

Prison Education: much more than a meaningful investment.

Paul Bélanger

CIRDEF-UQÀM

Montreal Canada

On behalf of the UNESCO Chair on Applied Research on Education in Prison at Collège Marie-Victorin in Montreal Canada,¹ I would like to say how pleased we are about the co-operative effort emerging between the UNESCO Chair and European and Italian networks. It is important to stimulate research on prison education and encourage public dialogue on this issue, especially given the punitive turn in correctional policy in many countries of the world.

Before discussing the scope, the social demand and the requirements of prison education, we must address this recent trend towards a hardline approach in penal policy and practices, the punitive turn in penal policy.

1. Punitive Turn in National Policy

For two decades, fear-based campaigns against organized crime have been undertaken in several countries. This emphasis on law and order tends to justify and increase the incarceration rate, while reducing rehabilitation policy and programs.

There is indeed a tendency in many countries towards a rise in the number of individual being put in jail. This hold true, for example, in Canada, where the

¹ <http://unesco.ca/~media/unesco/education/chairs/prison%20education%20eng.pdf?mw=1382>

incarceration rate climbed from 38/100 000 in 2002 to 47/100 000 in 2013, a 24% increase, even though the overall crime rate, as stated by the police, has been dropping since the last two decades. And let's not forget the increased percentage of the prison population pertaining to visible minorities, like aboriginals in North America, or Sinti and Roma in Europe.

Such campaigns of fear and insecurity led by certain governments and the media created a climate of anxiety or vengeance resulting in important changes in penal policy and practices, and on the criminal justice system as a whole. The two objectives, public safety and rehabilitation of detained persons, then tend to be seen as incompatible.

Governments in other countries have adopted a similar course of action. When population's fear against security increases, so does the support for punitive turn.

This being said, such repressive policies are now losing support among penal system decision-makers, because evidence shows that they are expensive and, most importantly, fail to attain the expected results. The most spectacular example is a recent one in Texas, USA. After years of adopting a punitive stance and reducing the educational services offered to convicts, the government of Texas is currently undertaking a major policy shift. Why? Because of findings coming out of major scientific reports (Fabiola, 2002; Davis et al., 2013). Indeed, an important research done by the RAND Foundation² and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, demonstrated that detained individuals who participated in educational programs had 43% percent lower odds of *recidivating* than other convicts. In terms of

² http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf

cost effectiveness, the study showed that prison education represents a positive return on investment, as the amount saved on the correctional system is nearly ten times higher than the money spent on education activities.

These scientific findings showed that participation of convicts in formal, non-formal education and vocational training reduces significantly the recidivism rate. This is not only on account of the benefits of long-term rehabilitation on an individual and his immediate environment, but also to significant savings for the State. By such measures, governments are not only reducing the budget of their justice department, but are also converting costly detainees into regularly employed people and thus fiscal contributors.

Prison Education and Learning

In the literature (Perrault, Meilleur, Bélanger, 2015), we have identified three types of education and training offered to detained individuals: basic schooling, vocational and technical training, and cultural training

Basic schooling

Given the low education rate among the prison population,³ it is not surprising the most commonly given education is related to basic schooling including literacy other essential skills, and that from elementary to the end of secondary education. To increase the success rate of such basic education, individuals have also to be provided with support, orientation and referral services.

³ In federal Canadian prisons, 75% of convicts have stated they had not completed their secondary studies, that is 11 years of schooling. (CSC, 2015, p. VII)

Vocational and technical training

There is also provision of vocational and technical training. Studies show that such vocational education increases significantly the durable reinsertion into the job market (Lois et al., 2013), more so that many individuals arrive in prison with limited professional experience. The hope of being able to get a decent job once released is a key factor in getting individuals to join such vocational training. Unfortunately in most countries, vocational and technical training falls far short of real needs and expectations due to limited funding.

Sociocultural education and learning

A third series of education and mentoring socio-cultural activities is also being offered: spiritual and personal development, psychosocial counselling, employability preparation, drug & alcohol counselling, artistic education (theater, music, painting, ...), physical training, etc. Such socio-cultural activities have a two-fold effect: humanizing relations within the detained population (ICPS, 2005) by meeting their immediate needs, and providing learning experiences that bring convicts out of their isolation, boost their confidence in their ability to acquire new knowledge and skills and develop self-confidence to undertake longer and more systematic programs, namely academic or vocational training.

The cultural and learning environment in penitentiary plays an important role. We are referring here to *library, *support and orientation services, *access to written and electronic documentation, *organization of recreational and athletic activities, *health and social programs and *opportunity of interpersonal contact, such as family visits. The

impact of a prison education program is enhanced by such positive informal learning environment. The level of quality of such environment sends a clear though tacit message about the dignity of individuals, about their self-esteem and hence their capacity to operate a shift in their life course. It facilitates the expression of people's learning demand and aspiration.

Let us not forget also the importance of human rights education in both the training provided to convicted individuals as well as within the professional development of justice system personnel, as a recent European publication has demonstrated in four European countries (Federighi, 2015). Recognizing the rights and respecting the individuality of convicts enables them to build their self-esteem, which is crucial for them to achieve such turning-point in their life path. The conversation skill is indeed a key competence for both the convicted individuals and the personnel in daily contact with them.

2. The Scope of Education in Prison

As stated earlier, research has demonstrated the effect of education and training on the socio-occupational integration of individuals. It reduces the recidivism rate and enhance capacity of ex-convicted individuals to reintegrate the active population and their local community.

Participating in basic schooling, vocational or sociocultural training gives individuals the opportunity to acquire the skills required for lasting socio-professional integration. But even more importantly, such learning episodes allow them to rediscover their capacity to learn and take charge of their lives—offering significant learning

experience that creates a new take-off in their life-course and learning biography. Right to education is the right to acquire capacities and thus become able to pilot change in one's life path.

Cost effectiveness of the impact on the recidivism rate

The findings of the American study noted above on the financial benefits of prison education have been corroborated in several countries. In Canada, these financial benefits have been confirmed by two important studies (CSC, 2005; CCCJA, 2014).

Not only has the recidivism rate being reduced and thus the exponential increase of the criminal justice budget being curbed, but the State earns additional revenue by the introduction of new taxpayers on the job market.

Effect on the climate in custodial facilities: the development of “dynamic security”

Introducing formal and non-formal education as a regular activity in prisons contributes also to changing the climate in custodial facilities, where we go from static, pervasive security to dynamic security. An environment is created in which the relationship between frontline personnel and detainees is changed; they engage in daily conversation. It has been demonstrated that the most secure environment, which is also the one easiest to manage, has more to do than with guard posts and cameras. It is one in which human bonds are created and where convicts have the space they need to build or rebuild their lives. Getting individuals out of their cell to pursue their personal development not only improves their mental health (Yates, 2012), but also enhances security because daily living contexts where good relationships and reciprocal empathy can be experiences, such living contexts make a significant difference. Detained

individuals and prison staff are then seen more and more as citizens capable of listening to their fellows and prison staff (Wright, 2004: 202). An American researcher has demonstrated that eliminating or restricting educational programs in custodial facilities tends to increase violence precisely because of the changing climate this creates. (Esperian, 2010).

Here is a citation from a recent report by the European Commission (Frederighi, 2015): “Positive and professional interaction between the personnel and the convicts, communication based on equity and mutual respect, as opposed to a harsh regime and hence a climate generating upheaval, plays a crucial role in building a safe and secure environment. It allows detainees to rebuild self-esteem and helps the personnel to better manage security risks.”

4 Research Needs in Prison Education

There is clearly a need for research in prison education, and we need to encourage the scientific community to continue their efforts in this area. We have to develop operational indicators of prison education and of its impact. We need to increase our comprehension of conditions facilitating change in the social and professional life path of ex-convicts. We have to study reinsertion policies, programs and practices, as well as to identify the most effective educational responses, learning methods, documentary support and mixed approaches (c-learning, e-learning, etc.). We must become more familiar with the obstacles and factors that facilitate learning process in a program from start to finish. We have to study the professional reintegration process of ex-convicted individuals upon

return to civil society. We need to gain a better understanding of the reciprocity between the objectives of public safety and of social reinsertion. It would be equally important to document the effect of human rights education on both convicts and justice system personnel through the professional development programs offered to the personnel. We have to explore the full spectrum of the learning demand in penitentiary. There is also a great need internationally to follow up on and monitor the quantity and quality of prison education in different countries.

The *UNESCO Chair of Applied Research for Education*, based in Montreal Canada intends to pursue its mission to follow up on similar research around the world and share the findings.

Conclusion

We will not move prison education forward reaching more than a minority of detained individuals, unless we can concretely demonstrate its multidimensional effectiveness and relevance, as well as analyze the factors or conditions that make such a social investment worthwhile. We need the assistance of the research community in helping the general population understand and appreciate the value of educational services offered in prison.

Convicted individuals exercising their right to learn not only produce a significant return on investment, it is first and foremost vital for each participating individual, allowing him to make a major turn-around in his life path. The right to education opens

the door to exercise the other human rights and it instils respect for the rights of our fellow citizens.

Prisons are changing. They are less and less defined as a place of punishment, and more and more as a place for biographical shift.

Safety and the respect of human rights are not mutually exclusive. Controlling criminality and implementing human rights in prisons must not be contradictory actions. We can now see that the opposite is taking place.

Bibliography

CCCJA - Comité consultatif clientèle judiciairisée adulte. (2014). *Impacts économiques et sociaux des services spécialisés pour les personnes judiciairisées adultes*.

<http://www.cccja.org/documents/Impacts-economiques-et-sociaux-services.pdf>

Cronin, J., 2011. *The Path to Successful re-entry: The Relationship between Correctional Education, Employment and recidivism*. Institute of Public Policy (Report 15-2011), p. 1-6

Esperian, J. H., (2010). The Effect of Prison Education Program on Recidivism, *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 61(4).

Frederighi, P., et al., 2015, *Human Right Education of Criminal Justice Personnel*. Florence, University of Florence.

Garland, D., 2001, *The Culture of Crime and social order in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fabiola, T. 2002. "The impact of prison education on community Reintegration of inmates: the Texas case" *Journal of Correctional Education*, 53 (3): 106-110

ICPS - International Centre for Prison Studies. (2005). Guidance Note 9. *Humanising the Treatment of Prisoners*. London: King's College. Repéré le 23 décembre 2011 sur: <http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/downloads/gn9-humanising-treatment.pdf>

Landreville, P., 2007, "Grandeurs et misères de la politique pénale au Canada: de réformisme au populisme" *Criminologie*, vol. 40, no. 2: 19-51.

Lois, M.D., Bozick, R., Stelle, J.L., Saunders, J., Miles, J.N.V. 2013, *Evaluating the effectiveness of Correctional Education*, Washington: Rand Corporation, Bureau of justice Assistance.

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf

Meyer, J. and O`Malley, P., 2009 *Missing the punitive turn Canadian criminal justice, "balance" and penal modernism in Legal Studies* Research paper, no. 09/95.

Perrault , G., Meilleur, J.F., Bélanger, P., 2015. *Étude exploratoire de l'éducation dans les Établissements de détentions de juridiction provinciale au Québec*. Montréal. Chaire UNESCO sur l'éducation en prison. Collège Marie Victorin.

Service Correctionnel Canadien, 2015, *Évaluation des programmes et des services d'éducation*. Ottawa: SRC. (Correctional Service Canada, 2015 *Offender Education Programs and Services*. Ottawa: CSC.)

Yates, M.T. (2012) *Prisoner Education Debates in Congress. Elite Discourse and Policymaking*, El Paso, LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC,

Wright, R. (2004), "Care as the Heart of Prison Teaching", *The Journal of Correctional Education*, vol. 3, no 55, September 2004,

http://www.csusb.edu/coe/programs/correctional_ed/documents/CareastheHeartofPrisonTeaching.pdf.