

LEARNING BEHIND BARS: THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN PRISON

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ABSTRACT

Most prisoners want to better themselves so that they never have to return to prison furthermore many studies have shown that the best way to reform and improve behaviour is through education however students studying in prison face numerous challenges in their endeavour to ameliorate themselves. In other words, schooling has become a painful experience for many of them and their feelings of shame and anger at becoming unsuccessful in a world where academic achievement is highly valued, run deep. Public perception is that prisoners should be denied access to educational opportunities and be punished for the crimes committed. Using qualitative phenomenological design, the article explores in detail the learning experiences of a group of inmates who are studying at undergraduate level, via distance learning. This article specifically focuses on the experiences and challenges encountered by these students. Data was collected from the five participants using semi-structured interviews and analysed using content analysis. All the participants were provided with informed consent and they demonstrated their willingness to participate in the research. Based on the data collected, we conclude that although the student inmates find the prison environment to impact negatively on their studies, they (students) also attach great value to their studies and hope to use it to secure employment once released from prison.

Keywords: learning experience, incarceration, recidivism, hostile, undergraduate, lock-downs, release, crime-free.

INTRODUCTION

When people think of prisoners, images of violent criminals come to mind. We think they should be “locked up and the key thrown away,” and as part of their punishment should have no rights at all Van Heerden (2011). Many of the outside population have images of the prison population comprising hardened criminals wearing striped suits, tough gangs fighting for power, steel bars, crowded cells or solitary confinement and even escape. Silva (2003) contends that it is perfectly acceptable to express negative feelings towards prisoners. According to Lempert et al. (2005) prisons are these completely opaque institutions that have no interaction with the community, and everything that is done, is done to keep that opacity going. As a result, people may not even be aware that inmates are able to attend school or even pursue studies at higher education level.

Gone are the days when prisoners did time and returned to communities without skills to help them live honest lives. These days, with rehabilitation programmes at Correctional Services facilities, prisoners have a chance to change their lives for the better by furthering their studies Mashego (2011). Education is on one of the great success stories of the South African democracy, and the right to education is a basic human right, which is granted to all

South African citizens including those who are incarcerated or detained in South African prisons. Mitra (2010), postulates that education should be understood as one of the main function of prisons in preparing inmates' return to society. Studies have shown that prisoners who have been involved in educational programs tend to stay out of prison after release and are less violent.

Bayliss (2003) maintains that through learning in prison, small incremental changes in behaviour and attitudes may occur. If education were to be integrated throughout the prison so that it becomes a secure learning organization, perhaps greater benefits would follow, thus encouraging inmates to continue education after their release to become lifelong learners. For education in prison to be of any use, it has to be structured and coordinated" Westrheim (2008). Van Heerden (2011) further maintains that many a scientific studies have shown that the best way to reform and improve behaviour is through education. However, Students studying in prison face numerous challenges in their endeavour to ameliorate themselves. Weisel et al. (2005) state that schooling has become a painful experience for many and their feelings of shame and anger at becoming unsuccessful in a world where academic achievement is highly valued run deep. We therefore found it intriguing to explore in detail the experiences of undergraduate students studying behind bars.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Prison Environment

Prison is a naturally radicalizing environment Frolander-Ulf & Yates (2001). It is a hostile environment designed for containment and punishment Greg (2007) and damages the prisoners' sense of self Williams (1991). Common to all inmates throughout the world, those doing time in prison experience tremendous psychological trauma. Many inmates live in fear of the prison environment and allow their thoughts to drift outside of the prison walls as a way of escape from the emotional pain they feel.

Wigley (1992) comments that "locked in a cell, you could at least kid yourself that you were locking the system out and retain some degree of privacy for part of the day. But here you were under observation twenty-four hours a day living in fear of being 'nicked' for walking too fast, having a shoe lace untied, breathing too heavily, or having the wrong expression on your face". Wigley (1992) further states that some ex-convicts continue to experience the emotional and psychological trauma long after they are released from prison. The memories were deeply engrained in Malcolm, (one of the participants in Wrigley's study) and some experiences still hurt when he called them. Not even twenty years of rebuilding and restoring his life fully removed the deep psychological damage of those prison years.

Bhatti (2009) contends that the prison is a closed environment, and there are laws, written ones, which appear in formal documents and unwritten ones which define how individuals should behave, which person to cross and which person to avoid. Bhatti (2009) further maintains that prisons house people whom the legal system and society has put 'out of sight' and often 'out of mind'. Lempert, Bergeron, and Linker (2005) express the view that "prisoners are often built in inaccessible areas to remove society's evil-doers, the bad apples that threaten the security of law-abiding citizens. Prison removes this evil influences from the visibility and consequently, from the collective consciousness of less transgressive citizens".

Education In The Inside

Many offenders have limited education Goebel (2005) and many prisoners have had negative experiences of compulsory schooling, thereby rejecting learning at the earliest opportunity Irwin (2003). For the vast majority of incarcerated offenders, prison is a transitional placement. After serving their sentences, the majority of offender's transition from incarceration back to their communities. Ex-offenders struggle to find their place in society while coping with the social pressure and economic hardships that led them to crime in the first place Goebel (2005).

In his key note address Travis (2011) expressed the view that incarcerated individuals are denied access to the educational opportunities available to their counterparts in free society and that the levels of educational attainment for incarcerated persons is low, with high levels of educational challenges. On the other hand, a study by Frolander-Ulf and Yates (2001) reported that 70% of all people entering state Correctional facilities have completed high school, with 46% having no high school education at all. Having been side-lined in the past, the education of prisoners is now receiving closer government attention in the UK, Bayliss (2003).

The Need For Education In Prison

Early research on the benefits of education for reducing recidivism was far from conclusive; it often showed mixed and at times, contradictory results (Martinson 1974; Palmer, 1976) cited in Richards et al. (2008). Frolander-Ulf and Yates (2001) indicate that studies have shown that the more schooling an imprisoned person receives, the less likely he or she is to get in trouble upon release. Literacy programmes reduce recidivism, job-training programmes reduce recidivism, and college programmes reduce recidivism.

Travis (2011) asks the question: does education in prison reduce the risk of re-offending once inmates are released? He uses findings of a 2008 study by Dr. Gerald Gaes who reviewed four meta-analyses and found that participation in educational programmes associated with reduction in recidivism ranges from 7 to 46 percent. In a study conducted by the Correctional Education association studying recidivism rate in three states (Maryland, Ohio, and Minnesota) over a three year period found that there is a 29 percent overall reduction in the recidivism rate for the group participating in correctional educational [programmes] in comparison to those not participating Richards et al. (2008). Bayliss (2003) found that inmates studying in a university Liberal Arts programme were 75 percent free from incarceration after three years – a figure much higher than comparative groups of prisoners. Frolander-Ulf and Yates (2001) express the view that one thing that is most likely to prevent a return to prison is education.

Not only does education work in terms of helping the incarcerated persons get on with life after prison Frolander –Ulf and Yates (2001), it can also provide the link to adult education courses such as access to higher education. If education classes are provided on the condition that crime rates will subsequently be reduced, it follows that if only marginal results are produced, education could be withdrawn Bayliss (2003). The value of prison education programmes is obvious. Bayliss (2003) state that the prison education encourages negotiation and choice, tries to build self-confidence and self-worth as well as to develop critical thinking. Wong Ken Seng, Minister for Home Affairs (2000) in his opening speech, stated the aim of

prison school is “improving inmate’s educational qualifications, thereby socially levelling them up. The minister further concluded that with this special environment, the prison school would promote a culture of continuous learning, self-discipline, and motivation.

Goebel (2005) expresses the view that ex-offenders struggle to find their place in society, indicating that re-entry efforts should begin while offenders are still in correctional facilities. Inmates who address their education needs during confinement do better when they return to their families.

Challenges Faced By Students

Inmates are not immune to life’s pressures and challenges. They face daily challenges within the prison environment such as untimely searches, gang fights and lock-downs. Added to the pressure and stress is the fact that within the prison environment, it is not easy to find a neutral space. Chulp (2005) explains, “The students are permitted only a certain area of square footage in their cells”. The problem becomes compounded due to lack of ‘silence zone’ Thomas (1995).

Time is also a major problem for inmates, especially for those who are studying. Bayliss (2003) states that, everybody is competing for prisoners’ time. Education, work, vocational training, and cognitive behavioural psychological programmes are all separately run sections; each can make a demand on that ‘purposeful activity’ time, which also includes time in the gym, visits, and phone calls”. Most of the prisoners’ days are taken up with the prison routine and work periods Ashley et al. (1994). Muth (2005) give an account of a student’s experience of using available time as: “by the time I get off work, eat and shower and go through to the room, I read from eight to twelve – a four hour a night” .Studying whilst incarcerated is an extremely difficult, if not an impossible task. Added to this virtually impossible task are security issues. Woods (2005) explains that Correction is sometimes at odds with education issues. Security may deem it necessary to lock down a living unit, at worst putting a halt to all education activity for the day.

METHOD

The researchers employed qualitative phenomenological design. According to Delpont and Fouché (2005), a phenomenological study is a general description of the phenomenon as seen through the eyes of people who have experienced it first-hand. A phenomenological study is, therefore, a study that attempts to understand people’s perceptions, perspectives and understanding of a particular situation. The researchers selected five participants for the purpose of this article. Since the purpose of the research is not to generalize findings, but to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To collect the necessary data, the researchers used open-ended phenomenological interviews as this will elicit the participants’ experience, views and beliefs of their lived experience. McMillan and Schumacher (2006) express the view that phenomenological interviews permit ‘multiple meanings’ of an experience. These interviews allowed the researchers to gain deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences, and to explore the meaning the participants attach to their experiences as incarcerated undergraduate students. All the participants were provided with informed consent and the signed to demonstrate their willingness to participate in the research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this section, we present the data by first providing a short background on each participant, (Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3) Participant 4 (P4) Participant (5)) thus giving a picture of the participants and their experiences. We also use direct quotations made by the participants. We then proceed to provide a narrative of the research findings using the three emerging themes.

Participant 1

Participant 1 has been in prison for many years now, 15 years to be exact. He finds the prison environment to be a hostile environment, and being a gang member, he has had numerous altercations with prison authorities, indicating that the prison officials once beat him up.

“The prison officials once beat the xxxx (swears) out of me because I am a gang member”.

Participant 2

The prison experience of Participant 2 is one that is characterized by an environment that is unhygienic and unhealthy caused by large amounts of dust. He contends that gangsterism and gang fights are the order of the day. He explains that during these gang fights, he is affected emotionally and psychologically, leaving him to feel helpless and useless.

“When these gangsters are fighting, I’m affected psychologically and I can’t cope with my studies because when these gangsters are fighting, the police [prison officials] lock us up, and I can’t do whatever I wanted to do.”

Participant 3

Having had the opportunity to work prior to his incarceration, Participant 3 knows the value that a good education and quality qualification can have in the business world. He, however, maintains that prison is not conducive to anyone.

“Besides the fact that prison itself has never been conducive to anyone and that it’s really difficult for all of us here, it’s even worse in winter. It’s hard to study because of the cold, and if you are cold, then your concentration is gone then the only thing you can do is to study under the blankets and that makes you tired and you can even fall asleep.”

Participant 4

To maintain a positive attitude in an environment that is characterized by violence and hostility takes a unique and special type of person. Despite his dire situation, Participant 4 finds prison transforming.

“Prison experience has been a very much transforming experience considering the fact that I’m deprived my freedom.....I’m not even close to my family.....I don’t eat what I want, I don’t get what I want at the time I want it.”

Participant 5

Studying towards a BA Communication Science degree, Participant 5 feels that prison is what you make it to be. He contends,

“It depends on your view and choices you make whilst here”.

He acknowledges that prison is a difficult place to be, admitting that he gave up on life when he was sentenced to prison.

“... I was just distressed and gave up, thinking that I will die here.”

EMERGING THEMES

Prison Environment

The prison environment exerts a large amount of influence on the inmates, especially in adapting to the prison conditions. As the participants indicated:

The prison environment is hostile... you have to constantly watch your back especially if you are a gang member...no more Mr nice guy (P1).

Prison has never been conducive to anyone.....it’s difficult for each and every inmate in prison....it’s not a place for human beings ...as they have structured it to be, but it’s for punishment... (P3).

“Whenever there is a gang fight the prison has to close up...then that itself has a negative impact on me (P4).

Some inmates spend many years in this small prison community which is removed from normal society:

“I was serving a maximum sentence but have been classified a medium prisoner (P3)

“I was in prison from 2000 until now. All in all I’m 11years in prison and I’m doing 16 years” (P2).

The data also revealed that inmates face ridicule from the prison officials, who are the very people who are meant to protect, serve and help rehabilitate them so that they can become better people:

“Most prison official have an fxxx (swears) attitude towards inmates especially if you are studying. They often remark that this is prison and not a university, maybe they fear

that we will become smarter than them... it is not my fault if they don't study because of their own laziness" (P1).

"Then I have to write a request and then the request is subject to approval and disapproval. Then can't you see that my studies depends on the MOOD of someone else as to whether he decides to approve the request or disapproves it?" (P4).

"The police officials at maximum they were helping us a lot [compared to] the ones here in medium" (P2).

Within the prison environment, the inmates are not in control of their daily activities. They are subject to the rules and regulations set down by the prison officials but also to lock-downs caused by gangsterism.

In prison, I have witnessed many gang related fights, sometimes you are locked up, you have an appointment with a lecture...I'm deprived my freedom...I don't get what I want at the time I want it... (P4)

They treat you like children but expect you to behave like adults...The prison officials once beat the xxxx [swears] out of me because I am a gang member (P1).

The participants all feel that prison; albeit a socially accepted institution, is not a nice place to be and that it is not conducive for human habitation. These findings confirm what Grey (2007:2) concludes that a prison is a hostile environment designed for containment and punishment. Prison does, however, serve the purpose of deterring inmates from a life of crime.

Support Provided To The Student Inmates

In the said prison, many of the inmates depend on prison officials especially the educationist, to assist them with their studies. Without this invaluable help from the educationist who is responsible for assisting the students, their studies will not proceed smoothly. The students depend on the educationist to assist with fax services, use of the phone (for study purposes) or posting of assignments.

"I have to write a request [to use the phone] and then it is subjected to approval and disapproval" (P4).

"When I need to contact my lecturer, I should make a request and the request should be to our unit manager so that he can approve the request... I must get my own escort that will take me to the phone" (P2).

Failing to obtain the necessary help from the educationist, the students turn to other officials for help. However, this much needed help is not always available.

"The thing is when coming to work, some of them do not do their work effectively and efficiently that makes it hard for us because now and then we need help, we cannot do things for ourselves without their help..."(P3).

There is also evidence that suggests that within this prison environment, the prison does provide some form of support for student inmates. At this particular prison, provision is made for student inmates to help them cope with their special study needs. The prison provides a cell for students who are studying at tertiary level as one participant indicated:

The cell is called C 6... Everyone who is studying in prison with an institution of higher learning is housed there, so am I. Basically that cell serves like a residence (P4).

Although the prison does provide support to the students, there are those who feel the prison does not provide any support. Participant 1 feels that support from prison is “non-existent”.

Within these living arrangements, the inmates residing in this cell organise themselves so that they can be able to live in harmony, as Participant 2 indicated:

“We have set our own rules and study times”.

This view is supported by Participant 3 who states:

“We have worked out times to study in the morning; it’s from 9 am to 12 pm and then again from 4pm to 7pm”.

Although there are those who study, some student inmates also display a culture of anti-learning, and this causes a disturbance in the cell.

“You can never find it very optimal to study. There is so much noise, disturbances internally and externally sometimes... internal noise which you cannot avoid ... the external noises you cannot avoid... Inmates have a tendency to say this is prison” (P5)

When participant 1 was asked about how the prison supported him in his studies, his response was:

“Prison is not designed for studying”.

“Not all of us are taking our studies very seriously”P5

Motivation And Value Of Studies

The last theme deals with the reflection of the participant in their experience of learning behind bars. All participants realise that they are given a second chance, an opportunity to study and gain some knowledge and an opportunity to improve their behaviour. As already indicated by one of the participants, the students in C-6 motivate one another, but some of these students find their motivation from beyond the prison walls. Participant 5 explains:

“I had a chat with my gran and then he told me that I was very good in jotting speeches. Then I thought that communication science will be best for me, so now I’m pursuing a BA communication science degree.”

The participant 2 indicated:

Besides that I read a book by John Maxwell which is about success which was very much motivational”.

Inspired by his “dream”, the Participant 2 remains committed to his studies. The Participant 3 motivated by a childhood dream of one day becoming a doctor. He attaches great value to studies, indicating that he wants to live a crime-free life and wants to work so that he could support his children. The participant 4 is motivated by the expectation of finding suitable employment and by the support he obtains from his parents. He is also motivated by regret of not having studied a long time ago.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this article was to gain an understanding of the experiences and challenges of undergraduate students, studying behind bars. The research site was a South African Correctional Centre. It was evident from the findings that there has been a paradigm shift in the corrections environment from imprisonment and punishment to rehabilitation. The data clearly indicated that inmates are, indeed, able to study while incarcerated. These findings are in line with those of Mashego (2011); Van Heerden (2011), Travis (2011) and Ashley et al. (1994). The participants in the study experienced the prison environment as hostile facing many challenges which impeded on their studies. These challenges included factors such as an anti-learning culture, unsupportive prison officials, noise and a lack of an effective means of communication with the University. These findings confirm findings by authors such as Bayliss (2003), Frolander Ulf and Yates (2001) and Thomas (1995).

The participants in the study felt that the prison authorities did not support them in their studies; this is despite the fact that the prison authorities provide a cell, some tables and chair for the exclusive use of the undergraduate students. The individual responses indicated that the students were dissatisfied with the support they received. On the surface, it appears that the students are content with the situation, but the prison environment impacts negatively on their studies. The anti-learning culture and negative attitudes of prison officials demotivate the students. However, within this environment and despite the hostile situation, the data showed that the students are motivated and committed. Some students motivate each other while others receive their inspiration from beyond the prison walls.

CONCLUSION

The participants all experience the prison environments as negative and indicate that this negativity has an impact on their studies. Having adjusted to the prison situation, they engage themselves in a self-rehabilitation process by undertaking undergraduate studies. In retrospect, the participants are aware of the benefits contained personally and professionally by this learning experience. The students attach great value to their studies and hope to use it to secure employment once released from prison. The value of this article lies in its unique setting, at a Corrections Facility where offenders are sent as a punishment for their crimes. The data presented in this article serves as evidence to show that not all inmates are illiterate, hardened criminals who do not want to change their behaviour. In fact, it suggests the opposite that inmates want to change their behaviour and need all the help and support they

can get. Muth (2005:35) postulates that the prisoners display an extremely diverse range of abilities and this article is an indication of such abilities.

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