

Inmates' Attitudes toward Pre-Release Educational and Vocational Programs

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Abstract

Some or all of the pre-release educational and vocational programs that are offered in state and federal prisons are free. Though these inmates are required to participate in these programs before they re-enter society, their attitudes regarding their participation in these programs are mixed. This study reveals literature of what attitudes some inmates may have towards pre-release educational and vocational programs and the manifestations of these attitudes. Review of the literature was conducted through Google Scholar and ERIC and revealed a number of scholarly articles. Inmates share both positive and negative attitudes with regards to pre-release educational and vocational programs in federal and state prison institutions. To a degree prison staff can provide more opportunities to improve inmates' attitudes towards pre-release educational and vocational programs within the confines of the prison environment.

Inmates' Attitudes toward Pre-Release Educational and Vocational Programs

One of the most crucial goals of any correctional facility is to help prisoners modify their criminal behavior and avoid re-offending after they had been released back into society. For this modification to occur, it is best for prisons to have special programs for inmates to participate and succeed. Consequently, our correctional facilities offer some of rehabilitation programs (Hollin, 1999). Some or all of the pre-release educational and vocational programs that State and Federal prisons allow are free to inmates. Though these inmates are required to participate in these programs before they re-enter society, research indicates that their attitudes regarding their participation in these programs are mixed. Some of these inmates will either show up for class on time or are tardy. Some will show up but will refuse to participate in classroom activities and will receive no credit, or not come to class at all.

For inmates to engage in these classes, they need to be motivated, which can be a challenge for their instructors and the instructor's inmates. It is important that the experts providing these programs hold positive attitudes towards these prisoners (Kjelsberg, Skoglund, & Rustad, 2007). In this context, positive attitudes imply a view of prisoners as healthy persons capable of positive change, whereas negative attitudes signify a view of prisoners as incurably deviant individuals (Melvin, 1985). Prison officers' attitudes toward prison inmates are just as important. Prison officers' positive attitudes have been shown to be critical in facilitating change prior to successful release from prison (Glaser, 1969) as they interact daily with the inmates and in this unique situation (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). These officers have the power to enhance or weaken the primary goals of the correctional institution where they work (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). This study reveals what literature may have on what educational programs prisons may offer,

and what attitudes some inmates may have towards pre-release educational and vocational programs and the manifestations of these attitudes.

Educational Opportunities

Most if not all prisons provide educational opportunities, academic and vocational, for inmates to participate and enrich their lives in preparation for when they are released back into society. Statistics indicate that about 90% of State prisons (Harlow, 2003), all Federal prisons, and almost 90% of private prisons provide educational programs for their inmates (BJS, Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities, 2000 and 1995; BJS, Census of Jails, 1999). Half of State prison inmates reported that they have participated in an educational program since their most recent admission to prison (Harlow, 2003). About a quarter of State inmates had participated in basic education or high school level courses, and almost a third took vocational training (Harlow, 2003). These facilities hold persons sentenced to at least a year in prison, giving inmates a long period to concentrate on achieving educational goals (Harlow, 2003). By contrast, local jails house persons from arraignment through conviction and for short sentences (Harlow, 2003).

Many inmates have taken advantage of educational opportunities while imprisoned. From 1995 to 2000, the percentage of State and private prisons offering educational programs to their inmates increased (Harlow, 2003). In 1995, 88% of State prisons and 72% of private prisons provided educational programs. In 2000 while 91% of State prisons and 88% of private prisons offered educational opportunities (Harlow, 2003). About 52% of State prison inmates, 57% of Federal inmates, 14% of jail inmates, and 23% of probationers said they had taken education classes since admission to a correctional facility (BJS, Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997 and 1991; BJS, Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996;

BJS, Survey of Adults on Probation, 1995). Harlow continued that while most States do offer educational services for their inmates, only half of adult inmates reported that they had participated in these services. Furthermore, only 11% of inmates reported that they have participated in college-level or post-secondary vocational classes.

General Educational Development

Probably the most common educational program offered to inmates is the general educational development program (GED). For some time, prisons concentrated their educational resources on those inmates with the greatest need, those who did not have a high school diploma (BJS, Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997). Approximately 54% of State inmates who had not completed the 12th grade and 61% who had a GED had participated in educational programs since being admitted to prison (BJS, Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997). In State prisons, between 1995 and 2000, the percentages of prisons offering classes increased for basic education (76% to 80%), high school courses (80% to 84%), and special education programs (33% to 40%), while the percentage with college classes went down (31% to 27%) (Harlow, 2003).

Secondary education programs for inmates were the most predominant type of courses in 2000 as it focused on preparing for the GED (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Over 8 in 10 State prisons, almost all Federal prisons, about 7 in 10 private prisons, and over half of jails offered high school level classes (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). The next most common were classes in basic arithmetic and reading, with 8 in 10 State prisons, almost all Federal prisons, 6 in 10 private prisons, and 1 in 4 local jails offering basic education programs (Harlow, 2003). For a quarter of State prison inmates, a fifth of Federal inmates, a seventh of jail inmates, and a tenth of probationers, as for about 4% of the general population,

passing the GED was the highest level of education they attained (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).

Harlow (2003) explained that more than a third of those who did not have a high school diploma or GED took high school classes, and a quarter participated in a vocational training opportunity. Vocational programs and high school or GED preparation classes were most popular. Fifty-six percent of State prisons, 94% of Federal prisons, 44% of private prisons, and 7% of local jails reported having participated in the vocational training. About a third of State and Federal prison inmates had participated in vocational training to learn particular job skills. About a quarter of prison inmates took high school level classes. Among jail inmates, 5% had vocational training and 9%, high school classes. About 28% of those with a GED were enrolled in a high school program and 44% were in vocational education.

Post-Secondary Education

At one time, correctional facilities included education and vocational programs, therapeutic communities and other residential programs, and prison industry work programs, which were considered imperative components of prison operations (Seiter, & Kadela, 2003). Many of these programs were necessary, and when they were voluntary, inmates still participated at high rates to impress the parole board and improve their chances of a favorable parole decision (Seiter, & Kadela, 2003).

According to Harlow (2003), it was less common for inmates to participate in post-secondary vocational classes than for those in the general population. About 11% of State prison inmates, 24% of Federal inmates, 14% of jail inmates, and 24% of probationers attended a post-secondary institution compared to 48% in the general population. State and Federal inmates had

higher participation rates in 1991 than in 1997. In 1991, 57% of State prison inmates and 67% of Federal inmates said they had engaged educational courses since entering prison.

Negative Attitudes toward Education

The literature indicates that inmates have a more negative approach to educational programs as compared to inmates who have more of a positive view towards education. Research suggests that this is due to some correctional employees who are burdened by the increased responsibilities towards the inmates as well as funding has been provided for prison operations but not for more rehabilitation programs (Shivy, Wu, Moon, Mann, Holland, & Eacho, 2007). A decrease in the number of programs and a lack of incentives for inmates to participate in result in fewer inmates leaving prisons having participated in programs to address work, education, and substance use deficiencies (Shivy et al., 2007). Self-assignment into programming could be difficult for inmates, with long waiting lists or opportunities that vary between institutions (Shivy et al., 2007).

Lynch and Sabol (2000a and 200b) compared prison release cohorts in 1991 and 1997 in terms of their participation in vocational training, educational programs, and pre-release programs. There was a decrease in participation in vocational training from around 32% in 1991 to around 27% in 1997. Participation in educational programs dropped even more, from around 42% in 1991 to around 34% in 1997. Those studying business economics held significantly more negative attitudes than those students who were studying nursing. Thus, students that had chosen a “caring” profession held the most positive attitudes (Kjelsberg et al., 2007).

Research indicates that these negative attitudes, that stemmed from correctional officers’ (COs) attitudes, were the biggest deterrent for inmates to not participate in educational programs while in prison. COs’ attitudes were reasonably negative and comparable to some college

students' attitudes (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). COs were described as cynical, authoritarian and pessimistic (Philiber, 1987), qualities that result in punitiveness as being the strongest characteristic for job stress (Lariviere, 2001). Some believed that the correctional facilities' main objective is to offer passive storage of criminals rather than to promote rehabilitation and prevention (Kifer, Hemmens, & Stohr, 2003). While COs generally hold more negative views than other correctional workers (for example, parole officers, chaplains, health staff and managers), studies suggest that many COs empathize with offenders and prefer rehabilitation to punishment (Lariviere, 2001). COs with lower job satisfaction and lower organizational commitment about other prison workers had high-stress levels and poor health outcomes (Lariviere, 2001). Case Management Officer (parole officers) reported the highest in stress levels (Lariviere, 2001).

Some inmates just drop out of the educational programs due to the negative attitudes they have towards these programs. Approximately 1 in 6 jail inmates dropped out of school because they were convicted of a crime, sent to a correctional facility, or otherwise were involved in illegal activities (Harlow, 2003). Over a third of jail inmates and a sixth of the general population said the main reason they quit school was due to academic problems, behavior problems, or loss of interest. About a fifth of jail inmates and two-fifths of the general population left school for financial reasons, had to go to work, joined the military, or needed money (BJS, Survey of Inmates in Local Jail, 1996; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992).

Positive Attitudes toward Education

With what educational opportunities that are available to inmates, these opportunities can decrease the possibility of recidivism. Statistics indicate that 13% of inmates have increased their

educational level to some extent while in prison (Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). Research also indicates a definite decline in recidivism among those who took no courses during their prison term and a 35.5% increase among those completing one or more courses for each of the 6 months of their term (Harer, 1994).

Glaze and Maruschak (2008) found that about 70% of mothers and 67% of fathers had participated in work assignments in State prisons since their admission. About 65% of mothers and more than half of fathers had attended self-help or improvement classes. While 65% mothers and fathers had attended self-help or improvement classes.

Shivy et al. (2007) found that inmates had mentioned the importance of receiving various forms of education, training, or programming before, during, and following their incarceration. Lariviere (2001) found that correctional institutions that have programs that offer higher educational levels, workers who were of older age, smaller prisons, and prisons with lower security levels, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, were great indicators of providing inmates with a more positive attitude towards participating in educational programs. Lariviere (2001) also found that one of the most important characteristics of a correctional institution in helping inmates to participate in these programs is its managers who were significantly more committed to the Correctional Service and generally more satisfied with their jobs (Lariviere, 2001).

Conclusion

Though correctional institutions provide many educational opportunities for inmates, many inmates indicate both positive and negative behaviors towards these programs. Inmates have shown more of a negative approach to these programs especially when correctional officers feel that they are or can be burdened by their responsibilities towards the inmates. A decrease in

the number of educational programs can also deter inmates from participating in these programs. By inmates participating in these educational programs, studies have shown a decrease in recidivism. They feel that it is more of their responsibility to acquire an education for themselves as they understand the consequences of not obtaining a certificate or any type of training.

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