

## Education Programmes for Prison Inmates: Reward for Offences or Hope for a Better Life?

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**ABSTRACT** Education is a means to emancipate people from abuse, unemployment and poverty, which is why democratic countries provide basic education for all their citizens, even 'law breakers'. Education for prisoners is gaining currency in many countries. In South Africa, it is both a constitutional right and a foundation stone for rehabilitation. The objective of this paper was to investigate the value of prison education at two correctional service facilities in Pretoria. A qualitative research approach in the form of interviews was used in the investigation. Hundred inmates and ex-inmates participated in the study which found that education for prisoners is not a waste of tax payers' money but has socio-economic value. The major findings of the investigation include the following: the promotion of social cohesion; the re-integration of ex-inmates into the community as reformed members; the provision of knowledge and skills for employment and self-employment through entrepreneurial activities.

### INTRODUCTION

Recidivism is the rate at which offenders who have been imprisoned return to crime (and prison) after their release from prison. Recidivism is thus both a personal and individual psychological phenomenon in that the particular person has not been able to overcome the conditions that pushed them into crime in the first place, and a social phenomenon in that society is put at risk by releasing offenders that will simply offend again. Recidivism is also an economic phenomenon in that the state spends more and more money on the security system, the justice system and the correctional system with no apparent effect. It would seem that recidivism is an important area of study, and yet very little information on recidivism in South Africa is known. Recidivism rates in South Africa are generally accepted to be very high, with some quoting figures as high as 95%, but official figures are not known. General research outside the justice and correctional system is also unclear about actual figures, mainly due to disagreements about the operational definitions to be used when researching recidivism for statistical purposes (Agomo 2009; Muntingh 2001; Schoeman 2002). The factors contributing to recidivism are said to be the same as those that contribute to crime in the first place; the argument is therefore often that factors contributing to recidivism do not have to be studied separately.

In today's world education is seen as the best means of emancipating people from abuse, ignorance, unemployment, vulnerability and poverty. In pursuing this noble aim of emancipation, the constitutions of liberal democratic countries make provision for educating all citizens including even prison inmates or so-called 'law breakers'. Education and training for prison inmates is thus currently gaining currency in many democratic countries. In most countries, including South Africa, prison education is not only seen as a constitutional right but also a foundation stone for rehabilitation. In the South African context it is regarded as common-sense knowledge that much crime committed is motivated by poverty as a result of the lack of relevant skills and knowledge for employment. Prison education therefore seeks to equip prison inmates with knowledge and skills that may assist them to reintegrate into their respective communities and to find employment or create self-employment, and in this way to prevent future crimes. Although prison education may not be the panacea to crime, the general assumption is that once prison inmates are equipped with the basic knowledge and relevant skills most of them could engage in self-employment activities instead of criminal activities. As the saying goes 'the devil finds work for the idle'. The guiding notion behind prison education is that once prison inmates learn specific skills they are likely to engage in useful socio-economic activities. In the context of prisoners, education

is seen as more than the ordinary understanding of socialisation or teaching and learning. The meaning of education in the prison context is much wider than this common notion. We can describe this reality as the growth, change or development of a person. When we maintain that we have to discern different contexts and personal growth and change (Danner 2002).

Critics of prison education, however, see education for inmates as inconceivable and a waste of tax payers' money on criminals who are supposed to be punished for their deeds. Many law-abiding citizens question the wisdom of spending public funds on educating criminals instead of using such funds for the benefit of the victims of crime or their families. Most ordinary citizens feel that prison inmates must be harshly punished for crimes committed, such as murder, maiming, raping and hijacking. To enhance their lives through education and training at the expense of the tax payer, and even at the expense of the victims of crime, appears like an acknowledgement that crime is good. Very often the emotions of the critics of prison education do not allow them to look beyond 'punishment'. On the other hand, proponents of prison education believe that the education and training of prison inmates is beneficial in a number of ways. The purpose of this paper is to investigate empirically whether the benefits of prison education are, in fact, realised.

### Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to explore the value of education and training for prison inmates in terms of social cohesion, self-employment and reduction in recidivism.

### Conceptual Framework

The currency which prison education is gaining in the contemporary world despite its critics informed the choice of this investigation. The study is grounded in two important theories – Humanism, particularly African Humanism, and Critical Rationalism. Humanism is a theory developed by thinkers who stress the overriding importance of 'the self' as the integrative, consolidating tendency in development that is a source and growth of the individual (De Roberts 2006). In the words of Wiredu (2002), African conceptions of morals would seem gener-

ally to be of a humanistic orientation. All value is derived from human interests, and human fellowship is the most important human need. Humanism sees human need, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern. It is a pervasive and fundamental concept in African socio-ethical thought (Gyeke 1997). Exploring education from the normative point of view, Letseka (2000) affirms that it is a moral concept.

From the perspective of African humanism, prison education is to promote humanness in line with the true African virtues and values of *ubuntu* - love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, care and benevolence. The implication is that through a proper education people who profess a lack of knowledge and skills, and therefore find themselves on the wrong side of the law could be forgiven and taught relevant socio-economic skills, knowledge, moral norms and virtues of courtesy, compassion, respect for life and the property of fellow humans. Through education, most prison inmates could learn to be humane and show genuine remorse, respect for life, law and other social institutions instead of killing, raping or robbing others. From the humanistic point of view, education should inculcate in prison inmates not only economic skills for employment but also the true African values of *ubuntu*, *botho* or *tema* ('humanness' in Zulu, Sotho and Akan respectively). This debate can also be framed in terms of the concepts of retributive versus restorative justice. Agomo (2009) argues that restorative justice gives a better lens through which to view the global problem of recidivism (see also Latimer et al. 2005).

Goldstein (1986) points out that the principles, ideals and themes of living are valued with personal and cultural meanings; they contain the person's standards and images of self that provide purpose and direction for living; they define the 'oughts', 'shoulds' and obligations of interpersonal relationship; express what is essentially 'good' and 'right' and in countless other ways add to the value and spirit of living. Thus, if despite their offences against humanity, society grants prison inmates pardon and teaches them basic knowledge and skills, they might reciprocate by being kind, law abiding, generous, courteous and show compassion to their fellow humans in the same way as they have been treated. Prison education therefore

seeks to redirect and rehabilitate inmates to become better humans and to empower them to live better with fellow humans in society. The education transaction should develop in inmates co-operative skills, sustain communal interdependence and concern for the welfare of others. Prison education programmes should include a strong foundation of moral philosophy and ethical reasoning to enable students to grapple with social and personal ethical dilemmas (Goldstein 1986). In essence, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities that students engage in, which is why education transactions with law breakers should transform their behaviours and habits into acceptable and just ones. The knowledge, wisdom and guiding principles that are absorbed in a humanistic and reflective approach to education cannot be easily lost because they become an integral part of the total self (Goldstein 1986).

Although prison education may have been established from the humanist point of view, the need to show compassion for law breakers and provide them with education and training, prison inmates must also take a critical view of their lives and behaviours through introspection, self-evaluation and self-criticism. This critical self-evaluation links up with our discussion on the theory of Critical Rationalism. This theory was introduced by the Austro-British philosopher Karl Popper (1902-1994). The theory begins with the insight that humans have to learn how to act and react in their environment in order to survive (Zecha 2002). The theory aims at self-criticism and evaluation because it is based on the premise that education is both self-criticism and problem solving. The Critical Rationalists see education as a process of helping humans to learn and become responsible members of their society. This is in keeping with the goals of prison education which seeks to equip inmates with the relevant knowledge, skills and information for survival because without true information, knowledge and skills people cannot live or exist. Citing Popper, Zecha (2002) affirms that human beings can always err and never know for sure. By implication, education for inmates should equip them with relevant and significant information and skills so that they learn to be sure of themselves and become independent and useful members of their communities. Education must be based on the intention to assist individuals to engage in in-

trospection, self-evaluation and development. This concept of education is based on actions through which human beings attempt to produce lasting improvement in the structure of their own and others' psychic dispositions; to retain the components they consider positive or to reject the formation of dispositions they regard as negative. The implication is that through basic education and training programmes inmates can re-examine and evaluate themselves and make concerted efforts to learn or improve their abilities, skills and attitudes. In Zecha's (2002) view the intention of prison education is to prepare inmates to re-integrate into society in a more positive way. Without these intentions there is no education. The differences between extrinsic cognitive and vocational models of prison education and training and the more holistic approaches grounded in the humanities and arts in the British prison system is debated extensively by Clements (2004) who argues that this "necessitates an educational discourse and methodology that is embedded in concepts of emancipation and empowerment, where creativity and heuristic learning enable personal transformation".

### **Education for Prison Inmates: Is It Necessary?**

The literature on issues regarding prison inmates in general, and prison education in particular, is abundant (Ubah and Robinson 2003). Throughout the world millions of people are incarcerated for offences they committed against fellow humans and the state. In the United States alone about 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the nation's penitentiaries (Smiling and Killackey 2008). In the modern criminal justice system imprisonment is the most important form of sanction and deterrent to crime (Drago et al. 2012) which is why in every country convicted criminals are locked up for specific period of time and it is common to hear a statement like 'lock them up and through the keys away' from crime victims, their relatives and politicians. There are various views expressed on educational opportunities for prison inmates. Such views range from education as unimportant and of little real significance, to educational opportunities as an integral part of rehabilitation and the humane treatment of inmates. Generally the public have dif-

ferent views regarding educational opportunities for prison inmates. There are people who may argue that prison education is not only a waste of tax payers' money but an encouragement for others to commit crime in order to be given the opportunity to education. The argument goes on that prison inmates should not be educated at the expense of victims and the nation; instead they should be punished and denied comfort and opportunities for development as payment for their deeds.

In South Africa there are people who argue for prison education as a constitutional imperative. To this group of people, prison inmates have the right to education like all other citizens of the country. When educational opportunities are viewed from a human dimension, they can become the centre of the prison's function and make incarceration more than a physical storehouse for society's legal rejects (Brian 1993). A vast majority of inmates enter prison without basic education, literacy or any practical skills for employment. Bracken (2011) affirms that many offenders enter prison with an entirely negative experience of education and work; almost half were unemployed in the year before arriving in custody and 80% have literacy skills expected of an 11 year old. To holistically rehabilitate inmates, it becomes crucial to teach them basic knowledge and skills to ensure self-employment and the reduction in recidivism. Smiling and Killacky (2008) affirm that about 75% of men and women released from US prisons may commit an additional offence within three years. Although data on recidivism in South Africa may not be available, it is common knowledge that many inmates commit other crimes when they are granted parole or complete their sentences. This may be due to a lack of compulsory rehabilitation programmes through relevant education and training. To make prison education effective, programmes must be compulsory for all inmates. They should not be allowed to only eat, sleep and wait for their time to be released. Slater (1994) affirms that the US federal prison inmates without college courses have a recidivism rate of 40%, whereas those prison inmates who were released having participated in some college courses have a recidivism rate of only 12%. Chappell (2002) also finds a clear correlation between educational level and recidivism, i.e. the higher the educational attainment, the higher the reduction of

recidivism. In the US, there is thus a positive relationship between education and recidivism which provides ample support for the assertion that education should be compulsory for all inmates. See also Duguid and Pawson (1998) for the positive correlation between a liberal arts education and recidivism in Canada, and Gaes (2008: 1) who concludes that "correctional education does promote successful prisoner reentry". See also Lynes (1992) on the hope that prison education brings to inmates.

Even though compulsory prison education, and the accompanying resources, are not yet in evidence in South Africa, the intention and spirit is provided in the Draft White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2003). Article 17, reads as follows:

We believe that rehabilitation and the prevention of recidivism are best achieved through correction and development, as opposed to punishment and treatment. The Department's approach to rehabilitation is based on the conviction that every human being is capable of change and transformation if offered the opportunity and resources. Our approach to rehabilitation is also much more than just trying to prevent crime. It is rather a holistic approach in which we try to encourage and include the following: (i) social responsibility; (ii) social justice; (iii) active participation in democratic activities, (iv) empowerment through life and -other skills; and (v) contribution to make South Africa a better place to live in. The Department also views rehabilitation as a process in which we combine three (3) important things. These three things are: (i) Correction of offending behaviour, and (ii) human development, through which we would like to achieve (iii) the promotion of social responsibility and positive social values. (Our emphasis)

Correctional education programmes are cost-effective and provide a substantial return on investment for society (Chappell 2002). The indication is that as long as inmates are kept in prison only to serve time without equipping them with employment skills as preparation for re-integration into society, they are more likely to commit more crime when they are released. The contention of these researchers is that prison inmates should be rehabilitated through compulsory basic education and training programmes both on humanitarian grounds and as a mechanism to reduce recidivism. The

learning of practical skills such as sewing, typing, painting, accounting, gardening and repair of shoes and electrical appliances (for example, stoves, radios, kettles and televisions) can provide prison inmates with a trade for living. The researchers argue that prison inmates should be trained, at the very least, in self-employment activities; they should not be released back into society without basic education and skills since that almost certainly leads to recidivism. Knowledge, they say, is power and it is therefore important to equip prison inmates with relevant basic knowledge and skills to empower them to lead better and useful lives on their return to their various communities. Smiling and Killacky (2008) affirm that despite the possible positive impact of education, in most countries, the criminal justice system has not been given adequate recognition and support to educate prison inmates. Brian (1993) adds that although the historical view, of prison as simply a place of punishment, has largely been discarded, educational opportunities for prison inmates are not generally given a central and integral role in the management of prisons. The researchers' view is that in a world where the death penalty is under scrutiny, and might eventually be phased out globally, eventually almost all prison inmates would be released and therefore education and training for inmates should be intensified and accepted as the norm and practice in every society.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study set out to investigate the value of basic education and training for prison inmates. The researchers employed the case study method where two correctional centres in South Africa were purposefully selected for an in-depth investigation. The term *case study* pertains to the fact that a limited number of units of analyses are studied intensively. Welman et al. (2007) confirm that in a case study we are directed towards understanding the uniqueness and the idiosyncrasy of a particular case in all its complexity. Of the two correctional centres selected one was for males and the other females. Both correctional centres have students on ABET (Levels 1-4), FET (skills training) and HET (tertiary education) programmes. The choice of the case study method was to get the opportunity to do an in-depth investigation of the selected

correctional centres. The selected correctional centres were typical in that they were highly representative of the prison population and possess all the attributes of correctional centre basic education and education programmes. For example, they have learners, educators and resources for teaching and learning. They have a learner population of 45 male and 35 female learners respectively, making a total number of inmate participants in the study 80.

Using the qualitative inquiry of in-depth interviews, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the educators and the adult learners. In the case of the educators, individual interviews were used while the adult learners were engaged in focus group discussions in the collection of the data. The 6 educators at each of the two centres were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. The 80 adult learners at the two centres were interviewed through focus group discussions. Six focus group discussions were conducted at each of the correctional centres. The discussions focused on the value or benefits that the inmates derive from ABET, FET and HET courses, the type of courses they do, why they enrolled for the particular courses and what they would do with the knowledge and skills being acquired. With the help of the prison authorities, 20 ex-inmates from the correctional centres in Gauteng were identified. The researchers made appointments with the 20 ex-inmates made up of 14 men and 6 women for individual interviews.

The identities of all the participants were kept anonymous and all participated voluntarily. Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential and not relayed to the prison authorities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The information in Table 1 regarding the prison learners in this study reflects the more general statistic that there are more men in prison than women. Although women do commit crimes such as murder, robbery and car hijacking, the number is lower compared to men. The indication here is that some men are perhaps more audacious and see crime as a way of life in South Africa. It is possible that some women prison inmates might have been recruited by male crime syndicates.

**Table 1: Gender distribution of prison learners**

| <i>Gender</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Male          | 45               | 56.25             |
| Female        | 35               | 43.75             |
| Total         | 80               | 100.00            |

A sequel to the relationship between gender and crime, is the relationship between age and crime. As Table 2 indicates, amongst the group of prison learners in this study, violent crime is more prevalent among young adults. The information in the table indicates that as much as 73% (58) of the prison inmates who participated in this study are between 18-39 years. This age range is supposed to be the productive working years of the prison inmates. Ironically, instead of working, they commit violent crime such as murder, car hi-jack, ATM bombings, rape and drug smuggling. By involving themselves in crime the young people should serve time in prison. As Drago et al. (2012) affirm, in the modern criminal justice system imprisonment is the most important form of sanction which serves as a deterrent to criminal activities.

**Table 2: Age distribution of prison learners**

| <i>Age</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 18- 28     | 35               | 44                |
| 29- 39     | 23               | 29                |
| 40- 49     | 17               | 17                |
| 50- 59     | 10               | 10                |
| Total      | 80               | 100               |

The information in Table 2 further indicates that, in this sample, crime is less prevalent in more mature people. As the table indicates, only 27% of adults between 40-59 years are in incarceration as compared to the youth. The smaller percentage of more mature adults in prison could mean that more mature adults do not see crime as a way of life. Many of them may have families and responsibilities and therefore think of the consequences of their actions unlike most of the younger adults who literally have nothing to lose. This information underpins the importance of prison education. Prisoners should be 'corrected' through education and training programmes as a preparation for reintegration into communities. The fact is that incarceration under harsher prison conditions without any form of education or training could be a recipe for a higher level of recidivism as it may lead to

greater human capital depreciation and worse labour outcomes for former inmates (Drago et al. 2012). This in itself indicates that it might be disastrous to release these criminals back into society without adequate rehabilitation programmes such as the provision of skills as a mechanism to reduce recidivism.

### The Focus Group Interviews

The focus group approach engages research subjects in a conversation in which the researcher encourages them to relate, in their own terms, experiences and attitudes that are relevant to the issues under investigation (McKay 1999). The 80 participants of 45 men and 35 women constituted 5 groups each (that is, 9 and 7 participants in the groups respectively). In all, a total of 10 focus group discussions of approximately 30 minutes per session were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured in that there was a schedule which provided a framework to ensure that the same issues were discussed across the various groups. The interviews focused on

- The learner's motivation for studying;
- The programmes that the learners enrolled for;
- The learners' motivation for enrolling for those particular courses.

The 80 prison inmates who participated in the investigation are currently enrolled on ABET, FET and HET programmes. The focus group discussion revealed that the two main motives to engage in education whilst in prison are: to acquire relevant knowledge and skills for employment and to boost their chances of parole.

The above responses are significant in terms of the contexts of the participants. The discussion revealed that most of the prison inmates did not have knowledge and skills for employment and this, they confessed, led them to crime and the concomitant incarceration. The discussion also revealed that some of the participants never got the opportunity to attend school when they were young, while others dropped out early because of the harsh conditions such as long-distances to travel to school, the poor schooling system, lack of support to remain in school and the motivation to learn. The participants were positive that relevant knowledge and skills could not only contribute to early release from prison,

but would also enhance their smooth re-integration into society as better or reformed citizens. In deed the intervention by education can improve prisoners' lives in many ways. As Bracken (2011) affirms, prison can provide a stable environment in which prisoners develop the skills that will enable them to follow a life in employment and out of crime. This confirms the suggestion that there is a positive relationship between education and recidivism. One of the 10 prison inmates enrolled for tertiary studies, a young woman, had this to say, 'I completed my matriculation here and hopefully next year I will complete my UNISA ABET Diploma so that I can teach even my fellow inmates while I am still here'.

From the focus group discussions it was clear that with the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills, these prison inmates could re-unite with their families and engage in useful socio-economic activities to earn a decent living instead of engaging in crime. Prison education can therefore promote social cohesion, re-integration and boost self-employment opportunities among inmates. The indication here is that in the long term, the skills and knowledge acquired whilst in prison could assist in the achievement of a restoration of self-esteem, forgiveness and the shedding of emotional baggage through the employment of these newly released community members.

### **Interviews with Educators**

The researchers held one-on-one interviews with the 12 educators at the two correctional centres. The interviews with the educators revealed that prison education covers ABET, FET and HET programmes although education for inmates is not yet compulsory. The interviews also revealed that although prison education could contribute to parole, parole is seen as a holistic package. That is, prison inmates who apply for parole should show evidence of their involvement in formal, spiritual, psychological and social (care) programmes. The discussion with the educators revealed that some of the correctional centres have normal schools. They offer mainstream school courses and vocational training and, in addition, some of their students do some courses with the University of South Africa (UNISA). Students are equipped with various skills to enable them compete for work or engage in self-employment activities. This

helps in reintegration into society. The educators confirmed that in 2009 ninety five (95) prison inmates graduated with various diplomas and degrees from the University of South Africa. The diplomas and degrees which prepared prison inmates for future life in their respective communities included programmes in ABET, HIV/AIDS, Theology, Commerce and Law. The educators concurred that most ex-inmates prefer to engage in self-employment activities, for example, as accountants, advocates and lawyers, and as entrepreneurs.

### **Interviews with Ex-Inmates**

With the help of the educators, 20 ex-prison students were identified in the various communities in Gauteng. The educators arranged for the researchers to meet with the ex-prison students. The researchers had to travel across various communities to interview the 13 men and 7 women. These people were involved in entrepreneurship activities such as sewing, upholstery, baking, cooking, tuck-shops, curtain designs, involvement in early childhood education and hair dressing. Some of them, mainly men, mended shoes, handbags, watches, repair televisions, did painting, panel beating, car repairs, teach adults, or engage in HIV/AIDS education. Seventeen of the ex-inmates, men and women, were involved in the above self-employment activities. Of the remaining three people, one was a pastor and the other two were partners in legal and accounting firms respectively. The 20 ex-inmates employed between 2-3 people each in their businesses. These people returned and successfully re-integrated into their respective communities. By gaining useful skills and qualifications whilst in prison, the ex-inmates were able to employ fellow community members and by so doing, restored some of the possessions taken from the communities. These people were gainfully employed and have turned their backs on crime. One of them remarked, 'prison did not only keep me away from my loved ones for 6 years, it opened my eyes to understand what life is all about. Life is not about using wrong means to get rich quick. It is about dignity of labour.'

### **CONCLUSION**

Literature in the US, Britain and Canada confirms the positive correlation between prison

education and a reduction in recidivism. In the absence of official and reliable statistical data on recidivism in South Africa, this study used a qualitative approach to establish and indeed confirm that there is a positive relationship between prison education and

- (i) current inmates' perceptions of their future chances of success in re-entering employment and re-integration into their communities, and
- (ii) ex-inmates' actual success in re-entering employment and re-integration into their communities.

Responses from both individual and focus-group interviews revealed that education for inmates is the pivot around which rehabilitation revolves because it equips inmates with basic knowledge and skills for employment. The investigation has revealed that education empowers ex-inmates with the skills for employment, social cohesion and a smooth re-integration into their communities as better citizens than they were before incarceration.

The paper concludes that any action plan to reduce recidivism should be based on moral regeneration and opportunities for individual development and re-integration based on personal needs.

Although the study was limited by the fact that it was conducted in only two prisons in only one of the nine provinces of South Africa it has validated and confirmed the importance of prison education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the study the following recommendations were made to the stakeholders such as the departments of Correctional services, Justice, Education, Home Affairs and Labour. That,

In view of the importance of education and training for prison inmates, more practical and job related courses like plumbing, joinery, painting, building, straightening, panel beating, poultry keeping, animal rearing, crop farming, accounting and computer skills are required.

As a strategy for rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners into society prison education should be made compulsory for all incarcerated persons.

All inmates who have relevant trade skills should be made facilitators of prison education and training programmes to reduce cost.

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