

**Effective Education for Inmates with Intellectual and/or Psychiatric
Disabilities: A Realistic Option?**

Margaret Goninan and Nina Walker

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Introduction

This paper addresses the education of inmates with significant impairment in cognitive functioning, either as a of intellectual disability, or of severe effects of drugs used to control some psychiatric disabilities. Many of the comments also apply to inmates who have neurological or psychiatric disabilities which are not well controlled. Individuals who fall into the groups described above present behaviours that significantly challenge both custodial and educational staff. Difficulties in focusing attention, using self-directed learning strategies, and generalising learning from one context to another, may inhibit these inmates' acquisition of the functional domestic, employment, recreational and social skills that other people seem to acquire incidentally.

Can education genuinely facilitate learning for new life for such inmates, or does it simply provide them with some distraction in a supportive environment – functioning as “dynamic security”? If we accept a philosophy of disability as a “matter for medicine to cure or control” (Russell and Stewart, 2001, p. 62), then education must assume a role of basic containment. Can we do more than this?

As authors of the paper, we are two part-time teachers who were employed by the Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE (Bankstown College) to teach in a special unit which catered inmates with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities. Throughout our time teaching in this unit, we compared this teaching with our other teaching experiences in mainstream prison units, and in community-based programs for people with a disability. In the paper, we will use these experiences to describe critical teaching incidents that were successful and unsuccessful within the unit, and to interpret them within the context of professional literature in the area.

Significance of the Issue

People with disabilities, particularly intellectual or psychiatric disabilities are over-represented in the nation’s prison populations (Bower, 1997; Cockram, Jackson and Underwood, 1998; Russell and Stewart, 2001), to

the extent that terms such as “criminalization of mental illness” have been used in the literature (Russell and Stewart, 2001. p. 67).

Several reasons have been offered for this phenomenon. There have been suggestions that people with intellectual disabilities or mental illness:

- commit more crime due to personal characteristics, such as impulsivity, suggestibility, exploitability, and the desire to please.
- have their crimes more readily detected by their inability to conceal actions are more readily convicted, having less access to legal counsel (Cockram, Jackson and Underwood, 1998).
- more frequently plead guilty to an offense without understanding all the ramifications (Bowker, 1994).

What Learning Outcomes Do We Need to Address?

We believe that education needs to assist inmates to make the type of choices that will increase their quality of life in the immediate prison environment, and later in the general community on release. The latter of these outcomes should also have the added benefit of reducing re-offending, the key concept of the mission statement as outlined in the 2001 corporate plan of the NSW Department of Corrective Services.

Acquisition of the functional domestic, employment, recreational and social skills would appear to be the key to the outcomes as stated above. In the remainder of this paper, we will describe the opportunities and constraints in our practical attempts to assist inmates with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities to achieve these outcomes.

Addressing Motivational Issues

Most writers in adult education believe that adults possess a suite of self-directed learning skills that they naturally seek to utilise in learning situations (Knowles, 1984; Candy, 1991). They are able to develop learning goals which have relevance to their needs, and trial strategies that lead to attainment of those goals. Our teaching of some of the inmates with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities challenged these assumptions.

We were struck by the motivational independence of the inmates we taught in the mainstream prison. These inmates had very specific learning intentions, and recognised the value of education. They were aware of the immediate benefit of educational participation (getting educational achievements and positive reports from teachers), in gaining access to programs involving day release for home visits and outside employment.

They also articulated a desire to use education as a career path. They had the capacity to take an immediate and long-term view of life.

In contrast, we noticed a significant absence of these longer term goals by inmates in the special unit. There did not seem to be a culture of achieving classification levels, which permitted day release to go home or to work. We noted that inmates from the unit were usually released directly into the community without the preparatory home and work experiences that were available to inmates in mainstream facilities.

It is quite possible that the lack of aspiration to pre-release programs was a result of our inmates' lack of comprehension of the prison classification system. Based on our experiences, there is a range of other possibilities:

- Many of the inmates in the special unit appeared to have little support outside prison. Without an outside sponsor, they would not meet the criteria for day release.
- Few had experienced sustained employment. As involvement in paid employment is a crucial part of pre-release programs, the unit inmates may have seen little point in aiming for something that could never be achieved.
- They may have received a lack of encouragement from staff who believed that transfer to a mainstream prison may have put the special needs

inmates at risk, or that inmates would pose a community risk in periods spent outside the institution.

- Because the curriculum guidelines that are used in NSW prisons (CGEA) have not been adapted for people with intellectual disabilities, accreditation is very difficult for them to accomplish. Progressive achievement of officially recognised modules by mainstream inmates, could have acted as a visible scaffold for educational aspirations, a scaffold which is not available to the inmates in the unit.

Whatever the reason, the inmates in the special unit did not demonstrate future planning. For many, their lack of an outside social network did not form the basis of a clear and positive future vision. Particularly for those with long sentences, the cognitive demands of such a future vision must have been particularly challenging.

In response to this apparent lack of a long-term life view to support intrinsic motivation for education, we had to develop strategies that encouraged participation. While we tried to show curriculum relevance on the broader life span, we ensured that at least, inmates could see immediate relevance in the teaching activities. One strategy that worked well was a co-operative venture with other staff to develop a drama production in which inmates produced a drama about their own life

perspectives. They were supported to develop a script for the production. The drama framework provided an activity in which individuals felt motivated to express their ideas. Two examples are provided below:

Half of the world dissolves around me because it is the way I feel. I want to be stable, the way it is for all of you. Gaol is not the nicest place to be, but we have all done something wrong. I feel the world is ending. I am saying this for all the young ones out there. Drugs are no good. They affect your brain. I am not a drug user. I know people who are. (Rex)

I do like a drink. I don't drink too much. I like to meet friends in the pub and in the club. Sometimes it is really hard for me to meet new friends, because it gets me into trouble. They encourage me to do things I shouldn't be doing.

Sometimes it is hard for me in gaol, mixing with other crims, I mean inmates. I get annoyed, frustrated. I like to get locked in in the afternoon and at night because it is peaceful and nice and relaxing. In my heart I will always care about myself and other people. I am a good person on the inside and I am a good person on the outside. Sometimes when I do get out, I would like to be an actor or a movie star, like in this play. I hope my wish will come true. (Milan)

In this activity, the inmates saw an immediate practical purpose for the activity. The commitment of the inmates to the activity was extremely

gratifying to the teaching staff. In terms of self-expression, increased self-esteem, and motivation for learning the activity was extremely successful.

Addressing Issues of Generalisation

As was indicated earlier, the ability to transfer skills learned in the classroom to the community is essential in an educational program. We were far less successful with this programming task, than with engaging motivation.

For example, despite the fact that one of the teachers had conducted health classes for six hours per week for six weeks, we noticed that inmates in the special unit were not successful in negotiating health issues as they arose. They did not seem to recognise the severity of symptoms, nor how to inform staff when they needed help. Such skills are critical to maintaining health not only in prison, but in the community when they are released. One explanation for the apparent lack of generalisable outcomes is that individual skills were not taught intensively enough for the inmates to remember what they had learned in the classes.

Alternatively, perhaps there were insufficient examples to allow for generalisation to “real life” situations.

A further explanation is that the inmates did recognise the severity of the symptoms, but did not have sufficient social skills to negotiate assistance. The initial contact for assistance would have been to prison officers, and so perhaps the inmates were not successful in articulating their difficulties, or they were intimidated by the power differential in the relationship.

In fact, the problem of lack of social literacy of people with intellectual or psychiatric disability is widely recognised. Pearl and Bryan (1994) suggest that limited social comprehension may lead to criminal behaviour. They identify the following lack of social skills as problematic: greater willingness to accede to a friend's wish that they join in with the friends in misconduct; less likely to recognise that someone was deliberately deceptive; less able to recognise manipulative behaviour; and less likely to how someone is likely to pose an invitation to participate in misconduct. In our case, the limited social comprehension that may have led to the criminal behaviour in the first place, may be placing the inmates in very vulnerable situations in custody.

Addressing Institutional Constraints

Perhaps we could take some comfort from the knowledge that others have also found the task of teaching these skills difficult. Glaser and Deane (1999) comment on the teaching of community skills in custodial settings: *“But despite what often amounted to extraordinary efforts on the part of Human Services staff, the impact of these programs was significantly limited by the restrictions imposed by the environment; only so much could be achieved within the confines of the unit. It is difficult, for example, to work with an offender on social and behavioural skills when contact with the community is nonexistent.”* (p. 351)

Of particular concern is the previously mentioned fact that the inmates in the special unit did not seem to have ready access to pre-release programs. Successful re-integration into the community seems predicated on effective preparation. In fact the corporate plan of the NSW Department of Corrective Services recognises this need for “the need for integration between community based and institutionalised settings” (plan (NSW Department of Corrective Services, 2001, p. 3).

The situation in our unit seems to be representative of facilities elsewhere. For example a study of a special unit in Victoria had results that indicated that of the 42 inmates, despite the fact that their prison security ratings did not differ from those found in the mainstream male prison population,

intellectually disabled prisoners found it much more difficult to move out of the maximum-security unit to a less restrictive environment (Glaser and Deane, 1999).

Unless this institutional constraint is addressed, our work in prison classrooms may have little sustainable impact on our clients. Teaching within the institution should emphasise the functional employment, domestic, recreational and social skills that would match seamlessly with the demands of the pre-release setting, which in turn, would match seamlessly with the demands of the general community.

There were additional institutional constraints that severely limited our teaching of many essential functional skills within the unit. For example, the physical environment of the unit in no way reflected a domestic environment. Inmates did have a rudimentary kitchen, but basic food was mass-prepared for them. Previous attempts to use the kitchen had raised safety issues, due to the size and facilities of the kitchen. As the environment was rated as maximum security, there were significant limitations on the teachers' ability to use essential cooking equipment. Skills such as changing light globes were not possible in this environment. In addition the prison employed only one individual as the group area

cleaner. Consequently, it was not possible to teach these inmates these home maintenance skills necessary for daily living.

Inmate movements also challenged effective teaching. Frequent transfer of inmates with difficult behaviour was a management strategy implemented by custodial staff. The consequent movement was particularly disruptive to the inmates with special needs, as they can take a considerable time period to become sufficiently familiar with the new teaching context, to relax and fully engage in learning. Also, the frequent arrival of new inmates with difficult behaviour was extremely distracting to the inmates. Time taken to accommodate was very disruptive of educational progress.

The Way Forward

We can make no conclusive remarks concerning the ability of education in prison to genuinely equip inmates with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities with the skills to develop a more constructive life on release. We have raised some challenges, as we see them, and conclude that we are at an embryonic stage of knowing how to make a real long-term impact on our clients.

For effective education of these most vulnerable members of our community, there needs to be changes at all levels of the system. Teachers currently operate within constraints that severely limit the teaching of essential skills. We would like to echo the suggestion of Glaser and Deane (1999) in their questioning of prison, and particularly maximum security prisons, as the most appropriate way to manage offenders with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities. In addition, we would like to reinforce their proffered alternative of a small non-prison-based unit, offering a range of individualised services (p. 352).

We may anticipate that Glaser and Deane's suggestion might be dismissed on the basis that the criminal activities of the inmates necessitated a high level of security, and that the inmates could not be accommodated in a non-prison environment. However, we suggest that it would be a reasonable compromise to locate a domestic physical environment within a secure setting. Teaching would have more sustained relevance in an environment that featured ordinary domestic appliance, and in which inmates were responsible for all aspects of domestic living.

The unit could accommodate inmates with a variety of security classifications, with the possibility of progression to pre-release programs

that had formal relationships with community supported employment programs and community leisure programs.

For such a situation to be realised, there needs to be strong advocacy to change existing institutional arrangements in which there are entrenched power bases. Such advocacy would need to challenge stereotypes of people with disabilities as having no potential for significant educational outcomes. For this endeavour, we certainly need leaders with vision.

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Authors:

Margaret Goninan

Nina Walker

Part-time Teacher

Institute Correctional Centre

Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE

Liaison Officer

Bankstown College

Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE

Bankstown College