Promotion of Reading, Literacy and Culture in Catalan Prison Libraries

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to increase awareness of the activities that are carried out in Catalan prison libraries to promote reading, literacy and culture among inmates. The educational role of prison libraries is recognized both in recommendations on international law issued by UNESCO and the Council of Europe and in recommendations issued by professional bodies such as the Library and Information Association (CILIP, formerly the Library Association) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). To ascertain the type of activities conducted by Catalan prison libraries to promote reading, literacy and culture, a survey was emailed to prison managers. The results reveal that libraries in Catalan prisons play a very active role in the education of inmates. They offer a wide range of activities related to the promotion of reading, literacy and culture, whether as part of an internal library initiative or in partnership with other education services. The survey revealed some relatively common prison activities, such as reading clubs and art workshops, in addition to some highly original initiatives such as rap writing, escape rooms and lip dubs, and programmes such as AlfaDigital, which aim to develop reading and creative abilities while enhancing ICT skills.

Keywords: Special libraries; correctional institutions; correctional education; prison libraries; Catalonia; prison education.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to increase awareness of the activities that are carried out in Catalan prison libraries to promote reading, literacy and culture among inmates. Such activities are conducted by the libraries themselves or in partnership with other education services within prisons, especially schools.

To find out about these activities, a survey was emailed to the managers of all ten prison libraries in Catalonia in March 2018.

The survey was divided into two sections (see Appendix 1). The first section asked questions about the library's services and activities, and the second section contained questions about activities carried out in collaboration with other education services within the prison (e.g., schools).

Prison libraries and education

The role of prison libraries as promoters of reading, literacy and culture is set out both in international law recommendations and recommendations issued by professional bodies.

Within Europe, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recognized the potentially key role of libraries in prisons in the chapter on education in Recommendation Rec(2006)2 on European prison rules: “Every institution shall have a library for the use of all prisoners, adequately stocked with a wide range of both recreational and educational resources, books and other media.” (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2006, 28.5). Reference should also be made to Recommendation No. R(89)12 on education in prison, which describes libraries as a service that guarantees access to education: “Libraries in the community are a source of education, information and recreation, as well as centres of cultural development.” (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 1990, 34–36).

With respect to publications about public libraries, the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994 should be the first port of call. The following statement makes explicit reference to the role public libraries should play when it comes to providing inmates with specific services and materials: “Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.” (IFLA, UNESCO, 2016).

In the strictly professional sphere, the educational role of prison libraries is one of the pillars of the service, alongside their recreational and informational roles. The third edition of the IFLA’s recommendations on library services for inmates states that “The prison library then becomes an important part of the entire prison environment in its support for educational, recreational, and rehabilitative programs”, and that “Prison
libraries should emulate the public library model, while at the same time providing resources for prison education and rehabilitation programs, as well as other prison specific requirements, e.g., legal collections.” (Lehmann, Locke, 2005, 4).

The UK-based Library Association (now the Library and Information Association, CILIP) has expressed similar views. In the second edition of its Guidelines for Prison Libraries, it asserts that “The prison should support all forms of education and training, formal classes, practical training, working parties, open and distance learning, and informal self-education.” (Library Association, 1997, 11). In addition, it is clear on the need for collaboration with the education services of prisons: “A central library, in or near the Education Department should be provided wherever possible, conveniently sited for use by all prisoners and available at times when the Education Department is closed.” (Library Association, 1997, 11).

**Prison libraries in Catalonia**

Catalonia is one of the nineteen autonomous communities of Spain. It covers an area of 31,895 km². With a population of 7.5 million people (2017), it accounts for 16% of the total population of Spain, making it the second most populated autonomous community.

Catalonia has nine prisons, with a total population of 8,367 inmates (110.7 per 100,000 inhabitants):¹⁰

2. Centre Penitenciari Brians 2: 2,068 men.
5. Centre Penitenciari els Lledoners: 1,025 men.
7. Centre Penitenciari de Ponent: 725 men and 52 women.

All have one library, except for Centre Penitenciari Brians 1, which has two; one for men and one for women.

The organization and operation of prison libraries are regulated by the Programa marc de biblioteques dels centres penitenciaris de Catalunya: gener 2002 (Libraries Framework Programme for Prisons in Catalonia: January 2002), which was drafted by the former General Directorate for Prison Services and Rehabilitation. According to this programme (Catalunya. Direcció General de Serveis Penitenciaris i Rehabilitacio, 2002, 3), the objectives of libraries within the prison context are as follows:

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To promote reading habits.
- To awaken and foster new intellectual pursuits.
- To contribute to lifelong learning.
- To facilitate access to knowledge and culture.
- To encourage the intellectual, social and cultural development of library users.
- To promote respectful attitudes and a spirit of coexistence.

The Programa marc also stipulates that all libraries must be run by a professional librarian who holds a degree in library and information science (Catalunya. Direccio General de Serveis Penitenciaris i Rehabilitacio, 2002, 10). As discussed below, this requirement is vital for the quality of the services offered by libraries and is very rare in most European countries, where not all prison libraries have professional or indeed full-time staff.

To reinforce these principles, the Catalan Ministry of Justice commissioned the Catalan Association of Librarians and Information Professionals to draw up guidelines for Catalan prison libraries in 2005. These guidelines were published in 2007 and specify that Catalan prison library services should be underpinned by four key strands, two of which are as follows:

“1. Access to education, not only through self-learning materials, but also through information about the resources available (print and online) and training courses or materials on how to use information access tools.

[...]

3. Promotion of the personal and cultural development of people through reading and activities related to leisure and culture.” (Comalat, Sule, 2007, 9).

It is therefore clear to see that the role played by library services in the education of inmates is also explicitly and strongly set out in Catalonia’s regulations and guidelines.

Promotion of reading, literacy and culture

Catalan prison libraries, as other institutions with students with special educational needs (Mortimore, Zsolnai, 2015), play a very active role in the education of inmates, whether internally or in partnership with other education services. In addition to offering a document lending and consulting service, which in itself is considered an education service, libraries offer a wide range of activities to foster reading, literacy and culture.

As mentioned above, the fact that all libraries are run by professional librarians guarantees that the service is professionally managed. Today, however, the range of educational activities available is constrained by a lack of financial resources, since libraries do not receive the regular budgetary allocation that would allow them, for example, to develop their collection to meet the specific needs of users and provide
access to an adequate level of up-to-date technological equipment (e.g. computers, printers and tablets). However, as revealed below, librarians strive to overcome these limitations through a professional approach and partnership agreements with prison personnel and services, as well as with civil society organizations and volunteers.

Before outlining a representative sample of the activities carried out by Catalan prison libraries to promote reading, literacy and culture, it is worth noting that the level of cultural outreach varies from prison to prison. This is because, regardless of the availability of resources and personnel, each prison’s inmates have different needs. For example, the needs of the inmates at the Centre Penitenciari de Joves, who are aged between 18 and 25, are different from those of the adults at the Centre Penitenciari de Ponent; and the needs of the inmates at the Centre Penitenciari de Dones are different from those of the men at the Centre Penitenciari Quatre Camins.

Likewise, the level of collaboration between libraries and other prison education services, especially schools, varies. The survey reveals that the librarians at most prisons coordinate with other education professionals in an informal manner, i.e. through personal contact rather than within the framework of a permanent coordination committee. This means that partnerships are often carried out through ad hoc committees to design specific activities or through the willingness of stakeholders to cooperate, rather than through a prison strategy in the form of permanent joint working bodies and officially recognized groups. However, the high level of professionalism of the stakeholders means that collaboration between librarians, teachers, social educators, instructors, etc., works well in all Catalan prisons and undoubtedly contributes to the success of such partnerships.

Reading clubs

Many libraries organize reading clubs, either by themselves or through partnerships with prison schools. Under the guidance of the librarian or another member of the prison’s education service, inmates read and comment on a wide range of works. Since many inmates have some form of transitional reading difficulty (due to immigration, delayed development of reading skills, poor schooling, etc.) or permanent reading difficulty (learning disorders, functional diversity, old age, etc.), some libraries employ easy-to-read materials, which enable such inmates to read and understand content more easily.

Writing competitions

As mentioned above, writing competitions represent one of the most successful activities for promoting culture among inmates. Competitions are often organized to mark Saint George’s Day on 23 April, since this feast day coincides with World Book Day, when books are traditionally exchanged as gifts. Poetry and short story contests are also popular. These two literary genres have enjoyed great success among inmates, and some
of their work has been selected for publication. The library at the Centre Penitenciari de Ponent organizes a competition with the support of a local cultural institution, the Cercle de Belles Arts, which donates prizes and forms part of the judging panel.

**Exhibitions, montages, festivals, etc.**

These tend to be organized in collaboration with members of other prison services (social educators, teachers, art instructors, etc.). Activities to mark festivals (e.g. Christmas and Carnival) and world days (e.g. International Women's Day, World Poetry Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and World AIDS Day), and those related to a specific subject or artist (e.g. exhibitions on astronomy and the street artist Banksy), are frequently organized.

Two outreach activities carried out by the library at the Centre Penitenciari els Lledoners are worth mentioning due to their high degree of originality: lip dubs and escape rooms. These are examples of the degree of sophistication with which librarians adapt to new times by converting traditionally non-educational activities into educational experiences.

**Literacy**

Many prison libraries adapt literacy activities to the interests and skills of their inmates. One such example is the library at the Centre Penitenciari de Joves, which houses inmates aged 18 to 25 with poor reading habits and organizes workshops on writing rap songs.

Collaboration with prison schools to promote literacy is relatively common, either through the supply of teaching materials for classes (e.g. dictionaries, atlases, films and music) or through the organization of joint activities. The library service at the Centre Penitenciari de Dones, for example, organizes a monthly storytelling session aimed at students who are learning to read and write.

Particularly noteworthy is the AlfaDigital programme, which is promoted by the Catalan government's General Directorate for Prison Services. AlfaDigital is aimed at digital literacy for inmates with the following key objectives:

- To incorporate ICTs into the daily life of prisons, as digital literacy and cultural stimulation tools.
- To promote links between the different areas that carry out actions to foster the digital literacy of inmates.
- To strengthen the tools and areas for collaborative work within and among prisons.

Thus, some prisons utilize this platform not only to improve their inmates’ reading ability and develop their creativity, but to enhance their ICT skills. The library service at
the Centre Penitenciar de Ponent, for example, collaborates with the prison’s teachers to record group reading sessions held in the library with literacy students and new readers and publish them as audiovisual material.

Art workshops

Activities carried out to promote art are usually organized outside the prison in collaboration with the school or the prison’s art instructors. These include craft workshops (to make bookmarks, envelopes and Christmas cards to provide inmates with a form of contacting their families, etc.) and photography workshops.

In this respect, one initiative worth highlighting is the “Reading and Prison” photography competition organized jointly by the General Directorate for Prison Services and the Centre for Legal Studies and Specialized Training:

“The objective of the competition is to highlight the subject of reading in prisons through photography. It is about increasing awareness of how artistic practice with people who are deprived of their liberty can be turned into an educational pathway to promote reintegration and rehabilitation. In addition, this artistic medium provides an opportunity to disseminate some of the prison’s cultural and educational work beyond the prison walls. The aim, therefore, is to break with stereotypes about prison life and show society that culture extends to all corners.”

The exhibition for the 2017 competition can be seen in the video Reading and Prison 2017 Exhibition.

Use of the library

The use of library areas by other education services is strongly determined by security-related aspects and the proximity of the library. For example, since the library at the Centre Penitenciari Quatre Camins is located within the prison’s education area, inmates can use it as a study room when they are not in class to carry out work set by teachers.

Conclusions

As shown, libraries in Catalan prisons play a very active role in the education of inmates. They offer a wide range of activities related to the promotion of reading, literacy and culture, whether as part of an internal library initiative or in partnership with other education services. The survey revealed some relatively common prison activities, such as reading clubs and art workshops, in addition to some highly original initiatives such as rap writing, escape rooms and lip dubs, and programmes such as AlfaDigital, which aim to develop reading and creative abilities while enhancing ICT skills.

Even though the survey detected differences in the range of activities offered, all ten of the library services attempt to adapt their education plans to the needs and
sociocultural characteristics of the inmates. In addition, formal or informal partnerships with staff from other prison education services (teachers, social educators, instructors, etc.) not only serve to expand the service, but often represent a means of overcoming the financial and human constraints faced by Catalan prison libraries.

References


Appendix 1

Name of the center:

Library own services

1.1. What is this service and activities related to education library offers the inmates own regular way?

- Reading clubs.
- Writing contests.
- Exhibitions, assemblies, festivals, etc.
- Readings by authors.
- Loan of text material and others for face-to-face education support:
1.2. Which of these devices or services does the library offer for educational purposes?

- Computers.
- Printers.
- Internet access.
- Others (indicate below which other devices or services).

2. Services offered in collaboration with other educational services of the center (ex. School)

2.1. Is the library located near the school?

- Yes (indicate the approximate distance).
- No.

2.2. With which educational services of the center, the library collaborates on a regular basis?

- School.
- Social educators.
- Others (indicate below which other educational services).

2.3. In what way is the library coordinated with the educational services of the center?

- In a formal way (coordination bodies, commissions, etc.).
- Informally (personal contacts).

2.4. Which of these services does the library provide the staff of the educational services of the center on a regular basis?

- Acquisition of text material and others supporting educational services.
- Loan of documents.
- From the collection of the library.
- Other libraries (interlibrary loan).
- Assignment of library spaces (ex. for classes, organizing activities ..).
- Others (indicate below which other services are offered).
2.5. What is this service and activities the library offers regularly inmates in collaboration with educational services center?

- Reading clubs.
- Writing contests.
- Exhibitions, assemblies, festivals, etc.
- Readings by authors.
- Loan for text material and others for face-to-face education support:
  - From the collection of the library.
  - Other libraries (interlibrary loan).
- Loan of text material and others to support distant education:
  - From the collection of the library.
  - Other libraries (interlibrary loan).
- Art workshops (theater, music, plastic arts, etc.)
- Creative writing workshops.
- Computer workshops.
- Literacy support workshops.
- Others (indicate below which other activities related to education).

Any other comments on the role of your library in the center educational services can be added here below: