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PRISON EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

College level education is provided by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice to inmates on site at the Riker's Island Correctional Facility in New York City. This undergraduate satellite program is examined in relation to the opportunities for de-institutionalization, re-socialization, and possible effects on "prisonization." The conditions and potential of "education behind bars" for rehabilitation, student development, and personal reorientation are discussed through an analysis of the emergence of an innovative instructional environment not directly controlled by the official nor subcultural systems of the institution. In this context, the educational uses of the "sociological imagination" become part of a critical social process.

"The world is a ghetto. Full of violence
in the streets
And death is a fear, that all men must
meet
But if life were a thing that money could
buy, the poor
people could not live and the damn rich
would not die. The World is a Ghetto!"

(Riker's Island student's Christmas card)

Prisons and Inmates:

It is questionable whether anyone can say what the function of our prison system really is. Keeping people behind bars removes them temporarily from the streets and is thought to be unpleasant and punishing. "Doing time" is more likely to be boring, depressing, and quietly infuriating. Our prisoners when released feel unjustly punished, abused by a corrupt system, and repay us for our efforts with a 70% recidivist rate. Prisons do not rehabilitate; do not deter; and punish inconsistently and unjustly. Most prisons are administered in violation of state regulations. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, staff corruption, drug and sexual abuse, physical violence, and exploitation of everyday facts of life.

For sociologists, the prison represents a formal organization. The prison is identified as organized by an official administrative formalization of rules and regimented activities. Similarly, an informal infrastructure of emergent norms and adaptations primarily developed by an inmate subculture has also been identified. Together these two social systems operate to maintain institutional order, a degree of inmate security, and facilitate everyday activities. This "total institution" approach recognizes the exercise of social limits and controls on a variety of work, recreation, domestic, and personal activities that make life within a prison manageable, predictable, and occasionally rewarding.

Typically, the separate functioning or subtle interaction of these two systems is marked by patterns of activity that involve the distribution of official and unofficial rewards and makes possible the "marketing" and purchasing of commodities and contraband in the token economy of the institution. Similarly, inmates within prison develop information exchange networks, various social

stratifications and subgroup formations, and establish methods for the rationalization of violence, penalty, and revenge.

While these systems do produce a certain stability and order, explosive conflict and crisis within the total institution of the prison are chronic. At best, conditions of prison life are merely tolerable; at worst, they are destructively repressive and violent. In any case, imprisonment is totally ineffective in any long range benefit in reducing crime, and the prison is a failure by any measure.

At Riker's Island, a "jail" facility maintained by the New York City Department of Corrections, formal and informal systems operate generally consistent with the sociologist's model. While this is primarily a short term and detention facility, inmate initiatives are particularly strong and officials controls are generally lax. The male population is primarily black and young with Hispanics forming a sizable minority. Whites are exceptional. The female population, also black and Hispanic, includes a higher percentage of whites. Most of the prisoners are serving a "bullet," one year or less, and are not viewed as dangerous, hardened criminals. Long term sentenced male prisoners awaiting transfer upstate are segregated from short-termers and detainees. While violence may erupt in response to inter-personal conflicts, sustained rioting and collectively organized violence are infrequent. As one inmate stated, "In reality, Riker's Island is just a very boring jail with the majority of people serving time for petty offenses."

Sociologically, the boring routines of prison life make up the processes of institutionalization and indicate the integration of the prisoner into the formal and informal social control systems. Consistent adaptation is the key to survival. Individuals incarcerated learn to play

"prisoner" roles and internalize "prisoner" expectations. The official administrative system directly controls and punishes, while inmate subcultures are equally although more subtly coercive and restricting. In effect, both systems encourage and support a conditioning socialization, "prisonization," that emphasizes the institutional realities of incarceration. The official sanctioning of criminality and the subcultural modification and rationalization of prisoner status create a closed system which severely restricts an individual's attempt at maintaining or developing non-institutional self-conceptions and roles.

Theoretically, we seek alternatives to the negative impact of institutionalization. De-institutionalization, as an attempt to reduce an inmate's prisonization, takes many forms, and may include frequent and open visitation rights, vocational placement in the community, the use of parole, week-end furloughs, and other non-imprisonment strategies such as probation and diversionary short-circuiting of the penal process. For reasons that may be considered practical or otherwise unknown, these options for de-institutionalization are generally not exercised at Riker's Island. One notable exception involves an undergraduate education program organized, staffed, and co-directed by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York.

The Riker's Island Program

This program was established to provide inmates capable college level course work with the opportunity to pursue a limited but standard undergraduate curriculum. Two ten week semesters are offered each year approximating the Fall/Spring college calendar. Classes are held Monday through

Thursday evenings and students are given the option to choose one to four courses for a maximum of 12 tuition free credits each term. There is some attempt to distinguish skills courses from introductory and advanced courses, and the course offerings in English, the social sciences, and the humanities form a pool of 12 three credit courses.

While students must qualify academically for the program, many of the students have not been in a college classroom previously and some do not hold a high school degree. Others have completed some undergraduate work and occasionally college graduates may attend. Typically, most inmates will be in place at Riker's Island only long enough to take advantage of one semester's course offerings, and the attrition rate during each semester is high due to transfers, work schedule changes, releases, and for other reasons.

Four patterns of inmate involvement may be identified based on my seven semesters experience as an instructor in the program. Approximately one-fourth of the students enrolled in any particular class will drop out within the first three weeks. Another fourth of the students will leave during the sixth to tenth week, while doing satisfactory work but not actually finishing the course. Most of these students withdraw for unavoidable reasons not related to academic accomplishment. A small minority, very few in most cases, attend regularly for the ten weeks, theoretically complete the course, but are seriously deficient in basic skills. Finally, approximately one-fourth of the students complete all course work, attend regularly, and represent the academic "success" of the program.

While we lack a clear understanding of the specific backgrounds of the students, the reasons for their successes or failures, and, of course, a systematic study of the relation

of the program to recidivism, the John Jay "College Behind Bars" does provide a unique opportunity for the inmates to experience an academic and social world that is not directly influenced by the official nor subcultural systems of the institution. The values and expectations of this world are considerably removed from "inside" realities and develop a set of conditions that are more like the "outside" than any other socially structured experience within the prison.

Most of the people working in this program would acknowledge that the primary goal is to educate students. Rehabilitation, while desirable, is generally undefined and unexpected as a program goal. The guiding rationale for instructors involves the developing of students in an unusual situation where the excitement and exchange of education when realized can be extremely rewarding and redeeming. With students considerably "disadvantaged" by poverty and race within the established educational system, their accomplishments, interest, and enthusiasm in the program are remarkable. Again, conventional notions of who is able to learn and what conditions are necessary for satisfactory performance are contradicted by these inmate/students as they engage instructors in effective, knowledgeable, and challenging dialogues. But rather than focus on the quality of this educational experience, we may ask how such positive experience is produced, how does it relate to de-institutionalization, and what are the practical implications and consequences of prisoner education.

Structurally, in terms of the institution's set of social roles and norms, the instructors represent the only outside agents who meet consistently with inmates and who do not serve nor reinforce the official administration or inmate subculture. Indeed, instructors, as outsiders, are forced to

create their own set of relations with student/prisoners and cannot rely on administrative policing for the organization and development of classroom activity. Similarly, the instructor is not part of the inmate subculture in any distinct or consistent way. In a very real respect, the instructors and the program are non-institutionalized outsiders operating in the relatively free and open context of a conventional academic class. The rules and restrictions that operate in the classroom are typically flexible, modified by the participants, and frequently innovative as they may be in college classrooms generally.

As the instructor understands his/her mission as education, penalty and rehabilitation are removed from the situational context, and an emergent, non-institutional set of activities and norms are developed around the classroom experience. The fact of the co-educational nature of this experience, a very exceptional occasion when males and females may interact together in a conventionally unrestrained and casual manner, significantly supports the non-institutional character of the experience. Equally, that education and credit are being provided, unconnected to the lock-step reward system of the official administration and unanticipated and unrequested by the inmate subculture, places the college in a favorable non-institutional limbo.

Observations on De-Institutionalization

What may be of most interest in this relatively non-institutional set of interactions is to examine the kinds of experiences that may develop when prisoners become students and meet teachers in the co-educational classroom. Indeed, we may hypothesize that the "conditioning" of

de-institutionalization may be rehabilitative, or, more simply put, exposing and supporting people in conventional experiences may encourage them to adopt conventional self-definitions and identities and project further conventional adaptations.

It is not so much that you can teach an individual non-criminal strategies in effecting rehabilitation, i.e. changed behavior, but rather that you may provide an experiential set of social cues, incentives, logics, interactions, values, and processes that make certain adaptations useful, possible, and enjoyable. The college classroom experience, because it is so removed from the practical exigencies of the institution and because it does not resonate with an inmate subculture, operates as an existential and situational real world of intellectual choices and non-criminal, conventional adaptations.

This classroom provides the opportunity for student/inmates to experience student roles, social interactions with the opposite sex, and maintain non-coercive communication with non-supervisory adults. All of this serves as a reminder of the non-institutional possibilities of the outside world, and, more than as a reminder, students function in a segment of this world and learn to succeed in an academic setting. The social meaningfulness of this process of de-institutionalization becomes quite explicit when student/inmates begin to identify with the program and use its resources to escape tedious prison routines, insulate themselves from the negative impact of their peers, and accomplish a real world activity that is legitimate, crediting, and frequently enlightening.

Aside from the situational context of conventional role-modeling, the intellectual processes of education, as critical learning and rational assessment, may also be assumed to support de-institutionalization.

Particularly in sociology and criminology classes, discussions revolving around social problems give students an opportunity to report analytically and relatively objectively on a variety of social situations. When these discussions turn to the students' awarenesses of the realities of inmate subcultures and prison institutionalization, we may suspect that the critical approach of objective analysis, rewarded and encouraged in the academic forum of the classroom, may lead some student/inmates to question established personal and cognitive commitments within the institution. And as student/inmates are encouraged to become open analysts of the social organization of violence, control, repression, and power, might we not expect that in developing this awareness of the structural necessity "to talk the talk and walk the walk" there may be some retreat from full identification with prisonization.

For example, in explicating and demonstrating knowledge of "inside" institutional realities, students discuss and analyze emergent language codes and traditional prison argot that are symbolic of a way of life that is secretive, conning, and intimidating. Similarly, hierarchies of privilege reflecting systems of dominance and subordination are explained in detail defining various forms of structured inequality, while the workings of the prison's complex political economies are addressed with reference to the general values of inmate subcultures. And perhaps most dramatically, the strategies of personal survival, involving psychological and sociological adjustment, are expressed with keen insight into the exigencies of adaptation in potentially threatening environments. While we cannot claim that all of the elements of this developing "sociological imagination" will always be effective in transforming the private

troubles of prisonization into a more politically viable understanding of the structures of repression and "deviance," sociological knowledge is not infrequently associated with alienation from negative institutionalized control systems. Simply put, there is advantage in the open discussion of the recidivist traps of institutionalization.

In sociology classes, assignments include readings from: James Baldwin's "Letter to Angela Davis," Dick Gregory's "Nigger," Oscar Lewis' La Vida, Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, Peri Thomas' Down these Mean Streets, The Autobiography of Malcom X, Sykes and Messinger's "The Male Inmate Social System," Philip Zimbardo's "Pathology of Imprisonment," Herbert Gans' "The Uses of Poverty: The Poor Pay All," R.M. Kanter's "How the Top is Different," and C. Wright Mills' The Sociological Imagination.

One assignment based upon a critical reading of N. Pileggi's popular journalism article in New York Magazine, "Inside Rikers Island," asked students to evaluate and discuss the validity of the report. During classroom discussion, students clearly indicated that they could not believe the article since they could point out a series of distortions. In a written essay, one student stated:

"In this article he [the author] portrayed things in a very sensational manner....From the opening paragraph about shot-gun toting guards which do not exist all the way to making the East River safe to swim, he does not have anything described correctly. ...Our author does not really understand the boredom and monotony of day-to-day living here. I do not think the Correctional Officers feel uneasy because of the

prisoners not being locked up all the time, as a matter of fact, they are very relaxed--to the point of being lazy. Also they do not openly condone drugs--naturally there are some available, but only through a lot of sneaking and conniving. The C.Os. try to stop them and will write you up if they catch you...

"Now we come to the point about our visitors. Naturally the majority of drugs brought in come through the visits--but still maybe one out of twenty visitors may be bringing a little something--and then the amount has to be relatively small. He makes all our parents and loved ones look like a bunch of drug smugglers. And nobody sits on the 101 bus bagging up their balloons!

"About the only truth in the article lies in the question about trials. The inmates are represented poorly and sometimes do not even know who their lawyer is, let alone talk with him. They wait for months and months for two minutes in court to be told that their case is postponed again and again. In conclusion I just wish to state that this place is a bit crowded, very boring but not any more dangerous than other jails, probably less. But it is jail and as such what can you expect."

There was a great deal of interest in this article as it purported to report on an experience which the student/inmate lived. Officers as well as students avidly debated various points and observations made by the author. Interestingly, it became apparent

that officers needed the opportunity to discuss their social experiences within the prison and they too would appreciate the opportunity for a more formal arena to vent their sociological imaginations. The following semesters did see the development of an on-site educational program developed by John Jay for officers interested in continuing or pursuing a college education. Instructors who became friendly with the officers recognized this need and believed that a joint program in which inmates and officers attended class together would be an innovative experiment in educational dialogue. Of course, from a more sociological point of view, one wonders how the boundaries of the two social systems would be tested in the common arena of the academic classroom. And even more speculatively, would it ever be possible to breakdown the barriers of these two institutional systems in a way that might allow for a constructive officer-student/inmate culture to develop within the walls of the prison?

In relation to analyses of the inside reality of the prison subculture, studies of the specialized language, argot, and other patterns of behavior were always very important to the students. Of course, here the students were the instructors and the process of discovery of common frames of reference was facilitated by the classroom experience. In sociology classes, students were encourage to observe their own "subculture" and discover ethnographic materials. They reported on the differential status values of "sneakers," the importance of the cigarette token economy, and the use of "maytags," (inmates who provide services to other inmates under a variety of "contracts"). The social bases of power and reputation were discussed in relation to the skillful workings of the "system" made identifiable by selectively tailored prison

clothes, favorable work assignments, and privileged dormitory placement.

One student in a letter received by an instructor combines a personal initiative in presenting a gift with an important sociological observation on the development of an aspect of the inmate culture:

"I'm enclosing the Freedom booties for you and I hope you and your family enjoy them. Just a little history so you know how it became a trend here at Rikers. When I first came a friend of mine was making a pair of slippers for her friends. I wanted to know how to do the stitch to make a pair. So I figured at the time I would just make a small one to make sure I got the stitch right. Well it wound up this small and when I showed the girls they wanted to wear them around their necks. It seemed when someone wore them to court they 'walked,' and went home. A discussion about it came up in Mr. Ridgeway's class and he named them Freedom booties. Since January I haven't made a large pair of slippers yet."

And while these discussions of inmate subculture and prison authority may be particularly developed in sociology and criminology courses, other avenues of de-institutionalization are made possible by the program. Many student/inmates become quite involved in the academic requisites of grading, reporting, testing, homework, etc. These interests and materials support integration in the student role and may be used symbolically in representing an elevated status. Books, folders, and papers are

displayed and set off student/inmates from other inmates. While it is difficult to determine, there is some indication that a student/inmate subculture or reference group develops during each semester, and that in the dormitory facilities and on the cell floors, "readers" of academic materials are noticeably distinct and uninvolved in the problematics of inmate "recreation."

Upon successful completion of the program, students are encouraged to continue their education on the "outside." Riker's Island students who are successful in transferring to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice may take part in a "Linkers" program that was designed to facilitate and counsel the transition to undergraduate status at the college. Former Riker's Island students, currently enrolled at John Jay, served as counselors and perhaps role models. Evidence suggests that several students did utilize this avenue, although program cutbacks reduced this resource to informal status and follow-up survey and evaluation have not occurred.

There is additional indication that students do transfer credits earned at the Riker's Island facility to other colleges, especially those affiliated with the City University system. While many students if not a majority may not finish the program, and others who do complete the ten week courses and receive credit, cannot be expected to continue in college programs, there is evidence that students returning to the "street" do have more incentive to return to work or other school programs. Instructors receive letters from released students discussing such plans and activities and are requested to write letters of recommendation. Students' letters often contain positive comments on the Riker's Island program and express gratitude for the instruction.

One student wrote:

"I will be going home with the hopes and intentions of continuing my college education. I thank you very much for the books you sent me. I have found them to be very interesting and I am sure they will be of great help in my studies. The book, Society as It Is by Glen Gaviglio and David Raye, is one of the books that I really enjoy because most of the articles I can relate to, and others stimulate my thinking as to what my position in society should be.

"I believe an understanding of the social order is very important for anyone who expects to succeed in his career."

Yet we may ask, can students be expected to hold on to their new awareness or maintain a general student attitude after release? While no formal measures of evaluation exist, many academic experiences in the sociology curriculum, such as the social analysis of prison life, the development of prison dictionaries of inmate argot, and other structural studies, certainly provide for a stepping away from full identification and submersion in the inmate subculture. And under conditions of stress and conflict, where the conditions of race, class, and power are socially problematic, introductions to the "sociological imagination" were often dramatic, revealing, and significant in awakening students to uses of social inquiry. With this formal knowledge and a relatively critical set of intellectual tools legitimated in both "course credit" and personal development, students acquired a foundation for the examination of important social differences and convenient mystifications. It would appear that at least one direct consequence of the

socialization provided by the inmate educational program was to encourage and support student participation in conventional institutional experiences. Here, the emphasis returns to school, work, and perhaps family life.

Proposals for Research and Development

Given the potentially explosive conditions of our prisons, the wasting away of lives in non-rehabilitative activities, and the apparent utility of education, it makes sense to explore more fully the positive indications of the Riker's Island college program. Primarily, we note that there is only a minimum number of students involved. Perhaps, on the average, 150 men and women are recruited and enrolled out of a potential student body of at least 1,000 if not more. The numbers and kinds of courses are limited and the infrequency of the program, 20 weeks out of a possible 52 weeks, is also restricting. More courses, more terms, and more instructors would help to develop the program extensively and intensively. Under these conditions of expanded adequacy, a better opportunity to measure and evaluate the educational impact of the program would be available. Obviously, all of this educational interest would be enormously enhanced if we could develop a methodological demonstration of the reduction in recidivism as related to participation in the program. Follow-up studies might focus on: 1) do these students continue their education; 2) how is the program related to employment opportunities; 3) what characterizes the successful students who complete course work; and 4) is there a recidivist rate drop attributable to the program.

While in existence for 10 years, the Riker's Island program is still something of an experiment. Its reputation within the prison is well established and quite positive. Yet, administrative development, shared by the Department of Corrections and John Jay College, is modest, with budget cuts always threatened and institutional commitment not always at optimum realization. Inmates, instructors, associated correctional officers, and immediate college supervisory personnel generally all agree that the program is exceptionally worthwhile, unusually effective, and maintained with good morale. Under these conditions and with the potential for upgrading, the college behind bars at Riker's Island would most probably be very responsive to program expansion and systematic evaluation.

Finally, the words of one student may express the urgency for education "behind bars" in ways which go beyond the formal values of the academic classroom:

"Jails in the city are significant because they show that the only people being deprived are Third World people. No education, no jobs, no allocation of funds, no decent housing and the means with which we gain the ends more than likely will end with no freedom.

"We have to be able to raise a conscious and constructive attitude as individuals before we can raise an all together social consciousness to fight this dilemma we're in. Because if things continue as they are, we are destined for annihilation, incarceration and plain and simple genocide."

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