

EDUCATION BEHIND BARS

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Sharryn Usher

According to the Australian Bureau of Statisticsⁱ, in the December quarter 2009 there were 86,282 persons under the authority of corrective services (excluding those in periodic detention) representing an increase of 4 per cent from the December quarter 2008. The total comprised of 28,870 persons in full-time custody of which 78 per cent were sentenced and 22 per cent were unsentenced prisoners.

Indigenous prisoners represented 26 per cent of the total full-time prisoner population in the December quarter 2009, comprising of 91 per cent males and 9 per cent females. The total Indigenous population aged 18 years and over at 30 June 2009 was 2 per cent of the Australian population. Indigenous imprisonment average daily rate in the December 2009 quarter showed an increase of 7 per cent from the December quarter in 2008.

Recidivism continues to be an issue with large numbers of ex-offenders heading down a path to more serious crimes and longer terms of imprisonment. The ABS national

prisoner census taken on the night of 30 June 2005 records the proportion of prisoners previously imprisoned, at 60 per cent of all adult prisoners in Australia.

The fact remains that unless offenders released into the community have the skills needed to obtain and keep a job, they may well find themselves back in the same circumstances that produced their criminal behaviour in the first place. Research supports the premise that imprisoned individuals are disproportionately and increasingly under-educated, with low skills in the basics of reading, writing, maths and oral communicationⁱⁱ. Similarly, a higher level of schooling is associated with a lower probability of arrest, incarceration and recidivismⁱⁱⁱ. Such studies clearly establish a strong case for remedial intervention programs, including basic literacy and adult education.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 45/111 on Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners at Article 6 states:

“All prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality.”



Correctional educators, in acknowledging the benefits which accrue not only to individual prisoners but to society in general as a result of the provision of education in correctional settings, continue their campaign for a guarantee in legislation for the provision of education in correctional settings in Australia. In order to identify current issues of concern, the following question should be examined closely to gain a snapshot into what is happening at the coalface.

How are correctional facilities responding to the educational needs of inmates?

Depending on their legal status, convicted offenders are provided with access to a range of educational programs which are comprehensive and which meet their educational needs and aspirations. Remandees, unless they self-refer will generally be excluded from educational contact. Certain classifications of offenders may also find their access to education limited by their housing arrangements.

All NSW sentenced offenders serving a sentence of more than three months are asked to undertake a group-based Core Skills Assessment to determine priority needs for

individuals and centres as a whole. Those who register with low skills in reading, writing and numeracy or who self-refer to education for vocational or further education goals then undertake an education profile interview. Information gathered then forms the basis for an individual education plan.

With changes to the way information is captured across NSW correctional centres, the time spent collecting and recording data in the many platforms that exist has dramatically increased over the past few years. Teachers are finding more and more of their day is taken up with administration tasks that, due to the nature of the information and the transient status of the student population, need to be completed on a daily basis. Some teachers still share computers and the increase in compliancy impacts greatly on their available time for preparation and planning tasks.

At Corrective Services NSW two Intensive Learning Centres, a five month full-time program is offered for targeted offenders who have not completed Year 10. However, in most NSW correctional centres education programs compete daily for student time. Offenders may be required to work, to complete therapeutic programs, to address their offending behaviour or to attend case management, not to mention the occasional disruptions to the daily routine of the centres. Given the limited time offenders have available day to day, access to education programs must be prioritised within an offender's individual case plan.

For offenders completing their sentence, addressing their offending behaviour needs to be evidenced by participation in designated therapeutic programs delivered state wide. The challenge for educators remains that the minimum literacy and language skill level required to actively participate and complete many of these programs is beyond the current capabilities of many offenders.

Offenders in many correctional facilities are required to maintain employment and given the limitations to their available time, educators have to negotiate their release time with industry staff to attend programs.

This then competes with release for any therapeutic programs they may be required

to complete and impacts on the offender's ability to earn piece money. As industry managers need to fulfil contracts, there are times offenders cannot be released to attend programs. Correctional educators believe that education should have no lesser status than work and no inmate should be disadvantaged financially or otherwise for taking part in education.

The introduction of Statement of Attainment courses combining small numbers of units was designed to provide offenders with more opportunities to achieve course completions. Given the transient nature of the offender population and the fact that some 60 per cent are serving a custodial sentence of six months or less, this has been welcomed by correctional educators. Disruption to an offender's education program by a move from one centre to another continues to create challenges for both offenders and educators. Ideally, offenders should be held at a centre until any program educational or therapeutic has been completed.

Creating correctional education environments that foster the involvement, participation and engagement of Aboriginal offenders is essential. In addition, the development and resourcing of programs should be set within the context of, and underpinned by, an understanding of the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system and their specific needs. In response to the NSW Teachers Federation green paper: *Aboriginal Education 25 Years Approach: The Way Forward*, NSW correctional educators raised concerns over the falling numbers of Aboriginal teachers employed in correctional centres.

Currently Aboriginal teachers make up approximately 6 per cent of all NSW correctional educators, yet Aboriginal offenders make up approximately 26 per cent of the inmate population. It is imperative that current Aboriginal employment rates are not only maintained but increased and supported through networking and professional development opportunities. In the report to this year's Annual Conference, Correctional Educators are calling for a minimum of one



designated Aboriginal teaching position in each and every NSW correctional facility.

After quite a battle last year, NSW Teachers Federation together with Unions NSW saved Cessnock Correctional Centre from being privatised. Other centres had been earmarked for future privatisation and one centre was lost to the private sector. The provision of educational programs in correctional settings should not be subject to outsourcing to private, for-profit organisations.

All correctional facilities should be adequately resourced and publicly funded. Appropriately resourced teaching facilities including a library or similar facility with a range of appropriate resources and technology should be available for all inmates.

Offenders seeking further education and vocational training encounter many obstacles. Enrolment into external courses involves the offender convincing the centre managers of the rehabilitation benefits that would be gained by such participation. Often the escalating costs of such courses will only be partially met by the centre and therefore offenders with little or no access to financial support are excluded from this option.

For those offenders who manage to secure enrolment in external courses, many are continually frustrated by the limited access to resources, such as computers and the ban on Internet access — a minimum requirement for most of these courses. While some Institutes offer alternate assignments for incarcerated students, offenders remain dependent on their centre's managers to initiate all negotiations around this as well as access to resources and contact with external lecturers. Those offenders who manage to successfully complete post school study within a correctional environment need to be applauded for their determination and commitment.

The development of educational programs in correctional settings should recognise the diverse backgrounds and needs of inmates, with respect to education, vocational



education and personal development. Recent statistics have shown a general increase in inmate population and a significant increase has been noted for female offenders. In many correctional centres, however, such increases are not reflected by a comparative increase in resources and teaching staff. More gender specific programs and resources need to be developed and made available to all correctional centres where females are housed.

As all teachers teaching in NSW correctional settings are teacher qualified, it is interesting to note that there is a recent requirement for all teachers to gain the current Certificate IV Training and Assessment TAA40104. Currently advertised vacancies have also included this certification as an essential positional criterion. With their professional status already recognised and linked to teachers in schools, TAFE or appropriate sectors, this additional qualification will add further costs to the sector that may be better utilised elsewhere.

Professional pathways for teachers within NSW correctional centres were under question at a recent union meeting.

Experienced and highly qualified teachers within the correctional education sector seeking opportunities to move into management were unable to secure promotional positions. It was noted that the more recent appointments of Education managers were being awarded to applicants from outside the sector.

Without clearly defined pathways for these teachers that seek the challenge of promotional opportunities, experienced

educators may be lost to the sector as they move away to fulfil their professional aspirations.

In conclusion, even though this is a limited foray into a complex topic, the bottom line challenge for leaders in correctional education is clear: to determine how to do more with less, and how to do it effectively and as a top priority, for a large and especially needy segment of the Australian population.

Correctional educators acknowledge that more effective advocacy for correctional literacy and adult education is needed if these issues are to be addressed. ❖

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i Australian Bureau of Statistics. www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/

ii. Lochner L & Moretti E 2004 *The Effect of Education on crime: evidence from prison inmates, arrests, and self reports* American Economic Association

iii. Rawnsley T 2003 *Dynamics in repeat imprisonment: utilising prison census data working papers in Econometrics & Applied Statistics* No 2003-02 ABSC@net351.0. Canberra. Canberra. ABS