

Redesign of Libraries in Chilean Prisons

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Abstract:

The following paper shows the state of progress of a project of setting up modern libraries in Chilean prisons, designed to execute its implementation phase between 2015 and 2019.

Based on the experiences of an old plan, launched in the early 1980s, parallel strategies have been developed for the installation and implementation, with the main objective of awakening interest in reading and providing tools that improve the quality of life inside the prison and the possibilities of returning to the free environment without the need to commit a crime again.

Currently, in the middle of this process, the strategies we are testing are established, we have seen the impacts, as well as the adaptability they have to the characteristics of each prison and the projections that intend to sustain the program over time.

Keywords: Libraries, Prisons, Digital Literacy, Chile

BACKGROUND

The year 1978 is the most accurate date to define the beginning of the library service in prisons in Chile. Thanks to an alliance between the Ministries of Justice and Education, the creation of libraries in the two most important prisons in Santiago is decreed. The one of women and the one of men.

Previously, there were only some books available for those who attended prison schools, as old as the prisons themselves.

For these two new libraries, librarians from the Directorate of Libraries, Archives and Museums of Chile were assigned. The DIBAM.¹

¹ In February 2018, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage was created in Chile and DIBAM became part of it, changing its name to the National Service of Cultural Heritage.

Three years later, 13 more libraries were created in the prisons of the main cities of Chile. For these libraries, it was agreed that it would be the Gendarmerie of Chile (the institution in charge of the security of the prisons) who had to assign an official for the provision of the library services. Therefore, a first difference was created, very predictable. The jails of Santiago, which had librarians, had stability in the service, despite the precariousness of their facilities and limited collections. Even when these librarians could not continue, Gendarmerie arranged other information professionals who maintained the service.

However, in the prisons located in all the other regions, the fate was very different. Some had no more than the first impulse and then remained inactive, reporting great loss of books and low interest of officials, who in turn claimed that decisions made at a central level, did not take into account the adaptation to the operational coordination of every prison, indeed, very different in each case. The result was libraries of little interest for the inmates and very difficult to access.

Those libraries that were linked to schools had better luck, who appreciated the service and added it to their educational offer. This allowed a longer stay and a greater care of the books, although benefiting only those who attended these educational establishments.

Even so, some didn't continue, even while being in the schools, also because of plans that did not consider the application in the territory itself. For example, some teachers refused to attend the library, since it was not within their duties. On other occasions, a change of authorities in the prisons was enough for the library to change radically, for better or worse. In any case, the fate of the library depended solely on the motivation of the people, or even a single person.

Despite all the above, some survived as a service, quite precarious, but active.

As of 2005, there was a sort of rebirth for some libraries, together with the creation of new prisons that the government granted in concession to private companies. 8 prisons were built in the largest cities in Chile, and in most cases, they replaced the old city jail. Along with the transfer of people, the library was also moved, but this time, its maintenance was contractually fixed with the company and linked to the school, also as a part of the contract.

Undoubtedly this meant a new impulse, but in a few years we saw again a lot of variation in the quality of the services between one another, and once again, this depended on the willingness of the people who took charge. It was not enough with what the contract stipulated, which was only having the library.

At the beginning of our current project, in 2015, we analyzed the situation of each pre-existing library and we noticed that it was feasible to carry out many actions that could have a real impact on the quality of life of the inmates. Inside, and once outside.

THE CURRENT PROJECT

The origins of the current project are the services of the BiblioRedes Program, which was created in 2002 with the aim of providing access and training to the community in digital technologies that promote social development. Always as part of the service of a Public Library. Already in 2004, the work of Digital Literacy of the BiblioRedes Program had developed many experiences in prisons, and although they were punctual and sporadic, the

evaluation and assessment were always very high. The demand grew exponentially and in 2012, taking advantage of a process of computer replacement in all the Public Libraries of Chile, we decided to create a specific Digital Literacy Program in prisons which, besides aiming at the particular needs of this public, would be the first step to create a Library plan, stronger than the previous one, which would include monitoring and differentiated treatment considering the characteristics of each prison.

Between 2012 and 2014 we continued installing computer laboratories in more than fifty prisons, in all regions of the country, implemented with computers that were recycled from Public Libraries, and with an Internet Simulation. All this as a means to support what we call "Digital Literacy Plan for Prison Facilities", which consisted in delivering knowledge and strategies so that once released, people had the skills to face the search for employment, entrepreneurship, work itself, education and everyday life in general, in a world that had become significantly digital.

It should be noted that by 2012 Chile had faced the digital divide quite well. The poorest, the elderly and geographically isolated people could already access a computer with Internet and receive free training. But not yet in prisons.

Considering all the previous experience, in 2014 we created the project to transform the computer rooms into modern libraries, with reading promotion strategies from the beginning.

And in 2015, the first stone was laid of what we call the Library Plan in Prison Facilities.

The first part was to establish new objectives. And while the library is a multipurpose place, a place that should become the cultural center of a prison, we decided that the central part of our management would focus on awakening interest in the reading habit, convinced of the personal and social skills that reading can develop, and the importance of this for life inside the prison. And of course for the integrity of the person who at some point will return to the free environment.

The rest of the cultural activity would come by itself. And we have seen that indeed it has.

To achieve our goals, we proposed several strategies that we have been evaluating and adapting each year.

STRATEGIES OF THE CURRENT PLAN.

Technical setting in cooperation with Gendarmerie and with each jail.

The first step to set a library, besides presenting the project to the authorities and relevant actors, who are fundamental to facilitate the execution, is a detailed work in the prison itself, planning the best conditions and strategies to position the place between the inmates and the officials. This is done together with the staff of each place, considering teachers, security and psychosocial support personnel, and as much as possible, with inmates.

A technical setting of the space is made, considering the location and conditions that the library should have, as well as the characteristics of each prison.

In this preparation we also obtain relevant information, such as the practical work carried out, the educational levels that are delivered, the types of sentences, the internal segregations, among many other factors that allow us to create a bibliographic collection and a service as specific as possible for each context.

Specific Bibliographic Collection

From the beginning we sensed that we had to be extremely cautious in the decision of the books that would have the great mission of captivating an audience that for the most part sees reading as something quite distant, and related to unpleasant obligations.

Undoubtedly, it was fundamental to build on the experience, and we spent a lot of time meeting, individually and collectively, with all the people we could contact, who had had some type of work related to reading promotion in prisons: workshop instructors, ex-prisoners, prison librarians, teachers of prison schools, etc. Also psychologists, social workers, Gendarmerie officials, workers of DIBAM, SENAME² and Public Libraries in general.

The question that included everything was: What should it have and how should the ideal library be in a Chilean jail?

Synthesizing the results of those experiences, it was necessary to create a library with a wide diversity of styles, with an emphasis on simple, contingent and entertaining readings that enable a sort of "entry into reading". Many of these books are about subjects of massive interest, such as football, famous people, esotericism, humor, self-help, etc. Also the constant growing collection includes many magazines, comics and newspapers that point to the same goal.

There had to be as well a certain specificity in each prison, considering the details that are extracted from the previous investigations in the field for each one, mainly the trades that are practiced, the level of schooling, the geographical region and of course the type of population and their conditions, that is, women or men, prosecuted or already convicted, small, medium or large prisons, work centers, high security prisons, etc.

In addition, we tried to complement this to a pre-existing collection, consisting mainly of donated books and most of which did not have any relevance to the needs of the prison population. In general, the collections we found, rather repelled reading and increased the vision of the library as a boring place. Even a place of punishment.

In mid-2015 we finished defining our bibliographic collection, which was distributed in our first 15 prisons, inaugurated at the end of that same year.

Henceforth, we have tried to be even more specific in the previous criteria, and also to respond to the general demand, to the preferences data that the statistics show us and to the needs of the workshops.

We also finished implementing a basic collection, common to all the jails, and developing a small specific collection in some prisons that have a particular characteristic. For example,

² SENAME is the National Service for Minors, which has a section on Deprivation of Liberty for lawbreakers over 14 years of age.

in the city of Angol, with the largest Mapuche population, as requested by them, you can find more books about the Mapuche and some in Mapudungun, the language of the native people.

Reading Promotion Workshops

One of the greatest lessons learned from previous prison library experience was that books, although pertinent, would not suffice on their own. The collection should be strengthened. So, together with the development of collections, we also designed several workshops, aimed at diverse audiences that began to be applied in 2016.

Since then and until today, the workshops have been permanently under evaluation, mainly by the beneficiaries and the workshop instructors, in order to make them increasingly relevant to the characteristics of the prison population, with all its variations, and of course aimed at the main objective: Start a taste for reading, which can lead to a constant reading habit.

In general, the workshops have consisted of collective talks, which deal with topics of common interest, such as football, fashion, fear, etc., that are related little by little with existing literature and with the possibilities that we all have to tell our experiences. And write about them.

Specifically: reading-writing, biographical accounts, letters and other writings addressed to relatives, acquaintances and also unknown people. Intra and inter-prison contests. And in addition, reading clubs, for which short novels are sent to each prison, with 8 copies of each.

Both inmates and workshop instructors perceive high or very high relevance in the contents of the workshops. They would come back, and they would recommend them. On the other hand, the security personnel consulted assure that those who read and participate in the workshops lower their levels of anxiety, with which we can argue that by sustaining this quality over time, the levels of general violence decrease.

Initial and constant training of the library clerk

In the alliance we have with the Gendarmerie of Chile, it is established that this institution is the one who appoints an official to take charge of the place, keep it open, coordinate the groups for the workshops, register the loans, keep the collection organized, etc.

The condition and previous training of those who have been appointed is very variable, therefore we decided to give great importance to the initial and constant training of the person in charge. The main parts of this training process are:

1. Initial face-to-face meeting, where they visit active Public Libraries, similar to the ones they will manage. Also libraries of jails already in use, and testimonies of library clerks, officials and even former inmates. In addition, they are trained in library management and in the use of computer programs incorporated in the library.
2. Introductory virtual course. To support the above and also considering the possibility of sudden changes of clerks, a relatively common situation, is that a virtual course was created, available at any time, where all the processes necessary to manage libraries are explained didactically, as well as good practices and constant interaction.

3. Constant regional support. Once the libraries are implemented, they become part of the regional network of public libraries, and therefore, of their offer of consultancy and training.

In addition to all this, the central team of the Library Plan in Penitentiary Facilities is constantly diagnosing and evaluating the functioning and training needs of each library.

Training of Gendarmerie staff

It is not a surprising fact that the population of Latin American countries is largely away from reading. For this reason, we think that we must maximize the strategies to reach a population that is even further away from reading than the average. This prison population certainly includes security personnel, whose situation is even more critical for our Plan, due to the facilitating role they should have in theory.

For these reasons, we decided to attack the root of the problem, and we made arrangements with the School of Gendarmerie, to include workshops to promote reading in the educational curriculum, in addition to complementing the library, mainly linked to security issues and laws, with the same common base collection found in prisons.

The two main objectives of this are:

1. Raise awareness on the importance of reading as entertainment and distention, but also as a tool that aligns with the processes of social reintegration that Gendarmerie already has, through labor workshops, education and psychosocial work.
2. Show in detail the Library Plan in Penitentiary Facilities, which is what they will find once they enter the units, so that they become real facilitators of the initiative.

Additionally, considering the high number of civil workers that Gendarmerie has, whose awareness is also fundamental, we have complemented and optimized a library aimed exclusively at staff, which already worked in a very intuitive manner. Nowadays it is a library with an automated loan system, with a professional in charge, thousands of books and a very active flow of loans.

Digital Resource Center

In the task of incorporating the richness of digital documents, and optimizing the Digital Literacy training lessons, we created a computer system that works off-line, as a kind of Intranet, but remotely connected to the Internet, from where frequent updates are downloaded and where statistics of training and use are uploaded, as well as comments and suggestions from the inmates.

The Digital Resource Center incorporates, for example, basic Digital Literacy training and certifications, school support material and university preparation, support for trades, a digital library, bibliographic catalog of the physical library, simulations of job search and online procedures, banks of videos, images and music; and a lot of entertainment material.

Altogether, it allows us to have basic statistics: users, access sessions, training certifications and differentiated access to each of the sections.

With all the above, the objective of the Digital Resource Center is not only Digital Literacy that prepares the inmates for their reintegration into the free environment, but also to deliver meaningful tools for the processes that are experienced inside the prison.

Since its implementation, this system has a wide acceptance among inmates as well as officials and the statistics are growing in all aspects.

Online loans

Despite the prohibition of Internet in prisons, we had the possibility of installing a connection for the exclusive use of the official in charge of the library in order to register users and loans, as well as access to the catalog and local statistics.

The biggest advantage of this is that at the national level we can have essential data that allow us to further specify the relevance of the collection and improve the general service.

Consultancy on project applications

In recent years Chile has increased the amount of competitive funds available for people and institutions to finance their cultural projects. Within these, the projects related to books and reading make a good part of the distribution.

To date, hundreds of libraries have been created or optimized thanks to these funds. However, the skills are not always available to be able to complete all the procedures associated with these applications, which are quite complex in some cases.

For this reason, the Plan has been assigned to the aids in the formulations that the National System of Public Libraries already has for the entire universe of Chilean libraries.

A project of its own, which is made concrete by the efforts of the people who will later take direct part of it, generates a sense of belonging that increases the value of the service.

Internal promotion

Understanding that each prison is different, so should be the strategies to promote the library among the inmates. Therefore, we provide various tools, based on the contexts we have detected in each prison, and then each prison uses what they consider most appropriate for their particular situation. We find generic posters, posters promoting literary styles of the collection, bookmarks, notice boards, broadcasting through megaphones and of course, word of mouth, which is undoubtedly the most effective promotion.

Design of spaces

Taking into consideration that inside the prisons the spaces present deplorable conditions and a terrible habitability (dismal, overcrowded, bad smelling, little hygiene, etc.), we work hard to give the library the opposite condition. That is, we want that being in the place is pleasant. Therefore, we invest in the overall design, which considers besides the functional aspects of a modern library, a relationship of attractive colors and shapes and optimum comfort conditions.

All this has also made possible for inmates and officials to take care of the place, maintain the facilities, and above all, that they frequent it.

Increased coverage

In terms of coverage, the challenge posed for this project was that by the end of 2019 we would arrive with libraries to all Chilean prisons with more than 50 people, which would cover approximately 99% of the population deprived of liberty in Chile. That number is variable year after year, oscillating until now between 75 and 80 enclosures. In addition, some larger prisons are designed with two libraries.

This increased coverage has been distributed in these five years, which has given us the possibility of being in a constant trial, redesigning the strategies and optimizing better and better the services ready to enter the new prisons.

This process has also made it possible for the results and impact to become a motivation for the prisons that do not yet have the service to strive to have the minimum conditions that allow them to be beneficiaries of the program in a more efficient manner.

COVERAGE, IMPACT AND PROJECTIONS

With respect to coverage, the figures as of May 2018 are:

- 43 Public Libraries working in Penitentiary facilities
- 18 Libraries in the process of implementation
- 2 Libraries in the Training Schools for officers and non-commissioned officers of the Gendarmerie of Chile
- 21,808 Inmates with access to a Public Library
- 13,291 Users have registered in the libraries since 2015
- 7,400 trained in Digital Literacy since 2013
- 1,870 Attendees to Reading Development Workshops between 2016 and 2017
- 40,314 Book loans since 2015

It should be considered that both registered users and loans of bibliographic material accelerate their growth month by month, which shows us that the service is spreading within each prison.

Regarding the social impact, it is a projection to demonstrate that by adding the reading habit and / or the tools delivered in the library to the other social insertion strategies available to the inmates, the possibilities of job placement increase and those of criminal recidivism decrease.

In relation to the evaluation after the reading promotion workshops, the numbers indicate that a high percentage of inmates, always more than 78%, declare, for example, to have written a literary text for the first time, to have shared the experiences and readings of the workshops with their families and friends during the visits, to have improved their reading comprehension and vocabulary and having more desire to read.

The workshop instructors and psychosocial professionals of the units also maintain that reading and attending library activities lower the levels of anxiety of the inmates.

With regard to continuity, in addition to the total coverage proposed, the Plan has the following projections today:

- Increase of alliances with public and private institutions that allow to increase the services and resources attached to the Plan. For example, institutions that manage volunteering to carry out workshops and other cultural activities, impact studies carried out by universities, response to specific demands of books by publishers, construction and opening of new places, etc.
- Active participation in the execution of the project "Reduction of sentences for reading" that nowadays is as a bill in the National Congress.
- Incorporation of library services in the Post-Penitentiary Departments, which provide support in training and job reintegration to people who are released, or who are serving the last part of their sentence in the free environment.
- Support to the Initial Literacy processes, contributing from the library to the challenges that the UN has for 2030, among which is the total elimination of illiteracy, still very present in prisons.
- Studies that detail in an increasingly specific way the benefits of reading and library services, impacting the processes of recidivism and social integration.

REFERENCES

- Supreme decree Number 1069 of 1978, Republic of Chile.
- Supreme decree 509 of 1981, Republic of Chile.