The “Death” of RJAs in Belgian Prisons

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Christophe Dubois
c.dubois@ulg.ac.be
Background

Drawing on the conclusion of an action-research
The Ministerial Circular of 4 Oct 2000
Delegated a mission
To new actors (RJAs)
But in June 2008, the RJA function was cancelled

1. Policy Making Process
2. Policy Implementation Process
3. Organizational Characteristics of Prison Settings
1. A Top-Down Policy Making Process

A (double) research (and penal policy) programme

- The research programme:
  - 1993-1998: Penology & Victimology Team (KUL) / NGOs *(Suggnomé and Médiate)* ➔ 2005 Law (June 22)
  - 1996-2000: the RJ approach behind the prison walls / pilot project (6 PS; KUL & ULG; researchers experimenting various initiatives)
  - Dec. 1999: research report
  - Oct. 2000: Ministerial Circular (end of research programme; further step in the policy programme)

- Critical statements:
  - The Ministerial circular didn’t result from any request emanating from the prison environment (professionals would be affected by its implementation)
  - How could prison professionals be interested in RJ if not informed nor trained? (they were not conceived as the main intermediaries)
2. An Unprepared Policy Implementation Process

The Ministerial Circular = 9 pages without any clear instruction for the RJAs
“Structural” role (> < case by case)
“Advisors” position (> < hierarchical part of pyramidal org.)

1. Appointment
   Nov. 2000 (23/31 Female; 22-33 y.o.; no experience)
   Indifference (sometimes hostility) of the environment

2. Double phase of integration
   COLLEGIAL SPACE (Intervisions): sharing of emotional difficulties; precision of their mission (a concept paper & a triangular diagram)
   LOCAL SPACE: variable integration process (size, type, architecture, location, culture of the PS)

3. Time of fulfilment
   Activities (NGOs) and Actions (information, awareness, training)
3. Time of fulfilment

**Actions**
- Information
- Sensitization
- Training

... both prisoners & staff

**Activities**
- Training & awareness (*Slachtoffer in Beeld* and *Arpège-Prélude*);
- Training inmates to deal with difficult situations (*Omgaan met lastige situaties*);
- Personality Human Resources Training (*PRH*);
- Socializing workshops (*Arnica*);
- Talks between citizens and prisoners (*Kaffeedetinee; gespreksavonden* and *gesprekcyclus*),
- Think-tanks (*Janus*),
- Mediation programs aimed at connecting offenders and victims (*Suggnome* and *Médiante*);
- Compensation programs (with the help of the Compensation Fund)
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1. **Appointment**
   
   Nov. 2000 (23/31 Female; 22-33 y.o.; no experience)
   
   Indifference (sometimes hostility) of the environment

2. **Double phase of integration**

   **COLLEGIAL SPACE (Intervisions):** sharing of emotional difficulties; precision of their mission (a concept paper & a triangular diagram)

   **LOCAL SPACE:** variable integration process (size, type, architecture, location, culture of the PS)

3. **Time of fulfilment**

   Activities (NGOs) and Actions (information, awareness, training)

4. **Permanent employment & extinction of the function**

   2005 (preparatory work for their statutarisation); 2007 (recruitment process initiated); 2008 (examination in Jan; Results in Feb; the era of the permanently employed in June; letter in Aug – “RJ is no longer a project stage but a stage in a project” – Jr Governors)
3. A Contrasted Embeddedness of RJ Policy in Prison Organizations

Belgium is a Federal State

- **In the North:**
  Flemish Community Strategic Plan (Dec 2000): providing a systematic policy of social assistance (Min of Welfare, Health & Family); 17 policy coordinators, 17 organisational coordinators, 10 pedagogical coordinators; cooperation with RJAs until 2008; the idea of RJ is *inscribed* in the Strat. Plan (structural roots)

- **In the South**
  French-speaking side, more complex institutional landscape; various coordination agreements; RJ isn’t *inscribed*; the last RJ activities are carried out by Médiante (based on the law of 22 June 2005 & without any RJA intermediation)

« In practice, the majority of the requests come from the side of the offender. For example, they contact the mediation service after having received information from a judicial body or from the social services in the prison or the probation service, or because they heard about the mediation service from a fellow prisoner » (Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016 : 347).
3. A Contrasted Embeddedness of RJ Policy in Prison Organizations

Belgium has 4 open prisons
And various regimes (high security vs high community)
Prison conditions as prerequisites
References


Some personal references

• DUBOIS C., VRANCKEN D., 2015, « Restorative detention or ‘work on self’? Two accounts of a Belgian prison policy », Ethnography, 16, 2, pp. 187–206 DOI: 10.1177/1466138114538803
THANK YOU!