

Adult Education in Prison: Agent of Change for Individuals and Communities

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As of March 2019, there were 2.3 million incarcerated people in the U.S., being detained in 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). As one might suspect, inmates are significantly less educated than the general population: a) 41% of inmates do not hold a high school degree - compared with 18% of the general population, and b) 24% of inmates received some post-secondary or college education - compared to 48% of the general population (Bender, 2018). Furthermore, while 64% of inmates are academically eligible to enroll in a college prison program, in reality, only 9% of inmates complete a college program while in prison (Smith, 2019). As of 2016, only 35% of state prisons provided college-level classes, serving as little as 6% of the inmates in the United States of America (Bender, 2018). Ironically enough, state and local spending on prisons and jails increased three times the rate of spending for education in schools k-12 during a 30-year period, from 1979 to 2013, however, not because of education costs but strictly because of housing costs (Bender, 2018).

Why is adult education important in prison?

According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, almost half of all inmates released from federal prisons will be rearrested within eight years of their initial release, and half of those will likely be sent back to jail (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2016). Individuals 21 years old or younger are at the highest risk since 60.4% of those rearrested are individuals who did not complete high school (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2016). It seems intuitive as it is true: the

ones to benefit the most from education while in prison are these young inmates, who could most definitely use any chance they could get to better themselves and become more than just another statistic once released from prison. That is not to say that older inmates should be ignored.

Education is eye-opening and beneficial to each and every person who is interested in pursuing it.

Perhaps one of the most straightforward arguments for providing an education to adults in prison is the following: it is one of the most cost-effective ways to reducing crime, and it benefits the greater population long term (i.e., reduced crime, reduced costs with inmates, more funds available to be invested elsewhere, for example, in K-12 education) (Bender, 2018). Research indicates that participating in any type of educational program while in prison reduces recidivism with an astonishing 43% (Bender, 2018). There are other essential benefits to education in prison than just reduced recidivism rates: 1) education in prison benefits the families of the inmates as they are more likely to become more educated themselves and therefore have more chances to disrupt the cycle of poverty, 2) prisons with college programs tend to have safer environments for staff and inmates alike and experience fewer violent incidents (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017). Countless research studies conducted over the past few decades indicate more or less the same thing. For example, a meta-analysis by Gerber & Fritsch (1995) found that inmate participation in any type of academic and vocational correctional education programs leads to fewer disciplinary violations during incarceration, a reduced recidivism rate, and increased participation in education upon release. A study by Gordon & Weldon (2003) examined the effects of education (GED and vocational programs) on inmates and found that: 1) inmates who participated in vocational training had a recidivism rate of 8.75%, and 2) inmates who

participated in GED and vocational training programs had a recidivism rate of 6.71%, compared to inmates who did not participate in an educational program and whose recidivism rate was 26%. Education is, without a doubt, an agent of change in the lives of inmates, their families, and their communities.

What are the different types of adult education available in prison?

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, “all institutions offer literacy classes, English as a Second Language, parenting classes, wellness education, adult continuing education, library services, and instruction in leisure-time activities.” Inmates who do not have a high school diploma or a GED must participate for a minimum of 240 hours in the literacy program while non-English speaking inmates must first take English as a second language (Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.). The broadest spread form of adult education in prisons are vocational and occupational training programs. College classes are not extremely common in prisons, and when they are offered, inmates are responsible for paying for those (Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.).

What are the characteristics of incarcerated adult learners and how do those impact their learning experiences?

As daunting as it may sound, many of the traditional characteristics of adult learners, which are also often times barriers to learning, are sort of automatically solved in prison. Adult learners in prison do not have to worry about their dependents and to provide for them, do not have to worry about balancing work and studying, about making ends meet, about enrolling in online or night classes vs. the regular ones, and so on. As unfortunate as it may sound, the nature of their environment almost works in their favor as once they decide to study they can focus

entirely on their studies - that is if there is no conflict among inmates or other environmental characteristics that may impact them.

Research has indicated that andragogy might be the best approach to adult education in prison. For example, Stephen (2012) analyzed how adult educators applied the six principles of Knowles' andragogy theory (1) a need for knowledge and knowing why they want to learn, 2) experiences, upon which they draw and use to filter the new knowledge, 3) self-direction - adult learners take ownership of their adult experiences, 4) readiness - adult learners learn when they feel ready to, 5) orientation to learning - through task-oriented learning experiences and problem-solving approaches, and finally, the latter added 6) motivation - adult learners tend to have high levels of internal motivation) in a correctional educational GED program. This study included nine participants, consisting of five facilitators of adult education in prison and four adult incarcerated learners. According to Stephen (2012), the four adult incarcerated learners reported that they were highly motivated to pursue their educational goals while in prison, among their motivations being family and their educators, without whom they would not have pursued an education. Many of the adult learners had dropped out of high school in the past and returning to school was a big intimidating step for them so having a support system in place was crucial for taking the first steps towards furthering their education (Stephen, 2012). Students were observed to make use of their life experiences in the classroom: for example, students with backgrounds in bricklaying, carpentry, and roofing were more likely to understand concepts of geometry (Stephen, 2012). Notably, all students viewed their educational experience as relevant and practical and indicated that they are always coming into the classroom ready to learn something new (Stephen, 2012).

Among other factors that impact incarcerated adult learners' educational experiences in prison are course experience, motivational beliefs, and self-regulated learning strategies (Diseth, Eikeland, Manger & Hetland, 2008). Knowing this, perhaps the prison officials can design introductory classes that provide an overview into the more advanced courses, that guide students through feelings of motivation and help them develop high levels of intrinsic motivation while exposing them to different learning styles and strategies. Learning should not feel intimidating to anyone. Learning and education are fundamental to any human being and a basic human right, and we should all do everything in our power to support anyone and everyone is even remotely interested in learning, at any stage of their lives.

As we know, self-directed learning is a fundamental concept in adult education. Introduced by Malcom Knowles, self-directed learning refers to a process in which individuals take the initiative into identifying their own education needs, formulate learning goals for themselves, identify the resources to accomplish those goals, and implement successful strategies to evaluate successful outcomes. There is no doubt that adult learners behind bars are self-directed learners, but it may be that they need a little bit more individualized consideration in order to start off right and keep on track with their programs.

What are the most important characteristics of facilitators of adult learning in prison?

Perhaps one of the most critical characteristics of facilitators of adult education in prison (and elsewhere) is understanding how adult students learn best. This implies that a good working relationship needs to be established, a relationship based on mutual respect and centering on learner's goals. In fact, Stephen (2012) mentions that both facilitators of adult learning and the learners themselves indicated that respect was very important. Facilitators of adult education

need to believe in their students and in the fact that they can all learn regardless of their educational backgrounds (Stephen, 2012). The educators in this study unanimously indicated that cooperative learning was by far the most efficient form of andragogy and provided the students with means for engagement and collaboration - in cooperative learning, much of the learning happens in groups, one-on-one instruction, peer tutoring, and feedback (Stephen, 2012).

The language used in the correctional facilities might predispose people, adult educators included, to make use of not such upbringing words when referring to inmates. Words such as “offenders,” “inmates,” “incarcerated individuals” are cold and have a strong tendency of dehumanizing. It is therefore imperative to keep this in mind when working with students behind bars, as it is imperative to treat them as we would treat any other student: holistically, seeking to understand their background, their motivation, their learning styles, and everything they bring at the table because only then we can truly reach and help them make the most out of their educational experiences (Costelloe & Warner, 2008).

Does adult education behind bars yield results?

One of the easiest and perhaps most relevant ways of answering this question is by providing an example of profound success and excellence of an educational adult learning program behind bars. In 1984, State University of New York (SUNY) created a master’s degree program in sociology. The program was introduced in some of New York’s maximum-security prisons and provided remarkable results: students were involved in conference presentations, journal publications, development of prison programs, the founding of a College Library and Research Center and more (Lanier, Philliber & Philliber, 1994).

Thankfully, there are more and more programs available to help people behind bars further their education, and more and more success stories stand as testimony that everything is possible with hard work and determination. For example, the Prison Scholar Fund (<https://www.prison scholars.org>) is a non-profit that believes that higher education should be accessible to everyone, including those incarcerated. Their mission is to provide assistance to people behind bars, through education and empowerment with the purpose of reducing recidivism and decreasing homelessness. Their success stories page (<https://www.prison scholars.org/success-stories/>) lists several people touched by their programs. For example, the Prison Scholar Fund has helped numerous students graduate while incarcerated: Robert Wood and Bruce Bennett graduated from Adams State University, Steven Masservy graduated from Louisiana State University, Antoine Wicker graduated with a degree in sociology from Ohio University, and many more. As Tonya Wilson, a student in liberal arts and sciences funded by the Prison Scholar Fund, puts it: “Through education, I’ve begun to comprehend that my position in relation to others and to global influences isn’t static, and that I have the agency not only to change my position, but to also affect change in my current community initially, and the greater community upon my release. One of the most valuable things about educating incarcerated people is that they learn that they can be agents of positive change within their own lives and the lives of their families and their communities.” (Prison Scholar Fund, n.d.).

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