

The Broken Lives: Countering Illiteracy's Influence

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

Theme: Achieving Development Goals

Sub-Theme: Collaboration

Topic: Partnership among educational providers, civil society and private industry

Presentation: Panel Discussion

The Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, University of Guyana, explores many different ways to work with adults. One effective way in promoting continuing education has been by forging partnerships among agencies and institutions for support and collaboration.

IDCE has forged a partnership with the Guyana Prison Service and PAHO and this collaborative effort has seen the manifestation of a specially designed Behaviour Change Communication Program for inmates in the Prison System.

The aim of this program is to help inmates

- (a) build self-esteem
- (b) learn about sexuality and reproductive health
- (c) learn about gender issues
- (d) erase the negative messages in their head and replace it with positive messages
- (e) commit to behaviour change

In this collaborative effort, the Guyana Prison Service provides the inmates and the venue for training; PAHO has provided equipment and funding for training; IDCE provides materials, tutoring and certification.

The lessons learnt were that

- (a) a great number of inmates were either illiterate or semi-illiterate
- (b) illiteracy (among inmates) produced other problems within the system
- (c) there was need for literacy and numeracy programs in the prisons
- (d) behaviour change communication program was really needed in the prison.

The outcome of this program highlighted the need for other forms of educational programs among inmates.

BACKGROUND

Brief history of Guyana's IDCE and Central Role of Collaboration in Program Implementation

On January 2, 1976 the University of Guyana Department of Extra Mural Studies came into being (in the Faculty of Education). This was thirteen years after the University itself was established. The guiding philosophy of the department's activities was "people improving themselves through their own resources". This philosophy saw the development and delivery of academic and professional courses in a multiplicity of disciplines in many rural communities, as well as the hinterland and riverain communities. Much collaborative work was done with agencies and community groups

to ensure that surveys were conducted and the needs of the communities were identified before setting about developing programs to meet the identified needs. With this collaborative effort, human resources in the communities were identified to help with the implementation of these programs.

In December 1983 approval was given for the upgrading and expansion of the Department and the Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) came into being in January 1984. In keeping with its mandate to help people improve themselves, it developed specific objectives, three of which were:

- To enhance the potential of the University of Guyana in creating and influencing change within the context of national aspirations
- To provide learning opportunities which would help the capacity of the adult individual to participate more effectively in the process of change, and
- To increase the awareness of the interaction between formal and non-formal education and to provide facilities for the continuum of education integration and interaction.

This phase of expansion saw the emergence of centres away from Georgetown in Regions 2, 6, and 10, and sub-centres in these Regions as well as in the hinterland and riverain areas.

In August 1996 IACE was re-constituted and renamed the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE). The additional functions expanded the scope of the Institute' programs, as it assumed a more pivotal role within the University. It is now mandated to assist the University in becoming a dual/mixed mode institution. In addition to performing its many functions, however, the main focus is still to create partnerships between educational providers, civil society, private industry, and communities to provide educational programs aimed at fostering growth and development.

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THE LITERACY INITIATIVE IN THE PRISONS IN GUYANA

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The Broken Lives: Countering Illiteracy's Influence

Illiteracy adversely affects all of society, not just those who cannot read. If an adult cannot read the warning labels on harmful products or medications, it can put their

very lives at risk. Illiterate adults have a lower earning potential than high school graduates, so tax revenues are lost. When persons cannot fill out job applications, unemployment is high and it impacts on personal life, family life and community life. Illiteracy promotes poverty and this results in many social ills including crime.

Guyana's prisons are filling up with people who cannot read and write, use numeracy, handle information, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems. These are people who do not have the basic literacy skills and so find themselves in a hopeless cycle - where their life as it was known is broken by imprisonment - and this has its own negative influence and consequence. Frustration presupposes the continuation of deprivation and it also frequently embodies a bleak perception of the future. This outlook can foster the belief that any action which will alter the likelihood of a dismal future is worthwhile, and this perception in turn encourages daring and bold behaviour. The availability of alternatives and resources which cushion the impact of continued or worsening deprivation plays an important role in determining the extent of an individual's desperation. If there are no availability of alternatives and resources, then existence becomes a vicious cycle because illiteracy promotes poverty and poverty is a catalyst for criminal behaviour. Therefore, the problem of illiteracy in individuals with criminal tendencies is indeed a problem for the society as a whole.

Recognising Illiteracy's Influence

For years, The Guyana Prison Service has focused on providing some degree of vocational and educational training for inmates who were either semi literate or illiterate and has worked in collaboration with other organizations to provide training for inmates in keeping with its reform program.

The Prison Service recognizes that there are many motivating factors behind criminal behaviour - illiteracy being ranked high among them. It also recognizes that a person's life is broken by imprisonment and this has its own negative effect on the individual. The reform program also targets recidivists who regard prison as their home so they commit crimes to return. Some of these persons have no skills, some return from sheer hopelessness because they are unable to cope, are rejected by their families, and so choose prison as a way of life.

However, despite the reform program, the prison population has increased dramatically over the past three years and records have shown that the highest numbers of crimes committed were various types of sexual offences, robbery and murder. Many of these offenses were committed by persons who were either illiterate or semi illiterate. In view of this rate of increase and the type of crimes committed, the Prison Service has had to re-focus its reform strategy. They recognized that their efforts required additional help and so collaboration was forged between the Guyana Prison Service and the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education/University of Guyana in an effort to provide a training program that is holistic - dealing with the influences of illiteracy and numeracy as well as providing information on HIV/AIDS, STI's, sexual and reproductive health and empowerment training - for growth and development and as an enabling tool for change.

The collaborative effort of the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education and the Guyana Prison Service focused on broadening the definition of literacy and developed three specific objectives, which are:

- To develop and deliver programs to meet the identified needs of the inmates of the Guyana Prison Service
- To enhance the potential of the inmates by influencing change through providing the opportunity for building awareness and self-esteem through learning.
- To provide learning opportunities which would help the inmates to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions, solve problems and to participate more effectively in the process of behaviour change through practicing what they learn.

Collaborating to change Illiteracy's Influence

In June 2004, bearing in mind Guyana's focus on HIV/AIDS, as well as maintaining their mandate to help people improve themselves, the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education/University of Guyana, in collaboration with the Guyana Prison Service initiated a *Learning for Behaviour Change* Program for inmates.

The Georgetown Prison was used as a pilot site. A random sample survey of 100 inmates was done to find out how much the inmates (in the sample) knew about HIV/AIDS and STI's and the indications were that they knew very little. One forceful fact that the random survey revealed was that many of the inmates in the sample survey were either semi-literate or illiterate.

The pilot program began in June 2004 with 25 inmates at the Georgetown Prison. Of the twenty-five, six were illiterate, thirteen were semi-literate, six were literate. The program focused on enhancing self-directed overall personal behaviour change among inmates. The strategy for achieving this through the program was to improve their awareness of HIV/AIDS and other STI's, improve their communication methods, empower them to address issues related to sexuality and prevention of HIV and other STI's and help them to replace the negative messages in their brain with positive messages. More importantly the program was intended to help them think and behave differently within the prison system and even when they leave prison, so that they would make healthy choices and live healthy lives.

The pilot program recognized the importance of modifying and adapting training to meet the learning needs of the inmates receiving the training. In so doing, many benefits in this method of program delivery were identified.

The program was taken to another Prison location - the Lusignan Prison on the East Coast of Demerara - during 2004. At this location 40 inmates participated in the program. Of this number, twelve were literate, eighteen semi literate and ten illiterate. (The goal was to train 100 inmates per year, but the severe flooding early in 2005 in Georgetown and its Coastal environs prevented this from materializing). One other program was done at the Georgetown Prison in 2005 and 36 inmates participated in this program. Of this number eleven were literate, thirteen semi literate and twelve were illiterate. The literacy level was always noted with the idea of having further collaboration for training.

Collaborating for Support

In working with inmates, IDCE found their educational needs to be different from that of conventional students. Many of the inmates had varying degrees of formal education while some had none at all. IDCE found existing methods of formal educational approaches were inadequate to meet these needs, so new innovative methods had to be developed.

As a result of this program aimed at *Learning for Behaviour Change*, several other areas of learning needs were identified among inmates, such as

- The varying levels of literacy and learning abilities required the implementation of a literacy and numeracy program as a foundation to make them ready for other programs
- Anger management training was needed as part of coping skills
- Training on sexual and reproductive health was needed for a healthier lifestyle
- The need to build self-esteem and improve self-expression
- The need to learn about human relationships
- The need to learn negotiating skills

- The need to have access to reading materials that would help inmates to learn to read and to encourage others to improve on their reading skills.

These learning needs indicated that it was necessary to forge other partnerships for collaborative support.

Collaborating to provide learning and continuing education

In August 2005 PAHO joined in the collaborative effort to support Learning for Behaviour Change within the Prisons. Equipment were donated and funding was provided for one year (2005-2006) to train more inmates at the various locations, as well as to train additional inmates as peer educators. The learning for behaviour change evolved into two programs *AIDS Awareness and Behaviour Modification* and *HIV/AIDS Prevention and Behaviour Change Communication*. Facilitators as well as all materials were supplied by IDCE.

In August 2005, also, the Rotary Club of Demerara (Guyana) joined in the collaborative effort with the Guyana Prison Service and funded IDCE's *Skills for Success* Program for inmates at the Georgetown Prison. This program teaches numeracy, literacy and entrepreneurship skills. The first phase of the program was to train trainers and peer educators, and the persons who were trained as trainers were prison officers and inmates. In the second phase the persons who were trained had to train the inmates. The inmates who participated in the training were then assigned (while being trained) to the craft shop, tailor shop, mechanic shop, carpenter shop, the printery, the bakery and the kitchen so that they would acquire or develop a trade. The trainers and all workbooks were supplied by the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE).

It was funded for one year (2005-2006) with the possibility of further funding for another year (2006-2007). Out of this initiative, prison officers were trained as literacy officers and inmates were trained as peer educators.

Mending the Broken Lives through Literacy's Influence

The peer educators who were trained in the *Behaviour Change* program and in the *Skills for Success* program are actively involved in training others in the Georgetown Prison. Many of the inmates who have participated in these programs have begun the journey to behaviour change. The inmates who were trained as trainers and are actively involved in training others are conscious of their role as positive role models. Inmates seek them out continuously for help and advice. Being trainers have given them a new sense of self and they take their responsibilities seriously, much to their credit and to the credit of the Prison Directorate.

Next Step

The next step in this program will be

- To continue to evaluate the impact of the program on the lives of participants and the peer educators while they are still in Prison. This will be done through continual interaction with the inmates as well as by documented observations made by the Prison Officers of observable changes in behaviour.
- To establish links with inmates and peer educators (while they are in Prison) so that this link will be maintained after they leave Prison.
- To Train Officers of the various Prisons (who would be identified by the Directorate) in the HIV/AIDS Programs so that they could continue to work with the inmates on a continuous basis.
- To continue to encourage the Directorate of the Prison Service to provide adequate space (in all the Prisons) for enhanced library facilities.
- To forge links that would provide suitable training videos and other teaching aids.

- To encourage more inmates to do Volunteer Counseling and Testing (Through PAHO) so that they could know their status, and
- To continue the training (through IDCE) on "AIDS Awareness and Behaviour Modification" and "HIV/AIDS Prevention and Behaviour Change Communication"

These initiatives identified for the next step would be quite achievable with the collaborative help of the Directorate of the Prison System, the Institute of Distance & Continuing Education, PAHO, the Rotary Club of Demerara (Guyana) and interested members of the private sector of Guyana.

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