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An Autoethnographic Approach to Developing Human Connections: A Prison Educator's Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Storytelling and reflective practices have been recent buzzwords in the fields of education and family and consumer sciences. The point is to tell our stories and inform the public about the infinite number of ways educators and family and consumer sciences professionals impact our schools and communities. Through this autoethnographic study, the researcher details how making human connections and the sharing of these stories has the potential to improve correctional institutions, education programs, and student-teacher relationships. Lessons learned and experiences easily translate to public education, higher education, and industry. Journey with the researcher through his memories and reflections as an educational administrator in a federal prison. The researcher's goal is to foster personal growth, safer prisons, and the building of human connections in all aspects of work, community, and family.

Keywords

human connections, relationships, storytelling, reflection, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, self-study, prisoners

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Acknowledgements

I would like to congratulate and acknowledge the many men who were students within my programs and institutions within the federal prison system who dedicated themselves to making positive changes in their lives through education, training, and programming.

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Storytelling and reflective practices have been recent buzzwords in the fields of education and family and consumer sciences. The point is to tell our stories and inform the public about the infinite number of ways educators and family and consumer sciences professionals impact our schools and communities. Through this autoethnographic study, the researcher details how making human connections and the sharing of these stories has the potential to improve correctional institutions, education programs, and student-teacher relationships. Lessons learned and experiences easily translate to public education, higher education, and industry. Journey with the researcher through his memories and reflections as an educational administrator in a federal prison. The researcher's goal is to foster personal growth, safer prisons, and the building of human connections in all aspects of work, community, and family.

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Developing meaningful relationships with students is widely accepted as an essential element for educators to get the best work from their students, and there is no difference in a correctional environment. Like classroom teachers who model student expectations, I believe correctional workers are responsible for modeling positive behaviors for the prisoners in their charge. Even though national guiding principles outlined by the American Correctional Association (ACA) detail responsibilities of humanity, justice, protection, opportunity, knowledge, and competence in regard to prisoner treatment, nothing specifically states they must model positive behaviors (ACA, 2004). Positive behavioral modeling is not as common a practice as it should be within correctional settings. My involvement and learned experiences within corrections will evidence the value of positive behavioral modeling and building human connections. The more positive roles and relationships made by correctional workers in developing life skills, education, rehabilitation, and re-entry efforts of the prisoner population, the safer our prisons will be, with the added benefit of lowering recidivism rates and creating stronger family ties.

A key component of this behavioral modeling strategy is to encourage staff to develop a human connection and a degree of empathy for the prisoners in their care. Bandera's social learning theory is commonly used for interpersonal skills training, and can be accomplished while maintaining professional boundaries, as the rest of this article will evidence (Kim, 2012). The data is presented through an autoethnographic approach, where I studied my experiences to learn and share the results I had through positive human connections with prisoners, from which I believe others can learn.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology where researchers study autobiographical data to analyze and interpret lived experiences through a narrative form of

inquiry. Poulos (2021) defines autoethnography: “sometimes rendered as auto/ethnography or (auto) ethnography (Greek roots: *autós* = self + *ethos* = people + *graphia* = writing)” (p. 4). Reflective writing is part of the investigative process and a beneficial learning and personal growth strategy. Writing and reflecting about one’s experiences in this way can be a valuable tool to help establish a positive culture within the prison walls for staff and prisoners alike. Poulos (2013) writes that “autoethnography is a method of inquiry... but it is simultaneously a method of relating” (p. 476). Thus, I encourage my readers to share their stories and experiences with peers and students through autoethnographic research and narrative inquiry, to develop a culture of shared responsibility in our mission to educate the public on the work that gets accomplished. Chang (2016) informs us that “studying others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study, in turn discovering new dimensions of their own lives” (pp. 33-34). Whether working with prisoners, secondary students, or pre-service teachers, stories have the power to enact change and foster the success of programs and missions. Below are some experiences I would like to share from my autoethnography (Roberson et al., 2019) where I saw opportunities to connect with prisoners (my students). My pedagogical training in family and consumer sciences informed my approach to how I worked with and interacted with the prisoners in my care. The first reflective episode was brought on after a special interaction I had with a student.

Reflections of a Prison Education Administrator

The Return on Human Connections

One specific human connection I will never forget had to do with something a student said to me as he was preparing for his release from prison. This student had graduated with an associate degree just before his release. He started as a GED student and was the first in his family to earn a college degree. He had a slight hiccup along the way when he failed his required history course. He had to retake the course to get a grade that would count toward his degree. After passing the course the second time with a “C” he was still unhappy. I asked him, “What do they call a medical student who graduates last in his class?” He looked at me confused, and I said, “Doctor!” He got my point and felt better about what he had accomplished.

I had a history with this student throughout his academic journey in the prison – encouraging, mentoring, and doing what I could to assist with his educational goals. He paid it back tenfold on the day he came to my office to receive his diploma. He had already participated in the commencement exercises, which he was so grateful to be allowed to do. Graduating students from the prison college program are taken on escorted trips outside the prison and to the college campus to participate in the commencement ceremonies. This is a pivotal part of their journey; they get to be like any other graduate who devoted long hours and hard work toward earning their degree. It is a big deal. Their families even get to come and watch them walk across the stage and receive their diplomas.

Figure 1

Graduating college class, Yankton Federal Prison Camp, Yankton, SD. Consent was received from each of these graduates to use this image to showcase the positive accomplishment of prisoner programs under my direction.



The student's actual diplomas usually showed up a week later. I had the privilege of presenting the document to them, which was a highlight of my job. I would page them individually to my office. When they came in, I would stand up and flip the cover open so their diploma and its shiny gold seal with their name so neatly imprinted on the document stared up at them. This typically generated a smile from ear to ear as they gazed at the document. Those smiles always made my day. Not often, do staff get to experience helping bring that kind of joy to a prisoner. It was a special day for me each and every time. On this day, I was not expecting anything other than that typical reaction. However, this graduate had more to say. He stated I was the key reason he would get to leave with an Associate of Arts degree, and I had made a huge difference in his life. He went on to tell me that when he got out, he would not disappoint me. What he said next is what touched me considerably. He said, "Mr. Roberson, don't ever quit your job." When I reflected on and journaled this event, I wrote how his comments meant more to me than any favorable performance appraisal or recognition award I had ever received. If I had ever wanted to "hug" a prisoner, this was the time (which is completely inappropriate in a prison setting). His comments validated everything I was working toward. Not just for this particular prisoner, but for all prisoners looking to improve their outlook. The human connection we developed over his years in the program contributed to his success, and he expressed as much with his statement. Any other person in this situation, expressing such a profound compliment, would have gotten a hug. This student (prisoner) had to settle for a

handshake. I wish all correctional staff could experience a compliment like this from a prisoner. It would help staff realize how they can make a difference, and prisoners can be sincerely grateful.

Relationships Matter

Relationships form the building blocks by which people connect with the world around them, and therefore, they are crucial to educators and correctional workers. Forming positive relationships will enable correctional workers to provide the best opportunity for prisoners to believe in their ability to be successful, through the programming and vocational training offered by the prisons. As professionals, staff should always be setting the example or modeling what is expected of our students, which is to embrace lifelong learning, personify professionalism, and be a mentor.

One way I specifically modeled relationship building was by *fist-bumping* a student when they passed an exam leading toward their GED completion. Ordinarily, this would be a practice that is discouraged in the correctional environment. Correctional staff have to be cautious on sending the wrong signal to a prisoner, and fist-bumping can be considered an overly friendly gesture in the correctional environment. Staff are trained to keep a certain level of guard up for prisoners with possible ill intentions. There is a fine line between developing human connections and being what many staff and administrators would consider as “overly friendly” with the prisoner population. However, when done within the educational setting, I explained to my staff, the *fist-bump* is a completely appropriate way to express encouragement and develop rapport with students. Fist-bumping is a simple gesture that sends a powerful message from the staff member to the prisoner that staff care and are excited about their success.

After providing some training and mentoring with my staff, I witnessed two staff who previously would not have been as encouraging during the GED testing process by extending sincere congratulatory remarks to students who passed their exam. One teacher even fist-bumped with the student, albeit the prisoner initiated the fist-bump. The staff member commented, “that’s a first.” I reinforced our previous conversations, relaying that was a good sign he is making great progress in motivating his students. The student would not have done that had he not identified his teacher as someone who helped get him to where he was in the GED program. In other words, it was a sign of respect for him as the teacher. The staff member commented that he had been working at changing his approach to students and stated he had noticed a huge difference in their attitudes toward him. The relationship between the student and the teacher now mattered, and it showed in the excited fist-bump. In school relationships, research has shown when a student has a positive relationship with their teacher, the teacher gets better quality work from the student, equating to higher learning gains (Enz et al., 2008; Xu & Qi, 2019). These students may put in more effort during class because of the rapport developed with their teacher and eventually earn their GED. This is a win-win for all parties. The classroom has one more student more engaged in the learning process, thus setting a good example, the teacher has a prisoner who causes less distractions for other students, and the student is closer to an objective that can dramatically reduce chances of recidivation (Esperian, 2010; Nuttall et al., 2003).

Reflection as a Training and Mentoring Opportunity

Reflective writing has long been recognized as a benefit to physical and mental health. Reflection is not only healthy but a great learning tool anyone can be taught. Malcom Knowles (2015), credited with the theory of andragogy – how adults learn – asserts how reflection is a

key element of how adults learn and use prior knowledge to develop their conclusions. By sharing our stories and reflections we offer others an opportunity to learn. Educators should implement reflective writing and narrative inquiry as a medium for self-study in their educational settings. These practices can improve interactions with others, and as educators, improve our teaching practices inside the classroom. Reflection can help develop skills to better analyze classroom culture and relationships and better prepare teacher candidates to appreciate and build human connections with their students.

Developing human connections is an important component in virtually any field. Teachers are encouraged to learn how to relate and connect with their students (Enz et al., 2008). It is common knowledge that supervisors and administrators see higher levels of morale and productivity when they connect on a more personal level with their teams. “The best practice of medicine occurs when we solve problem through human connections” (Landry & Ouchi, 2020, p. 526). These are a few examples of how human connections can impact and lead to improved outcomes. When a prisoner can identify with the correctional worker as a member of their rehabilitative team, versus an unempathetic authority figure, the levels of tension in almost any given situation within a correctional environment are diminished (Roberson & Alexander, 2021). Training correctional workers to see the value in building human connections leads to increased levels of empathy, better outcomes in prisoner programming, reduced prison violence, and ultimately lower recidivism.

Limitations

There were three limitations identified during the course of this autoethnographic research project. Two of the limitations revolved around recommendations from the Institution Review Board (IRB). The IRB was concerned my close relationship with the prisoner population I served would add an element of coercion. Prisoners are considered a vulnerable population, and considering my direct position of authority over them, I was not permitted to interview those prisoners mentioned in my reflective narratives. Full IRB approval was not pursued due to the nature of my position and the lengths it would take to obtain authorization. Not only was it necessary to gain IRB approval from the university, but it was also needed from both my agency and the union that represents the federal prison workers. However, due to time constraints and the inconsistency in how autoethnography is still currently debated (Adams & Herrman, 2020; Chang, 2016; Dull, 2021; Keles, 2022), the decision was made to only include my personal thoughts, reflections, and memories. I was authorized to include artifacts from my personal collection and those published publicly from other projects and programs participated in by the prisoners.

Second, I was also discouraged from member checking for the same reason stated above. Member checking is used to clarify data and has the possibility of generating new information (Candela, 2019). This was a concern to the IRB because member checking was viewed as an interview and not as a strategy to validate information. When member checking, the researcher is not interviewing the participant but using another party to validate the information with the possibility of discovering new information. If discrepancies are noted, then the member may help the autoethnographer remember events more clearly, thus informing the researcher so the narrative can be accurately recorded. Being able to conduct interviews and member checking would have added validity to the research. However, this process was not authorized by the IRB. To add validity to the study, the researcher collected non-textual artifacts to support the narratives. For example, the photo above supports the narrative of graduating several students along with maintaining the graduate program as archival data.

The final limitation noted is the reliance on memories of the researcher. Memories become faded over time and can certainly be recalled and recorded differently than how they

actually transpired. Without being able to use interviews or member checking, the researcher had to rely solely on personal memories to record the narratives and reflections found in this article. Considering the main data sources collected for an autoethnography are the researcher's own memories, experiences, and observations, I had to be aware of a few behaviors to avoid and a few principles to adhere to for strengthening the data obtained. Chang (2016) states:

[T]he autoethnographer (1) is complete member in the social world under study; (2) engages reflexivity to analyze data on self; (3) is visibly and actively present in the text; (4) includes other informants in similar situations in data collection; and (5) is committed to theoretical analysis. (p. 46)

Item (4) is where the researcher used artifacts to further substantiate the narratives, since interviews and member checking were not approved.

Second, the autoethnographer avoids simply telling their story and failing to connect the data to other people, the culture, and community (Chang, 2016). Self-narratives are made up of much more than just our physical being: "Friends, acquaintances, and even strangers from the circles are interwoven in self-narratives. Therefore, studying and writing of self-narratives is an extremely valuable activity in understanding self and others connected to self" (Chang, 2016, p. 33). However, Chang also advocates in the autoethnography the "nonscientific" factor of "the three I's" (p. 130). The three I's are "insight, intuition, and impression," as cited by Creswell (1998). Chang goes on to say, "These nonscientific factors are necessary ... because a holistic understanding of a cultural case requires a comprehensive approach" (p. 130). Balancing these two points is an important part of the data collection process of the self-narrative and the autoethnographic process.

Future Research

Ethnographic Studies

There is a lot to be gained from the experiences of others. Due to the limitations of this research project, more research is needed that includes specific data from correctional staff and prisoners that could be gathered through interviews and surveys. In future studies, it would be beneficial to record reflections of staff and prisoners and compare and contrast the practices and ideologies each feel, which could make for a safer and more positive atmosphere within the correctional setting.

This type of ethnographic study could be very useful in developing training programs for both staff and prisoners that works to build better human connections, interpersonal communication skills, and develop positive attitudes for the work that must be accomplished from each stakeholder's perspective.

- Correctional workers taking a more active role in occupational training programs, whether it is simply being more supportive and encouraging, or physically providing specific instruction and opportunities for learning and growth.
- Students taking full advantage of programs and training opportunities offered to them and being open to the support and encouragement offered by the educators.
- Correctional educators taking a holistic approach with each of their students and the prisoner population in general. Develop and facilitate programs and activities that not only assist the prisoner with educational goals, but address all

aspects of life literacy; employment, finances, family, health and wellbeing, and how to balance those aspects.

I hope my experiences assist other educators, correctional workers, and family and consumer science professionals in to not only see the value in using reflection as a medium for personal growth, instruction, and supervision, but also learn from my specific experiences. Additionally, I would like to encourage more research that includes descriptive data in the form of narrative inquiry, autoethnography, self-study, and ethnography in both our correctional facilities and public classrooms. These stories, both successful and unsuccessful, are important to document in descriptive narratives within these research models, so the public can feel and visualize the *human* element behind the quantitative data most often presented through academic and industry research.

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