

Management of the Correctional Education Program for Students Behind Bars

Emma Lina F. Lopez

Asian Institute of Tourism, University of the Philippines, Manila,
PHILIPPINES.

emmah122000@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Every person has the right to education even for one who finds himself in conflict with the law. Thus, convicted offenders can continue their schooling while undergoing rehabilitation in prison and eventual reintegration to their families and communities upon discharge from incarceration. Correctional education is one of the biggest opportunities afforded for Filipino inmate students. This research was prepared with the end view of analyzing the education program offered to inmates of the medium risk security camp of the national penitentiary, the New Bilibid Prison (NBP) in Muntinlupa City, Metro Manila. Also, it will help fill in the research gap as to how education can provide the coping mechanism for inmates when they rejoin the mainstream of society as ex-offenders or the more common term used, as ex-convicts. The analysis will delve on the following indicators: program objectives, curriculum, faculty roster, inmate students, graduates, facilities and equipment, other services and lastly, financial support. The research will likewise assess how the correctional education program can reorient and transform the highly regimented life of inmates in prison into a new learning experience at the same time equip them upon their release. It may also be used by authorities to reassess the current correctional education program and its implementation. They can review policies and design the program to suit the needs of the inmates and the changing times. Thus, more concern and funding for the program's development and eventual expansion may be expected in the future.

Keywords: Correctional education program, inmate students, national penitentiary, ex-offenders

INTRODUCTION

Advocates of education in penal institutions would have to reckon with a difficult task. They are required to work in a setting geared towards punishment and the protection of society from convicted individuals while simultaneously trying to imbue these same prisoners with knowledge necessary to survive outside the confines of the prison cells. They are expected to assist the inmates in terms of internalizing a moral code that will positively guide their actions in the future. Various forms of intellectual stimulation are needed such as classroom instruction and other learning resources. Values reorientation has to be achieved while fulfilling the custodial and punitive purpose of the institution. As such, the work of punishing and putting in prison in order to correct becomes staggering given the circumstances. It is common knowledge that conditions inside prison could be deplorable.

The discussion in this research does not involve regular, ordinary students. They are students behind bars and law-breakers who want to start a new life by continuing to pursue their studies. An improved education program and facilities brought about by the identification of the inmates' immediate problems can result to socially advantageous and more relevant rehabilitation programs. The latter will help negate criminal tendencies and pre-dispositions

and at the same time restore the inmates' self-confidence so that they may become productive citizens.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

At present, correctional or prison education program is a major institutional concern of the penitentiary's administration and is an integral part of the mandate of prisoner rehabilitation. One of the important areas of management is making formal education part and parcel of their rehabilitation program. Inmates advance academically through correctional education. Intellectual and reasoning abilities are improved and so are their interpersonal skills towards free society and their fellow inmates. However, the biggest aim of correctional education is to facilitate not only the acquisition of intellectual skills but the values formation of the inmates (NBP Educational Programs Folder, 1998). The education programs provide the inmates with new coping resources which will enable them to make positive use of their time while in prison, develop insights and recognize previously untapped talents. Education thus assumes the role of a change agent and its repercussions become evident in all aspects of the inmates' lives.

The Risk-Need-Responsivity model of intervention (Andrews, Bonta & Hoge, 1990) takes into account the issue that offending behavior, like other human behavior, is multi-determined and stimulated by the influences of personal and environmental conditions when applied to offender assessment and rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is a process of reforming offenders. It comes as a dynamic positive change geared towards the promotion of human dignity, enabling man to find recourse in contemplation and penitence, and to fully relate to himself, his fellowmen and to God (Bureau of Corrections Manual of Standards and Policies, 1993).

Consistent with standard theories of personality, crime causation and rehabilitation are two principles for rehabilitating offenders which in recent times are being employed by parole, probation and prison workers. These are the 'clinical principle' and the 'group-relations principle' (Cressey as cited in Merton and Nisbet, 1966). The clinical principle assumes that the personality of an individual is autonomous and considers his interaction with rules and regulations of society and other organizations as submission rather than participation. Criminality is therefore a personal characteristic of the person exhibiting the behavior. Cressey further argues that the focal point in this principle is that a 'healthy' or 'adjusted' personality is one that does not own criminality because it has been permitted to express itself freely in various alternative ways. Some rehabilitation techniques aligned with this principle are individual and group therapy where offenders are treated clinically in modifying the impact of incarceration to them.

On the other hand, the group-relations principle is based on the theory that the person is inseparable from social relationships in which he lives. Therefore, he behaves in accordance with the rules of the large organization, called society, wherein he participates. Criminality then is behavior that the concerned person has appropriated from the social relationships in which he has been involved. It is not singularly the product of an individual's contacts with particular groups. In reality, it is behavior that is 'owned' by groups rather than individuals. Following these assumptions, the effort of changing the criminal behavior of a person must be aimed at modifying the groups owning the behavior and to which he is affiliated with. In consonance with this principle are the rehabilitative techniques of probation and parole and the management of academic and vocational education programs for inmates which is the main concern of this research.

In rehabilitating offenders, correctional institutions utilize both clinical and group-relations principles. At the micro level is the clinical principle since the individual counseling and group sessions are designed to address problems of each individual offender. In contrast, the group-relations principle helps in explaining the rehabilitation techniques for offenders at the macro level. As an institution, the prison provides a set of programs designed to address the inmate population's needs. These are the education programs and vocational training.

Correctional education thus becomes an outlet of the two principles of rehabilitating offenders. It is perceived as an opportunity which would alleviate the strains that resulted to inmates behaving in unacceptable modes. Education for most of them represents the possibility of enhancing personal opportunities to reintegrate into the dominant culture of society.

Other factors should not be taken aside in the rehabilitation process. The principal solution for deviant behavior is resocialization given the premise that the interaction of personality and environment determines behavior (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Increasing meaningful group contact with legitimate patterns of behavior and reducing it with illegitimate patterns is the best way to resocialize (Rubington and Weinberg, 2010). Timmins (1989) stated that correctional education has sought to fulfill five functions which include uplifting morals through study of the Bible, hard work and discipline; skills training; developing intellectually and human understanding; changing behavior modes; and increasing opportunity structures. It is in relation to the last function that inmates are given the chance to develop themselves despite the conditions of incarceration. It is expected that at the end of the program they will be more hopeful, obtain self-respect, self-reliance and a sense of dignity in lieu of apathy, indifference and the feeling of hopelessness.

The role of education is best expressed by Davidson (1995). Based on his evaluation, he found that if given the opportunity, literacy teachers could willingly challenge the prevailing assumption within prison education that represents literacy as a neutral technology. That is, prisoners learn in order to get jobs thus avoiding criminal activity. Moreover, educated inmates can be a stabilizing influence in an often chaotic environment, enhancing the safety and security of all who live and work in the correctional compound. This can help the facility to run more smoothly and with less violence.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilized participant and non-participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the inmate students, inmate and volunteer teachers and selected administrators in the process of collating data. In non-participant observation, the researcher gathers primary data by entering social systems to observe events, activities and interactions to understand these social systems in their natural contexts (Given, 2008). In depth interviews are used to elicit information from relatively few respondents. These interviews are carried out with open-ended questions through conversation between the interviewer, (i.e., researcher) and the individuals. Focus group discussions are usually accomplished through group interviewing. Participant observation was done through the researcher's involvement in classroom activities as a volunteer teacher in Level I of the alternative learning system wherein the inmate students are beginning to acquire basic literacy and learn the ropes of reading, writing and arithmetic. Said level is equivalent to the first grade in a regular school. It is also in the same level where the country's state university, the University of the Philippines, started to implement the literacy component of the National Service Training Program (NSTP) in April till May of 2014.

FINDINGS

The emergence of school units inside the penitentiary countered the torturing idea of what punishment should be and paved the way for a more compassionate and humanitarian approach.

Focus was on variables which are deemed important for the education program to succeed. The prison environment must be understood to properly comprehend literacy work behind bars.

Program Objectives

As stated in the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) Manual of Standards and Policies (1993), ‘The entire correctional process itself must be viewed as an educating and harmonizing experience that seeks to transform misguided individuals into useful citizens’. It is the ultimate objective of the education program to develop the inmates’ functional abilities physically, psychosocially, culturally and spiritually at the highest attainable levels.

While ambiguity could arise from the fact that the education program functions as an institution within the larger institution of corrections, commonly accepted goals for the program include self-reliance and self-sufficiency by providing basic academic education and livelihood skills; renewed self-confidence by providing inmates with the chance to change their behavior and values; responsible citizenship by reducing recidivism; and participation and involvement in society.

Curriculum

For the medium security prisoners, it is a program of “Rehabilitation Through Education” which follows the same curricula as prescribed by the government’s regulatory bodies, namely, Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). The prison school operates in compliance with the program requirements of both agencies.

The program is described not just as educational but as compassionate and democratic as well.

The type of learning environment and subject content in prison schools are influenced, in part, by the philosophical orientation of teachers, prevailing penal philosophy, goals of the local prison administration and the security level of the prison.

Faculty Roster

Correctional officers and employees as well as volunteers from non-government organizations and other institutions of learning comprise the roster of correctional educators. The faculty members evidently come from different fields of discipline and have special training in correctional education. It is actually the spirit of volunteerism which prompted them to offer their services. Approximately 70% of them are BuCor employees who are considered full-time employees of the NBP Education Section and have official duties and functions in the agency. As such they are paid honoraria as mentors and are also receiving fixed monthly salaries from the government. Volunteer teachers, on the other hand, are paid minimal honoraria despite a number of factors working against the program. The site is too far and teachers travel at their own expense and spend for their own teaching aids. The meager amount cannot provide the motivation needed even if apostolate work is admittedly part of it.

The prison educator’s challenge is compounded by the uniqueness of prison culture routines: lock-downs and head counts, inmates’ hearings or meetings with lawyers which disrupt

regular classes. Peer pressure may also discourage attendance or achievement. Moreover, the prison environment is not likely to be rich in verbal and sensory stimuli.

Inmate Students

The Reception and Diagnostic Center (RDC) serves as the admissions office tasked to receive, study and classify inmates before they are assigned to any of the security compounds within the NBP. It is during the interview phase that the inmates' interest and plans in prison are discerned. When they express their desire to study and their levels have been determined, the RDC recommends them to the school of their choice. Applicants to the program go through rigid screening. IQ tests, essay and reading comprehension examinations are given. The last phase is an interview conducted by a panel consisting of three (3) faculty members. A thorough screening process is important to deny unmotivated or disruptive prisoners the chance to participate in class. Although education is offered to all the three security groupings of prisoners, i.e., minimum, medium and maximum, majority of the student enrollees come from the medium security classification.

The degree of commitment for schooling by prisoners varies. Inmate students may quit school from time to time and the reasons frequently provided include inter- and intra-prison transfers, sentence expiry or parole, inability to concentrate or to stay put physically in one place for long periods of time, the rules being too strict, unrealistic commitments, lack of motivation or completion of academic goals. Other reasons for dropping students include gambling, drug abuse, refusal to obliterate tattoo marks, and lastly, gang affiliation and gang wars.

Graduates

For some inmates, prison school attendance is the chance to try for a second time at what was a failure the first time. The expressed need to 'save face' became an offshoot of the exposure of past failures within the prison environment. Moreover, the desire to learn in a safe learning place appears to outweigh their anxieties. This therefore stresses the importance of a safe and respectful prison school environment for learning to occur.

Inmates usually have definite goals upon entering the education program. They make significant gains and may set realistic education-related goals for release. The four primary self-identified factors which prisoners believe will influence the success of release goals include personal motivation; family support; drugs and alcohol; and financial means. Other goals may include self-improvement, acquisition or betterment of job skills, getting a job and lastly, obtaining a college diploma.

Facilities and Equipment

Given that the school is located within the walls of prison, the learning environment is thus affected by this fact. Hence, resources must be allocated and directed to respond to students' needs. There are classrooms, a computer room, a typing room, an audio visual room, a canteen, and a library. The different levels are heavily reliant on contributions from various civic and religious organizations since the government can only do so much given its very limited budget.

Other Services

Major services include treatment services which focus on case management, counseling and group work activities. Also, there are group living services which involve the provision of well-balanced, organized non-formal activities geared towards the achievement of the treatment goals for the offender and the group as a whole. Intensive religious guidance is

extended to the inmates in the belief that religion has a positive influence in terms of restoring self-respect and strengthening the faith of inmates. Health care facilities, visitation and postal services are also provided.

There are regular activities conducted in order to develop the students socially. These are athletic competitions, cultural, musical and literary contests which enable the inmates to showcase their talents.

Financial Support

The inadequacy of funds greatly affected the current implementation of the program and plans for its improvement. This primarily led to delayed renovation of school facilities, inability to purchase additional equipment and instructional materials, etc. The program relied on whatever resources are available and maximized their uses. From the students' end, lack of finances was also a common problem encountered. Attempts are made to resolve their financial difficulties by relying on the support of their families and fellow prisoners. Funding is indeed one major problem that the inmates have to reckon with in the course of their education.

DISCUSSION

Education programs at the New Bilibid Prison (NBP), the national penitentiary, started in the 1950s merely as part of prison orientation for inmates. Their main goal was to enhance immediate rehabilitation and not just eradicate illiteracy among the inmates. The establishment of the education programs inside the prison compound was met with stiff resistance. Opposing parties thought that by providing education, the criminals were being spoiled and were not accordingly punished. The concept of effective rehabilitation through education eventually won its rightful place and became the flagship of the rehabilitation program after much debate and heated discussions. The NBP has placed the education programs at the forefront of the treatment and rehabilitation of offenders. To date, among the seven correctional facilities located all over the country, it is only at the NBP where formal education is offered. This covers the elementary, high school and college levels aside from the alternative learning and vocational schools.

The penology system being implemented in the country is curative and rehabilitative in nature rather than punitive. In order to successfully carry out the school's objectives, quality education must be given to the inmates. The process would involve the correctional administration and educators, the curriculum, budget allocation, physical facilities and other services. Updating of library materials is a prime consideration since a lot of the holdings are already outdated. Variety should likewise be introduced in their recreation and sports activities. Regular inspection and close supervision of food preparation and servings are also necessary.

Areas for improvement would require regular assessment and evaluation so that continuous development of correctional education as the leading provider of new coping resources can be sustained. With regard the objectives of the program, these should be made more explicit to both the students and faculty members. From the students' viewpoint, objectives should lend more emphasis on values and skills development and provide adequate preparation for the inmates when they assume their role in free society. Because of the distinct nature of the student clientele, correctional educators should be given in-service training on classroom management alongside the operations of the criminal justice system.

If possible, a follow-up of students should be undertaken so that the program will have a record of how former student inmates are faring and how the program benefited them. So far,

no follow-up study has been done to track individual students who have been released. It therefore becomes incumbent upon the government to concentrate mainly on the implementation of the reintegration program and assistance for the ex-detainees if the NBP cannot perform in this area. Ex-detainees can be more functional if employment or placement services are made available to them. Comparatively speaking, the national government is more willing to provide employment for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who return to the country, or those who lost their jobs or were probably displaced by war or natural occurrences. Because of the dearth of supportive services, many inmates find themselves released without access to employment opportunities or additional training and education programs. As the first few months after release are critical, it is imperative that supportive services are in place and that ex-offenders are provided with access to them.

When it comes to the budget, there is no definite allocation for the education program. This can only be increased if the government supports it by providing a bigger slice for inmate students. There seems to be no solution but this. The program cannot merely rely on solicitations and donations of individuals, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other civic organizations. It must be noted though that of all crime prevention methods, education is more cost-effective than building prison compounds. It could reduce recidivism and lead to the additional benefit of individuals obtaining work, paying taxes and contributing to the general economy.

However, it is not just the government's responsibility to ensure an effective reintegration of the ex-detainees. The education program may formulate income generating activities whose proceeds can partly finance the implementation of the program itself. These could consist of marketing the products of inmates, the setting up of small service-oriented businesses where they may be employed and subcontracting from private companies. Collective action and involvement from the community is also highly needed.

CONCLUSION

Education functioned as a coping mechanism to sustain the inmates while living behind bars. It also prevented them from thinking of themselves merely as prisoners but as students. Maturation and self-discovery can occur for prisoners who are willing and able to commit to the process of personal change. It is sometimes an ironic observation that inmate students have made on the privilege of education. They say that they have to be criminals in order to avail of free education up to the college level. Prison schools therefore provide a separate environment for the inmates. Academic courses are effective rehabilitative techniques only to the extent that they allow the inmates to express themselves, sublimate antisocial tendencies and escape the restrictions on people who lack the education or who have none at all. The rehabilitative effects are facilitated by their response to education and the environmental aspect of the prison school.

It is but necessary to improve the level of program standards to fully attain the rehabilitation of prisoners. Public participation and cooperation in the reintegration of the offenders and resocialization of prisoners, probationers, and parolees are therefore solicited. Consider inmates as 'accidental deviants' instead of disposing them as altogether incorrigible elements of society. It is best that areas for improvement be looked into and acted upon inasmuch as formal education to inmates is geared towards 'humanizing' education.

Education can furnish individuals with the opportunities to achieve and maintain crime-free lives, and help to create safer communities for all. Correctional planning should therefore focus on providing a supportive environment. The positive effects of institutional programs are wasted if follow-up programs are not available in the community. It is essential that

offenders return to positive environments, whether these are home communities or not. It is in the best interest of society to make the prison population productive through education. The country has the responsibility to prepare the offenders for successful reintegration. These offenders cannot achieve this until they overcome the handicaps posed by personal, economic, social and civic deficiencies.

When the correctional education program is made better, the inmates can be served best.

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