

Educating the Incarcerated Female: An Holistic Approach

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Abstract

The education of the ever increasing female inmate population poses both problems and challenges. In the past, correctional educational programming was predicated on the curriculum and strategies utilized primarily in the male institutions. The totally self-contained classroom approach similar to the old one room schoolhouse of the 19th century, absent the teacher being a facilitator, has served as that model. Like the one room school of the 19th century, this mind set must be abandoned. Correctional education programs and policies must be re-assessed especially with regard to the female population. New and innovative educational initiatives must be implemented if we are to return to society a better functioning woman and mother than we receive. The problem areas of curriculum, staffing and unique female programming, are addressed in this article, as well as many suggestions for structuring a successful approach to educating the incarcerated female.

Introduction

The education of incarcerated females has not received the attention it deserves from either correctional educators or prison administrative staff (Miller, 2001). The reasons most frequently given are that females make up a small percentage of the total incarcerated population and their sentences are of shorter duration. Many assume falsely that programs for males work just as well for females.

In this article. The author addresses the unique, and often unmet, needs of female inmates. He also describes a number of innovative programs and methods that make up and extend prison literacy programs, and prepare female offenders for re-entry into the community. Many of the innovations are currently in use at the author's school, the Eddie Warrior Correctional Center (EWCC), in Taft, Oklahoma.

The Unique and Unmet needs of Female Offenders

The profile of the "typical" female offender nationwide is one that includes substance abuse, low self-esteem, and sexual abuse. Substance abuse was noted as a factor in over six of ten incarcerated women, who were typically in their mid-twenties, serving time for drug-related or property crimes (Fletcher, 1993). The women experienced more physical and emotional abuse and lower self-esteem than male inmates. They were likely to be single mothers and the sole support of the family unit before incarceration.

The impact on the family of incarcerated mothers has become a growing national problem. According to Ann Jacobs of the Women's Prison Association, "A child with an incarcerated parent is five times more likely to be jailed than a child who grew up with parents who manage to stay out of jail" (Krane, 2000). C Today there are 1.5 million children with one or more parents in jail. As many as 10 million minor children in the US currently have had one or more parents incarcerated (Fay, 2000). Incarcerated females were the principal care giver for 75 percent of these children prior to coming to prison. The other 25 percent were reared by single fathers or grandparents. Seventy-five percent of these children go into foster care or some other form of state custody. It behooves us as citizens to address this ever growing problem as quickly as possible.

The number of incarcerated females has exploded in the last 20 years. There were 13,400 women incarcerated in 1980; today over 200,000 women are behind bars in America (Chen,

2000). Since 85 percent of these incarcerants have had direct or indirect involvement with the illegal use of drugs (Davis, 1999), it should follow that prison systems are initiating more comprehensive drug treatment programs. However, Chen also cited a recent study that found that in state prisons 73 percent of females admitted to regular drug use, but only 15 percent received any help through state sponsored programs (Chen, 2000). He noted that in Texas, California, and the federal system, drug treatment programs have been expanded, but waiting lists for treatment continue to grow (Chen, 2000). Chen quotes one prisoner rights group as saying "Community drug treatment instead of prison based treatment would be more effective and less damaging to families."

The cause of the shortage of drug treatment programs in prison is usually attributed to budgetary shortfalls (Miller, 2001). That rationale loses meaning when the cost of recidivism is factored in. A recent study noted the average cost of incarceration was \$25,000 per year with the average offender recidivating three times in his or her lifetime, and spending an average of 10 years per inmate behind bars at a cost of \$250,000 (Davis, 1999). Yet, the average cost for a residential drug problem is \$6,800 or \$2,500 per year for outpatient. The American public can no longer afford to ignore the economics of intervention, especially in the area of drug related incarceration.

For comparable crimes, women receive longer sentences than men. Women who kill their intimate partner serve an average of 15 years while men for the same crime serve on average 2 - 6 years (Davis, 1999). In one Oklahoma case, a husband was found guilty of child abuse and the mother was also convicted of accessory for not reporting the crime. The man served less than 2 years while the woman remained in custody at EWCC for over 3 years.

The emotional, psychological, and physical needs of the female inmate have for too long been either ignored or not recognized. Women come to prison for different reasons than men. The female offender enters prison ill-equipped to handle the emotional roller coaster she must endure. She typically has had the services of enablers for most, if not all of her life (Miller, 2001). Her family may have been the first enabler, followed by early sexual liaisons that evolved into emotional dependency, then followed by a social or state-sponsored enabler such as welfare or prison. The cycle of emotional dependence, abuse, and low self-esteem are factors that affect female offenders more than male offenders. Emotional dependency often co-exists with dependency on drugs or alcohol. Dr. Linda Alberty who founded the New Beginnings program at the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center for women in Oklahoma City, teaches that one's emotional and intellectual growth ends when drug addiction begins.

Programs for Women

A number of programs, carefully designed to address the holistic needs of female offenders, are built into and extend the literacy program at EWCC. There is also a carefully cultivated set of values that are shared by both staff and inmates. The staff believe that mind (education), body (health issues), and soul (life skills) should all be a part of the rehabilitative process. They make every attempt to return to society a better person. Please note the published philosophy of our GED teacher, Harold Tomlin:

"... we must reach the hearts of our students before we can attempt to affect any changes in their minds. Optimum educational progress can not occur with a wall of distrust hindering any inroads we hope to make educationally. Nearly all of our clientele suffer from what I term 'unconscious resistance'...students don't necessarily pre-determine not to learn; they unconsciously resist because of some prior experience or decision that caused them to experience failure or unpleasantness with the educational information being explored...we must gain trust and acceptance with our students. I believe that every person is concerned with some really basic questions with regard to trusting us in their world: Can I trust you? Do you really care about me? Are you committed to your work? Will you treat me as you want to be treated? It is necessary for us to evaluate ourselves to determine the answers to these very simple questions. If we qualify, the next thing for us to do is to 'infect with the germs of success' by setting up situations in which

our students have no opportunities to fail. Once infected by this success, the students can allow themselves to embark on tasks that have some possibilities of failure because they have become secure enough to be vulnerable to some failure without being deterred from the process of trying and learning again. Thus, becoming trustworthy in the minds of our students and overcoming resistance caused by prior failure are key factors in having optimum success in the educational process.

Most of the programs described below either originated at EWCC or have been changed and updated to meet EWCC's mission of preparing the female inmate for re-entry into society. Currently these programs include HIV Peer Tutoring, Tales for the Rising Moon, FREE, Children's Play Day, Parenting, Nutrition, College, and Life Skills.

The HIV Peer Tutoring program is funded through the Oklahoma Department of Health and consists of 16 hours of seminar-based instruction. A grant pays for one hour of college credit through Tulsa Jr. College. This program was chosen by the Center for Disease Control to be featured in a national broadcast on ABC network in April 2000. The HIV Peer Tutoring program has now been implemented at the maximum security facility and one community corrections facility for women in Oklahoma.

The increased rate of HIV infection in correctional facilities has been cause for concern nationwide. A registered nurse and a former Vietnam veteran working as a tutor at EWCC expressed concern with regard to the lack of information and/or misinformation on HIV that inmates had to deal with. With the cooperation of our medical administrator, we made contact with Dr. Melanie Spector at the Oklahoma Department of Health. We applied for a federal grant, which was approved, and the HIV Peer tutoring program became a reality. It has now become a part of the orientation process for all new arrivals.

Tales for the Rising Moon was developed by Suzanne Edmondson, with support from a faith based organization in Tulsa. The program is designed to address the alienation experienced by many of the women and help re-connect them with their children. In the program, inmates record a children's book and discuss it on audio tape, and then mail the book and tape to their children. The program has mailed out over 600 books and tapes to date. It is currently funded by the FEW Foundation, founded by Suzanne Edmondson and the author in 1997. The foundation has also funded over 200 women in college since inception. This program has been featured in the December 20, 1999 issue of People Magazine; IDEA Television, Washington, D. C.; and a PAX network broadcast in April 2000.

Family Recovery Embraces Education (FREE) is a 16 week program that originated at Mabel Basset Correctional Center, the maximum unit for the State of Oklahoma. It is an inmate run program supervised by staff. The program uses a Transactional Analysis approach to address the issues of addiction and abuse. FREE has been an important element in the recovery process of many female offenders at EWCC.

The focus of this program is the "inner child" that co-exists in all of us. Many female inmates have suffered abuse as children and lost touch with that inner child. We furnish each participant with a stuffed animal or doll and they carry the doll with them everywhere. This approach would never work in a macho-male environment, but here we see hardened individuals begin to show care and concern for others. The encounter sessions become very emotional and the female is encouraged to "open up" and share her problems with others. The motto of "What's said here, stays here," is strictly enforced and any breach brings expulsion.

Children's Play Day and Parenting are two programs designed to maintain the bond between the incarcerated mother and her children. To take part in Play Day, the female inmate must participate in the Parenting program. This requirement helps the inmates learn proper parenting skills and provides a vehicle for practical application. EWCC sponsors Play Day four times a year. A network of faith based volunteers provide bus service from all over the state to transport the children. All Parenting participants are also encouraged to avail themselves of nutrition classes provided by the Oklahoma State University Extension Service.

I recently visited and observed two programs at the Gatesville Women's Unit in Texas. These programs are very effective in addressing the unique needs of the incarcerated female. They are E.Q.U.I.P. (Enhancing Quality and Understanding Incarcerated Parents) under the direction of Ann Mooney, and a cognitive intervention program called Turning Point which is effectively helps to re-directs the thinking process of female offenders from negative to positive outcomes. Ms. Betty Oyervides, Turning Point Coordinator, has established a climate of mutual respect, class interest, and interaction between facilitator and inmates. This is a program that I would like to have for our women at EWCC.

College and life skills programs at EWCC are designed to improve both practical skills and self-esteem. One of the greatest problems female inmates experience is self-esteem. The life skills program addresses not only practical, work related issues, but the moral and ethical value system that is often dysfunctional in this population. The habilitation and increased awareness of self that is generated by the life skill program promotes self-esteem. EWCC staff have found, however, that success in education, especially college, provides more self-esteem than any other programs. There are now 95 women actively pursuing college degrees. EWCC is also participating in a doctoral research program through Oklahoma State University that is studying the correlation between emotional IQ (maturity) and educational attainment.

Another program that adds to the effectiveness of the literacy program and the positive atmosphere of EWCC is the Inmate Tutor Corp. When I arrived at EWCC, there were four inmate tutors. The school produced an average of 32 GED's per year. I convinced the warden of the need for more tutors. Over a period of two years we went from four tutors to 35 full time inmate tutors in paid positions. Our GED production increased to an average of 190 per year. We utilize 12 tutors in our Literacy Lab (6th grade and below) alone. The tutor corp is made up of individuals that have achieved a total battery score of 12.9 on the A level TABE. They are interviewed by myself and staff to determine if they have the people skills to be successful. Many tutors are also college students and they serve as role models to the entire compound. The inmates enrolled in school can visualize themselves as future tutors and potential college students. The students and tutors see themselves as part of something positive and easily buy into our program. I try to take the top GED graduates and move them directly into the tutor corp. For many, this ability to help others is the next step in the maturing process.

The EWCC Mission

The education department at EWCC has taken on a life of it's own. Both students and tutors see themselves as part of something important. They have bought into the mission statement of the school which reads, "You are here because of your past, we are here because of your future." The inmates realize that EWCC has a caring staff that is invested in their success.

The school motto at EWCC is, "If you can't touch their hearts, you'll never reach their minds." One way to reach their hearts is through their children. As described above, a concerted effort is made at EWCC to re-connect these inmates with their children and families.

In addition, a 12-step program frames EWCC's holistic approach to meeting the needs of its female offenders. The steps guide staff to: (1) provide a nurturing atmosphere; (2) encourage personal investment by staff; (3) promote positive relationships; (4) orient the school environment towards the affective needs of the inmates; (5) allow students to buy into the system and invest themselves in the process; (6) encourage leadership among the students through academic tutoring, Laubach, HIV Peer Tutoring, FREE and other programs; (7) re-connect mother with children; (8) encourage spiritual renewal; (9) maintain high expectations for all students; (10) be free with praise; (11) allow success to happen; and (12) reward success.

EWCC staff have learned that, taken individually, these steps do not create a successful student. But when used holistically by staff and inmates, the incarcerated female student emerges from the system with an increased sense of worth, moral awareness and intellectual acuity. The staff have also learned that an atmosphere of reciprocal respect must be established by the staff before the female inmate will buy in to the program. When the inmate becomes a contributing

element in the school, the process of assimilation is greatly enhanced. As mentioned above, many female inmates are affectively oriented, and respond positively to a nurturing environment. Their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are exacerbated by the prison experience. Our efforts must be directed at the reconciliation and re-connection of these individuals with their children, family, and communities from which they have become alienated.

The Cyclical Curriculum

The EWCC academic program is cyclical (Eddie Warrior Correctional Center, 1999). Stand alone learning modules allow staff to place inmates into the program any time and move them through the cycle. EWCC staff adapt the system to meet individual needs as identified in their IEP. The IEP profile is a comprehensive printout of all areas of proficiency and deficiency based on TABE test results.

The new arrival to EWCC is TABE tested the first Wednesday after her arrival. If she scores less than 6.0 on the TABE, she is enrolled in the Literacy program. If her total battery score falls between 6.0 and 8.5, she is assigned to the ABE classes. If she achieves a score of 8.5 or above, she is placed into the Fastrack GED program. This curriculum can be accessed on the Internet through the ERIC system at ericacve@postbox.acs.ohio~state.edu or at Acquisitions Coordinator, ERIC clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090.

Since 1993, the average EWCC student has progressed at a rate of one academic grade level for every month of full-time school (Murphy, 1998). The following is a brief summary of the educational process at EWCC.

If a student comes into the system as a non-reader, she is classified as a Laubach student. If a student comes in with a total battery score of less than 6.0, she is considered a Computer Lab student. In either instance, there is a protocol that is followed concerning tutor assignment and enrollment in our Literacy Program.

At each table, instruction is led by a carefully trained tutor closely monitored by the staff. Tutors are trained to evaluate student learning, introduce new skills, recognize and reinforce student progress, assign materials, maintain daily records, and provide other assistance. Additionally, some tables use computer assisted instruction to reinforce specific skills and supplement instruction.

Competency requirements for each student to pass into ABE is a 6.0 total battery score on the TABE, 6.5 total reading score, 95 percent on Walmath (Murphy, 1995) and an 85 percent on the Holey Test (Murphy, 1995). In addition to the above requirements, the student must also show 75 percent competency on the TABE in the following areas: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of decimals.

The goals and objectives of the ABE curriculum are to prepare students for GED level (9 - 12 grade) concepts. The grade levels covered in ABE (6 - 8 grade) are not as comprehensive as literacy or GED, but they are often the most challenging. Part of the challenge stems from transition. When students begin to study ABE concepts that become application based rather than computational based, they may develop anxieties in the content area. EWCC staff and tutors work hard to alleviate this stress.

EWCC staff have found that students in ABE do not need to be taught every concept that is found in a textbook. The staff teach those concepts which prepare the ABE students for the GED. The rotation system is not utilized in the ABE or GED environment. Each ABE teacher has four inmate tutors and a combination of classroom instruction and one-on-one tutoring is used. All students that have an overall battery of 6.0 on the A level TABE can participate in our ABE program. Many come directly from Literacy to ABE. As with the Literacy program, tutors are imperative for the success of the ABE program.

The Cyclical Curriculum provides sequential learning experiences for the ABE student. In addition, it prepares the student for the application format of the GED test. The mastery of the

concepts covered in the ABE program are evaluated with a minimum grade 8.5 on the A Level TABE.

Correctional GED programs for both male and female require a flexible curriculum. The GED program is structured into a short, concise program that reduces instructional time while utilizing one-on-one tutoring. The average length of time in GED is three to four months. The tutoring program provides for the various knowledge levels of students, and helps provide opportunities for success where students have not experienced successes in the past.

The EWCC GED program is focused on a nurturing, self-paced environment where students excel. This approach alleviates the problems of boredom, frustration with a traditionally structured classroom, and the pressure to keep up with student peers. Many different types of motivational reward programs are implemented, such as certificates, special privileges, and occasionally, current movies. Being a part of success, tends to help direct the focus of the students' energy to learning and understanding our mission.

The GED program also does not use the rotational process utilized in Literacy. It is structured very similar to our ABE program and depends on the combination of stand alone teaching modules and our tutor corp. The staff serves as teacher, role model, cheer leader, and chief facilitator.

The goal of the Cyclical Curriculum at all levels, is to prepare the graduate to continue her education in a vocational or college setting. She needs to be able to pass any entrance exam provided by a higher education institution. The success of this program depends upon the cooperation of the staff, tutors and students, and their commitment to a holistic program that encourages mutual respect.

Summary

The most important factor in the success of the EWCC school for female inmates, is its caring staff. This nurturing attitude provides for a climate of respect, within which the holistic 12 step framework is implemented. While academics are the focus at EWCC, the affective and emotional needs of our students are not be ignored. Correctional educators must recognize that family is the most important socializing agent in ones life. We must help female inmates connect or re-connect with their children and other family members. Hope is the most important commodity we can share with our students. Without faith in their future, recidivism will become the accepted alternative. Holistic education must become a priority not a perk, if we are to successfully re-integrate out clients back into our communities (Davis, 2000).

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Bio

Dr. H. Clint Davis was accepted as a Doctoral Fellow at Texas A & M, Commerce, Texas in 1988, and received his doctorate in Supervision, Curriculum, and Instruction with a comprehensive minor in History in 1991. Clint also taught for SOSU (Southeastern Oklahoma State University), Grayson Junior College, and Bacone College as an Adjunct Professor until he assumed the position of Supervisor of Education at the Dr. Eddie Warrior Correctional Center (EWCC) for Women in Taft, OK in 1993.

Dr. Davis helped organize and develop an integrated cyclical curriculum for incarcerated adults that has increased the G.E.D. production from an average of 32 in 1992 to an average of 190 in 2000. EWCC utilizes a computer program to generate an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) on each individual and then focuses only on the areas of deficiency. Clint is also the author of four books and has published over a dozen articles in both national and international newsletters and journals.