

Prison libraries serving the ‘whole person’: A qualitative study

Journal of Librarianship and
Information Science
1–10

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DOI: 10.1177/09610006211008956
journals.sagepub.com/home/lis



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Abstract

Incarceration is a traumatic life experience for both convicted and non-convicted individuals and life in prison is not easy to get through. However, prison administrations often establish different avenues for the prisoners to help them navigate through their incarceration. One such avenue is prison libraries. This study explores the influence of the prison library in the lives of eight incarcerated individuals, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. The study is based on the concept of the ‘whole person librarianship’ while using a phenomenological approach. The analysis resulted in the emergence of three broad themes: ‘Coming to term with incarceration’, ‘Library, a ray of hope’ and ‘Reinventing self through books’. The study expands our understanding of how the prison library can be a place that reduces stress and increases positive mental health by serving the ‘whole person’. Furthermore, it reduces stress and anxiety related to the state of liminality created by incarceration and gives inmates a purpose beyond prison. Thus, it helps them in making meaning of their situation, being mindful of themselves and their surroundings, healing them in the process, and supports their well-being. The findings suggest that books help the inmates to navigate their lives during incarceration.

Keywords

Incarceration, liminality, phenomenology, prison libraries, whole-person librarianship

It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one
has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by
how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.

–Nelson Mandela

Introduction

A prison is a section of society that is separated from the rest of the societal system by building physical and social boundaries. It is seen as a place where individuals who indulged in unlawful activities are sent for punitive measures. By design, prisons take away the freedom of the inmates, as a means to punish them for their acts, in the hope that going forward, they would desist from criminal activities (Amali et al., 2021). Although prisons are required to restore balance in the world and provide security to society, they have an adverse effect on the well-being of the inmates (Bates, 2018). However, Garner (2017) states that ‘access to library and to educational, legal and recreational reading in prison can have a positive effect on the lives of prisoners’. It provides prisoners with an avenue to utilize their time constructively rather than indulging in destructive activities (Finlay and Bates, 2018).

Despite the literature available on prison libraries, there is little knowledge about the influence of prison libraries on the inmates (Finlay and Bates, 2018; Garner, 2017). The need to understand how prison libraries can play a positive role in the lives of inmates is vital (Krolak, 2019). This holds true especially in India, where the population of prisoners is much higher than the actual capacity of prisons (Government of India, 2018), creating an environment of stress. Furthermore, Uttar Pradesh (UP) a North-Indian state, records the highest prisoner population in the country (Government of India, 2018).

Keeping the above in mind, the Ranganathan Society for Social Welfare and Library Development (RSSWLD), an NGO run by the Birla Institute of Management Technology, a business school situated in UP, took the initiative to establish libraries in different prisons of the state, called the BIMTECH Pustakalaya. The first of the 11 libraries established till date, was the Dasna Jail in the year 2012. Taking the case of Dasna Jail, this study explores

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