

Changing Perceptions: Teaching Literacy in Correctional Facilities

Eighteen years ago, in what feels like another lifetime, I coordinated a program on Vancouver Island for women who had been assaulted by their partners, sexually assaulted, or sexually abused. Many of the women had challenges with reading and writing. My job was to explain how the legal system worked, help them prepare to testify, and accompany them through the trial process. In the context of this work, I provided emotional support and referrals to counselling and other community services. Every day, I saw the impact violence and trauma had on these women's lives. While some were able to pick up the pieces and move on, many felt stuck. Alcohol and drug abuse, depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts, low self-esteem, unresolved grief, anger and rage, and fear of failure were common. For these women, the prospect of finding a job or going back to school seemed an insurmountable task.

More recently as I've been interviewing literacy practitioners, and doing research, I've learned more about the impact of violence and trauma on learning. I heard stories about men and women in the remand centre, people who had committed violent crimes, but were trying to turn their lives around. I heard stories about their vulnerability and their own histories of abuse. I learned that even an hour a week of literacy education can make a difference, and people can and do make huge changes in their lives.

What the Research Says

- People in correctional facilities are three times as likely as the rest of the population to have literacy problems.
- 65 percent of people entering Canadian correctional facilities have less than a grade 8 education.
- 79 percent don't have their high school diploma. (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, 2008)

We know that education and literacy are significant issues for people in correctional facilities who also struggle with the impact of violence and trauma on learning — both the violence they have committed, and their personal life histories of violence. Another factor that adds one more layer of complexity for learners and adult literacy practitioners is the “high prevalence of learning disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, and mental illness among persons in prison” (Brazzell et al. 2009, 8).

Numerous studies have shown a link between prison-based education and literacy programs, and higher rates of successful rehabilitation. A Canadian study found that prison literacy can reduce recidivism by up to 30 percent depending on the level of literacy a person achieves (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, 2008).

For officials and governments, reducing recidivism and the costs of incarceration are of prime concern. “Every dollar allocated to vocational and basic education programs for offenders yields a 200-300% return on investment” (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2012).

For individuals in jails, and the adult literacy practitioners who work with them, educational programming is an act of hope and offers a second chance at life. This is how Stefan LoBuglio, Chief of

Pre-release and Reentry Services in Maryland's Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, puts it:

The whole enterprise of correctional education— the teachers, the volunteers, the classrooms, the books, the computers — helps humanize correctional facilities and plays a key role in relieving inmate stress and frustration by focusing individuals on positive and constructive activities and relationships. Students benefit directly from these programs by improving their skills and knowledge, and staff — particularly correctional officers — benefit from working with individuals who are more cooperative and better adjusted to their circumstances. More than that, educational programs help elevate the mission and professionalism of corrections from one of warehousing individuals to one of preparing individuals for their futures (qtd. in Brazzell et al. 2009, 3).

What Literacy Practitioners Said

Sheri Lockwood, a Bow Valley College literacy practitioner, works at the Calgary Remand Centre with men ranging from eighteen years old to the oldest in his seventies. She teaches a cooking program in the morning and a life management program in the afternoon. The students' skills vary widely. Some are not able to read or write. Others have more education, but still have lower literacy levels. She sees the classroom serving as a sanctuary within the corrections setting.

One of the earliest things that struck me was that one of the fellows said my classroom is a sanctuary for him... Soon after, I attended a Jenny Horsman workshop and watched a video about a group of women that had experienced abuse and family violence. In the video, a woman was talking about the classroom being a sanctuary for them. And all of a sudden I could feel this tear coming down. I got what my learner was telling me. He was an older fellow and hadn't been in jail before. It was a totally foreign environment for him... I realized there is a transition as people come into the classroom, a transition from being a jail person to being a student. A place where you can be yourself and think... I knew I had to trust them, but I didn't realize the degree to which they have to trust me.

She went on to speak about the impact of violence on learning she sees among her students.

Many of these men have experienced historical violence as children. And they will have done violent things to others. I think one of the things we don't always recognize is the impact of having done something violent to somebody else. Especially if the person is looking at their lives and not wanting to be involved in violence any longer... How do you put yourself back together again?

Toni Brown, a literacy practitioner from the John Howard Society, works one-on-one with men and women, also at the Calgary Remand Centre. She said this about her teaching experiences:

Until you really know someone, you don't know how vulnerable they are sometimes. I've probably lost some people because they've been scared. I've learned a lot about the human

piece. I've learned never to assume anything about people. When people can't do their work, you really have to do some exploring around why they're not doing their work. And sometimes people don't understand it themselves. You have to find out what's going on and usually there is a lot... The biggest thing is that learning is about the whole person. A lot of these people I work with are afraid to learn. So sometimes I feel like I can't get to the reading and writing part because I'm working on communication and letting go of that kind of fear.

Sarah MacKenzie and Alyssa Nicholson, with the Calgary Elizabeth Fry Society, work both in the community and in the Calgary Remand Centre running the UNLOCK program for women. UNLOCK (unlocking new levels of capability and knowledge) was created in response to an Inside Out study that identified a need for women's programming targeted at developing skills and making changes in preparation for returning to the community. The program has six key sessions on: communication skills, emotional coping, relationships, boundaries and co-dependency, developing your potential, and goal setting. Nicholson talks about the flexibility and success of the program:

Remand is a different environment in the sense that the clients aren't mandated to attend but often choose to attend every session of the program that they can. Some clients incarcerated in the remand centre may be there for a shorter period of time and only attend one session. We even have clients who take the six sessions over and over again, and they are able to pull new information from every session.

It's clear from the information gathered through my interviews that providing educational programming within a corrections' setting requires practitioners who are conscious, flexible, compassionate, and who have knowledge of adult learning and literacy principles. Whether their clients are victims of violence and/or have committed violent crimes themselves, as learners in these settings they experience unique challenges requiring innovative teaching approaches.

Canadian researcher Dr. Jenny Horsman has done ground-breaking work in exploring the [impact of violence on learning](#). Her uniquely interactive website talks about some of the things that come up when working with learners who have experienced violence:

- **Spacing out or dissociating:** The learner daydreams or goes somewhere else in their mind when violent memories surface.
- **Acting out:** The learner may cause trouble in class, hurt themselves, or use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain and the fear.
- **Escaping into the mind:** The learner stays in her head, doing well in the studies, but feeling disconnected from her body which can result in health issues.
- **Silence:** The learner has difficulty answering questions and is afraid to participate.
- **Lost hope and dreams:** The learner may give up any hopes and dreams, or a belief in a better future.
- **Feeling bad, stupid, and wrong:** The learner may lack self-esteem and avoid learning new things because of a fear of failure. (phrases in bold retrieved from <http://learningandviolence.net/impact.htm>)

When learners walk through the classroom doors they bring their entire life history with them. It's important for practitioners to develop an awareness of the impact that violence and trauma may have had on their lives. Horsman offers these questions to consider:

- Do you know how many students in your program have experienced and/or perpetuated violence?
- What is the fallout in your school or class from different forms of home and societal violence? What have you noticed about the impact of the violence of war and displacement? Poverty? Hurtful early schooling? Several forms of violence combined?
- Do you see ways in which violence diminishes the spirit and increases the likelihood of continuing student setbacks? (retrieved from <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>)

During our interview, Horsman emphasized that adult literacy practitioners are allies to others' learning journey and asked: "How do we create learning environments that have spaciousness and room for exploration, and work really hard at not creating a sense of shame or judgement? How do we help create a sense of curiosity and openness — a place where learning can flourish?"

As Horsman has illustrated, violence takes many forms: domestic abuse, sexual assault, racism, sexism, homophobia, war, displacement, and historical abuse in residential schools. The list is long. Whether the setting is community, college, or corrections, we will meet individuals whose lives have been touched by violence and trauma. As practitioners we "need to examine our own stories and our relationship with violence if we are going to be open to the programming needed for students who have experienced trauma" (Stewart 2009, 10). Stewart speaks about "moving beyond the 'us-them' way of thinking about students' lives as often traumatized and ours as not." Acknowledging our own humanity and our experiences of violence opens the door, and the heart, to greater understanding, benefitting learners and practitioners alike.

References and Resources

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Elizabeth Fry Society of Canada is an association of self-governing, community-based Elizabeth Fry Societies that work with and for women and girls in the justice system, particularly those who are, or may be, criminalized. They work to ensure equality in the delivery and development of services and

programs through public education, research, legislative and administrative reform—regionally, nationally, and internationally. <http://www.caefs.ca/>

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John Howard Society of Canada is an organization of provincial and territorial societies whose goal is to understand and respond to problems of crime and criminal justice. Their work includes advocacy, research, community education, coalition-building, and resource development. <http://www.johnhoward.ca/>

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