ADDRESSING SOCIAL CHANGES AND EXPECTATIONS IN EDUCATING FEMALES IN A CORRECTIONAL SETTING

Shelagh Trusselle

Mary Crombie

Queensland Corrective Services

Introduction

This paper explores the issues in providing education to females in a correctional environment when the criminogenic nature of the prisoners’ behaviour is mirrored in their learning styles, expectations and educational outcomes.

Background

Educating females in a correctional environment is a challenge at the best of times. Not only are you challenged by the physical environment itself and its inherent restrictions, but you are also challenged by the nature of the students you are teaching. In a correctional environment, you are not always teaching the developing mind; rather, you are teaching over entrenched ideas and biases and established patterns of behaviour. However, in the last twelve to eighteen months, there is the further challenge of accelerated social changes reflected in the correctional environment. These changes are still subject to social expectations which have not adapted to these changes.

The Role of Education in a Correctional Environment

To summarise the role of education in a correctional environment, there are three main purposes in such education. 1. Function as an agent of change for both the offender and the system. 2. Maintain the integrity of education and 3. Respond to all variables in
the process (offender, society and system) so that all benefit from the process. A fourth purpose is offering education as an intrinsically satisfying and edifying pursuit, particularly given the nature of the environment. Positive education intervention is not only necessary but practical in monetary terms as it lowers recidivism and is cheaper than incarceration. (Stevens, Ward 1997)

Various Australian states have acknowledged the role of education in lowering recidivism rates in our prisons and the then Victoria Minister for Corrections, Tim Holding, and Minister for Women’s Affairs, Mary Delahunty, issued a media release in 2005 citing education and vocation opportunities as intrinsic to contributing to an improved community safety by tackling the causes of women’s offending. In short, education and vocation training reduce recidivism and return functionally improved females to the community.

That is the theory and one which is endorsed and adopted in Queensland correctional facilities. However, at the front line, we see the divide between theory and practice. Educating females in a correctional environment poses challenges because, for some females, education is not a top priority. Women have more pressing concerns such as poverty, drugs, domestic violence, neighbourhood violence and single parenting. Literacy and education cannot be separated from the experience of domestic violence in their lives. Many incarcerated females are rather romantic, sentimental, passive, dependant, religious and generally unrealistic about life. (Stino & Palmer 1999) Whilst education is provided and supported by society at large, how is it achieved in a meaningful way?

The challenge being faced at the moment is the changing face of female prisoners and the inherent challenges this presents to educators. As a reflection of social trends, women prisoners with fraud and drugs as their main offence are coming into the gaol system in ever increasing numbers. Each presents a different challenge and addressing the combination of challenges in a limited educational setting is problematic.

**Nature of fraud offenders**

Approximately one third of the present prison population has been convicted of fraud offences. Most of the offences have been committed to fund a gambling problem. The psychological issues of such an issue will not be addressed in this paper but underscore the problems faced by educators. Suffice to say that self-gratification as opposed to economic necessity is an issue that affects educational progress. Unlike
many of the drug offenders, those convicted of fraud were largely in employment prior to their incarceration and many committed their offences over a long period of time, largely undiscovered. Hence, their sense of the effect of their crime on others has been carefully hidden under layers of justification.

**Educational challenges of fraud offenders**

The inherent challenges of educating these offenders are numerous. Because of the need for instant gratification, long term commitment does not come easily. Many have no previous criminal history and are therefore processed through the system quickly. Hence, no sooner is an education plan designed and the offender given a set of achievable goals than they are reclassified and moved to a low security facility. Hence, education and administrative necessity come into conflict.

Whilst it has been said that few of these offenders have a criminal record, interviews suggest that the fraudulent behaviour is of long standing – they simply weren’t caught or the behaviour escalated to a criminal level or a level that attracted attention. Entrenched patterns are hard to change and the mind set of circumventing rules and regulations that do not suit is a constant battle, particularly when facilitating distance education. By its very nature and structure, distance education relies on personal integrity. Plagiarism and assignment “scams” require a level of management and supervision that is hard to maintain. However, academic integrity and social expectations of rehabilitation demand such a level.

Two years ago, a “scam” surfaced which was devised by a group of fraud offenders whereby they stated that assignments had been submitted but not returned and marked by the university. In the current social environment which limits individual responsibility, Education Officers and custodial staff were placed under intense scrutiny by such organisations as the Ombudsman and the Official Visitor and had to instigate a series of resource intensive security measures and computer checks in order to uncover the scam and then minimise its effects on all concerned. Maintaining the integrity of education under these circumstances can be challenging.

Many women convicted of fraud tend to place responsibility on others and manage to do so in such a way that it is difficult to track, manage and challenge. They are often highly skilled manipulators whose actions are often only tracked when staff has the opportunity to compare stories. This means that communication channels between staff must be open and maintained. A recent example involved a student who had told different stories to each Education Officer and the university and only when all three
bodies merged was it apparent that her manipulation skills were of a commendable level.

Prisoners convicted of fraud offences are often in an older age group and therefore the credibility of post discharge plans is called into question given the pensionable age of the offender upon release to the community. The parole conditions for fraud offenders are also such that it is difficult to retrain them for viable career options. A case study relevant at this point is a bank manager who committed fraud against the institution for which she worked. Not only were her parole conditions very restrictive but she, in turn, did not want to engage in any post discharge employment that involved career progression, stress or responsibility. Her education plan was limited to vocational opportunities and she subsequently qualified as a welder. This is a success story in that the female was prepared to undertake manual work. However, for many similar women, manual work is not a desired option and no amount of counselling will alter the self-perception of years standing. Thus, education as an agent of change is challenging.

**Educational management of fraud offenders**

The department’s response to these challenges is dynamic and still being fine-tuned. The use of interviews and assessments for motivational, practical and purposeful advice and direction is crucial. Unlike most distance education students, fraud offenders need constant interaction with staff and need to be constantly challenged before an event rather than after they have developed their layers of justification. At the moment, we have two offenders enrolled in tertiary studies who have been convicted of fraud offences. All material is provided to them in person and case noted in order to avoid claims that the material has not been received. All directions are given in writing and case noted. They are reminded of all due dates and encouraged to see the education facilitators as individuals in order to minimise the trait of distancing themselves for justification purposes. Honesty, accountability and personal responsibility are constantly re-enforced as integral personal attributes. By the same token, they require constant support and encouragement when their own efforts produce results. Yet, there are still problems!

There is a constant need to provide access to shorter, more immediate meaningful activities e.g. a writing group, music group, magazine, drama and physical activities in order to set up a gradual, step by step success ladder. There is also the need to ensure regular linkage with the psychologists and counsellors to map behaviour and
check on underlying personal issues which result in the offender reverting to “old habits”.

Educational challenges of drug offenders

It is difficult to place a percentage figure on the offenders entering the system with drug related offences. This is largely because many offences, whilst not specifically or readily identifiable as drug related, upon further investigation show drug seeking or drug affected behaviour as the trigger for the offence. A recent and high profile murder case was the direct result of non-payment of a drug debt. A couple of high profile trafficking cases were the direct result of seeking a monetary source to pay for a drug habit. Armed robbery is often the result of sourcing money to feed a habit. Driving offences can be drug related and so on the list goes. The challenges posed by offenders with drug addictions/drug related offences are manifold.

Hence, one of the first tasks of an education officer when interviewing a new reception is to identify if there is an underlying drug problem. Offenders attending induction may still be suffering from drug withdrawal. This may impact on their ability to concentrate on simple matters or routine things such as literacy and numeracy assessment because they are hanging out for ‘dosing’. Others may have mental health issues which were being obscured through their ‘self-medication’ e.g. drug taking behaviour.

The ongoing impact of the offenders’ drug taking behaviour spills into their class attendance. Their need for instant gratification, their inability to concentrate for any period of time, their focus on the medication regime and hence their disconcerted feelings can affect, not only their own attention but that of the others in the class. Often the unsettled behaviour of one is very quickly copied by others and several people may leave a class citing any number of ailments. Whilst attending the Health Centre is often a requirement for those leaving class for reasons of illness, the practicality of managing a class which has been unsettled is challenging.

Completing a program is often an issue for offenders who have a drug history because they are used to instant gratification and find the commitment of any period of time difficult to understand. Recently there was a rumour that if they wanted a certificate to produce at court or to a prospective employer, they could attend literacy and numeracy and after the first pre-testing would be issued with a certificate. In their haste to acquire a very basic and largely meaningless certificate, the offenders failed to assess the long term value of their actions.
Educational management of drug offenders

Generally, offenders with an early drug history have minimal schooling, have a dread of school and are uncomfortable when educational issues are discussed. Their school lives may have been unpleasant because of their home situation, childhood abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence or poverty. Any of these would have impacted on their school attendance, motivation and attention resulting in losing interest in education at an early age. Hence, motivating them to undertake any study is challenging because it can be seen as part of the punitive regime of being incarcerated. This impacts on their ability to compete and maintain employment in the community and consequently their work history/work experience is limited or minimal. A high percentage of our offenders find employment in prostitution and the sex industry much easier to procure though distasteful. Hence, they report taking more drugs to escape the reality of their situation and the whole cycle is exacerbated.

From the departmental perspective, education officers are required to encourage, motivate and enrol offenders to meet a target. Achieving this is quite a challenge and sometimes not ‘doable’ in spite of the implementation of many innovative measures. For instance, discussions are held with the offenders on how they could support their children with homework if they improved their education whilst in custody. It is pointed out to them how they could feel empowered by displaying their knowledge of computers to their children and what this could do for their self-esteem. They are advised on the recent government changes to unemployment and other benefits and encouraged to address how this will affect their future financial support. They are reminded how their participation in educational and vocational courses could be viewed positively by a parole panel in terms of taking on and following through with a commitment just as they will be required to do with a parole order. For offenders who have children in the care of the Department of Child Safety, they are reminded how they could use their completion of a course as a sign of their willingness to take their parenting responsibilities seriously. One or more of these methods sometimes work. Some offenders enrol in courses, not for the intrinsic value of education but rather the attraction of being able to purchase things and earn beyond the limited amount of an unemployment cheque.

What needs to be mentioned at this point is that, when referring to drug taking behaviour, it is not a historical reference. The National Institute of Justice (August 1998), states that women in prison used more drugs and more frequently than men. In short, we are dealing with women who were and still are drug users.
Meeting social restrictions and expectations

Queensland’s correctional system is not simply about incarceration. A large part of its ethos and resourcing is about rehabilitation. However, what do we mean by rehabilitation; what does society expect given many of the legal restrictions in place for someone who has passed through the correctional system? This paper does not intend to explore this issue but will briefly address it. In short, secure containment and rehabilitation are often at odds. An immediate consideration is prisoners undertaking studies through outside institutions.

Some offenders can be counselled and motivated to change careers to which they cannot return as a result of their offending behaviour. Generally, the offenders who are in this category have professional experience and formal secondary/tertiary education. So, for instance, a young teacher with drug trafficking offences obviously cannot return to teaching children under 18 years old but will have many years of working life ahead of her on release. So linking her into another career is essential. Often, this person is motivated, has the proven educational background and discipline to undertake more studies. However, finding the right mix in terms of the course requirements so that it can be accessed in custody is a challenge. Most university courses in this technological age are electronically managed. The student’s ability to access information, seek clarification, borrow books and participate with others in a timely manner is impeded or non-existent in custody.

Year 10 studies are highly sought after by many offenders as this is a level of education seen by many employers as desirable. Many prospective employers are happy with some level of Year 10 commencement or completion. Year 11 is a suitable progression for many who have completed Year 10 at some stage but who have no study currency and do not want to repeat something for which they have already been credited. However, there are currently no Year 11 subjects that can be undertaken in a correctional environment and a limited number of Year 10 subjects. Why? Most studies are now online or CD based and demand resources which cannot currently be supplied to prisoners. Even if they were supplied, the changing nature of female prisoners is such that management of these resources, given the above discussion, would be challenging and resource intensive.

Summary

In summary, educating females in a correctional environment is a constant challenge. However, the changing trends in the offences for which women are incarcerated are
adding another layer to the initial assessment process and to the ongoing goal of preparing women for their return to the community. It is acknowledged and accepted that female offenders who participate in educational and vocational courses demonstrate reduced recidivism and positive behavioural change. The latter relates to both staff and other offenders whilst they are incarcerated and to the community upon release. However, the challenge of attracting and retaining women in courses is difficult given all the factors previously outlined. However, it is not an equitable argument to only show the negative. After all, we are discussing the challenge and we need to include the successes.

Some success stories of which we are very proud are the drug manufacturer who is now studying biomedical research at university. We currently manage an offender with a long history of drug abuse and domestic violence who is developing her writing skills to the extent that she has become proficient in her computer skills, edits the centre magazine’ for which she is a prolific contributor, and is in the process of writing two books, one fictional and one historical. We have seen one of our high profile drug traffickers, whose only experience of Australia has been the prison and the road to and from the court, develop confidence, learn English and write articles on our history and our culture as an observer. English as a Second Language has also taught her to speak Australian, some of which she may not be able to use safely upon her return home!

Challenge is a positive concept and does not innately include defeat.

References


Stino & Palmer 1999, “Motivating women offenders through process-based writing in a literacy learning cycle”, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 43.3

National Institute of Justice, August 1998 “*Women Offenders: Programming Needs and Promising Approaches*”.