

Book Review: Jan Walker, *Unlocking Minds in Lockup: Prison Education Opens Doors*, 2015, Plicata Press

Reviewed by JUNE EDWARDS
Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, Ireland

Education is a powerful tool that not only opens doors within prisons, but international research would indicate education also, and more crucially, prevents men and women from re-entering those same doors back to prison. Therefore Jan Walker's recently published *Unlocking Minds in Lockup: Prison Education Opens Doors* is a welcome addition to the already rich literature on this subject.

Walker opens with the astonishing statistic that there are currently over two million men, women and youths in prisons, jails and centres of detention in the US. In *Unlocking Minds In Lockup*, Walker addresses the fact that the majority of these two million men and women will one day return to society and to their families, but without the life-skills and social skills to deal with such situations, recidivism is a very real threat. Walker feels strongly that sending vulnerable people with poor educational and social skills back into the outside world serves no-one: not the prisoners, their families, society or indeed the taxpayers who ultimately pay the cost of keeping people behind bars.

A retired community college instructor who taught at the now closed McNeill Island Correctional Institute in Washington State, Walker's book is largely a memoir and collection of warmly told stories about the characters she met during her years teaching parenting and family relationships. Walker describes her initial shock at being 'drafted' into the prison from her cosy job at the local community college. It was not her choice, and she initially agreed to just one year's teaching, but she ended up staying 18 years until cuts to education programmes and changes in attitudes forced her to leave the system which was no longer working for her.

Many of the stories in the book are movingly told and those of us who have worked 'inside' will be all too familiar with the heart-breaking back-stories of many prisoners, and the feeling that if only they had had a different start in life, they likely would have travelled a very different path. Walker dedicates the book to 'Correctional Educators and Inmate Students and the children of incarcerated prisoners'. However it is unclear whom she is targeting in terms of readership, as there is little here to engage academics in the

fields of sociology or criminology, given that her work is more memoir than research or evidence-based study.

One of the more interesting aspects of this work is the parenting programme in which Walker worked for 18 years, particularly the very progressive practice of allowing male students to try out their parenting skills on their own children in a supervised childcare facility attached to the prison. Prison governors and departments of justice elsewhere could certainly take something from this, as male prisoners are rarely allowed such privileged and valuable access to their children in many prisons. Walker is very much an advocate for re-parenting programmes, and teaching inmates to deal with 'uneven parenting', basically a nicer way of saying 'neglectful' or absent parenting, usually as a result of addictions.

Walker's style is warm, down-to-earth and almost maternal, and it is obvious that she has genuine care for those she works with, but in parts the editing could be sharper. Occasionally she starts telling us a story about one of her students, but she has a tendency to change focus, leaving the reader eager to know what happened in the end to the particular student. From an editorial perspective, Walker could perhaps have had a tighter focus on the importance of parenting programmes in prisons as her theme, as this is definitely her area of expertise. Her stories reflect on the work she did to help prisoners re-invent themselves as better parents who could not only take responsibility for how their behaviour was impacting their children, but also how they could right those wrongs for the future, and hopefully break some of the tragic cycles of imprisonment within generations of vulnerable families.

The author of nine books, including *Parenting from a Distance: Rights and Responsibilities*, Walker is an experienced parenting professional. She is also active in publishing and founded her own independent publishing company, Plicata Press.

June Edwards teaches English Literature and Literacy in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, Ireland. She previously worked as a journalist in a national newspaper, and has an MA in Journalism, and an MA in Children's Literature.