



RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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Attitudes Toward Education for Themselves and Their Children Among Female Inmates

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Overview: On 7/17/00, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) approved a research proposal submitted by Ms. Emily Wakeman who at that time was a psychology major at Fordham University and interning as a Discharge Planner in RIDOC's Women's Facility. Ms. Wakeman's research examined the effects that participation or nonparticipation in rehabilitative academic and non-academic programs offered in RIDOC's institutional facilities had on female inmate's attitudes toward education. In addition, this project examined if education affects, if at all, a female inmate's attitudes toward parenting and the values of parenting and education among female offenders. Ms. Wakeman defined education as, "any program or course that introduces new information that may be applied after incarceration."

Hypotheses: (1) Sentence lengths over one year yielded more positive attitudes toward education in comparison to sentences of less than one year. (2) Offenders with children would have more positive attitudes toward their own education than offenders without children. (3) Offenders with children have more positive attitudes toward their children's education than their own.

Project Description: Participants were randomly selected female inmates over 18 years of age. Fifty-six female inmates were given a survey consisting of the *Attitudes toward Life and Attitudes toward Education Measures* (Tootoonchi, 1993) and eight items selected from another study (LeFlore & Holston, 1990). Participants did not write their names or their inmate identification numbers on the surveys, therefore all information was considered confidential and only group statistics were reported. The researcher read the survey to the inmates who recorded their answers on the questionnaire. Participants were placed in the following categories: mothers, not mothers, served more than one year, served less than one year, participated in educational programs, and not participated in educational programs. Participants who were not mothers at the time of the interviews were only asked to answer questions regarding their attitudes toward education so that their responses could be compared to participants who were mothers.

Research Methodology: Data was gathered through the administration of confidential surveys. The surveys were also used to measure female inmate's expectations and attitudes toward parenting which was measured by the amount of control offenders believed they had over their children, the parenting skills of the fathers of their children, and the offenders' overall satisfaction with parenthood. In addition, the surveys measured how important offenders considered education for themselves and their children, which was measured by their attitudes toward educational programs available in prison as well as their intentions to help their children succeed in school.

The researcher performed a factor analysis to create reliable measures to test the hypotheses. These factors were designed to assess education as a form of self-improvement, concern for children's education and belief that education does not impact a person's life.

Conclusion: The research did not support any of the researcher's three hypotheses. Starting with the first hypothesis there was no differences in attitudes toward education by female inmates with sentences over one year compared to those with lesser sentences. Regarding the second hypotheses, the researcher found that children did not affect inmate's attitudes toward education. However, participation in substance abuse courses plus non-academic courses did tend to yield positive attitudes toward self-improvement, which participants saw as a benefit. The third hypothesis that participants with children have more positive attitudes toward their children's education than their own was also unsupported by research findings. No differences were found between mothers and non-mothers.

The researcher found that perhaps the *Attitudes toward Life and Attitudes toward Education* measures used in this study might not have been appropriate for female inmates because they were in fact created for male inmates. In addition, the researcher found that consistent responses between samples were only found for half of the individual items, thus the Tootoonchi (1993) items might not be valid for a range of incarcerated female inmates. Thus the researcher posits that the measures used here might not adequately assess the attitudes toward education of female inmates, and might not be the best measurements of educational attitudes for this type of sample.

The researcher conducted independent t-tests on the average item responses between the male (Tootoonchi, 1993) and female (this study) samples and found that overall, the male sample had more positive attitudes toward education than the female sample. Moreover, the male inmates served significantly longer prison sentences.

Ms. Wakeman felt that the small sample size (56 female inmates compared to 158 male participants in the Tootoonchi 1993 sample) was a limitation for interpreting findings. Ms. Wakeman suggested that her study be replicated but with a larger sample size, which might result in different findings and differences between the attitudes and participants, could be better evaluated.