The Education of Prisoners: A Holistic Perspective

Irene C. Baird

Abstract

Our corrections system is in crisis. Do we build new facilities for the soaring numbers of prisoners or do we invest in the education of the prisoner, focusing on identifying and remediating the root causes of incarceration? After years of research showing the correlation between more education and lower recidivism rates, the National Institute for Corrections introduced a cognitive-based "Thinking for a Change" curriculum that is receiving positive evaluations. Situated within that behavioral model, visionary thinking suggests that necessary literacy needs to be supplemented with a personal education plan that holistically prepares a balanced human being for community reentry.

Introduction

Crime and corrections are topics of such magnitude that they fill books and are fodder for film. They invite studies from sociologists and criminologists. They beg the question as to what precipitates aberrant behavior and how we are going to help communities that have been losing generations, thereby saturating our prisons. Actor Bill Cosby has provoked ire by recommending that minority communities, those most frequently targeted, assume responsibility for promoting education and changed behavior and thinking. Educator Michael Dyson, on the other hand, blames policy and social conditions that have created inequalities and limited opportunities, especially for the disenfranchised, that make destructive behavior either alluring or the only alternative for survival. And the proliferation of drugs? Mind-boggling aftershocks!

Irene Baird is an Affiliate Professor in Adult Education and Director of the Women's Enrichment Center at Penn State Harrisburg.

Given this context, prisons have been focusing on reentry programs—ones that should help offenders acquire the necessary life skills to succeed in becoming law-abiding citizens upon returning to the community. Such preparation comes under the heading of "Prison" or "Corrections Education," that is vocational and academic preparation as a rehabilitative process. Looking at the issue from a global perspective, the Council of Europe and 42 member states set standards for European prison education, some of which are:

 access to classroom subjects, vocational training, creative and cultural activities, physical education and sports, social education and library facilities;

• educational context similar to that provided on the outside;

• facilitation and support from those in administration and management;

• education at developing the whole person keeping in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context (Prison Education, 2008).

Alternatively, in our country we tend to focus on deficits, especially among those with low literacy levels. We continue to support tough and dehumanizing policy on the basis that offenders are all in the same boat... a bone of contention among those in the groups I will describe later in this article.

Far more inspiring is the European model of developing the whole person-a concept endorsed by author Talvi who posits that education "require[s] that the ultimate worth of each individual be the center of analysis and action" (2007, p.252). On the basis of 15 years of conducting Freirian-oriented programs within a county jail, I am convinced that our commitment should be to the "Education of Prisoners," a title suggested by adult education colleague, Dominique Chlup. He describes a holistic approach supplementing "how to do" training with exploring and addressing the affective aspects of "how to be," with awareness of behavioral consequences. Since prisoners are the owners of their experiences, we need to learn and understand their lived experiences and the community culture that influences their behavior. We must advocate for the assessment of each prisoner's abilities and educational needs, and support innovative programs that are designed to assist and prepare them for reentry into the community and for successful maintenance on the outside. On an optimistic note, interventions are emerging-the kinds that focus on personal responsibility and the cognitive-based "Thinking for a Change."

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The Issues: How We Got Here

"Crisis and social control," "scandalous," and "a problem getting bigger and bigger that is costing taxpayers about \$45 billion" are references to our corrections system. To cite just one alarming statistic, one percent of U.S. adults are behind bars (2.2 million, plus 5 million more under some jurisdiction of the system), an historic high (Fears, 2008).

Through the years, the pendulum has swung between penitence, with a Bible and isolation as essential to reform, and retribution dispensed in the form of harsh sentencing and treatment prescribed to teach a lesson. Early reformers believed that the threat of imprisonment, not its severity, deterred criminal behavior and that rehabilitation rather than retribution was, "the proper goal of punishment" for infractions. The philosophy and policy to address crime continue to swing back-and-forth regarding punishment and rehabilitation. The issues of race and gender, however, are constants and must be integral to the program planning process. In the early years, African-Americans were stereotyped as "impassioned and incorrigible." As a result, they were incarcerated in large numbers. In addition, because of their perceived "nature," they were considered incapable of penitence, let alone reform (Kann, 2001, p. XX). The media and research have informed us that blacks are more frequently stalked, searched and apprehended than Whites. Sabo, et al. notes that as of 2006, over 50 percent of new admissions to U.S. prisons were Black. In maximum security prisons, where inmates are confined to their cells almost 24 hours a day, more than 90 percent are Black as are 40 percent of those on death row (p.20). Or, in another configuration, one in every 14 adult black males is locked up on any given day (p. 49).

On the gendered side, other than a significant increase in numbers (by 2004, a staggering 757 percent since 1977 to more than 111,000), incarcerated women's issues have not changed (Talvi, 2007). In 2001, I wrote of their being silenced and invisible. I added that this insured their "marginalization and limits their ability to successfully reenter society" (Baird, 2001, p.169). In Talvi's 2007 comprehensive book, Women Behind Bars, she writes that "most of the [current female inmates] feel they are a nearly invisible group that has been dehumanized, forgotten, and locked away... [their] realities have simply been reduced to their offenses and the prison numbers" (p.14). She underscores the colonial practice of stereotyping female inmates as "fallen women" who refused to conform to their appropriate gender role. That bias still exists. She also confirms my educational perspective that, rather than relying solely

on academic studies and their theories, it is essential to learn directly from the inmates because who is "more insightful and informed about the realities of female incarceration than the prisoners themselves"? (p.viii). What better context is there when preparing an educational or training program for inmates?

The Washington D.C.-based Sentencing Project's associate director writes that the current context for policy regarding crime goes back to the 1970s. Increasing urbanization and the social movements of the 1960s led to a rise in crime. That created a backlash. A 1968 presidential campaign on a law-and-order platform generated discussion about the rehabilitation goal and the indeterminate sentencing which would provide incentives of early release to those participating in prison-based educational and vocational programs. Then judges and parole boards were allowed to use their discretion in sentencing but some contended that there was evidence of bias in terms of race, gender and political belief. By the early 1980s, there was an emerging "get tough movement," the "three strikes and you're out" laws and a "war on drugs." As a result, the prison population has increased every year since 1973. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of violent offenders in state prisons rose by 86 percent; the number of drug offenders increased by 478 percent (Mauer, 2001). The United States now has the dubious distinction of incarcerating more prisoners than any other nation. Because of the numbers and conditions within the system, the Sentencing Project works on creating alternatives to incarceration and promoting Criminal Justice reforms. At local levels, activists for change are making their voices heard in the community and the legislatures.

Education and Training

There is no disputing that literacy levels must be addressed prior to progressing to vocational and academic preparation in order to equip the inmate with skills that can translate to outside employment which decreases the potential for recidivism. This presents a challenge because of the many causes of low literacy levels such as: school dropout; disincentives to book (ie. "school")learning; learning disabilities. Learning styles also need to be considered. For adult educators, the Freirian model offers innovative insights. The Freirian approach focuses on the individuals' words, their basic vocabulary being a starting point for expansion so that the individuals move from the object status, of one oppressed because of low literacy levels, to a subject stage, with an

enlarged vocabulary that contributes to self-efficacy and empowerment. Freire confirmed this by teaching Brazilian peasants how to read and write in less than a year so that they could act in their own behalf and improve their conditions (Freire, 1997).

Pennsylvania: On the Inside

According to the National Institute of Corrections (3), Pennsylvania's Corrections system houses 43,998 inmates in 26 prisons, 14 community facilities and a boot camp with a staff of about 15,000. A September 23, 2008 edition of the Harrisburg Patriot News reported that drugs, violent crime and mandatory minimum sentences have boosted that number to 46, 816. A request for two additional facilities is being based on overcrowded conditions and/or aging facilities. Each inmate housed within the system costs the taxpayer about \$33,000. How much more fiscally prudent it would be to promote education from a holistic perspective to reduce the cost, reduce risk-taking behavior and reduce the recidivism rate.

As an example, in her book for men, author Iyanla Vanzant (2002) refers to men's always being taught to do and if they don't do enough the right way, they experience frustration and anger...which breaks out into destructive behavior. Her antidote? Along with the "how to do", teach men how to be", an affective component that rigid patriarchal thinking would consider unmanly (p.19). In a phone inquiry about education and training programs prescribed by the Central Office in Camp Hill, the current list was primarily a "how to do" one. At intake, medical, psychological and academic levels are assessed, with recommendations for implementation at the parent institution assignment.

Since 2004, adult basic education and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation and testing are mandated. English as a Second Language and Special Education classes are available to establish a basic literacy level. That is supplemented with 26 vocational offerings with a range of topics from business education to welding. There is a staff of 177 academic instructors, 145 vocational ones, principals and counselors. There is also an Act 143 Victim Awareness program, a 12 hour class that addresses violence which must be completed prior to parole. A new CORE program is being developed at Camp Hill to address reentry in areas such as management skills, citizenship and wellness. As soon as the information is available for publication it will be listed on the state's web site www.cor.state.pa.us. Pell Grants, a post-secondary financial aid package Rhode Island's senator Claiborne Pell moved through Congress in 1972, were denied inmates in 1994 even though they represented less than one percent of all grant recipients (Mauer,2001). Several states have maneuvered around that loss. Pennsylvania, for example, has negotiated, through contracts with Lehigh County Community College, Westmoreland Community College and Penn State DuBois, to provide post-secondary business classes.

Muncy: A Women's Facility

Included in the list of state facilities are two exclusively for women: Cambridge Springs and Muncy. Since I was not able to discuss their educational programming personally, I can only share a sampling of a twelve page list of offerings from Muncy. There are activities classes featuring exercise and wellness and an assortment of crafts and music as therapy. Twenty four of the listings are in the purview of psychologists and deal with violence prevention, anger and stress management, substance abuse and addictions, and mental health in general as examples. Religious services and bible study are available to women of different faiths. Parenting classes include family virtual visitation especially for those with family from areas as distant as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. In addition to ABE and GED preparation, there are classes that teach specific skills/trades that can be transferred to future employment. Unlike jails, at state prisons there are some long term offenders and some lifers. Their offerings are designed to facilitate adjustment to their present situation, to prevent depression, with attention to maintaining contact with family on the outside. The list gives the impression that the programs were designed to address the needs of the whole person: how to relax, how to do from a leisure perspective, how to learn to do for employability. Impressively, integrated into some of the groups is a cognitive underpinning to introduce inmates into restructuring their thinking in order to change their behaviors. There is also a stand alone, the Thinking for a Change, that is devoted exclusively to cognitive-based behavioral modification

Thinking for a Change: The Current Direction

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) is a federal agency mandated to provide specialized services to corrections. Its programs are designed from a theory-to-practice perspective with the purpose of raising

the performance for corrections agencies nationwide (4). In December, 1997, NIC introduced a new, cognitive-based behavioral change model that has been implemented at prisons, jails, community connections, probation and parole supervision sites. The curriculum can be used with juveniles and adults, with males and females. Initially it contained 22 lessons and must be implemented sequentially with, ideally, a group of 8 to 12 individuals.

The philosophy is reminiscent of Iyanla Vanzant's references to men's never having been taught "how to be." The inmates, in a sequence of classes, start with identifying and examining behaviors that led to incarceration. The first step is to recognize that there was a thinking problem; that is followed by looking back to try to identify the thoughts and attitudes related to the behavior, to make the correlation between personal thinking and behavioral response as well as to recognize that there are consequences to one's actions. Identifying and being aware of risktaking behaviors are key in the process of behavioral change. Problem solving skill acquisition, the social and emotional needs of the offenders are all part of the intervention. To date, NIC has trained more than 6000 correctional staff as group facilitators (4).

Dauphin County Prison (DCP)

The Thinking for Change intervention is a natural segue to my programs at Dauphin County Prison since they complement each other. Dauphin County Prison is one of the state's 73 jail facilities; it lists a broad spectrum of services for its nearly 1000 inmates; currently approximately 125 of them are females. Jail services vary by facility so my discussion will be limited to my experiences at DCP since 1994. According to its web site and the Treatment department manual, DCP houses both pre-trial detainees and sentenced offenders. They are assessed/evaluated at admission and are provided counseling along with mandates or recommendation for programming. The Education Department oversees all educational classes which include:

• the Central Dauphin High School program for special needs inmates under the age of 22 and regular inmates under 18;

• Adult Basic Education (ABE), six days a week, with emphasis on reading and writing skills;

• English as a Second Language (ESL), 3 days a week, and required for those who do not speak English;

• General Equivalency Diploma (GED), 6 days a week, to prepare inmates for testing and a Commonwealth Secondary School Diploma;

• LASER (Life, Attitudes, Skills, Educational Retraining), a 9 week program in self-development, interpersonal and family relationships, drug and alcohol awareness, stress, community involvement and job search skills, including computer literacy. Outside speakers share their experiences and offer recommendations. A support group assists new participants while reinforcing their own preparation.

Bible study and religious services in English and Spanish come under the jurisdiction of Community Connections, within the Treatment Department, with 286 community volunteers and in-house chaplains attending to the needs of a diverse group of inmates such as Catholics, Protestants, Jehovahs Witnesses and Muslims. In addition, the Treatment Department's manual lists 69 programs/services in areas such as anger management, violence intervention, addictive behaviors, mental health, Aids/HIV counseling and parental support groups. Depending upon the infraction, some of these services are mandated; other groups can be a voluntary request by the inmate.

My groups are listed in the Treatment Manual as enrichment education and are offered to the inmates on a voluntary basis. Created in 1994 for females and in 1999 for males, the model is considered a nonthreatening first step in self-discovery and self-acceptance. The process involves reading, reflection and discussion of the writing of authors of similar race, class and experience. Author Iyanla Vanzant (1998) wrote that we are all doing some kind of time and it is our responsibility to find the key to unlock the personal cell. Parable-like words such as hers inspire and motivate inmates to undertake a personal inward search to acquire a sense of personal balance prior to acquiring skills for reentry. A key element is subsequent creative self- expression because it has been said that diagnosis cannot be made until the story is told; that telling the story is the treatment. For the outsider, the personal story helps us understand the inmates' lived experiences and provides the context in which risk-taking may take place. When the story includes the prison context we learn what is or is not working on the inside and that may lead to adjustments.

Writing topics depend on the experiences the reading evokes. In order for the outsider to learn, it is imperative to listen, to be flexible and non-judgmental. As examples, what messages are you hearing in the following?

Hello, is there anybody that can actually hear me?

... who can listen for a minute

I have been crying out for at least

one person to listen.

I'm afraid to know the real me, afraid to be

me...afraid to be {who} I actually am.

Another inmate reinforces the constant race and gendered stereotyp-

ing:

From birth I was considered inferior...

Jails take the results of what this atmosphere makes our people

to be

Wow. It's great to be black!

Your {considered} either a dike...or a hoe.

Wow. It's great to be a woman!

Being incarcerated makes you feel like an animal in a cage...

After you do the time your still considered an animal...

Wow. It's great to be a black woman in jail!

Inevitably there is a version of the following experience; listen to it also for some insights into the abusive male:

Feeling the pain of each hit landed on my body. Looking up and seeing the bottom of his

foot coming down to meet my face – his words-"I was nothing to him, no one would ever

love me, want me. I am ugly, can't cook, can't love him the way he wants."

The following excerpt is by an inmate who has achieved self-awareness:

This is not a poem. It is my life. It is about family,

We are short, tall, good, bad, ugly, smart, dumb or sad...

happy, confused, frustrated, wise, brilliant...

Giving thanks, giving strength, giving loving, giving trust...

giving hope, giving a part of us...

It is excepting {sic} responsibility, criticism, the truth hurts but what is it worth.

It is time to live our lives, it is ours to live, one day at a time.

Alternatively, the men's reflections center primarily on their masculinity and sexuality. One man wrote of being 13, without a father, and having a male relative decide to fill that role by turning the cub into a bear or lion. Another defined his manhood as, "{being} in control over everything, and never show your feelings or what we would call weakside because if we did we think it's a chump move or something so I always wanted to be in control and never let anyone control me and never showed my feelings." This writing affirms patriarchal indoctrination, reinforced in a prison setting, and reflects the tenuous line between doing and being in that environment.

The following presented another definition of manhood from a sexual perspective:

"...she looked like a red apple ready to be picked. We were real close...and she would have had her first baby to me but were 17 years old. Her mom got her an abortion...I do miss her... she would have been the first to have my baby."

In our group discussions, in spite of their present circumstances, both the men and the women articulate a deeply entrenched traditional gender role and envision a life, picket fence and all... with strong patriarchal influence and direction. It is for these very reasons that initial programs should be oriented towards the inmates' learning their value as human beings prior to examining and addressing identity, responsibilities and career options.

The administration has been very supportive not only of the in-house programs but also of a community theater presentation, "Voices Inside" (2001), whose script was based on the writing of some of the female inmates in my groups, and a DVD, "Rerighting Ourselves," (2007), a taping of five male inmates, on the inside, sharing snippets of their writing, their personal stories and advice to young people, to deter them from comparable behavior.

The Arts: An Alternative Approach

Prior to discovering Freire, I based my learning model on the Humanities, an educational philosophy that Newman, Lewis and Beverstock (1993) affirmed in their study on prison literacy. They maintained its relevance because it was cognitive learning about one's life, one's culture and community. Comparable to Freire's focus on the oppressed, it was about being part of society, not an outsider (Baird, 2001). Moreover, it was a branch of learning that examines human constructs and concerns through language, the arts, philosophy, etc. It was very relevant in the Harrisburg theater production of female inmates' stories and the DVD focusing on the male perspective.

Prison Art is emerging as a significant field of study. An October 2008 national Arts in Criminal Justice Conference in Philadelphia high-

lighted a spectrum of prison issues with interventions such as art, dance, theater and writing as ways to understand what was happening to the person within the system. Absent were the stereotypical references to illiteracy and socio-economic deficits. Highlighted was artistic expression such as citywide murals created by school students which generated self-esteem within the students and their concern for the appearance of their community. Present were dances and theater performances that informed with their stories. Networking resulted from the conference and groups are meeting to form an Alliance to advance this agenda. A recent publication, Creating Behind the Razor Wire (2008), contains essays that give voice and visibility to the inmates. The publication also contains a statewide directory of programs and contacts as well as a Resource list. The web site is www.prisonarts.info.

Post Secondary Education: Dream or Reality?

In 1994, when scholarship aid through Pell Grants became ineligible to inmates, just 6 percent of the \$22 billion was being spent for prison programs (5). As a result, 350 such programs were eliminated nationwide. Finding employment after release is difficult and more so if the offender has a limited educational background. In spite of earlier backlash against financially supporting post secondary classes for prisoners, the door has finally cracked open in a few places, in addition to the sites in Pennsylvania. Following are examples:

In Massachusetts, Boston University founded a Prison Education Program in 1972 that has granted 160 Bachelor of Arts degrees and 50 Masters of Arts. University faculty teach the classes on site and qualified students receive tuition, texts and supplies.

At Harvard, Janet Repper Rice, as part of her Divinity School field work, was assigned to work on a nonprofit College Behind Bars program. She also developed a project to pair prisoners with sponsors to support students in the Boston University program.

With approval from the Connecticut Department of Corrections and Wesleyan University, the Wesleyan Prisoner Resource and Education Project (WesPrep) is ready to be included in the college–in-prison program taught by professors.

At D.C.'s Georgetown University, an Associate Professor of English founded the Prison Outreach Program, having taught for 16 years at a maximum security prison. She and her students now do outreach in Virginia, dedicated to the successful reentry of the incarcerated.

Two higher education prison programs read like benchmarks for the incarcerated. The College Program at San Quentin in California was started in 1996 by a University of California professor at Davis following the demise of Pell Grants. Through fundraising it grew from 2 classes, aa volunteer coordinator and no budget to be incorporated as the independent, non-profit Prison University Project. Its goal is to, "educate and challenge students intellectually; to prepare them to lead thoughtful and productive lives outside of prison; to provide them with skills... and to prepare them to become providers, leaders, and examples for their families and communities." Its growth and outreach to the community are significant (6).

The Bard Prison Initiative was conceived in the late 1990s by Max Kenner, a Bard graduate. It began as a one year pilot project in 2001 at Eastern New York Correctional Facility, with fifteen students. Now, as a private enterprise with a nearly million dollar budget, it operates at five prisons with nearly 200 men and women from across the state. Originating as a student volunteer project to visit prisons in order to help in areas such as GED preparation, now college professors teach the prison students who receive college credits and degrees upon completion. The inmates receive a liberal arts education with a rigorous and impressive curriculum in civics, math, social sciences, world history and literature, writing styles, political theory and sciences. Integral to the liberal arts orientation are critical thinking and analysis, learning processes that change the prisoners' lives. One impressive aspect is the coordination of the curriculum throughout all of the prison sites so that if an inmate is transferred to another site course continuity remains.

The newest development will take place at Bayview Woman's Prison in New York City which will become the centerpiece of a statewide network for liberal arts education for incarcerated females. The Bard Prison Initiative has been showcased in the media and former President Bill Clinton described it as "a good investment in a safer, more productive society" (7). Although only one of a handful of programs of its kind in the United States, the fact that it is expanding and its graduates are trying to implement the model nationwide, this and San Quentin's Prison University Project just might be harbingers for the future in the education of prisoners.

Conclusion

There is no presumption that all offenders who were offered educational programs with a holistic perspective would choose to participate or would choose to change attitudes, values and beliefs, who would consider consequences before acting out. It would also be naïve to assume that all offenders can be rehabilitated. Some have committed such heinous crimes that they need to be isolated from the outside community. There is a legislative movement, however, that should provide incentives for nonviolent offenders to opt for change. The Pennsylvania legislature (Harrisburg Patriot News, September 23, 2008) has bills before the Governor that would decrease prison time for nonviolent offenders after completion of educational programs and demonstrated good behavior. Corrections Secretary Beard supports the legislation but the bills would require consent of local prosecutors and judges.

This legislation represents the first break from the harsh mandatory minimum prison terms and longer sentences. It is also encouraging that although the system is in crisis, education is part of the thinking about reducing the soaring numbers of prisoners. Hopefully, integrated into the educational program will be a holistic component, one "aimed at developing the whole person keeping in mind his or her social, economic and cultural contexts (1). To quote Pennsylvania Prison Society Director, William Dimascio, "...we may not think of ourselves as the monsters who created this bloated penal system. But, it will surely be a crime if we fail to do all we can to change it" (Correctional Forum, Spring 2008).

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