

# **INMATE WOMEN AS PARTICIPANTS IN EDUCATION IN QUEENSLAND CORRECTIONAL CENTRES**

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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. Data collection spanned the period of relocation of Brisbane Women's from Annerley to Wacol, from a traditional lock-and-key establishment to a keyless unit. This study investigated inmate women's accounts of education using interview data and analysis of policy. While the study drew upon feminist criminology theory and conversation analysis to provide a theoretical dialogue for investigating prison education, this paper investigates more broadly five key themes. They are categorised as a culture of containment and surveillance, types of education, access to education, pedagogical issues and the role of support groups in education. Women's prisons and their rituals have been constructed by men for men, sometimes with concessions made for women and criminal laws have been drawn with reference to the way that men define women and perpetuate the dependence of women on more powerful male others. The structural and interactional features of oral texts such as interviews were examined to understand the educational experiences of women inmates. The research found that women's involvement in prison education is framed by a culture of containment and surveillance. In the keyless prison, heightened electronic security reported increases in internal body searches and routinized head counts were found to exacerbate the difficulties women inmates experience in prison education. This work recommends as a research policy imperative a longitudinal case study to investigate 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 reentry 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 which, 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 percent of the overall prison population despite the increased rate of imprisonment to 17 percent 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.

Not only do gender differences apply to the rate of imprisonment, but also to sentence length and nature of offence. There is a disproportionately high representation of indigenous females in the prison system (26 percent of the female prison population in Queensland) and the rate of imprisonment for Indigenous persons (males and females) is over 14 times the rate of imprisonment for non-indigenous persons.

The most frequent length of sentence for women is two to five years (31.2 percent) 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 percent of females compared to 17 percent of male prisoners convicted of sex offences. Fraud and misappropriation account for 15 percent of females compared to 8 percent of males. In terms of recidivism, almost two-thirds (61 percent) of male prisoners served previous prison sentences compared to 54 percent of females.

Previous studies 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 percent 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 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 percent) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (24.58 percent) 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 percent 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 percent 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 percent 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.

A key recommendation of Cox and Carlin (1998) was the need to develop a management plan for release of inmates in order to provide support and guidance in obtaining or continuing employment and/or training upon release. Suggestions included closer links with Centrelink and Job Network agencies; timely pre-release programs; development of support networks outside; and extension of services offered by organisations such as Second Chance.

## **The Research**

This study drew upon feminist criminology theory and conversation analysis to provide theoretical understandings for investigating prison education. Feminist criminology theory argues that women's prisons have been built by men for men, sometimes with concessions made for women (Hampton, 1993; Heidensohn, 1985; Smart, 1992; Tomasevski, 1993). Similarly, criminal laws have been drawn with reference to the way men define women and perpetuate the dependence of women on more powerful male others (Scutt, 1995). Feminist criminology theory, moreover, argues that educational policy implementation in women's prisons is impaired by a culture of retribution and punishment.

Conversation analysis (Danby, 1998; Danby & Baker, 1998; Drew & Sorjonehn, 1997; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Psathas, 1995; Sacks, 1992) is used to examine the features of oral and written text, such as conversations and policy documents, in order to understand the educational experiences of women inmates. Through conversation analysis, the researcher identifies "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). Conversation analysis, in this study, involved analysis of audio-recorded data of interviews with inmates providing accounts of prison education. This paper identifies key themes within the data, and future papers will focus more directly on data analysis using these methodological tools.

The study aimed, therefore:

1. to analyse policy documents including curriculum documents and guidelines relating to prison education for inmate women in Queensland in order to establish the official prison stance on inmate education;
2. to interview women inmates regarding their experiences of prison education; and
3. to analyse the experiences of women inmates in terms of implications for policy research and practice in prison education.

This paper addresses the second and third aims specifically, with the first aim the subject of another paper.

## **Method**

The involvement of inmate women in prison education was investigated in two custodial settings. In February 1999, ethical clearance to conduct research was gained from key gatekeepers in the Queensland Corrections and QUT's University Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct research in the two custodial settings, Brisbane Women's and Helena Jones. Participants were recruited by the researchers in collaboration with the Education Officer and other key staff within the centres. Inmate participation in the project was voluntary. A preliminary stage involved circulation of an information sheet to participants outlining the aims, methods and possible outcomes of the project to ensure that participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their

conversations through oral and written assurances. Fortunately, rapport had been established between key players in the research sites and one of the chief investigators, Dr Farrell, over the years of previous research in corrections.

## **Data Collection**

The data collection consisted of:

1. audiotaped interviews with 7 women inmates from the Helena Jones Correctional Centre;
2. interviews with 9 women inmates at the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre; 6 interviews were audiotaped and 3 were documented with researcher notes only; and
3. examination of the education policies, as provided by the Department of Corrective Services.

At both the Helena Jones Community Correctional Centre and the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre, there were many volunteers for interviews. Seven inmates were interviewed at Helena Jones. At Brisbane Women's, twenty-seven (27) women put their names forward to be interviewed, and five were interviewed in 1999. In 2000, a further 4 inmates were interviewed. Those interviewed were selected on availability at the time of the interview. All interviews followed a similar pattern of questions. Of the 16 inmates interviewed, three elected to not have their interview recorded and the researchers made hand-written notes during these interviews. All interviews were transcribed with pseudonyms given for each participant. Because of the need for complete confidentiality for the interview participants, all names of participants whose words are quoted in this paper have been changed and any pseudonym coinciding with the name of an officer or inmate now or at the time of interview does not refer to that person.

## **Data Analysis**

Audio-recordings of the interviews with the women inmates were transcribed and analysed. In addition, some scripts were transcribed in fine-grained detail using conversation analysis notations and techniques to preserve the key features of talk (Psathas, 1995); and policy documents were analysed using provisional and negotiated categories and sub-categories (Hodder, 1994). Analysis focussed on the themes, categories and issues relating to the conduct of prison education life in relation to the stated policy guidelines.

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" (Baker, 1997, p. 136) of their own circumstances. This approach let 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 allowed for situated "accounts", making "audible and visible ... how people account to one another, whatever might be inside their heads" (Baker, 1997, p. 131). To sum up, interviews were treated as:

- interactional events in which members drew on their cultural knowledge, including their knowledge about how members of categories routinely speak. For example, the data showed how the institutional identity of "inmate" was talked into being; and
- accounts rather than reports. The accounts worked to generate versions of social realities built around categories and activities (Baker, 1997).

## **Findings**

Overall, the research found that women's involvement in prison education is framed by a culture of containment and retribution. The prison culture is manifest most poignantly in the invasive body searches, practised rehearsal of prison rules by staff, pervasive surveillance of physical movement and communication and highly scrutinised visits with families including children and infants. Cultural factors combined with structural factors such as movement through the system, sentence length and the mix of work and education converge to impair effective participation in education. This echoes the findings of Cox and Carlin (1998) that 50 percent of inmates in their sample reported that they were not satisfied with the extent of the education and training they receive in custody.

While findings of the research are complex and multi-layered, for the general purpose of this paper, they are classified into the major areas of:

- a culture of containment and surveillance;
- types of education;
- access to education;
- pedagogical issues; and
- the role of support groups in education.

### **Culture of Containment and Surveillance**

There was unambiguous evidence that the capacity of women to engage in meaningful educational experiences was embedded within the prison culture, especially at Brisbane Women's. This area identified three key issues: a sense of heightened prison security, the identity of women as prisoners and prison routines.

### **Sense of Heightened Prison Security**

A clear manifestation of prison culture was heightened security in the keyless prison. This was noted as a distinct surprise to some inmates who had anticipated a different and improved culture in the new establishment to the one they knew at the former Brisbane Women's at Annerley.

*We were led to believe that when we came from the old jail that this would be a different situation but it's just gone back again, you know. I mean I haven't done a lot of jail but I know between those two places...what it teaches you in here is to be manipulative, you know it's not good. (Sally, BW)*

The prospect of the new keyless prison held high expectations for inmates and staff; and inmates anticipated an expanded range of education options. In reality, however, the prison culture and routines transposed from the old prison to the new continued to interrupt access to, and participation in, courses. Heightened security at the new establishment emerged as a recurring theme for women seeking access to education. Kay, for example, commented several times in an interview that the musters were taking extended periods of time in the new establishment.

*With the new prison, they're promising all these, all these courses which would be great if they can do them. It would be wonderful – but, you know, they promised us a lot of other things too and it's not happening, like musters are taking an hour so too bad if you have a bloody course or something – 7.30 when you are still locked in your goddamn unit. (Kay, HJ)*

The issue of security procedures within the new establishment impinging on participation in education was corroborated by both Pamela (BW) and Sally. Sally noted that

*It could take half an hour to get out the gate. Your one o'clock course, you know, you don't get there 'til one thirty and you're late. (Sally, BW)*

As further continuing evidence of heightened security in the new establishment, some women reported that they refused to meet with visitors due to the physical intrusion of strip searches of themselves and surveillance of their visitors. One inmate at the newly opened Brisbane Women's commented in a research interview

*Strip searches are so- they make you feel awful, you know, the way they- they make you squat and cough and carry on. It's just invasive. And for me personally I always get the feeling that I hate it so I don't have visits. I don't want people looking at me...It's really humiliating and you find some of the officers, they can sort of use it against you in a way, you know, it's like psychological thing, you know, like a punishment, they use that a lot here...So the whole process of making you take all your clothes and off and stand in the nude and squat with your hands in the air, you've got to go to the toilet. And none of our bodies are perfect you know what I mean. (Sally, BW)*

Another clear manifestation of heightened security was the issuing of keys. In the residential section in the new prison, for example, six inmates are housed together in a self-contained unit. Each unit has bathroom and laundry facilities, as well as a kitchen and living area. Kay described how the inmates of the new establishment voted to have keys to their units so that they could come and go more freely, although she recognised that this freedom was always contained within the electronically controlled system.

*We actually voted that we get the keys to our units because when it first started, they were just going to give us keys to our-ourselves, but not to get into the unit like we'd have to buzz the fishbowl to let us in. But we're actually allowed to have keys to our units now so we've got that, 'cause otherwise I mean, you know, these people can't even organise getting us out, imagine trying to get into the units, you'd be standing there for ten minutes saying "nah look come on, give us the keys to the unit", you know. But of course that key's no good like once we're locked down 'cause it's all electronically controlled, but yeah, we pushed for that. (Kay, HJ)*

### **The Identity of Women as Prisoners**

The prison culture perpetuated the identity of the women as prisoners and stigmatised them as 'bad girls'. In this environment, new ideas were described as not allowable in an environment that enforced the *status quo*. Reflecting on her identity as an inmate and as a participant in prison education at Brisbane Women's, Laurel noted:

*I've got to remember my place. I've got to remember I'm an inmate you know...your mind doesn't stop if you know what I mean you've got to make it stop. So I shouldn't have any ideas. I'm not to have any ideas...I've got to sort of keep them squashed down. (Laurel, BW)*

A sense of alienation from home and family was noted by a number of women. When women reflected on education inside, they noted the dislocation associated with separation from family and friends.

*I mean I'd never been inside before and you know you're stuck here, and it was just foreign, everything is so foreign to me...It's really hard. (Sharon, HJ)*

*Like in my case it's affected my family. I haven't actually held a gun to anyone's head and sort of threatened them, but it does affect your family and people that care about you. Especially to end up in prison at my age when you've never ever done anything else wrong in your whole life. (Jane, HJ)*

### **Prison Routines**

Prison routines also framed participation in education. This 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-cor-rect. 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, routines and 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, HJ)*

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

*You're made to stand in a line for your medication and something 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, HJ)*

Inmates noted that new prison routines and rules needed to be learned. Sharon, an inmate at Helena Jones, stressed the need to educate the inmates on 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, HJ)*



## Types of Education

An examination of the types of education available to women inmates at both facilities indicated that, while some staff were well-intentioned to provide appropriate education experiences, the structural and cultural dimensions of prison life work against effective participation in the types of education that would contribute to rehabilitation.

Here again, the construction of women as inmates emerged as prescriptive of the way in which education was introduced and accessed inside. Both Marissa (BW) and Kay (HJ) 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 percent 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, HJ)*

There was, however, concurrence of inmate 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, for example, 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, HJ)*

Alongside the issue of stigmatisation was that of movement through the system and other structural impediments such as 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, BW)*

A relatively recent structural change cited by Esther (BW) and Tina (BW) 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.

To move from the structural issues to the individual, Kylie, an inmate at Helena Jones, forwarded 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, HJ)*

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 (BW), Donna (HJ) and Kylie (HJ), 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 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 (BW)*

*Anger management is run more like a lecture. There should be workshops 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, HJ)*

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

A number of inmates in our study, however, did express appreciation of broad life skills of education rather than of specific core programs while inside. Art and craft activities, for example, were cited by Donna (HJ) and Kay (HJ) and budgeting and cooking by Sharon (HJ), Marilyn (HJ) and Jan (HJ) as meaningful activities that generated a sense of pride in their achievement and heightened self-esteem. Sharon (HJ) 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, HJ)*

*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, BW)*

*Welding, that was great. I thoroughly enjoyed that because its 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 a better job rather than a being some check out chick or something like that, and that's a good job, it's better than nothin but if you've really had nothin in your life and you want to make that yourself and to feel good about yourself I think you know, Didn't know I could do that, I've achieved that and hey well I want to go the full hog, you know, I want to achieve that certificate at the end of it, sort of like, that very big black hole that we seem to live in here, it sort of, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel, you sort of came in here a drug user and a, and I'm not a very good input to society and how I can walk out and put a really good input into society. (Cindy, BW)*

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, HJ)*

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 (HJ), for example, noted that physical pursuits such as tennis required an officer to accompany and supervise the women.

Jan (HJ) 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, HJ)*

Age as a criterion for educational opportunity was raised by Marilyn:

*I think when you get older, you don't need it as much. I think maybe the ones that need it are the younger ones, really. The ones over forty probably don't need it. (Marilyn, HJ)*

## **Access to Education**

Access to education was a key theme identified by the women, with three key issues emerging. Sentence duration emerged as a precursor to inmates' pursuit of specific types of education, as well as a shortage of human and physical resources and perceived education outcomes.

## Sentence Duration

This study corroborated Farrell's (1996) finding that the shortness of sentence length for inmate women precluded widespread educational achievement while in custody. Inmates spoke at length of their access to educational and vocational courses and limiting factors such as communication barriers, sentence length and *ad hoc* enrolment procedures. Consistently, inmates stressed the importance of better communication through the use of appointment times and advance notice of courses. This was exemplified in the comments of Sharon:

*I wanted to do heaps of courses, anything to keep me busy, you know. There's just no access to it. Not enough access to it... You have this concept of prison and you think that there are these courses available, but when you get in there, they are just so hard to get access to. (Sharon, HJ)*

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, HJ)*

*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 ... So there was a lot of courses that I missed out on because I didn't know that there was another first aid in young children right, parenting first aid or something for newborns I wanted to do that. And there was also – what else was there – of there's quite a few, quite a few that started and we didn't even know about it, you know, a hospitality class... Well like I said, especially being at Dutton where we didn't get told about it and if we did get told about it, it was a shit fight to get in. (Kay, HJ)*

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

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

*When I actually got there I – it took about oh just over a month to actually see the education officer and for her to organise 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, you know, and having the assignments due. (Kylie, HJ)*

The *ad hoc* nature of enrolment was verified by a number of women. Donna (HJ), for example, undertaking an Open Learning course, recounted her experience of enrolment and the assistance provided, not by prison staff, but by a person external to the prison.

Another noteworthy finding was inmate perceptions about access to tutor support, particularly in relation to major literacy and numeracy problems. Tina (BW) discussed the need for more frequent and ongoing tutor support and Kylie noted that those with serious problems 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, HJ)*

Endemic movement of inmates between facilities emerged as another 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 Numinbah, 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, HJ)*

Here again, the shortness of sentence length for women inmates, as well as movement between centres, proved a mitigating factor against their effective participation in education.

### **Education Resources: Human and Physical**

Patterns of access to appropriate human and physical resources could be summed up as 'a waiting game.' Cindy pointed out the difficulties that occur when there is a shortage of staff as well as shortage of materials and resources.

*But same old problem in this place, short-staffed. Not enough people like her to go around, so her time is very limited. Um (0.5) accesses to computers, um an educational stuff, especially for protection its very difficult because we have to be escorted everywhere, an 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. So doing studies and an stuff like that yeah makes it really difficult. (Cindy, BW)*

Waiting for the arrival of study materials was identified by Kylie, Lyn (BW) and Tina (BW) 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, HJ)*

Another resource issue was access to and use of library facilities. Kylie (HJ), Sally (BW), Marissa (BW), Cindy (BW), Esther (BW) and Laurel (BW), 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, BW)*

Another issue to emerge within the accounts of the women was the funding arrangements for courses. Courses undertaken in the prison were funded by the prison system, but courses undertaken while on community service were not funded except by self-funding from their prison accounts. Kay spoke of her experiences in accessing funds at Helena Jones.

*You get more funding now in the jail, in the main jail than what you do here, when this is where you really really need them more than anything...I couldn't find any funding for that [a vocational course]. I went to Centrelink and they said no you're not our responsibility because you're not the Federal Government's responsibility so we can't pay for it. So I approached the General Manager [of the Centre] and said look can I borrow the \$200 from the Centre? You know because she knows I'm working part-time. I said look I'll pay it off. She said no no no. (Kay, HJ)*

Another difficulty cited by inmates, including Cindy (BW) and Kay (HJ), was how the presenters themselves perceived the inmates in the courses. Kay, in her discussion below, pointed out that there could be misunderstanding between the class conduct and motivation of some inmates and how this could be misread by the presenters.

*... it gets really difficult when you've got the psychs and that sort of comin to see you when they've got this picture that you know, the majority of the women don't, they don't give a shit. (Cindy, BW).*

*We had another one a women's development group or something. They came up – they came up for about three lessons and it was meant to be a nine lesson class and then they just didn't turn up 'cause they didn't think we were interested. I don't know what they expected us to do, you know, Like we were turning up... (Kay, HJ)*

## **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 (HJ) and Esther (BW) 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, HJ)*

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, HJ)*

*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, I was a very poor student, so I scraped through grade ten and left 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, BW)*

Donna was realistic about the amount of time and commitment required to study successfully.

*To educate yourself you need at least six hours every day, isn't it? Is like I'm study at least three four hours every day, maybe six during the night, did not have sleep. After that you can't change overnight. It's going to happen, but it's not going to happen overnight. (Donna, HJ)*

## **Pedagogical Issues**

The women interviewed spoke about their experiences of the classes being offered. They discussed the types of classes that they found valuable and commented on issues that can be termed *pedagogy*. 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, HJ)*

*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, BW).*

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, HJ)*

*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, HJ)*

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 it 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, HJ)*

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, HJ)*

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.*

Donna, from Helena Jones, also emphasised the importance of structure for successful sessions. She pointed out that there needed to be "someone to guide the discussion, to be the leader". Otherwise, she stated, it's "chaotic". Edith, too, noted the significance of class structure when she commented on the effectiveness of positive social interaction in groups. She pointed out that such interaction could take place only in a "safe environment".

*You know yourself if someone gets a workshop happening and you actually get the people in the workshop interacting, they come away from that and say to themselves oh well you know I learned something out of that ... When people start to share their experiences and points of view, provided people are open to that, you know and that generally is because they need to feel in a safe environment. (Edith, HJ)*

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, HJ)*



A number of participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging and catering for individual differences. Donna (HJ) 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, HJ)*

One problem that seemed to emerge was that good intentions were often short lived as there was the lack of planning and follow through.

*I mean, they rushed out and bought a whole lot of baskets at what that's place. Home craft things you know those sorts of shops. And we bought the dried flowers and we bought the ribbon. We've got all that. No-one's interested in sitting down and doing it. There's a whole pile of it. Paints. We went out and got special paints to paint on the jars and paint bottles and that. But it's still all here but it's stopped. (Marilyn, HJ)*

### **The Role of Support Groups in Education**

Across a wide range of interviews, the community service group, Sisters Inside, emerged as instrumental in advocating for women's education, in general, and in facilitating specific educational opportunities for many women. Their proactive involvement with inmate women supported Farrell's (1996) findings that such non-custodial personnel provided consistent informational and emotional support to inmate women whilst in custody and in the post-release period. Sharon's comments exemplified the high regard of Sisters Inside held by many inmates:

*They are the ones that have got my course up and running for me...Sister Inside, they do their best, but they are just totally swamped. If it wasn't for them, I don't think I would have got this far through the system. It was really hard for me, really hard. Just not even knowing how to use the phones and what we have to do, like it was ten days before I could even ring my family. (Sharon, HJ)*

The practical support offered by Sisters Inside extended beyond the education program to the provision of services to the families of inmates on the outside.

*Sister Inside spoke to my husband and my family for about two and half hours and if it hadn't been for them, they would have just- they were pulling out their hair. (Sharon, HJ)*

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper investigating inmate women's accounts of educational experiences has identified and discussed major findings clustered around the five key areas:

1. a culture of containment and surveillance in correctional facilities for women;
2. types of education for inmate women;
3. access to prison education;
4. pedagogical issues; and
5. the role of support groups in education.

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.

Key recommendations, therefore, include:

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.

**Research and policy imperative**

*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.*

These recommendations at the level of the macro-and microsystem require systematic prison reform. 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.

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