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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Education Enhances Sing Sing Residents

Professor Kimora, Ph.D.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Since 1992, I have devoted much of my life to educating prisoners at various prisons and jails in the United States and Canada. This work is challenging and extremely interesting. There is no such thing as a dull moment when I teach inmates. For example, the students in such classes openly challenge the material, and they do it with a sense of intelligence that is not often found in the regular classroom. In addition, many of the prisoners suffer from mental illnesses, so that keeps me on my toes too.

I teach at Sing Sing because it is necessary. I teach at Sing Sing because the majority of the inmates will someday be released to society. If they are not educated on various subjects, chances are they will offend again, or worse, they may hurt you or someone you love. I want to do everything with- in my power as an educator, a professor, and a compassion- ate human being to equip prisoners with skills to thrive in society.

Reentry is a hot topic in the field of corrections today. Here is a definition of re-entry:

We define "reentry" as the process of leaving prison and returning to society. All prisoners experience reentry irrespective of their method of release or supervision, if any. So both prisoners who are released on parole and those who are released when their prison term expires experience reentry.

If the reentry process is successful, there are benefits in terms of both public safety and the long-term reintegration of the ex-prisoner. Public safety gains are typically measured in terms of reduced recidivism. Reintegration outcomes would include increased participation in social institutions such as the labor force, families, communities, schools, and religious institutions. There are financial and social benefits associated with both kinds of improvements (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001, pg. 1).

Approximately 600,000 individuals – about 1,600 a day – will be released from state and federal prisons this year to return to their communities (A.J. Beck, 2000). It is clear to me from my work at Sing Sing that the vast majority of these people being released to

society are not going to thrive, let alone stay out of trouble.

...education has to liberate the prisoner so that he or she will literally be free to think and to act in a non-oppressive manner that empowers him or her.

Nearly two-thirds of released prisoners are expected to be rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years of their release.

(continued on page 2)

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Such high recidivism rates translate into thousands of new victimizations each year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

If I am going to be successful at all with these prisoners, I have to teach them life skills that will enable them to function in a rational, objective manner. I reiterate the importance of the following concepts to the students at Sing Sing:

1. Understand the importance of respecting oneself;
2. Learn the meaning and importance of building community within and outside the prison walls;
3. Understand the difference between right and wrong;
4. Learn to actualize the difference between right and wrong;
5. Practice yoga to enhance the strength of the mind and the body;
6. Meditate and pray on a daily basis to enhance the spiritual side of the person;
7. Understand that violence begets violence;
8. Realize that violence is not the answer to problems;
9. Respect prison officials and peers;
10. Mentor other prisoners so that all prisoners can learn to communicate better and provide leadership inside and outside the walls.

The education has to liberate the prisoner so that he or she will literally be free to think and to act in a non-oppressive manner that empowers him or her. If a person doesn't feel confined by a system, I truly believe that, in most cases, the inmate or ex-offender will start on the journey to thinking for himself or herself in a much healthier way. Care must be taken to ensure that the offender has learned the lessons, however, before he or she is released to society. I am sure we would all agree with that idea, even if some of you are skeptical about prisoners learning anything before they are released.

Hope is definitely something that offenders and ex-offenders need as they cope with the prison term and later, the return to society.

The world-renowned educator, Paulo Freire, once stated it well when he proclaimed:

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors-teacher on the one hand and students on the other. Accordingly, the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved. Dialogical relations – indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognizable object – are otherwise impossible.

Indeed, problem-solving education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher (Freire, 1970, pg. 67).

Despite the antiquated sexist language within the long quote, it is clear that Paulo Freire rejoiced in the notion that we all have the power to learn how to respect ourselves and to be given hope. (Do note that "banking education" in the quote above by Freire implies that the students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. The students also do not practice any form of cognition, and so the student and the teacher gain no true form of knowledge.)

Hope is definitely something that offenders and ex-offenders need as they cope with the prison term and later, the return to society. I teach inmates because I see the good in them, even if they don't see it in themselves. I also believe that all prisoners have the right to be educated.

You will be surprised to learn that even an inmate at Sing Sing did not agree with me that offenders should be educated. I was lecturing a group of approximately 50 offenders in December

2006 at Sing Sing. As I introduced myself to the gentlemen, one of the men raised his hand defiantly and then spoke. He thought my teachings would teach rapists to "be better rapists." I allowed the prisoner to speak, as it was clear he wanted to talk and that he was angry. After he finished his tirade, I simply stated that I too did not want to teach anyone to become "a better rapist," but that I did firmly believe that any inmate at Sing Sing, as long as he was willing and able to intellectually comprehend my teachings, should be given the opportunity to learn from me and others.

Later that day at Sing Sing, I held out my hand to the vituperator, and he shook it reluctantly.

I hope to see that angry inmate again. I want to educate him.

Beck, A. J., "State and Federal Prisoners Returning to the Community:

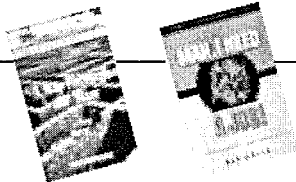
Findings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics." Paper presented at the First Reentry Courts Initiative Cluster Meeting, Washington, D.C., April 13, 2000.

Bureau of Justice Statistics, U. S. Department of Justice, "Direct expenditure on criminal justice, by level of government, 1982-97." (Accessed March 20, 2001).

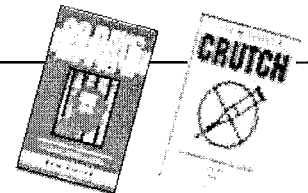
Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Travis, J., A.L. Solomon, and M. Waul. *From Prison to Home: the Dimensions and Consequences of Prison Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, June, 2001.

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