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Inside-Out Prison Exchange

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Final Paper

SECTION ONE: PROCESS

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange program is not the typical lecture course taught at Xavier University. Throughout the semester the students have gone through a spectrum of emotions, beginning as shy, hitting walls of frustration and ending with excitement. The uniqueness of this class is that the typical college reading was done outside the class to lay the groundwork for the atypical environment and discussion. This was my first class that went beyond abstract theory to real people and real lives.

The group dynamic changed from insecure and tense to relaxed and at ease. The first class with the inside students and the outside students together was a nerve racking experience. The atmosphere in the room was tense and all the students were guarded in their actions and words. Once both sets of students were more comfortable with each other all of that comfort was rescinded for the inside students the first time we were asked our opinions on a topic. When this occurred, inside students offered their opinions, but the outside students were not comfortable enough, yet, with their surroundings to answer. Now that we are at the end of our sessions together, the tone of the classes has changed. Inside and outside students speak freely to one another and there are not feelings of offending others. Although the outside students do not always agree with the inside students, we view them as more than inmates when we are with them.

The inside and outside students have grown more comfortable within our own groups. For example, the car rides up to the prison have allowed us to get to know each other as more than peers. Although I have had regular classes with some of the other outside students, I have not spoken to them outside of class or even during class before this program. The outside group as a whole is less superficially polite each other. This is true for the inside students as well. I noticed at the beginning of the semester, there were sub cliques within the inside students. Our last few classes together, I noticed a more willingness to communicate and joke between these cliques.

I believe some parts of the group dynamic did not change over the course of the semester. This is most evident in our class on prison myths. The outside students do not have the experience or knowledge of what is a myth in the prison system because none of us had been to prison. The outside students did not want to offend any of the inside students during that class by suggesting that any of the issues the inside students were raising were false or untrue. I also believe that the prison tour affected the inside students comfort level with the outside students. This is because they were treated as inmates in front of their peers—the outside students. Most of them seemed embarrassed and humiliated when they had to be patted down or separated from us on the tour. I think these issues did not bother the outside students, but harmed the psyche and therefore the group dynamic of the inside students.

My own individual process began with an open mind and has ended with some solid opinions. I definitely became more relaxed and comfortable in the prison atmosphere and in speaking my thoughts. However, I went into this class without any experience of communicating with inmates and therefore had only what I read in books

of criminal theory to guide me. I now feel that there is something different between myself and the inmates. Although there are similarities and they are human too, there is something that does not seem to add up in their minds as it does in the minds of the outside students. I was disappointed that most of the inside students often blamed society, the prison industry, harsh laws and an unjust legal system for their problems. However, I am still unable to resolve the issues we discussed over the course of the semester.

The inside students have commented on their initial nervousness in meeting the outside students for the first time, and vice versa. The inside students held perceptions that we were spoiled Xavier students that would treat them all as inmates and judge them. The outside students, particularly myself, harbored fears that the inmates would be scary, rude to us and intimidating. Both counts were wrong. Outside students have tried to remain as open minded as possible when conversing with the inside students, and the inside students have been equally open and friendly. My perception of animal-like inmates being stone-cold and unattached has been disproved.

From my observations, prison life is often unproductive. At the main compound, cells are too small and opportunities to educate one's self and contribute to society too few or under funded. After viewing the prison on the tour and participating in the home confinement experiment, the confines and boredom of prison life can have a detrimental effect on the inmate population's mental state.

SECTION TWO: CONTENT

People commit crimes because they make a choice. The choice is ultimately made whether the person committing the crime chooses to admit it. Elijah Anderson's

Code of the Street is an example of how a subculture develops and excuses certain crimes as acceptable and veils the decision to commit a crime behind a code that states a person must commit a crime under certain circumstances. The responsibility is no longer right versus wrong and abiding the rules of society, the responsibility becomes living to the code of the streets which, “. . . is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of **faith in the police and the judicial system—and in others who would champion one’s personal security**” (Anderson 34). The theory of the code is based on Thomas Hobbes—a general level of violence keeps the subculture in check. This code was evident in our discussion of the Alligator River Story. The inside students felt that Slug had a code to live up to when Abigail told her tale to him. Anderson describes this as, **“Manhood on the streets means assuming the prerogatives of men with respect to strangers, other men, and women—being distinguished as a man” (Anderson 91)**. This type of ideology eliminates the responsibility of one’s actions and decisions to commit a crime. People may commit crimes for economic reasons, personal gain, vengeance, to protect their family, or to gain respect. Ultimately, people will not feel held to any responsibility, place the blame and justify their actions on a larger entity such as society failing or no other choice.

The Criminal Justice System is missing two components necessary for success: prevention and reintegration. Elliott Currie’s Crime and Punishment in America rests on the idea that, **“the justice system should emphasize preventing crime, not simply reacting to it; it should strive, insofar as possible, to reintegrate offenders into society, not simply contain them. . . Three tasks are especially urgent: investing in rehabilitation, rethinking sentencing, and reducing violence in the community**

through more effective police strategies” (163). In class discussion over the Criminal Justice system it became apparent that although policing incorporates some prevention and corrections’ incorporates some reintegration, it is minimal when it should be their own entities. These two may not receive their own divisions because a victim and an outraged public are not concerned with prevention and bringing the offender back into society as they are concerned with capturing and punishing the offender. However, when our system does this it is only serving, **“to recycle offenders from unproductive confinement to unsupportive, chaotic communities and back again” (Currie 165).** Furthermore, it is true that by the time an offender is ready to return to society, **“... an offender’s sense of alienation from society is only heightened by the legal process and by the prison experience” (Zehr 16).** This only toughens the road to a legitimate lifestyle when the Criminal Justice system has left chips on inmate’s shoulders. Reintegrating offenders is overlooked because ex-offenders are marginalized, when they should be given more attention to reverse whatever caused them to make their poor decisions in the first place. Same is true for prevention. There needs to be an emphasis to, **“invest in programs for vulnerable adolescents that build their skills and keep them on track toward higher education or training” (Currie 101).** Currie also believes the most important prevention is intervening and preventing child abuse and neglect. Abuse is something the inmates have also brought to our attention as a problem in their childhoods.

The myths and realities of prisons is a topic that was both surprising and predictable. Most of the violence and code of respect the media and television shows portray is true to life. Similar to the streets, in the prison system respect is a type of

honor offenders must strive to maintain. This is because, **“the rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. With the right amount of respect, individuals can avoid being bothered in public” (Anderson 33)**. As one inside student related, if one does not want to be messed with, then his first day in prison he should go after another inmate. The biggest concern of the inside students is the outside world, particularly their families back home. This causes the frustration which leads to a large portion of the violence and rule breaking in prison. Stanley Williams describes one aspect of the frustration: **“The guards in prison get to know who our relatives and friends are. They find out about our family problems—and everything else—before we do” (50)**. The corrections officers are yet another source of enmity in the prisons. This was also predictable, but the corruption that can sometimes extend from the corrections staff was surprising. Everything from sexual relationships to bringing drugs into the prison has happened in part to the corrections officers or other staff at the prisons. This is a dimension that is astonishing since these personnel should be acting as role models.

Punishment and Rehabilitation are two overlapping concepts that detract from one another. For example, if a person is caught and punished to the full extent of the law, then that person is more than likely none too happy with the system. Then that person is forced to rehabilitate as part of their punishment, than that person will not successfully rehabilitate. That has to be a choice a person makes, and then their lifestyle must change to support that choice. This is another dimension of the problem: in prison where life is regimented, it may be easy to complete a rehabilitation program and for that person to believe he does want to change. Once that person is released to the streets and back in

their old life style, change will not happen. To set the inmates on the correct path towards rehabilitation while in prison is the best approach. For example, Currie argues that, “offenders come into prisons with quite tangible problems . . . if we fail to address those problems, we shouldn’t be surprised if released offenders fail on the outside. If we do address them, we may be able to change their lives” (165-66). This is logical in that, if an offender enters the system with a history of abuse which has caused him to live a violent lifestyle but he does not want to change, than perhaps mental healthcare to address his abuse will push him towards long term rehabilitation. Another example of this logic is ridding a person of a drug addiction; this may cause him to want to remain clean. This is not to say that offenders should not be punished to the fullest extent of the law—they should. Consistent punishment is the only way to punish and show offenders there are no excuses for the decisions he has made. However it is society’s responsibility to attempt to change these offenders when we have the chance.

After deliberating with the class over the issue of punishment versus rehabilitation, I believe rehabilitation should be an option rather than a requirement as part of a sentence. Offenders should not be forced to attend victim awareness classes, alcohol or drug treatment, therapy, or even vocational training. These programs should be allocated more money in funding and made completely optional. The first step to an offender changing would be to make the decision to take advantage of the opportunities around him. This would be an empowering, positive decision, as opposed to the negative decision which landed the person in prison in the first place. Making the decision to change and work the system for its benefits is important to rehabilitation because the offender needs to understand that his decisions have the impact, meaning no one else can

make decisions for him and he has no one else to blame for why his situations. Secondly, this is important because there is no way to force rehabilitation on a person, he has to want it. Also, if rehabilitation is completely optional than there would be more room in programs for offenders who truly want to work that program. Any offenders pretending their way through a program for the parole board should be removed from it.

Another solution for the criminal justice system would be to create more opportunities for education. It should be mandatory for all inmates without a college degree to continue pursuing their education. More contracts should be directed towards privatizing education in the prison system. Although it would be perceived as making criminals smarter, it would give ex-offenders more benefits in the world real, such as controlling their finances, making budgets, and working their way to a promotion at their employment. An employer is more apt to hire an ex-felon with a college degree and the ability to articulate their speech, read and write clearly than an ex-felon who learned how to cut hair in prison. Additionally, this sort of focus on education will reap benefits for their children. For example, typically, a person usually receives as much education as their parent received. If a parent made mistakes in life, went to prison and then earned their GED or more, the child will now have higher standards set. Education has the benefit of opening minds and raising people from the streets and poverty. If society failed to give these offenders a proper education the first time around, then society cannot afford to correct the mistake the second time.

Some of my reasons for applying to the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program at Xavier were to gain experience with offenders and to give a face to the theories I have learned at Xavier. Although I expected my opinion to shift from my conservative

persuasion to a more liberal and sympathetic stance due to spending time with the inside students, I did not experience such a shift. In fact, witnessing the theories of crime, purposes of prison and theories of rehabilitation and punishment materialize into everyday life for the inside students gave me an even more conservative view. I feel that I did gain valuable experience through the time spent in Lebanon Correctional Institution and the theories also received faces. In the end, the ups-and-downs to this program provided valuable experience to my future work in the criminal justice system.