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How Do We Think About Correctional Education, and Why?

Surely then, if the present system has totally failed, there must be something radically wrong in it, and it ought to be changed.
Mary Carpenter, Our Convicts, 1864/1969.

Abstract

The field of correctional education has always been and continues to be a politically charged discipline. Immigration and world migration have affected the interaction and relationships between cultures. As the culture changes and economic forces expand or contract, the way we manage people who do not follow social norms also changes. This paper will discuss several issues associated with where we came from historically, where we are, and some thoughts on how we might prepare for the future of the field.

U.S. Correctional Education Systems

There are currently over two million prisoners housed in U.S. state, Federal, and county facilities. In California, which leads the nation in incarceration, there are 175,000 prisoners in State facilities (Johnson, 2006). This equates to 600 per 100,000, with African Americans being incarcerated at the rate of 5,000 per 100,000 (Johnson, 2006). Of this number, 44% do not hold a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED, secondary completion).

Prisons in the U.S. are providing a mental health function for many offenders. U.S. prisons are becoming the largest mental health facilities in the Country. For those whose major problem is mental illness, there are not enough treatment options. When those behaviors lead to criminal actions, prison is often where they are placed. In addition, there is a lack of distinction between crimes committed primarily due to drug addiction, and those primarily criminal in nature. Although there are drug treatment programs in some state prisons, the primary purpose of U.S. prisons is not treatment. There is also a severe overrepresentation of prisoners with special learning needs. The general population has a special education rate of about 12%; in prisons the best estimates we have is that about 44% of the population would be identified for special education, if they were tested. This would include those with learning and behavioral disabilities, as well as lowered cognitive functioning.

Prisons are organized in several different ways in the U.S. There is a Federal Bureau of Prison at the national level, which incarcerates for certain types of Federal
offences. These include crimes carried over state lines, or those that are against the Federal government, such as bank fraud. Education programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (the name of the Federal system), are those most directly impacted by the war in Iraq, as funding for those prisons comes directly from the Federal government. In addition to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, each state has its own institutional system, generally divided between juvenile and adult programs. To further complicate matters, there is a local or county system in each state, which handles less severe crimes, in which prisoners are housed in local jails or detention facilities.

Every institution in the U.S. has some form of education program available. The organizational structure can vary a great deal, but the most common format for providing education in prisons is that there is a division within a state department of corrections, which addresses education, and, often other programs as well. The educators in these programs are hired by the prison service.

There is a second organizational structure in that some states have a form of a school district, along the lines of public schools, where the education programs are organized statewide.

A third structure provides education in the institutions by contracting to a community college, which provides education in all state facilities. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has one national system that organizes schools in the 130 Federal prisons. In juvenile institutions, around 93% of wards attend school. In adult institutions, the average school participation is between 30 and 60%. The focus of education in prisons is on basic and marketable skills. In the juvenile system, there may be a high school diploma option available to students who have enough high school credits to be close to high school completion from their own home school district. In most juvenile facilities, educational attendance is mandatory, as students are under compulsory attendance laws.

In some adult prisons, education is mandatory for a certain period, although it is often the case that there are waiting lists for admission into school. Education programs in adult facilities provide academic and vocational options for students, but students often have to choose between attending either academic or vocational offerings, so more students may attend school. There was a time when post secondary programs were common in U.S. prisons, but since 1989 when access to low-income grants for education were eliminated for prisoners, few postsecondary programs remain.

Some of the positive developments in prisons in the U.S. include attention to accreditation for teachers. Almost all programs have teachers who hold the same accreditation as their public school counterparts. There is an increased effort at training for prison teachers, including professional development on the job, as well as preservice training. Professional development for prison teachers has been steadily rising to include more appropriate and relevant programming. Course offerings for prisoners within states are increasingly being standardized. This has several benefits; when a
prisoner is moved to another prison, education can continue without disruption or loss of credits, and also courses can be aligned to be more like free world courses.

One of the negative recent developments in prisons in the U.S. includes a large-scale reduction in force for those teachers. Due to economic downturns in most states, many correctional educators have been laid off as part of budget cuts. In California in 2010, 60% of teachers were laid off.

Systems are struggling with making the vocational programs relevant to current employment needs. Vocational programs are very expensive to initiate, and are difficult to keep current. Traditionally vocational education centered on those jobs needed within the prison, but real efforts have been made to update and modernize programs.

There have been experiments in several areas that are promising. Drug courts have been springing up which allow accused offenders the option of avoiding prison, with contracts for drug treatment attendance and drug free periods. This has required additional drug treatment options for them to attend, which has historically been a problem. In addition, in solitary confinement prisons there have been efforts to bring education into the prison via cell study, which for some is their only access to education.

There is a promising effort in reentry programs in the United States. The Federal government has placed a greater emphasis on returning prisoners, with the recognition that support is critical to success. Those in the field have known this anecdotally for many years, but research has finally caught up to practice. The Federal government has provided support for a number of reentry efforts under a series of Second Chance Acts.

A recent report of the Re-Entry Policy Council made a series of recommendations for consideration by Federal and state governments. These included; making better release decisions, victim support, safer living, addiction reduction, better treatment to mental and physical illnesses, improving family relationships, and access to training, education, and work (Office of Justice Programs’ Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2002). Although these items are not surprising to professionals in the field or to returning prisoners, they have helped inform funding in states and by the Federal government in the U.S. We have long known that returning prisoners are part of a family unit, part of a community. Little success will occur without reunification into family and community, even if the birth family has rejected the prisoner.

A California governmental report in 2009 recommended reducing re-incarceration to State prisons for revocation of parole for non-violent activities (LAO, CA, 2009). There has been financial incentives given to counties to provide local support for manage actions locally. The effort also includes development of best practices to improve service offerings.
Problems remain in U.S. prisons. There remains a terrible overrepresentation of ethnic and linguistic minorities in prison. Whatever the minority of a state is, that is the group represented in the prisons. This is, I believe, a problem for most countries and needs to be seriously addressed. There is still a severe difficulty with post release programs being available to released prisoners. Whatever good we can do while the person is inside can be quickly undone with lack of support on the outside.

History of Correctional Education

It is clear that in whatever it is our duty to act, those matters also it is our duty to study (Arnold, in Quick, 1916, p. xiii).

Faculty of the Center for the Study of Correctional Education at CSUSB have spent a great deal of time learning about how correctional education got to be where it is today. There is a rich history and literature in correctional education, of which most of us are unaware. There are many major historical figures that contributed to correctional education, largely unknown by professionals in the field today. It is important to research this history, as it provides ties to what is currently happening.

Very few correctional teachers grew up planning to be correctional educators. This is a problem, because we have not been not properly socialized into the field of correctional education. Instead, we tend to come into institutional teaching identifying as reading teachers, math teachers, or trade instructors. 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, about 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 that 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 somewhere else. These locations, included, of course, north American colonies prior to the U.S. revolution, and the colonization of the continent of Australia. 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, if they were considered at all.

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. Eventually he was replaced by Captain Bly, of Mutiny on the Bounty fame, because officials were so afraid of the effect the innovations might have on the prisoners.

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 immigrating 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 propaganda about 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 it’s heyday, Elmira Reformatory had 40 different vocational trades available, and academic instruction from pre-literacy 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?

There are nine major periods of correctional education history, each with its own identifiable theme(s): 1. 1789-1875: Sabbath school period; Pennsylvania (solitary) and Auburn (factory) systems of prison management; correctional education is recognized as possible. 2. 1876-1900: Zebulon Brockway's tenure at Elmira Reformatory; based on the work of Maconochie (prison reform in the South Pacific), Crofton (Irish prison reform), and the Pilsburys (American prison management); the beginnings of correctional/special education; reformatory movement efforts to transform prisons into schools. 3. 1901-1929: Libraries, reformatories for women, and democracy. Thomas Mott Osborne, Katherine Bement Davis, and Austin MacCormick. 4. 1930-1941: The golden age of correctional education; early influence of MacCormick, especially in the New York and Federal Bureau of Prisons experiments; rebirth of correctional/special education. 5. 1941-1946: World War II, which interrupted the development of correctional education. 6. 1946-1964: Limited recovery from the interruption. 7. 1965-1980: "Hot spots" in correctional education--the Federal influence in education; postsecondary programs; correctional school districts; special education legislation; correctional teacher preparation programs. 8. 1981-1988: Conservative trend in Federal programs and many states; rise of the Correctional Education Association's influence; continued refinement of trends from the previous period. 9. 1989-: The current period; Canadian Federal paradigm; contributions by the Ross and Fabiano team, Stephen Duguid, David Werner, and others; greater international cooperation.

Professional Development in Correctional Education
Probably no element of the correctional education scene is more negative, more lacking, than that of professional status. If the educational process is to play any role at all in the rehabilitation of the inmate (or the change of prison systems), it must have a professional status. This is its greatest lack and, at the same time, the resource with the greatest overall potential for a major breakthrough in penal systems.


The Center for the Study of Correctional Education at California State University, San Bernardino, USA, (CSUSB) has been developing capabilities to address a problem that is central to our field: prison educators have little or no access to information about prison education—its history, literature, and best practices. Faculty associated with the Center have acquired an extensive collection of reference materials and prepared texts to help prison teachers learn the social/cultural and historical context of their work.

Prison educators are aware of this every day they work, although they may respond in different ways to this lack of professional status. Sometimes they are influenced by situations specific to their site: an administrator who emphasizes or de-emphasizes the role education can play in helping prisoners turn their lives around, a faculty that sees itself as either teachers or as workers in a bureaucracy, etc. Some prison educators note that policy and practice reveal disrespect for the program and respond with an “I won’t care” attitude. Others see the same problem and respond with a social activist orientation, networking to build alliances for improvement. Prison educators can easily neglect their own professional needs to focus on student learning. Others struggle to gain clarity about the work so they can maximize teaching and learning effectiveness. We have developed a masters’ degree program for those who see education as reciprocal—“what’s good for the students in my class is good for me.”

One thing that tends to unite prison educators is the need to defend institutional programs. The education of the marginalized has been marginalized education. Conditions for teaching within the institutions can be hostile and tenuous. Many of the systems that employ us do not value our services, and outside audiences often make things worse. This lack of support can impact us. Many feel alone and redouble their efforts—typically by aligning their own personal priorities with their professional aspirations for teaching and learning.

There has been a lack of professional training for prison educators. We were trained to be reading or math teachers, perhaps adult or special educators, but not prison educators. While we need to have mainstream educational skills, after all, prison education is a field of education, we lack grounding in the field of prison education. Several assumptions to the “education is an effective strategy to improve the human condition” approach are as applicable to institutional teachers as to prisoner
students. For example, one can assume that (a) learning has different purposes at different times in one’s life, (b) it is more engaging to be in the company of classmates engaged in self-development than with people who are not, and (c) everyone can benefit from being in the presence of a good teacher, working with useful instructional materials. Another central assumption is that (d) the more one pursues purposeful education, the more one’s life can be infused with personal purpose.

The attainment of higher levels of education is generally associated with higher levels of understanding: more skills, more nuanced and useful knowledge, even wisdom. In this there should be no double standard between our advice for students and the standards we apply in our own lives—if education is a good thing, it should be good for us, as well as for students in our classes. These reasons make it imperative that we continue with our own professional training.

**A Third Generation Master’s Program**

This is the world’s first known ‘third generation’ program prison teacher education program. Managers from the local prison crafted first generation programs and university, in response to whatever particular emphasis they thought would be appropriate for institutional teacher preparation (law enforcement, counseling, adult basic education, elementary education, and so forth). Second generation programs were driven by special education funds for personnel development; they were based on the (mistaken) notion that all confined students possessed educational disabilities. These disappeared when external funding ended.

Third generation programs should be eclectic—based on the concept that the field of prison education has a unique literature and history (as reflected in the Program’s prison education core courses), and many specialties (such as vocational/prison, English as a Second Language, special/prison, prison/literacy, etc., specializations in which MA students will take courses). The following figure describes the degree requirements and roster of Program courses. The Program is designed to build on the educational work most prison educators bring to prison teaching.

References


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