

# Training Prison Inmates in Social Work

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**T**RAINING prison inmates as paraprofessional social workers is something new for social-work education. A more common situation has been for the prison to be a field setting for graduate social work students. However, the program for training inmates as paraprofessional social workers described in this article suggests new opportunities for social work education and correctional practice. From the inception of the training program, problems and issues developed that needed to be addressed if social work education was to provide inmate paraprofessionals effective in institutional and community-based human service programs. This article reviews these educational issues and highlights the efforts of one undergraduate program to address them.

## Prison Education Programs

Prisons generally have not been considered likely settings for college education. Given their priority to provide custody and security, and their physical structures, prisons do not easily provide an academic atmosphere. In addition, inmates are usually not thought of as potential college students; the average inmate's educational record is unimpressive. Given these obstacles, the experiences of training inmates as paraprofessional social workers would seem to be of interest to social-work educators and to criminologists involved in correctional reform.

Within the last twenty years, an increasing number and variety of college programs have been established in American prisons.<sup>1</sup> These efforts have included offering correspondence courses, developing structured programs within prison walls, and establishing formal relationships with outside academic institutions. An important objective of these programs has been rehabilitation, the attempt to engage the offender in a useful life after prison. "Useful life" is generally accepted as meaning an absence of criminal activity, as well as life that is useful to the individual and society. Studies of several programs indicated an overall positive impact of prison education programs on post-release ex-offender accomplishments.<sup>2</sup>

A major impetus for the social work education program described in this paper was to provide career training as a rehabilitative effort, and to further develop a manpower resource to supplement and extend the work of professionals in correctional facilities and human services in general. In addition the program anticipated that a special impact of social-work education on rehabilitation would stem

from the "helper-therapy" principle.<sup>3</sup> This principle suggests that an inmate will derive growth and awareness of his own problems from helping another prisoner.

There are additional compelling reasons for training prisoners as para-professional social workers. Within the prison itself, inmate/students provide role models for other inmates. In their field work settings, and if hired upon their release, they help bridge the communication gap between professionals and the inmate population.<sup>4</sup> The employment of paraprofessionals, including former inmates, for work with prisoners has been tried in a number of cities. At the Anderson College in Indiana, former offenders and local para-professionals were involved in probation activities. Published reports suggest a positive impact, with less distance between client and counselor resulting. In New York City paraprofessionals, including ex-offenders, have entered prisons on a regular basis to assist in rehabilitation. The reported impact on rehabilitation was significant. The paraprofessional ex-offenders seem to provide proof to inmates that someone from a similar background can "make it" outside the prison. Another by-product of a prison social work education program is the development of a trained pool of paraprofessional social workers. The social class background, and in many cases the ethnic status, of the ex-offender paraprofessional provides something potent to human service programs. The paraprofessional ex-offender through experiences, crises, or problems will often have a better understanding of client needs. The social and cultural overlap between the ex-offender and the human service client can also provide insights for professionals of the values, beliefs, morals and customs of client-groups. Effective service delivery often will result from the acceptance by the client of the paraprofessional ex-offender.

### **Training Inmates as Social Workers**

The community college degree program described in this paper is located at a maximum security correctional institution with an inmate population in excess of two thousand. Twenty inmates are enrolled in the first year of the social work associate degree program. The educational program requires a diversity of courses in science, math, humanities, social science, and electives, as well as in a specific number of social work courses. The 'core' courses in the social work concentration include "Foundations of Social Welfare," "Community Service Agencies," "Interpersonal Skills," and a field practicum and accompanying seminar. Each inmate's courses and field work experience take place within the prison facility. The inmate/student's tuition and books are paid for either by the student or through federal and state education assistance programs.

The focal points for student field work experiences at the correctional facility are in two on-site social programs. One program

involves pre-release counseling and assistance to inmates who are preparing for parole. Ninety days prior to an appearance before his parole board, the inmate voluntarily contacts the pre-release program for assistance in the preparation of materials to be reviewed by the board (e.g. a performance summary and description of future plans for housing and employment). The pre-release program also offers inmates other preparatory services which include seminars on job interview skills, self-awareness workshops, and budgeting assistance.

The second field work site is a "therapeutic community" that has been established within the prison. Inmates from other prisons are admitted to the therapeutic program based on two criteria: (1) They are presenting serious discipline problems in the prison, and thus are unable, or unwilling to follow prison rules and procedures. (2) They have committed serious crimes, e.g. grand larceny, rape, or murder. The rehabilitation program is in a unit separated from the main prison population and provides a variety of group therapy sessions and daily work programs. The staff consists of two or three professionals, and twelve to twenty-five inmate peer counselors who agree to live in a separate unit.

The social work student in the prison who participates in these two programs as a peer-counselor satisfies the associate degree requirement of six credits of field work. The responsibilities of student/inmates placed at the field work unit are:

1. To work with community ex-offender programs in interviewing inmates and offering assistance in adjustment techniques for outside living.
2. With assistance from professionals in the community, to provide individual counseling and workshops on job-hunting, and readjustment to family and community life after prison.
3. Together with professional staff of the program, to perform intake interviews, to do casework and case management, to write reports on individual cases and on program activities, and to work as liaisons with other units inside the prison.
4. To understand the parole board and its philosophy, structure, and procedures.

Student/inmates in both field sites are evaluated along the following dimensions:

1. Knowledge of the field setting, its policies, agency mandates, and regulations.
2. Ability to perform intake and referral procedures.
3. Skill in obtaining and assessing essential information about attitudes, feelings, and needs.
4. Ability to design and implement intervention plans assessing need for support services, and arranging the steps necessary to carry out the plan.

5. Communication skills.
6. Knowledge and use of available resources.
7. Capabilities in self-learning, utilizing the learning resources in a field setting.

Also placed at the two field units are full-time, non-inmate undergraduate students enrolled in a local four-year college's human service and criminal justice programs. These students work with the inmates and staff in the field unit.

### **The Prison as a Social Work Education Setting**

Since the beginning of social work education, classroom and field learning have been considered vital components of every social work program. The heritage of social work education favors supervised practical experience as the necessary preparation for work with people. Experience alone, however, is insufficient for learning. For this reason, the social work profession has insisted that field education develop a means of checking the soundness of individual decisions. Self-monitoring and self-evaluation are effective methods of bringing practice under control of evidence. These methods generate data which are related to clients as well as workers, and thus are more useful for guiding action.<sup>5</sup> It is reasonable to expect social work students not only to evaluate existing theory and literature, but also to judge critically existing guides to practice. Clearly this critical perspective must be coupled with a willingness to take measures to insure that knowledge is utilized appropriately and is more than rhetoric. Social workers must be capable of independent, responsible judgement. Field and classroom learning, therefore, must involve systematically thinking out available alternatives and probable consequences. These educational standards have been a challenge to implement in more traditional educational settings. The use of these standards in a prison social work education program becomes especially problematical and does not come easily, for faculty and inmate/students.

The internal environment of the prison presents unique problems that the social work educator must deal with. The problems derive from placing an education facility in a set of buildings designed and administered primarily for security rather than education. The psycho-social aspects of prison design are pervasive; the sensory and aesthetic deprivation of prison life dulls the senses. In direct contradiction to social work educational goals, prison life produces monotony, listlessness, and ennui. Learning and growth are compromised by the lack of enrichment in daily prison life.<sup>6</sup>

Organization of the prison social-work education program described in this paper presented additional challenges. Although the program developed two sites for field education, the potential for expansion was circumscribed by institutional factors. The pre-release

center and the therapeutic unit were developed as field settings because they required the least amount of security clearance, and the least inconvenience to routine prison procedures. Any effort to increase the number of field sites is dependent on the good will and credibility that the social work program establishes with the prison administration. Failing to accomplish this would limit the number of inmates enrolled in the program at any one time.

Another problem inherent in the institutional setting is the use of outside resources and providing contact with external human service programs. Prisons have complex administrative procedures for screening audio-visual materials, texts, reading materials and speakers. In addition, the inmate/student faces limited exposure to the network of public and private human services in any community. Non-inmate students in their classroom and in community based field placements are better able to become aware of inter-organizational linkages between agencies, and the "environment" of social programs through personal visits and interaction.

Supervision of social work students in the prison also presented a serious problem. Prison staff generally do not have professional social work training. Although sincere in their efforts, they are usually unfamiliar with social work principles, theory, knowledge, and history. Therefore, they are unable to help the student integrate classroom and field experiences.

The location of the education program in prison also made difficult the acquisition of what has been termed the "art of creative utilization of self" in applying knowledge appropriately.<sup>7</sup> Prisoners are generally on guard in their interpersonal relationships. They are anxious to project an image and behave in a manner that facilitates early parole, or at least makes prison life less stressful. This undermines the development of critical, experimental, and risk-taking behavior. The exchange of information between student inmates and field supervisors is limited, and confidentiality rarely exists. Instead the inmate often protects his image and reputation, giving out information that cannot be used against him. The result is that institutional norms often undermine the value of the student/field supervisor relationship.

### **Educational Adaptations to the Prison Setting**

The problems to be overcome are many, and schools need to make a greater investment in problem-solving and program development activities if quality prison social work programs are to be developed. However, though the problems are there, the experiences of the program described in this paper suggests reasons for optimism. The first year of the program has provided occasions where good learning opportunities for the inmates were provided despite the many problems attendant on the institutional setting. What follows below are

brief outlines of program developments which addressed many of the problems raised above.

*Formation of an advisory group:* The educational program received assistance from an advisory group, many of whom were opinion leaders at the prison. In this way key prison administrators and staff participated in the development and implementation of the education program. Involvement in the advisory group allowed prison officials to see the extent to which the social-work program was consistent with existing values, norms, and customs of the institution. In addition regular interaction between prison officials and faculty improved feelings of trust and receptivity to the program. This change of attitude among prison officials gave the faculty some flexibility in developing the program. One noticeable change observed was the increased cooperation in monitoring and control of classroom instruction and use of materials.

*Role of Faculty:* The approach to dealing with the shortage of social work educated field instructors was to invest faculty with more than usual practice experiences. The greater involvement of faculty in field supervision provided a professional role model for students, as well as assurance of integration of the classroom and practice experiences.

*Inmate and Non-inmate Field Units:* The oppressive and dulling environment of the prison was partially obviated by including in the field units social work students from outside the prison, as well as prisoners. A "spillover" effect was observed, with the outside students having a positive impact on the inmates. The outside students would "break the ice" in the field setting by asking for independence, autonomy, and the right and power to exercise judgement. The outside students often raised critical issues, attempted to question unit activities, and applied knowledge about other human service agencies. The outside students also brought in information, techniques, and skills that the inmate/student often lacked.

*Rapport with Correctional Officers:* What became apparent over a period of time was that the social work program contained education that was relevant to guards and convicts. "Passing time" is a problem of both correctional officers and inmates. A group of officers emerged who became interested in, and supportive of the program. A conscious effort was made to encourage their involvement. Some of the guards audited classes and one guard, who was enrolled in a four-year program outside the prison, fulfilled his field work requirements as a counselor within the pre-release center. In addition the prisoner education program was supported by prison staff and guards concerned with offering progressive rehabilitation programs.

These developments further institutionalized the program within the prison by encouraging and facilitating staff participation.

### Conclusion

The paper highlights a challenge to social work education to broaden its training to include prison inmates. Unfortunately scant attention has been given by social work programs to this potential student population. A number of institutional characteristics were identified which potentially impede social work education in the prison. However, the community college program described in this paper was able to overcome many of these obstacles.

For the inevitable extension of the program and for the establishment of related programs, intensive evaluation and follow-up studies will have to be undertaken. From such efforts more definitive guides and procedures should emerge.

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