

The Relationship Between Prison Vocational Training and the Self-Perceived Effectiveness of Ex-Offenders in the Eastern Region of Kansas: A Statistical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to determine what factors were associated with the rehabilitative success of ex-offenders (EOs) in the state of Kansas and what type of prison educational training needs to be provided to inmates before their release into the community to prepare them for employment opportunities in the state of Kansas. This study further explored why EOs lack self-effectiveness after re-entry into their community based on the quality of educational training received in the penal system. This study also examined the relationship between prison educational training of EOs in Kansas as the independent variable and their self-assessed effectiveness at their jobs as the dependent variable. The investigator surveyed a population of EOs working in the labor market in the eastern region of Kansas (Kansas City metropolitan). These EOs were working at different job classification levels of employment. The investigator developed a questionnaire for the instrument in this study and pilot-tested it. Five EOs, working in other occupations and of cultural backgrounds, acted as the pilot for the study. The investigator found the pilot helpful in shaping the research. Subsequently, 99 out of 125 recipients returned completed survey forms. This represented a 79.2% response rate. Used as computational formulas, the Pearson correlation coefficient, the Likert scale, and Cronbach's coefficient alpha showed the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

KEYWORDS: self-effectiveness, correctional rehabilitation, correctional education, prison education, program effectiveness, prison education, prison vocational training, vocational education, prison vocational education

Introduction

This study sought to find the relationship between components of prison educational training and factors associated with the self-perceived rehabilitative

success, or effectiveness, of ex-offenders (EOs) in Kansas. Prison educational training is vital for all eligible offenders because this scheme will help reduce re-offending, increase self-effectiveness, and provide responsibilities for their future and success after release (Mirko 2024). However, the cost is a hurdle for many correctional institutions. The Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) has a wide distribution of educational training programs for offenders but no instrument to measure or rate the quality and effectiveness of its training programs. The pressure for EOs to secure and maintain gainful employment has worked to the detriment of the KDOC and the effectiveness of its educational training programs. The problem is that EOs need more self-effectiveness after re-entry, especially self-effectiveness based solely on the quality of educational training received in the penal system.

The lack of prison education and training funds to help prisons address their educational needs and instill self-worth in offenders makes the investment expectations of employers and society more dubious. The structure and curriculum of prison educational training programs must be of better quality if offenders are going to gain the education and skills they need for employment. Without the essential underpinning skills of literacy, language, and numeracy, offenders are much less likely to achieve the education and skills they need to get and hold down a job, play a positive role in society, and, most importantly, feel adequate in their endeavors (Saylor & Gaes 1997). According to Travis et al. (2001), training offenders for jobs they cannot realistically expect to receive upon release from prison is ineffective or inefficient. Additionally, low-wage jobs will not afford the offender success in the world of work. Offenders must have the training and ability to earn a wage that will allow them to support themselves and their families. They must also be able to work in a job that will enable them to feel adequate and satisfied.

Literature Review

History of Prison Education

Academic educational programming in prisons has existed since first developed in the United States (Gerber & Fritsch 1995; Lawrence 1994). A gradual shift in American penal philosophy occurred between the early 1800s and the 1970s. The idea of reforming a prisoner through harsh and brutal confinement began to be subordinated to a more humane understanding of the basic needs of people. This reform resulted in a significant increase in prison educational programs in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the debate over educational effectiveness continued through the 1970s and 1980s, the consensus in the 1990s was that prison educational training programs were needed. For example, according to Welch (1996), Walnut Street Jail, the first facility to

house felons during the latter part of the 1700s, included "instruction in reading, writing, and math" (173).

Such programs have expanded to the present time, so few prisons lack some educational endeavor (Kirshstein 1996). According to the Office of Correctional Education 1992 survey, 42 state responses were used, "almost all facilities offer educational training." In the United States, the penitentiary began with the intention of reforming criminal behavior. Reforming the criminal developed into control, isolation, and brutality to change behavior. A convicted felon was sent to prison to be punished and corrected. This idea was so novel that early 19th-century prison reformers came to the United States from around the world to study that American invention, the penitentiary.

Educational Training and Employment

Educational programs in prisons can be real rehabilitation tools, as shown repeatedly by national and statewide recidivism studies. Because education can dramatically increase an inmate's chance of success upon release, correctional education programs should be of high quality and held accountable for outcomes. Prison educational training provides offenders with job skills and problem-solving experiences and prepares them for useful employment upon re-entry into society. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1993), "nearly half of all inmates have received academic education" (27). It has been reported by Kirshstein (1997) that 400,000 state-held inmates "have participated in some type of correctional education program" (1). If the inmates' time is spent productively, they give back to society for the crimes they have committed. Also, opportunities for future employment are created that many EOs never imagined possible. Research indicates that simply because offenders are involved in education and vocational training while incarcerated, the likelihood that they will return to prison once released is reduced (Kirshstein 1997).

Governance patterns vary because, in most cases, the Department of Correction has charge of education, sometimes contracting with adult basic education and literacy, community colleges, vocational-technical schools, voluntary programs, and community-based organizations to deliver educational services to inmates. In other states, a department of education has been established solely to serve correctional institutions, thereby assuring that they do not have to compete with other education programs for funding (Nelson et al. 1988).

Effects of Educational Training

According to Gerber and Fritsch (1995), most studies have shown a correlation between pre-college education and lower recidivism rates, post-release employment, and post-release educational participation. In contrast, according to Gerber and Fritsch (1995), fewer studies have shown "no correlation between

prison education and recidivism” (126). Glaser’s 1961 study found no relationship between these variables (Clear & Cole 1994). It was summarized that with the acquired prison educational training came unrealistic expectations of post-release life and employment. In addition to the numerous methodological questions, the lack of random assignment to groups and the absence of control groups, among other concerns raised about these studies, have shown the positive effects of prison education (Batiuk et al. 1997; Gerber & Fritsch 1995). Other issues of a theoretical nature were articulated as well. Specifically, Batiuk et al. (1997) assert that “there is a lack of clear specification about the process by which correctional education and recidivism are linked” (169). In an effort to address this problem, the relationship between postsecondary education and recidivism was thoroughly studied. Batiuk et al. concluded that “college education [in prison] does reduce the likelihood of recidivism, but this effect works principally through post-release employment” (175).

Recidivism

While focusing on recidivism, Lawrence (1994) cited an Oklahoma study by Langenbach, North, Aagaard, and Chown that found a “significant negative relationship between participation [in instruction by television] and recidivism” (47). Despite the methodological concerns identified above, Gerber and Fritsch (1995) concluded that prison education programs have positive outcomes. Gerber and Fritsch (1995) stated that the programs with the most significant degree of success include the following: “(1) those with more extensive programs, (2) separating the participating inmates from the rest of the prisoners, (3) providing follow-up after release, and (4) only placing only inmates meeting the program criteria” (135-136). One identifiable factor contributing to prison overcrowding is the high number of offenders who repeatedly commit crimes or violate the release conditions of probation or parole supervision, referred to as the “revolving door” of the penal system. This trend is recidivism, and it is an adaptive problem for most corrections departments throughout the United States. In its broadest sense, *recidivism* can be defined as a public safety failure (Barton & Turnbull 1989). More specifically, for the purposes of this study, recidivism is a new criminal activity by a person after a criminal conviction that resulted in either imprisonment or another sanction (i.e., probation, diversionary sentence, or fine). Many variables cause recidivism, and incarceration alone is ineffective in reducing recidivism. The prediction and causes of recidivism are important, and the development of appropriate and successful interventions is the key to improvement (Barton & Turnbull 1989).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study was influenced by Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory, a social cognitive theory introduced by Albert Bandura, constructivism theory developed by Jean Piaget, and andragogy theory advanced by Malcolm Shepherd Knowles. This study proposed to capture self-efficacy and educational training related to the ex-offender population. The theories presented are learning theories regarding how students develop knowledge and problem-solving. Self-efficacy assessments tailored to domains of functioning and task demands identify patterns of strengths and limitations in perceived capability (Bandura 2006). Self-efficacy is concerned with perceived capability. According to Bandura (2006), this refined assessment increases predictability and provides guidelines for tailoring programs to individual needs. According to Zimmerman and Bandura (1994), the most successful way of creating a high sense of efficacy is through mastering experiences. According to Lunenburg (2011), people with low self-efficacy have low expectations and aspirations. The theoretical framework presented incorporated the relationship between ex-offender self-efficacy and prison education. The theories are similar because they promote learning through understanding and personal experiences.

Data and Methodology

This study was designed to find the relationship between components of prison educational training and factors associated with the self-perceived rehabilitative success, or effectiveness, of EOs in Kansas. It was designed to determine problems encountered by EOs in their jobs, social environment, rehabilitation progress, and community. It was also directed towards determining the relationships between support systems and self-perceived effectiveness and, overall, makes recommendations on what type of prison educational training should be administered to inmates upon their arrival in the penal system to prepare them better for employment and meeting social expectations in American society. The main instrument to be utilized in this study was a survey questionnaire developed by this investigator. A pilot study was conducted with five EOs working in different occupations and with different cultural backgrounds. Five administrators (a correctional advisor, two parole officers, a probation officer, and a human resource specialist) also participated in the study to develop a reliable instrument. The pilot was helpful and helped the investigator in shaping the research. It also helped eliminate possible problems by refining some of the questions.

Presentation of Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Criminal justice officials and human resource administrators who are supervising and employing EOs in this large metropolitan area were initially contacted to determine the EO population and the hiring dates of their current employment

starting in 1995. The KDOC provided this investigator with a list of EOs currently under post-release supervision, EOs who had completed parole and/or are working in various private and public establishments throughout the Kansas City metropolitan area. The identified population included EOs working in entry-level, skilled, and on-the-job training (OJT) positions in both public and private sectors. It should be noted that EOs' convictions and supervision status were not the focus of this study and were a matter of public record. If applicable, respondents were required to sign consensual forms at various probation and parole district offices in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Tables 1-5 depict the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Data Analysis, Instrument, and Procedures

The main instrument to be utilized in this study was a survey questionnaire developed by this investigator. A pilot study was conducted with five EOs who were working in different occupations and with different cultural backgrounds. Five administrators (a correctional advisor, two parole officers, a probation officer, and a human resource specialist) also participated in the study to develop a reliable instrument. The pilot was useful and helped the investigator in shaping the research. It also helped eliminate possible problems by refining some of the questions. This study was designed to evaluate the standards for EOs' selection, including the level of education, experience, gender, and language because it details the construction and validation of the evaluation instrument for completion by male and female EOs in receipt of prison educational training.

Table 1: Respondents' Distribution by Gender

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Initial %	Valid %	Cumulative %
Male	1	69	69.7	69.7	69.7
Female	2	25	25.3	25.3	94.9
No response	9	5	5.1	5.1	100.0

Table 2: Respondents' Distribution by Job Classification

Value Label	Frequency	Initial %	Valid %	Cumulative %
Entry level	66	66.7	66.7	66.7
Semiskilled	23	23.2	23.2	89.6
Skilled	6	6.1	6.1	96.0
No response	4	5.1	5.1	100.0

Table 3: Respondents’ Distribution by Level of Education

Value Label	Frequency	Initial %	Valid %	Cumulative %
No high school diploma	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
High school diploma	9	9.1	9.1	11.1
General equivalency diploma	35	35.4	35.4	46.5
Vocational	45	45.5	45.5	91.9
2-year degree	4	4.0	4.0	96.0
No response	4	4.0	4.0	100.0

This study aimed to enable such people (referred to throughout this study as EOs) to become more effective workers and citizens. It also set out to develop the knowledge, skills, understanding, and attitudes needed for active participation in mainstream community life as rehabilitated men and women. Another important contribution of the pilot test was to identify some sensitive questions and some that would lead to the recognition of some EOs who still hold supervisory or leadership positions in various business establishments in this metropolitan area. Respondents to the pilot study provided the researchers with the formulation of a list of critical topics to be explored in the survey.

Research Questions and Associated Hypotheses

In this study, the quality of information to be conveyed in the prison educational training program was to be measured by EOs’ perception of their level of comfort at the end of the training program and was based on the following:

RQ1: What factors are associated with the rehabilitative success of EOs in Kansas?

RQ2: What educational training should prisons provide inmates before their release into the community to prepare them for employment opportunities in Kansas?

H₀1 addressed the level of perceived quality of prison educational training for EOs and its impact on the predictable working problems experienced by those workers. The higher quality of training was expected to produce fewer working problems. The correlation coefficient [®] was 0.07, nearly 0. The null hypothesis is not rejected. The substantive hypothesis is not supported.

H₀2 sought to determine the relationship between the quality of the prison education training program and EOs’ perceived effectiveness during their first year of employment. The higher the quality of the prison educational training program, the higher EOs perceived effectiveness during their first year of working. The

correlation[®] of -0.05 is not significant. The null hypothesis is not rejected; the data do not support the hypothesis.

H₀₃ external support systems are associated with EOs perceived effectiveness during their first year of working. The correlation coefficient of 0.16 is statistically significant at 0.05 level (one-tailed). The correlation is relatively not strong, but the data supports the hypothesis. Although there was no hypothesis about the relationship between the two variables, support systems and problems, the correlation was -0.2 (significance level of $p = 0.025$), indicating that the more and better support systems the EOs had, the fewer problems they encountered and thus improved employment longevity and problem-solving abilities.

The hypotheses were based on the premise that there is a direct relationship between educational training programs for inmates and their aptitude to secure gainful employment upon release from the penal system. Therefore, it should be further asserted that the information presented in prison educational training programs may become more complete, more relevant, and better quality with each successive year. Consequently, the amount and quality of the information conveyed in the educational training program may vary. Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents who rated each of the components of the variable support systems “very important” or “important.”

These results indicated that support systems significantly affected the overall self-rated effectiveness of the EOs surveyed. Of these variables, personal ability to adjust (83.8%), church/religion (82.9%), family (71.8%), previous experience (65.7%), probation/parole officers (54.6%), and peers (53.5%) seem to be the most powerful predictors of effectiveness.

Table 4: Percentage of All Respondents Who Rated Each of the Support Systems “Very Important” or “Important” (N = 99)

Support System	Very Important	Important
Personal ability to adjust	41.42	42.4
Church/religion	57.6	25.3
Family	46.5	25.3
Previous experience	27.3	38.4
Probation/parole officers	26.3	28.3
Peers	20.2	33.3
Temporary lodging	28.3	12.1
Social services agencies	12.1	26.3
Coworkers	7.1	7.2

Data Analysis and Results: Tests Conducted on Recent Released Population

The investigator expected that better educational training would lead to fewer problems and higher effectiveness. Neither hypothesis was supported in the data.

Training correlated only 0.09 with problems and -0.08 with effectiveness. The investigator also hypothesized that better support systems would enhance effectiveness. This relationship particularly supported newly released EOs who were working. The value of r was 0.38. This value was statistically significant at 0.001 level (one-tailed) and was a little more than double the value for the entire population. The relationship between support and self-perceived effectiveness was notably stronger. The null hypothesis was rejected, and the substantive hypothesis was supported. For the more recently released, the correlation between experienced problems and self-perceived effectiveness was also stronger. The correlation was -0.35, and $p = 0.0001$. Hence, the less severe problems workers experienced, the more effective they felt.

Analysis of Data: Importance of Support Systems

During their first year at their jobs, EOs were reported to rely primarily on social support systems to feel effective as workers. These support systems logically had the most significant impact because EOs most easily accessed them. Table 5 shows the percentage of recently released respondents who rated each component of the variables' support systems "very important" or "important." The results essentially indicated that almost all support systems combined significantly affected the overall perceived effectiveness of respondents.

Table 5: Percentage of Recently Released Respondents Who Rated Each of the Support Systems "Very Important" or "Important" (N = 71)

Support System	Very Important	Important
Personal ability to adjust	39.4	44.1
Church/religion	60.6	22.5
Family	39.4	28.2
Previous experience	31.0	35.2
Probation/parole officers	29.6	32.1
Peers	39.4	16.9
Temporary lodging	16.9	33.8
Social services agencies	12.7	28.2
Coworkers	5.6	12.7

During their first year, many EOs seemed to rely heavily on support systems such as family, church/religion, personal ability to adjust, previous experience, criminal justice officials, and peers. This would make sense in that these support systems were available to EOs permanently and continuously enhanced their effectiveness. Taken separately, each of these major social support systems contributed differently to individual effectiveness. As Table 5 shows, other

support systems could have played a more important role in the overall effectiveness of EOs.

A second series of frequencies was run using the data collected only from the 71 new releases. As with the entire population ($N = 99$), these EOs also relied on support systems to feel effective as workers during their first year at their jobs. A comparison with Table 4 showed that more new releases felt that previous experience (66.2% compared to 65.7% with the entire sample population) was better help for them than criminal justice officials (62.0% compared to 54.6% with $N = 99$). In addition, the effect of temporary lodging increased from 40.4% to 50.7%.

Stepwise multiple regressions were conducted for this population, too. Self-effectiveness was independently related to the quality of support (unstandardized partial regression coefficient -0.21) and the degree of problems (or lack of problems; unstandardized partial regression coefficient -0.27). Regression results were also stronger for the more recently released population ($N = 71$) than for the entire sample population ($N = 99$), especially for the relationships between “experience of problems” and “perceived effectiveness” ($r = -0.17$, $\beta = -0.32$). The one-tailed significance was ($p = 0.001$). Between variables “support systems” and “effectiveness,” $r = 0.37$ and $\beta = 0.34$ with one-tailed significance equal to 0.001 . This indicates that both variables (“experience of problems” and “support systems”) significantly impacted the overall effectiveness of new releases.

The specific case of the support system “church/religion” deserves to be highlighted. The majority of respondents (60.6%) declared that the impact of church/religion on their perceived effectiveness was “very important.” This was no surprise, considering that these EOs underwent the same experiences that new inmates were going through. They, therefore, formed the best group to provide practical advice and suggestions for new releases.

Implications of Findings and Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, it was expected that better educational training would lead to fewer problems and higher effectiveness. Neither Hypothesis 1 nor 2 was supported in the data. What do these results suggest? The results of this study suggest that discussions may be conducted from two important perspectives: (a) a research perspective and (b) a practical perspective. From a research perspective, this study suggests that success for EOs’ adjustment and effectiveness at work may be more attributable to social variables in the host environment rather than specific aspects of prison educational training. The underlying assumption that EOs’ effectiveness is significantly influenced by the quality of educational training was not confirmed. Possible explanations of these results are as follows:

1. The prison educational training programs suffered from defects in what was taught and how it was taught.
2. The study might not have targeted detailed components of the educational training program that could link training to effectiveness in a cause-and-effect relationship.
3. It may be that ongoing support is more significant than prison educational training. This seems logical to some extent if one considers that EOs do not know what is ahead of them until they start working.

In addition, EOs reported that they did not perceive their prison educational training program as efficient in preparing them to handle employment problems appropriately and to feel effective as employees. Other problems they encountered at work were related to other employees and the working environment. However, the most harmful problems came from other sources, such as supervisors and managers, who made requirements that EOs found difficult and unacceptable, such as working shift work and long hours.

From a practical perspective, this study suggests that a prison educational training program is not a mechanical process that would serve as a necessary prerequisite to painless adaptability, effectiveness, or quality performance, regardless of the quality of training. Educational training must attempt to prepare EOs to fit in the workplace and community. In designing an educational training program for EOs, administrators have to consider the challenges and needs of EOs and tailor the training accordingly. Reentry and the transition period for EOs can cause considerable psychological pain and humiliation; therefore, training for them should be designed to prepare them for the contingencies of the work culture and community living through more highly experiential training principles.

Another factor that played a major role in facilitating the integration of EOs is that, as time went by, employers and the community could have been more accepting and developed a better understanding and tolerance of the nature of problems that EOs often encountered in society. Thus, EOs were better prepared to effectively build a network of social support systems to help reduce their degree of stereotyping, stigma, and discrimination.

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