

Studying in Capital Letters Formal Education in Venezuelan Penitentiary Institutions*

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal the intentions and meanings of the given formal study of those deprived from freedom, held imprisoned in Venezuelan correctional Institutions. The lack of theoretical works and backgrounds to approach the problematic of people studying while being held, evidences the lack of records of the notions produced in these secluded classrooms. The approach to one of the less published events of prison activity goes to study the complexity of humanizing processes, formation and re-education of inmates inside the prison walls. Departing from a qualitative approximation, the essence and significance of the phenomena are presented in the words of the protagonists. The access to the experiences, was made through the privileged information recollection technique: The participant observation and in depth interview. The following Correctional.

Centres were selected for the research: Instituto Nacional de Orientacion Femenina, and Internado Judicial Los Teques where educative activities were developed. The research counted with the participation of 25 people: 15 women and 10 men. The interpretation and content analysis, in a progressive reduction of data, was categorized and included in the consequent dimensions and categories. Three important elements were evidenced in the process of becoming free again: (internal, external and a combination of both); to begin with the factors due to an imprisoned person, the ways they internalize and assume the moment they're going through, their emotions, motivation, having family support or not having it-sentiments of hope and guilt, shape and give meaning to the fact of studying and train in prison. These study from the protagonists words reveal that classrooms in a prison, give real meaning to what prisons should be made for; prisons can become what they ought to be: reinsertion spaces.

Key words: Correctional education, educational needs, educational improvement, qualitative research.

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“Lack of enthusiasm destroys every possibility of personal growth” (Sai, 22 years age, inmate).

Introduction

Freedom, for man, is considered at the same time as a right and a property; losing it, by entering a prison, may suppose losing much more than freedom. Imposing punishment to individuals for commission of crimes, has changed from the arts of physical torture, toward an economy of suspended rights (Foucault, 2002). Entering a prison is becoming chained to a deprivations system, obligations and prohibitions; it is sanctioned through deprivation from freedom, thought as a punishment in itself. In theory, the jail has changed to perform a mission of resocializing the inmate, considering him as a human being historically excluded, to include him in the favoured sectors of the society (Padron, 2008); however, experience undergone at jails, neither is, nor has been so kind for the inmate.

Notions such as imprisonment, social control, and power relationships regarding confinement, do not ignore prisons anywhere in the world. In Latin America, inmate rehabilitation is, to say less, death letter (Cisneros and Anguiano, 2007); today, they become true centers of criminality and misery (Posada and Diaz-Tremarias, 2008). In farther latitudes, such as Europe or United Arab Emirates, in inmates rehabilitation, standards established by the United Nations, regarding treatment and rehabilitation of inmates, are complied with (Gharaibeh, 2012); In Spain, for example, design of model prisons introduces substantial improvements for inmates, by implementing innovations in services and socio-labor equipping, with modern structures and education, labor and recreation opportunities. (Yague, 2007).

Venezuelan law, in accordance with the humanizing function of penitentiaries, since 1999 has performed changes and transformations to destigmatize them from being torture and repression instruments, to become true centers of re-education of the inmate (Millan, 2005). In this sense, the legal framework supporting this new humanizing plan, as adopted, article 2 Law of Penitentiary Regime provides that “social reinsertion of the inmate is the fundamental purpose of the term serving sentence” (National Assembly, 2000). Supporting on non-discrimination principle, laws establish treatment according to international rights of individuals, including conditions to protect their fundamental lawful privileges, even being deprived from freedom (personal integrity, nutrition, health care, education, among other).

Beyond the legal aspect, an approach to Venezuelan penitentiary system shows innumerable problems, among other: precarious jail facilities, process delay, stacking, no inmate classification, serious lack of basic services (food, health care, electric power, water), in addition to such excessive violence, triggered by presence of drugs and guns (Posada and Diaz-Tremarias, 2008). Which Gonzalez (2001) calls true schools of criminality, in the life of inmates having committed an error, or imprisoned by error, are described as a chaos, disorder, and the most alarming: the hell (Clarembaux 2009). At these facilities, worlds or subworlds that might be unreal, loss of freedom brings itself loss of dignity (Padron, 2008).

Within these such special environment, where rehabilitation purpose would seem minimized and little clear, penitentiary education units surge, where study as well as work, is considered as a mechanism for sentence redemption provided by the law. Being so, education in prison spaces, would have to become the arts of creating freedom spaces, where trends such as I can, I learn, I know should surge. ¿Is it possible to create, transform

and promote new realities within these contexts? It is still a large the gap between law and practice; actions undertaken not always are in concordance with intentions of the law. Education at penitentiaries drag the stigma of being taken more as a benefit for sentence reduction, that as a human right capable or re-educating and re-inserting punished individual (Manchado, 2012). In Rangel's words (2013), it is matter or educating against the current.

Jails present a formative proposal, both in formal and non-formal education. The first, corresponds to those formation plans on education levels for inmates (primary, secondary, and college), and the second one, is mainly composed of occupation-oriented activities (courses, workshops, among other), specific of some labor areas, or through non-government organizations or groups, generally religious. It is important to mention that, most inmates bear education low level, poor professional qualifications, and job experience centered in employment deficient conditions (Matthews, 2011).

In Spain, according to Castillo and Ruiz (2007), women participate in both types of formation, although mainly in non-formal education, showing a marked difference regarding male education. This thing is mainly due to low education of women in penitentiaries. In addition, Rangel (2009), refers to Latin American case by stating that percentage of foreign women, mainly coming from industrialized countries, make formation level, regarding formal education is major. However, many jails continue to provide non-formal education courses linked to the traditional condition women have been seen with, such as weaving or cuisine.

In this approach to performing at education spaces of prisons, it becomes interesting and necessary interpretation of the speech of those living, on daily basis, the experience of studying and educating themselves. Hence, parting from an interpretative approach, analysis of experience of formal education in prison is stated, paying special attention to immediate and mediate purposes, and the impact of joining to study, from the inmates point of view. In this sense, relevant questions surge, such as what for?, and, then what?, to account for study which is projected in Venezuelan prisons. Taking into account the above, the following questions are proposed, as initial questions of the research: ¿If I am in jail, what studying for? And then, when I get freedom, what?

Demarcating notions and meanings

Problems faced by Venezuelan jails turn them into unfair, cruel and inhuman environments. Suarez (2005), defines these irregular conditions as: crowding, non-suitable infrastructure, absence of classification and grouping, process delay, violence, deficient legal assistance and health care. Everything, not to mention that figures show Venezuela as the country facing the highest number of inmate mortality (Padron, 2008; Clarembaux, 2009). It may be stated that, the necessary regeneration should start by penitentiaries, rather than by the inmate himself.

It becomes hard to conceive the framework expressed in the above paragraph, as the most qualified to attend inmates in their demand for education services. Notwithstanding, penitentiaries apply the strategies created by Venezuelan State in matters of education both outside jails and inside, known as missions. As social projects implemented since 2003, under the name of education missions, it is started a sort of government execution mainly aimed at those excluded (Navarro, 2003). Such actions were mainly focused on formal education, with structured curricular design, to attend citizens from initial formation through higher education. These education programs in their transformation and re-design processes, have turned from an education mechanism for insertion and equity, into a political clientelism instrument, through formation, organization and

ideological indoctrination (Mundo, 2009). In this sense, education missions represented by Robinson mission (alphabetization and primary level education), Ribas (high school or secondary level) and Sucre (College level), are a part of structures known at jails as formal education, which are not other thing but regular education plans, but with a ideologic-political intention.

Classrooms, at penitentiaries, are understood as an open place (in the symbolic aspect), within a closed place (physical aspect). There, as a life space, away from, and different from daily action of the prison, interaction with the other is developed; both the peer, also deprived from freedom, and the teacher, who much more than in any other education space, surges as a figure vested of authority, by his function of educating and re-educating. According to Padron (2008), penitentiary officials and professors of missions performing duties at the prison, each makes an insulated effort, which, generally, dilutes between inefficacy and inexistence of an unifier managerial plan; the penitentiary teacher is understood in terms of solidarity and identification with precary situation and mistreatment faced by inmates. These classrooms are operated on week days, except Wednesday, when inmates are visited by their relatives, and friends. Class schedule includes morning and afternoon, although activities corresponding to high school level (mission Ribas), and college (mission Sucre), use to be only in the afternoon, until the time of enclosing the population in their respective pavillons, (little before 6 pm). In addition, it results unfortunate that, for the numerous government authorities, education does not represent an option; this disposition reduces at a great extent the possibility of providing education programs to inmates (Rangel, 2013).

For Gil (2010), education centers are spaces to promote values: competitiveness, disposition to achievement, gratification postergation, among other. Today, it is assumed the challenge of teaching facing student resistance, lack of standards and indiscipline. However, in the classroom a particular context within the prison, increase of violence and tensions of pedagogic relationships remain almost absent. Education space turns into an oasis in the middle of disconcert, anger and fear caused by any prison environment.

The paradox represented by the law at stating that reinsertion of the inmate is the fundamental objective of the sentence (National Assembly, 2000), derives in the inmate himself, who hardly trusts in the purpose of re-socialization of the prison (Clarembaux, 2009). In a proportion of 8, for each 10 inmates, remain apathetic in front of the call to perform education activities (Padron, 2008). More than education achievements, previos research show that predomining reasons encouraging them to study, is the possibility of reducing confinement days, regenerate them from leisure, and governing degeneration in the other space of the prison (Millan, 2005; Padron 2008; Manchado, 2011). These reasons, and much more, make us believe that penitentiary centers are much far from achieving real purposes.

Materials and methods

Questions such that ¿What studying at the jail for? ¿and then, when I get freedom, what?, and from this experience and this look by the inmate, allow us to run over paths of detailed descriptions of the essential, parting from the immediate (here and now), and the mediate (image, meaning). Reduction and search for essence of studying at prison, are a part of this possible run over. There is no hypothesis, there is no assumptions; there is just what is not known. Multiple options from the individual himself, leave prints which mark what Ricoeur (2000) calls the “speech of events”.

Parting from a qualitative paradigm, with a phenomenologic orientation, this article explores experiences from the phenomenon itself, and a look at its main actors. This method or tradition, as a manner of doing, is founded on description of appearance of things, as a way for captation of essence (Hernandez, 2001). Interest is located in comprehension of the event in itself, explored in the experience described by the subject as a protagonist, emphasizing on subjective aspects and individual of his actions and feelings.

Access to experiences was carried out through the technique of private information collection: participating observation, and in depth interview, lacking of any structure, and guided by the need of identifying the essence found in those worlds of life (Moreno, 2003). The following Correctional Centers were selected for the research: Instituto Nacional de Orientacion Femenina, and Internado Judicial Los Teques, where education activities are performed. The research included 25 individuals: 15 women and 10 men, who voluntarily accepted to cooperate, and whose names are held. Interviews were made at education environments of each prison, taking into account search for every possible meaning, and trying to describe the essential.

Three of the 15 women held university higher technical education, 9 had completed secondary, and 3 just primary education. In the case of men, 2 of them had higher education, 6 had completed secondary, and 2 had not completed it. In general, crimes leading to their imprisonment were: Extortion, robbery, homicide, and drugs.

All interviews were recorded; and later transcribed for data interpretation, following recommendations made by Taylor and Bogdan (1992) for content analysis. Interpretation of essence identified in narrations by protagonists, includes identification of dimensions and groups of meaning (topics, and characteristic patterns). These dimensions or meaning nucleus were condensed as follows:

- Growing myself: is a gain
- Taking advantage of time. I have to do something
- Feeling better: I am not in jail
- My future: work when I get out

Discussion and results

Below is an account of the two relevant notions within the context of penitentiary education: the 'what for', and the 'then what', in words of the same students in confinement context.

Through this thing it is not intended to impose classification which turn into a strait jacket for future interpretations, but stress on those elements showed as meaningful in narrations by the protagonists.

Growing myself

Almost absolutely, it is found in all narrations, the idea that studying while in jail makes it possible personal growth. Being studying is seen by the inmate as a possibility to learn new things, which would not be learned in freedom; in turn, getting away from the temptation of becoming a part of the school of delinquents which operate in the whole Venezuelan prison. This is not necessarily related to the professional competence of the career taken, since in many cases, if they were able to take another career, inmates

would take studies related to any other areas of knowledge; generally Law, psychology, Education, and Medicine (in the case of women), and Law and Engineering (in the case of men). Here education is felt as the opportunity of learning something useful for oneself. Testimonies show the purpose of studying within a prison:

“Yes, definitively I am going to continue studying, because now I understand that one grows and avoid many problems” (woman, 40, completed primary, and condemned to 4 years, for drugs).

“I have seen that by studying one may grow” Man, 27, student of mission Ribas, condemned to 8 years for robbery).

In addition, this notion of growth is also shown as an opportunity for sentence reduction, which means being free earlier, and far from misery of prison system; hence, studying represents a sort of courtesy ticket to enlarge the list of those achieving the benefit of sentence reduction. In their narration, some of them stated:

“Studying to grow myself, and over all, for the benefit of my redemption” (woman, 40, condemned to 20 years for homicide, TSU in Mechanics, student of mission Sucre).

“... for my personal growth, and to achieve any benefit of sentence reduction” (man, 33, master’s degree, condemned to 15 years for drugs, a student of mission Sucre).

Taking advantage of Time

Attending class seems to represent two important situations for the inmate: Doing something useful, and releasing from boredom. Regarding the first, the possibility of getting busy, and taking advantage of time during the time in prison, seems to give them the sense of holding control, if not about every day events, at least, certain dominion of what they would live upon leaving confinement, which they positively value, thinking in their future, and better conditions later. Added to this, they add the notion that a great part of what lived previously to getting imprisoned, is lost time, therefore, they intend to take advantage of this new time. For example, this testimony states:

“Is study to take advantage of time, and grow myself as possible” (man, 22, sentenced to 5 year, for robbery).

Probably time elapses quickly, or drags, depending on how we feel (Elvira-Valdes, 2012). This expression takes, an exact impression, the second complement of meaning related to time, since it becomes a escape from routine, confinement between four walls, leisure and slowness which time elapsing is perceived. This may be understood in words of Valverde (2009), since, it is said that in jail 365 days of the year are not lived, but one day 365 times. Prison is a habitat, and inmates may not escape, even studying, but it enables them using lost time. Hence, search for escaping from routine, what exhausts, and possibly boredom, the inmate finds in being studying a release, which in addition is beneficial for the remaining time in jail. Therefore they state:

“I study to pass time, days are endless here...” (woman, 32, under trial for drugs, high school, student of mission Sucre).

“... it is better being doing this, because if I remain in my room, I get crazy” (woman, 29, graduated as TSU, processor for extortion, student of mission Sucre)

Feeling better

Manchado (2012) already says it, at stating that these classrooms are not only considered as a school, but as a space for encounter; a place where it is possible to contribute to formation and change. They are also the possibility to rethink ties but not disregard them; to accompany, not to guide, to sustain voice, not to represent it. Classrooms turn into opportunity space, to find, if not a friend, someone who move the inmate away from misery, who show him the face of life he hoped to live, who enters and leaves, who connects, and connects him with life lived outside: the street. During class time it is possible to communicate with others, those not in jail, and who many times provide classrooms with an environment that may provide a scenario which dignifies the condition of what is done there: teaching and learning. Therefore the following is stated:

“... when I am here at the education unit, I do not feel as an inmate” (woman, 32, under trial for drugs, high school, mission Sucre).

“I see these studies as usefull, the only thing I see short is class time” (woman 57, TSU in Nursery, under trial for homicide).

Classroom time is not enough to magically erase frustrations, insufficiency, shortages and frustrated dreams of inmates, but in certain way, it may mean an escape from confinement problems, and the above mentioned poor conditions, faced by such imprisonment places. Occupying this time reduces possibilities of bothering others, or being bothered by other inmates, while it allows to relate with others who also intend to be away from such problems. Everything, in spite of lacking security and resources which jails do not provide, but that should be provided for access to re-educating functions of the prison. Two of them state:

“here I am busy, and avoid problems” (woman, 23, accused of drugs, not completed H.S., a student of mission Ribas).

“...in addition, here I entertain myself, and distracts my mind, which is quite difficult here...” (woman, 20, H.S., condemned to 5 year for assault).

My future

This dimension embraces the possibility of re-meaning the future, giving a new bearing to that thing that has been uncertain and deprived from improvement possibilities. Studying at jail becomes a sort of license which trains and ensures an option other than the criminal world upon leaving the jail, in some cases the following is stated:

“I study because I seek a job tool to go out to the street” (man, 29, accused of drugs, H.S. student of mission Sucre).

This hope, just to give a name to this naïve thought, perhaps out of context from Venezuelan economic reality and social, and with a high expectation, is even more intense in those illiterate, or with low level of formal education. The challenge is overcoming such condition of scarce culture, facing stay in prison, and some day, being able to cover personal and job needs. Studying is shown as the connection which will make it possible a better tomorrow, a change of statutes that, joined to the hope of changing life, family support and desire to improve the situation, will lead to rehabilitation of the inmate. The following testimonies evidence it:

“... I study in the mission because, then they help me to find a job (woman, 20, sentenced for robbery, H.S. a student of mission Sucre).

“I study because I want to have a career when I leave...” (Woman, 40, primary, a student of mission Ribas, condemned 4 year, for drugs).

“I want to be more trained to be able to attend the University, when I leave...”(man, 48, H.S. processed for drugs).

Conclusions

Resulting dimensions try to answer to the questions, showing complexity of this topic, and difficulty found in promotion and impulse to education at Venezuelan jails. Two trends are shyly shown of the meaning found about ‘what-for’, and ‘then-what’ of the experience of studying at prison. In one hand, the answer to situations of the moment when education serves as relief from boredom, leisure, sensation of loss of time, a possibility of getting away from problems, a space to feel free, a different moment to be able to forget; some how, the classroom within jail spaces, represents a momentaneous solution to problems of cohabitation and space. In addition, studying at prison seems to be a means to achieve better future possibilities, since once in freedom, such study ceases to be a momentaneous solution and bears an important sense for life project of inmates, to articulate as a rehabilitation alternative.

The sheme (see table 1) shows articulation of three important elements, and interesting in the process of getting freedom (internal, external, combination of both): in principle, factors proper of inmates, how they assume and accept the moment they live, their emotions, motivation, having family support – or not having it -, hope feelings, and guilt, give form and sense to the fact of studying and educate at jail. The true humanization begins inside the inmate himself.

Table 1. Categorias and internal and external aspects of the inmate

Emotions, motivation, family support, hope, guilt.	State policies	Prison situation, country economy, unemployment, laws
	Formal education	
	Growing myself	
	Taking advantage of time	
	Feeling better	
	My future	
	Way to rehabilitation	
Condemn duration, criminal proceedings, crime		
Freedom		

In addition, external factors to the subject, and which definitively influence him: penitentiary poor situation, unemployment, economic situation of the country, Venezuelan laws; as a whole, turn into detonating fuse of extreme situations, and many times sharpen the complex rehabilitation process. The third factor surges from combination

of the above: sentence duration, process conditions, crime resulting in freedom privacy, make that the study to take a key role in rehabilitation and later hoped freedom.

State policies in matters of prison formal education, should consider the role of the later in rehabilitation process of the inmate, and approach as a north, within its action plans and goals, consolidation of a penitentiary system, which ensures true humanitarian orientation, so necessary and far away, but which some inmates know how to take advantage of. At this point, important challenges to be faced by education public policies are seen, since dealing with contexts of inequality and confinement, where it is urgent to provide quality equalitarian education; that is, properly conciliating inmate population hope of achieving knowledge and culture, with conditions that demonstrate them full development of their possibilities.

Penitentiary education proposals should be conceived as a strategy to achieve peace within prisons. Due to few opportunities of study, because of various reasons and/or marginality conditions, most of Venezuelan inmates lack of proper school levels. Besides the fact that provided programs are insufficient, there are little interest by inmates in entering formal education; it is necessary proper management by prison authorities, aimed at promoting more interest in increasing the number of inmates involved in integral, formal, non-formal education programs, and that inmates are ready to claim their rights as human beings and improve their own education and expectations.

Finally, it is worth to mention that education provided at prisons, deserve recognition, it is not just a matter of providing education programs, but such programs should receive the importance they deserve. The inmate needs to believe that his training and professionalism by taking his study plan, are possible and achievable. Regarding the function of rehabilitating the inmate, it is important to overcome the problem of personal-family-social interaction, which currently difficults insertion of the individuals upon leaving prison; the institutions should run a group of alternatives aimed at integrating former inmates, in social and labor contexts, after an educational intervention at the jail.

Before this panorama, more questions surge, that are not new, but which deserve new meaning: Rehabilitate through studies at the jail, ¿what does it mean? Attending class is just a dream of few hours per day; regrettably, there is always the time of waking up. This study, from words of its protagonists, reveals that at prison classrooms, penitentiaries may become what they must be: reinsertion spaces.

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