

The basic principles and characteristics of correctional adult basic education

Why is it worth while to devote professional time and effort to correctional adult basic education? The primary reason is that there are clear differences between adult basic education and correctional adult basic education.

This does not mean there is always a clear distinction between education, adult basic education and correctional adult basic education. What it does mean is that a continuum runs from normal (public) education to adult basic education to correctional adult basic education, and Correctional Service of Canada teachers have been most effective when operating at the correctional adult basic education end of the continuum.

Further, the Service correctional strategy requires that all programming be correctional-it must be designed to meet offender needs and to contribute to their successful re-integration into the community.

As such, the Ontario Region's senior educators recently proposed correctional adult basic education as a special ongoing project. This article sets out the authorities upon which this decision was based, as well as analyzing the principles and characteristics of correctional adult basic education.

It is important to note that correctional adult basic education is often an essential prerequisite to any type of correctional work programming, as many offenders lack even the minimal skills necessary to begin employment training.

Authority A variety of sources combine to provide is the authority for correctional adult basic education within the Correctional Service of Canada.

The *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* and its regulations legislate the use of educational programming to meet criminogenic needs. Section 76 states that the "Service shall provide a range of programs designed to address the needs of offenders and contribute to their successful reintegration into the community."

The Service mission statement also provides for active offender encouragement and assistance through programming. Mission core value #2 specifically supports the provision of correctional education.

Further, Service Commissioner's Directive #720 states that offenders are to be provided with provincially accredited or certified programs that meet their identified educational needs to help them re-integrate into the community as law-abiding citizens.

The American Correctional Association has also long recognized the correctional nature of well-designed and well-executed correctional adult basic education programs, while the Correctional Education Association subscribes to the opinion that correctional education is a means of addressing the root causes of criminality.

Finally, the Service's case management process thoroughly supports correctional adult basic education as an important step in offender re-integration into the community. After all, without basic literacy and

numeracy skills, it would be difficult for offenders to understand the content of other programming and, ultimately, the world in which they live.

The role of correctional adult basic education Correctional adult basic education contributes to the re-integration of offenders into the community by providing programs that address the literacy, numeracy, personal and employment skills necessary to function as law-abiding, self-directed members of society. These programs also address the acquisition of equally vital pro-social attitudes and values.

Research has established that educational programs are among the most effective ways of helping offenders re-enter society. As such, educational programs are increasingly gaining recognition within the correctional community.

Further, many offenders are undereducated in comparison with other Canadian adults. In fact, many are functionally illiterate. There is, therefore, little chance that such offenders will find suitable employment after release without upgrading their education.

Test results show that, upon entry into the correctional system, more than 60% of offenders function below high school entrance levels, 80% function below trade training entrance levels and 90% function below high school completion levels.

Many offenders also lack the thinking and reasoning skills essential to successful social adjustment, and often lack the employment skills and good work habits necessary to hold a job once it is obtained.

Education programs are designed to address three kinds of learning needs:

- academic improvement (particularly functional literacy);
- the acquisition of employment skills (particularly generic trade skills applicable to a variety of occupations); and
- the acquisition of the interpersonal, reasoning and social skills required for pro-social behaviour.

Key principles and characteristics A comprehensive literature review was recently conducted in this area of correctional education. It confirmed that it has been long established that effective correctional adult basic education has a positive influence on offender self-esteem, social competence and confidence.

The research also indicates that correctional programs with certain specific characteristics reduce recidivism between 25% and 80%, with an average reduction of about 50%.⁽²⁾

These principles, as they apply to correctional adult basic education, include:

- intensive services should be behavioural in nature;
- behavioural programs should target the criminogenic needs of high-risk offenders;
- teachers should consider and respond to the characteristics of both the program and the offenders in it;
- behavioural strategies should be enforced firmly but fairly;
- teachers should relate to offenders in sensitive and constructive ways (and should be trained and

- supervised accordingly); and
- offenders should be placed in situations dominated by pro-social activities.

It is equally important to be aware of principles of correctional adult basic education intervention that have proven ineffective. These include traditional Freudian psychodynamic and Rogerian client-centred therapies, medical-model approaches, subcultural and labelling approaches, programs that target low-risk offenders, programs that target offender need factors that are weak predictors of criminal behaviour, and "punishing smarter" strategies.

Analysis of research on correctional literacy programs also indicates that effective programs have a significant number of common characteristics.⁽³⁾ For example, literacy program materials should be diverse, meaningful and relevant to offenders, and they should address real-life issues such as family, sexuality and violence. The content should also give inmates information they need for their return to society, such as information on employment, housing, transportation, welfare and health care. Accordingly, programs for parents with custody of dependent children should address such issues as child care, nutrition and family planning.

Courses for offenders with limited English skills should recognize cultural differences and provide language instruction. The programs should also be based on behavioural objectives, and should be open-entry/ open-exit, competency-based and self-paced.

Further, programs should integrate basic skills development with life skills development and should monitor the progress and achievement of inmate students. The learning environment should be structured and supportive, providing positive reinforcement and pro-social models. Learning experiences and activities should provide opportunities for offender students to apply and practise skills in functional, real-life settings and situations.

Finally, the programs should use individual and group teaching methods, and a range of techniques, educational technologies and resources from community groups, business and industry. Discussion Education provides a foundation for acquiring the skills needed for offender growth and personal development, therefore enhancing the probability of successful offender re-integration into the community. In short, success in any program generally requires functional literacy and numeracy.

Before 1994, education, correctional programming and community re-integration were only informally connected. This relationship was considered important enough that education was included in official documents such as the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*. Further, the importance of offender education within the Correctional Service of Canada has been consistently reinforced through corporate policy and planning.

Today, there is an even stronger reason to support offender education. It has been shown that skillful use of the proven principles and characteristics of correctional adult basic education may reduce recidivism substantially.

Correctional teachers have long defined their profession simply as "correctional education." However,

when pressed to define the term, they often could not provide a precise and measurable answer. There is simply no longer any validity or sympathy for statements such as, "I just teach adult basic education to criminals. Their criminality is not my problem." We are not just trying to graduate smarter crooks with more credits. We are professionally committed to addressing offender attitudes, feelings and values.

Staff training is, therefore, the key to successful correctional adult basic education. A clear understanding and definition of the program now exists. This must be used to re-educate Service teachers so that each has a thorough and clear understanding of the goals of this process, and the skills and abilities to implement the principles and characteristics of correctional adult basic education.

To ensure that its educational curriculum is entirely correctional in nature, it has been proposed that the Service's Ontario Region embark on a project to enshrine the principles and characteristics of correctional strategies within its adult basic education program. However, the acid test for the correctional adult basic education project will be its success in the practical application of the proven principles and characteristics of correctional education by every teacher, with every student, in every course of study.

(1)Warkworth Institution, P.O. Box 760, Campbellford, Ontario KOL 1L0.

(2)P. Gendreau, "The Principles of Effective Intervention with Offenders," *What Works in Community Corrections: A Consensus Conference* (Philadelphia: International Association of Residential and Community Alternatives, 1993).

(3)T. A. Ryan, "Literacy Training and Reintegration of Offenders," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 3,1(1991):17-23.