

Education for Incarcerated Aboriginal Western Australians: Education Revolution Or Just Plain Revolting?

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Abstract

The current Australian Federal government has voiced a commitment to an “education revolution” and set targets for “closing the gap” in education attainment for Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, this revolution appears to have bypassed prison education altogether with no mention of it in the publicly available policy documents. This is regrettable given the large numbers of Aboriginal people in custody and begs the question “Are our incarcerated Indigenous citizens going to be excluded from any potential benefit of the ‘revolution’?”

Education of incarcerated people is not often the subject of academic research. Furthermore, consideration of prisoner education from the viewpoint of Aboriginal prisoners reveals a research boundary that is seldom noted, let alone crossed. When referring to the issue of Aboriginal people and education in prisons, Semmens (1998: 1-2) laments that it “is probably the most persistently serious problem that the various governments of Australia have never faced with much resolve or dedication.” After considering reports by the Western Australian Inspector of Custodial Services over the past decade along with the history of Aboriginal education in Western Australia it seems that little has changed since Semmens made his comments in 1998. This is also reflected in the voices of Aboriginal people with whom I have been yarning for my PhD project “Closing the Gap in Indigenous Prisoner Education”. Overall, a picture is emerging of inadequate resources, lack of attention in practice to cultural needs and provision of training that is useless to prisoners upon release back to their own communities.

Considering these preliminary findings in the light of theories of critical whiteness and patriarchal white sovereignty, the paper raises more questions than it provides answers. It highlights the poor state of prisoner education in general and, more specifically, the situation for Aboriginal adults in Western Australian prisons.

Introduction

Before yarning with Aboriginal ex-prisoners in Western Australia about their experiences of what helped and hindered their education in prison, I sought to find what had previously been written in this field. Given the current Australian Federal government commitment to an “education revolution” and their targets for “closing the gap” in education attainment for Aboriginal people, (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011a and 2011b) I was surprised to no mention in the publicly available policy documents of plans and targets for prisoner education.

While non-Indigenous prisoners share some of the disadvantage found in the corrections system “what is not shared is the history of dispossession and disadvantage that has resulted from the cumulative acts of colonial and State governments, and the residual level of structural bias in the criminal justice system that operates to the detriment of Aboriginal people” (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services [OICS], July 2008b: 18). What is discussed here could sometimes also apply to non-Indigenous prisoners, however the impact is more severely experienced by Aboriginal

people whose rate of incarceration per 100,000 people is, in Western Australia, twenty one times higher than that of non-Indigenous people (Baldry, 2008: 5).

Background

Prisoner education in Australia

There is, overall, a lack of research on prisoner education in Australia (Pawson, 2003; Miller, 2007). At this stage the researcher has been able to source only one academically refereed journal article that considers education in Western Australian prisons. It was published in 1987 by John Ekstedt in the *Western Australian Law Review*. All other local resources appear to be in the form of reports and papers, often written internally by staff of the Department of Corrective Services. They usually have a training focus and originate from the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research, taking the form of reports prepared by those working in the sector. The only independent reports appear to be those from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Office of the Custodial Inspector of Prisons (OICS).

Prison inmates were identified by the Federal government's *Come in Cinderella Report* of 1991 as the most neglected educationally of all disadvantaged groups (Semmens, 1998: 5). Since 1996, at a national level the policy for prisoner education has been based on vocational education and training with all goals of education in prison geared to getting a job: 'to provide adult prisoners and offenders with educational and vocational pathways which will support their productive contribution to the economic and social life of the community' (ANTA 2001: 3) The *National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training for Adult Prisoners and Offenders in Australia* was developed by ANTA in 2001 and endorsed by all state and territory government departments responsible for vocational education and training as well as those in each state responsible for correctional services (Dawe, 2007: 7-8). It is unclear how much, if any, wide reaching and collaborative input or ownership there has been from Indigenous people in Western Australia in regard to this policy.

Undoubtedly much good work is done in vocational education however focusing on vocational education does not encompass the entire gamut of educational possibilities that people have a right to access. Nor do the *National Strategy* goals include the personal growth and informed critical thinking that is required to successfully create and sustain the enduring personal change required to create a new life. So, while Resolution 1990/20 of the UN Economic and Social Council notes that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity" (Coyle, 2009: 94) and findings in the USA reveal that the rate of recidivism decreases with the level of education obtained (Slater, 1994/1995; Smiling Hall and Killacky, 2008: 302) Australian states are

still focused on provision of vocational training in prisons. Slater notes that even completion of small amounts of higher (college) education reduced recidivism rates by 28 per cent.

Nationally there is an Australian Correctional Education Association in Australia that is affiliated with the both the Correctional Education Association in the United States and the European Prisons Education Association. The website of each association is a rich source of information on Prison Education but it has not been possible to find any research to date that considers the needs of Indigenous Prisoners or directly includes their voices. The *Journal of Correctional Education* has been published in the United States since 1951. An initial search of this journal reveals no articles focusing on the needs of Indigenous prisoners. The voices of those incarcerated in WA prisons are silent, and the voices of Indigenous prisoners are all but impossible to find both in WA and throughout the world.

Aboriginal Prisoner Education

In 1909 42 per cent of WA prisoners were Aboriginal (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, March 2005: 7). The situation has improved only marginally in a century. Approximately 3.8 per cent of all people in Western Australia are Aboriginal (ABS 2006). On May 27, 2011 38.8 per cent of adults and 73.3 per cent of juveniles in detention in Western Australia were Aboriginal (Department of Corrective Services, May 27, 2011). Aboriginal women represented 77 per cent of female prisoners. They were under represented in the better resourced prisons and made up 100 per cent of female prisoners in the poorly resourced Roebourne and Eastern Goldfields prisons (Department of Corrective Services May 27, 2011. The Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services has noted that “the Department [of Corrections] commitment to the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in the justice system appears to have amounted to little more than a form of words, well past its utility” (OICS, July 2008a: 27).

Despite the over representation of Aboriginal people in, there is a dearth of enquiry into the education and training needs of Indigenous people who are in prison (Miller, 2007: 27). If prisoner education is a relatively new field of enquiry (Wilson and Reuss, 2000) then prisoner education for Indigenous Australians is embryonic.

Professor Bob Semmens, pulled no punches when referring to the situation of Aboriginal Australian prisoners and education when he wrote,

“provision for Aboriginal prisoners is still largely inadequate, because there are few Aboriginal teachers and there is an issue of cultural relevance of many programmes that are offered. This is ... probably the most persistently serious problem that the various

governments of Australia have never faced with much resolve or dedication.”” (Semmens, 1998: 1-2).

I suggest that little has changed since 1998 and that the enormous gap in incarceration rates, the gap in knowledge about what does and does not work for Aboriginal prisoners and the gap, at state and federal levels, of attention to the needs of education in incarceration all still exist. Despite the rhetoric for “closing the gap” on Indigenous disadvantage, investment levels are already dropping and the long term commitment difficult to see (Russell, 2011).

Office of Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS); Prison reports used in this analysis

The Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) in Western Australia was originally established by the *Prisons Amendment Act 1999* and came into existence in 2000. It is a statutory authority that reports directly to state parliament. The Office’s website, <http://www.custodialinspector.wa.gov.au>, outlines that the mandate of the Office is “to bring independent external scrutiny to the standards and operational practices relating to custodial services”. The Inspector carries out regular inspections at all state prisons, and has been reporting since 2001. While the reports are themselves not immune to the impact and assumptions of the privilege of the white institution that produces them, they provide a rich and detailed source of information on Western Australian prisons over the past decade. They note areas of success and improvement, areas needing to be addressed and areas consistently not attaining an acceptable standard.

The reports included in this analysis were all adult prisons; Acacia (June 2008) , Greenough (August 2010), Broome (March 2005; November 2008), Eastern Goldfields (August 2001; July 2008), Albany (April 2009b), Bunbury (February 2009), Woorooloo (September 2009), Bandyup (December 2008), Boronia (January 2010), Casuarina (September 2010a), Roebourne (April 2009a; February 2011), Hakea (March 2004; June 2010). Pardelup Prison Farm was not included as it has not had a separate OICS report completed on it. Table 1 summarises basic information about each prison, including dates of reports, numbers of Aboriginal prisoners in each prison, total prison population and if each prison houses males and/or females. This information proves useful background for a discussion on prisoner education in Western Australian prisons.

Name of Adult Prison	M	F	Dates of OICS reports used	Number of Aboriginal prisoners (and % of each prisons' population) on May 26, 2011	Total population May 26, 2011
Acacia Privatised Prison	✓		June 2008	373 (37.9%)	984
Albany Regional prison	✓	✓	April 2009	100 (32.8%)	305
Bandyup Women's prison		✓	December 2008	87 (41.2%)	211
Boronia Pre-release Centre		✓	June 2010	10 (12.5%)	80
Broome Regional Prison (remote)	✓	✓	March 2005 November 2008	83 (76.2%) 2 non Indigenous women	109
Bunbury Regional Prison	✓	✓	February 2009	66 (20.1%)	328
Casuarina Prison (Men)	✓		September 2009	279 (46.2%)	604
Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison (remote)	✓	✓	August 2001 July 2008	94 (70.7%) 0 non Indigenous women	133
Greenough Regional Prison (remote)	✓	✓	August 2010	241 (84.3%) 5 non Indigenous women	286
Hakea Prison	✓		March 2004 June 2010	204 (27.4%)	746
Karnet Prison Farm	✓		September 2010	26 (11.1%)	234
Pardelup Prison Farm	✓		N/A	3 (3.4%)	88
Roebourne Regional Prison (remote)	✓	✓	April 2009 February 2011	166 (92.2%) 0 non Indigenous women	180
Woorooloo Prison Farm	✓		September 2009	46 (12.8%)	359

Table 1 Summary of prisoner numbers in adult prisons in Western Australia, May 26, 2011. (Based on Department of Corrective Services, May 26, 2011).

The analysis identified common themes across all of the reports in relation to education for Aboriginal prisoners. Five common themes were identified, each representing a gap needing to be closed in Aboriginal Prisoner Education in Western Australia.

Five Gaps to Close

The five gaps identified are; provision of adequate resources and infrastructure; access to current technology; innovative, training programs; a focus on cultural education; access to education.

These gaps cannot be closed by action from Aboriginal people. It is the actions of non-Indigenous institutions who need to create change within if these gaps are to be closed. It is pointless to focus blame on Aboriginal people as the resources to generate change are in the hands of governments and government departments.

Gap 1 Provision of adequate resources and infrastructure

Overcrowding is an issue in WA prisons with all now holding more than they were designed for. This puts pressure on all resources, physical and human and is a major contributing factor in the difficulty prisoners have in accessing education. “The main issue for Greenough and most of the State’s other prisons has been the need to accommodate and provide for a higher number of prisoners with little infrastructure expansion” (OICS, August 2010: iii). At Bunbury “there are significant gaps in program delivery at the prison. The service is not adequately resourced to deliver a sufficient quantity or a wide enough variety of rehabilitative programs.” (OICS, February 2009: 23).

A gap in adequate staffing provision is also a concern. At Acacia a key issue is retention of staff with around 160 people having worked at the education centre between 2001 and the most recent report in 2007. “Morale was low and staff expressed some cynicism about the likelihood of change. Their main concerns were communication with management and resources” (OICS, June 2008: 63-64). At Hakea provision of staffing and resources was not keeping pace with demand and “less funding is now provided for casual tutors (\$127,000 in 2006/2007 and \$104,000 in 2009/2010)”(OICS, June 2010: 75) A similar pattern was found at Karnet where the education ‘centre’ had received its first upgrade since being opened in 1963 when the prison housed only 60 prisoners. The current prison population at Karnet, as can be seen in Table 1, is 234 prisoners. The upgrade consisted of the “addition of a transportable building containing two classrooms and an office space.... even with the new extension, the reality is that the education centre is still too small to cope with the needs of the prisoner group at Karnet.” (OICS, September 2010b: 33).

While there are many dedicated and quality staff working in prisons, they are doing so under significant resourcing pressures which “cause the under resourcing of employment, training and general education initiatives...[and] demonstrably inadequate infrastructure’ (OICS, September 2010b: iii-iv). Another pressure on education provision is the tendency to employ education staff on casual and fixed term contracts (OICS, September 2010a: 63-64; OICS, September 2010b: 33; OICS, September 2009: 24; OICS July 2008a: 20). It is not difficult to understand that planning and implementation of strong education programs that cater for a diversity of individual needs would be easier said than done in these circumstances.

Despite these difficulties the OICS notes that education at some individual prisons, such as Boronia (January, 2010), Bandyup (December 2008) and Albany (April 2009b), were professionally delivered, of a high quality and provided a high level of satisfaction amongst prisoners. At Boronia “94 per cent of respondents to the pre-inspection resident survey expressed satisfaction with their

access to education. Moreover, residents ranked education and training first in the top five positives about life at Boronia.” (OICS, January 2010: 14). Though there was such positive feedback from Boronia, there was still a challenge. There were no full-time face-to-face courses provided. The prison population is small and there is also a reliance on both external providers and work based learning. In this environment the risk was that the needs of women with general education priorities might be overlooked (OICS, January 2010: 14). Potentially this could impact significantly on Aboriginal prisoners. In addition, Boronia has a low level of Aboriginal inmates (see Table 1). This means that Aboriginal women miss out on the quality of facilities provided at this prison.

At Casuarina a “sensible though a short term unsustainable approach to managing restricted resources” (OICS, September 2010a: x-xi) has been adopted that prioritises education provision for trainees, those close to release and those with a low level of literacy. This has been the case since 2007. Most of the training provided at Casuarina was noted to be in units in workplace safety. In 2010 beds were provided for 256 extra prisoners (OICS, September 2010a: 37). There were at that time no “human resource or infrastructure plans to increase Casuarina’s education capacity” (OICS, September 2010a: xi) to keep pace with this growth. Therefore, the education centre at a prison which currently has a population of 604 could only cater for a maximum of 60 students at any one time, due to a lack of toilet facilities (OICS, September 2010a: 66). Full time education was no longer an option due to a lack of facilities and, at the time of the inspection, 160 prisoners were not involved in any employment or education programs at all in Casuarina (OICS, September 2010a: 64).

Unfortunately, where gaps exist it is most frequently Aboriginal prisoners who miss out. Bandyup was, for example, praised by the Inspector for the quality of what was provided, however infrastructure limited the ability of the prison to diversify more. A life skills course for Aboriginal women had been identified as a need but could not be implemented as there was no kitchen for it to happen in (OICS December 2008: 56). Similarly, at Casuarina, a numeracy and literacy program provided largely for Aboriginal prisoners was unsuccessful in securing ongoing funding. This coincided, in early 2009, with the cessation of the Indigenous Tuition Assistance Scheme, “which provided part-time students with the option of individual tuition and educational support,” (OICS, September 2010a: 67). The value of investment in education for prisoners is without doubt. Education has been shown to be twice as effective as prison building in reducing future crime (Steurer et al, 2010: 41). It is a false economy not to provide quality educational facilities and opportunities as a priority.

Gap 2 Access to current technology – an essential for the twenty first century

One of the glaring difficulties for delivering relevant and timely education to our present day prisoners is the antiquity of the technology for learning in prisons. Today's world is very much an information technology world but Western Australian prisoner's are not permitted any internet access, with security cited as the reason for this.

The 2010 Karnet report exemplifies the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services' concern at the government's decision to withdraw all personal computers from prisoner's cells in all prisons across Western Australia. External studies then became very difficult at University and TAFE. The report notes that if such prohibition continues there will be a need for prisons to provide study space, enough computers and "additional education staff hours will be required to supervise and support these prisoners. Note that these comments are true of every prison in the state" (OICS September 2010b: 32). There do not appear to be any plans to change departmental policy on this matter any time soon.

The Custodial Inspector, in his report on Boronia Pre-release centre notes that the lack of access to appropriate computer facilities "particularly impacts upon tertiary students". He goes on to describe how

"They are not permitted to access the Internet ... are only allowed to use floppy disks for information storage and management of work files; these are anachronistic, unreliable and inefficient. The Campus Manager accesses the Internet at home on behalf of students. However, this is not only an inefficient use of the manager's time, but also can frequently result in less fruitful Internet searches because of the lack of specific and personal familiarity with the materials, academic requirements and content of certain courses. Fundamentally, such restrictions fly in the face of re-entry and continued study. The Department should customise its security policies to suit the different needs of Boronia as a re-entry facility and the respective risks posed by the residents therein" (OICS, January 2010: 15).

It is indeed difficult to imagine building research skills in the twenty first century without the ability to link with university websites, search engines or academic data bases on line. It is also difficult to imagine writing assignments with only limited computer access and no personal computers permitted in cells.

Reporting on Casuarina the Inspector noted that "the pursuit of external education has been further challenged across the prison estate with the withdrawal from prisoners of their personal computers.

This has disproportionately impacted upon prisoners in the SHU and Infirmary, and to a lesser extent protection prisoners, because communal computers have also been withdrawn. Unlike those in mainstream, prisoners in these areas cannot even access communal computers in the education centre” (OICS, September 2010a: 67) Again, those most disadvantaged are even further hampered. In the same report it is also noted that the Local Area Network at Casuarina was not fully operational which was “preventing IT students from completing their qualifications, and creating inefficiencies for teachers because they are unable to mark work without students present” (OICS, September 2010a: 67).

Even at Bandyup, where programs were seen to be run very well, more computers were required to support adult education (OICS, December 2008 : 56). Acacia provided eight computers for seven hundred and fifty prisoners which is “woefully inadequate and comparable with the very worst examples we have seen”. (OICS, June 2008: 62).

In addition, the audio and video conferencing facilities that could also provide a potential avenue for prisoners to connect with lecturers, tutors or tutorials is so around ten years old and unreliable, with no budget allowance for its update in the next budget, according to the information provided by the Department of Justice to the state Parliamentary Inquiry into Prisoner Transport on Monday June 14, 2010 in Perth. The department also seems wary of introducing Skype for long distance visits, which impact most on Aboriginal prisoners who are out of country. A request to the Department of Corrections by Acacia Prison for example, was forwarded to the State Solicitor’s Office, though why they did this was not clear. The Inspector concludes by saying that “Western Australia’s inertia compares very poorly with many Asian countries. In countries such as Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong, “E-visits” over the internet are commonplace and similar initiatives are being rolled out in Thailand” (OICS, June 2008: 42). As far as I am aware, Skype is still not utilised in prisons in this state.

Addressing information technology needs in the twenty first century may seem obvious, however O’Brien (2010: 57) sees technology for learning as the next frontier to be overcome in prisoner education and that “the future challenge will be to increase access to Internet-based services that can reduce the risk of reoffending while working within security and public safety limitations.” She sees this as a challenge for governments as it will “take some political courage and goes against the risk-averse nature of successive governments’ approaches to prison policy”.

Gap 3 Provision of innovative training programs

Albany prison provides an example of how it is possible to develop and implement new, innovative courses. The education centre keeps a list of areas of interest along with ideas from both prisoners

and tutors. New courses are drawn from this list with an example given of a request for chainsaw training so that trees could be safely pruned. This was organised within three weeks with TAFE and started within four weeks. (OICS April, 2009b: 27)

One of the issues faced at Albany, and reiterated in other OICS reports, is the amount of hours available in a day for constructive work or learning. At Albany it is, at best 5.5 hours, with one and a half hours shut down for lunch (OICS April, 2009b: 24). At Acacia only 4.45 hours was provided for vocational work and education (OICS, June 2008, :62). Such short hours can make it difficult for trainees to complete the number of hours required for a qualification. Sometimes too, the value of education is not shared by all staff at a prison. This is noted at Hakea, for example, where education is viewed as something to be done by education staff in the education centre (OICS, June 2010 : 73).

At Greenough, Roebourne, Broome and Eastern Goldfields prisons an opportunity is being missed to develop cultural programs for Aboriginal women. The female prison population is usually at or close to 100 per cent Aboriginal in these prisons and there is no reason for education not to have a cultural focus and be developed with the input of Elders, prisoners and community. The OICS suggests, for example, that Greenough Prison consider provision of parent education programs as this would be of benefit to parents in prison (OICS, August 2010: 13).

An innovation that Bunbury have shown to be possible is for prisoners to become teachers in the prison setting (OICS, February 2009: 24) where a music program is run and delivered by prisoners. Many of the OICS reports comment on difficulty finding productive ways to fill in the hours of each day for prisoners. Therefore, innovations such as inclusion of peer tutoring should be more fully explored and acknowledged. Bunbury Prison also utilises flexible delivery in order for people to achieve full qualifications and the OICS applauding what can be achieved with an innovative approach. Bunbury Prison education centre staff feel strongly supported by local management and the prison superintendent. Unfortunately “the relationship with head office management was more problematic. Education staff were concerned that head office do not support the different practices instituted at Bunbury. However, it is these innovative practices that have enabled the Bunbury education centre to achieve such outstanding results” (OICS, February 2009: 25).

The metro centric approach of the department is elsewhere questioned in other reports by the OICS as a potential barrier to innovative positive, outcomes for Aboriginal people. At Greenough, for example, the usefulness of focusing on provision of nationally credited units of competency is questioned by the OICS. “It will be necessary to assess whether such nationally accredited units

are flexible enough to allow Aboriginal prisoners at Greenough to tailor their education and skill development in ways that are best suited to their communities post-release....For Aboriginal people from remote areas, one might also question the extent to which any of the employment activities at Greenough are likely to prepare them for employment after release” (OICS, August 2010: 38). Having employment as the major indicator of success could, in fact, be at odds with what prisoners value most. Though it is not clear what Western Australian Indigenous prisoners value most, or if anyone has actually asked them this question, prisoner students in the USA have been found to perceive success more intrinsically rather than being about only getting a job (Smiling Hall & Killacky, 2008: 308).

Prisoners at Eastern Goldfields questioned the usefulness of what was offered, saying to an OICS inspection team that the courses offered to them were “generally irrelevant to their needs and very limited in scope” (OICS, July 2008a: 19). The report subsequently recommended that ‘Education courses should be developed that are directly related to the lifeskills required by prisoners upon release’ and that an outcome be that prisoners develop an understanding of government (OICS, July 2008a: 26). Provision of such non-accredited personal development and general education is the focus of a course provided in Hawaiian prisons. The course *E Holomua MeKa 'Ike Pono (Go Forward with Correct Knowledge)* (Keahiolalo-Karasuda, 2008) was developed by an Indigenous Hawaiian woman alongside Indigenous prisoners and ex-prisoners. It aims to build confidence and the ability to participate more fully in the structures of our world with a fuller knowledge of settlement, colonialism and the structures that help create disadvantage. There is room for development of such a program in Western Australia; by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people.

Students do not always complete educational courses in prison. The OICS notes that a major reason for this was the short time spent in prison by many prisoners (OICS, September 2009: 24; July 2008a: 20). Short term imprisonment is common for Aboriginal people so the kinds of education offered needs to be flexible enough to provide useful opportunity for growth and perhaps the ability to articulate into other institutions upon leaving. It is apparent that one size will not fit all for regional, remote and metro prisoners.

The aforementioned reliance on casual and part time staff also inhibits the ability to develop innovative offerings. Again, Aboriginal prisoners can be even more affected by inadequate staffing. For example, at Eastern Goldfields prison the 0.5 Aboriginal Education Worker position had been vacant “for some time” (OICS, July 2008a: 20). With recruitment processes controlled from Perth it was difficult for the local remote prisons to act swiftly to secure suitable staff, who were then often snapped up elsewhere before the long process was completed in Perth.

The lack of ongoing professional development for staff and their isolation from the broader training sector can also hinder program development and improvement. Woorooloo is one example of this where “the ongoing professional development and skills training of staff was not happening – unless it was for administration or security training with...little or no attention to moderation meetings outside of campus” (OICS, September 2009: 23). At Boronia, training was being provided for the 20 residents who work in the horticulture area each day. They were not, however receiving credit for what they learned because the Vocational Support Officer (VSO) did not have a suitable qualification. No alternative assessor had been arranged. “This group predominantly comprises Aboriginal women who would particularly benefit from accredited learning. There seems to be no reasonable argument for allowing this situation to continue” (OICS, January 2010: 16).

Gap 4 A focus on cultural education

Even where there have been attempts to provide culturally relevant programs for Aboriginal Prisoners, they have not often been successful. At Casuarina, for example, almost 50 per cent of Casuarina’s prisoners are usually Aboriginal. Many of these are held ‘out of country’ which means it is impossible to connect with family or cultural supports from home. Even in this situation the cultural needs of Aboriginal people are not addressed, as the following reveals. At Casuarina there was

- “proportionately higher levels of unemployment and under employment;
- a lack of ongoing cultural awareness training for staff;
- a diet familiar to prisoners not being routinely or regularly provided;
- resources in the form of an Aboriginal Education Worker not being allocated in proportion to the numbers of prisoners at Casuarina;
- ‘out of country’ prisoners in Unit 1 lacking an accessible cultural space in which they felt comfortable; and
- the Displaced Aboriginal Prisoners (DAP) program ... not delivering on stated intentions”

(OICS, September 2010a: ix).

At Bunbury prison (OICS, February 2009: 13) Aboriginal prisoners expressed a desire for access to cultural learning. The Inspector saw that this could be an opportunity for developing a Nyoongar cultural learning program as Aboriginal men in this prison are usually Nyoongar. As yet it does not appear that this is occurring.

The prison environment may not allow, physically, for cultural needs to be met. At Roebourne prison, for example, women’s participation in education was limited because the prison design did

not allow for the following of cultural rules that dictated women could not mix with men from different families. “In practice this means that if an inappropriate’ male is in the education centre, the women will not attend” (OICS, February, 2011: 78). There was no cultural meeting place for women at Greenough prison at the time of the OICS visit though this was being planned. Hopefully it does not meet the fate of the cultural centre planned and built for Casuarina that was needing to be utilised as an education centre for all prisoners due to the lack of facilities available for education (OICS, September 2010a: 53-54). Greenough did not provide any cultural aboriginal programs such as language, stories and music. “As an Aboriginal prison this is a serious omission” (OICS, August 2010: 16). Acacia prison is criticised for having under developed Aboriginal policies and strategies with a weak range of courses (OICS, June 2008: 68).

Accurate awareness raising and education about the role of colonialism in constructing the present reality for Indigenous prisoners has been identified as a key component in success for Indigenous prisoners upon release from prison (Keahiolalo-Karasuda, 2008). Keahiolalo-Karasuda’s PhD research included development of a prisoner re-entry curriculum “to advance community access and civic participation, as well as to increase cultural and political literacy among prisoners (2008: 2). A similar approach has been taken with juvenile detainees in a partnership between community volunteers and Camosun College in Canada. Here too the detainees learn about the history of colonisation as well as their culture (Williams, 2011). These programs provide opportunities for Indigenous people to learn from other Indigenous people; be supported by other Indigenous people to effectively re-enter the broader community.

This type of curriculum, developed by an Indigenous person and based on the participant’s needs and interests is not fostered in WA prison education. It could very well be explored, with ownership actually given to people in identifying and meeting their own needs. It is also important to remember that education is defined in part as an enlightening experience (Oxford Dictionary of English Online). To provide cultural education for prisoners could indeed be enlightening by assisting to build much needed self-confidence and self-awareness.

“Cultural awareness training” is also targeted by the Custodial Inspector as needing to be addressed more adequately (OICS, September 2010a; OICS, August 2010). The staff at Greenough prison “had concluded that the Department’s training package was too metropolitan focused and was not culturally appropriate for the prisoners held at Greenough” (OICS, August 2010: 34). While, at the largest metropolitan prison the Inspector concludes that “despite the very high numbers of Aboriginal prisoners, this inspection found that little training in culturally appropriate custodial management had been provided to staff” (OICS, September 2010a: 49). In the same report Prison Support Officer (PSO) staff at Casuarina had spoken to the Inspector

of the need for ongoing cross cultural training and the perceived ignorance of many custodial staff of what is and is not culturally appropriate.

If there is to be an education revolution in prisons it will have to include reform of the system itself. Systemic reform in the justice system was recommended over 20 years ago by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991). For “gaps” to be closed the holes in knowledge, understanding and awareness of non-Indigenous people also need attention. The term “cultural awareness” does not accurately express what is needed as it implies learning about how something is “different” or a curiosity. Eckerman et al(2006: 166-169) believe that cultural awareness is stage one of a three stage process required to reach a point where all people feel respected. The second stage is moving from awareness to cultural sensitivity. The third and final stage is that of cultural safety. To only provide learning and training only at the first stage of cultural awareness does not challenge institutions or individuals to increase awareness of their own assumptions and prejudices. Therefore, I believe that the OICS reports for custodial officers and prison staff in terms of training in working effectively with Aboriginal people. Cultural awareness and appropriate listening to Aboriginal people is a way of being, not a “skill set” (Carnes, 2011: 180).

Gap 5 Access to education

Aboriginal people have long struggled with access to education in Western Australia. In the past it was the case that Aboriginal children could be excluded from school for no other reason than the request of a white parent (Neville, 1947: 13, 149; Beresford, 2003; 46-47). Beresford believes that this situation continued, in reality, until the 1970’s.

Education was the domain of each state until the 1967 referendum saw the Federal government step in to take on special responsibility in the area of Indigenous affairs, including education. Beresford (2003; 62-68) provides an impressive list of actions that were implemented to reform Indigenous Education during the 1970’s, including things such as establishing advisory committees, attempting to provide culturally relevant programs and employment of specialist advisors. Unfortunately, as he notes, this impressive list remained little more than words on paper with Aboriginal employees isolated in departments and able to have little real influence on what was happening in schools. The “gaps” in the knowledge, understanding and actions of the colonial education institution remained little changed.

In WA prisons in the twenty first century there continues to be a gap in access to programs and courses for Aboriginal prisoners. Roebourne prison, for example, is described by the Inspector as

impoverished in terms of personnel and resources “ and given that its population is invariably 90 per cent or more Aboriginal equity considerations arise that the Office should always treat as a prominent theme in its work” (OICS, April 2008: 2). Women were the most disadvantaged at Roebourne prison, and all women in this prison are currently Aboriginal (Department of Corrective Services. (May 26, 2011). While education services were not openly denied there were only limited opportunities for women to access them. Though the Inspector had, in the 2007 report, called for provision of services to women at Roebourne to be at the same level offered at Bandyup Women’s prison in Perth, little had changed by 2011. “Unfortunately, the 2010 inspection revealed that little progress had been made for women prisoners at Roebourne over the past ten years. Despite some improvements to departmental policies for women prisoners in the regions, the services available to women at Roebourne Regional Prison remain impoverished”(OICS, February 2011: 27).

In a similar vein of disadvantage to female Aboriginal prisoners, a teacher from the education centre at Greenough was visiting the women’s section three mornings a week, “significantly less than the full time access to education enjoyed by male prisoners” (OICS, August 2010: 13). Table 1 reveals that the lowest representation of Aboriginal prisoners are in the better resourced prisons that are set up to assist with education for re-entry. On May 26, 2011 the figures were 11.1 per cent at Karnet Prison Farm and 12.5 per cent at Boronia pre-release centre. Such low figures at these prisons represents a lack of opportunity to access the highest quality offerings of education and further reflects lack of equal access for Aboriginal prisoners. To address this inequity is not as simple as sending more Aboriginal prisoners to Karnet and Boronia. It also requires improvement of facilities and offerings at all prisons so that those in the large metro prisons and the regional prisons (largely Aboriginal people) are not disadvantaged.

Completion rates, once courses had been accessed, were equal to or slightly higher than completion rates for non-Aboriginal students. For example, at Casuarina, “Aboriginal students’ completion rates were 63 per cent as compared with 60 per cent among their non- Aboriginal counterparts” (OICS, September 2010a: 51). Unfortunately, lack of resourcing and overcrowding made education access difficult. At Casuarina there was likely to be between 250 and 300 aboriginal prisoners at any one time. One Aboriginal Education Worker delivered the Aboriginal programs for all these people. The OICS recommended a second position be filled, which would also help with “addressing the generally narrow focus of current educational provision, with its attention overly weighted in favour of safety education and training” (OICS, September 2010a: 51). Overall, Casuarina offered an example of trying to stretch limited resources around more and more prisoners. “While there is an appearance of service delivery and a small number of people receive the sort of education and training service that would be expected, most prisoners in reality receive

little or no access to education and training beyond an initial assessment and some safety training” (OICS, September 2010a: 68) .

The situation at Acacia revealed another issue of overcrowding and under resourcing that impacted on access to education. The library contained a rather limited range of books and the prison needed “an improvement in the range and level of educational offerings” (OICS, June 2008: 63). When prison populations rise so does the need to provide more courses and the infrastructure and staffing to support that. To simply try to do more and more with no injection of resources fails to offer prisoners opportunities for rehabilitation to avoid re-offending and returning to prison again.

Closing the Gap(s) – a whiteness perspective

Whiteness is a social construct, not a physical characteristic. Aileen Moreton-Robinson defined whiteness as “the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and law” (2004: vii). Whiteness is invisible yet all pervasive, establishes conditions that privilege non-Indigenous people (bell hooks 1994; 2009; Gillborn 2009; Ladson-Billings 2009, Moreton-Robinson 2003; Riggs 2004: 2007) and leads to a cultural deafness that does not consider the legitimacy of other worldviews (Carnes, 2011: 171).

To begin dealing with the cultural deafness and start addressing the gaps identified in this paper, I suggest privileging Aboriginal voices on Aboriginal issues, developing and utilising Aboriginal definitions of “the gap” and moving beyond closing the gap by absorption, each of which is briefly addressed below.

Privileging Aboriginal voices

Wilson and Reuss (2003), when grappling with the challenges that face education in prisons, highlight the importance of “listening to prisoners”. As they note; “it seems to us that any assessment of the role of education in our prisons should not be undertaken without taking their [prisoner’s] views into account” (2003, p 176).

The need to “listen to Aboriginal people” was one of eight suggestions made by Professor Neil Morgan, Inspector of Custodial Services in Western Australia in his closing address to the April, 2009 WA Justice Conference held in Fremantle. The need for the voices and active inclusion of Indigenous people in planning of education programs had previously been noted by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991). The Royal Commission made twelve recommendations targeting education, especially with regard to the education needs of Aboriginal people, most of which have not been addressed.

The OICS recommended that Indigenous services committees/reference groups be established in prisons (OICS, July 2008; 27). This recommendation has not been implemented consistently across the state, with most prisons having either no such group or groups that faltered (OICS, September 2009: 36; February 2011; 64; August 2010; 22). Without such groups the goals, processes and desired outcomes of prisons and prisoner education are based on those of the white majority. The natural consequence of this is advantage for non-Indigenous prisoners and disadvantage for Indigenous prisoners. To explore exactly what such privileging of Aboriginal voices may look like in practice is beyond the scope of this paper, but is central to addressing of “gaps” and needs to be noted as such here.

Aboriginal definitions of “the gap”

It is well documented that there are unique cultural, language and individual needs to be met in Aboriginal education (Beresford and Partington, 2003; Malin, 1998; Munns, 1993). These needs extend to the arena of prisoner education (Ekstedt, 1988; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991; Semmens, 1998). As long ago as 1988 Ekstedt reported, “Without doubt, the most problematic element of prison education in Western Australia is the attempt to provide a programme of relevance to the large number of Aboriginal prisoners” (1988: 86).

It is also apparent that the “gap” has been, and continues to be, defined by those with the most privilege in our culture; the colonising institutions. The gap is defined as one for Aboriginal people to step up to the plate and “get over”, rather than a gap between world views and ways of seeing, believing, acting and doing. Historically, Aboriginal people have always been educated, just differently and for different purposes. These purposes included spirituality which helped provide the focus and unity to education which was holistic, not siloed as in white schooling traditions (Welch, 1998: 207).

For too long Aboriginal education has remained exclusively in the hands of the colonizers who have had varying bases from which education has been provided to Aboriginal people. These have included, ignorance and disdain, separation, assimilation, integration and self determination (Welch, 1998: 208). The impact of this history continues to be felt in our policy making and development of processes and programs across the education sector.

Despite numerous Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies and Indigenous Support Units at State and Federal level since the mid 1970’s, lack of funding and insufficient infrastructure to effectively conduct and evaluate consultations at a community level has hindered progress.

Indigenous employees and members of such groups are “pulled in all directions to deal with every problem in relation to Indigenous education such as resolving parent/school conflicts to dealing with requests for a school bus to facilitating cross-cultural training for teachers.” (Bin-Sallick & Smallacombe”, 2003: 35-36).

In the twenty first century, non-Indigenous people still have the largest say in what, how and why Indigenous people are educated and, while this continues to be the norm, conflict will occur as will an outcome of ongoing injustice for Aboriginal people (Chalmers, 2005:162). Beresford reports that Tatz (1999, 85) believed conflict, anger and the high ongoing representation of young people in the justice system is due in no small part to the lives of most Aboriginal people having been dictated by the decisions and wishes of others (Beresford, 2005: 199). It is possible that constantly living lives that are dictated by the decisions and wishes of others also contributes to the reason for the “gap” in educational outcomes.

Moving beyond closing the gap by absorption

Neville (Commonwealth of Australia, 1937: 11).speaks of the importance of education in assisting Aboriginal people to be educated to be “absorbed into the general community...and educated at least to the three R;s. If they can read, write and count, and know what wages they should get and how to enter into an agreement with an employer that is all that should be necessary”. David Wallace Adams (1995) refers to this kind of policy in the United States as “education for extinction”. Education within in state institutions and residential schools, such as Sister Kate’s Children’s Home (Haebich & Delroy, 1999, 40) was the vehicle for becoming more white and less “native”; for the “rescue of near whites” as the Commissioner of Native Affairs pointed out in 1941 (Haebich & Delroy, 1999: 40). As ‘Malcolm’ says, “... they basically just ignored the fact that we were Aboriginal. We were being brought up as whites and to live in a white society” (Haebich & Delroy, 1999: 53).

In prisons in 2011, prisoners are still subjected to a form of residential education that prepares them to live in a white society and basically ignores Aboriginality. The training is decided upon and determined in format and need by the white majority, not the Aboriginal communities. There is little in the way of Aboriginal owned, developed, implemented and determined re-entry programs such as those referred to earlier that are in operation in Hawaii (Keahiolalo-Karusada, 2008) and Canada (Williams, 2011). These programs are based upon a belief that it is vital for Indigenous people to be in touch with who they are and the strengths that can be found in their own cultural world view. These strengths can assist in staying strong on re-entry and going forward from a powerful position.

Unfortunately there is no mention of such an approach in *“Making our Prisons Work Inquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of prisoner education, training and employment strategies”* (Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, 2010). There is no mention of the centrality of spirituality to traditional Aboriginal ways of life that many Elders still speak of needing today. Spirituality is central to learning in Indigenous cultures around the globe and has been noted as a core element of Indigenous life (Williams, 2007). Based on Grande (2000:356) and Huff (1997:71) Table 2 highlights the boundary needing to be bridged between a white approach to education and an Indigenous approach.

The Issue	White Way	Indigenous Way
Education’s central question is	Democracy and greater equality	Sovereignty Self-determination
Relationship with natural environment is	Manipulation of natural environment	Collaboration with natural environment
Institutions	Support competition	Support co-operation
Accepted behaviour	Is competitive Individual at centre	Is collaborative Community at centre
World crisis is	Economic	Spiritual
Scholars focus on	Intellectual-political	Mind/body/spirit

Table 2: Tensions in ‘white’ and Indigenous approaches to education

(adapted from Grande 2000: 356 and Huff, 1997:71)

These differences are apparent in the way our colonial education system is established, with the ultimate competition being who can secure a “good job”. The “gap” in Indigenous education is being defined, addressed and evaluated by the economic, intellectual, white agenda and the boundary to an Indigenous viewpoint not crossed. The focus remains on absorption into a white world.

Much has been made of the extent of sub-functional literacy levels amongst Aboriginal prisoners which is true and does deserve attention. However, it is crucial to remember that, while “42 per cent of Aboriginal students assessed at Bandyup were at sub-functional literacy levels compared with 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal students” (OICS, December 2008: 57) 58 per cent would be functional or higher”. While it is important to ensure literacy is provided it is just as essential that the majority receive quality education at a variety of levels. This should include the option to study

at higher education level, accessing alternative entry programs where possible. The type of learning required at higher education level “comprehensively affects the thoughts, values and behaviours of student-prisoners” and has a greater impact on recidivism than other forms of education (Batiuk et al, 2005; 60).

Inherent tensions and struggles that perpetuate the gaps

Many of the writers on prison education, such as Ekstedt, 1987; Forster, 1998; Smiling Hall and Killacky, 2008; de Maeyer, 2005; O'Brien, 2010; Semmens, 1998; Slater 1994-1995; Wilson and Reuss, 2000 and Warner, 2005, either allude or refer directly to the inherent tensions between the purposes of education and imprisonment. This is described by Ekstedt (1987, 82) when he says, “The education experience proceeds best (particularly for adults) in an atmosphere of free inquiry....It is not possible to imagine an ‘atmosphere of free inquiry’ being fully realised in a closed institution such as a prison.” This sentiment is echoed by de Maeyer, (2005, p 2); “The context does not free one’s mind and does not create an incentive for creativity; it does not encourage the thinking of other ways of living or doing; prison is the place where taking no initiative is considered good behaviour. Even everyday knowledge will be left aside: cooking, organising one’s schedule, distinguishing spare-time from mandatory activities.”

Such experiences are most likely to be exacerbated by a “tough on crime” approach to correctional services. Kevin Warner, Co-ordinator of Education, Prison Education Service, Ireland in addressing the Australasian Corrections Education Association Conference in 2005, considers how views of prisoners, education and learning impact on what options are offered to those who are incarcerated. He concludes as follows:

“there is an obvious tie-in between penal policies that follow the punitive model and the narrower versions of prison or correctional education, which pander to the negative stereotyping of prisoners by limiting the focus to offending behaviour, or which in other ways offer an education service that is less than fully respectful of the whole person. Whether we are dealing with a prisoner in the overall context of the prison, or a learner who happens to be in prison, deficit models – which in each case over-concentrate on what is deemed to be wrong or missing – are to be avoided as far as possible in favour of broader approaches to imprisonment and to education that recognises the common humanity of our fellow-citizens in prison.”

It would appear then that the nature of education in prisons will be dictated by the broader approach to corrections and crime taken by the government and policy makers of the day. In Western Australia this is currently a “tough on crime” approach which, on the face of what is being

purported by de Maeyer, Warner and Ekstedt, does not bode well for this state providing education that achieves the first standard set by Resolution 1990/20 of the UN Economic and Social Council which refers to education in prisons. The first standard states that “Education in prisons should aim at developing the whole person” which is very difficult when the goal of a prison is based on a deficit model of what is missing in the prisoner. “As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education points out, education in prisons is ‘much more than a tool for change, it is an imperative in its own right’” (Coyle, 2009; 93).

A Preamble

It is customary at this stage in an academic paper to write a conclusion. Writing a conclusion implies something is finished and, in this instance, addressing holistic education for Aboriginal prisoners in Australia has barely begun. Therefore, a preamble seems more appropriate here.

The education revolution does not appear to be infiltrating Indigenous prisoner education in Western Australia. Despite the best efforts of dedicated staff, education receives insufficient resources to meet demand. In addition the legacy of white colonisation leaves a one-sided view of what is important and needed for Aboriginal prisoners. Overall this leaves an impression of being more revolting than revolutionary.

For there to be an education revolution it is time for the system to learn from Aboriginal people what helps and hinders education from their perspective. So I now have turned to listen to Aboriginal ex-prisoners whose voices are so absent; absent from the debate and discussion on education, from decision making about what could help their communities, absent from control over implementation of actions in communities and absent from ownership of their own solutions to the problems they have defined. Therefore, the next challenge for me is to continue yarning with Aboriginal ex-prisoners to determine with them what gaps they see and what might fill those gaps to ensure effective education outcomes for them, their families and their communities.

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