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Addressing Education, Training, and Employment Supports for Prisoners With Cognitive Disability: Insights from an Australian Programme

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Abstract

The provision of appropriate education, training, and employment supports for incarcerated people is pivotal to mitigating the risk of recidivism, to improving rehabilitative outcomes, and to securing employment upon release. People with cognitive disability are disproportionately represented in prisons internationally. The vast majority of this group have significantly low levels of education, are unable to participate meaningfully in mainstream prison programs, are more likely to return to prison than their nondisabled peers and are generally excluded from the labor market. There is thus a significant need for specialized in-prison education, training, and employment programs for this group. However, in Australia and internationally such programs are scant. There is also very little known about good policy and practice in this domain. We present findings from qualitative research conducted on one of the few specialist education, training, and employment program models for prisoners with cognitive disability in Australia. The findings suggest that a practice model informed by and delivered from a well-considered theoretical base by a collaborative multidisciplinary team capable of adapting mainstream education, training, and employment programs in a flexible and culturally sensitive manner offers an opportunity to provide improved outcomes and greater equity for this highly disadvantaged group. The implications for policy and practice in this domain are discussed. We conclude that the expansion of appropriately designed education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability is critical to protecting the human rights and improving the life trajectories of this highly disadvantaged group.

Keywords: cognitive disability, education, employment, policy and practice, prison, training

Introduction

In Australia and internationally, the disproportionately high incarceration rates of people with cognitive disabilities (Baldry, Clarence, Dowse, & Trollor, 2013; Herrington, 2009; McIsaac et al., 2016) appears to be increasing (Hayes, Shackell, Mottram, & Lancaster, 2007). The term cognitive disability is used here to include individuals with intellectual disability (ID; IQ < 70), those with borderline disability (BID; IQ between 70 and 80), and those with acquired brain injury (ABI). The absence of a standardized approach to defining what constitutes cognitive impairment, together with gross inadequacies in recognition and assessment of disabilities among prisoners (Holland & Persson, 2011; Levine, Proulx, & Schwartz, 2017; Talbot & Riley, 2007) makes estimates of the prevalence of cognitive impairment in prisons unreliable. Despite problems with identification, measurement, and inclusion criteria, however, there is widespread consensus among scholars, researchers, and

Received November 4, 2017; accepted March 27, 2019 Correspondence: Simone Rowe, School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia. E-mail: s.rowe@unsw.edu.au policy makers that the disproportionate representation of people with cognitive disabilities in prison is a global trend. In Australia, for example, recent prevalence estimates indicate that up to 15% of prisoners have an ID (Dias, Ware, Kinner, & Lennox, 2013; Indig et al., 2011) compared to a prevalence of approximately 2.9% in the general Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In the Australian state of Victoria, 33% of women and 42% of men in prison have an acquired brain injury, compared with just 2% in the general Australian community (Winford, Howard, & Richter, 2017). In the United Kingdom, 6.7% of prisoners have an IQ of <70 and a further 25% have an IQ of <80 (Hayes et al., 2007). While in the United States, it is estimated that up to 11% of prisoners on "death row" has an ID (White, 1991 in Everington & Fulero, 1999). Extant findings indicate much higher rates of cognitive impairment among Indigenous Australians in custody compared to nonindigenous Australians (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; Shepherd, Ogloff, Paradies, & Pfeifer, 2017), and internationally other racial minority populations are similarly overrepresented (Feist-Price, Lavergne, & Davis, 2014).

This overrepresentation of people with disability in the criminal justice system does not arise from a pervasive inclination for

crime. Rather, as research in the field has established, this group is disproportionately subject to processes of criminalisation (McCausland & Baldry, 2017) and the vast majority of people with cognitive disability who come into contact with the criminal justice system experience multiple and intense forms of disadvantage, including: mental illness, having more than one form of disability, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, low levels of literacy and numeracy, poor health, and violence (Baldry et al., 2013). The combination of issues experienced by this group most often results in compounding social disadvantage and what is commonly referred to in the literature as "complex needs" (Carney, 2006; Soldatic, van Toorn, Dowse, & Muir, 2014).

It is now well recognized that these complex needs do not originate from an individual, but rather from the systemic failure of services to appropriately support people with cognitive disability who experience intense social disadvantage (Baldry, 2014; Cunneen et al., 2013). In the absence of appropriate support, these individuals cycle in and out of prison, more rapidly and more frequently compared to those without disability (Young, Dooren, Claudio, Cumming, & Lennox, 2016). Research in the field has established that robust, holistic support and intervention—including assistance with education, training, and employment—for people with cognitive disability would reduce the significant human and economic costs associated with this group's high rates of reoffending and reincarceration (McCausland, Baldry, Johnson, & Cohen, 2013).

The importance of stable employment has been widely acknowledged as one of the key protective factors against recidivism (Farrall, 2004; Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2011), as has the role of prisoner education and training in improving rehabilitative outcomes, rates of employment upon release (Prisoners Education Trust, 2016) and in mitigating the risk of recidivism (Hall, 2015). In terms of education, training, and employment, people with cognitive disability who come into contact with the criminal justice system are multiply disadvantaged: they have significantly low levels of education and are largely excluded from the labor market (Dowse, Baldry, & Snoyman, 2009). In addition, imprisonment represents a disproportionately harsh punishment for people with cognitive disability (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009): they are targeted by other prisoners in custody, do not receive the support they need (Talbot & Riley, 2007), and are unable to participate meaningfully in, and unlikely to benefit from mainstream prison programs (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014; Talbot & Riley, 2007). It is therefore indisputable that incarcerated people with cognitive disability are not afforded the care, protection and right to "the full and equal enjoyment of all [their] human rights and fundamental freedoms" and "respect for their inherent dignity" as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008).

The provision of specialized education, training, and employment programs for incarcerated people with cognitive disability constitutes an important component in addressing the persistent human rights violations, multiplicity of disadvantages, punitive and destructive cycles experienced by this group. Yet while there is some evidence of the efficacy of education, training and employment programs in improving reintegration outcomes and reducing recidivism for prisoners with cognitive disability (Ellem, Wilson, & Chui, 2012; Lindsay, Steptoe, Wallace, Haut, & Brewster, 2013),

very little is known about *how* such programs assist in achieving these aims. Furthermore, in Australia and internationally very few specialized education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability exist. There is therefore a significant gap in our knowledge about policy and practice in this domain

Introduction to the Study

The "A Future Beyond the Wall" Research Project

The research reported upon in this article is a component of a larger project titled "A Future Beyond the Wall" that seeks to improve the provision of vocational education, training, and employment supports for prisoners pre and postrelease. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council.

Aim of the Study

The overarching aim of the study was to improve understanding about specialized approaches to education, training, and employment supports for prisoners with cognitive disability. Four specific research questions guided the study: What do managerial and frontline staff involved in the delivery of education, training and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability consider central to good practice in this domain? What are the key issues influencing service delivery? What is the appropriate way to measure the effectiveness of these programs? What is required to ensure that future programs are effective in improving rehabilitation and reintegration and to reducing recidivism?

Method

The Sample

Consultation with all relevant project partners, together with an online search¹ was undertaken to identify existing in-prison specialized education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability in all Australian jurisdictions. Only two providers with publicly available documentation were identified: (1) the Additional Support Units (ASUs) in New South Wales, administered by Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) and (2) the Joint Treatment Program in Victoria, jointly administered by the Statewide Forensic Service (Department of Human Services), Port Phillip Prison and Corrections Victoria. Efforts to gain approval to undertake a study of the Joint Treatment Program in Victoria were unsuccessful; however, permission was sought from CSNSW to undertake a "case study" of the ASUs in order to capture key features of the

¹The online search was conducted using the combination of the following key words, with the Boolean operators "And", "Or", and "Not": Education, training, employment, programmes, prison, corrective services, cognitive disability, cognitive impairment, intellectual disability, intellectual impairment, acquired brain injury.

program. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the CSNSW Ethics Committee.

Data Collection

Two types of data were collected: (1) publicly available and internal documentation about the delivery model, funding, eligibility criteria, policies, and practices; and (2) seven semistructured interviews individually conducted with three senior management staff involved in the operation of the ASUs and four frontline practitioners directly involved in the delivery of education, training, and employment support at the ASUs.

Participant selection was primarily based on the voluntary agreement and availability of individuals involved in the operation of the ASUs to participate in the study. The research team also ensured that there was at least one representative for each of the range of professional roles involved in the management and delivery of the ASUs. In addition, the researchers ensured that, where appropriate, participants had direct knowledge and experience of managing, or directly working in, each of the ASUs three separate units. Interviewees were asked to describe the key features of the ASUs education, training, and employment programs, and to comment on what they saw as major areas of strength, as well as the level of success that the programs have had for prisoners with a cognitive disability. They were also asked to identify those factors that constrained program delivery and to describe how the program could be enhanced.

Data Analysis

The NVivo analysis software was used to assist with the analysis of the program documentation and interviews. The analysis of the program documentation proceeded via an analysis of thematic content pertaining to the organizational context and roles, aims, structure, and programmatic principles of the ASUs. Using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012), analysis of interview materials was undertaken over two stages. Initial preliminary independent coding by one researcher revealed a range of elements perceived to be associated with good practice in education and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability, as well as a number of challenges associated with the model. Three members of the research team then reviewed the findings from the preliminary analysis to identify key unifying themes.

Findings

The Additional Support Units

Thematic analysis of the program documentation revealed several key components pertaining to the organizational context and roles, aims, structure, and programmatic principles of the ASUs. These are detailed below.

Formally established in 2006, the ASUs accommodate a small number of the most vulnerable inmates with an identified

intellectual or cognitive impairment. The primary stated aim of the ASUs is to provide comprehensive assessment and appropriate programs to address offending behavior. Individuals housed in the ASUs have complex support needs and traditionally present challenges for placement and management within the corrections environment. Placement in the ASUs is determined by the Placement Committee and is dependent upon an inmate meeting the following criteria: (1) must have been referred for assessment; (2) must be assessed as having an IQ below 80 or an ABI that affects individual functioning and/or management; (3) must be referred for consideration of placement in the ASUs by a CSNSW staff member or an external source; and (4) must be suitable for placement.

Due to the limited number of beds available within the ASUs (57 in total), a number of factors are taken into account to determine suitability for placement. These include: (1) the individual must agree to participate in the specialist programs offered in the ASUs²; (2) the individual requires further assessment pertaining to their disability, or specialized case management or through-care planning; (3) previous placement in mainstream correctional centers has been problematic and has resulted in repeated transfers between centers; (4) vulnerability within the custodial environment, including a history of assaults or stand overs, which indicates a current or future risk to safety; and (5) the individual is unable to cope in mainstream prison due to their disability, including difficulty with social adjustment and peer relationships.

The ASUs consist of three step-down units—one assessment unit, one therapeutic programs unit and a prerelease unit. Upon entering the ASUs, an individual is first housed in the assessment unit, a 19-bed maximum-security facility. Upon admission an inmate is assessed by a multidisciplinary team in a range of areas, including risk assessment, social skills, cognitive functioning, and education and work skills. Based on their progress while in the assessment unit, individuals may be moved to one of the other two ASUs, or to a suitable mainstream correctional center.

If remaining in the ASUs, an individual will either be placed in the therapeutic programs or prerelease units, a decision based on consideration of a range of factors including outcomes of assessment, length and nature of sentence, and the individual's needs. If sent to the therapeutic unit, a 22-bed maximum-security unit, an individual will be required to undertake a number of programs to address factors relating to offending, safety in custody, and to enable access to in-prison employment via a specifically trained Correctional Services Industries Officer. Programs in the therapeutic unit also aim to increase problem solving skills and overall understanding of the criminal justice system. In addition, and of particular relevance to the present study, an individual housed in the therapeutic unit will be offered a range of educational courses run by special education teachers and will also be given the opportunity to participate in employment within the prison.

When nearing the end of their custodial sentence, an individual will enter the prerelease unit, a 16-bed minimum-security

²While consent is important, there are some situations where CSNSW has a duty of care to place individuals in the ASUs. For example, where an individual is particularly vulnerable in the mainstream prison environment, or where an individual does not have the capacity to make decisions about their placement.

unit. Programs offered within this unit are designed to address offending behavior and decrease the likelihood of recidivism. Employment skills, social, and interpersonal skills form a significant part of this program. Staff working in the prerelease unit liaise extensively with community-based services to ensure that individuals have appropriate post-release supports arranged prior to their release.

Key Elements of the ASUs Model

Thematic analysis of interviews with management and practitioner staff revealed several key principles underpinning the model of practice adopted at the ASUs. These fall into six key areas including that the program is: (1) person-centered and relational; (2) flexible and adaptable; (3) collaborative and multidisciplinary; (4) strengths-based and holistic; (5) culturally appropriate and focuses on (6) context-based skill building.

Person-centered and relational. All interviewees described, in varying ways, the "one size fits all approach" underpinning the majority of mainstream correctional programmes as "inappropriate and ineffective" for this group; rather, a person-centered approach attuned to the complex and varied support needs experienced by prisoners with cognitive disability was seen as critical to good practice. Five of the interviewees reported that for many prisoners, their experience in the ASUs is the first time they have felt "respected" and taken "seriously":

"Many of the people who come through the ASUs really do benefit from the contact they have. It is the first time they actually have people listening to them, taking them seriously as people, respecting them as people" (Participant 7)

Interviewees also identified the importance of relationship building, a key component of a person-centered approach, as central to good practice in education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with disabilities. Through their relationship with staff, individuals in the ASUs come to feel that they are "people of value" who are able to "learn and contribute." The chief emphasis on the relational aspect of working with individuals was reported to provide a critical "foundation for their learning."

All interviewees communicated an acute awareness of the extensive disadvantage and trauma experienced by individuals who enter the ASUs and of the subsequent challenge such experiences create for them in developing rapport and trusting relationships; a process that takes considerable time. The importance of engaging with individuals in ways that are "supportive, welcoming and warming" was seen as "paramount" to understanding the vulnerability and complex needs of prisoners with cognitive impairment: "You need to have a very strong rapport with these guys in order to be able to achieve any outcomes with them. Once you've got that rapport ... then you are able to really get into the vulnerabilities and the issues that they have..." (Participant 5).

Trust and rapport between prisoners and staff in the ASUs were also seen as integral to assisting individuals to understand the nature and value of support services, since many will have either little knowledge of community supports or have had negative past experiences with services in the community. This trust building aims to maximize the likelihood that individuals will utilize community-based external services for support post-release.

Flexibility and adaptability. All interviewees explained that the vast majority of individuals in the ASUs have significantly low levels of education and very low levels of literacy and numeracy; priority is therefore given to improving literacy and numeracy skills. However, interviewees stressed the importance of adopting a flexible approach to achieving this aim, with a concentration on functional rather than formal instruction. For example, literacy and numeracy training is integrated with the teaching of employment-focused "practical skills." Similarly, literacy and numeracy are incorporated in a flexible manner into the teaching of "daily living" skills, skills that prisoners with a cognitive disability often lack. This approach ensures that literacy and numeracy training flies "under the radar" for prisoners:

"We organise for them to do ... a range of different practical things. With that, we add on a literacy component so that they're always practising their reading and writing and learning [in] ways where they're not just sitting in a classroom doing ABCs. That doesn't really work with them" (Participant 6)

Education and training programs implemented within mainstream prison populations are also delivered within the ASUs; however, these are adapted to meet the needs of individuals with cognitive disability. Teachers involved in the ASUs described the process by which they continually seek to come up with "novel" ways of adapting and delivering mainstream programs to prisoners with cognitive disability while simultaneously ensuring that core competencies are met. One participant reported that they engage in "live learning" which can "take place at any time." Employment programs are also modified to aid comprehension and understanding. For example, work procedures are adapted so that those with low levels of literacy can understand them. This often involves rewriting procedures to "make it as simple as possible."

Collaborative and multidisciplinary. The ASUs comprise a multidisciplinary team of professionals who work collaboratively to meet the complex and varied support needs experienced by individuals with cognitive disability; an approach consistently identified by a range of interviewees as a central characteristic of good practice. All interviewees described the ASUs team as having a "mutual respect for each discipline and what each discipline does," along with a shared vision of "keeping the offender at the centre of what we do."

Four interviewees from a variety of disciplines also described a shared openness to ongoing learning and a willingness among staff to draw on each other for support and guidance; features identified as central to developing collaboration between staff from varying disciplinary backgrounds. The capacity for staff to work effectively in collaboration was further identified as facilitating the development and application of shared knowledge to

practice: "Working with inmates is all about practice ... having colleagues that you can speak to, to ask them how they manage things and what you could have done better" (Participant 6).

Four of the interviewees explained that the skilled educators at the ASUs were critical to the collaborative multidisciplinary team. Educators at the ASUs are "well-trained" in adult learning techniques as well as having experience and skills in working with people with a disability. They utilize their training and knowledge to "drive" things along and to create a learning environment that is "interesting, fresh, [and] relevant" for prisoners. The role of the educators at the ASUs was described as going "above and beyond" the "standard teacher role." Educators provide not only education but also "support" for a particularly "vulnerable" group of individuals. They act as "mentors" and "role models" for prisoners and play a significant role in their "day-to-day management."

Strengths-based holistic practice. A strengths-based approach emerged as a foundational component of good practice in education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with disabilities. By "enabling" individuals to recognize and build on their strengths, interviewees stressed that strengths-based practice is especially important when working with those who have lived with the disability "label" throughout their lives. One interviewee explained that individuals are often amazed to discover that they are capable of learning and achieving. This leads to "confidence," "believing in themselves," and feelings of empowerment. They realize that they have "strengths and skills" they never knew they had. This leads to a "snowball effect" where a growing belief in their capabilities leads them to undertake new challenges, including feeling "confident to engage with a workplace" (Participant 5). Instead of limitations, staff involved in the ASUs described possibilities and they encourage individuals to view themselves in the same way.

Alongside the central role of strengths-based practice, interviewees stressed the crucial role of holistic practice. Holistic practice was explained as involving not only the flexible delivery and adaptation of a full range of in-prison programs and services, but also an equal emphasis on linking individuals to a comprehensive range of supports prior to exiting custody. This holistic approach aims to assist prisoners to "transition into the community properly." The importance of a holistic approach emerged as particularly essential for individuals with cognitive disabilities, the vast majority of whom experience significant disadvantage and compounding complex support needs. As one interviewee explained, in the absence of a holistic approach, the majority of those exiting the ASUs would return to "nothing" (Participant 2).

Cultural awareness. All of staff involved in the ASUs communicated the importance of providing culturally appropriate services and programs to Indigenous Australian prisoners. Collaboration with Indigenous staff working in the mainstream prison was seen as crucial to achieving this aim. To this end, the services of regional indigenous program officers, indigenous classification coordinators, and indigenous services and programs officers are all called upon when necessary.

One interviewee explained that a few years earlier staff involved in the ASUs arranged a focus group with Indigenous inmates in an effort to ascertain how they may achieve greater cultural awareness and sensitivity in the programs delivered at

the ASUs. Participants in this group expressed a desire to feel "more connected" to their community by incorporating culture into literacy, numeracy and other educational programs:

"They wanted to learn much more about culture, particularly when they were so disconnected. They've come from a rural area, but because of their crime they can't go back and so ... they wanted to learn language and feel more connected to country" (Participant 1)

As a result of the focus group, classes on Indigenous culture and history, as well as indigenous language courses are now offered in the ASUs. One education officer explained that knowledge gained from these courses is then integrated with literacy and numeracy programs.

Context-based skill building. When discussing the impact of the education, training, and employment programs provided to individuals at the ASUs, four interviewees described the need to transcend the frequently adopted framework of measuring "success" only in terms of gaining employment postrelease or rates of reoffending; rather they identified the need for a realistic approach that is cognizant of the extreme disadvantage and complex support needs experienced by prisoners with cognitive disability. While gaining employment postrelease was acknowledged to be an important factor in preventing return to prison, all interviewees acknowledged that, for prisoners with cognitive disability, securing employment postrelease is complicated by a multiplicity of structural and systemic barriers. To this end, interviewees clarified that the prime aim of the education, training, and employment programs is to assist individuals to build foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy that are fundamental to improving rehabilitative outcomes and to reducing the risk of recidivism:

> "Teaching them those very, very basic skills increases their confidence, increases their motivation, gives them hope for the future. Even if they do come back to jail again, it may be over a longer period of time. They've just been able to function that little bit easier when they get out of here" (Participant 5)

Interviewees also reported that focusing on teaching prisoners day-to-day and practical living skills can increase the likelihood of gaining employment postrelease. For example, improving "computer skills" and "teaching [prisoners] how to read a bus timetable" was understood to increase the skills central to securing employment (Participant 3). In addition, one interviewee identified that assistance with obtaining a driver's license was a key practical skill that gives ex-offenders "a way of getting around and getting to work" and thereby enabling capacity to seek employment (Participant 6).

Key Challenges for the Model

As well as identifying the key principles underpinning the program, participants also pinpointed several challenges they have encountered or observed both with individuals and in the broader context of the program and specifically its potential

impact in achieving support for employment and education postrelease.

Risk of dependency. Three of the interviewees observed that the safe, nurturing environment of the ASUs could, in some circumstances, encourage dependency. Staff cited examples of former inmates released back into the community who expressed (and sometimes enacted) a strong desire to return to the "sanctuary" of the ASUs. Staff described that they try to combat the risk of dependency by teaching prisoners' skills that will enable them to "cope" and be "happy" living in the community:

"...coming back to an Additional Support Unit is almost safe for them. They know that they've got that support here. So, rather than enabling that support, we're trying now to enable them with skills ... to not return ... Let's try and set up a life for you outside that you think is home. ... something outside for you [that is] a happy and safe and great environment to live in" (Participant 5)

Responsibility shifting in mainstream prisons. Three interviewees observed that the presence of the ASUs has encouraged mainstream prison staff to defer responsibility for prisoners with disability to staff involved in the ASUs. Separation of the responsibilities for disability-specific prison services (ASUs) and mainstream prison services often results in the needs of prisoners with a disability being unmet. It also decreases the capacity of mainstream prison staff to respond to the needs of prisoners with disability. For example, one interviewee reported that needs assessments of cognitively impaired prisoners are generally low on the priority list of mainstream prison psychological support services.

"One of the things that also happened historically [is] we had a team of psychologists in SDS [State-wide Disability Services] who used to go out and do cognitive assessments to identify people. What that meant was that we built an attitude that only SDS could deal with people with disability and so nobody else in the mainstream wanted to touch them...So years later, we're still paying for that." (Participant 1)

Improving postrelease employment and education support. Five interviewees stressed that greater specialized community-

Five interviewees stressed that greater specialized community-based services and supports designed to assist ex-prisoners with cognitive disability and complex support needs to obtain employment are urgently required. Ideally, prisoners would be linked in with such support services prior to release. Staff provided a range of suggestions for improving postrelease employment support. For example, it was proposed that the ASUs could form partnerships with community-based disability employment providers where prisoners could continue with traineeships, obtain qualifications, or undertake employment postrelease. It was further suggested that transition into community-based employment could be facilitated through in-prison employment pathway programs, allowing prisoners to undertake employment with

community-based employment providers while still in custody. This would give prisoners the opportunity to undertake employment in a real-life workplace while continuing to receive the intensive support of the ASUs.

One interviewee expressed that more needs to be done to establish partnerships between the ASUs and community-based education providers. These partnerships would allow prisoners to "transition" their education/training across to community education providers so that education/training commenced in prison could be more easily continued in the community. As explained by this interviewee, at present "All the good work stops at the gate" (Participant 4).

Discussion

This study brings to the fore, a largely unaddressed and underexplored issue for incarcerated people with cognitive disability: access to appropriate education, training, and employment programs. These are identified as critical to both the postrelease outcomes for this group and more broadly as a measure to address their human rights via access to meaningful participation in prison programs with appropriate supports. The findings highlight two important strengths and two related benefits of the practice model detailed in this study: participants reported that a flexible approach to improving foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, and practical living skills increases the capacity of this group to live independently in the community; and engaging person-centered, relational, strengths-based, and holistic practice principles has an important therapeutic and humanizing effect that reduces the disproportionately harsh punishment that imprisonment represents for people with cognitive disability while also countering the personal and systemic disadvantages and trauma experienced by this group. The findings thus suggest that prioritizing and attending to the personal and systemic forms of disadvantage experienced by incarcerated people with cognitive disability has the potential to improve the rehabilitative outcomes and life trajectories of this group.

The findings support a range of research (see e.g., Baldry, 2010; Cunneen et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 2007) which highlights that ceasing offending for marginalized and disadvantaged groups is not the fundamental problem; rather desistance from crime for such groups demands that the underlying social, structural and individual forms of disadvantage are addressed. Furthermore, as Baldry (2010, p. 260) argues, the widespread assumption that people with cognitive disability who come into contact with the criminal justice system "offend in the conventional understanding of that term, can choose to stop it, and that their motivation and chances in cognition orientation are understood" (Baldry, 2010, p. 260) is fundamentally flawed. Accordingly, without adaptation, mainstream criminal justice interventions will fail to address the unique life circumstances, behavior, and cognitive coping skills of the increasing number of incarcerated people with cognitive disability. One of the key tenants of the criminal justice system is rehabilitative; and while this is increasingly addressed via the widespread incorporation of education and employment initiatives by corrections education staff and external education providers in many correctional jurisdictions, the provision of

appropriate and accessible education, training, and employment programs for people with cognitive disability remains scant.

In relation to incarcerated indigenous Australians with cognitive disability in particular, the findings contribute to the recent body of work focused on the pressing need to develop and implement strategies designed to reduce the significant overrepresentation of this highly disadvantaged group (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; see also Council of Australian Government, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2017). As Shepherd et al. (2017) report, incarcerated indigenous Australians with cognitive impairment are processed through the criminal justice system more rapidly than any other group. The recent inquiry into the incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Australian Law Reform Commission inquiry, 2017: 284) established that the creation of, and improved access to, culturally appropriate prison programs "that address known causes of offending - such a poor literacy [and] lack of vocational skills" can assist in reducing the disproportionate recidivism rates of indigenous Australians, and those with cognitive disability in particular. The findings from our study provide a foundation for achieving this aim. However, we suggest that the expansion of education, training, and employment supports for incarcerated Indigenous Australians with cognitive disability must be developed with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations.

There are a number of limitations to the study. Most notably, the research team was unable to access quantitative outcome data that would have provided a means by which to quantify the impact of the education, training, and employment programs provided by the ASUs. In the absence of such data, interviews were used to elicit anecdotal evidence and examples regarding program outcomes for individual inmates. Further limitations relate to the qualitative component of the study. Due to ethical restraints, no interviews were conducted with inmates at the ASUs. Such material would have provided a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness or otherwise of the education, training, and employment programs.

This research highlights the need for the systematic collection of sufficient and appropriate data to more effectively evaluate the efficacy of specialist education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability. Existing knowledge about the compounding social disadvantage and complex support needs of this group indicates the need for a well-considered evaluative framework that moves beyond a simplistic measurement of recidivism or employment outcomes alone; rather a broader array of outcomes need to be considered. This requires the systematic collection of a range of quantitative and qualitative outcome data. Quantitative outcome data should address factors such as (1) the recidivism rates of program participants; (2) the length of time between release from custody and any subsequent return to custody; (3) the severity of any further offending; (4) the postrelease education, training, and employment outcomes of inmates; and (5) the accommodation, health, and community connections of program participants postrelease. Qualitative outcome data should aim to elicit a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness or otherwise of the programs, including social and emotional well-being from both the perspective of program participants and those involved in supporting them. The systematic collection of such data will be critical to developing an evidence-based understanding of "what works" in terms of education, training, and employment support for prisoners with cognitive disability. Moreover, it is crucial to achieving greater equity for this highly disadvantaged group.

The study also reveals challenges for the model examined, which can be extrapolated to the project for wider introduction of similar initiatives. The comparatively safe, nurturing environment of the ASUs can encourage dependency for inmates, and the persistent lack of appropriate and sufficient specialized community-based services and supports for ex-prisoners with cognitive disability undermines the positive outcomes achieved at the ASUs. Together these issues bring into sharp focus the continuing lack of appropriate service provision in the community and the subsequent urgent and critical need for the systematic provision of evidenced-based, holistic, and specialized support. Internationally there is ample documentation that the critical needs and fundamental human rights of people with cognitive disability exiting prison are not being met (see e.g., Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014; Baldry et al., 2013; Ben-Moshe, 2017; Talbot & Riley, 2007), a problem that is compounded by the increasing rates of imprisonment of this group. As successive government inquiries and empirical research has affirmed, what is fundamentally required to end the human rights violations of people with cognitive disability who come into contact with the criminal justice system is a genuine commitment to providing appropriate support in the prison and in the community.

Conclusion

The issue of cognitive disability and its intersection with the criminal justice system has gained traction in recent years; there is however limited examination of how this highly vulnerable group is managed and supported in prison, and further how to prevent their return to prison. The analyses in this article reveal that the provision of specialized education, training, and employment programs for incarcerated people with cognitive disability constitutes an important component in addressing the persistent human rights violations, multiplicity of disadvantages, punitive and destructive cycles experienced by this group. In light of the increasing incarceration of people with cognitive disability across the globe, the expansion of appropriately designed education, training, and employment programs for prisoners with cognitive disability is urgently required. The key elements of the practice model revealed in this article provide foundational understanding for improving policy and practice in this domain. The development of such models is critical to protecting the human rights and improving the life trajectories of this highly disadvantaged group.

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