

Sentencing People to Learn?

The Future of Literacy in Prisons

National corrections information shows that the majority of Canadian prisoners are "undereducated". It is fairly well recognized that many people who end up in prison have problems with reading and writing. But reports vary when it comes to actual numbers. Some researchers think that at least half (50%) of people who are sentenced to prison for two years or more are functionally illiterate. Whatever the actual numbers, it is clear that many prisoners have limited literacy and numeracy skills.

In 1989, I visited 29 communities and interviewed 426 people about the state of literacy programming for prisoners and ex-offenders across Canada. The research project was one of many funded by the federal government in preparation for 1990, the International Year of Literacy.

Much of the work on the project involved discussions with prisoners, volunteers and staff in prisons. Many of the education programs in prisons were starting to concentrate on providing literacy help. In fact, the politicians and policy-makers were demanding that prisoners enrol in adult basic education. They argued that giving prisoners literacy training would help keep them from committing crime.

The overall results of the project were very distressing. Men and women in prisons across the country described horrible experiences of trying to obtain an education. I heard lots of examples of negative treatment by family, teachers, students and school administrators. Many had been labelled as "bad" and "stupid" in elementary school. These sorts of labels tend to follow people as they grow up.

Too often, children who are called names and otherwise verbally, emotionally or physically abused, start to believe the negative things other people say about them. They often believe that they are "bad" and "stupid". Worse still, they start to believe that they deserve to be treated badly. All of this can directly affect how they are then treated by others. It does not take long before a vicious cycle develops. People are told they are bad. They believe they are bad. They do bad things. People continue to tell them they are bad. If they are also told they are stupid. They start to believe that they cannot learn any new ways of living or thinking about themselves or other people.

Unfortunately, the situation has not changed much in the past six years. Many people think the situation is getting worse. I am one of these people. I think that people who do not have power or influence in our communities tend to be blamed for their own situations. Poor people, people who are not white, people who have a criminal or youth record are often blamed for all kinds of problems in the community. Most experience a high degree of discrimination.

How many times have you heard someone say that people should pull themselves up by their boot straps. These people do not seem to realize that many of the people who live on the margins of our communities do not even have boots! Cutbacks in funding and limited resources overall have severely limited the availability of educational, social service and health assistance for individuals and groups who are disadvantaged. It is difficult to imagine how difficult it is for people to think about improving their literacy and numeracy skills when their basic needs for food and shelter are not being met.

Current plans to further cut funding for Canada's social programs will likely see an increasingly bleak future. Is there hope for those whose social and economic well-being is further hampered by imprisonment and the stigma of a criminal record?

Current correctional practices do not hold out much hope. But, I do think we can all work to change the situation. We can encourage correctional authorities to support and promote integrated educational programming for prisoners. We can encourage them to provide prisoners with choices and incentives for educational advancement. Then perhaps we will cease to hear of prisoners and staff alike being punished

for failure to attain correctional literacy quotas.

Prisoners themselves have requested that the teaching of literacy skills be integrated into and include life and vocational skills acquisition. For example, women in prison have requested that the academic and work programming be combined to create a more useful and comprehensive educational component. In addition, given that 2/3 of women in prison are also mothers, many have indicated that life skills programming, as well as educational and work opportunities should include child development and child care training.

The lesson is not a new one. To improve the future of literacy programming in the community, most of us learned that we first had to listen to and meet the needs of our learners. The future would look a lot brighter for prisoners if all federal and provincial providers of "correctional" services would adopt a consistent approach.

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