

## THE ROLE OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AMONG EX-INMATES LIVING CRIME-FREE

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### Abstract

Post-secondary education is claimed to have long-term life benefits for all individuals. However, little is known in terms of how post-secondary education assists ex-inmates to live crime-free. The aim of the present study was to explore how post-secondary education independently and directly came to assist ex-inmates to live crime-free. Participants (n=20) in the study were male ex-inmates living crime-free. Comprehensive education-related information in terms of school experiences, learning trajectories and educational history/background was collected for each of the participants. The study found that only few participants (20%) who continued post-secondary post-prison education not only remained crime-free but had a positive pathway post-release. Gaining post-secondary qualifications appeared to position ex-inmates in a socially cultured academic environment away from anti-social and negative at-risk communities directly assisting them to live crime-free. Consequently post-secondary education appears to reposition ex-inmates into a crime-free post-prison pathway. Hence, prison education (i.e. education programs delivered in prison) for inmates should be organized and/or facilitated toward post-secondary education with a multifaceted lifelong learning pathways.

### Introduction

Education i.e., beyond basic literacy and numeracy has several benefits to inmates and ex-inmates leading up to employment and reduced recidivism (Correctional Association of New York, 2009; J-F, 2010; MacKenzie, 2009, Murphy, 2007; Owens, 2009; Rose, Reschenberg, & Richards, 2010; Schirmer, 2008). Exploring the role of post-secondary education through the voices of ex-inmates living crime-free may offer useful insights into its precise role and its relationship with crime and crime-free living (Leyva & Bickel, 2010). Importantly, documenting the experiences of ex-inmates provides a unique opportunity to accurately investigate if and how post-secondary education comes to protect and safe guard ex-inmates from reoffending (Murphy, 2007). This paper presents data from a Queensland project and takes a contemporary approach on educational attainment among ex-inmates living crime-free; and focuses on four participants who pursued post-secondary education.

### Education prior to incarceration

A review of studies over the past 20 years widely assert that low levels of education and deficits in educational attainment contribute toward an inmate's criminal behaviour (Adams et al., 1994; Gwynn, Lyon, Doling, Hasler, & Webster, 1997; Harer, 1995; Newman, Lewis, & Beverstock, 1993; Ryan, 1991; Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Smith & Silverman, 1994). To this end, a number of studies claim that there is a negative correlation between levels of education (i.e. basic 3Rs) and crime (Correctional Service Canada, 1991a; 1991b; Freeman, 1996; Greenberg, Duleavy, Kutner, & White, 2007; Gwynn, Lyon, Doling, Hasler, & Webster, 1997; Harer, 1995; Harlow, 2003; J-F, 2010; MacKenzie, 2009; Macomber et al., 2010; Newman et al., 1993; Ryan, 1991; Stevens, 2000; Taylor & McAtee, 2003; Tewksbury & Vito, 1994; Vacca, 2004). Perhaps the premise from the above findings is that low levels of educational attainment not only limit but restrict a number of pro-social and economic prospects needed for one to be successful in a community. Rose et al. (2010) and

MacKenzie (2009) unequivocally note that both the public and policy makers acknowledge that education in its own right has several benefits for inmates and that the primary purpose of education should be to increase the educational levels of all inmates (p. 294). Thus, addressing barriers and improving overall educational levels (i.e., higher education) should be the primary focus of prison education programs (Foley, 2001; J-F, 2010; Mackenzie, 2009; Murphy, 2007; Owens, 2009; Rose, Reschenberg, & Richards, 2010; Schirmer, 2008; Wilson, Gallagher, Coggeshall, & MacKenzie, 1999).

### Education during incarceration

While most prisons provide basic adult education only a small group of inmates appear to take part in education and achieve success (J-F, 2010; Wilson et al., 1999). So what would explain such low levels of inmate participation in prison-based education programs? Of the many, perhaps there are three important possible explanations: first, the role of prison staff (i.e., those in authority); second, the prison environment; and third, limited program availability (i.e. only basic literacy and numeracy programs). Over and above individual motivations/aspirations to study in prison, the above mentioned factors are argued to be important factors (i.e. external) for the success of prison education (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002). Indeed, O'Neill, Mackenzie and Bierie (2007) note that vindictive impositions by prison staff alongside punitive environments such as boot camp conditions were not conducive to engaging inmates in educational programs. For example, prison staff improperly imposing authority (e.g., restricting inmate movements and not allowing them to attend classes) and ridiculing inmates for learning can be demoralizing, and possibly this in turn can perhaps lead some inmates not to participate in education.

Second, disciplinary and authoritarian prison environments are very likely to deter inmates from participating in education, as inmates are likely to be subjected to harsh orderliness and/or penalizing administration. Thus, at a systems operational level, it is important to limit the barriers faced by inmates and to create atmospheres and cultures that promote and encourage participation in education. A conducive learning environment alongside proper staffing (i.e., supportive staff), adequate resources and delivering individualized education programs are imperative for prison education to be successful for all inmates (Bhatti, 2010; Vacca, 2004). It is generally conceded that when prison education is positive, supportive, and conducive to learning, inmates are likely to complete prison education and pursue further education (i.e., post-secondary) in post-prison as a lifelong pathway (J-F, 2010; Wilson et al., 1999). Further to this, Smith and Silverman (1994) found that over 90% of participants wanted to continue their education on release following positive educational experiences in prison.

In line with the delivery of education, it is equally important to accurately screen inmates on both educational deficits/gaps and their aspirations so as to directly target and cater for their specific individual needs (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002; Rhodes, 1988). Having education programs that are adequately structured to cater for the needs of inmates and scaffolding the process of learning is fundamental to assisting those inmates who are motivated to study. Recognising this, Vacca (2004) argued that having education programs designed specifically for different learning styles and levels of knowledge were likely to increase overall success for inmates (Ryan & McCabe, 1994). Perhaps this could be an additional reason as to why a great majority of inmates do not participate, succeed or continue in education as their learning needs are possibly overlooked and/or not screened appropriately.

Finally, another challenge in prison education comes from conflicting priorities and ideas around policies on how best to conceptualize education for inmates (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Most conceptualizations and ideologies appear to be economically driven (i.e., industry focused) and seem to be based on the 'value for money' paradigm, merely equipping inmates with basic literacy and numeracy skills alongside ad hoc vocational/trade skills rather than accurately re-positioning inmates as lifelong learners (Harer, 1995; Ryan, 1991; Stevens, 2000). Importantly, such constraints create barriers for those inmates who want to engage or take part in post-secondary education. Perhaps then, those inmates who did succeed in taking up secondary and post-secondary education and continuing in

it may have been those that struggled on their own and used their own resiliency, commitment, discipline, work ethic or sourced support from outside the system such as: family or friends that has sustained them in their educational pursuits (Haggard, Gumpert, & Grann, 2001; Maruna, 2001).

While a number of basic education programs are delivered within a prison context, it seems that high-school level education and, importantly, post-secondary education programs (e.g., college studies) appear to be most beneficial leading up to reduced recidivism (Batiuk, Moke & Rountree, 1997; Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005; Chappell, 2004; Gerber & Fristch, 1995; Leibrich, 1993; Steurer & Smith, 2003; Vacca, 2004). In one of their earlier studies Lanier, Philliber and Philliber (1994), found that of the 11 inmates who participated in a college program (e.g., Master's Degree), on release four pursued doctoral studies, six were employed in professional positions and that only one had returned back to prison. With regard to ex-inmates these findings suggest that post-secondary education seems to create diverse lifelong post-prison pathways, be it employment, successful re-integration, and/or post-prison higher education opportunities. If this is the case, then why aren't a great majority of inmates being encouraged and fostered into participating in post-secondary education?

### Education in post-incarceration

Post-secondary post-prison education which is independent of prison education has the ability to create diverse productive opportunities for ex-inmates as it addresses barriers of societal re-integration i.e., criminal history (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; J-F, 2010; Murphy, 2007; Rose et al., 2010; Tyler & Kling, 2007). A number of studies claim that ex-inmates have benefited through continuing education in post-prison, and importantly claim that education in post-prison can lead to and result in reduced recidivism (Adams et al., 1994; Correctional Service Canada, 1991c; Gwynn et al., 1997; Harer, 1995; Porporino & Robinson, 1992; Steurer, Smith & Tracy, 2001; Taylor & McAtee, 2003). Such that, when ex-inmates engage in post-prison education they are likely to have immediate (e.g., increased employment prospects and acquisition of skills) and positive lifelong opportunities.

Post-secondary post-prison education can create a constructive lifelong pathway leading to increased possibilities of professional employment (Chappell, 2004; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Taylor, 1992; Yates & Frolander-Ulf, 2001). This constructive lifelong pathway through professional jobs and careers provides successful community re-integration (Adams et al., 1994; Brown, 1988; Correctional Service Canada, 1991c; Gillis, Motiuk, & Belcourt, 1998; Gwynn et al., 1997; Harer, 1995; Jenkins, 1988; Newman et al., 1993; Markley, Bercaw-Dooen, & Flynn (1983); Porporino & Robinson, 1992; Rhodes, 1988; Ryan 1991; Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001; Taylor & McAtee, 2003; Thornton, 1988; Tiberi, 1988; Tully, 1988). Constructive pathways are best understood when the focus of post-secondary post-prison education extends to a lifelong pathway aimed at developing a professional skill set that is likely to position ex-inmates into a variety of professional careers (e.g., skilled urban surveyor; graphic designer) rather than becoming stagnant in a mediocre job (Schirmer, 2008).

Importantly, post-secondary post-prison education positions ex-inmates away from criminogenic risk factors and places them in pro-social communities and contexts, criminogenic risk factors are best understood as both casual and/or correlated factors which either promote and/or provoke crime (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). This is because the very context of post-secondary post-prison education itself creates a positive and stable environment away from the stigma of crime. Post-secondary post-prison education learning environments are in themselves pro-social communities away from anti-social and at-risk communities and bring about adherence to pro-social values (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; J-F, 2010; Schirmer, 2008).

In addition, post-secondary post-prison education provides an opportunity to break the cycle of inequality as ex-inmates are provided with a collegial context to learn in a supportive learning environment. Thus, engaging in post-secondary post-prison education is likely to position ex-inmates in a positive learning environment fostering productive pathways and indirectly reducing gaps

between labour demands and the educational deficits of ex-inmates (Brown, 1988; Gillis et al., 1998; Jenkins, 1988; Newman et al., 1993; Markley et al., 1983; Rhodes, 1988; Ryan 1991; Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Thornton, 1988; Tiberi, 1988; Tully, 1988). Therefore, post-secondary post-prison education could be a salient factor (e.g., cost-effective) in assisting ex-inmates to live crime-free and could be one possible way for reducing recidivism, to this end Schirmer (2008), Rose et al. (2010), J-F (2010) Murphy (2007) and Owens (2009) argue that beyond basic education and that leads to positive pathways and reduce recidivism. While Parker's (1990) and Porporino and Robinson's (1992) note that it can lead to other positive benefits such as: increasing one's self-esteem and confidence.

## Context of study

The current study was based on the premise of Macomber et al. (2010) who strongly argued that "successful schooling", is a "major" determining factor in reduced recidivism. Even though several studies were noted in this paper on education and recidivism, to date there is no study that has captured the role of post-secondary post-prison education among ex-inmates within an Australian context. This study aims to documenting the role post-secondary education in the lives of ex-inmates living crime-free, rather than asking the question "has the lack of education led you to offending?" this study used a more constructive way of inquiring how education is contributing towards ex-inmates living crime-free. This study was part of a larger research project (*Male Ex-inmates living crime-free: A phenomenological study*) undertaken at The University of Queensland, Australia, to explore how various factors were supporting ex-inmates to live crime-free (J-F, 2010). However, this study selectively reports on the role of post-secondary education and how it has come to assist ex-inmates to live crime-free.

## Method

### Participants

Out of 60 ex-inmates, a total of 20 participants met the eligibility criteria for the present study. To be eligible for the study, participants were required have (1) served at least a two year prison sentence and (2) be living crime-free for at least a minimum of two years from the date of release. The second eligibility criterion was indicative of ex-inmates having made a successful transition into the community, as recidivism is noted to be high in the first 24 months after release (Beck & Shipley, 1983; Kershaw, 1997; Kershaw & Renshaw, 1997; Langan & Levin, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Walters, 2005).

Participants living crime-free were selected through their self-disclosure, where participants reported that they did not commit any offence or misdemeanour over the two year period. Participants were volunteers who responded to a local newspaper (e.g. Westside News, Courier Mail) advertisement "*Ex-inmates needed for UQ research*" released by University of Queensland Media Office; participation in the study was voluntary with no monetary rewards or incentive offered for participation. All participants were living in Queensland and were aged between 27 and 65 years with a mean age of 44.3 years. Most participants (n=18) identified themselves to be non-Indigenous Caucasian with two identifying themselves as being of Aboriginal Torres or Strait Islander descent.

### Design

Phenomenology was used as methodology, as it has the unique ability to clearly capture each participants description of how they experience their social world and how they perceive their own experiences (Hammond et al., 1991; Hancock, 2002; J-F, 2010). Each participant took part in a face-to-face open-ended semi-structured interview with the researcher. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Data were collected in a descriptive manner inviting participants to communicate their lived experiences. The primary role of the researcher was to document through note taking and tape recording, the various experiences of the participants by asking them relevant open ended questions to facilitate discussion in identifying the various experiences, about how education was assisting them to live crime-free. The primary role of the participants was to share their experiences and to articulate how they had come to change their life from offending, to living crime-free.

### Measures

A survey questionnaire was used to capture the data. The first part of the questionnaire documented demographic information and Index offence (i.e. the last known convicted offence) details and the second part of the questionnaire had three phases. Phase I comprised an Exit Checklist (with 24 forced response questions, e.g., *Did you know how to use a street directory?*) which provided some insight into the educational levels of ex-inmates at the time of leaving the correctional facility. Higher scores on this Exit Checklist were indicative that their transitional needs were met and that they were able to use education in their day to day post-prison life with ease. Phase II was comprised of one question with a twofold response - it required both a quantitative and qualitative response. Firstly, participants were invited to give a score between 1 (not at all assisting to live crime-free) and 5 (fully/totally assisting to live crime-free) as to how they perceived education to be assisting them to live crime-free. Secondly, after giving a score, participants were invited to describe how and in what way education had assisted and/or was assisting them to live crime-free. Phase III, had a modified version of the Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG), which was used to collect information related to school experiences, learning trajectories, and educational history/background for each participant. In this phase, participants were also invited to qualitatively describe the role of education prior to incarceration, during incarceration, and post-incarceration.

## Data Analysis

Given the method was mixed methods; the focus of the study was to mainly qualitative, data analysis aimed to explore and identify broad and unique themes. Using Tesch's (1990), understanding, a general description was obtained by comparing all specific descriptions, and from this a general theme was formulated/constructed, whereby commonality in the general theme was directly validated by the individual's description, such that the meaning of units were an accurate description of one's own experience (Spiegelberg, 1975). Given that data was recorded, analysis was robust and reliable, a Researcher could go and revisit to both confirm and validate responses. And secondly, quantitative data primarily through descriptive statistics was used to report on demographic and to quantify the saliency in and among factors. All analysis was conducted by the Researcher.

## Results

Results are reported in two sections: (i) descriptive information on the participants and background information of education at the three stages; and (ii) qualitative descriptions on the role of education. The results primarily report on the major 'essences' and themes found in terms of participants' experiences about the role of education.

### Descriptive Information on Education

*Time spent in prison, age at the time of release, time spent living crime-free and offence history.*

The mean age of the time spent in prison by the inmates (n=20) across their life time was 8.7 years (range 2 to 20 years). The average age at the time of release was 44.25 years (range 26 to 65). The average time spent in the community living crime-free was 8.74 years (range 2 to 17 years). In terms of Index Offences, participants reported the following: 35% of the participants were convicted of drug trafficking, supply and possession (n = 7); 20% of the participants were convicted of murder and attempted murder (n = 4); 15% were convicted of violent offences and assault (n = 3); and a further 15% were convicted of armed robbery (n = 3). Over and above Index Offences as part of participants' criminal histories, other offences also included: fraud, assault, unlawful entry, possessing stolen goods, possession and cultivating cannabis and drink driving. The accuracy of the Index Offences and the consequent charges leading up to conviction were not verified against official records, as this was never the intention of the study. However, two participants did bring their official legal documents to the interview to confirm the status of their Index Offences.

### Education Exit Checklist

The Exit Checklist (*Table 1*) which measured the educational transitional and exit needs received by inmates prior to their release revealed that their transitional educational needs were not

fully met. Most reported that they were released into the community without any proper post-prison support mechanisms to assist them in their training or education. Low score of M=14 (i.e. 24 being the high score) implies that participants were not able to use simple functional education knowledge in their day to day post-prison life, and goes on to reveal that at the time of their release from the correctional facility participant educational transitional needs were not adequately met. This finding also shows that participants had fewer or less than half of their educational transitional and exit needs met indicating that they were released into the community without any proper post-prison support mechanisms to assist them in their post-prison education.

**Table 1**  
*Participants' (n= 20) Mean Scores against Exit Checklist at the time of Leaving the Correctional Facility*

	Number of questions	Group Mean Scores M
Exit Checklist	24	14

**Education Prior to Incarceration and Education Level of Ex-inmates**

The modified version of VRAG on school experiences, learning trajectories, and educational history/background for each participant revealed that most participants (n=15) having low levels (e.g., middle school) of education prior to incarceration. It also showed that most participants apart from one completing primary level education (i.e. Grade 6), with one participant completing only Grade 4 level of education. Around 25% of participants reported that they had complete Grade 11/12 before incarceration, while less than 30 % completed Grade 10 and with only 85% completing Grade 8/9 level education before incarceration, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Summary of Education Levels for Each of the Participant Prior to Incarceration and Post Prison*

		Formal Education																		Total %			
Post Prison	Bachelor	*	*	*															15%				
	Cert/ Trade																		*	1%			
Prior to Prison	Grade 12	*	*	*	*															* * *	25%		
	Grade 11	*	*	*	*															* *	25%		
	Grade 10	*	*	*	*															* *	30%		
	Grade 9	*	*	*	*						*			*			*	*	40%				
	Grade 8	*	*	*	*	*					*	*		*	*	*	*	*	55%				
	Grade 7	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	85%				
Primary	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	95%					
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20		
Individual ex-inmates education levels																							

In addition, a majority (70%) of participants reported deficits and gaps in knowledge, and went on to report that they had negative school experiences and that they were either regularly suspended or expelled from school. Participants also reported that they had various behavioural problems, reading difficulties, special needs (e.g. ADHD) and were regularly suspended and/or expelled from school. In addition, they reported that school was a negative experience and that they did not receive adequate support. Additionally, 50% participants reported that they still could not read or write at a high-school level and further that they still depended on others to complete forms and applications. Importantly in post-prison only 4 participants' pursued Bachelor level education and post-secondary education i.e. TAFE Certificate but these participants had high-school level prior to incarceration.

### Education during Incarceration

While most reported low levels of education when coming into prison, they did not report of any urgency or need for wanting to get education. However, participants reported participating in several *ad hoc* and structured educational programs. For example, they reported participating in various courses such as basic literacy, numeracy, computing skills, Adult Tertiary Preparatory Course, Certificate I and II level courses, open learning courses. Those that completed Grade 12 reported of starting Bachelor level courses whilst they were incarcerated. These participants that undertook Bachelor level education and Certificate level education, merely wanted to keep themselves busy while in prison rather than work toward completing their course or program. While participants did not associate prison education and training as assisting them to live crime-free, they did recognize that education in prison to help them to learn to read, write and spell (i.e. acquiring basic literacy).

Participants were asked to rate (1 to 5) how education was assisting them to live crime-free (see Table 3). In general, participants reported an overall self-rating of 2.1 out of 5, clearly indicating that that education (i.e. perhaps their low levels of education) does not assist and does not directly contribute toward them living crime-free. Over half of the participants (n = 12) reported that education was independent of them living crime-free. The three participants who studied Bachelor level education gave a score of '5' indicating that education was directly assisting them to live crime-free.

### Role of Education in Post-Prison

Table 3

#### Responses by Participants on the Role of Education Assisting Them to Live Crime-free

Scores	Self-rating on how on how education was assisting ex-inmates to live crime-free					Group Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	M
Role of Education	12	2	3	2	3	2.1

#### Responses by participants for each score

Note. Participants (n = 20) self-rated (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) on how each education was assisting them to live crime-free (5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest).

### Qualitative Descriptions on the Role of Education and its relationship with crime and crime-free living in post-prison.

A small group (n=4) of ex-inmates pursued education at post-secondary post-prison education reported that their educational skills to be assisting them to live crime-free and in finding and maintaining employment. Some of the major 'essences' and themes found in terms of these four participants' experiences of how education and vocational training was assisting them to live crime-free were that education/vocational training provided a positive pathway post-prison and created a corridor to suitable employment.

One of the four participants reported a gradual and progressive positive curve toward education and reported that when he got out of prison, he went to TAFE. He stated,

*... went to TAFE to do 11 and 12 ... which gave me a rank ... and then I applied to University and then got into University ... and now I am studying Environmental Health and Environmental Science, a double degree ... the study was good ... I had book(s) to go to (and to) keep me busy and keep my mind off things ... I didn't think I could do it, I always thought I was stupid ... and now I just realize that I can do it and that blows me out ... it has also given me knowledge of my background ... and this helped me to understand myself a bit more ... it has given me the ability to problem solve and logically see sequence of events and to forecast which has (also) helped me ... it has (further)helped me (to) build a lot of belief in myself to know that I can compete and can comprehend ...*

In line with the above another participant (i.e., one of the four) reported,

*... I have changed my degree about three or four times but the common theme was always Journalism and Public Relations ... and I got a job in Public Relations and Journalism ... I am now a graded Journalist ...*

Another participant reported completing a Bachelor of Social Science at the Australian Catholic University and stated that he was eager to complete the study and graduate from the program to become a Social Worker or a Counsellor. It also appears that participants who begin a Tertiary program are likely to pursue and complete it; perhaps because University life could be fostering a sense of a safe haven toward accomplishing goals. Further, it appears that just being within the context of a University environment seems to provide a sense of pride and value to participants. They also report that post-secondary education to have led to professional and reputable jobs, for example, journalist, urban surveyor, director of training, and business manager. There is also recognition that education has other benefits and to this end, one participant reported,

*... study has kept me occupied ... it stopped me sitting around getting bored ... (and it) increased the chance of getting a job ...” and by, “... completing various courses and certificates gives me confidence in myself ... boosts my self-esteem and gives me strength to apply for jobs ...*

It appears that post-secondary post-prison education not only provides participants with a positive life pathway but also creates a corridor for a successful career pathway. There is a recognition that qualifications and training are useful when used and applied in a positive manner. One participant noted that training indirectly assisted him with learning various skills for example, “... *having a forklift license ... semitrailer license ... truck license ... bus license ... car license ... motor bike license ...*” and consequently increasing the possibility and scope of employment. For another, Vocational Training through Centrelink got him into TAFE and it eventually led him to study at University. This particular participant went on to report,

*... it gave me the ticket to get into Uni because they paid for me at the TAFE course and I also got encouragement from the guys at the Employment Plus Office ... (they) pat me on the back and all that ... and gave me faith in society*

Similarly, when participants were asked whether Vocational Education and Training was directly assisting them to live crime-free, they reported that training indirectly assisted them to live crime-free. It appears that Vocational Education and Training could independently increase the capacity of skills and scope of employment leading to a lifelong pathway.

Another important theme that participants reported was that of negative educational experiences. Most participants reported having been labelled with behavioural problems at school; negatively labelled with disorders and school staff wrote them off as difficult and limited positive opportunities in prison to learn. Participants did not report of punitive prison environment or disciplinary prison staff but did report that they did not perceive education to assist them to live crime-free, given their negative experiences in schools. Negative educational experiences appear to have detrimental outcomes for participants. One participant commented that, as a child he was seen to have lots of problems, “... *throwing chairs at teachers ...*” and that they eventually sent him to “... *Child Guidance ...*” where he was assessed as having Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and was on medication. He also reported that he was moved from one primary school to another and that in total he attended six different primary schools. To this end, another participant (i.e., one of the four) noted that,

*... I don't really have an educational level ... I can't stud. It just makes me cranky, I can't absorb things ... I can't sit down and read ... it doesn't sink in to me ... I hated school and I would never go back ...*

## Summary

Actively participating in post-secondary post-prison education/training appears to create a positive pathway to participants in post-prison. Post-secondary post prison education seems to provide a constructive and affirmative culture fostering an optimistic and confident environment to achieve



and succeed. While education in post-prison may not always directly assist participants to live crime-free it does appear that pursuing and having an education and further training can create a productive paradigm in terms of increasing the possibility of choices of employment and making participants more marketable when seeking employment due to their increased skills set and perhaps a greater sense of self-worth.

## Discussion

The findings of the current study indicate that post-secondary post-prison education assists ex-inmates to live crime-free. This finding is in line with Schirmer (2008), Rose et al. (2010), J-F (2010) Murphy (2007) and Owens (2009) who indicated that education beyond literacy and numeracy has several benefits to ex-inmates leading lifelong pathway, employment and reduced recidivism. This study found that those who took up educational opportunities were able to desist from crime and continued on a journey of not only living crime-free but in becoming productive and constructive members of the community. Overall, this study also found education in general to indirectly support ex-inmates in post-prison life. Indirectly, education seems to assist ex-inmates by: filling gaps in educational knowledge; assisting them to acquire trade skills and technical knowledge; facilitating the process of employment; creating an opportunity for higher learning; and, increasing self-esteem and confidence. This confirms Parker's (1990) and Porporino and Robinson's (1992) view of educational benefits. In particular, prison education with all its complexities and definitions appears to have played varied roles in the lives of ex-inmates (Haggard et al., 2001; Maruna, 2001).

In terms of education prior to incarceration, this study confirmed the findings that most ex-inmates had low levels of education prior to incarceration. Importantly, however, in terms of education during incarceration, this study has confirmed that only a small group of ex-inmates were able to succeed in education, that is, continue post-secondary education. The Education Exit Checklist used in the study clearly identified that a great majority of inmates, despite having participated in prison education, still could not read or write at a high-school level and a majority were still educationally disadvantaged. This seems to indirectly confirm that adequate and proper educational screening did not occur and that prison education did not target individual needs.

To learn that after years of incarceration and participation in education programs a majority of inmates do not succeed in education, once again indirectly confirms the existence of systematic, operational and cultural barriers, for example, prison staff attitudes toward learning and non-conducive learning environments, which need to be urgently addressed (O'Neill et al., 2007). Prison education must address barriers faced by inmates by accurately screening them on educational deficits/gaps and aspirations, ensuring that programs are inclusive, directly targeting individual needs, and having supportive staff and a conducive culture of learning (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002; Bhatti, 2010). In the case of those who did succeed in education, it maybe because of their own commitment, resilience, personal strength, and vigour to succeed.

The findings of the present study indicated that post-secondary post-prison created a positive pathway for ex-inmates in the post-prison period. In addition, this study also found that those ex-inmates who had persisted and personally overcame the several systematic barriers, and continued learning in post-secondary post-prison leading to professional and reputable positions, for example, journalist, urban surveyor, director of training, and business manager. Importantly, these ex-inmates seem to have overcome the barrier of a criminal history which is in line with research by Lanier et al. (1994) which suggested that college programs improve post-prison outcomes and create diverse post-prison opportunities.

In addition, this study also found that post-secondary post-prison education, in general, appeared to have exposed ex-inmates to a positive lifestyle, pro-social behaviours such as work ethic and self-discipline, and in some cases was a bridge from prison to the world of work and to post-secondary post-prison education (Brown, 1988; Heckbert & Turkington, 2001; Jenkins, 1988; Leibrich, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Motiuk & Belcourt, 1996; Rhodes, 1988; Thornton, 1988; Tiberi, 1988; Tully, 1988). Continued higher-level or post-secondary post-prison education, either through

tertiary or post-secondary education appears to be a protective factor for ex-inmates, as they seem to be positively positioned within an intellectual and a civilized learning context away from delinquent, anti-social, and criminal communities. However, it is unclear how these participants arrived at the point of undertaking post-secondary education and it is not clear what in particular motivated them and/or sustained their interest in post-secondary education.

This study confirmed that post-secondary post-prison education after release could also be a cost-effective approach to reducing recidivism as it creates diverse productive pathways for ex-inmates (Chappell, 2004; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; J-F, 2010; Murphy, 2007; Rose et al., 2010; Taylor, 1992; Yates & Frolander-Ulf, 2001). Continuing education as a positive lifelong learning pathway should be encouraged for ex-inmates and should be part of post-release plan as it is likely to position inmates in an academic and socially cultured environment fostering a constructive and productive post-prison pathway (Newman et al., 1993; Rhodes, 1988; Ryan 1991). In-line with previous research, this study found that positioning ex-inmates in such productive pathways of education reduces the gap between labour demands and overcomes societal barriers to their employment (Gillis et al., 1998; Markley et al., 1983; Saylor & Gaes, 1997). Thus, education/training for inmates and ex-inmates should be defined broadly and should look beyond assumptions and correlations of deficits and gaps in terms of anti-social and criminal activities, to a more holistic paradigm of lifelong productive learning pathways.

While this study claimed to confirm several findings, caution must be exercised as results are not likely to be generalized to a wider population given the small sample size. Even though the results are not likely to be generalized to a wider population, they still provide a much needed a unique and novel insight into the role of education through the voices of ex-inmates who are living crime-free in Australia. Further, this study did not provide a full explanation as to why the other 16 participants did not pursue post-secondary education, except to note in passing that they had little or no interest in education, for they recounted that education was not assisting them to live crime-free. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that post-secondary education may not be appropriate for every ex-inmate and may not necessarily be a benchmark for all. For instance the 16 who did not pursue education beyond middle school but were still living crime-free.

This study has presented opportunities for further study such as how various mediating and/or moderating factors could come to indirectly or directly foster or hinder post-secondary post-prison education as well as researching what enables and/or motivates ex-inmates to continue education in post-prison. In conclusion, while this paper can be critiqued as a summation of a straw man assessment, this paper does strengthen and confirm the existing findings by providing Australian evidence, that post-secondary post-prison education is perhaps useful, passable and a cost-effective way for reducing recidivism, and very likely to provide varied lifelong benefits to ex-inmates.

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