Community & Youth Training Services (CYTS)

Ruah Women’s Support Services

Centre for Social & Community Research

Breaking the Cycle

Final Report

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Breaking the Cycle: A Training Program for ‘Urban’ Aboriginal Women Exiting Prison in the Perth Metropolitan Area

• A collaborative action research project funded by the Department of Education and Training through the ‘Australians Working Together: Paving the Way’ initiative.

• Collaborative partners: Community & Youth Training Services, Ruah Women’s Support Services, Centre for Social & Community Research Murdoch University

Introduction

The ‘Breaking the Cycle’ proposal is a collaborative action research project initiated by Community and Youth Training Services (CYTS) as a response to specifically identified needs for culturally appropriate training services for Aboriginal women exiting prison and reconnecting with families and/or communities in and around the Perth metropolitan area. The initiative is designed to comply with the Action Research section of the Department of Education and Training’s ‘Australians Working Together: Paving the Way’ initiative.

The overall aim of action researchers is to strive to develop pedagogical relationships which assist learning and personal growth in all participants. Action research can be described as:

…an intervention in personal practice to encourage improvement for oneself and others. The action is not haphazard or routine, but driven by educational values that need to be explored and defended… a central value that is accepted by most action researchers is the value of respect for other people, which means that those people’s views and values must be accommodated (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003:18/19).

In the case of ‘Breaking the Cycle’, the action researchers were: the project’s initiator, Katie Culkin - Chief Executive Officer, Community and Youth Training Services; the three CYTS trainers: Arron Yarran – CYTS trainer and Noongar artist, Colleen Sariago – CYTS trainer and Nijina woman, Naomi Clarkson – CYTS trainer; and Dot Goulding – Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Centre for Social & Community Research, Murdoch University.

Motivation behind the funding application was as follows:

1. women in prison represented every target group identified in the Department of Education and Training’s tender document
2. through another training initiative, CYTS had already connected with several women in prison who felt confident enough to enrol in an accredited training course, several of whom had reconnected with CYTS and continued their education programs post release

3. this initiative was seen as an opportunity to formally document and publish the importance of developing relationships of trust with the women prior to release, as part of a through-care strategy to present a user-friendly organisational face to encourage women to engage with CYTS training programs out in the community

4. this initiative presented an opportunity for CYTS to develop and deliver culturally appropriate training to Aboriginal women in prison who traditionally did not access formal training, viewing this as a chance to create pathways into further education/training for the women

The Action Research Component

Action research has two main thrusts: (1) the British tradition, linked in the main to education, which tends to see action research as the enhancement of pedagogical practice, and (2) the US tradition, linked mainly to the area of social welfare, which views action research as a ‘systematic collection of information designed to bring about social change’ (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 223). The ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program has application to both camps, being designed within an action research methodology which seeks to inform and enhance program content and delivery and also to raise consciousness of social injustices within a specific cultural, social and criminal justice context, hopefully to inspire others to initiate positive change both at individual and wider social levels.

The action research process generally works in three main stages (Smith, 2001: 4). These are:

1. Identifying an initial idea; gathering relevant information; describing the issue to be explored within its social context; describing what all of the participants have been doing to date – this includes the program designers, trainers and potential participants.

2. Analysis and evaluation of data, reflecting on activities and looking at any deficiencies, successes and surrounding issues.

3. Resolving problems; looking at notions of value/worth, effectiveness, appropriateness or otherwise of program to client group; measuring outcomes.
Thus, the action research component of the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ project is designed to evaluate, at grass roots level, the overall worth of the program to the targeted group of participants; in this case imprisoned Aboriginal women from in and around the Perth metropolitan area. The methodology used is qualitative in nature and centred in feminist research principles of preserving the presence of actual subjects, allowing silenced voices to be heard and presenting challenges to traditional relations of power.

**The evaluation process**

The researcher was involved, as an observer, in the development of the program from its inception, also attending research advisory group meetings as an active participant. Thus, she was embedded actively in the project with the trainers and enrolled women from the outset; a necessary component of action research (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003:12/13). Also, because of her extensive experience of doing research in prisons, the researcher was able to inform the CYTS trainers about the rule governed nature of prisons, what could and could not be done, and general security considerations surrounding entering, being in, and leaving a maximum security facility.

**Data gathering methods**

Research methods included observation, prior to program commencement, at initial yarning sessions between trainers and potential participants, including an explanation of the researcher’s role in the project. Observation and group discussions continued throughout the various artwork sessions both with enrolled women and trainers. Individual conversations were held with enrolled women and trainers continually throughout program sessions in the main classroom and separate discussions with trainers occurred during the lengthy process involved in actually leaving the prison and walking to the car park. Individual in depth interviews were also conducted with each of the women in a separate room within the prison education centre.

The issues discussed in the in depth interviews with the women were as follows:

- Previous experience in relation to paid employment
- Had the women been in prison/juvenile detention before
- Previous experience in relation to developing positive social networks
- Previous experience in relation to accessing relevant services
• Reasons for undertaking the program
• General expectations in relation to program
• Any particular expectations and value in relation to future employment, developing positive social networks, accessing services, reconnecting with CYTS after release

**General assessment of program**

• Whether or not program met participants’ expectations
• What worked best
• What worked least well
• Whether it should be changed
• Suggestions for change

Conversations about the program were also conducted with prison education staff and the prison officer who worked at the education centre. Issues discussed with education staff related to their perceptions of the value of the program to the women, education staff and prison management. The prison officer was asked about her perceptions of how the program had run – smoothly or otherwise – and how the program logistics had affected her normal working day.

Evaluation is a process of delineating, obtaining and providing information which is useful for describing and understanding a program and for making informed program judgements and decisions. Program evaluations should include descriptions of constraints on resources, time, expertise and access as well as criteria such as the relevance, importance and meaningfulness of the content to the client group. An impact evaluation such as this asks: ‘What difference is this program making?’ ‘What would happen if this program were not available?’ ‘What has happened in the past to this particular group?’ Most significantly, any meaningful evaluation should include the social context in which the program development and delivery occurred. In this instance, and in order to illustrate the importance of this culturally specific program, it is important to outline the marginalised socio-economic position of Aboriginal women within both the wider social and specific criminal justice contexts of Western Australia.
Aboriginal women: the socio-economic and criminal justice contexts

Socio-economic position of Aboriginal women in Western Australia
Colonisation and its consequences; dispossession from land and culture and forcible removal of generations of Aboriginal children from their families and communities have had a disastrous impact on Aboriginal people’s general well being and life chances. It is well documented that ‘Aboriginal people suffer entrenched disadvantage in all spheres of life’ (Salomone, 2002:2). Aboriginal women, in particular, are among the most socially and economically disadvantaged members of West Australian society. They endure deep rooted poverty, ongoing systemic racism, entrenched family violence and sexual abuse, high rates of teenage pregnancy, high rates of unemployment, as well as bearing the burden of high levels of mental health problems, alcoholism and increasing substance abuse.

Some social indicators of Aboriginal women’s entrenched socio-economic disadvantage include: a life expectancy twenty years less than that of non Aboriginal women; infant mortality rates which are twice those of other Australian infants; they are twice as likely to be sole parents; five times less likely to have a post school qualification; and most disturbingly, they are forty five times more likely to be victims of domestic violence and eight times more likely to be victims of homicide (HREOC Face the Facts, 2005:4/6).

Contextualising the position of Aboriginal women in the West Australian criminal justice system
Apart from their collective experience of general social disadvantage, Aboriginal women in Western Australia are also disadvantaged by their disproportionately high rate of incarceration. Although women, in general, represent a small proportion of the West Australian prison population, the rate of female incarceration is rapidly increasing with a 110 per cent increase in women’s imprisonment compared to a 45 per cent increase in the male prisoner population (ABS: AusStats 4512.0 Corrective Services Australia). Currently in Western Australia, women are imprisoned at twice the national rate. In particular, the rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal women is increasing alarmingly (ATSIC Social Justice Report, 2004:3). At the time of writing, Aboriginal women, who make up approximately 3 per cent of the general female population, constitute more than 50 per cent of the female West Australian prison population (Department of Justice Monthly Graphical Report, January 2006). Notably,
Aboriginal women within the criminal justice system are more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be repeat offenders, with approximately 70 per cent having previously experienced imprisonment (Salomone, 2002:2). A dire consequence of the high recidivism rate amongst Aboriginal women is their continuing and increasing over-representation in West Australian prisons.

Despite their over-representation in the prison system, Aboriginal women appear to be invisible to policy makers within the criminal justice system in terms of culturally appropriate and gender specific service and program design and delivery. According to the ATSIC Social Justice Commissioner (2004:8):

...responses to Indigenous over-representation in criminal justice processes over the past decade have been focused on responding (though not in a sustained manner or very fully) to the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. These almost exclusively focused on the circumstances of Aboriginal men, with none of the Royal Commission's recommendations addressing the circumstances of Indigenous women. This also has the potential to render Indigenous women invisible to policy makers.

In addition to this factor, but inextricably linked to the invisibility of Aboriginal women's particular needs, is that where gender is considered in criminal justice policy formulation ‘the needs of Indigenous women are generally treated as being met through mainstream services for women (which are not culturally specific)’ (ATSIC Social Justice Commissioner, 2004:6). In short, there is a significant unmet need for West Australian criminal justice policy makers, particularly in the areas of service and program design and delivery, to recognise the very specific needs of Aboriginal women.

**Background to program development**

At the time of ‘Breaking the Cycle’s’ conception, there were no programs specifically designed for Aboriginal women in West Australian prisons. Most particularly, there were no programs designed by Aboriginal women for Aboriginal women. ‘Breaking the Cycle’ was groundbreaking in that it was designed by and for Aboriginal women and two of the three trainers who delivered the program were themselves Aboriginal women.

‘Breaking the Cycle’, a currently non accredited training program, was developed specifically to address some of the needs of imprisoned Aboriginal women from in or around the Perth metropolitan area (mainly Noongar women) as they prepare for
release into the community. The program specifically targeted ‘urban’ Aboriginal women because; (a) it was not economically or logistically viable for Community & Youth Training Services (CYTS) to offer post release training to Aboriginal women who live in regional towns and remote communities, and (b) urban Aboriginal women were identified as a distinct socio-economic and cultural grouping in a recent major report on the impact of imprisonment on women’s familial and social connectedness in Western Australia (Goulding, 2004:20). The training program, held within Bandyup maximum security prison, was also designed to encourage the women to engage in further education with CYTS after their release. This was done because most research highlights the importance of establishing trusting relationships with people in prison prior to release as a major factor in re-engagement post release (ATSIC Social Justice Report, 2004:2, Salomone, 2002:6).

The initiative for this program was borne out of an idea which was fuelled by information in the aforementioned ‘Severed Connections’ report. Information contained in the report highlighted some of the issues and difficulties that faced women when they attempted to reconnect with their families and/or communities upon release from prison. The report acknowledged that, although women in prison share certain common experiences such as histories of abusive relationships and high levels of mental illness, they also come from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, illustrating the need for culturally appropriate training and services. The report identified six distinct socio-economic and cultural groupings related to women in prison in Western Australia. These were:

- **Group 1**: Young mainly non-Aboriginal women, repeat offenders with chaotic lifestyles and no stable family or community connections.
- **Group 2**: Urban Aboriginal women with strong kinship connections but questionable connections to mainstream society, repeat offenders.
- **Group 3**: Mainly white middle class women, typically first time offenders engaged in white collar crime which is often work related.
- **Group 4**: Aboriginal women from remote communities and regional towns, strong kinship and community connections, equally likely to be first time or repeat offenders.
- **Group 5**: Foreign National women convicted while on visitors’ visas to Australia
- **Group 6**: Long term and life sentenced women.
Having read the *Severed Connections* report, Katie Culkin, CEO of CYTS, then contacted Ruah Women’s Support Services and the Centre for Social & Community Research at Murdoch University and arranged a meeting to discuss the possibility of initiating a collaborative effort towards positive change through some form of training program for Aboriginal women exiting prison. Funding was available through the ‘Paving the Way’ initiative. CYTS had access to Aboriginal professionals and ‘urban’ Aboriginal women nearing release from prison were identified as a discreet socio-cultural group (Group 2 in the report) whose specific needs were not being met by available services and so the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program took shape.

‘Breaking the Cycle’ program: design and proposed delivery

The ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program is designed to attract those women who do not traditionally connect with education or training programs either within prison or post release. It specifically targets ‘urban’ Aboriginal women and their significantly unaddressed needs (ATSIC Social Justice Report, 2004:11, Goulding, 2004: 45). In addition, and in line with identified best practice, the program has been both designed and delivered in a culturally appropriate manner by Aboriginal women trainers. Importantly too, the program plan deliberately set out to present a culturally sensitive and friendly face to the imprisoned women so that they might more readily engage with CYTS based education and training post release. It is recognised that, historically, Aboriginal women tend not to access mainstream post release supports and/or education. Also, currently available justice-based and non-government organisation re-entry programs are not designed to address the specific needs of Aboriginal women exiting prison (Salomone, 2002: 11/12). ‘Breaking the Cycle’ was developed with the intention of addressing some of the gaps in this area.

In order to maximise the prospects of a fully enrolled program of fifteen to twenty participants, the trainers from CYTS visited Bandyup prison, prior to program commencement, for two yarning sessions with interested Aboriginal women.

Program design

The training program is presented as an art project that culminates in a prison based art exhibition which is organised and facilitated by each of the women enrolled in the program. The women are expected to participate in four or five major art projects, both individual and group oriented; creating various items for display and voting both for preferred projects and for nominated spokespersons to communicate and
negotiate with prison authorities. Enrolled women are also expected to participate in planning, promoting and presenting the exhibition. In short, the training program is designed to draw out the women’s creative talents, enhance their cultural knowledge and draw on more formal skills such as effective communication, negotiation, literacy and numeracy.

The art projects include mask design and manufacture, jewellery making, frame making, mobile making, and painting. The painting component includes individual art works and two major group projects. In completing these modules, the CYTS trainers lead the women through a variety of skills based activities that require the employment or development of a variety of proficiencies. However, at the beginning of each training session, the trainers do not always formally identify the specific skills that are expected to be learned that day. Rather, participants become aware at the end of each training session of the range of skills they have utilised to progress to the next point of the program. Trainers facilitate the process of identification and recognition of the range of skills that the women utilised in the course of the day.

Each weekly activity is intended to be completed in around two daily five hour sessions. The painting activity, for example, is designed to provide the skills and knowledge to complete an oil painting on canvas. The learning objectives of the painting component are that the enrolled women will be able to achieve the following:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the six Noongar seasons
- Select a Noongar season or seasons for their painting
- Create a story based on the chosen Noongar season
- Design their painting in the provided visual diary
- Discuss the significance of the plants and animals in each season
- Resize design from diary onto canvas
- Demonstrate an understanding of spatial awareness
- Use accurate proportioning
- Use culturally representative colours
- Provide rationale for selected colours
- Use visual diary to record and plan projects
- Respect and provide positive feedback to others’ artwork
- Listen to constructive criticism objectively
- Finally, identify the skills used and link these skills to cultural knowledge, budgeting, time management, communication and respect
All materials for the artwork (visual diaries, oil paints, brushes, pencils and canvas) are provided by CYTS. In addition to the provision of materials, the painting module includes information on the six traditional Noongar seasons and the meanings of colour and symbols in traditional Noongar paintings.

Skills development throughout each training module includes:

- **Enhancement of cultural knowledge and connection**: story telling in pictures and words; learning about traditional Noongar culture, including the six Noongar seasons and how to depict them in artworks; using cultural knowledge to promote positive identity and self esteem.

- **Communication skills**: dealing with everyday conflict, negotiation and compromise; presenting the 'I' perspective, consideration of and respect for the opinions and feelings of others; consequences of actions; ‘protective behaviours’ principles.

- **Planning**: keeping to a timetable; setting and completing achievable goals; working together in teams to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes; planning to cope with negative outcomes via risk management and alternative strategies.

- **Team work**: learning to network; using consensus decision making strategies; losing judgemental attitudes towards others, helping and encouraging others less able.

- **Literacy**: developing promotional brochures/posters for the exhibition; identifying policies/rules for the group; telling their stories; bookmaking; creating stories for their children.

- **Numeracy**: through use of fractions/ratios in colour mixing; counting beads in jewellery design; designing and planning various art works; spatial skills in planning of art/jewellery; book designs; costing materials, working out hourly rates and profit margins in sale of art works.

*Program delivery*

Program delivery is largely dependent on various aspects of the women’s daily prison regime which is currently designed around the security considerations inherent in a maximum security institution and the notion of a ‘constructive day’. That is, the women held in Bandyup prison are expected to engage in recognised constructive activities such as employment within various prison sections/industries, formal
education, and/or recognised self improvement activities. The women’s remuneration status within the prison is totally dependent on the degree to which they engage in the prison’s ‘constructive day’. The ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program is to be recognised as part of the Bandyup ‘constructive day’ regime.

CYTS had originally intended to run two consecutive programs in Bandyup Women’s Prison and Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. However, the rule governed nature of carceral institutions, the difficulties involved in managing secured institutions, and the limited physical space which is characteristic of women’s prisons in particular, precluded running the program during normal ‘term time’. Also, Boronia Pre-release Centre had diminishing numbers of Aboriginal women and space in the education centre was already occupied by accredited programs, including an Aboriginal art program (although not designed or delivered by Aboriginal trainers). In addition, the superintendents of Bandyup and Boronia informed CYTS that they did not want the non accredited program to provide competition for accredited programs already in place. Moreover, the women held in both facilities already had full structured days in place so it would be difficult to accommodate the CYTS program during normal term times. Importantly, at the time negotiations were taking place, the numbers of Aboriginal women held in Bandyup Prison were relatively high (around 50 per cent of the prison’s population) so there was an optimum window of opportunity to attract the women to enrol in the program.

For these reasons, and after discussions between CYTS and the Department of Corrective Services, it was decided that the program would go ahead but only at Bandyup Prison during ‘summer school’ time when competition for space in the education centre was at a minimum. Also, the timing of the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program over the Christmas holiday period was seen to be beneficial for the women as prison activities are at a minimum then; feelings of sadness and disconnection from family and community run high around Christmas; and general feelings of frustration and boredom prevail.

The program content was then adjusted to run twice weekly for five weeks during the traditional ‘down time’ in the education centre in; December 2005, January and February 2006. Each week was to herald the beginning of a new art project, culminating in the organisation of two art exhibitions; (1) to be held at the Recreation Centre for invited official guests and other women held in Bandyup, and (2) to be held in the Family Visits Area where the artworks were to be displayed for one week,
thus allowing visiting family and friends to view the art displays. The artworks could then be signed out to family members or held in the women’s property to be accessed upon release.

‘Breaking the Cycle’: a full house

Initial yarning sessions

Notice of the proposed program had been posted around the prison and had been clearly identified as a course designed specifically for Aboriginal women. On the 14th and 28th November 2005 the project team visited Bandyup Prison to yarn with the women about the forthcoming program. The project team consisted of:

- Arron Yarran: CYTS trainer, Noongar artist
- Colleen Sariago: CYTS trainer, Nijina woman
- Naomi Clarkson: CYTS trainer, non Aboriginal woman
- Katie Culkin: CEO of CYTS, non Aboriginal woman
- Dot Goulding: Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Centre for Social & Community Research, Murdoch University, non Aboriginal woman

During the two yarning sessions the women had the opportunity to get to know the trainers and the researcher and ask any questions about the program. In turn, the trainers were able to gain some sense of the restricted, rule governed nature of the prison environment, learn about the women’s interests and determine any special considerations regarding learning activities – the fact that the women would not necessarily be permitted to keep their completed artworks in their cells, what could and could not be brought into the prison by the trainers, the manner in which things must be brought in and taken out.

The yarning sessions were a most valuable ice breaking tool. The presence of the two Aboriginal trainers was obviously the key to high levels of interest in the program. Initially, during both yarning sessions, the women engaged solely with the Aboriginal trainers, asking about family names and discovering extended family members in common. Although the women afforded the non Aboriginal members of the project respect when they spoke of their own particular roles, it was apparent that the familial and cultural links to the Aboriginal trainers were central to the women’s strong interest in participating. From a non Aboriginal observer’s perspective, it was clear that a very significant connection between the women and the Aboriginal trainers had taken place. When conversation moved on to the program and its content the women
displayed enthusiasm and offered suggestions regarding art and craft projects in which they might like to participate. Several women said that they were pleased that the program was designed and taught by Aboriginal women and was only available to Aboriginal women in the prison. Subsequent conversations with the women who participated in the training program determined that these were the most important factors in ensuring its extraordinarily high levels of attendance and enthusiasm.

The program was designed around ten training sessions of five hours (9.30am – 12.30pm, break for lunch, 1.30pm – 3.30pm). These sessions included butterfly mask making, frame making, jewellery making, painting and learning about Noongar culture in relation to art and the six Noongar seasons. During each of these sessions, time was taken to include the ‘hidden’ skills components of the program. These included; negotiating and formulating house rules for the class; nominating and democratically electing a spokesperson and a scribe; planning for the exhibitions; negotiating with prison management for time and space for the exhibitions; designing and writing up fliers advertising the exhibition; writing and delivering speech of thanks at exhibition opening.

The first art session involved butterfly mask making. The women were given materials: the visual diary, pencils, a blank mask form, paints, glue and various decorative components such as coloured glitter, beads and feathers. The trainers demonstrated various methods of decorating the masks and the women set about designing and making their own. During the mask making process, the trainers continued to interact amongst the women, assisting with colour choice and mode of application. Also during this time the trainers spoke to the women individually and in small groups about formulating house rules, the proposed art exhibition and how they might go about organising the big event. This stage was a learning process not only for the women but it was also a steep learning curve for each of the CYTS trainers as they learned the minutiae of how life really is experienced by women held in a rule governed maximum security prison, separated from their children, extended families and community.

After the women had been working on their projects for an hour the trainers called a break and introduced some of the formal components of the training program. The first was the compilation of house rules for the group. These included issues such as demonstrating mutual respect for each other, not interrupting when someone is speaking, assisting others less able and so on. These rules were agreed upon
collaboratively by the women and trainers. Break times were allocated – 10.30am for morning tea and 12.30pm for lunch (the women were obliged to exit the education centre between 12.30 – 1.30pm). However, such was their intense interest in the activities that, for the duration of the project, the majority of the women participants did not break for morning tea, preferring to keep working in the classroom on their various artworks. In addition, the women were usually congregated at the entrance to the education centre early in the mornings, awaiting the arrival of the trainers. It is also interesting to note that, by the end of the first morning session, several of the younger women were already referring to Arron Yarran, and Colleen Sariago (the two Aboriginal trainers) as ‘Aunty Arron’ and ‘Aunty Colleen’; ‘Aunty’ being a term of acceptance and respect for women within Aboriginal cultures.

Each of the work sessions took on the abovementioned format: work on specified art project; time out for formal skills, back to art project, lunch break and then regroup after lunch and continue working on the art projects. All sessions were well attended and the degree of industriousness within the classroom was at all times impressive. The painting project was particularly popular as it involved, not only hands on creativity, but lessons in Noongar culture, the six Noongar seasons and an explanation of colours related to the season’s flora and fauna. Each of the women completed at least two paintings with several women completing as many as four.

**Program perceptions: staff perspectives**

Bandyup prison education staff perceived the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program in a very positive light, taking the program and its content seriously despite its non accredited status. Education staff said they were impressed with the enrolled women’s enthusiasm, continued high levels of attendance and the quality of work they produced. The lack of any management problems amongst the women was also noted.

The prison officer assigned to monitor prisoner movement at the education centre said that she, too, was impressed with high attendance rates and the ever increasing interest in the program amongst the women themselves and other education staff. She also noted that she was impressed that the program involved meaningful Aboriginal cultural content that was neither tokenistic nor patronising.

**The women's experience of the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program**
The most significant part of any program evaluation is how the participants themselves experience their involvement. In order to ascertain the participant perspective it was necessary to conduct in depth interviews with the women on a one to one basis. The main difficulty involved in actually doing the interviews was the reluctance of several women to interrupt their artworks in progress. Time would then be negotiated when they had finished one project and before they embarked on the next. The face to face interviews were conducted in a room adjacent to the classroom. Twenty four women agreed to be interviewed in this way. Their ages ranged from eighteen to forty five years. Six women elected not to be interviewed on a one to one basis. Three of these had pending parole issues and were feeling understandably stressed at that time. The remaining three women gave no reason except that they did not wish to be interviewed. However, each of these three women spoke to me within the classroom environs whilst working on their projects.

Following is a summary of the women’s thoughts on the program content and delivery as well as an outline of their previous experience with issues such as paid employment, any prior incarceration, social networks, expectations, and value placed on the program with regard to employment prospects, widening social networks and accessing services.

**The issues**

*Previous experience in relation to paid employment*

Of the twenty four women interviewed individually, only four had previous experience of paid employment. Of these, two had worked for the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) – a ‘work for the dole’ scheme for Aboriginal people which is viewed as a form of welfare payment. CDEP work project participants do not attract prevailing market rates of pay; rather people employed under this scheme receive a CDEP Community Participant Supplement on top of their Centrelink payment. Thus, only two (8 per cent) of the women had been employed as regular paid employees with recognised marketable experience in the workplace.

Several women said that they understood that the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program was designed to foster a reconnection to spiritual and cultural well being as well as to give them marketable work skills. Ningli (pseudonym) told me:

> This is giving me cultural knowledge I never knew before. Lots of us Noongars have lost our real culture, our connection to the land and our spirit. I never knew there was six Noongar seasons until last week. How cool is
that? I can tell my kids that. I never knew I could paint either. I know I can make a living at this – Arron told me I could sell my paintings easy.

**Previous experience of prison and/or juvenile detention**

All of the twenty four women interviewed had served time in prison and/or juvenile detention prior to their current prison term. Sixteen women had served three or more terms in an adult prison. The remainder had served either two adult prison terms or had served time in juvenile detention prior to being sentenced within the adult system. Chantelle (pseudonym) described her experience of the criminal justice system in this way, ‘I was in and out of “juvy” from about fourteen, maybe four or five times. Then I came here when I was eighteen. This is my third time in here but the last twice was on remand and I got out at court for time served. It’s mostly for drunk and disorderly, driving without a licence and resisting arrest’.

**Previous experience in relation to developing positive social networks**

With few exceptions, the women said that most of their social connections were with close and extended family and their local Aboriginal communities. Because of their marginalised position within mainstream society, the women tended to socialise with other Aboriginal people, generally keeping within some form of family boundaries. That is, there were sometimes certain families they would avoid because of past arguments or fights. There was little experience of developing social networks outside the cultural circle.

**Previous experience in relation to accessing relevant services**

Most of the women claimed to have difficulty in accessing relevant services out in the community. For example, dealing with government agencies such as the Department of Housing and Works and Centrelink was often problematic for the women and, from their narratives many appeared to have difficulties dealing with government agency staff in a way that might bring about positive outcomes for them. Sandra put it this way:

You go into Centrelink because you need an emergency payment. Then some snotty bitch just plain tells you “go away, you’re not entitled” when you know you are because you’ve just come out of jail. You’ve got no money for food and that and you just lose it. I got chucked out of Centrelink the last time I got out because I got abusive but what else could I do? They wouldn’t listen to me and I didn’t have nothing left so I went out and stole and ended up back in here.

**Reasons for undertaking the program**
All of the women said that they were initially interested in enrolling in the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program because it was advertised as being specifically for Aboriginal women. That factor was crucial to the high levels of initial interest and subsequent attendance at yarning sessions. The women who came along and enrolled in later program sessions said that they did so because the already enrolled women said how enjoyable the art activities were, they were learning about Noongar culture, and that two of the trainers were Aboriginal women who knew of and about various extended family members. The family connections known to the Aboriginal trainers and the women extended from the south west of the state, through and around the metropolitan area, to the central west and up to the Pilbara and Kimberley regions. The importance of these factors to the program’s unprecedented success in terms of participant attendance and enthusiasm needs to be emphasised.

**General expectations in relation to program**

The women cited the following expectations in relation to attending the program (in no particular order of importance):

- Alleviation of boredom during a particularly monotonous period within the prison calendar
- Enhanced cultural knowledge
- Spiritual healing through the gaining of cultural knowledge
- Being able to make things for their children (photo frames, paintings, masks, jewellery)
- Ability to use art to deal with negative emotions such as anger and despair

**Any particular expectations and/or value placed on the program in relation to future employment, developing positive social networks, accessing services, reconnecting with CYTS after release**

Throughout the program sessions the trainers had emphasised the value of developing positive social networks as a priority of successful community integration and as a necessary component of career development. This was taken very seriously by several of the women who said they had come to a point in their lives where they wanted to get out of crime and into more positive lifestyles. These were the women who said that they would try to reconnect with CYTS upon release. In addition to this, the notion of being hugely inspired by the Aboriginal trainers was raised by several women. Arron (CYTS trainer and successful Noongar artist), was particularly inspirational to some of the women who, through the program, discovered they had
artistic talent. These women said that they would reconnect with Arron either through CYTS training or through her private art business. They felt that they could gain employment as artists in the Noongar tradition in and around the metropolitan area and felt that reconnection with CYTS and Arron Yarran would diminish their chances of experiencing exploitation in the market. It was apparent that strong trusting relationships had developed throughout the duration of ‘Breaking the Cycle’ and that these relationships would be pivotal to subsequent reconnection out in the community.

**The women’s general assessment of program**

*Did the program meet participants’ expectations?*

Each of the twenty four women interviewed said that they enjoyed the program and that it had either met or exceeded their expectations. The general consensus was that the art exhibition was successful and made them feel pride in their cultural heritage.

*What worked best?*

Twenty women said that they liked the painting component best because it was an enjoyable activity, that to complete a traditional Noongar painting was a positive thing to do, and that they enjoyed learning about their culture as it made them feel better about themselves. All of the women said that they had minimal prior knowledge of traditional Noongar culture. None had prior knowledge about the six Noongar seasons or the related flora and fauna and all said that they wanted to learn more about their culture when they were released. They all liked the ‘fun’ based activities and having something to show for their efforts (jewellery, masks, frames and paintings). They also said that being able to move around the classroom, interact with the trainers and their peers and discuss their projects was a major factor in holding their interest.

*What worked least well?*

General consensus was that sometimes the formal skills sessions involving components such as organisational skills and voting for various things took up too much time. Several of the younger women said that they became bored during this time and that the older women in the class would normally make these decisions anyway. The women were also concerned that they were not allowed to take their finished works such as earrings and necklaces back to their cells but had to place them in their property to be collected upon release. With regard to this issue, there
was some concern over prison officers’ differing interpretation of the appropriate rules with several women apparently being permitted to retain their jewellery while some were not. This issue pertains to the rule governed nature of prisons and would need to be clarified prior to any subsequent program delivery.

**Whether the program should be changed?**

The women generally thought that it would be beneficial for Aboriginal women if the program could be run several times throughout the year rather that just during the education centre’s down time in the Christmas holiday period. They mentioned that this was the only program specifically for Aboriginal women and that this was an important factor to most of them. Several women indicated that, while many of the other non Aboriginal service providers and trainers were good people who offered genuine help, they did not know what it was to be Aboriginal and experience many of the negative socio-economic aspects of being an Aboriginal woman. Lisa (pseudonym) put it this way:

> No disrespect to you, but wadjelas (non Aboriginal Australians) can’t know what our issues are. Not really. You might read about them and be sympathetic to us but you can’t know what it is to live with violence and racism and put downs every day of your life in your own country. These women - the Aboriginal trainers - they’ve lived it too so they know who we are and what we go through. And they’ve survived it all and made something of themselves. That’s inspiration to us. It means that maybe we have some hope of making things better too.

**Suggestions for change**

Several women suggested that a more formalised manner of leading the women towards CYTS community based programs was called for; methods that are not daunting for Aboriginal women. One suggestion was that an Aboriginal woman trainer from CYTS could visit the prison regularly, informing the women about any Indigenous specific programs available in the prison and out in the community. They explained that many Aboriginal women served relatively short sentences and that they needed some flexible model that would allow them to commence training in the prison and then continue after release, thus allowing them to ‘see something through from beginning to end and actually get something concrete out of it’ (Becky, pseudonym).

**Do you intend to engage with CYTS when you get out?**

Five women said that they most likely would not engage with CYTS, only because they were already enrolled in university based courses or bridging programs.
Fourteen women said that they would like to engage with CYTS but that would depend on their personal circumstances when they got out – if they could get public transport, if they could afford fares and if other family commitments did not get in the way. Most notably, the women said that if they could take their children then they would probably make the effort to enrol in some CYTS training program.

**Program impact**

*What difference is this program making to Aboriginal women in prison?*

The program content is relevant to Aboriginal and Noongar culture in particular. It is designed to enhance cultural knowledge, draw on and further develop various social competencies, enhance notions of cultural identity and individual self esteem, and promote economic independence through the development of marketable job skills. According to Salomone (2002: 13), evidence gathered through consultations across Western Australia suggests that:

> Aboriginal women want the opportunity for meaningful employment for themselves and their family members. They want a way out of disadvantage and poverty and the means to overcome the many barriers currently impacting on their economic and employment opportunities.

Apart from the program's emphasis on enhancement of cultural and spiritual well being, its focus is centred on some of the most pressing issues facing Aboriginal women nearing release from prison. In addition to the specifically targeted cultural content, the high rate of attendance at all program sessions is clearly indicative of the program’s popularity and perceived importance amongst the women. However, at the time of writing only one of the women enrolled in the program had been released so any reconnection data is, at this point, unavailable.

*What would happen if this program were not available?*

In the past, Aboriginal women in prison have been invisible to policy makers in terms of culturally appropriate program and service design and delivery. This invisibility has served to perpetuate the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal women, impacting on themselves, their children, their families and communities.

A consequence of this invisibility is that Aboriginal women in prison have had no access to gender appropriate and culturally specific programs or service delivery. ‘Breaking the Cycle’ has attempted to address this shortfall in terms of program delivery, allowing the women access to program content which has been both designed and delivered in a culturally appropriate manner by Aboriginal women. The
program attracted significant numbers of those women who, traditionally, do not access educational services either in prison or post release. Thus the CYTS program, which followed best practice approaches targeting training opportunities towards identified areas of high need, offered a window of opportunity to engage with women who traditionally fall through the educational net. In this, the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program supported The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) recommendation that ‘special consideration be given to culturally appropriate teaching methods and the learning dispositions’ of Aboriginal prisoners. Furthermore, the program endorsed, in practical terms, the RCIADIC claim that ‘relevant vocational training, the development of job-market-relevant job skills and social supports, including child care and respite services, are essential for Aboriginal women entering and remaining in the workforce’ (Salomone, 2002:14).

Reversing the historical trend for attendance at non compulsory prison programs, ‘Breaking the Cycle’ commenced with fifteen women participating in the first session and had thirty women enrolled by the program’s completion. Numbers should have capped at twenty participants but, because of the nature of imprisonment, women would be called out of class for legal, official or social visits; to receive medication; for attendance at court; called back to their units; called to their work stations. Consequently, there was a degree of ‘coming and going’ within the classroom but each session was well attended and there were rarely less than twenty women in the room working on projects at any given time.

What restraints are there on resources, time, available expertise and access to prisons?
In spite of the program’s obvious success in terms of attendance rates and participant interest, there are many problems involved in delivering training programs within the prison context. These difficulties ought to be addressed prior to any subsequent program delivery. Identified problems include (in no particular order);

• Competition for time and space within prison education centres; being aware that programs may be cancelled on short notice due to other prison related considerations.

• In accordance with the above consideration – competition for time and space within prison education centres – it was noted that local prison superintendents did not want non accredited programs to compete with already established accredited programs. It is therefore strongly recommended that accreditation be sought for ‘Breaking the Cycle’.
• Security issues: police clearance for trainers; identifying which items may or may not be taken into prisons; keeping reasonable boundaries.

• Being aware of and keeping to local prison rules which may be interpreted differently by various members of staff.

• Individual trainers need to have some form of induction to the prison environment prior to program commencement, including information on prevailing prison culture and the rule governed nature of total institutions.

• The availability or otherwise of suitably qualified Aboriginal professionals, keeping in mind that the single most important factor in the success of ‘Breaking the Cycle’ was the holistic involvement of Aboriginal women trainers.

Summary
The ‘Breaking the Cycle’ program was a successful project in terms of retaining high attendance rates and enthusiasm amongst a disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural group that traditionally does not seek out educational training within the prison environment. The program complies with identified best practice in programs for Aboriginal women prisoners which should be:

…designed in a culturally appropriate manner, be delivered wherever possible by Aboriginal women workers and professionals... promote Aboriginal women’s involvement, facilitate their integration back into the community and foster their economic independence and general wellbeing in the long term (Salomone, 2002:6).

Also in accordance with best practice, ‘Breaking the Cycle’ is designed to enhance notions of self-determination and foster empowerment rather than dependency. It is also intended to emphasise strengths rather than deficiencies, foster family and community involvement, raise social competencies, develop marketable work skills, provide training opportunities and qualifications, establish relationships with mentors and emphasise the significance of Aboriginal culture. Finally, and most importantly, ‘Breaking the Cycle’ at all times included meaningful, rather than tokenistic, involvement of Aboriginal people (Salomone, 2002:7). It is therefore recommended that ongoing secure funding be sought by CYTS in order that the program might become an accredited example of best practice in program design and delivery to Aboriginal women, thus assisting in the promotion of their well being both pre and post release.
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