

INMATE EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education programs are among the many programs offered by the Correctional Service of Canada to prepare offenders for community living. The Correctional Service of Canada's Mission, Core Values and Strategic Objectives, along with the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, the Commissioner's Directives of the Correctional Service of Canada and the Correctional Service of Canada's case management process, provide the authority for correctional education in Canada.

All federal institutions in Canada offer education programs, including Adult Basic Education (Grade 1 to 10), Secondary Education (Grade 11 and 12), Vocational, College and University level programs. The Correctional Service of Canada gives priority to Adult Basic Education. Education programs are a priority in the correctional plans of all offenders who have achieved less than a grade 10 education or require skills upgrading to participate in vocational or CORCAN (work experience) programs.

The inmate student presents significant challenges to educators. Poor self-concept, low achievement levels, learning disabilities and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome all present serious challenges to correctional education. However, research into correctional education has revealed the characteristics of effective correctional learning environments.

Inmate students have often had prior negative education experiences which have resulted in low self-confidence and negative attitudes about learning. Effective correctional education programs need to improve offenders' attitudes about learning, which have often contributed to illiteracy and under-education. Prison educators need to inspire confidence in the inmate student about his/her ability to learn. The inmate student's negative experiences in mainstream education also suggest the need for unconventional teaching methods.

Correctional education for individuals with learning disabilities and/or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) needs to be quite structured. In addition, students with FAS and learning disabilities also have difficulty retaining information. Repetition is critical. Computers and other electronic teaching aids can help these students to retain information.

Other characteristics of successful correctional education programs include program content which is relevant to the lives of inmate students and which is sensitive to cultural learning differences. Offenders have unique and varied education needs. In order to better meet the needs of inmate students, a range of teaching methods should be employed.

It is also critical that correctional education programs meet the adjustment and employment needs of offenders. Therefore, education programs should teach job skills and cognitive skills that will help offenders to become productive, law abiding citizens.

Correctional education has many potential benefits. Generally, studies show that prison education is associated with reduced recidivism. Other associated benefits include fewer institutional behaviour problems, further education following release and increased employment. However, for correctional

education programs to be successful, it is critical that post-release follow-up and support be provided for offenders.

While a 1996 audit concluded that the Correctional Service of Canada appears to offering education and vocational training to offenders in need of such programming, the Auditor General identified a gap in services to offenders making the transition from institution to community. Presently, over 95% of the Correctional Service of Canada's employability training resources are spent in institutions. Therefore, almost no funding is available for education programs after release. The Auditor General recommends that the Correctional Service of Canada develop a framework for the allocation of its employability training resources. An evaluation of the effectiveness of employability training programs should be conducted to identify the most cost effective programs and set guidelines for offender enrollment.

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INTRODUCTION

Education programs are among the many programs offered by the Correctional Service of Canada to prepare offenders for community living. The Mission of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) expressly states:

The Correctional Service of Canada, as part of the criminal justice system and respecting the rule of law, contributes to the protection of society by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control. (Correctional Service of Canada, 1997, p. 4)

The Mission of the Correctional Service of Canada is supported by a number of Core Values and Strategic Objectives. The provision of education programs is outlined by Core Value number 2 and Strategic Objective number 2.4. The Correctional Service of Canada's Mission, Core Values and Strategic Objectives, along with the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, the Commissioner's Directives of the Correctional Service of Canada and the Correctional Service of Canada's case management process, provide the authority for correctional education in Canada (Lilly, 1996).

Education programs are offered in Canadian correctional facilities to aid in the rehabilitation of offenders. Upon admission to correctional facilities, federal offenders have very low average education levels. Given the high correlation between early school leaving and unemployment, it is not surprising that many offenders report inconsistent employment histories. This is problematic given that unemployment is believed to be a risk factor associated with crime. Correctional education programs are an absolute necessity if the chances of offenders obtaining employment and becoming law-abiding citizens upon release from prison are to be increased.

THE CHALLENGE OF PRISON EDUCATION: MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF INMATE STUDENTS

The inmate student presents significant challenges to educators (Platt, et al., 1993). Federal offenders undergo standardized testing upon admission to correctional facilities to determine the grade level achieved by the offender or at which the offender functions (Correctional Service of Canada, 1994a). The average education level of federal offenders upon admission is grade 7.5 (Correctional Service of Canada, 1995a). Over 60% of offenders test below the high school level upon admission to correctional facilities (Lilly, 1996). Therefore, correctional education programs need to be tailored to the individual education levels of offenders, beginning instruction at the offender's current achievement level.

Learning disabilities are more prevalent among offenders than the general population (Fisher-Bloom, 1995). Between 5% and 10% of the general population have learning disabilities; the incidence of learning disabilities among offenders in federal institutions is between 7% and 25% (Lysakowski,

1980, Folsom, 1993; both cited in Fisher-Bloom, 1995). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) may also be more prevalent among the correctional population, although this prevalence has not yet been established by the research (Carmichael-Olson, 1993). The presence of learning disabilities and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome among the correctional population requires that educational programming be sensitive to the special educational needs of these groups.

Finally, offenders often have a history of failure in school. This history of failure typically leads offenders to assume that they will not succeed in their present schooling (Mason, 1993). Offenders' beliefs that they will fail in school will seriously limit their ability to learn by ruining their self-confidence and willingness to learn. Therefore, offenders' beliefs about their potential for success in school must be improved.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

To be effective, correctional education programs must meet the unique needs of inmate students. Poor self-concept, low achievement levels, learning disabilities and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome all present serious challenges to correctional education. However, research into correctional education has revealed the characteristics of effective correctional learning environments.

Effective correctional education programs need to improve offenders' attitudes about learning, which have often contributed to illiteracy and under-education (West, 1994). In order to improve the inmate student's learned notions about his/her ability to succeed in school, Mason (1993) recommends that the prison educator help the inmate student to understand why he/she previously failed in the school system and try to point out concrete examples of the student's present success to encourage the belief that he/she can be successful. In addition, the inmate student's achievement in correctional education programs should be based on competency (i.e., meeting goals and objectives) rather than comparison with other students (i.e., bell curves) as "adult students in the prison system have no doubt been told clearly many times that they are not as good as most and clearly have no desire to hear it again" (Mason, 1993, p. 77). Therefore, the inmate student's negative experiences in mainstream education suggest the need for unconventional teaching methods (John Howard Society of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (JHSLM), 1995). One study has indicated that inmate students prefer community tutors over other instruction possibilities (John Howard Society of British Columbia, 1992, cited in JHSLM, 1995).

Correctional education for individuals with learning disabilities and/or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome needs to be quite structured (Carmichael-Olson, 1993; Fisher-Bloom, 1995). Students with learning disabilities are easily distracted and do not function well in unstructured group sessions; "therefore, group leaders should use a relatively structured format, directive questions and constant monitoring to remain on topic and involve these offenders" (Fisher-Bloom, 1995, p. 22). FAS and learning disabled students also have difficulty retaining information (Carmichael-Olson, 1993; Fisher-Bloom,

1995). Repetition, therefore, is critical. Computers and other electronic teaching aids such as tape recorders can help these students to retain information (Fisher-Bloom, 1995).

Ultimately, correctional education for individuals with FAS needs to teach functional skills. Instructors of FAS students should ask the following questions: “What do they need to function in the community? What job skills do they need? How can they learn communication and predictions skills?” (Carmichael-Olson, 1993, p. 8). FAS is often characterized by poor reasoning skills; therefore, education programs should strive to teach FAS students cause and effect prediction skills. Educational programs for FAS students should assist these individuals to become independent, functioning members of society.

A fair amount of research has been conducted into effective correctional literacy programs. Effective literacy programs have been found to contain program content which provides valuable information relating to the offender’s future life in the community such as nutrition, housing, parenting and employment (Ryan, 1991; cited in Lilly, 1996; Thomas, 1993). Reading materials should be relevant to the lives of inmate students (West, 1994). Students should be given choice of subjects, audiences and materials to bring meaning to instruction and to promote individual responsibility for learning (Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (S.I.I.T.), 1990). For example, an inmate student newspaper can be used as an inspirational tool by promoting student responsibility for learning to write (Hadden, 1993).

Other characteristics of successful correctional education programs include sensitivity to cultural differences and language instruction for offenders with poor English (Lilly, 1996; S.I.I.T., 1990). The inmate population is multicultural and there are distinct cultural learning differences; therefore, “correctional educators need to obtain skills related to multicultural instruction” (Platt et al., 1993, p. 68). Instruction and teaching materials which are sensitive to cultural learning differences have been found to be more effective in promoting achievement (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974; Witkins, 1963; Gooden, 1993; cited in Glasgow, 1994; S.I.I.T., 1990). Educational programs need to be delivered in a language understood by inmate students as a program can only be effective if students understand the content (Dillon, 1994). Lessons also need to be modified to accommodate different learning styles (S.I.I.T., 1990).

Offenders have unique and varied educational needs. In order to better meet the needs of inmate students, a range of teaching methods and techniques should be employed, including both individual and group instruction. Staff training is the first step in ensuring that the principles of successful correctional education programming are applied in every prison classroom.

Finally, it is critical that correctional education meet the adjustment and employment needs of offenders:

Offenders are not in prison because they cannot read. Acquiring a General Equivalency Diploma, although worthwhile, is only a small part of the solution. We

must recognize that offenders need to learn job skills and to develop thinking strategies that will help them avoid committing crimes. (Platt et al., 1993, p. 68).

Effective correctional programs are based on sound theories of criminal behaviour (Porporino, Fabiano & Robinson, 1991). For example, studies have shown that offenders tend to be impulsive and lacking in self-control (Porporino et al., 1991). Therefore, it is critical that rehabilitation programs address offenders' thinking patterns. The Correctional Service of Canada's Cognitive Skills Training program is based on the Cognitive Social Competence model of criminal behaviour. The program assists offenders to develop skills, values and attitudes which research has shown are needed to foster pro-social behaviour (Ross & Fabiano, 1985; Zamble & Porporino, 1988; as cited in Porporino et al., 1991). Preliminary evaluation findings have shown that offenders who have participated in the Cognitive Skills Training program have shown significant improvement in a number of cognitive skills areas such as an appreciation of other people's perspectives, more pro-social thinking patterns and less impulsive behaviour (Porporino et al., 1991). Further, offenders who received the Cognitive Skills Training program were found to have lower rates of readmission to correctional facilities for subsequent convictions than the comparison group (Porporino et al., 1991).

EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN FEDERAL PENITENTIARIES

The objectives of the educational programs offered by the Correctional Service of Canada are as follows:

1. To provide offenders with provincially accredited or certified programs which meet their identified education needs to assist them to reintegrate into the community as law-abiding citizens.
2. To provide appropriate library services similar to those in the community, while meeting the needs of the correctional environment.
3. To facilitate continuity in educational programming when offenders are transferred between institutions or are released to the community. (Correctional Service of Canada, 1994a)

All federal institutions offer education programs (Correctional Service of Canada, 1995a). The education programs available to federal offenders are Adult Basic Education (Grade 1 to 10), Secondary Education (Grade 11 and 12), Vocational, College and University level programs. The Correctional Service of Canada gives priority to Adult Basic Education (Correctional Service of Canada, 1994a). Education programs are a priority in the correctional plans of all offenders who have achieved less than a grade 10 education or require skills upgrading to participate in vocational or CORCAN (work experience) programs. In 1995/96, about 9% of the Correctional Service of Canada's million dollar budget was spent on correctional programs including education, employment and counselling (Correctional Service of Canada, 1996).

Education or vocational training costs about \$7,500 per year per inmate enrolled in such programming (The Auditor General..., 1996). Offenders can be required to pay some or all of the cost of their post-secondary education (Correctional Service of Canada, 1994a). The institution may pay a portion or the full cost of post-secondary education for an offender if the following criteria are met: (1) the offender meets the Ministry of Education's criteria for enrollment in post-secondary education, (2) the offender has successfully completed previous education programs, (3) the course is a priority in the offender's correctional plan, (4) the provincial education organization which offers the course is both recognized and accredited and (5) the cost is within the institution's budget limits.

INMATE ENROLLMENT IN AND SATISFACTION WITH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In 1993/94, 41% of federal offenders participated in education programs, including full-time, part-time and correspondence (Correctional Service of Canada, 1995a). There were 4,212 enrollments in grade 8 in 1993/94; 750 inmates successfully completed grade 8 in that period (Correctional Service of Canada, 1995a). In 1993/94 there were 2,739 enrollments in grade 10 and 561 completions.

According to the 1995 National Inmate Survey, 46% of inmates surveyed had been involved in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and 37% had been involved in other education programs at their present institution (Correctional Service of Canada, 1995b). In terms of the helpfulness of ABE, those inmates surveyed gave the following ratings: 10% (poor), 21% (fair), 39% (good) and 31% (excellent). Inmate respondents rated the helpfulness of other education programs as follows: 10% (poor), 20% (fair), 39% (good) and 31% (excellent).

The Auditor General's 1996 audit of federal government agencies concluded that the Correctional Service of Canada appears to be offering education and vocational training to offenders in need of such programming (The Auditor General..., 1996). However, the Auditor General identified a gap in services to offenders making the transition from institution to community; over 95% of the Correctional Service of Canada's employability training resources (i.e., education, vocational and employment programming) are spent in institutions. Therefore, almost no funding is available for education programs after release. The Auditor General recommends that the Correctional Service of Canada develop a framework for the allocation of its employability training resources. An evaluation of the effectiveness of employability training programs should be conducted to identify the most cost effective programs and set guidelines for offender enrollment.

THE IMPACT OF CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

Correctional education has many potential benefits. For example, “adult education in prison could lead to a reduction in criminal behavior, to postrelease enrollment in education, to better postrelease employment history, and to fewer disciplinary problems” (Gerber & Fritsch, 1995, p. 120). Generally, studies show that prison education is associated with reduced recidivism (Lilly, 1996; Gerber & Fritsch, 1995; Taylor, 1989; West, 1994). For example, a study by Gendreau (1993, cited in Lilly, 1996) found that effective correctional education programs reduce recidivism among participants by 25% to 80% (50% average).

Most offenders have low education levels upon admission to correctional facilities and there is a high correlation between early school leaving and unemployment (Mayor’s Task Force on Safer Cities, 1992). Education programs have the potential to increase the employability of offenders and improve their chances of securing employment in the community. While the link between employment and law-abiding behaviour has not been conclusively established, unemployment is believed to be a risk factor associated with involvement in crime. A Correctional Service of Canada study found that at the time of arrest, 69% of federal offenders were unemployed (Motiuk, 1996). A study on the relationship between unemployment and repeat offending found that one year after release from federal penitentiaries, unemployed men were more likely to re-offend than employed men, 42% versus 29% respectively (Waller & Weiler, 1984, p. 21). Correctional education, therefore, needs to address not only the literacy, thinking skills and basic education needs of offenders, but also their employment skills needs.

The nature of the workforce is changing to demand higher skilled workers (Platt, Bohac, & Barnes, 1993; S.I.I.T., 1990). It is estimated that 71% of new jobs between the years 1985 and 2000 will require post-high school training (Packer, cited in Platt et al., 1993). In Canada, it is projected that about half of all new jobs until the year 2000 will require over five years of post high school education and training combined (Employment and Immigration Canada, cited in S.I.I.T., 1990). Given the low average education level of federal inmates upon admission and that an estimated 40% of inmates do not have a steady employment history (Platt et al., 1993), correctional education programs are an absolute necessity if the chances of offenders obtaining employment upon release from prison are to be increased.

However, for correctional education programs to be successful, it is critical that post-release follow-up and support be provided for offenders (Platt et al., 1993; Gerber & Fritsch, 1995). According to the Auditor General (1996, p. 11), this is an area for significant improvement by the Correctional Service of Canada:

The Service does not have an adequate continuum to assist offenders in their transition from the institution to the community. For instance, we found that there is only limited assistance to help offenders locate and keep a job, once released into the community. As well, employment counselling or job placement services by the Service or by other agencies is sporadic. Under fiscal restraint, Human Resources

Development Canada is having difficulty maintaining the traditional level and form of assistance for ex-offenders. In addition, the federal government's decision to withdraw from purchasing labour market training may leave a significant void in the range of services to offenders.

DISCUSSION

Prison education is a controversial subject. Some regard education as a privilege that inmates do not deserve. It is not surprising that in this era of fiscal restraint, legislators have difficulty giving priority to correctional education (Platt et al., 1993). However, correctional education is cost-effective; research on the impact of correctional education on recidivism rates have shown promising results. On the benefits of prison education, an Eastern New York Correctional Facility inmate states the following:

On a more personal note, college programming has kept me busy and productive, has given me career choices and has allowed me to plan for the future. Most of all, it changed my life by giving me hope. (Parker, 1996, p. 21)

For correctional education to be given priority, it is necessary to convince legislators that correctional education reduces recidivism (Platt et al., 1993). Platt et al. (1993, p. 67) caution that "this cannot be done with promises; it only can be done with cost-effective programs and data that attest to savings from reduced recidivism." After all, the ultimate goal of corrections is to assist offenders to become law-abiding, taxpaying citizens.

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