

# **An Ethnography of a Corrections Education Instructor: Critical Issues**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Incarceration comes with its own sets of difficulties. People are thrust into social situations that are antagonistic to typical life, such as defending against rape, fighting lengthy appeals, and living and working around often unfavourable people and conditions. Additional challenges are time and opportunity, resources, effective instruction, and psychological states of both students and instructors. This paper describes the universal challenges and subjective experiences as instructor for an adult basic education and general education program within the state operated prison context. The paper includes constructs that may help educators prepare and plan in such a dynamic and dangerous environment.

*Key words: General education diploma; adult basic education; prison violence; corrections education; free-world*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching and learning within the context of an adult correctional institution is much different from secondary and post-secondary environments in which we are used to in broader western society. For example, andragogy is a distinct field from pedagogy and the efforts of trying to instruct adults who have been incarcerated for crimes (and who will often remain so for years) eliminates much of the relatively immediate incentives for learning normally seen in free-world situations. Rather than transition from one grade to the next, or experience definite milestones such as graduations, the prisoner-student must figure out a way to achieve benchmarks without much accolade or celebration.

Generally, prisoners who have been assigned to an education program were found to need such a program via court order or general corrections case plan. For whatever reason, the incoming students have not finished high school nor completed a GED (general education diploma) prior to being imprisoned for crime and are assigned to be a student due to need. It has long been understood that earning an education can prevent recidivism (Ntombizanele, 2019), as well as contribute to financial stability and longer

life expectancy (Luy, et al., 2019). Based on such policy foundations, we will continue to see corrections education programs up to the high school level at the very least.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is grounded in *participant-as-observer* methods as a form of qualitative approach (Jerolmack and Khan, 2018; Jorgensen, 2020). Ethnography has long been used and valued by researchers and is characterized “by in-depth observation of groups of individuals, being cognizant of the influences of historical and cultural contexts on social interactions” (Jones and Smith, 2017, p. 98). In fact, ethnographic research can “provide a deeper insight into a culture” (Shafik and Grant, 2011, p. 378). Ethnography has been found useful in a variety of contexts, such as anthropology, sociology, and even corrections (Thomas, 2014; Helfgott, 2018).

## ANALYSIS

The instructional and learning issues within adult basic education and general education diploma contexts in prisons are unique and numerous. The primary issues are safety related and the secondary concerns are logistics, and actual learning. This is not so different facially from free-world experience, however, the environment and culture within which learning and instruction must occur is, in this writer’s opinion, different, as discussed below.

Imprisoned adult learners, for example, are thrust into a living structure that is most foreign to human experience. They are further being mandated to participate and complete adult basic education and/or the GED after having previously failed the endeavour in the free-world. Research indicates that those people without any high school level diploma totals roughly “75 percent of America’s state prison inmates” (Amos, 2010, n.p.). Three-out-of-every-four people imprisoned require a GED, either by court order as part of their sentence, or via a corrections plan. Conversely, less than one-in-three (27 percent) actually obtain the GED while imprisoned, according to Couloute (2018). The reality of this data did not begin to provide insight as to why. Though not exhaustive, this paper offers to fill the void in the data by offering a list of following prison conditions that were barriers to

educational success that were either known or encountered by the author throughout his years as an instructor.

### **Subculture of Exploitation and Peer Pressure**

Within prisons there are gangs, drug dealing, and other subversive endeavours such as beer-making, tattooing, and other antisocial forms of diversion. Self-improvement via educational attainment is a minor concern and some prisoners were very susceptible to how they might be viewed by other prisoners for attending classes. It is possible that some viewed all of these distractions as nearly insurmountable and acted in conformance to the attitudes of the general population as an easier lifestyle. These subversive endeavours are barriers in that they are ever-present and exist even after the diploma. These behaviours operate to increase absenteeism, diminish the opportunity to acquire and use newfound knowledge, which is to consequently reject a means to expand upon it.

Tackling these issues from an institutional standpoint is difficult at best. A sole instructor or culture of instruction is also at a disadvantage. This is especially true given the vast sizes of most prisons and that, in addition to distributive and logistical service issues, they are somewhat understaffed and staff are often not ambitious enough to undertake eradication of these issues.

### **Mental Health**

While data in this area is conflicting, it nevertheless highlights another fundamental problem in corrections – there is an overrepresentation of mental health sufferers who make up around half of any state prison population. One study from the state of Virginia provided that 15 percent of its state prisoners suffer from severe mental illness (Torrey et al., 2014), whereas a Bureau of Justice Statistics report indicated as high as 49 percent suffer from a mental health disorder (BJS, 2006; also see Wainwright and Dawson, 2022). Finally, while addiction is an aspect of the mental health or medical sector, there was minimal interaction with these types of prisoners. This is particularly so because drug habits are unsustainable due to cost and supply within a prison setting. There may have been comorbidity with mental health issues and addiction, but mostly limited attention span and/or hyperactivity were both prevalent in the classroom and in the one-on-one tutoring context. One had to strain for a miraculous level of creativity and affect to impart the nuances of the Pythagorean Theorem and the order of operations to encourage focus in this demographic.

**Violence and Lockdowns**

Violence in prisons is another reality that detracts from concentration on one's education. To obtain and retain knowledge, one needs persistent interaction with the material and time for the endeavour. Lockdowns are prevalent due to violence, as are shakedowns for drugs and other contraband, and rare situations such as was experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the vaccine rollout, there was no education program, nor mass congregation of prisoners for eating, nor religious services. These are uncontrollable situations.

**Dated Resources in the Internet Age**

Quasi-related to attention span is that students are limited to dated materials. Even those students with access to computers lack sufficient computer skills. Typing and navigating programs are typical skills that are rare in the prison context. Even having access to a computer is an issue, largely due to perceived security interests. In the internet age, knowledge is easier to locate and access than in any time in history, yet prisoners are kept from this revolution. Resources taken for granted by free-world people such as Google search, Google Scholar, YouTube, and other online databases are absent. These sites would make teaching and learning much easier.

**CONCLUSION**

Instruction in the state prison context is fraught with problems which serve to diminish the capacity and ability for educational attainment. Environmental factors to the student such as violence, drugs, hustling, and other antisocial distractions are more attractive activities than learning algebra and developing language comprehension. This is further complicated by administrative functions such as lockdowns (and pandemics) and even instructor inadequacy.

Students also sometimes have internal challenges such as mental health issues, self-esteem, or perhaps even learning disabilities which have not been addressed. Drug addiction may be co-morbid to personality disorders or mental health issues but were not seen to determine or influence educational success in terms of completion of the GED.

Instructors considering a career in corrections education would benefit from learning about the occupation from those who practice or have had experience in prison education context. In this way, one can discern

employment goodness-of-fit before applying. If one is encouraged to attempt this occupation, it has to be with a full understanding that instructing in the context of a prison setting may demand the best of oneself and, when one least expects it, perhaps make a difference in the lives of others.

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