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Utilizing Organizational Theory to Improve Education Opportunities in Correctional Facilities

Cover Page Footnote

Developed in EGLC 714 with Dr. Kent Rhodes.

Introduction

Currently, the United States has one of the most highly concentrated prison systems, housing approximately 2.3 million people (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). California houses 239,000 of these inmates (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). The stated mission of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is:

“To facilitate the successful reintegration of the individuals in our care back to their communities equipped with the tools to be drug-free, healthy, and employable members of society by providing education, treatment, rehabilitative, and restorative justice programs, all in a safe and humane environment” (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.).

As stated, education is one tool that the prison system uses for rehabilitation. With about 90% of State prisons providing programming, educational offerings are readily accessible throughout the incarceration system, with about 41% of the inmates with basic or high school level competency (Wolf Harlow, 2003). We can see that correctional institutions value using education as part of their inmate reform system, but there is work to be done to further advocate and expand the opportunities presented to folks facing incarceration.

While prisons may seem remote and disconnected from everyday society, decisions made for the incarceration system impact us all as these individuals reintegrate back into the spaces we all occupy. This reintegration makes the issue of rehabilitation for incarcerated folks something everyone should care about. This paper explores the need for postsecondary education opportunities and how utilizing social constructionism and systems theory can help for better activism around increasing postsecondary educational opportunities.

Need for Education

There are multiple groups of people that are impacted by correctional reform. These include those facing incarceration, those handling administration of correctional facilities, and the communities across the country that receive those formerly incarcerated back into their spaces through reintegration. Those facing incarceration tend to be less educated than members of the general population (Duwe & Clark, 2014). Time spent incarcerated further delays educational growth if they are unable to actively work on their education during their sentence. The benefits of receiving an education inside the prison have long-term effects as well. A meta-analysis found that those who participated in the education programs lowered their odds of recidivating by 43% (Davis et al., 2013). Not only does any participation lower their chance of returning to a correctional facility, but it was found that for those who were actually able to complete a degree during their sentence, there was only a two percent chance of recidivism (Lagemann, 2014). Growth in education will also set these individuals up for better success in securing a job after release. Participation in education leads to a 48 percent increase in the likeliness of obtaining employment, compared to inmates that do not participate in the programs (Davis et al., 2014). From there, just like the general population, receiving college degrees even further increases employment opportunities.

As with any system that receives public funding, taxpayers become stakeholders and are impacted by the decisions these facilities make. Investing in education programs for these individuals make a large impact on overall budget spending for these facilities. One study found that for every dollar spent on correctional education programs, five dollars are saved on the three-year reincarceration costs (Davis et al., 2014). The Bard initiative found that spending one million dollars on correctional education would prevent 600 crimes from being committed,

compared to the same amount of money spent on incarceration alone would prevent only 350 crimes (Lagemann, 2014). Not only would this funding be more rewarding for the individuals receiving this education, but the spending would actually allow for an overall increase in available funds that can be put either into other areas to improve these correctional facilities or be allocated to another public entity. Especially since taxpayers often don't see the dollars at work with the criminal justice system, this will also provide more opportunities to connect the general public with a better understanding of reform in the system.

Lastly, education helps with inmate behavior (Lagemann, 2014). Behavior, especially in confined spaces like prisons, is contagious. Improvements in an individual's attitude would help improve the behavior of many of the inmates. This allows for an increase in safety for correctional officers and the public upon release. In a program based out of California State Prison, Los Angeles County (LAC) in Lancaster, California, inmates serving life without parole received the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree. A prison staff member stated, "Life without parole is this stable population in there [prison], they are like tenured professors if you like. So if you educate that population, when the young kids into the yard they're developing a culture from the elders" (Cal State LA Community Impact Media, 2018). By providing this program to such a stable population in the facility, they noticed a trickle-down effect on the other inmates, creating a more positive environment with improved inmate behavior.

Current Degree Programs in the United States

Current education programs in correctional facilities include literacy programs, GED and high school equivalency pathways, associate degrees, vocational courses, and bachelor's degree opportunities. The least common program for a facility to have is a bachelor's degree pathway program, yet there are several programs in the United States paving the path for these

opportunities for their inmates. These include the program through California State University, Los Angeles, Pfizer College, and the BARD Prison Initiative.

California currently has one program that allows California inmates to receive a bachelor's degree. The program is based out of California State Prison, Los Angeles County (LAC) in Lancaster, California. The degree-granting university that is partnered with LAC is California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). This program allows inmates to receive a B.A. in Communication Studies (California State University, Los Angeles, (n.d.)). The majority of participants have sentences of life without parole. This means that they are completing this degree without an opportunity to apply this degree in the world outside of prison (Cal State LA Community Impact Media, 2018). Allowing these types of inmates to participate in this program demonstrates that these systems support these individuals and recognize that they have value and can enrich their lives, even if they will spend the remainder of their time on Earth behind bars. The life-changing impact of this program is apparent through several of the inmate testimonials:

“When they see an inmate with that serving life without parole trying to get his education, it gives these other guys that have dates to say, ‘man, like if he’s doing it, I’m getting out so I need to get my stuff together so I can be a productive member of society’” - Unnamed Inmate (Cal State LA Community Impact Media, 2018).

“I would speak to my family about education. I can hear in their voice the positive response that is coming from them; it just encouraged me from there.... my sister [is] even thinking of going back to school. I have caused a lot of pain in my family’s life... so these are moments for me to kind of bring some joy” -- Jesse Crespin, inmate (Cal State LA Community Impact Media, 2018).

“The public has no idea how much education has changed the mentality of inmates” --
Unnamed Inmate (Cal State LA Community Impact Media, 2018).

Pitzer College in Claremont, California, is also working on establishing a program with a pathway to receiving a bachelor’s degree. Announced in December 2020, this “inside-outside” program allows select Pitzer college students, called the “outside” students, to attend class with “inside” students, who are inmates at California Rehabilitation Center (CRC) in Norco, California (Pitzer College, 2020). It is the first program of its kind in the country (Pitzer College, 2020). Inmates are required to have three years of college credits before entering this program, including at least one year of credits from a four-year accredited institution. Not all participating inmates are degree-seeking students, but they do have the opportunity to earn a B.A. in Organization Studies (Pitzer College, 2020).

The Bard Prison Initiative, facilitated by Bard College, is a program based in New York that supports educational programs for inmates through several different partnerships. The Bard program has been granting bachelor’s degrees since 2008 and works in six prisons in the state of New York (Bard Prison Initiative, n.d.). This program has successfully followed the inmates who complete this program to see the long-term benefits and provide support for these individuals.

These inmates see this opportunity not only as a way to better themselves but as a way to be an example for their family members, the people they left behind in their home communities, the other inmates within the prison, and for the general public to see that they can amount to something besides a life of crime. This opportunity allows them to develop professional relationships with professors, have intellectual conversations, and improve their critical thinking skills. All of this allows them to feel they are living lives with purpose and meaning, regardless of the circumstances they are under. Seeing how many different things are impacted by one

inmate's education shows how wide the correctional system truly is and why we must view it from a holistic perspective. This growth also challenges many preconceived notions and beliefs about who the individuals are living behind bars.

Organizational Theory

Organizational theories take a sociological approach to understanding the structures of a variety of organizations. Taking the time to gain a deeper understanding of a system or organization will help increase efficiency and allow for additional growth. Two types of organizational theory are social constructionism and systems theory. Applying these theories toward understanding educational opportunities within correctional facilities can allow for better activism and an increase in postsecondary programs for inmates.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism emerged from a greater need to understand our situations' reality while using grounded theory (Andrews, 2012). With this theory, it is important to view knowledge as created, not discovered (Schwandt, 2003). This means that through the organizational analysis, one must be cognizant of how their thoughts may not be the reality and could have been shaped by external factors. A specific aspect of social constructionism is relativism, which states that because there are multiple realities, there are multiple interpretations of those realities (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionism challenges one to be critical of one's belief in the truth. This belief bias has the potential to then impact the way an organization, system, or concept is understood.

In order to apply social constructionism to the field of correctional services, the criminal justice system needs to be viewed as a social institution with problems that can be addressed. Historically, social constructionism has been used to conduct empirical studies around other

social issues such as AIDS, hate crimes, child abuse, and many others (Weinberg, 2014). Similar to the criminal justice system these are all social issues that either have large public concern and/or greatly impact the general population. Every individual person has a certain outlook, personal experience, or bias when it comes to various social systems, including correctional institutions. Utilizing social constructionism can reframe the thought of inmates as criminals serving a punishment, but as people working on being rehabilitated to rejoin our society. Then understanding the evidence that supports education on reentry allows for better activism for an increase in opportunities.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is an approach that considers all entities inside nature, society, and scientific domains as systems that are impacted by various factors in their environment. This theory's keystone is to investigate these systems from a holistic perspective (Mele, Pels, & Polese, 2019). Examiners, not only look at various parts of the system but aim to form an understanding from a macro level. This will allow one to see the factors impacting the system. There are three types of systems that systems theory seeks to understand; those are open, closed, and isolated systems. The system of correctional facilities would be considered an open system due to the fact that it exchanges people and information with its external environment (Mele, Pels, & Polese, 2019). Through a specific application of systems theory to an open system, one analyzes the interconnectedness of the system with its external factors. In the case of correctional facilities, this can look at reentry into society and the factors within the system that ensure a successful reentry. Additionally, systems theory requires one to think about the system from a holistic perspective, nothing that one must “work on the system, not in the system” (Kim, 1999).

This correlates directly with the notion of social constructionism of letting go of personal biases and understanding that one's pre-conceived stance may not be the true reality.

For the success of postsecondary programs in correctional facilities, the system must rely on strong partnerships with external systems. As noted in many of the example programs, the current degree-granting programs are partnerships with local universities. Systems theory allows us to gain an understanding of the relationship between these different kinds of institutions to foster a collaborative environment to work towards the shared goal.

Conclusion

The first thing we need to do in order to advocate for better correctional education programs is to use social constructionism and reframe the preconceived notions we have about the incarceration system and the people in it. By taking the time to understand not only these inmates' drive but also their ability to make improvements in their life, regardless of their sentence allows for people to help advocate for and work towards constantly improving these programs.

Next, we must use open systems theory to look at the effect these education programs have on many aspects of our society. Not only do these programs help reform the individuals directly associated with them, it promotes pursuing education for those surrounding them, helps keep the general public safe, and allow for additional funding to be allocated elsewhere.

There are many programs across the country that support these individuals' educational pursuits. Even though we see growth in program offerings, there are still 2.3 million inmates in our system, and they must be viewed as people to serve that can add value to their lives and our world. Through understanding the significance of these programs, advocacy for additional

postsecondary opportunities can occur and help more inmates strengthen their pathway to a new future.

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