

## The Many Faces of Prison Education

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The educational process that occurs in prison takes many forms at San Quentin State Prison, in California, the institution where I am incarcerated. We have the traditional correctional education program, where prisoners who show a need to improve their academic skills are channeled into classes shortly after a committee of staff members classifies them. To determine which prisoners will be routed into education, a standardized test is given when the men enter the institution. If the resulting test score is less than a skill level of grade twelve, the individual will be placed automatically in school; if he can prove he has a high school diploma or GED, he will be allowed to leave education for another work assignment. Attending school is mandatory for those men who do not have a diploma or GED. For the most part they will remain in school until their release from prison or until they pass a GED test. We also have voluntary education programs that meet at night. These non-traditional programs utilize prisoner tutors who work mainly in one-on-one situations with other prisoners to help them advance their academic skills. There is also a college program available at San Quentin. Individuals can earn an Associate Arts degree while they serve their sentence by taking what are essentially the same courses in general education that students at an outside two-year college would take to earn their AA degree.

I am a forty-nine year old first-term prisoner, with a Bachelor degree in sociology. I have been incarcerated at San Quentin for two years. For the first six months I was a teacher's aide in a basic education class. I have been a volunteer tutor in a GED study program for almost two years, and in a program called Project R.E.A.C.H. for twenty-one months. Both of these programs are peer-tutoring forms of education.

For two reasons I do not intend to place blame on any institution, department, or person for whatever shortcomings exist in the educational process that takes place in San Quentin. First, I am committed to trying to improve the skill level of the men with whom I work, and I believe that trying to place blame is counterproductive to achieving that goal. Second, I do not have enough information available to me to be able to make valid criticisms of why those shortcomings may exist. In my experience, I have seen a great deal of support for all educational programs that are in place at San Quentin, not only from those directly involved in education (i.e., teachers and education department

administrators) but from the warden, associate wardens, and other officials. I sincerely believe the educational process is valued highly in this institution, primarily because educating prisoners has proven to be a huge factor in helping to reduce the rate of recidivism (Cecil et al., 2000; Harer, 1995).

### THE LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL PRISON EDUCATION

Traditional education in prison has much in common with public education as it exists in the larger society. In both cases it is a rather expensive proposition. Buildings and their maintenance, supplies and equipment, and salaries for teachers and administrators add up to an enormous amount of money on an annual basis. Divide that total by the number of students being taught per year and you will come up with a surprisingly large sum per capita. It is common to read about the lack of funding for education in the larger society, so certainly one would not realistically expect the situation to be any different in prison. In fact, one would expect the public to be even less concerned about prison education because prisoners are viewed by society primarily in a punitive way. While there are undoubtedly some citizens who understand that prison education is the best way to reduce recidivism (thereby saving millions in tax dollars), there are many more members of society who are not particularly anxious to see their tax dollars spent on educating people they believe should be punished.

Mandatory education in the prison system is also subject to the same factors inherent in any large bureaucratic system that operates in society. In that sense, prison education is a microcosm of public education. Large educational systems are typically slow to recognize the need for changes in their methodology, and are even slower when it comes to implementing change once its necessity is recognized. The teachers I have worked with are intelligent, caring, and dedicated educators, but they are constrained by a bureaucracy that dictates policies they must follow.

Any educational environment requires that there be regular meetings amongst instructors and administrative staff to discuss problems, goals, and upcoming issues relevant to their specific responsibilities. This is true in prison as well, however, in prison these meetings take away from class time. School is essentially year-round since there are new students coming into the system all the time. Because of this there are no breaks or "vacations" when these important meetings might take place without class time being shortened.

This same factor applies to monthly and quarterly paperwork being completed. The bureaucratic policies result in teachers being required to do a large amount of paperwork. While this goes along with the job of being a teacher in any school, there is extra paperwork involved in being an educator in prison because of security concerns. The time spent doing that work ultimately takes time away from educating students. In addition to the paperwork for security, at the end of each month there is one day taken off from class so the teacher and teacher's aide can complete the paperwork that is required by the state. At the end of each quarter, that one day stretches to two days because there is a tremendous amount of quarterly work that must be submitted as well. Students are held to attendance standards (just as students are in public schools), and they receive certification credits and grades, all of which involves a lot of records to document performance. Because this is a prison, records must be completed on a regular basis and involve far more information than would be required in an outside school setting.

There are other factors that limit the degree to which traditional prison education can be effective. In San Quentin, there are no classes for special education; even students with significant learning disabilities find themselves being "mainstreamed" into regular classes which may present great obstacles to their ability to absorb the lessons being taught. While this may prevent these students from being stigmatized, it also limits their academic advancement in dramatic ways. We do have an English as a Second Language (ESL) class here, which is helpful for the men who attend it until their English skills improve enough to be placed in a class where English is the primary language. We also have a high percentage of prisoners who are serving short terms for parole violations and may only be in a traditional education program for two to four months, hardly enough time to learn comprehensively about even one subject let alone several. For these men it is important to try to convince them that they should seek out adult education programs upon their release from prison so they will continue to build upon what they have learned.

The reality of institutional security issues also has a dramatic impact on the effectiveness of prison education. Lockdowns (where prisoners are confined to their living area), institutional recalls (where prisoners must report to those living areas, at least temporarily), and foggy weather all shut classes down. These situations occur regularly. Therefore, learning continuity, which is such an essential factor in the success of any educational endeavor, is interrupted. Students who learn something one day may have to learn it again after several

days of the school being closed. It is difficult under these conditions to build upon the learning process in an effective way.

Teachers must also participate in the inmate classification process, which takes more time away from the classroom. Thus, in addition to security issues, it is not uncommon for a class to be closed so that an instructor can be utilized to administer the standardized tests given to new arrivals to the prison to determine their academic skill level. Of course, testing is seen as a necessary part of the process that determines who will be placed in a traditional education program, but it contributes to valuable class time being lost in the process.

San Quentin and many other prisons offer a three-week class known as "pre-release." It is designed to help men who are in the final few months of their terms prepare for life on the outside. It has been shown to reduce the rate of recidivism dramatically (Shand, 1996). Several outside people come in to help the men with this preparation, including job counselors and parole officers. Long-term prisoners also give talks to the men in pre-release class about things they need to avoid doing so they do not keep coming back to prison. Since the class lasts for just three weeks, usually it is canceled only for security reasons; however, if the regular teacher cannot be there another teacher is forced to cancel her or his regular class to substitute for the pre-release instructor. This, of course, cuts down on the time that the regular class has together.

Since San Quentin has so many men here for short terms there is a constant turnover of students in any given class. It is not uncommon for a class of twenty-seven men to have five or more students leave and be replaced by new students each month. That kind of rapid turnover tends to be disruptive to the learning process for several reasons. First, a new arrival cannot be expected to just pick up immediately on material that may have been presented several weeks before the student arrived. Second, the teacher is always in a state of adjusting to new students, which is a challenge in itself. Third, because there is constant turnover, the class members are unable to get in that "comfort zone" of learning that lends itself so well to the educational process.

In addition to the problems posed by the high rate of turnover in a class, quite often there is a wide range of skill levels in a given class. While each class is, in theory, supposed to accommodate students with roughly the same skill level, in reality students are put into open spots in classes as they become available. Students at the most basic level of education are almost always correctly placed in the proper class, but it is not unusual to find students with a higher skill level in there with them. In that situation the material being presented

can be too hard for some and too easy for others. In both of these cases the educational process is then inhibited because some students are bored and others are overwhelmed by the lessons being taught. This is not to say the same phenomena does not occur in all educational systems, but a prison environment is already a place that is not particularly conducive to the learning process.

Classes in the traditional prison education system share another situation in common with classes in outside schools: There are some students in class who are highly motivated to learn and others who do not care about learning at all. The difference is that in a prison setting there are already in place mitigating factors that work against attempts to motivate students to learn. First, prisoners in general do not place a high value on education. Motivated students are not surrounded by an atmosphere that stimulates learning. Second, although we have a library, it is quite small, and access to it is limited. Third, the environments where prisoners are housed tend to be very noisy places where it is difficult to study. Fourth, social and recreational activities such as playing cards take place in living areas where it is easy to become distracted from studying.

On the whole, traditional education in a correctional institution is an enormous challenge. The trouble is that so many of the problems the school faces are inherent to the realities of prison life in and of itself. That is not to say there are no ways in which things could be improved upon. Surely there are, but certain aspects of life in prison will probably never change. In many ways the volunteer education programs that are offered in San Quentin can be seen as an attempt at improving upon the traditional system of correctional education. I believe that those of us who are involved as tutors in these programs see ourselves working with the people who are professional educators so we may provide a valuable supplemental component to the educational process that takes place in San Quentin.

#### **VOLUNTARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND PEER LEARNING**

As mentioned previously, I have been a volunteer tutor at San Quentin in two peer tutoring programs since shortly after I arrived. These programs are the GED study program and Project R.E.A.C.H., an acronym for Reach for Education, Achievement, and Change with Help. The men who attend these programs do so voluntarily. They are, in general, more highly motivated to learn than is the average student who is placed in a mandatory education class.

Each of these programs is coordinated by outside sponsors who volunteer their time to tutor, support, and encourage the men who participate in the programs. In my experience, these outside sponsors are almost always involved in some aspect of education beyond what they do in San Quentin. In the voluntary education program they are frequently teachers (currently employed or retired) or people involved with literacy work. In the college program, they are college instructors or students. In both cases, these are people who firmly believe in the importance and value of education. Their sense of concern and their commitment to helping these men stimulates the learning process, in part because the men are very appreciative of the fact that these outside people are there strictly to help them with no financial rewards involved. This may sound strange to some people, but the reality of prison life is such that outside volunteers who come to prison to help prisoners in any capacity are highly respected and well liked for giving of their time so generously.

The peer-tutoring programs here have advantages over traditional correctional education classes in several ways. Perhaps the single most important advantage is that the tutor works one-on-one (or occasionally in small groups of two or three) to help others improve their skills. This enables the teaching process to take place at the skill level of the individual student, which greatly enhances the learning process. Even when tutors work with more than one student at a time in these programs, they always work with students who are at almost exactly the same skill level in the particular subject. In fact, sometimes the students will help each other by holding study sessions on their own time, which further enhances the learning process; indeed, it makes students into peer tutors, so the whole process is very democratic and self-generating. It has been well documented in studies on education that students who receive a significant amount of individual attention achieve a much greater level of academic success than those who do not. In a traditional classroom setting there is one teacher, and one or sometimes two teacher's aides to work with twenty to twenty-seven students. This does not allow for the kind of one-on-one time given to the students who attend the voluntary education programs. Of course, those men in the traditional education classes are encouraged to explore the voluntary education options available to them; in fact, several individuals are involved in both mandatory and voluntary education in San Quentin.

The voluntary education programs that are run here also allow students to borrow learning materials, which they can take to their living areas for personal

study. In addition, tutors in voluntary education can often coordinate additional time to work with students away from the program for more one-on-one education. Neither of those options exists in the traditional correctional educational setting. Of course, lockdowns, institutional recalls, and certain weather conditions close down voluntary education too, but since students in those programs have study materials checked out they can use that time to work at their studies on their own, or in small groups, if they so choose. In dormitory living areas a tutor may even live in the same dormitory as his students so both student and tutor can use the extra time for educational purposes in the same way that they would in the nightly peer tutoring programs.

The environment in which voluntary education takes place is also quite different from that of the traditional prison classroom setting. From a physical point of view, it is much quieter with fewer interruptions than those that occur in a mandatory education class. That lends itself well to an effective learning process because tutors and students can concentrate better in that situation. Academics are also more highly valued by the students in these programs than in traditional classrooms because these students are there voluntarily with the specific goal of improving their skills. This creates an atmosphere in which the learning process can thrive because these students take their education very seriously. In addition, voluntary education programs at San Quentin require a minimal amount of official paperwork; they are not hampered nearly as much by the bureaucratic requirements placed on the traditional educational systems. That allows these programs to be focused almost entirely on the learning processes of the students who participate in them.

Another aspect of voluntary education at San Quentin that might be difficult for an outsider to understand fully is the powerful bond that is often formed between a tutor and his student. Of course, bonding between tutors and students anywhere is not uncommon, but in a prison environment it can be magnified dramatically. First, both the tutor and student are prisoners who are subjected to the same form of treatment on a daily basis. That in itself gives them much in common. Secondly, the level of mutual respect that exists between tutor and student is probably higher than one would find in most other situations. An isolated social environment like prison tends to emphasize the importance of mutual respect, so members of that social environment will get along with each other. Respect is *very* important in prison. Without it a prisoner will have an endless stream of problems coming his way. Because respect is highly

valued, mutual respect between a tutor and his student takes on a special meaning for both of them. It signifies that they appreciate and empathize with each other's predicament.

Third, there is a sense on the part of both individuals of wanting to succeed against what can sometimes feel like overwhelming odds against prisoners. The rate of recidivism is so high in the California Department of Corrections that even individuals with a lot going for them tend to worry about making it in the outside world when they are released. Also, because the overall prison environment is not particularly conducive to the pursuit of academics, there is a heightened sense of awareness about the importance of acquiring new skills to help improve chances of success out in society. This in turn increases the level of motivation on the part of both tutor and student to see to it that as much progress as possible is made by the student while he is incarcerated. The strong bond that is forged under these circumstances is often very special and unique. As a tutor, I have been privileged to experience this. In fact, that special bond, combined with the thrill a tutor feels when his student grasps something he never understood before, is the primary reward I receive for being a tutor in San Quentin.

Another feature of voluntary education that contrasts sharply with the features of mandatory education is that the former is very goal-oriented. The individuals in the GED study program are working towards earning their GED fairly soon. A GED is also a goal for some men in Project R.E.A.C.H. Other students in Project R.E.A.C.H. are trying to improve their skill level to the point where they will eventually be capable of learning the material they must know in order to attempt to pass the GED. This type of goal orientation helps strengthen the learning process in these programs for the same reasons that being goal-oriented in any endeavor tends to reinforce the process by which we achieve our goals. Primarily, being goal oriented makes people focus sharply on an activity and achieve more than people who do not set goals for themselves.

The voluntary peer tutoring classes at San Quentin meet at night in the same building where general education and college classes are held. Seeing students attend these college level courses often serves as a source of motivation for the individuals who are trying to earn their GED. They know that after they acquire their GED they can pursue a college education as well. That provides them with another goal they can try to achieve while they are incarcerated.



### A COLLEGE PROGRAM FOR PRISONERS

The college program offered at San Quentin consists of basically the same general education courses that one would be required to take in order to earn an Associate Arts degree at a two-year college program outside of prison. The individuals who participate in this program are essentially earning their AA degree with no financial cost to themselves or their family. The books used in the classes are high quality and are free of charge as well. A wide variety of courses are offered, and for those who may need to build up their skill level first, there are not-for-credit math and English classes also offered. The director of this program, and the professors and teacher aides who teach the classes are intelligent, dynamic people who give of their time freely—literally without any pay—and generously. They are very caring human beings. Of course, San Quentin's proximity to a large urban area with many colleges and universities nearby most certainly facilitates the process of finding qualified professors and teacher aides who are willing to donate their time to this program. Thus, there is a relatively large pool of highly-qualified potential volunteers that can be chosen by the director of the program. In addition to that, the San Francisco area has a time-honored tradition of being open-minded toward aiding individuals who are incarcerated to turn their lives in a positive direction for the future. Having said that, it should be noted that the director of the program and the professors uphold very high standards for the students enrolled in college courses when it comes to grades and course credits. Students in college classes at San Quentin work hard and put in long hours to earn their AA degrees, just as students do on the outside at their respective colleges.

The college program also benefits from a high level of support within the prison administration. The warden and associate wardens are strongly committed to the programs' success, and they have facilitated its growth in every way possible. In addition to that, the community resource manager strongly supports the program and puts in many hours to see that it runs smoothly and properly.

Aside from the regular classes that students in college courses attend, there are also nightly study halls if individuals need help with a specific aspect of one or more of their courses. These study halls are in many ways similar to some lab classes that one might find on a regular college campus. In prison, these study halls are probably even more beneficial to those who attend them because they provide an academic atmosphere in which individuals can study

and exchange ideas, something that is difficult to find elsewhere in the prison environment. Again, it should be noted here that prison living areas are not conducive to the pursuit of academic study. Interestingly enough though, some individuals I have met used the adverse study conditions as a form of motivation to study even harder for their classes than they might at an outside college campus.

The benefits to society that are accrued when people pursue higher education have been proven time and time again, so it is not necessary to list them here (Bonfanti, 1992; Lynes, 1992). It is, however, of particular importance to point out the potential benefits society reaps when prisoners pursue a college education. One of these is the dramatic reduction in the rate of recidivism that takes place when a prisoner receives his AA degree. Perhaps more importantly, we should remember that the acquisition of that degree provides a jumping off point for a parolee to continue his education or find gainful employment upon his release. Now, admittedly, the number of college students at San Quentin comprises only a small fraction of the prison's population, but those students are in many ways positive role models for the others serving time here. This is true not only because they are pursuing academics but also because they are providing an example of how an individual can turn his life in a positive direction while he is incarcerated. Even if getting a college education is not a goal for other prisoners, seeing the advantages of learning a trade, a college education, or other worthwhile life skills may ultimately influence individuals who are not initially interested.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

San Quentin State Prison is an institution that is quite old and well-known; therefore, we may benefit more than other prisons do from outside people who volunteer their time to come to work with prisoners. I believe it is certainly the case in the voluntary education programs that we have available to those who choose to participate in them.

If I could change just one aspect of the educational system it would be to have a very large, quiet study room made widely available for several hours a day to anyone who wanted to work in a positive educational environment. I believe that alone would aid the learning process in a dramatic way.

There are clearly many men in San Quentin—as well as many men who have paroled out into society from here—who have benefited greatly from the

education they received during their incarceration. This is true for men who have participated in both the mandatory and voluntary education programs. The goal for the educational system of San Quentin should be to improve the quality of education for prisoners who participate in that system, while working within the realities that are a part of prison life. In addition to that, the voluntary education programs should try to reach out to more prisoners in a meaningful way so that they will see the value in taking advantage of the educational opportunities that are available to them while they serve their time. I hope to continue to be a part of that process for the rest of my prison term. I would like to leave San Quentin knowing that in some small way I helped to improve the system of education for the individuals who will pass through here in the future.

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