culture. Conrad reported that “No one doubts the importance of correctional education; everyone recognizes why it is important...” (1981, p. 34). Beto declared “I don’t think you have to prove that correctional education is good. It has intrinsic value” (p. 33). Forster found that “...educational development in prison is obviously a ‘good thing’” (in Morin, 1981, p. 66).

(c) Community reintegration

The goal of community reintegration is based on the following assumptions:

(1) criminal behavior results from a “disjunction between the offender and society,” but (2) “society and the individual are inseparable,” so (3) offenders must be “assisted in coping with the everyday environment to which they will return upon release.” Therefore, “contact and interaction with positive elements of the free society” are essential. (Pursley, 1980, pp. 355-356).

Correctional education may be the most positive element of the institutional community. “Education in prisons is generally recognized to be a ‘good,’ ‘humane,’ and ‘personally beneficial’ activity.” (Morin, 1981, p. 43). The development of a productive, pro-educational value orientation is the highest aim we can realize from a sentence behind bars. For the incarcerated, “education is the real hope” (MacCormick, 1931, p. 2).

(d) Socialization

Researchers have identified a link between thinking skills and crime. Criminals are often unable to plan or problem-solve, tend to be impulsive and irrational, and lack social perspective and moral reasoning. These thinking problems are precisely the ones that education can best address. (Gehring, 1985, 3rd page).

MacCormick found that society customarily establishes programs of socialization for certain groups in the general population, and that prisoners are one of these groups. He reported that prisoners tended to be nonsocial rather than antisocial. They tended to “look out for number one and accept their relation to the social order” rather than “feel actual enmity towards society or have any idea of taking revenge on it for real or fancied wrongs.” (1931, pp. 204-205).

However, MacCormick also warned that the effort to socialize the offender should not be loudly touted: “We shall do well...not to let him know that he is being socialized; he is likely to resent this and to resist it just as he resents moralizing and resists obvious attempts at reform” (p. 207). Education may therefore be the perfect institutional program. Its benefits are not obvious until their effect is already secure.

Baker's findings were parallel to MacCormick's: "Studies indicate that the question is less one of inculcation than it is of activation of latent prosocial attitudes" (in Roberts, 1973, p. 250). When offenders express prosocial attitudes by pursuing educational goals, it is important that they encounter a well-organized school capable of helping them attain those goals. Institutional schools should therefore be staffed by qualified teachers trained in the techniques of educational outreach and intervention.

(e) A more productive citizenry

Seashore and Haberfeld found that

In addition to increasing the participants' educational level, developing a more stable and socially acceptable lifestyle, and perhaps reducing recidivist behavior, prison college education programs can be shown to pay their own way...through higher future tax payments from participants due to their higher incomes as a result of their college education (1976, p. 145).

These benefits are associated with elementary and secondary education, as well as at the college level. They accrue from academic, vocational, and social education.

It is in society's interest to provide correctional education. Incarceration itself is the punishment offenders suffer; forfeit of educational opportunities has nothing to do with punishment of the criminal. Instead, that forfeiture punishes society with extra costs: crime, prisons, and welfare. Uneducated ex-offenders have great difficulty obtaining employment—which leads to still more crime, dependent families, and return to the institution. By contrast, ex-offenders with marketable skills have less difficulty obtaining employment. They pay taxes and tend to be responsible as citizens, parents, employees, and neighbors.

(f) Reduced recidivism

Nearly all observers agree that correctional education is associated with reductions in recidivism. With regard to the basic educational attainment of our target group when they were incarcerated, Harlow reported in 2003 that 41.3% of the correctional population in the U.S. has attained only some high school or less, compared with 18.4% of the general (non-correctional) population. She found that only 12.7% of the confined population had experienced some postsecondary education, as compared with 48.4% of the general population. (in NICE, 2003, p. 1). Data such as these repeatedly suggest the clear need for correctional education outreach and intervention.

In one of the most comprehensive literature reviews on the subject of recidivism, Ryan reported that:

In the inevitable scramble for limited funds, the question arises: Is it worthwhile to spend scarce dollars for correctional education? The answer is a resounding Yes. Evidence clearly documents the effectiveness of correctional education. An exhaustive review of articles on prison education and recidivism (Ryan and Mauldin, 1995) discussed the effectiveness of prison education. Of 97 articles on correctional education and recidivism, 30% reported a positive relationship; 11% reported a positive

relationship between correctional education and post release employment with implied reduction in recidivism; and 44 implied a positive relationship without documenting the conclusion with empirical data. Thus out of 97 articles, 83 (85%) reported that participation in a prison education program had an impact on reducing recidivism of released offenders. (Ryan, 1995, p. 62).

The 2003 report on what has become known as The Three State Recidivism Study is a good, current baseline on the relationship between recidivism and education. The three states were Maryland (MD; n = 840), Minnesota (MN; n = 1,025), and Ohio (OH; n = 1,234). For this study the data were reported in three categories: re-arrest, reconviction, and re-incarceration. Cohorts of inmates who participated in the correctional education program, and who did not participate, were followed for three years, and the results were rather dramatic.

	RE-ARRESTED		RECONVICTED		RE-INCARCERATED	
	Participants	Non-Participants	Participants	Non-Participants	Participants	Non-Participants
MD	54%	57%	32%	37%	31%	37%
MN	42%	54%	24%	34%	14%	21%
OH	50%	58%	26%	33%	24%	31%

(Smith, 2003, p. 15). The aggregate for all three states was a reduction of recidivism of 9% in re-arrest (48% for correctional education participants and 57% for non-participants), of 8% in reconviction (27% for participants and 35% for non-participants), and 10% in re-incarceration (21% for participants and 31% for non-participants). Parallel findings for postsecondary programs were reported by Duguid in a more comprehensive, separate, 20 year ex post facto study (2000). In summary, from almost any perspective that has been studied, the association between correctional education and recidivism reduction, correctional education can be said to be a robust intervention strategy.

(g) A proving ground for educational innovations

In 1980 the U.S. Education Department implemented a Correctional Education Association proposal to establish a Corrections Program. The following paragraph is from that proposal:

The environments in our training schools, reformatories, and prisons are antithetical to the educational mission by virtue of their intense severity. They are dangerous, physically bleak, and emotionally harsh—the worst possible setting for education. Most of the students have dropped out or been pushed out of the public schools, their academic skills are retarded 4-6 grades, and few have saleable occupational skills. They have resisted education, and their self-concepts are poorly developed as a result of successive failures. Correctional students are frequently afflicted by special learning and/or drug-related problems; they are accustomed to violence; their study habits are lacking. Daily life in confinement results in intense frustrations; the institutional setting blocks normal maturational processes; racial tensions are emphasized....Indeed, programs which can succeed in this most difficult setting can be replicable in less restrictive environments. Toward this end, correctional education should be viewed as a laboratory for testing relevant models which can be disseminated to other contexts.

This approach can be meaningfully applied to inner city [and other] public schools servicing large student populations which parallel those of corrections. (Gehring, 1980, pp. 4-5).

In a related effort, the Correctional Education Association resolved to “implement a dissemination of information program to help public school educators benefit from advances in correctional education” (Gehring, 1984, p. 140).

The literature suggests that many modern education practices were developed in training schools, reformatories, and prisons. Among these practices were (1) compulsory attendance, (2) the systematic development of individualized instruction, (3) trade and industrial education, (4) physical education in its current configuration of services, and (5) special education for disabled learners. One influential education reformer, David Snedden, traced the origins of these practices to reformatory schools around the turn of the century; there is a vast literature on the subject.

Final remarks

Correctional education benefits inmate students, institutional officials, and the entire community. Education is the most pro-social phenomenon on the Western scene. When offenders identify educational goals, they mark the beginning of a changed outlook on life. When offenders actively pursue those goals, they should be encouraged to follow through on their interest—in former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger’s words (1981), to “learn their way out of prison.” Personally identifying as a student is infinitely better than identifying as a criminal or as an inmate.

Educated persons are a minority in our correctional institutions. They are articulate, informed, equipped to function in a variety of law-abiding roles. They are involved in fewer disciplinary infractions than the uneducated within the institution, and they commit fewer crimes when released. More than 95% of all inmates will eventually be released—they will become our neighbors. Do you want them to be prepared for law-abiding community life through education? Of course you do.

In addition, correctional education can be a crucible for testing various educational innovations—any educational program that can work in corrections will probably be successful in various educational settings. All things considered, correctional education is a wise investment.

Biographical sketch of the author

Thom Gehring has been a correctional educator since 1972, in New Jersey, Virginia, New York, California, and in other systems as a consultant. He served as a teacher, counselor, researcher, administrator, and professor. Originally prepared as a secondary history teacher, Thom earned his M.Ed. in Adult Education, and his Ph.D. in Urban/Correctional Education, from Virginia Commonwealth University (dissertation on correctional school districts). Much of his scholarly work has been directed to the anomalies of correctional education: the connection to prison reform, transforming institutional schools into “real schools,” and democratic management in successful prison programs. He directs the Center for the Study of

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