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Life Long Learning: The Prison Library As A Bridge To Participation

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Abstract

Prisoners in Belgium have the right during their detention to access social-cultural activities (e.g. library, sport activities, education, vocational training, cultural activities, mental health care). Based on survey-data (N=486), this article explores prisoners' participation rates in these different kinds of programmes and services. The findings indicate that 92% participated at least in one activity, among which the library had the highest participation rate (85.8%). 40.5% practised sports, 38.8% participated in vocational training, 29% followed an educational course, 18% participated in mental health services and 10.1% followed a socio-cultural training course. Furthermore, more than 58% multiplied participation in different correctional programmes. The results indicate that the library may serve as a bridge to participate in other life long learning programmes.

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1. Introduction

In prisons there are tensions between providing security on the one hand, and rehabilitation services and health care on the other hand (Shaw & Humber, 2007). Correctional programmes are often considered a luxury by the general public, stating that prisoners do not deserve such privileges (Carter & Russell, 2005). However, research has shown several positive effects of participation in correctional lifelong learning programmes and services, for instance reducing recidivism (Kim & Clark, 2013), better functioning of the prison as institution (Johnson, 2008;

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Meek & Lewis, 2013) and contributing to mental and physical health (Nelson, Specian, & Tracy, 2006). Furthermore, the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (United Nations, 1955) and The European Prison Rules (Committee of Ministers, 2006) provide the right of prisoners to have access to a library, sport activities, education, vocational training, cultural activities, mental health care, etc. Within the research focussing on these life long learning programmes, different research gaps can be identified. Of the 22 reviewed studies about motivations and barriers of prisoners to participate in prison programmes (Brosens, 2013), none focused on all the different types of programmes. Research on correctional programmes is mostly subdivided into one specific type such as sports, educational courses, vocational training, library, socio-cultural training courses, or mental health services. However, research that focuses on one type of programme overlooks the fact that people can engage in multiple activities. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge on the multiplicity of programmes that prisoners undertake. Clustering programmes rather than study them separately and getting insights into the extent to which programmes compete or complete each other are necessary to get insight into the engagement of prisoners. How people use their time has already been the subject of research across different disciplines (Kamakura, 2009). For instance in the discipline of social work Morrow-Howell, Hong, McCrary, & Blinne (2012) emphasize that activities potentially compete with each other for someone's time. If someone participates in one activity, their time for other activities is squeezed. To date, only a few scholars conducted studies incorporating multiple programmes prisoners undertake. Therefore, the goal of this explorative study is to investigate the participation of prisoners in various programmes. The following research questions are addressed: (1) What are the participation rates of prisoners in the different life long learning programmes? (2) How many prisoners partake in one or more programmes? (3) Which programmes do prisoners combine?

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection

The data used in this study are collected in a remand prison in Belgium. Using a structured questionnaire, information was collected on participation in different correctional programmes. This research project was developed in close co-operation with professionals of each sector offering activities in the respective prison (i.e. culture, education, health, sports, vocational training and wellbeing). Although the surplus value of developing such a collaborative research partnership in prison is recently acknowledged (e.g. Apa et al., 2012; Cislo & Trestman, 2013), most academics and correctional institutions are not very familiar with this new way of doing research (Gostin et al., 2007). Prisoners were invited to fill in the questionnaire in small groups of maximum 16 prisoners in a classroom. The questionnaire was available in 13 languages and was self-administered, although volunteers were allowed to clarify the meaning of the questions. Furthermore, prisoners with writing and reading difficulties could get assistance to complete the questionnaire. Consequently, also illiterate prisoners could participate.

2.2. Participants

The sample obtained (N=486) presented a 73,97% response rate. 432 were men (88.9%) and 54 were women (11.1%), which matches the real gender segmentation within prison. Almost half of the respondents were aged under 30 years. 19.9% was aged between 18 and 25 year, and 20.1% between 26 and 30. Only 1.9% was aged 60 or more. The majority obtained a (very) low educational level. 37.5% went to school between 0 and 9 years, and 41.1% between 10 and 12 years. 10.6% went 13 or 14 year to school. 10.8% is highly educated (they went 15 years or more to school). In comparison with the national population, prisoners are more likely to be low educated (de Maeyer, 2005).

2.3. Measurement of participation

To get insight into the level of participation of prisoners in the different correctional programmes, we asked the respondents the following questions:

- Did you practice any sports in the past month? (1=yes, 2=no)

- Have you ever called upon the mental health care centre in prison? (1=yes, 2=no)
- Are you (currently or in the past) taking any classes in prison? (1=yes, 2=no)
- Did you already have contact with the employment and training service? (1=yes, 2=no)
- Do you go to the library? (1=yes, 2=no)
- Have you taken any socio-cultural training courses? (1=yes, 2=no)

3. Results

3.1. How many prisoners participate in correctional programmes?

Figure 1 indicates that 92% participated at least in one life long learning activity, among which the library had the highest participation rate (85.8%). Prisoners had the opportunity to go to the library within the prison once a week and could borrow books, CD's, DVD's, comic strips, and video games. 40.5% practiced sport outside their cell (e.g. fitness, football, volleyball, zumba). 38.8% participated in vocational training. This training consisted of programmes that are developed to prepare prisoners for work after their release from prison (e.g. job interview training, draw up a curriculum vitae, orientation on the labour market). 29% followed an educational course. The offered courses were different for men and women. Men could follow Dutch for foreign speakers and computer courses. Women could follow manicure. 18% participated in mental health services, which means that they went to a psychologist and had a conversation about the offences they committed, anxiety, depression, traumas, aggression, suicide, use of alcohol, drugs, medication, etc. The correctional programme with the lowest participation rate (10.1%) was socio-cultural training courses. Examples of such courses are "dealing with aggression", "being a father/mother in prison", "standing up for yourself", etc. Despite the fact that the participation rate among prisoners is high in general, 8.1% of the participants did not participate in any activity.

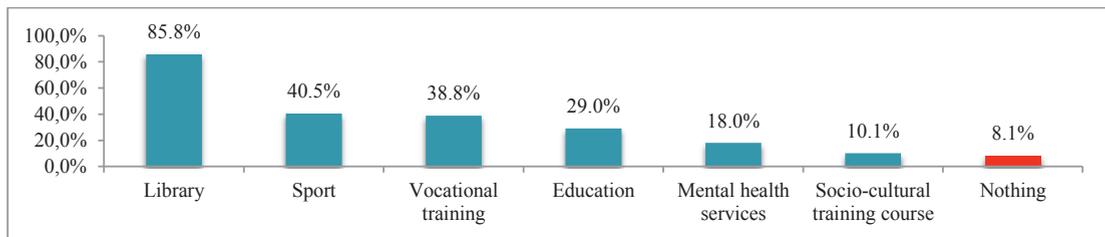


Fig. 1. Participation rate to the different kinds of life long learning programmes

3.2. Do prisoners participate in multiple correctional programmes?

Most of the research concerning correctional programmes focuses on one domain through which they overlook the possibility to participate in multiple programmes. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge on the multiplicity of programmes that prisoners undertake. A first method to study this multiplicity is through assessing the numbers of programmes (Smith, Mohan, & Dury, In press). Figure 2 shows that the majority of prisoners participated in one programme or combined it with one other life long learning activity. 33.8% took part in one life long learning programme, 32.6% participated in two programmes and 25.5% was engaged in three or more programmes. Consequently, more than 58% of the respondents were active across at least two different domains.

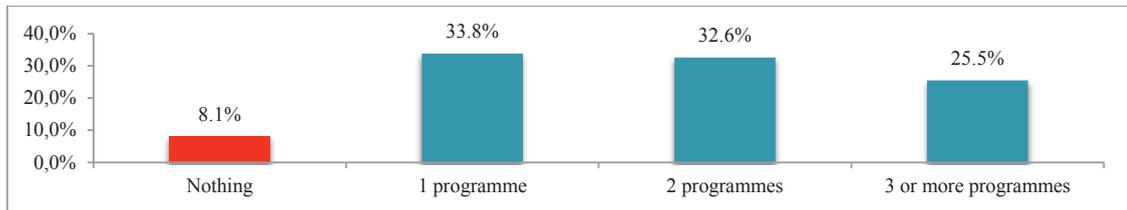


Fig. 2. Participation in multiple correctional programmes

A second method to study the multiplicity of programmes that prisoners undertake is to analyse which programmes compete or complete each other (Smith, et al., In press). Table 1 presents an overview of the participation rates to only one programme or one programme in combination with another.

Table 1. Participation in one or two life long learning programmes (%)

	Library	Vocational training	Sports	Education	Mental health care	Socio-cultural training course
Library	23.2					
Vocational training	9.3	4.1				
Sport	14.1	1.2	3.7			
Education	2.1	0.2	0.4	1.0		
Mental health care	2.7	0.4	0.6	0	1.0	
Socio-cultural training course	1.2	0	0.2	0	0	0.6

Most of the prisoners only went to the library (23.2%). Besides, the participation rates of the different life long learning programmes in combination with visiting the library were higher than the participation rates of each programme separately. 14.1% combined visiting the library with doing sport and 9.3% with vocational training. Fewer prisoners were engaged in only one activity. 4.1% only took part in vocational training and 3.7% only practiced sports. Also the other life long learning programmes were more popular in combination with the library. 2.7% multiplied conversations with a psychologists (mental health care) and visiting the library - versus 1% that only went to the psychologists. 2.1% combined the library with following an educational course - versus 1.0% that only participated in education. And 1.2% combined following a socio-cultural training course with the library - versus 0.6% that only participated in a socio-cultural training course. Besides, 1.2% of the respondents combined practising sport and following vocational training. When looking at prisoners that combine three or more correctional programmes, it was demonstrated that the library was involved in 97,6% of the cases. The library plays an important role in participation in multiple life long learning programmes.

4. Discussion

Research into participation in life long learning programmes in prison is very fragmented and subdivided into different types (e.g. cultural activities, education, mental health care, physical activities, the library, vocational training). Our exploratory study examines the inter-relations of multiple activities that prisoners undertake. The results show that prisoners are often engaged in more than one activity and that many activities do not occur independently but rather complete each other. In that respect, engaging in one kind of correctional programme does not happen in isolation of other programmes. In addition, the concept of 'time squeeze' (Morrow-Howell et al., 2012) seems not to be suitable for the majority of prisoners who participate in correctional programmes. The different programmes more frequently complete than compete each other. Based on the finding that especially visiting the library does not occur in isolation, some practical recommendations can be indicated. We can suggest that visiting the library increase the tendency to get involved in other life long learning programmes. Since the majority of prisoners visit the library, the possibilities of using the library as a bridge to other life long learning

programmes can be explored. The library can fulfil an important role in advising the prisoners about the different correctional programmes through flyers and folders. However, this classic manner of communication is not the most successful. Folders and flyers often form an inconvenient pile of papers that quickly ends up in the dustbin. Word-of-mouth advertising seems to be more efficient. The librarian can act as an information provider. If he is aware of the offer of correctional programmes, he can address prisoners personally. For instance when a foreign prisoner would like to learn Dutch, the librarian can refer him to the educational providers; if someone has difficulties with aggression, he can refer to the physical activities or to the socio-cultural training course about aggression control. There are already prisoners who combine visiting the library with other activities, but there are still possibilities to involve prisoners who do not participate in multiple programmes. However, we need to be aware that participation in one or more programmes takes time and reduces the time that people can spend on their daily activities (e.g. going for a walk, visit, making phone calls).

To our knowledge, this is the one of the first studies that focuses on the multiplicity of life long learning programmes that prisoners undertake in order to explore their engagement. In addition, several issues for future research can be identified. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of prisoners' participation in life long learning programmes, research must seek for the integration of the fragmented literature about the different kinds of programmes. Likewise, a theoretical framework about the various factors that influence prisoners' engagement can be developed. More research is needed into which factors influence participation (e.g. socio-demographic, socio-economic, prison related characteristics, daily activities). Acknowledging the various programmes that prisoners undertake and gathering knowledge about the competition or complement of the different programmes can serve as guiding principles. Furthermore, 8,1% of the prisoners do not partake in correctional programmes. Future research can identify their profile and the reasons why they do not participate.

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