

Prison Education: Effects of Vocational Education on Rehabilitation

Abstract

Education, and specifically vocational education, has been seen as a means of rehabilitating prisoners by teaching them marketable skills. This follow-up study of ex-prisoners who had completed vocational programmes while incarcerated indicates that those aspects of the programmes that had the most impact on rehabilitation were not necessarily the specific knowledge and skills acquired, but rather those dimensions of the educational process that emphasized human development.

The ultimate goal of correctional systems is the successful reintegration of inmates into the mainstream of society. However, the high rate of recidivism among former inmates is convincing evidence that this goal is not being met as successfully as correctional services, and society for that matter, would like.

Education has been seen as a means of aiding inmates reintegrate into society. However, there is little evidence to indicate that it has been a particularly effective strategy. Nevertheless, correctional systems do offer a substantial number of education programmes in the hope that these will be of some benefit to inmates upon their release. It follows, then, that correctional authorities find it important to study the theoretical and practical aspects of education in prison in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their programmes, particularly in the context of the rehabilitation process.

This paper is a report of a follow-up study of former inmates who had completed a vocational programme in federal penitentiaries in

Québec. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the operation and effectiveness of the vocational programmes, and to seek possible links between these programmes and the rehabilitation of former inmates. It focused on three objectives: describe how former inmates viewed the operation of vocational programmes, identify their degree of satisfaction with these programmes, record their perception regarding the benefits of these programmes toward their rehabilitation.

Education within the Canadian Correctional System

There are approximately 10,000 inmates held in the 59 federal penitentiaries across Canada. The Correctional Service offers them a full range of educational services, from basic literacy to university education. Twenty per cent of the penitentiary population (approximately 2,000 inmates) participate in these programmes on a full-time basis. More than 40% of these (over 800 inmates) are registered in vocational programmes. This study focused on the latter programmes since they implicated the largest single group of inmates within the Correctional Service's educational system.

Development of the Project

Definition of rehabilitation

Since this study was concerned in part with education and rehabilitation, the research team had to formulate an operational definition of rehabilitation in order to deal with this concept pragmatically. The concept of rehabilitation is a complex one, with psychological, sociological, and economic dimensions. With the assistance of officers of the Correctional Service of Canada the research team adopted a simple definition. An inmate was considered to have taken the initial steps toward rehabilitation when he was released. Furthermore, since this study was to rely on perceptions of former inmates, it was left to each inmate to describe the development of his own progress toward rehabilitation. This very flexible definition was deemed acceptable to the research team, since one of the study's objectives was only to try to identify possible connections between vocational programmes and rehabilitation, and not necessarily to reach definitive conclusions.

The interview-questionnaire

The research team judged that interviewing former inmates would be the most suitable way to collect data. Given inmates' generally low level of education and lack of experience with formal written questionnaires, it was felt that a flexible approach most resembling a normal conversation would be the most effective procedure. In addition, an interview would allow for interesting digressions and discussions and perhaps lead to additional pertinent information. A framework of pre-formulated questions, on the other hand, would ensure that all interviewers would gather similar data.

The 35 items in the questionnaire were based on seven specific themes derived from the objectives of the study:

1. determine the motives of inmates to register in vocational programmes, and the time during their sentence when they registered;
2. describe the pedagogical operation of programmes and courses;
3. determine the degree of satisfaction of inmates with the programmes;
4. list programme shortcomings according to inmate perceptions;
5. state improvements proposed by inmates;
6. describe the current status of ex-inmates;
7. estimate the influence of the programmes on the rehabilitation of these former inmates.

Two experts were used to validate the questionnaire, a criminologist from the Université de Montréal, who had had substantial experience dealing with former inmates, and a former inmate who had been rehabilitated for a considerable number of years. The questionnaire was then field tested with an ex-inmate in a simulated interview.

The interviewers were given instructions on procedure. They were to inform the former inmates of the objectives of the project and guarantee confidentiality. They were to request permission to record the interview, and if this was refused, to take detailed notes. The interview was to be conducted in an informal manner while following the pattern set by the 35 items in the questionnaire. It was to last approximately one hour and was to be held at a time and place convenient to the former inmates.

The subjects

The Federal Training Centre (FTC) in Laval, Québec, a medium security penitentiary, was chosen as the institution from which to select the subjects. As the name implies, it is primarily an educational and training establishment, and with over 200 inmates enrolled in various programmes, it is the largest such centre in Québec. It offers sixteen vocational programmes: eight in the construction trades, four in the automotive trades, and four others (commercial education, technical drawing, computer programming, and hair-dressing). Registration in these programmes is divided as follows: 50% in construction, 25% in automotive, and 25% among the other four trades.

The following criteria were used to select subjects for interviews: to have completed a vocational programme at the FTC from 1980 to 1983; to

have received a diploma, certificate or other formal attestation stating the programme had been completed successfully; to have been released by the Correctional Service and still be free.

The period 1980 - 1983 was selected on the advice of officers of the Correctional Service essentially because inmates who had completed programmes during this time would be easier to trace through the parole system. Locating former inmates was the single most difficult task the research team faced. Understandably, ex-inmates are most anxious to sever all ties with correctional institutions and lose themselves in the anonymity of society as soon as they can. Other researchers who had conducted studies with former inmates had had similar problems.

This somewhat limited time period was acceptable to the research team for very practical reasons. It had to find suitable candidates in a relatively short period of time with limited authority and resources. Secondly, Correctional Service officers stated that former inmates who get into trouble with the law again do so, generally, a short time after their release. Hence, former inmates still free after a year or two were probably well into their rehabilitation process. Finally, this project was essentially a preliminary inquiry into possible connections between vocational programmes and rehabilitation. It was not expected to arrive at definitive conclusions.

A search through the FTC records yielded 149 names of inmates who had completed a vocational programme successfully between 1980 and 1983. Since 50 were still incarcerated, only 99 candidates met the sample criteria.

Because of administrative complications with judicial records, the complexities of the parole system, the distant residence of some former inmates, and the unwillingness of many to cooperate, only fourteen of the 99 subjects were finally interviewed. These were divided among the various programmes in approximately the same proportion as the general student population at the FTC: 57% in the construction trades, 21.5% in automotive, 21.5% among the four other programmes. Therefore, the data collected were not specific to some programmes but reflected the reality of all vocational programmes offered at the FTC.

The fourteen interviews were conducted by four members of the research team over four weeks. Since none of the former inmates objected, all interviews were recorded.

Compilation of data

Each interview was transcribed by the interviewer himself or herself in order to retain the most accurate representation of the content and spirit of the interview, including digressions and other comments. The research team tabulated the replies first under each of the 35 questions and then grouped these data under each of the themes of the survey. Pertinent comments not linked directly to one of the questions were compiled under a category named "comments of subjects".

Results

Motives to register and time of registration

Of the various reasons given by the former inmates for registering in educational programmes the one mentioned most often was that it improved conditions of incarceration. Secondly, others felt that it was viewed favourably by the authorities and seemed to improve chances for an early release. The next reason cited was that education helped to prepare them for their eventual release in as much as learning a trade and acquiring work experience were seen as improving chances of finding employment. Finally, a few of the former inmates said they registered in a programme simply out of interest in the subject.

Although rehabilitation, as such, was not stated specifically as one of the factors motivating inmates to follow a vocational programme, it was mentioned often indirectly and was linked closely to finding suitable employment.

The time during their sentence when inmates registered in programmes followed a pattern. Those serving first sentences varying in duration from two to six years generally registered during the first three months following their sentence. On the other hand, those having served previous sentences or whose sentence was longer than six years registered later in the majority of cases.

Operation of programmes and outcomes

Virtually all the candidates were able to register easily in a programme of their choice, and only three transferred from one programme to another during the period of training.

In general, the former inmates stated they were satisfied with learning conditions. Because the courses were essentially modularized, virtually continual registration was possible and students could work more

or less at their own pace. The classes were small, between ten and twelve students. There was a good mix between theoretical studies and practical work, and the equipment available was satisfactory. The instructors were seen as competent, there was continuity in instruction, adequate feedback, and satisfactory evaluation procedures. The only serious complaint about learning conditions was that these, at times, were interrupted because of non-academic administrative practices particular to penal institutions.

There were mixed reactions regarding interpersonal relations. Those between the instructors and students were judged as very good. The instructors were seen as understanding and available for advice. On the other hand, interpersonal relations among the inmates themselves, in and out of class, were seen as poor. Most former inmates declined to elaborate. It seemed the least said, the better. Silence here can be seen as typical of the climate of caution and mistrust which exists in penal institutions.

Generally, then, the operation of vocational programmes was viewed favourably by the subjects interviewed. The FTC was seen as offering a sound programme of instruction in the various trades. However, a word of caution is in order here. It must be kept in mind that the subjects interviewed could be considered the winners of the system. They had all completed programmes successfully, were still free, and most seemed well on their way in the rehabilitation process.

On the other hand, 85 of the subjects of the initial sample were not interviewed, many because they refused to cooperate in the project. There were also 50 subjects who had completed programmes and were still incarcerated. Finally, there were all those who had failed to complete a programme, whether they were now free or still incarcerated. Therefore, the statement that the operation of the vocational programmes appeared satisfactory must be taken with these limitations in mind.

Generally, the content of the vocational programmes met the expectations of the subjects. All but one found the courses interesting, felt they had acquired useful knowledge and skills, and looked upon the experience very positively.

The majority of the subjects saw no major shortcomings in the programmes. Only two negative comments were made. One was that someone more advanced in the subject could not proceed as rapidly as he would like. Another was that the practical components of the programmes did not always correspond to the realities of actual working conditions in industry.

Proposed improvements and comments

Some subjects felt that there should be more instructors available to supervise the practical phases of the programmes. Others stated that there should be more emphasis on practice, and that this phase should resemble actual working conditions as much as possible. Many urged that steps be taken to improve interpersonal relations among students, or to create conditions to improve them. Finally, one subject recommended that both French and English be made compulsory so as to facilitate access to employment upon release.

Additional comments

Most of the comments made outside the constraints of the questionnaire centered on the attestations of studies and work experience issued by the Correctional Service. Some of the former inmates stated that these credentials often were not recognized by industry. Others said that the fact that they were issued by a penal institution worked against them. They recommended that the name of the penal institution not appear on attestations. In practice, many former inmates preferred not to use their attestations so as to hide their past.

This problem of attestations seemed most acute in the construction industry, an industry of concern to 50% of those following vocational programmes in penitentiaries. Apprentice and journeyman papers are controlled by parity committees of the industry, and hiring practices are virtually in the hands of the trade unions who tend to look after their own members first. Former inmates found it difficult to break into this guarded preserve.

Other former inmates expressed the need for more effective procedures to ease the transition from correctional institutions to society at large, and many suggested that more help be available to find work upon release. Some proposed the introduction of cooperative education programmes with industry to achieve this.

Rehabilitation Process*Current status of ex-inmates*

Ten of the fourteen candidates were currently employed, while three were seeking work. One did not reply to this question. Of those employed, only five were working in their field of training, and interestingly, not all the subjects wanted to work in their trade. In fact, four stated they were not interested in practicing the trade acquired.

These data indicate that the rate of employment among these ex-inmates was high, in view of the existing economic situation in Québec and the high rate of unemployment, particularly in the construction industry.

Perception of the influence of programmes

Perhaps the most significant findings from these interviews were not those concerned with knowledge and skills acquired by the subjects, nor even their relative success at finding employment. Rather, they were what could be considered the incidental by-products of the vocational programmes, the human development of inmates. Nine of the subjects interviewed indicated that the vocational programmes had had substantial positive effects on them as human beings. During their incarceration, which in itself was seen as a dehumanizing experience, the courses helped pass the time in a comfortable and relatively pleasant environment. The human contacts, as well as the feeling of accomplishment in completing tasks successfully, helped increase self image as well as social image. In addition, through studies and practical assignments they learned work habits and experienced a new life style. These findings are similar to those of other studies on prison education and they offer interesting leads to further research.

Motives to participate in the project

At the end of the interview the subjects were asked why they had accepted to participate in this project. The fourteen subjects listed some twenty-one reasons. By far, the most common theme among these was the desire to help others, whether it was other inmates, instructors, or the system itself. This seems to imply a certain degree of emerging social responsibility. When considering the data, however, the size of the sample and the fact that those interviewed all had had a considerable degree of success, must be kept in mind. Nevertheless, it is an interesting observation and one which should be pursued further.

Conclusions

The interviews indicated that, in the perception of the former inmates, the programmes and courses were adequate, well-administered, and the learning conditions, the equipment, and the instructors were all satisfactory. The shortcomings cited and the improvements suggested were not very different from comments made about most training programmes. It is encouraging to note that on the whole the system appeared to function adequately. The most serious problems raised about the vocational programmes were not concerned specifically with the training itself but with the recognition of the credentials obtained and with the hiring practices of

industry. Unquestionably, the correctional service must try to establish closer links with industry. Finding suitable employment was seen by the former inmates as an important first step toward rehabilitation.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from the interviews, one not anticipated initially, was that the human development influences of the vocational programmes, and not the acquisition of knowledge and skills, were the most influential factors in the rehabilitation process. The increase of self-esteem, the ability to evaluate oneself, the acquisition of work habits, and the development of interpersonal skills were the most beneficial aspects of the programmes to the inmates.

This finding coincides to some extent with those of others who have written on prison education in Canada. J. W. Cosman, of the Correctional Service of Canada, found fault with mechanistic, psychological, economic, and medical interpretations of criminality, as well as the effectiveness of traditional education programmes based primarily on the acquisition of knowledge and skills and on occupying the time of inmates. He suggested an education model which placed the accent on human development: "The education model, on the other hand, assumes lacks in learning – deficits in cognitive development comparable to the pre-adolescent deficiencies in intellectual as well as moral development" (Cosman, 1981, p.41).

Like Cosman, J. D. Ayers of the University of Victoria, looked at prison education beyond the acquisition of skills leading to the work force. Rather, he saw that programmes which stressed problem solving, fundamental concepts, and the essence and structure of theoretical disciplines were the most beneficial. This is what the University of Victoria attempted to do with its university level programme for the inmates at Matsqui (Ayers, 1981).

The Matsqui programme concentrated on cognitive, moral, and socio-political development through the study of the humanities, with a special emphasis on history and literature. Stephen Duguid, of Simon Fraser University, described a follow-up study of 65 men in this programme over a period of three years. The rate of recidivism among students was 14% compared to 52% for the matched group of non-student prisoners (Duguid, 1981).

It is interesting to note that our own observations on the influence of vocational programmes on former inmates coincides to some extent with the findings of the Matsqui experiment. The human development component of the programmes, according to the former inmates interviewed, seems to have had more long term influence than the work related

knowledge and skills acquired. This similarity between the findings of the two studies is all the more interesting since they were conducted in different ways, at different times, with different prisoner populations, and with different programmes.

The Matsqui experiment was designed and conducted specifically to investigate the hypothesis that cognitive, moral, and socio-political development through university studies in the humanities would be a determining influence on the rehabilitation of inmates. The evidence gathered tended to support that hypothesis. On the other hand, our study was not based on a programme designed specifically to test a hypothesis. It centred on existing programmes as they were actually administered in penitentiaries and it sought to find some long term effects of these programmes in the rehabilitation process. Yet, the findings can be considered similar to those of Matsqui inasmuch as they showed the predominance of the human development aspects of the vocational programmes in the rehabilitation process.

Because of the size of the samples and the relatively short time period involved, the findings of neither study can be taken as conclusive. At best, they point the way to new avenues of research. It would seem that whatever the programme, what is critical in prison education is to stress the human development component.

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