

Women Inmates' Accounts of Education in Queensland Corrections¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on research with women inmates undertaking prison education in two Queensland correctional facilities: Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre and Helena Jones Community Corrections Centre. This study investigated inmate women's accounts of education using interview data. The research found that women's involvement in prison education identified institutional and cultural limitations concerning women's access to, and participation in, prison education programs. These accounts attested variously to the embeddedness of their educational experiences within these constraints. This work recommends, as a research policy imperative, changes to structural and cultural dimensions of prison education to support women inmates' educational access and experiences.

Female Inmate Education in Australia

While prison education was mandated by the United Nations (1957) as a basic human right for inmate rehabilitation and re-entry into society, there is a paucity of research on female inmate education in Australia. The lack of research evidence may be attributed to the invisibility of inmate women in the criminal justice system that, in turn, may be due to the small number of female inmates in relation to their male counterparts. Most recent census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) reveal that female inmates represent only 5% of the overall prison population despite the increased rate of imprisonment to 17% between 1993 and 1997 (Criminal Justice Commission, 1998). The rate of imprisonment for adult females was 14.7 per 100,000 compared to 285.6 per 100,000 for adult males.

The most frequent length of sentence for women is two to five years (31.2%) and female prisoners serve shorter sentences than males with a median expected sentence of 1.9 years compared to 4 years for males. Eighty percent of these women are between 20 and 39 years of age and most are mothers of dependent children and head single parent households, thus exacerbating the impact of removal from home and family.

Gender difference is seen also in the nature of offence with only 1% of females compared to 17% of male prisoners convicted of sex offences. Fraud and misappropriation account for 15% of females compared to 8% of males. In terms of recidivism, almost two-thirds (61%) of male prisoners served previous prison sentences compared to 54% of females.

Previous studies have found that women inmates' relatively low levels of formal education prior to entering prison limited the involvement of inmate women in prison education. Farrell (1998b) found that almost one-quarter of women prisoners had completed primary school or less and a high proportion of inmates were either unemployed or on pensions when they were arrested. The National Prison Census (1991) indicated that almost half of those who had been in prison were unemployed due to their prior incarceration; and the financial circumstances of their families often worsened during the custodial period. These findings parallel Cox and Carlin's (1998) recent study that of the 358 male and female inmates surveyed in Queensland (11.11% of the prison population), the average level of education was Year 9. Thus, the relative invisibility of female inmates given their low numbers in relation to male prisoners, their low levels of formal education before entering prison and increased custodial orders for women emerged as compelling reasons for researching the involvement of women inmates in prison education.

Education in Queensland Corrections

Education in Queensland prisons is the umbrella term for four basic categories of program: therapeutic intervention programs, education programs, vocational programs, and recreational programs (Farrell, 1998a). While previous studies have investigated these categories of program and identified the distinctive education needs of inmate women (Byrne, 1990; Farrell, 1996, 1998b; Report of Combined Community Agencies, 1990), current research has found that there have been only modest gains in making effective educational opportunities a reality for inmate women.

A recent report on education in Queensland corrections is Cox and Carlin's (1998) review of the delivery of vocational education and training. While their report did not focus exclusively on the education and training needs of women inmates, women prisoners (7.26%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (24.58%) were represented in the sample in proportion to their representation in the general prison population. Vocational training, within their terms of reference, included business, hospitality, horticulture and other training such as first aid courses.

Cox and Carlin (1998) noted that, in Queensland corrective facilities in 1998, 133,948 curriculum hours were spent in vocational training and the total number of hours of literacy education was 100,000. Of significance was the finding that combined curriculum hours at Brisbane Women's and Helena Jones represented only .04% of the total hours spent by all prisoners in the state. Thus, there is evidence of a disproportionate under-representation of females in vocational training. Both officers and inmates reported improvements in some inmates' behaviour due to education and training. Their survey found that a uniform 100% of Education Officers, Managers of Offender Development, Industry Managers and Trainers reported an improvement in attitude and behaviour of some inmates who had undertaken training; and 60% of inmates reported improvement in behaviour and attitude of some inmates after training, particularly in self-confidence, self-esteem, communication skills, respect for others, maturity, tolerance of other, self-control and self-discipline.

The Research Study

This study interviewed women inmates in two custodial settings, Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre and Helena Jones Community Corrections Centre, to ask them for their accounts of education experiences while incarcerated. Data collection consisted of: interviews with 7 women inmates from the Helena Jones Correctional Centre and with 9 women inmates at the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre.

Table 1: Participants in Study

Helena Jones Correctional Centre	Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre
Kay	Cindy
Jan	Lyn
Sharon	Tina
Kylie	Sally
Donna	Marissa
Marilyn	Esther
Edith	Laurel
	Pamela
	Chantelle

With the exception of three interviews, where researcher notes were taken, all other interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were used for the participants. The interview accounts were analysed in order to understand the educational experiences of women inmates and to identify “institutional and cultural constraints...[that] reveal the functions of apparently irrational practices and help us to understand the possibilities and limits of attempts at social reform” (Silverman, 1998, p. 171).

The use of interviews as a method for data collection is a well-known and popular way of eliciting understandings and constructing data regarding a particular matter under investigation (Baker, 1997). In many instances, the interview data are accepted as ‘truth’ and as representations of ‘how the world really is’. In this study, however, the interview, while still seen as a valid and useful source of understanding, is understood as an *account* where respondents (both interviewer and interviewee) demonstrate their competence in the interview role (Dingwall, 1997). The interview is a particular form of social interaction that is different from a conversation, for instance. Rather, an interview is a manufactured socially constructed opportunity to be invited to

“talk about something that the interviewer is interested in and that may or may not be of interest to the respondent” (Dingwall, 1997, p. 59). Consequently, an interview is a controlled situation where only certain topics can be proposed and elaborated upon. In this study, the topics proposed and discussed related to participants’ views on their educational experiences while incarcerated. The inmates were asked to talk about:

- their experiences of education while incarcerated
- gaining access to education
- the types of education that they found helpful
- the types of education that they found least helpful
- the types of education that they would like to see offered.

In this study, the research interviews were used primarily to ask the women inmates “to reveal, describe, report on their interiors or external world as they know it” (Baker, 1997, p. 136). In this sense, the respondents were deemed to be “witnesses” of their own circumstances (Baker, 1997). This approach lets go of the notion that interview data give “privileged insight into what people really think, believe or do” (Baker, 1997, p. 137). Rather, the interview data are understood as an *account* that makes “audible and visible ... how people account to one another, whatever might be inside their heads” (Baker, 1997, p. 131). From this perspective, “accounts ... are treated as legitimate” (Dingwall, 1997, p. 60) ways to understand experiences and activities that is typically not knowable to the researcher.

Audio-recordings of the interviews with the women inmates were transcribed and analysed. This approach recognizes that interviews allow for participants to account for their experiences and so the inmates’ accounts were analyzed for the categories and issues relating to the conduct of prison education. In brief, findings indicated that, with minor exceptions, the “institutional and cultural constraints” (Silverman, 1998, p. 171) of prison life worked against effective participation in the types of education that might contribute to rehabilitation; and these constraints will be considered respectively in the following sections.

Institutional Constraints

While the institutional constraints of prison life were multitudinous, dimensions such as prison routines, sentence duration and the shortage of human and physical resources impinged upon inmate access to education significantly.

Access

Prison Routines

That prison routines framed access to and participation in education was exemplified during a research visit to Brisbane Women’s when a message on the public address system alerted inmates to a muster, “Attention all ladies, the head count is in-correct. Please present yourselves for a

muster. I say again, a muster will now take place”. The instruction was followed by the appearance and interjection of a male prison officer, “Excuse me but I’m sorry ladies we’re making a muster.”

Even when inmates had access to courses, routine disruptions appeared to be a major difficulty in the actual conduct of the class. One type of disruption involved participants being pulled out of class.

You’re lucky if you get through the curriculum at all because there’s so many disruptions and you know, like one course I was in we’re in the middle of class bad then they pulled everyone for UTs [urine tests] ... and then you know one girl got dragged out ‘cause she’d been breached and had to go the breach cells. (Kay)

Particular routines such as those associated with the dispensation of medication also exemplified conformity to the institutional life of the prison.

You’re made to stand in a line for your medication and sometimes they make you stand there for ten minutes. It’s just like you’re a naughty child. But we’re prisoners and we have to put up with it. But to me that’s no rehabilitation. (Jan)

Inmates noted that such prison routines and rules needed to be learned as part of the enculturation to institutional life inside. Sharon, an inmate at Helena Jones, stressed the need to educate the inmates about the prison system,

You’ve got to learn a new set of rules. I mean I know prison’s not meant to be easy I understand that, but they just need some sort of education on how it works and your family’s outside. (Sharon)

Thus, multifarious prison routines around musters, urine tests and medication were institutional constraints that served to “regulate the lives of women” (Smart, 1992, p.1) within the two establishments.

Sentence Duration

Alongside prison routines, the study corroborated Farrell’s (1996) finding that the shortness of sentence length for inmate women precluded widespread educational achievement while in custody. To ameliorate the effects of this time constraint, inmates stressed the importance of better communication through the use of appointment times and advance notice of courses.

Many women, including Lyn and Sharon, explained possible reasons for poor access to education. For example,

I think you’ve got to be in the right place at the right place at the right time to hear about the courses. (Sharon)

I’ve worked in the nursery for a while but not only that the classes would come up and all the girls from down the centre would get them and we’ll sort of only

hear of them from word of mouth and so we'd ring up the education officer and say well look you know, why didn't we even know about this course. Oh because it's all been filled. At... we didn't get told about it and if we did get told about it, it was a shit fight to get in. (Kay)

Difficulties in access occurred both in the length of time it took to make an initial appointment with the education officer and the maintenance of regular meetings.

Like the education officer at...as I said to you I didn't even know who she was until three or four weeks later. (Sharon)

When I actually got there...it took about oh just over a month to actually see the education officer and for her to organize for me to do my (senior certificate). So I'm doing that at the moment it's a bit hard to get the help that you need to – like for the questions and stuff like that because of my age, because things have changed since I was younger and going to school. Instead of Maths and English and stuff like that it's hard to have gotten the help that I needed in there only being able to see the lady once a fortnight. (Kylie)

Endemic movement of inmates between facilities emerged as a related limiting factor for inmates accessing educational opportunities. This was exemplified by Sharon who was transferred between four correctional facilities, three of which she refers to in this extract from her interview.

The education officer at Brisbane Women's, she was excellent and did have me down for different courses. But then I was transferred to ... and the education officers down there would breeze in and breeze out very quickly and unless you knew who she was, took me three weeks to even figure out who this lady was. By the time I'd figured that out and had a chat with her I was being transferred to here. (Sharon)

Here again, the shortness of sentence length for women inmates and movement between centres combined with educational resources as mitigating factors against effective access to and participation in education.

Education Resources: Human and Physical

Patterns of access to appropriate human and physical resources could be aptly described as 'a waiting game.' Cindy pointed out the difficulties that occurred when there was a shortage of staff as well as a shortage of materials and resources.

Same old problem in this place, short-staffed. Not enough people like her to go around, so her time is very limited. Um, accesses to computers, um and educational stuff, especially for protection its very difficult because we have to be escorted everywhere, and the hallways have to be cleared. If we're short-staffed or um there's something going on in the other half of the jail or um they can't

clear the walkway well, we don't go. Our access to the library is very limited. Um we're supposed to go once a week, but very rarely do we go. (Cindy)

Waiting for the arrival of study materials was identified by Kylie, Lyn and Tina as a source of frustration, with Kylie commenting,

It takes ages, it does. You don't actually get your books when you're meant to get them you know and then they ring up distance education and say well how come we haven't received this yet for this person and they go because you're not enrolled, we sent the papers off a month or so ago...It's slow, it's a slow process. (Kylie)

An allied resource issue was access to and use of library facilities. Kylie, Sally, Marissa, Cindy, Esther and Laurel, for example, commented on the limited range of materials available in the library. Tina also noted the inappropriateness of facilities within the library area for quiet activities.

They should have some sort of quiet room, a quiet place where people can go in and they've got access to you know, computers, you know what I mean just quiet time. You know, like in libraries, you know what I mean...But in our library it is so small you can't even, there's no desks in there, it's just like a little room. (Tina)

Institutional impediments included the inability to access advanced levels of training beyond the basic, the inability to access training due to long waiting lists and the lack of resources to undertake relevant education and training. Concern over issues of waiting lists and scarcity of resources was exemplified in the account of Tina.

You gotta put forms in, forms, forms, forms, forms you know. It's just gettin on the waitin list for them. I wanta start doing computers and you know stuff like that. and there's like, I've been waiting nearly six months, seven months to get on the computers and I'm still waiting. (Tina)

A relatively recent structural change at Brisbane Women's cited by Esther and Tina was the practice of docking inmate pay if education hours were exceeded. Esther coined the phrase "paying for the privilege of learning" to refer to this practice.

Another noteworthy finding was inmate perceptions about access to tutor support, particularly in relation to major literacy and numeracy problems. Tina discussed the need for more frequent and ongoing tutor support and Kylie noted that those with major literacy problems were given priority over others.

There's so many kids wanting to, you know, do courses and stuff like that, especially the women who are literacy, you know and can't spell and all that properly, you know, they tend to spend more time with those women than with women who know you know how to write and stuff like that. (Kylie)

Despite clear institutional limitations, Kylie, an inmate at Helena Jones, put forward a reasoned view that individual inmates within the system need to take responsibility for their education, “I think it’s up to the individual to actually want to learn and get something out of it”. Personal responsibility for one’s education in tandem with opportunities to be listened to and heard by prison staff were seen by Kylie as crucial to education on the inside.

I don’t really think education, but I think more along the lines of counselling and stuff like that. Have the officers listen to you when you’ve got a problem and don’t push out the door, you know. They should really sit down and listen to us, listen to what we have to ask. (Kylie)

This account points to the need for ongoing and focussed counselling support in relation to education needs. The fit of education to the rehabilitation needs of women inmates is seen acutely in the case of some core programs. Several inmates, including Cindy, Donna and Kylie, pointed out that counselling is needed to deal with the underlying issues, issues not typically addressed in core programs.

I find the core programs good but I felt that um with a lot of them with relapse, substance abuse, there’s always other underlying issues to why people use substances, and all that sort of stuff, and a big majority of the time, those underlying issues are not dealt with, prior that you doin (sic) these courses which I think, is, extremely important, that women deal with the underlying issues, understand why they use, um, what triggers them off, deal with that then go through core programs so it has a bigger impact on yous, on the individual. (Cindy)

Anger management is run more like a lecture. There should be workshops on Anger management...you can do it five times and you can still have anger, right, because basically someone’s up there saying to you this how you deal with your anger. But unless there are workshops where people are able to actually bring out some of the areas that have created the anger. (Kay)

This evidence corroborates the findings of Cox and Carlin (1998) that prison education and training, in general, lacked practical, hands-on application to the lived experience of inmates.

While this is arguably the case, this paper would be remiss in not registering the appreciation by some inmates of broad life skills education. Art and craft activities, for example, were cited by Donna and Kay and budgeting and cooking by Sharon, Marilyn and Jan as meaningful activities that generated a sense of pride in their achievement and heightened self-esteem. Sharon also cited the aesthetic and physical rewards of restoring furniture in another low-security correctional facility. A number of respondents noted that the other facility provided valuable practical experiences, such as community service programs in respite centres and nursing homes.

It gives you the benefit of being in the real world and doing practical things...doing things that some of the girls may never have done before, but they're involved in doing it and it is a learning process for them. It's one where for a lot of people it would actually lift their self esteem...It gives them an idea about doing things and feeling, because the community so supportive, feeling very happy at the end of the day really that they've done a really good job. (Edith)

I learnt a lot. I didn't know I could draw until I came to jail. Yea but they're really good, like that's the good side of this place. (Tina)

Welding, that was great. I thoroughly enjoyed that because it's hands on...and it was practical and um that widened my chances of maybe being a boilermaker or something you know when I get out. This place is basically (sigh) because it's all bloody political, it's all revolving around core programs and all that sort of stuff...yeah more variety of um hands on things I think would be more beneficial to the girls um (clanging in roof) workshops, certificates, and that so they've got all those they can walk, work out, walk out and get a better job rather than a being some check out chick or something like that. (Cindy)

Jan noted that life skills such as grooming skills may be useful “to teach them how to look after their skin, their hair, things like that, just basic things that when you're brought up with mum and dad you learn, but if you're not brought up like that you never learn”. Edith also referred to these life skills, making specific reference to the needs of young inmate women.

A lot of them in there they really don't know how to boil an egg or wash their clothing. They just haven't got a clue. They didn't know how to get by in the world. (Edith)

Physical activity was noted by a number of women as a motivating force and lack of physical outlet as injurious to rehabilitation.

A lot of them lose their motivation when they get to jail because they're not doing enough, whereas I'm lucky. I'm working Monday to Friday so I'm motivated to work and keep going. (Marilyn)

While there was widespread support amongst the inmate women for physical activity in custody, there was overriding reliance on the goodwill and/or availability of an officer to supervise such activities. Edith, for example, noted that physical pursuits such as tennis required an officer to accompany and supervise the women. Thus, the institutional dimensions of incarceration perpetuated the dependence of the inmate on individual prison staff.

Cultural Constraints

So too, were cultural dimensions of incarceration, such as the stigma of imprisonment, prescriptive of the way in which education was introduced and accessed inside.

Stigma

Within the inmate accounts there was concurrence of opinion that prison education *per se* was stigmatised socially and that a qualification acquired whilst inside would not carry the same weight as the same qualification acquired on the outside. Kay, an inmate at Helena Jones, commented,

We only learn the basics to give us our certificates so it's really no claim to fame if you've got a TAFE certificate from within prison cause you know that it's sort of like a bit of a, bit of a sham, bit of the scam the whole thing. You don't get into it as much as they would outside. (Kay)

Both Marissa and Kay commented on this phenomenon, with Kay noting,

Well the funny thing is that with all those education classes, like they decide what they think is good for us...not once did they ever ask us.

This view was counterbalanced by Kay's later comments that staff had, in fact, provided her with opportunities to voice her opinions on education.

I was on the actual committee, like they had a committee of prisoners. The GM selected women to represent the other prisoners and I was asking for a money management program, because I said the reasons were... you've got the girls ...like 89.9% of women in prison today have got drug-related crimes which to me always means money. You're giving them all these stupid core programs you know substance abuse and bla bla bla...(Kay)

Pedagogical Issues

The women interviewed spoke also of the types of classes that they found valuable and commented on issues that can be termed *pedagogical*. Participants generally felt that classes were important and that they should be offered.

Edith, from Helena Jones, commented on the format of the courses. This issue was discussed by a number of women interviewed.

What I think is happening is the courses are being done but they are not really getting through. Now maybe you can do some more research on...the format of the course. (Edith)

It's not like self explanatory, it's not um written in simple terms for people that are not educated well, it's very difficult, usin these big words and all that sort of

stuff and that makes it difficult and if you don't understand what they're talkin about how can you learn from it. (Cindy).

A number of women interviewed referred to the style of presentation used in a particular health and fitness course run near to the time of the interviews.

The girls just said, "oh all he stood there and did was read out of a book." Okay? Now that was three Mondays in a row. Well what did they get from that? Nothing. In terms of actually yeah someone standing there well they said well we could have read it out of the book. You know it wouldn't have made any difference. (Edith)

That was boring. He read straight from a textbook. He didn't adapt it— like he was mainly talking about competitive sportsman. And that's not us. So I feel he should have adapted it to our needs, And to read from a textbook as far as I'm concerned we could do that. So I just found it pretty boring and he needed to adapt it to the people he was trying to teach. (Jan)

It became clear that the women who attended the course saw it as not being suitable for a female audience.

Most of the girls felt that is was a little bit boring because he mainly spoke on endurance sports and— you know let's face it, we're not, none of us were anything into that type of thing. We mainly wanted to talk about diet, healthy diets and things like that but he was more into-but it was still good. I mean I still learned the two weeks I did go I still learned a little bit. But had he have changed it around to suit the girls rather than the men, cause obviously that's where he well he did teach it at the men's prison as well. But I think he hadn't reverted it to the girls. I mean obviously the men that's what they wanted to hear. (Sharon)

Participants had strong views about their experiences as well as descriptions of successful sessions. One strategy that appeared to work well was the idea of contracts, where participants agreed that they would undertake certain behaviours while in the class. Edith, from Helena Jones, spoke about a mask-making workshop run by Sisters Inside.

And we do have a really good workshop that Sisters Inside organised of mask making...but it was a good workshop because you know we made a contract at the beginning that everyone had to abide by that no-one was to criticise other people's work and we were all together and share etcetera etcetera and that worked really well. (Edith)

Edith spoke also of the boundaries that were set up by the contract approach. She described these as positively defining behavioural expectations,

The participants knew the boundaries. They knew that when they were all together for instance they were not to rush off outside to the girls who didn't do it and talk about it "Oh this person did this" and made this statement or shared this thing, you know. It was to be done in the confines of that space.

The idea of interacting together in positive ways was a theme to emerge time and time again. Sharon, from Helena Jones, discussed the importance of working in a team when she was discussing her experiences at another correctional facility.

And you work with a team, in a team up there. You have to, so that's another good thing that the girls learn is to work in a team. (Sharon)

A number of participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging and catering for individual differences. Donna pointed out that individual differences needed to be taken into account when planning sessions. This theme was discussed also by Edith, who spoke also of acknowledging individual differences.

And bearing in mind that we are all individuals and you cannot just – that's one thing about you know, well we can't treat you any differently because – but how are you going to look at our individual needs unless you do look at us an individual. (Edith)

Educational Outcomes

A number of inmates concurred, independent of each other, that they had learned little from their education experiences while incarcerated. On the other hand, Kylie and Esther were both positive about their education experiences inside. Kylie was studying for a Year 10 certificate and was positive about her plan to continue her studies to complete senior and then a tertiary degree in psychology. Kylie felt that the prison system, however, was slow in helping the women and that it did not provide appropriate courses when required.

They should help us out more than what they actually are. It is shame because this is my fifth time in. And if I had done relapse prevention and cog skills when I first come in I don't think I would have come back in. (Kylie)

Later in the interview, Kylie acknowledged, however, that prison had helped her to change some of her attitudes.

Because I've done these courses and going to rehab last year and that has helped me. Helped me change my whole attitude. You know, the way I spoke to people, the way I actually acted to everyone towards my family and you know. But um, so I will give the prison some credit, so they have helped me. (Kylie)

Well I've had a really good time (laughter). I barely got to grade ten and I was a very poor student because of problems that I had, and then I've just been so busy

over the years with rearing five kids and working to support them most of the time. I just never had time for education. But I really had a good time the last two years furthering my education. Strictly speaking this two years in jail has been some best years of my life. (Esther)

Thus, the selected accounts of these inmate women attest variously to the embeddedness of their educational experiences within the institutional and cultural constraints of the prison.

Conclusion

This paper investigating inmate women's accounts of educational experiences generates a raft of policy implications. While women still constitute a small minority of inmates in Queensland and serve relatively short sentences in relation to their male counterparts, these findings confirm the pressing need for a thorough review of policies for their education and training. Given the complexity of the institutional and cultural constraints of prison life, this paper is arguing for:

1. a comprehensive review of security procedures which frame prison education and training;
2. a thorough review of the range and types of education provided for inmate women in the light of their educational background, their current experience and personal aspirations; and consultation of inmates about their education needs and preferences;
3. improved communication with inmates of education, career counselling and training options so that access to and participation in such experiences are optimised. This includes a review of the impact of sentence length on effective access and participation;
4. inservice of prison educators in using appropriate and effective pedagogy within a women's correctional facility;
5. strategies to best utilise the skills and resources of support personnel to enhance inmate education and training; and
6. an audit of physical facilities and resources (such as computers and library materials) to establish the resourcing and access level.

These recommendations require systematic prison reform and could be best served by a longitudinal case study investigating women inmates' access and movement through the system to document the effect of sentence length, recidivism and modes of containment on educational access and experiences. Moreover, if correctional authorities are not prepared to engage in such a process, it must be questioned whether a policy of incarcerating women is, in fact, sustainable.

Key Words

Inmate education, prison reform, incarcerated women.

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Endnotes

1. Excerpts of the paper were presented to the conference, Women in Corrections: Staff and Clients, convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology, Adelaide, November 2000