

Empowering Male Prisoners for Meaningful Living

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Abstract

Life must have meaning that is relevant to an individual's development. This meaning is found in education. But education that is not empowering is not truly education, for education must seek to prepare the student for life and living.

Reading is an essential aspect of education. Illiteracy has been linked to poverty, crime, and low self esteem. But what motivates an individual to learn to read, especially when that individual is an adult, and moreover, that adult is male and incarcerated?

This presentation is the true story of how prisoners at the Maximum Security Prison fell in love with learning to read and with learning to learn and to live via The Empowerment Program. The program is a literacy program that begins with a self esteem component which can be summed up in the caption, "I know I'm somebody, 'cause God don't make no junk!"

Students against whom the odds are stacked need to know that they are loved and that they are worth loving to be brought to that place where they love themselves and are willing to learn to read and achieve in order to develop themselves for meaningful living.

Education must have meaning that is relevant to the learner's development. Education must empower the learner to cope with his social and personal context and to develop cognitively, spiritually, and emotionally. Education that is not empowering is not truly education, for education must seek to prepare the student for life and living. "Learning that is most effective is a process that is situated within the context and the culture of the community. This is called meaningful learning" (Naidu, 2006). This presentation is the true story of how prisoners at the Maximum Security Prison fell in love with learning to read and with learning to learn and to live via The Empowerment Program (TEP). The program is a literacy program that begins with a self-esteem component which can be summed up in the following caption, which forms one of the early lessons of that component:

Meaningful Education

Education that offers only cognitive information and ignores the emotional, social, moral, and spiritual intelligences is not meaningfully effective since it does not develop the whole person, and does not empower students. Education becomes meaningful when it provides opportunities for students to actively participate in the learning process, to engage in the construction of their world view, to develop critical thinking skills, and to enhance their emotional and moral development. Meaningful education fosters students' empowerment for life-long learning and enables personal growth and development.

Empowerment is the ability to cope with the social context of living and the development of self-efficacy and personal control (Gordon, 2004). TEP places personal growth and development at the top of its priority list, and empowerment as its goal, making use of the context to situate the learning process.

Situated learning is often used to refer to learning in the workplace but the term entails more than the physical space and includes communities of practice. Participation is encouraged in situated learning since it adds to the relevance of the education process. Illeris (2003) proffers the theory that adult learning is three dimensional, comprising the cognitive, the emotional, and the social-societal dimensions. In this setting the focus is shifted from education and teaching to learning and competence development. Illeris insists that one "cannot understand cognitive-professional content learning without also considering what happens in the emotional and social-societal dimensions" (p.172). TEP employs the social setting of the inmates as one source of topics for discussion and items for vocabulary exercises.

Meaningful education for adults cannot be pedagogically based. Andragogy, the science of teaching adults, is based on assumptions different from those of pedagogy. Knowles, quoted in Forrest & Peterson (2006), defines these assumptions, among them: "Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning process; adults are oriented toward immediate application of learned knowledge; adults need to know the reason for learning something" (p. 116). Adult learning takes place on a continuum and is impacted by previous knowledge and previous experience. It is important that acknowledgement be given to the previous knowledge and experience of adults as part of the motivating technique in adult education.

Motivation for education is engendered by positive attitudes to learning developed from positive personal

experiences in learning. Poor self-esteem and low self-confidence restrict participation in learning activities. Anticipated benefits such as rewards (material or symbolic), satisfaction, and praise improve motivation and increase participation in learning activities (Cross, 1981). TEP begins by focusing on the building of self-esteem and self-confidence before any academic topics are introduced. Because most of the inmates are found to have had negative personal experiences in learning, the challenge is to keep this learning experience positive at all times. Praise for achievement as well as for effort helps to encourage the students to keep aspiring.

Illiteracy and Crime

Reading is an essential aspect of education. Reading is a survival skill in a print-laden society. Reading is an integral part of every subject area in the school curriculum. Success is therefore dependent, to a large extent, on the ability to read. Illiteracy has been linked to poverty, crime, and low self-esteem (Leone, 2004). Leone also posits that "Literacy skills appear to be an essential component of education to meet the demands of a complex, high-tech world... Higher levels of literacy are associated consistently with lower rates of juvenile delinquency" (p. 261). Maher (2004) confirms that, "Study after study has shown that recidivism rates drop in direct proportion to the number of college credits an inmate completes while incarcerated and that the children of inmates are far more likely to attend college if their incarcerated parent does so" (p. 102). Individuals who have been through school and have left without learning to read have been done a disservice. The onus is on teachers to make learning, and more especially learning to read, a successful and enjoyable activity that more individuals may develop higher literacy levels and thus engender lower delinquency rates.

The Empowerment Programme (TEP)

What motivates an individual to learn to read, especially when that individual is an adult, and moreover, that adult is male and incarcerated? Love and self worth! Students against whom the odds are stacked need to know that they are loved and that they are worth loving.

As education officer of the Council of Prison Chaplains and Ministers (COPCAM) I was given the challenge by the prison authorities to develop, on behalf of the prison ministry, a literacy programme to partner with the prison service in its approach to reform prisoners. Out of this shared responsibility approach to develop strategies that challenge offenders to take responsibility for their lives and actions and to assist them to become productive law-abiding citizens TEP was initiated. Tutors are sourced from the various religious groups functioning in the religious ministry in the prison. The criteria for selection are willingness to learn and to share, commitment and caring, and availability for classes twice per week.

The programme is a totally voluntary project with no funding from any source other than the volunteers themselves and any friends and acquaintances from whom they may solicit assistance. Stationery, reading and writing materials, teaching aids, traveling costs, and subsistence are all donated by the volunteer tutors who have volunteered their time and effort to the project. Classes are scheduled on four days per week in two cycles viz. Mondays & Wednesdays, and Tuesdays & Thursdays in the classrooms of the Learning Centre, formerly the School, in the compound of the Maximum Security Prison, Arouca, Trinidad.

The goals of the project are:

- to provide inmates with self-esteem and cognitive/literacy development
- to provide opportunities that would make a difference in the lives of inmates and in the attitudes that govern their behaviour
- to improve relationships between inmates and their families
- to facilitate the return of inmates into society in a positive, contributory manner

In order to ensure that the students are given the opportunity to acquire skills which would make them self-sufficient, productive, and successful citizens, the programme is designed on the premises that intelligence can be taught and that everyone has intelligences of strength, and delivered in large and small group settings with participatory, discussion/activity type sessions with some plenary type sessions by visiting professionals. The focus of the programme is the answer to the earlier question viz. love and self worth. This is crystallized in the chorus of the poem turned song, Desiderata, which the students learn during the self-esteem component:

You are a child of the universe,

No less than the trees and the stars,

	CIVILIANS	OFFICERS	INMATES	PROG- RAMMES	INTRO- DUCTORY	BEGIN- NERS			SCHOOL LEAVING
1999	17	5	0	62	13	10	14	18	7
2000	28	2	1	72	14	18	12	18	10
2001	15	0	7	113	10	16	20	13	21
2002	17	1	21	132	11	10	28	21	57
2003	19	2	20	149	15	25	21	27	49
2004	9	1	18	154	17	22	27	32	32
2005	7	1	23	167	18	24	27	35	32
2006	11	1	24	138	20	20	25	24	28

**TEP - LEVEL THREE
SCHOOL LEAVING RESULTS**

2002

SUBJECT	GRADE				
	Distinctions	Credit	Pass	Fail	Absent
ENGLISH	3	19	23	1	4
COMPOSITION	13	30	2	0	5
MAHEMATICS	2	11	19	14	4
GENERAL PAPER	16	27	2	0	5
TOTAL	34	87	46	15	18

2004

SUBJECT	GRADE				
	Distinctions	Credit	Pass	Fail	Absent
ENGLISH	1	14	7	1	0
COMPOSITION	12	9	1	1	0
MAHEMATICS	8	4	8	3	0
GENERAL PAPER	11	11	1	0	0
TOTAL	32	38	17	5	0

2005

SUBJECT	GRADE				
	Distinctions	Credit	Pass	Fail	Absent
ENGLISH	7	11	0	0	0
COMPOSITION	7	9	2	0	0
MAHEMATICS	4	6	7	1	0
GENERAL PAPER	9	8	1	0	0
TOTAL	27	34	10	1	0

The data show the numerical development and successes of TEP over the years. Some students progressed through all the levels, moving on to the CXC classes. Some became tutors of the literacy programme. Many stayed with the programme until their discharge from prison. Those tutors who have left the prison have expressed the desire to return and work in the programme, but Prison Regulations do not allow such interaction. The growth of TEP initiated the birth of many other programmes as the inmates' hunger for learning became evident. TEP awakened new awareness and opened the way for a new culture of learning in the community of the Maximum Security Prison.

The initial invitation to the inmates to attend literacy classes met with much resistance from some of the inmates and some of the officers. One non-correctional officer enquired of me, "What make you feel that this what you all doing going to make any difference to these hardened criminals?" and advised that, "You all just fooling yourselves and wasting our time." Some inmates came only to "break jail" with no intention of participating; some came out of curiosity; few came with a desire for learning. When inmates were sent to the literacy classes without the self-esteem exposure, they were less co-operative and less focused than

those who had experienced the self-esteem component. It was obvious that the experience affected their way of thinking and manner of behaving, one of the goals of the project.

Some of the inmates expressed the same point of view as the earlier mentioned officer and stayed with the programme in the hope of proving themselves right before leaving; they never left. One of the inmates confronted the tutors with the question, "Why you all keep coming here? You all just wasting your time." Our response was, "We don't mind wasting our time, you just keep coming to class and let us waste our time." He kept coming and soon encouraged others to come with him. One inmate announced to us, "Miss, you see me, I bad, I bad, bad, bad. It ent have nothing good in me." We rejoined, as from the self-esteem session, "the God in me sees the God in you, stay with us and you too will see." A few sessions later he queried further, "Why you all keep coming here? What you have to gain? You all love us for true?" Our response, "Yes, we love you. We keep coming because we love you. We are not being paid, but we gain joy in seeing your progress." A few sessions later the questions turned to statements, "Miss, you know I learning to read, yes, I realize I learning. You really said I could do something good, and look, I doing it." The classic demonstration of the worth of TEP philosophy came when one student raised the question, "Miss, you are a teacher. Why they don't teach teachers to teach in school the way you all teaching us in here?" And then commented, "You know Miss, when I was going to school if only one teacher in all my school life had ever said to me I could be something good, I wouldn't a' have to spend most of my life in jail. Look at my age, and I now learning to read."

Progress also became obvious when other inmates started remarking on the changes in their peers who attended school and started asking to be allowed to come to school. Soon the classes were becoming bigger than the desired class size and inmates had to be placed on a student waiting list. One of the challenges of this growing popularity of the classes was to convince the assigning officer that students had to wait for the self-esteem component before coming to class. He felt that if they asked to come to class they should not have to wait till the next school year when the self-esteem sessions would be done. This led to some conflict since I was adamant that the self-esteem was compulsory, and that it was the self-esteem sessions that were initiating the break-through and not the reading classes. The self-esteem groups soon grew to include students from the CXC and Art classes who were not involved in the Literacy Programme. At present the entire school population attends the self-esteem programmes, at the end of which students return to their various groupings.

Another challenge that came with progress, and one that was indicative of personal growth in the students, revealed itself in a discussion that raised the question of training the officers in the 'batch', the non-correctional officers. The students explained that some batch officers were applying undue pressure to them to prove that they had not indeed changed. Some noted that while we made them see themselves as worthy human beings, some officers continued to treat them like animals, which tempted them to just give up on the process. They had to be encouraged to look at the bigger picture, the future, and also to recognize that those officers needed to develop their self-esteem, so they, the inmates, who had grown should help the officers by not retaliating or reverting to their old ways. It was a difficult lesson for them to absorb.

Growth was reflected in the desire of students to attain to the position of tutors in the programme. Some students progressed from the level two literacy classes to writing CXC examinations and becoming tutors in the project. Some were so motivated that they successfully pursued Advanced level courses and applied for University admission. The exhilaration of writing their own letters to their families was infectious when the feat was achieved by those who were in the habit of having to pay other inmates to read and write their mail when they could not have done so for themselves.

Growth and progress is curtailed by the lack of funding for the project. Glowing tributes are paid to the programme and the tutors at every graduation ceremony of the self-esteem component by the prison authorities and the inmates. The positive effect on the prison community is lauded. But no financial assistance is forthcoming. The lack of finances results in the loss of civilian tutors when they can no longer afford to maintain the expense of serving in the programme. It also reduces the output because of a lack of materials with which to increase production. But, in the words of a sankey, "the good over weighs the bad".

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