

*Copyright © Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (1992)
All Rights Reserved. Cite this article as the Formatted Online Version
(2006)*

“Editorial Note”

-Howard Davidson

* * *

Some time ago we decided to publish issues which focus on topics that should be considered in depth. This has led Little Rock Reed to edit a special issue on attitude and behaviour modification as social control because this form of control, he argues, 'is at the heart of the prison system.' The issue you have in hand is focused on a practice of imprisonment which has interested me for some time - prison education.

On and off since 1981, I have taught in prison schools; thus one, but not the only, reason for my interest in prison education is personal involvement. The other is the popularity of prison education among prisoners, a popularity which is unequaled when compared to other prison programs. This support is restated by each article in this issue. And as Ray Jones observes in his contribution, although cut-backs to programs justified by the 'nothing works' debate was typical during the 1980s, prison education not only survived the attacks, it flourished during this period. This may change abruptly, however, if the present attempt by federal legislators in the United States to disqualify prisoners for Pell Grants is approved.

In many forms and with as many intentions, prison education has been a fixture of imprisonment since the, 18th century, but it was towards the turn of the twentieth century when its status dramatically improved. Up to this time, prison slave labour was the principal form of control; then in the northern United States and eastern Canada the use of prison labour went on the defensive under attacks by middle-class reformers and trade unions. By 1920 it was legally banned in many jurisdictions, and near panic arose among penal elites as to how they would avoid 'idleness and moral decay' among a rapidly growing prison population. In this climate of uncertainty, an interest in prison education was renewed. During this turbulent period, other practices justified as rehabilitation were introduced to keep prisoners busy and

controlled (e.g., group therapy), but none were as well received by prisoners as prison education.

During the early twentieth century, there are several accounts of incarcerated radicals being assigned to teach illiterate prisoners and operate small libraries. Along with reading they also taught politics and used their contacts with radical organizations (e.g., International Workers of the World) to acquire literature for distribution among prisoners students. Later 'professional' (i.e.; non-political) teachers replaced these prisoner instructors and schools lost their political/radical focus. Juan Rivera's article in support of a non-traditional curriculum indicates that the struggle to link prison education to raising prisoners' political consciousness is still very much alive. But political or not, prisoners have supported schooling, and more often than not they are joined by prisoner rights advocates and even the penal elite.

Should we take this popularity for granted? Is there more to this unique phenomenon than some intuitive recognition that education is essentially good and therefore widely acclaimed? If you take the time to pursue these questions, one thing soon becomes clear: with rare exceptions those who write about prison education are not prisoners or former prisoners. For the most part, it is educators who dominate the discourse. The tone of their work is somewhat adversarial. Because they suspect or recognize hostility on the part of guards and 'the public,' they aim to head-off public criticism and waning political support with reasoned arguments, turning chiefly to the claim that schooling prisoners can reduce recidivism rates. In this discourse they merely assume that education is rehabilitative and liberating, a little bit of intellectual freedom in an otherwise coercive environment. In response to the criticism that schooling fails to reform, they argue that the mandate of prison schools conflicts with the mandate of security and the will of the public (i.e., retribution); thus, schooling and security clash, and the weaknesses and failures of prison education are the dire results. Do prisoner-students see prison education in the same light? Are they asking the same questions? You cannot know from reading articles in the most prestigious journals in the field because articles by prisoners are not published there. This issue is an attempt to overcome the one sidedness of the discussion on prison education.

It is not my task to review what the articles contain. I shall leave that to you and to Dennis Lynes in his 'Response.' I do want to say that I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to work with the contributors to this issue and to see the beginning of what I hope will be a continuous process of creating research by prisoners and former prisoners on this subject.

I also want to take this opportunity to introduce two new members of our editorial board: Little Rock Reed and Peter Linebaugh.

Correction: Omitted in R. Gaucher's 'Organizing Inside: Prison Justice Day (August 10): *A Non-violent Response to Penal Oppression*' (Spring 1991) is the full reference to R. Ratner and B. Cartwright. 1990. 'Politicized Prisoners: From Class Warriors to Faded Rhetoric.' *Journal of Human Justice*, 2(1): 75-92.