

The Effects of Educational Programs in Prison Towards Overall Rehabilitation:

The Observations and Perspective of a Prisoner

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This essay represents Christopher Malec's original research and writing, with slight final edits completed by Wendy Hinshaw on his behalf.

EXCHANGE FOR CHANGE: THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION AND ELIMINATING MISCONCEPTIONS

Twice, and sometimes even three times a week, Kathie Klarreich enters the front entry gate of Dade Correctional Institution to teach creative writing. Armed with a see-through plastic carrying case filled with pencils, paper, and the day's assignments and handouts, she's ready to bash the monotonous lives of the prisoners with stimulating reads and intriguing prompts to get the creative juices flowing, something which prisoners are rarely afforded in the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC). Ms. Klarreich is quite the facilitator though, as she goes the extra

mile for people incarcerated; there are a total of fourteen classes spread through five institutions that teach creative writing, thanks to her. She started an organization called Exchange for Change for the purpose of bringing and teaching her own well-documented skills to prisoners. She originally started in a women's prison and later expanded to male prisons. After her organization started receiving support, she was able to employ facilitators to teach multiple classes at different levels, for different things including Creative Writing 101, Creative Writing Advanced, Spanish Creative Writing, Poetry, Debate, Journalism, Rhetoric, and Writing Exchange.

Writing Exchange is by far the most unique, and having been a benefactor of the class, I can express some of the magic it casts on a prisoner's dull existence. The exchange occurs between the inmates and students from either a college or a high school. There is an absolute adherence to anonymity, so everyone is secure on both ends, but that also gives everyone the opportunity to express themselves freely without worry of being identified. The exchange usually begins with a story or a prompt, which both partners read and simultaneously respond to. The finished pieces are then exchanged for each partner to reply to. In the replies, we are able to relate, give personal advice, show sympathy, and express ourselves in a very human way. Once the replies are exchanged, there is an opportunity to answer and say farewell before switching partners and starting the process again. But what can occur in that short time is sometimes unbelievable; the connection made can be life-altering on either side, and more than anything, another misconception is broken.

For the prisoner, many of whom have limited contact with the outside world, the ability to give honest advice and feedback is a chance to have his/her voice *heard*. And ten times out of ten, prisoners use it in a positive manner, awakening and solidifying some of the rehabilitative processes that began with their intention to join a betterment program. Further, the reception they receive from their partner helps minimize some of the fears they have of returning to a cold world full of cold shoulders. The students are something like some of the people they will encounter, and that can alleviate the stigmatization many of us feel.

For the student, aside from being accredited for another class, they get to see that the prisoner is really human. The fact that these students may someday be a future lawmaker, prosecutor, lawyer, judge, congressman, or be a part of any branch of government is then complemented by *real experience* with actual prisoners; the people they may affect the most with their decisions. They've had actual interaction with the people they can either hurt or help. And their choices speak for themselves. Some of the students have even ended up in the Exchange for Change office seeking work or a way to help because of what they experienced in the program.

So in a very real way, Exchange for Change goes the extra mile by incorporating more than just a facilitator to help rehabilitate the prisoner. Multiple people involve themselves wholeheartedly in the movement that is changing views on both sides. Exchange for Change is bridging a gap not just between minds, but hearts as well.

Why aren't programs like this in every prison? And why don't more prisoners push for them?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WILLING STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Aside from the basic classes provided, like adult basic education courses that prepare prisoners for the GED and English as a second language, many prisoners in the state of Florida must seek out either religious services or re-entry programs for any kind of positive stimulation. Re-entry classes and vocational courses (if the institution has any, as they are rare) are generally reserved for people with three years or less remaining on their sentence and are therefore not available to the people serving lengthy sentences. The problem with this factor is that the people with the lengthy sentences usually want to join the classes the most, just to get away from the compound's negativity, if nothing else.

Betterment programs however, are not so strict when it comes to classroom rosters, and they offer a wide panorama of interesting subjects to be learned. I've seen such courses as Creative Writing, the Life Course from Prison Life Inc., Civics 101 and 201, Financial

Happiness, Debate, Rhetoric, and Poetry facilitated by outside volunteers. There have also been classes to learn Italian, General Knowledge, Horticulture, Spanish, Money Matters, and Art, facilitated by inmates qualified to teach the specific fundamentals of the subject.

However, classroom size is limited, and the number often decreases through the semester, sometimes due to disciplinary measures or transfers. Those who do make it to the end receive a certificate for completion and attendance, and perhaps a spot in the next course if it is a class that progressively levels up. But mainly, the inmate's biggest reward is the skill and knowledge earned through dedication. Betterment certificates are arguably worth more than any trade certification available, as there is no real incentive to obtain one of these certificates other than one's real interest in transformation of skill and character. To trudge through the thick aggravations of security, extended counts, and share time with other inmates who would normally be avoided is an extra stress that many people would shun altogether, regardless of any education provided. And yet, the prisoners and facilitators alike muscle through in order to get the job done. This level of dedication is a testament to the development of character and determination of the individual's desire to change for the better. There is no incentive other than a new perspective and abstract tools to apply to the objectivity of everyday life.

However, a stick in the spokes keeping this wheel from turning lies in the fact that inmate facilitators do not have all the skills or desire to teach all these courses, and when they do, they are not given the resources or permission to do so. Thus, volunteers are a prevalent need due to an extreme shortage in availability and funding.

THE NEED FOR VOLUNTEER FACILITATORS: THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRISONER

Entering a prison can be a frightening idea to any free-world person, especially with the mainstream media's depiction of what takes place behind the confines of 15-foot fences topped with razor-wire. Most people picture the inhabitants as a thousand hardened faces perched

above tattoo-filled bodies full of anger, hatred, and evil. What the volunteers facilitating programs find is quite another story altogether.

In a very real sense, volunteers see the prisoners for what they are: Human Beings. The sense of which we are deprived of on a regular basis. Officers refer to us as “inmate,” “convict,” “prisoner,” or our last name when they decide to keep it professional. When they don’t, the range of titles varies from among “dipshit,” “asshole,” racially derogatory or sexually preferenced derogatory names, to pretty much all things profane. The demeaning treatment is somewhat akin to the way I picture slaves being treated prior to Amendment XIII of the U.S. Constitution taking effect.

But sadly, officers are not the only perpetrators. Other prisoners are a big part of the dehumanizing taking place. Sex offenders of any kind are stigmatized, belittled, and victimized by other prisoners. Homosexuals are avoided, discriminated against, and viewed as disease carriers; commonly referred to as “punks,” “boogers,” and “fags.” Anyone who smokes spice (synthetic marijuana), or partakes of other illicit substances is looked at like a bum or filth, taking on the identifiers of “junkie,” “baser,” or “_ _-head” according to their vice. And if you do none of the above, you’re a “mark” or a “square,” i.e., a “good boy,” and therefore liable to snitch or not “keep it 100.” In other words, if you’re not doing what everyone else is, you’re biased against; if you do, you still are.

Added to this already tense atmosphere is (another factor to be included at certain Florida prisons) the consumption of psychotropic medication and earning the title of being a “bug.” The general mindset at “psych institutions” is that if the person you are talking to is not “psych,” then they think you are, and therefore the air of communication is even more untrusting. What if you lived life suspecting that every person you talked to was mentally ill? Can you imagine going through everyday life in that state of mind? It cannot be healthy, and arguably, can lead to real mental health issues.

In some ways, for those participants of direct betterment programs, the volunteers are the only reminder that we *are human*. They call us by our first names, talk to us about things outside of prison, and

take the time to teach us on individual basis when they can. They encourage, motivate, and congratulate us on our progress. They bring their own resources, give us their time, and even show up to our graduations in place of the family and friends who are unpermitted to attend.

It is no wonder then, that these people become an inspiration to the prisoner. That is why it is they who get mentioned in the graduation speeches and are new topics of conversation for classmates and other prisoners on the compound. Inmates even lend the volunteers credit for being the reason that they stay out of confinement out of fear of being taken out of the class and losing their spot. In doing so, the volunteers are reawakening what corrections should be: a sense of responsibility, decision-making skills, and learning to prioritize what matters most. It is actual rehabilitation taking place, and all the volunteer does is show up and *care*. Care, for once, is provided to the prisoner where it did not exist before, causing a change in character to occur.

If care is the basic principle that inspires rehabilitation in a person, and just one person's care can affect many, what can many people working towards the rehabilitative process accomplish?

THE PRISONER'S PERSPECTIVE

From my cluttered desk in the back of the law library where I've been assigned to work the last four and a half years of my life, I'm in a beneficial place to observe the things going on around me: a position most anyone in prison cherishes. Aside from being able to spot trouble, arguments, or even unfavorable staff, there are many other things that come into focus from this highly valued job assignment within the FDC: access to the newest court rulings; first dibs on forms and motions that aren't provided in the housing area; and above all, the ability to put the most hours of work and focus on one's own case. There is also the privilege of getting the pick of the litter from the bleak magazine racks, novels-sparse bookshelves, and the outdated behind-the-counter reference section of the general library attached to our section. And, within the last couple of years, easy access to betterment programs.

Through grievances, case law, and the literature cycling through the law library, we witness not only the development of prison culture, but also the Department of Corrections as a systematic whole and the compound atmosphere we inhabit. We then mix this in with our own experience of living in this subculture. We handle disciplinary reports, noting which person is actively engaged in their case instead of prison temptations, and live with each other without much privacy. This puts us at an observational advantage to see how these betterment programs affect those who participate with us.

And that perspective is what is mainly missing from the large part of decarceration movements, prison reformation proposals, and mainstream prison talk—no one is talking from the inside. Yet the minds in here can provide the most insights on the perspectives, behavioral traits, and philosophies built inside these walls. How do you know these programs are working for the prisoners? Ask other prisoners. After all, where little other activities exist to distract attention (especially in Florida), most prisoners spend quite some time watching each other.

The education building where these classes take place is located in the same building as the library. Having constant contact with staff and facilitators regularly makes it quite easy for those working in this position to get enrolled in the programs that are offered. Nevertheless, in order for the full potential of these programs to come about in a punishing democracy, there is a bigger question to be pondered: Is educating a prisoner going to help when he feels he'll never get the opportunity to apply what he's learned?

THE BIGGER PICTURE: SENTENCING SCHEMES; WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF SEEKING REHABILITATION WHEN NO OPPORTUNITY FOR ITS APPLICATION EXISTS?

From the last statistic I could locate, in 2016 there were 13,005 life sentences being served in Florida prisons; 8,919 of which were life-without-parole sentences (Nellis). With a population of roughly 100,000 prisoners, that means about one in every eight and a half prisoners has a life sentence. And "Life" in Florida for a person with no option for parole means just that: Life. Parole was abolished in

1983 for all crimes, but as statutory anomaly left it available to those charged with capital offenses (murder and rape mainly) all the way until 1995. Of those still parole-eligible in the system (more than 4,000), there are less than twenty paroled each year. As Nellis notes, “virtual life sentences” are a “third category of life sentence which refers to a term of imprisonment that a person is unlikely to survive if carried out in full.” Nellis reports that 1,161 Florida prisoners are serving a virtual life sentence. This rounds out to as much as 15% of the Florida prison population judicially destined to die behind bars. With an appeal process in which seventy-some-odd percent of direct appeals lose, and every stage of litigation afterwards finds the percentages of relief dropping, lifers in Florida are short of one thing: Hope.

So what do the prisoners do? They come try to live life on the inside and make the best of it according to their vices. They do drugs, smoke cigarettes, drink homemade alcohol, steal, gamble, join gangs, and embrace sexual activity with other prisoners unprotected. Because in their eyes, its justified by saying, “that’s how I do my time.” And if they feel that they have no hope in overturning a life sentence, who can convince them otherwise?

The problem starts to come in when the short-timers begin to pick up the habits of their newfound “homeboys” so they don’t seem like a “square” or a “mark,” and thus become subject to some form of victimization in the prison setting. These habits are then brought to the streets and planted right back into the community. And so by Florida keeping its attention on releasing fewer criminals and not putting focus into releasing more rehabilitated men, it’s doing one thing: *releasing more criminals*. Criminals breeding, infecting voraciously.

That’s why Florida has the third largest prison population in the United States, with more prisons per square mile than colleges, and some of the harshest sentencing policies in the nation. Before the 1996 S.T.O.P (Stop Turning Out Prisoners) Act, the mindset towards prisoners was “just let them out without worrying about educating them,” and afterwards it turned to “just keep them in without educating them.” Our legislative bodies and voter groups

have still not figured out that you must *educate and release* if a lasting change is to take place, rehabilitation accomplished, and communities strengthened.

Norway gives us the best example to follow; kindergarten teachers must hold a Master's degree and correctional officers must train for *three years* to be certified, compared to the six months it takes in Florida. In places like Norway, and most of Europe as a whole, it is illegal to sentence anyone to life without an opportunity for release. Prisoners in Norway are treated like people, given privileges unheard of in U.S. prisons, and given a proper education. Yet, in spite of prisoners being permitted privileges that would be considered a security threat in Florida prisons, Norway boasts a mere *14 percent recidivism rate* compared to Florida's 85 percent. Numbers don't lie, but some politicians do.

Florida has the third largest prison population in the U.S. and so far has provided little relief from its harsh sentences. Without retroactive sentencing reform, I feel it will be extremely difficult to change the mindset of at least one out of every eight prisoners; the ratio now serving Life in Florida. And if there's one thing I've realized from my cluttered little desk in the law library, it's that it is not enough to change the way a prisoner thinks. The way we think is rooted in the way we feel. Incarcerated or not, we're people too. And if a change is needed, society must shift the way we feel in here. Then watch the thinking processes come alive. But we need hope.

Hope and opportunity.

WORKS CITED

Nellis, Ashley. *Still Life: America's Increasing Use of Life and Long-Term Sentences*. The Sentencing Project, May 3, 2017. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/still-life-americas-increasing-use-life-long-term-sentences/#XI.%20Appendices>

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