

Adult Education in Canada's Penal System

Glynn Sharpe

(Corresponding author)

Faculty of Education

Nipissing University

100 College Drive

Box 5002

North Bay, Ontario

1637 Jocko Point Road

Canada

P1B 8G5

P1B 8L7

705 474 3450

Ext: 4170

e-mail: glynns@nipissingu.ca

Tracey Curwen

Faculty of Arts and Science

Nipissing University

100 College Drive

Box 5002

North Bay, Ontario

Canada

P1B 8L7

705 474 3450

Ext: 4275

e-mail: Tcurwen@nipissingu.ca

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Abstract

What are the goals of Adult Education in Canada's Penal system? How is its curriculum devised and on what philosophical principles lay its foundation? Adult education is offered to inmates regardless of their existing knowledge base or prior educational success. Completion by Canadian inmates of the many educational programs offered to them results in higher levels of inmate self-worth, self-esteem and lower reported rates of criminal activity and recidivism.

Keywords: Adult Education, Canada, and Penal System.

Introduction

The foundation of the Hamburg Declaration states that basic adult education is a right that should be afforded to each individual regardless of skin colour, religion, or social standing (Unesco, 1997). Moreover, adult education is viewed as a vehicle for empowerment, which allows a person to meet their full personal/vocational potential (Unesco, 1997). Canada's Penal Institutions have adopted the

philosophy of the Hamburg Declaration: the belief that adult education is vital in reshaping how inmates see themselves and their place in society is embedded in the structure of education for offenders. Learning, in this regard, is connected to discovery, transformation and the pursuit of making life more meaningful (Margo. 2001). This paper will present three theories of adult education (i.e. Behaviourist, Humanist, and Transformative) and discuss their utility within the Canadian Penal System. This paper will also provide an overview of the history of Adult Education in Canada's Penal Institutions (CPI), examine CPI's objectives regarding educational programs, and reflect upon the impact of educational programs on the prison population. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate the value and importance adult educational opportunities afford inmates in Canada's Penal System.

Since the mid-1800's, adult education has been an integral part of penal life in Institutions throughout Canada (Correctional Services Canada, 2006). The philosophy of Canada's adult education programs was based on a report written by Inspector Moylan in 1881 (Correctional Services Canada, 2006). Moylan believed that education is pivotal to the "reformation of the fallen," and that educational programs delivered to prison inmates "inspired self-respect, supported proper pride of character, excites ambition, opens new fields of exertion, ministers to social and personal improvement and affords a healthful substitution for low and vicious amusements" (Correctional Services Canada, 2006). Therefore, since 1881, reformation through adult education has been a goal of Canada's Penal Institutions.

Moylan recognized the vital role education played in how an inmate saw himself or herself and the role he/she was capable of playing in society. Education afforded inmates the opportunity to see themselves in a new light while obtaining new skills and knowledge. Education gave inmates hope, a renewed sense of self-worth, and the means to apply their abilities to a new and meaningful path. The cornerstones of the philosophy adopted by Corrections Canada in the late 19th century were one of personal growth, skills development and self-realization; the very foundations of the Behaviourist, Humanist, and Transformative perspectives and theories of Adult Learning.

Perspectives and Theories of Adult Learning

Although Canada's Penal Institutions could be examined through a myriad of theories and perspectives on Adult Education, the Behaviourist, Humanist, and Transformative theories are of particular interest as they are given obvious consideration when shaping the goals and objectives of Penal Adult Education.

The Behaviourist Perspective on adult learning focuses on skills development and overt changes in an individual's behaviour (Margo, 2001). Adult educators must be able to assist learners to make meaningful connections between new ideas and thoughts presented to them and their own prior knowledge and experiences (Margo. 2001). The Humanist Orientation believes that learning is a process of personal growth development (Margo, 2001). Carl Rogers has been one of the leading theorists and voices within the Humanist perspective and he emphasizes choice, freedom, creativity, and self-realization as the critical parts of meaningful learning (Margo. 2001). Learning, Rogers believes, is more than just the accumulation of facts; learning is meaningful and important when it makes a difference in an individual's behaviour (Margo. 2001). The Transformative theories of Adult Learning hope to elicit deep, meaningful changes in the existing values, attitudes, beliefs and, ultimately, the actions of individuals (Margo, 2001). Adult learners, in this context, are empowered to help themselves and to take an active part in improving the world around them (Margo. 2001). Reflection, dialogue and critical thinking are viewed as prerequisites for meaningful change, or for transformation to occur at both the societal and individual level (Margo. 2001).

The common agenda of the Behaviourist, Humanist, and Transformative theories, described above, is the desire to help reshape the way an individual sees him/herself and how he/she fits into society. A person is able to change their life only when there has been a fundamental shift in self-perception. From the inception of adult education in Canada's prisons, the goal has been, through course content and curriculum, to assist inmates to see themselves in a different context and to realize their worth and the contributions they are capable of making to the fabric of society. Learning is, and has always been seen, as a vehicle for meaningful change in an inmate's life. Although the spirit of Inspector Moylan's report on Adult Education in Canada's Penal Systems remains the same, there has been a shift in

today's programming for adult offenders. The change can be seen through the mandated policy objectives and goals instituted by Corrections Canada.

Current Education and Employment Programs in Canada's Penal Institutions

The prime objective of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is to educate inmates so that they may compete lawfully in the community (Corrections Canada, 2002). Seen through the lens of a Behaviorist, education for Canada's inmates attempts to change behaviour through skills development and vocational training. To meet these objectives, the CSC has implemented the following programs, which are available to all minimum, medium, and maximum-security facilities throughout Canada. The programs include: Adult Basic Education (Grades 1-10); Secondary Education; Vocational Education, and Post-Secondary Education.

Adult Basic Education

Upon arrival to penal institutions, roughly 65% of offenders test at an academic completion level lower than grade 8 and 82% lower than grade 10 (Corrections Canada, 2002). Given these low educational levels of incoming inmates, the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program is the educational priority of Corrections Canada. This level of education maintains the highest level of enrollment of all the educational programs offered to inmates. Although originally offered up to grade 8, the ABE program has been enhanced to the grade 10 level so that academic components such as mathematics, language, and science can be completed. Successful completion of the ABE program provides offenders with the opportunity to further their education in other areas where basic literacy skills are required (Correctional Services Canada, 2002).

Secondary Education

The Secondary Education Program leads to graduation at the grade 12 level. Approximately 25% of inmates who attend an education program are enrolled in the Secondary Education Program (Correctional Services Canada, 2002). Inmates in Canada's Institutions are made aware that a secondary school diploma has almost become a prerequisite for securing lasting employment in Canada's work community (Correctional Services Canada, 2002). Graduation from Secondary School also opens the door for entry-level positions into a variety of training and vocational opportunities (Correctional Services Canada, 2002).

Vocational Training and Education

Vocational Education Programs (VEP) is another popular educational choice of inmates, with approximately 25% of all inmate students attending this program (Correctional Services Canada, 2002). Vocational education is provided for a wide range of job-related skills that are both relevant and essential to employment opportunities that exist within the institutions as well as in the community. Some of the many subjects currently taught and offered to inmates by Corrections Canada vocational programs include: welding and metal trades; hairdressing; small engine repair; auto mechanics and auto body repair; electronics; carpentry and cabinet making; upholstery; plumbing; cooking; and computer programming. The VEP incorporates a generic skills component that is applicable and transferable to a wide number of vocational fields, which will benefit inmates upon release from an institution. The VEP component of adult education for those in the institution stresses both personal and interpersonal skills that are necessary for reintegration into the work force (Correctional Services Canada, 2002).

Post-Secondary Education

Post-Secondary Education (PSE) offers offenders the opportunity to acquire a trade or profession, as well as to update trade qualifications prior to their release from prison (Correctional Services Canada, 2002). This program is not as popular with inmates, as demonstrated by the low (less than 10%) participation rate. There are a number of reasons that PSE in Adult Education Programming in correctional systems may be unpopular and could include: the need for course prerequisites (i.e., Adult Basic and Secondary Education) or that fact that prison inmates are generally required to pay for their own PSE (Correctional Services Canada, 2002).

Skills for Employment

In addition to all other levels of adult education programs, a program in skills for employment is required. Inmates must participate in programs that call for healthy group interaction that will be necessary prerequisites for reintegration into private sector work settings (Correctional Services Canada, 2002). The goals of the Skills for Employment program is to stress interactive problem solving, critical thinking, punctuality, positive interactions with coworkers, being respectful of others people's opinions and feelings and healthy dealings with authority figures (Correctional Services Canada, 2002 (b)).

Adult education is offered to inmates regardless of their existing knowledge base or prior educational success. Along with the goals of providing inmates with new skills and advanced knowledge, the foundational concepts that link the various levels of Adult Education and Vocational Training include a reshaping of one's core ideals, belief attitudes, and interactions. Given that the goals of Corrections Canada is to increase knowledge while providing the opportunity for an inmate to re-evaluate their skills, it is evident that the focus of CSC within the institutions utilizes the beliefs of the Behaviorist, Humanist, and Transformative Theories of adult learning. Ultimately, educational initiatives in penal settings stress the need for a fundamental change in one's behaviour and self-perception, the very basic beliefs of the Behaviorist, Humanist, and Transformative theories of Adult Learning. The Behaviorist, Humanist, and Transformative theories of Adult Education advocate for a reorganizing of the views and opinions of the adult learner; therefore, if the inmate is to be successful in their educational initiatives, the knowledge gained through the educational programs should carry over once the inmate is released into the community.

The Impact of Adult Education on Canada's Prison Population

The effects of Adult Education in Canada's Penal Institutions have been well documented both within and upon release from the correctional setting. Since the goal of education for inmates is to alter their views and provide inmates with the skills to become productive members of society, it is important that the benefits be reported once the inmate is released from the institution.

Research conducted by the Corrections Canada has shown that such programming has a deep effect on feelings of self-worth and self-perception within the context of society as a whole (Correctional Services Canada, 2006). The cognitive and affective changes an inmate experiences when exposed to prison education is profound and widely documented. A recent study found that as the educational level of inmates increased, so did their self-reported self-esteem, self-worth, and life satisfaction levels (Correctional Services Canada, 2006). Similarly, educational levels were found to have a significant positive relationship with both self-esteem and social competence (Correctional Services Canada, 2006b). Therefore, within the penal setting, inmates have reported improvements in self-esteem and satisfaction as a result of their newly acquired educational experiences. Perhaps more significantly, effective educational programs for Canada's inmates have proven to be successful in reshaping the way offenders view the world around them once they are released from prison. According to agencies working with released prisoners, educational programs have successfully addressed and assisted to alter offenders' detrimental thinking patterns which, in turn, is believed to improve feelings of self-worth and foster and nurture pro-social behaviour (John Howard Society,

2002). Furthermore, Cognitive Skills Training Programs that are part of inmate education have demonstrated significant improvements in a number of cognitive skills areas, such as empathy, greater pro-social thought patterns, decreased impulsivity, changes to unconstructive thought patterns, and improvements in coping and interaction skills (John Howard Society, 2002). Moreover, education programming for inmates in Canada's Penal Institutions have also been linked to post release enrollment in education, better post release employment history, and to fewer disciplinary problems both within and outside our penitentiaries (John Howard Society, 2002). It is also believed that all of the beneficial changes that occur as a result of educational programs within the penal institution assist to significantly reduce recidivism rates (John Howard Society, 2002), which is a major goal of incarceration.

Ultimately, adult education programs have many significant benefits. At the individual level, inmates experience enhanced self-esteem and self-worth while acquiring a skill and enhanced knowledge. Societal benefits include the reduction of crime and violence in our communities as assessed by lower readmission or recidivism rates (John Howard Society, 2002), as well as the addition of productive citizens. It is apparent that education programs made available in Canada's correctional facilities are beneficial for all involved and it is likely that these benefits are a direct result of the theories on which penal educational programs are guided: Behaviorist, Humanist, and Transformative Theories of Adult Learning

Conclusions

The Behaviourist, Humanist and Transformative theories of Adult Education all stress the need for a fundamental shift in behaviour and self-perception to occur if adult education programs are to be deemed successful. Canada's Penal Institutions provide courses of study that meet *these* needs. Educational programs for prison inmates are designed to alter the way these individuals act and react to the world around them while providing them with the skills to succeed in a productive manner. Cognitive/behavioral training, educational programs that meet an offender's individual needs, and vocational training are all provided to help inmates view themselves in a new and different light. Ultimately, the goal of adult education in Canada's prisons is to nurture an inmate's feeling of self-worth, their self-esteem, and to provide them with the required training and preparation necessary for reintegration into society. Doing so benefits all. Only through appropriate adult educational programming can an inmate begin to break away from the problematic, patterned behaviour of his/her past while adopting a new, healthy sense of self and the role they are capable of playing in society.

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