

Trends in Correctional Education for Incarcerated Women Reflected in Journal of Correctional Education

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Abstract: Research on correctional education progressed significantly over the past century, yet little research has been done on correctional education for incarcerated women. This article examines how studies of incarcerated women in Journal of Correctional Education from 2000 to 2010 align with Gehring and Wright's new paradigm of the "Cultural Period." Correctional education programs for incarcerated women from 2000 to 2010 focuses on addressing the holistic needs of female offenders, including mental well-being, reestablishing positive connections with family, addressing abuse, vocational training, and motherhood. The characteristics of correctional education for female behind the bars aligns with Gehring and Wright's paradigm model.

1. Introduction

The function of prisons and correctional facilities in the 21st century has extended beyond simply warehousing people. Instead, theories and methods are being constantly proposed and tested regarding how to bring positive changes to people in those institutions. Incarceration not only means physical confinement; it often inflicts mental harm and dehumanization upon members of the prison community [1]. The long-term negative impacts might outweigh the correctional efforts, which betrays the purpose of correctional institutions [2]. Correctional education as a discipline of studies emerged as a response to the harmful influences. It is an important component of the criminal justice system and provides academic, vocational, health, cultural, and social education for people behind the bars [3]. Many participants of correctional education programs found their takeaway beyond mere academic/vocational performance; they were able to stray away from the culture of their membership in gangs and/or participation in criminal activities [4].

It has been twenty years since Gehring and Wright proposed their theory that correctional education fits into a unifying paradigm. Kuhn's paradigm theory states that a field of science undergoes a state of incoherence before anomalies appear and a paradigm forms [5]. Before the late 18th and early 19th century, correctional education theories remained in fragments, and there lacked any commonly agreed models and principles [5]. Anomalies appeared as correctional education leaders began to appreciate that students in correctional institutions could take responsibility of their education [5]. Correctional education has encountered a crisis during the Cold War era when educators were in disaccord as in its first stage [5]. From the late 1980s, a new paradigm formed with focus on more democratic and humanitarian approaches towards correctional education, emphasizing on accounting for the needs of the incarcerated community based on gender, culture, and their connections with the community outside the prison wall [5]. Gehring and Wright characterized that stage of change as the "Cultural Period." A transition from restorative justice to retributive justice is suggested by many educators. Distinct from the traditional definition of crime as a violation of the state, retributive justice emphasizes on repairing the violation of one person by another [4]. This article will examine how studies of incarcerated women in Journal of Correctional Education from 2000 to 2010 align with Gehring and Wright's new paradigm of the "Cultural Period."

2. Women in Correctional Facilities

Women are a rapidly increasing prison population in the 21st century yet received little public attention. Correctional education programs has focused preliminarily on men before [6]. Although incarcerated female is significantly smaller in size than male, their unique needs were often unmet. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 75% of incarcerated female are mothers prior to their arrests [7], and the impact on the family has become an increasingly critical issue [6]. Studies show that children with an incarcerated parent is five times more prone to incarceration than a child whose parents do not have experience behind bars [6]. And these children are more likely to experience unstable family life, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and inadequate learning conditions [7]. For incarcerated mothers, an important objective is to reestablish healthy connections with their children; yet, this is challenging to many without help from professionals. Legal issues regarding their children might also present a challenge to incarcerated parents who are unfamiliar with their rights and responsibility as parents [7]. Further, around 85 percent of female are convicted from offenses surrounding direct or indirect illegal drug use, yet only 15 percent received help from drug treatment programs because of budget shortage [6]. However, drug treatment instead of prison based confinement would be more effective for female offenders. Finally, incarcerated female are more affected by emotional turbulence, abuse, and low self-esteem than their male counterparts (Davis 80). Traditional correctional education programs that emphasize academic and vocational training do not account for these conditions.

Vocational training equips women with skills to support their children upon release and overcome economic marginalization. Historically, vocational programs focused primarily on training women for gender-stereotyped roles [6]. Some vocational programs were not available to both genders, and women's correctional institutions were significantly more likely to be provide trainings in technical and sales and service occupations, which pay lower than traditional male occupations [6]. Although some institutions made available a diverse class of trainings for incarcerated women, most correctional facilities still offered traditional programs that failed to meet the level of need [6]. Furthermore, other practical factors beyond vocational skills played significant roles in determining the success of job seeking and reintegration. Women returning to their communities post incarceration needed housing and welfare assistance which became less accessible to individual with criminal records and drug offenses [6]. In many cases, vocational programs in most correctional facilities created a false promise to successful reintegration as they failed to account for these practical needs of incarcerated women.

3. Holistic Approaches to Female Oriented Programs

Programs designed to address the holistic needs of female offenders work in conjunction with academic programs. They focus on providing emotional and physical safety, establishing healthy relationships, assisting with substance abuse, and addressing sexuality including pregnancy and sexuality [8]. An important aspect of these programs is to listen to the female "voice" within correctional institutions and individualize based on the needs of the participants.

A correctional facility for juvenile female offenders in the states of Iowa uses a team model in which all students, staff, school faculty, and administration are considered stakeholders in the program. The participants are asked to assess their institution on emotional and physical safety providing and whether the programming is culturally appropriate [8]. It's interesting that the assessment's criteria focus on personal well-being and diversity, instead of attributes related to traditional perception of learning. The assessment concludes that the highest priorities are to provide emotional and physical safety, provide relationship based programs, address abuse, be strength-based, and to nurture the spiritual lives of participants [8]. Similarly, the Eddie Warrior Correctional Center (EWCC) in Oklahoma aims at using holistic approach to address needs of its female offenders. Important aspects of its mission includes providing a nurturing atmosphere and encouraging personal investment, so as to promote positive relationships, and to encourage leadership among students [6].

Aside from female oriented programs, a study by Mageehon gives insights for correctional educators from incarcerated women's experience during k-12 education. The researcher interviewed five women in a county jail with open-ended questions regarding their educational experience, their experience within the jail classroom, and their relationship with prison staff and social supporters [9]. All of the five women completed or nearly completed their GED [10]. Mageehon concludes that women's positive educational experiences, such as developing passion for reading, encouragement from teachers, might serve as an incentive for them to continue education during adulthood [9]. While frequent moving, unconcerned teachers, crisis moments such as abuse, and the responsibility of taking care of children prevented them from succeeding in the classroom [9]. Mageehon points out that correctional educators might be able to encourage their students by recalling their positive experience with schooling, while they should be attentive to the students' psychological issues relating to sexual or emotional abuse [9].

These programs focus on listening to voices of all stakeholders and identifying what is important. Eventually, the programs aim at providing an understanding for both the students and educators and a strategy leading social changes for incarcerated female. The female oriented programs align with Gehring and Wright's description of the new paradigm. As programs account for female offenders' special needs—namely, emotional well-being, establishing healthy relationships, and sexuality—they not only help the individuals but also attempt to bring positive changes to the inequality faced by all female [5].

4. Parenting Education for Incarcerated Mothers

Given the impact incarceration might have on families, incarcerated parents are pressed with the question of how to stay connected, repair past mistakes, and build healthy relationships with their children from afar. A parenting curriculum for incarcerated mothers identified two problematic ways of communication that are very common among them [7]. One way of communication is maintaining little contact with their children, because incarcerated mothers might believe their absence has little effect on parenthood, or they are burdened with guilt that they could do nothing for their children [7]. On the other hand, mothers are passionate about getting back the children once they get out of prison regardless of whether their children are ready for this change, not to mention many custody issues [7]. After 12 workshop sessions, the curriculum resulted in significant improvement of parenting attitude and knowledge as well as a desire to maintain their relationships with their children [7]. The parenting program reflects some aspects of retributive justice. As incarceration negatively impact the family and children, female offenders attempt to repair and minimize the harm with appropriate measures.

5. Limitations

Research on correctional education programs for incarcerated women is limited due to the relatively small number of female offenders and those who have participated in special programs. The limited sample size inhibits researchers from drawing conclusion for a larger population. Furthermore, although with correctional education programs, female offenders often experience lower self-esteem comparing to their male counterparts [10]. This is manifested by a fear of being labeled as "ex-criminals" and shying away from closest family members because of a sense of guilt [10]. Many participants report that correctional programs only offer training for traditionally female occupations [10], and they find materials provided within prisons often outdated. There is a gap between what correctional education programs teach and what is needed for employment outside prisons [10]. The situation raises the consideration of whether female-orientated programs have confined female offenders in narrow career niches because of their uniqueness. Admittedly, programs for incarcerated women receive less funding and resources than those for the general prison population.

6. Conclusion

Correctional education programs for incarcerated women from 2000 to 2010 aim to address the holistic needs of female offenders including mental well-being, establishing positive connections with family, addressing abuse, and motherhood. By listening to the female voices within correctional facilities, correctional educators are able to identify what is important for the participants and address social justice. The attributes of correctional education for women is aligned with Gehring and Wright's characterization of the "Cultural Period." Aspects of retributive justice is incorporated in parenting education as mothers attempt to repair and reestablish their relationship with their children. However, the implication of those female-orientated programs on a larger incarcerated population is unknown due to the limited sample size. And participants' experience post-release raises the question of whether female-orientated programs confine female offenders in narrow career niches because of their uniqueness. New studies on these questions might lead to a new paradigm within correctional education.

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