

SHOW NOTES

Offender Use of the Library

Presenter

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In this webinar, we are joined by Dr. Jane Garner, an academic working at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include the library's role in prisons. Her PhD thesis was titled "Experiencing the Use of Australian Prison Libraries: a Phenomenological Study."

Her presentation covers the research she did, how it relates to data-driven librarianship, what questions she asked, what she found, and how the prison system can benefit.

In Australia, correctional facilities are required by law to have a library. However, funding for these libraries is very sparse. Only two libraries in the country are staffed; the other libraries are run by prisoners. There's almost no standardization among libraries, even relating to collections. Dr. Garner's research focuses on the

prisoners' perspectives of their library – what the library means to them, how they're using it, and how well it fulfills its functions.

Dr. Garner visited multiple states and territories, and went to several prison facilities in each one. Over the course of her data gathering, she interviewed 29 individuals, many prisoners and some administrative staff who were responsible for operating their facility's library. Overall, the interview respondents conveyed 13 main ideas about how libraries benefit offenders during

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their incarceration. These ideas were then grouped into the 5 major concepts below. The prison library helps offenders:

- Experience distraction from their situation
- Pass time differently
- Experience education
- Experience community
- Gain a sense of responsibility

From the prisoners' perspective, there are 4 main ways in which libraries can contribute to correctional outcomes:

- Contribute to education, by providing a space where learning is encouraged.
- Contribute to behavior management by being a therapeutic space and providing positive self-directed recreation (as opposed to drug use/gang behavior).
- Give positive links to community, by forming connections and positive friendships inside.
- Create the opportunity to experience personal transformation leading to positive behaviors, by fostering empathy with fictional characters in books, connecting with like-minded individuals, and supporting others.

Her study concluded that prison libraries offer significant positive outcomes. They demonstrably benefit prisoners both while they're incarcerated and in their lives while on release. The education and community that the library fosters helps to instill a positive mindset and form good habits.

Several points were raised in the Question and Answer session:

- The libraries that were staffed with professionals had significantly greater participation, as the staff member was able to accurately gauge inmate interest and satisfy what they want.
- Inmates who used the library were well-behaved and actively discouraged antisocial behavior in each other, as doing otherwise would result in library permissions being revoked.
- A marketing approach: Gearing a library proposal to management and telling them how a library can help their concerns is the best way to get management on board.
 - Considering the *Theory of the Mind*, social contact through the library can foster community engagement and empathy, reducing the risk to re-offend.