

The

PRISON

Journal

VOLUME LIII

NUMBER 2

PRISON
EDUCATION

AUTUMN-WINTER

ONE DOLLAR

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The Humanities In Prison

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From September 1968 through May 1969 an experimental educational program based on the humanities was presented to selected inmates of the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. The program was designed to expose its students to materials and issues of inherent interest which would help them to define a sense of personal identity and to develop a set of values consistent with those prevalent in society. This ambitious goal seemed to be partially achieved while the inmates were in prison, but there was no evidence of any effects following their release. The data gathered in prison revealed that the student in the humanities program became somewhat more aware of themselves and the realities of their environment. This increased awareness, however, seemed to be associated with heightened feelings of alienation and attempts to avoid these realities.

These responses are quite understandable, given the conditions of their lives. The students were, first and foremost, in prison; that is, they were denied most of the supports that are essential to one's concept of who he is. Prison inmates are isolated from normal social contacts, stigmatized as unfit for association with "decent" people, and made completely dependent upon their keepers for virtually every necessity of life. Such an environment would be detrimental to the most self-confident of individuals, and inmates hardly fit this description. The pre-prison experiences of most of the inmates were characterized by poverty, family discord, and academic and vocational failure. It is hardly surprising that increased responsiveness to their situations led the humanities students to shield themselves from this greater awareness.

The follow-up data, gathered in three yearly interviews after the inmates left prison, suggest that the lives they had led before they entered prison were the lives they resumed upon their release. During the follow-up period of thirty-three months, almost one-third of the released inmates were returned to prison. Of those who remained in regular society, almost one-third were unemployed during each interview period. Many of those who were employed expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, and job changes were quite frequent.

The main problems which the respondents encountered following their release from prison focused on two areas. The first was their inability to find good jobs and, consequently, their lack of money, and the second concerned personal and interpersonal problems. The personal problems described were basically those of readjustment, of attempts to find a place in society and meaning in one's life. The interpersonal problems usually involved former (preprison) friends, especially former girlfriends. The respondents who reported problems of this type were usually trying to

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avoid the influence of their prior male associates and were seeking to regain interest of female associates.

Although employment was a central concern of many former convicts, there was no evidence that their prison training influenced any of their postprison work histories. None of the job indices—number and kinds of jobs obtained, number of months employed, hourly wages, or job satisfaction—differed significantly among the three groups studied. With regard to postprison employment, it did not matter whether the respondent had attended vocational classes, regular high school classes, or the humanities classes. Furthermore, there was no evidence that employment was related to recidivism. Those who committed new crimes following their release had much the same employment experiences as nonrecidivists.

During each follow-up interview, in addition to reporting his work history, each respondent completed an extensive questionnaire that contained several psychological scales. These scales were selected because they referred to values and attitudes that the humanities program tried to influence. There were, for example, scales that measured the individual's concept of best and worst ways of life, acceptance of illegal activities, sense of social responsibility, attitudes toward racial equality, and feelings of self-esteem. Neither these nor any of the other scales in the questionnaire indicated any significant difference between the former humanities students and the two comparison groups. Even the scale that measured postprison participation in activities similar to those included in the humanities program failed to yield any significant differences. There was no evidence that the humanities program caused its students to read books, write essays or poems, visit museums, or attend concerts or plays to any greater or lesser extent than the other respondents. In short, none of the follow-up data indicated any effects that could be attributed to the humanities program.

These, then, are the basic results of the humanities program. They present an overall picture of some immediate effects while the inmates were still in prison but no carry-over after they were released. If the program is judged purely on these results, it can be fairly concluded that it failed; there is no evidence that it contributed to the rehabilitation of those inmates who participated in it. Even though the program did not achieve its objectives, there can be some merit in examining possible reasons for the failure. Such an analysis can provide some understanding of the characteristics of a prison and the basic conflicts inherent in its nature—conflicts which our society has never fully confronted or resolved.

PUNISHMENT OR TREATMENT?

Although the humanities program was not designed to study the effects of the prison experience on inmates, the prison setting influenced the development of the program so much that some of the broader studies of corrections were reviewed. This review, together with the data gathered from the follow-up interviews, forms the framework for an examination of the role of prisons and their impact on people. The humanities program was definitely a product of the rehabilitation approach that is dominant in modern correctional theory. The failure to find any effects that could be

attributed to the program caused some reconsideration of the whole issue of treatment versus punishment and, indeed, the question of whether rehabilitation is possible within a correctional institution. The thoughts presented here are tentative; there are few firm answers to questions in corrections.

Crime and the system of criminal justice involve all segments of society. The average citizen is not often the direct victim of a crime, but his taxes pay for police protection, court trials, prisons, parole officers, and all of the other institutions and personnel involved in capturing, sentencing, and attempting to rehabilitate offenders. Besides these direct costs, there are other indirect ones, such as public assistance for the families of incarcerated offenders and the higher prices of goods and services that are caused by crimes or the precautions taken to prevent them.

In a larger sense, though, the problem of crime goes beyond these financial considerations and directly concerns the quality of life in a society. People need to believe that their person and their property are reasonably secure against threat. If the incidence of crime begins to threaten this sense of security, people will support repressive measures that are aimed at increasing security. The average citizen is likely to accept invasions of privacy, preventive arrest, or restrictions on freedom of movement if these measures hold the promise of increasing one's personal security.

The most likely target of increased repression, however, is not the average citizen but the convicted criminal. For most of the twentieth century, the treatment philosophy has dominated theory, if not actual practice, in corrections. This approach emphasizes the rehabilitation of the convicted criminal; that is, the length of the sentence, the type of institution, work assignments, educational programs, counseling, etc. should all be geared to prepare the offender to assume a normal life upon his release. The *Manual of Correctional Standards* (American Correctional Association, 1966) is probably the best single statement of this philosophy. Two recent best-selling books, Ramsey Clark's *Crime in America* and Karl Menninger's *The Crime of Punishment*, strongly advocate rehabilitation as the basic goal of corrections.

There are some signs, however, that suggest the emphasis on rehabilitation is due for a period of re-examination of its assumptions and its results. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller's call for mandatory life imprisonment for all drug pushers and former Attorney General Kleindienst's support of the death penalty are prominent examples of renewed interest in the deterrent effect of severe punishment. Even one of the foremost voices of liberal thought in America, *New Republic* magazine, has published a four-part series on the failure of prison rehabilitation (Martinson, 1972 a, b, c, d).

These are some of the current manifestations of the dilemma that has confronted correctional officials ever since they became responsible not only for holding their charges but also for treating them. When prisons have these dual responsibilities, their practices reflect a complex mix of

moral judgments, traditional practices, and scientific thought. To achieve the objectives of security and treatment, society has given one group of people, the prison staff, virtually complete control over another group, the inmates.

The original and still primary task of a prison is to confine those individuals who have been found guilty of violating the basic norms of society. No matter how much they may support treatment programs, security is usually the prime concern of correctional officials. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the relatively new concept of rehabilitation through treatment has been superimposed upon the existing security-custody operation, but the goals of the two types of organizations are frequently antagonistic. Typically, there is no relationship, no integration, no chain of command among the opposing systems.

The quick conclusion that society should do away with prisons since they do not work—that is, released prisoners commit new crimes—overlooks the basic needs of the society that prisons serve. There can be little doubt that prisons act as a physical embodiment of the moral and legal sanctions of the society. Sanctions on deviant behavior are needed in every society, and ostracism is a very common form of punishment. In our complex society, prisons constitute an institutionalized form of ostracism—the convicted offender is exiled from normal society for a period judged suitable for the severity of his crime.

Prisons also provide some psychological relief to the victim of the crime: the criminal pays for his crime through years of imprisonment. What type of society could exist if the victim were largely ignored and the criminal's punishment consisted of various services designed to "rehabilitate" him? Furthermore, if a society were to place full emphasis on rehabilitation, it is very likely that demands for more effective methods of rehabilitation would escalate. The medical and behavioral sciences now have within their repertory many very effective methods to induce behavior change. Only respect for the rights of the individual and a general ignorance of these techniques prevent them from being used on a much broader scale.

Even though the present prison system is by its very nature punishing, correctional officials view their efforts within the context of treatment. Evidence of "improvement" is essential to any hope of early release. If the punishment aspect—time served for crimes committed—were to be eliminated, the demand for methods that really deterred future crimes would be paramount, and those responsible for bringing about such changes would turn to the most effective techniques available. What such demands would do to historic concepts of respect for the rights of the individual cannot be foreseen, but it is likely that the affluent majority who do not go to prison would be willing to condone a great deal if it increased their sense of security.

The current state of knowledge in corrections argues against imprisonment for the younger or first offender. In the belief that prisons only tend to reinforce criminal tendencies, the current emphasis is on community-based treatment. These assumptions may well be valid, but they tend to

de-emphasize the deterrent effects of punishment and to over-emphasize the rehabilitative effects that community services can achieve. Very few of the inmates at Camp Hill were first offenders. Most had accumulated a long record of encounters with the law and had failed to respond to the treatments to which they were exposed in their home communities. Camp Hill was the last recourse for judges who had seen these young men many times before. The recidivism rates of approximately 20 percent following release from Camp Hill suggests that something involved in being sentenced there may have deterred some of the inmates from committing new crimes.

It should be noted, once again, that all the Camp Hill inmates who participated in this study received some type of education in prison. The follow-up comparisons were among different types of educational program and not between education and no education. It seems very likely that education would be one of the most beneficial treatment programs that could be offered in a prison. Nevertheless, the effects of educational programs on such criteria as recidivism and postrelease employment are unclear.

EFFECTS OF PRISON EDUCATION

Glaser's (1964) study of the federal prison system included one of the most thorough examinations of the effects of prison education. He found that inmates who had been enrolled in correctional education programs generally had *higher* rates of recidivism than those who had not been enrolled. Glaser has suggested some possible explanations of this phenomenon:

1. Prison educational programs may be composed of inmates who are already academically retarded and who may be poor risks in terms of postrelease success.
2. Some inmates may simply respond better to other types of rehabilitation.
3. Inmates who are insincere in their desire for self-improvement may enroll in educational programs merely to impress parole boards or other officials.
4. Prison education may raise an inmate's vocational aspirations without increasing his capacity to satisfy those aspirations, thus leading to disappointment and frustration.

Glaser also found that prison education was statistically related to low recidivism only when the education was extensive and occurred during prolonged confinement. Among inmates who were imprisoned for three or more years, the recidivism rates were 30 percent for those enrolled in a correctional education program versus 48 percent for those not enrolled. Both Plummer's (1969) study of a Texas prison and Pownall's (1969) follow-up of the employment problems of released offenders also found that longer periods of training were related to better adjustment following release. In general, however, Pownall's data suggest that vocational training programs have little effect on the employability of released offenders. Less than one-third who received vocational training reported using it in their subsequent jobs; this figure is virtually the same proportion found for the vocational students in the present study.

To further confuse the issue, not all studies of prison education yield negative results. The Draper Correctional Center at Elmore, Alabama, has been the setting for an extensive application of programmed instruction techniques to a prison population. Seventy percent of the inmates enrolled in the program had been incarcerated at least once before, but among trainees who were followed up, the rate of recidivism dropped to 30 percent ("The Road Back," 1969). It should be noted, however, that this self-instructional type of program is far from the norm and cannot easily be compared to most correctional education programs. Morrison (1968) suggests that the Draper project may be especially successful with inmates because of its minimum use of teachers, lack of competition, and lack of embarrassing disclosures of ignorance. Furthermore, programmed instruction provides immediate results and appeals to the inmate's need for immediate gratification.

The effects of a correctional school program on inmates' tendencies toward postrelease recidivism were also studied by Zink (1970). Comparisons between inmates who took part in educational programs and matched control groups three, four, and five years after release revealed that the education group did consistently better on the criteria of arrests, convictions, and sentences. However, less than half of these differences were statistically significant.

These fragmentary and conflicting results reflect some of the best evaluations of the effects of prison education on the postprison adjustment of released offenders. The results are variable because the programs which have been evaluated are so diverse. There is reason to believe, however, that these findings represent the upper range of the possible beneficial effects of prison education. Most of the studies were conducted in cooperation with federal prisons, which are acknowledged leaders in corrections, or exceptional programs in state prisons. The effects of the educational program offered in an average prison are usually not evaluated. In the few cases where average programs are evaluated, the procedures usually lack adequate controls and rarely extend to postprison experiences. On the basis of the data that are available, it appears that, at best, educational programs have limited effects once the inmates leave prison. A much more extensive review of published studies by Kerle (1972) yielded the same conclusion.

If this can be concluded about educational programs, what are the chances of finding benefits from other types of prison treatment? Typically, the educational program constitutes the major treatment that is offered, and it should be the one to which the inmates are most responsive. Most inmates have an inadequate education and lack vocational skills, and one would think that they would welcome an opportunity to overcome these deficiencies.

Even with these factors in its favor, however, prison education appears to have a limited effect. Part of the explanation for this conclusion may lie in the attitudes toward education that have been developed in the average inmate. His previous exposures to education have probably been frustrating and often embarrassing. He has acquired few academic skills, but he has learned one lesson well—he is stupid and should avoid educa-

tional activities. His years in public schools have taught him that he cannot perform school tasks and that he will be made to feel ignorant and inferior if he tries.

It is difficult to overcome an antipathy such as this in any setting, and it is especially difficult in a prison setting. Prison programs do not usually attract very capable teachers--the most frequent suggestion the former inmates made with regard to improving the educational program at Camp Hill was to replace the teacher--but the quality of the teachers is not the main reason that prison education is not more successful. The humanities teachers were carefully chosen for their ability to relate to the students. The evaluations indicate that they succeeded in doing so, but the humanities program had no observable postprison effects. The inability of the prison to produce positive changes in the inmates lies not in the characteristics of the staff but in the nature of the institution itself.

One obvious point must always be paramount in any consideration of prisons and their roles--prisons confine inmates. This basic fact about prisons produces a social setting in which conflict between inmates and staff is virtually inevitable. Since the inmates typically outnumber the staff, methods of social control based on coercion are adopted. Inmates are reduced to the status of nonperson (Sykes, 1958) and made dependent upon their keepers for the basic necessities of life. These conditions obviously produce many changes in inmates but hardly the type of positive personal growth assumed under the term "rehabilitation." As long as prison is a prison, that is, as long as it confines inmates, it seems very doubtful that honest rehabilitation is possible.

This is not to say that prisons should be abolished. They perform a necessary function in society, and it would be rash to propose that the punishment inherent in being imprisoned does not have some deterrent effect upon crime. What is being proposed is that the prison is not an appropriate setting for rehabilitation. The total environment is so antithetical to the treatment efforts that these attempts are largely overwhelmed. It would seem more rational to separate the functions of punishment and treatment into separate settings where they could be more effectively performed.

Nor is this a recommendation that prisons be made more punishing. They are by their very nature punishing enough. It is a recommendation that convicted criminals no longer be forced to undergo treatment and to demonstrate "improvement" to qualify for return to society. To allow correctional authorities to require evidence of improvement (according to their criteria) gives them enormous additional control over the lives of inmates. When this authority is combined with an indefinite sentence, the control of the officials is almost absolute. Treatment then becomes a matter of the inmates trying to guess the type of behavior that will be labeled "improvement." If this means taking educational courses, they will take courses; if it means attending group therapy sessions, they will attend group therapy. What most inmates want more than anything else is to get out of prison. They will, therefore, engage in any behavior they think will hasten their release.

There are, of course, some exceptions to this general rule. Some inmates become so adjusted to institutional life that the outside world

becomes insecure and threatening. A few inmates also refuse to play the prison game. Those who will not submit to the treatment model are the ones who cause the most trouble in prisons, and who spend much of their time in punishment cells. But they are the exceptions: most inmates want out.

If prisons are inherently punishing, there is no need to add this punishment through inadequate facilities, poor food, or incompetent staff. Prisons should also provide opportunities for personal improvement, including educational programs, but inmates should not be judged by how much they respond to these opportunities. It is in a prison where opportunities are available but treatment is not forced on inmates that the humanities could make a contribution.

THE ROLE OF THE HUMANITIES IN PRISON EDUCATION

The main question to which this study was addressed was whether the humanities could play a role in the rehabilitation of young criminal offenders. The answer to this question must be "no." The humanities cannot play a role because rehabilitation, as it is presently conceived of within a prison context, is a false goal. Inmates are not rehabilitated in prison. They may be deterred from additional crime, but they are not rehabilitated.

There would be some, perhaps even a majority, of those professionally involved in the humanities who would reject the whole concept of the humanities as a rehabilitative technique. This perspective sees the value of the humanities in their contents alone. What one sees in these contents depends on the individual and the acuteness of his perceptions. Instruction in the humanities consists of sharpening perceptual skills so that fuller and deeper meanings can be grasped. This view of the humanities would also dismiss much of the content of the humanities program that was presented at Camp Hill as not legitimate to the humanities.

There is, however, another viewpoint in the profession that holds the humanities must move beyond its traditionally elitist position and attempt to address the basic problems of individuals and society. The Summer 1969 issue of *Daedalus*, for example, is devoted to a consideration of the future of the humanities. A continuing theme in this issue is how the humanities can be made more meaningful to the present generation of students.

The program at Camp Hill tried to make the issues of the humanities, if not the traditional content, meaningful to young prison inmates. Even though there was no evidence that this exposure had any effect following release from prison, there was ample evidence that it was well received by its students. There were also suggestions of some effects while the inmates were still in prison. On the basis of these findings, the following conclusions are offered:

1. A course based on the humanities will find a receptive audience among a segment of a prison population. The disruption, caused by imprisonment, of an individual's life often produces a receptivity to an examination of the meaning of one's life. The humanities can provide a

method and a focus for such an examination to which a significant proportion of the prison population will respond. When the humanities program at Camp Hill relied on voluntary attendance, 60 percent of the randomly selected students continued to attend.

2. *A humanities course should include only inmates who volunteer to participate.* A basic theme of this discussion is that treatment should not be forced on inmates. Inmates who volunteer for a humanities course will, in all likelihood, be favorably disposed to the topics and materials to be covered. This should make the course more rewarding for both the teacher and the students.

3. *Racial tension is likely to be reflected in the issues discussed in a humanities course.* Racial tension is present in virtually every racially mixed institution. Given the security considerations in most prisons, it is unlikely that many of the most sensitive issues can be dealt with directly in racially mixed classes. Most inmates will not be able to manage the transition from the control exercised in the total institution to the relative freedom available in the classroom. However, topics related to basic issues can be discussed if prison officials will allow such discussion and will permit the introduction of somewhat sensitive material to the institution. If there is sufficient trust between teacher and students, discussion of related topics will provide opportunities for expression of deeper concerns.

The degree of trust between teacher and student raises the question as to whether a teacher in a prison can build a trusting relationship with students if he retains a staff identification. There is considerable evidence in the penology literature and in the actual experiences of the humanities staff of a continuous, latent conflict between inmates and prison staff. To reach the students in the humanities program, the teachers found themselves identifying more and more with the students. To teach a vocational or purely academic course, it may not be necessary to gain the students' trust, but if the material deals with topics of vital personal interest, some degree of rapport is necessary. Teachers who have more extensive contact with inmates might be able to retain their staff role and still convince students of their interest and concern. The humanities teachers, with only five hours per week, had to gain the students' confidence on a personal basis.

4. *A humanities course is unlikely to have any lasting effect on the attitudes or values of most of its students.* The follow-up results yielded no significant effect on the behavior or attitudes of the humanities students following their release from prison. That is, the behavior and attitudes of the humanities students did not differ significantly from the behavior and attitudes of the inmates who attended the regular academic program or those who received vocational training. It appears that the overall effect of the prison was the dominant factor and the minor variations in treatment had little impact.

To make the comparisons more valid, it would have been useful to include a group of inmates who received no education or training, but because of the emphasis on rehabilitation at Camp Hill, all inmates participate in some program, so such a group was not available. Even if such

a group had been available, however, the arguments presented in this chapter suggest that it would not have differed from the others. The prison experience itself appears to be the important variable in postrelease behavior, not the kind of education received in prison.

Even though neither a humanities course nor any other educational program is likely to rehabilitate inmates, it can make a contribution in the prison. What it can contribute is a break in the stifling routine of prison life, an opening of new horizons for some inmates. The humanities can give some students new perspectives and make them more responsive and aware of the realities of their own lives and of the concerns they share with all mankind. David Miller, the coordinating teacher in the humanities project, defined the humanities to the inmates in the following way: "The humanities are about what it means to be a human being." If the humanities can lead some inmates to grasp the implications of this definition, perhaps that is the most that can be asked of any field of human endeavor.

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