

Nordic Prison Education - A Lifelong Perspective
Torfinn Langelid, Norway; Svenolov Svensson, Sweden; Kaj
Raundrup, Denmark

A Nordic Project

In 1999 the Nordic Council passed a recommendation where the Nordic Council asked the Nordic Council of Ministers to set aside funds for a systematic charting of the prison education in the Nordic countries. The County Governor of Hordaland, Department of Education in Norway, was given the task to organise and carry out the project in accordance with the guidelines. Torfinn Langelid has been the project leader and together with one representative from Denmark (KR), Finland (VK/KK) and Sweden (SOS). The report was published in December 2003 with a summary in English. The whole report is now available in English.

Introduction

The purpose of the project Education, Training and Correctional Services in a Life-long Learning Perspective, a Nordic Study of Structures and Models, is to provide a concise, overall and updated comparative view of education and training in prisons in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Based on these observations, general analyses were then made of strengths and weaknesses in order to identify a common basis for making progress in the field. The project group has put forward joint Nordic recommendations for improvements.

The typical Nordic prisoner is around 30, often left school early, seldom has completed secondary education, has rarely had a job and often has drug and drink problems. It is hardly a surprising picture and most of us readily recognise it.

In an attempt to look into the future, a Swedish report has drawn up a model categorisation of the inmates of the future; the abusers, the casual visitors and the professional criminals.

According to the report, abusers are, and will remain, the dominant category of prisoner, while casual visitors are liable to have been convicted for the first time and to come from a relatively orderly background. Their crimes may, however, be of a relatively serious nature. The third category is quite broad and contains members of known criminal gangs and people who take part in planned criminal activity. It is important to generate debate about the activities that can be offered to these clients because their primary need is not for social support according to the authors of the report (KVS, The Swedish Prison and Probation Service and its Clients, 1998).

The education and training needs may be formal in nature to a great extent but a major need for informal skills is also identified (life skills, the ability to function in a team at work, in society, in the family, etc.). Official efforts to promote life-long learning must also include prisoners in the care of the correctional service. (See also 5.8.)

The overall question is: what type of education and training does the altered prison population need?

Diagram 1.1 Prisoners and prison teaching in relation to society

The right to education and training

If prisoners are to receive education and training on the same terms as the rest of society then one basic prerequisite is that their rights must be clearly stipulated in the legislation. While the authorities in all of the Nordic countries actively advocate life-long learning and skills enhancement for adults, our study reveals that prisoners' rights to education and training are not as clearly defined. Legislation governing the correctional services must also stipulate, therefore, that the only thing of which a prisoner is deprived is his or her liberty. In principle, all other rights must be upheld.

Based on the principles of normalisation, integration, openness and responsibility, the project group is in favour of prisoners taking part in the general education system to a much greater degree, e.g. by making greater use of day release. This would allow prisoners to join in the ordinary school system, which would provide them with a completely different approach to society than teaching in confinement/prison. Choice is also greater in the local educational system. Denmark use day release to school and work to a much greater extent than Finland, Norway and Sweden. Day release and open prisons are also cheaper and reintegration better.

Life-long learning

Both in the European Union (EU) and in the individual European countries, the educational authorities are providing qualifications/enhancing the skills of young people and adults in order to equip them to face new tasks in a society in a state of constant change. Those who cannot cope with/handle taking part in this type of skills enhancement will be excluded from the ordinary educational system and the labour market. The prison population is an exposed group in this context. One precondition for meeting the needs of the different groups of prisoners for education and training/skills enhancement is that the educational authorities possess the tools to assess their needs and the options available.

Education/Training Options

Prison education and training must reflect the ordinary educational system. Research shows that many prisoners have had inadequate schooling compared with the rest of the population. From several perspectives, e.g. the right to education and training, the humanitarian perspective and in terms of rehabilitation, education and training in prisons should be defined broadly. Good prison education and training is considered as an investment in crime prevention in the sense that more prisoners will take a further education and find jobs at the end of their sentences.

Our study of prison education and training in the Nordic countries shows that the definition varies from country to country. The importance attached to life-long learning and the attention paid to the need for continuous skills enhancement and to the increasingly multicultural nature of Nordic society mean that these perspectives also have to be acknowledged in prison education and training.

Despite the different models for prison education and training, a joint Nordic starting point does exist in the sense that education and training are perceived as being there for the clients, for their own personal development, but also as a step on the way to standing on their own feet after their release – hopefully to a life free from crime and drugs. The organisation, courses, methodology and prioritisation should, therefore, be based on the prisoners situations.

The education and training needs may be formal in nature to a great extent but a major need for informal skills has also been identified (life skills, the ability to function in a team at work, in society, in the family, etc.). Official efforts to promote life-long learning must also include prisoners.

The role of the teacher and methodology

The teachers need to possess skills that meet the special needs of the prison population for education and training, e.g. they must be able to recognise the different learning needs of the individual inmate and possess knowledge of language, religion and culture when dealing with inmates from abroad. They must be properly qualified teachers and keep up to date with the latest in correctional techniques in order to promote proper pedagogical dialogue and avoid institutionalisation.

In Denmark most of the teaching in prisons is done by full-time teachers appointed by the Ministry of Justice. Over half of the teaching in county gaols is by prison teachers and the remainder is part-time teachers appointed by the local authorities.

In Finland, most of the teaching is done by teachers appointed by local education institutions, but also by teachers appointed by the Ministry of Justice (in three prisons) and by contract teachers (rare).

In Norway all teaching in the prisons is by full and part-time teachers appointed by the educational authorities.

In Sweden the teaching is done by a large number of different adult education centres (with different competence in this area). In 2001, there were 21 different contractors. The contracts last for 1-2 years but with a renewal option for a further one or two year. In 2003, an experiment has been launched using teachers appointed by the correctional service under the pedagogic direction of the Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning - CFL (corresponding to VOX – the National Institute for Adult Education in Norway).

Is there a dimension to the teaching in a prison that distinguishes prison teachers from other teachers? According to Claesson (2002), a Swedish researcher, it may have something to do with the social aspects and she refers to a meeting with an inmate/student. " What distinguishes them? Three things actually. One is their commitment to teaching, they really want to teach and they also recognise the social dimension. Secondly, they are extremely practical. They are prepared to change learning and teaching methods. Thirdly, it is OK to be bad. Because a lot of people in this environment, including me, have mixed experience of school. Some may even connect being bad at a particular subject with being bad as a person. So they end up skiving, not turning up or not caring. But it is OK not to be on top all the time. It is OK to say that I haven't done anything. OK, but sit down and try it anyway. And the feeling that there is space for you nevertheless, that the teachers won't give up on you, I think that's important."

If you imagine a time line, Skaalvik et al (2002) says, which begins with preconditions and finishes with long-term goals, it will contain the perspective that constitutes the basis for the different perceptions held by the head of the school, the teacher and the rest of the staff about the purpose of prison education.

Preconditions Learning targets Formal targets Long-term goals
Well-being Knowledge Examinations Mastering life
Motivation Skills Certificates
Self-esteem Social development
Attitudes

Diagram 1.2 The purpose of prison education and training seen in a time perspective

The teacher who is close to the inmates weighs "the preconditions" for procuring tools with which to make progress against the long-term goals. The head of the school on the other hand, with his experience of the traditional school, stresses the "formal targets". What is important is to approach each new inmate on the basis of this awareness and from a life-long learning perspective, without preconceived opinions and really try to see where on the time line he or she is and continue to work with suitable methods on that basis. To focus on definite goals may be the correct solution for one inmate, while working on the basic preconditions may be the right approach for other inmates. Prison teachers are presumably put under greater pressure than "normal" adult education teachers when it comes to finding the right "keys" to the individuals concerned.

The teaching must, therefore, also in the prison environment, be epitomised by the development of qualitative characteristics, self-confidence, the ability to solve problems, creativity, the ability to learn new things and to collect and evaluate information.

The role of education and training in the correctional service

Custodial sentences are one way in which society deals with undesirable actions and they must be based on the initiatives that the correctional service has at its disposal in order to integrate the prisoner back into society. A variety of different professions take part in this process. In other words, the correctional service is an institution with a variety of stakeholders who sometimes also have different and contradictory goals. The educational authorities are among the government services whose job it is to make sure that prisoners receive the education and training to which they are entitled by law. The correctional service has a particular responsibility to co-ordinate initiatives by the different government services so that prisoners are offered a positive range of educational opportunities.

Administrative co-operation

Close co-operation between the correctional service and the various authorities is one important precondition for meeting the needs of the inmates for education and training. Strategic plans are needed for the extension of prison education and training. Close co-operation and good internal planning will provide a broader view of the needs of the different prison groups for education and training, help develop good programmes and make better use of resources.

From an overall social perspective it is important to encourage co-ordinated efforts that will make it easier for prisoners to return to society.

Documentation and research

The study shows that the Nordic countries, except Denmark, collect systematic reports about prison education and training. Apart from Norway and Sweden, little evaluation and research is done into prison education and training. At the same time, quality assurance is a general requirement in the Nordic education systems and that entails various types of reporting, evaluation and research. This helps

ensure that the resources invested correspond to the options available and provides us with a very clear picture of what is going on.

Economy

At present, demand far outstrips supply. Those with the greatest need are often a group that is difficult to reach on the outside, so it is easier to make a start towards society's ambition of enhancing their skills and encouraging them to join in the process of life-long learning while these groups are serving prison terms. At present, education and training constitutes only a fraction of the total cost of a place in prison. It would probably be more profitable in purely socio-economic terms to increase investments in education and training in prisons.

The cost of prison education and training is small compared to the total cost of a prison place, even though the total cost of the education and training in the Nordic countries is many millions of crowns. The proportion of total costs is approximately 2-5%. Or, to put it another way, the correctional services in the Nordic countries provide inmates with education and training for the price of a packet of cigarettes a day.

International recommendations/conventions regarding imprisonment.
Our legislation is often based on international recommendations /conventions. Existing and future prison education and training must comply with international recommendations/conventions.

Recommendations

The project group has drawn up a number of recommendations for the future of prison education and training in the Nordic countries (for further details see chapters 5 and 7). The project group has made the following core recommendations:

- Legislation

The project group recommends that legislation in the Nordic countries should stipulate the right of prisoners to have, and the duty of the educational authorities to provide, the same right to training as other citizens. The legal authority embodied in Education Acts must also be reflected in penal codes. A clarification of the prisoners' right to education and training must have an impact on resources.

- Educational opportunities

The project group recommends the following proposals to meet the need for formal and informal skills.

Theoretical education and training

Basic education (Finland on a limited scale)

Remedial teaching/reading, writing and arithmetic, specially directed at those inmates with the most obvious educational difficulties (unique chance to meet and motivate the individual during his or her incarceration)

Further/higher preparatory education, with a breadth corresponding to what is on offer in society

The possibility of studying during day release is important, as the options for the individual increase as the inmates find themselves in a "normal" study environment

Education and training that meets the needs of foreign prisoners (including second/third generation immigrants).

There must be room for self-tuition with guidance so that individual needs can be covered.

Vocational training

Vocational training in co-operation with job centres so that training is relevant to the labour market.

Exploit the opportunities for co-operation between schools (theory) and prison workshops (practice). This co-operation could involve the comparative evaluation of the activity with approved course curricula or course modules. The inmates' previous experiences must be included in this evaluation, which can mean a great deal for a person who has good qualifications on paper.

A certain amount of vocational training can be given in another language, even for those awaiting deportation, which would equip them with a valuable skill for a future life in their homeland.

New technology

Introduction of new technology (Internet solutions adapted for security purposes) would provide more people with direct access to a broad range of further education, university and high school education programmes.

IT teaching similar to that outside the prison (to master the methods but also to be able to use new technology in other subjects). New technology is also needed as a tool for many educational and training programmes outside prison – a natural tool for a growing range of options for net-based distance learning in society.

Creative activity, library, etc.

Training in creative subjects to improve self-confidence, mastering life and motivation – improves social skills. Creative activity and physical training motivate a lot of people to continue their studies in other subjects.

Access to a comprehensive library service in co-operation with the general library service.

Women inmates

All of the above points apply equally to women inmates who must be offered as broad a range of options, adapted to meet individual needs, as male prisoners. Improved access to new technology in particular can open doors for women who otherwise risk making up too small and "expensive" a target group (unless we consider mixed gender teaching).

Education and training as part of a holistic approach to correction

Education and training can be made more effective by combining them with work, word-processing programmes and other approved activities. Few prisoners cope with full-time studies. Greater flexibility and "tailor-made" weekly timetables are needed for each individual prisoner. Education and training is an important part of a

greater whole in which other elements may exert a crucial influence on progress in the school work and vice versa.

General

Access to suitable premises and modern equipment which bears comparison with adult education on the outside

- Administrative co-operation

The project group recommends that specific plans and routines be drawn up for co-operation between the correctional service and the various stakeholders at central, regional and local level.

- Documentation and research

The project group recommends systematic reporting, evaluation and research into education and training in prisons in order to:

- document the amount of effort put into, for example, word-processing programmes and other priorities
- assess whether the range of options available in prison education and training corresponds with the needs of the prison population
- obtain an overall picture of who takes part and who does not in prison education and how the recruitment process works
- assess teaching methodology and quality
- assess the workshops systematically in relation to approved curricula
- evaluate the place of prison education and training within the correctional service
- decide how to evaluate or conduct research into new initiatives, e.g. teaching and various forms of treatment.

Crime prevention in the short and long term

There are plenty of crime prevention initiatives directed at individuals or groups—both in the correctional service and on the outside. There is far less awareness of and willingness to change the basic social relationships that provide the fertile soil for crime. If crime prevention is to have any impact, initiatives on both levels must be seen in context.

Evaluations of the effect of education and training within and outside the correctional service are conspicuous by their absence. The fact that little research is conducted into prison education and training ought not to serve as an obstruction barrier to launching joint Nordic research projects into, for example: attitude training, situational prevention and social planning.

