

CLASSROOM TO PRISON CELL BY ALISON SUTHERLAND

Judge Graeme MacCormick
Family Court (retired)

Classroom to Prison Cell is a short work addressing one particular topic from the perspective of a number of young criminal offenders. The topic can be broadly stated as their perception of their school years and of the education system as a whole. The author, Dr Alison Sutherland, had previously noticed that a small group of young offenders with whom she was then working expressed a universal dislike of their formal schooling. They had all hated school. Her research can be seen, in part, as an attempt to determine why this was so.

The book opens with a short resume of the author's own life and background. This establishes her qualifications to deal with the subject matter and, more importantly, the likelihood of her having been able to establish a high degree of rapport with those agreeing to be interviewed – notwithstanding some anxious moments at times. The dynamics between the author as interviewer and each young person are captivating.

The purport of the work having been established, methodology is then succinctly described, including brief impressions of the three different youth justice facilities at which the interviews occurred. There follows a selection of the responses the young people gave as they were interviewed in a very unstructured way with the aid of "memory jogging" cards. These responses, substantially tape-recorded, are in alphabetical order, based on the pseudonym given to each respondent, grouped under female and male respectively. Being tape-recorded, the responses are virtually verbatim. These are their recollections: the book is primarily a vitally important listening exercise.

The initial impression each participant makes on the writer is first recorded; the response to the interview follows. Then each interview record closes with a short note or comment, sometimes limited to the offences that participant had been charged with, but also on occasion including a comment from the participant's case social worker or from one of the staff of the institution concerned.

From my perspective, I wished the opportunity had been taken, concurrently, to explore more of the family background of each participant – something of the home they grew up in, their earliest home and family memories. Sometimes a snippet of their background emerged in any event. However, to have expanded the work in this way may have detracted from its primary focus, and may also have created greater problems in terms of the consent to interview process.

I was surprised at the extent to which bullying featured, in one way or another. Also noteworthy, in many cases, was the extent to which problem behaviour increased markedly with the transition from primary or intermediate to secondary school level.

The work is brought to a close with four short summaries: an overview, a section identifying youth at risk, a discussion of schools' role in youth offending, and the conclusions. The study reveals aspects of the compulsory school system that exacerbate existing risk factors and propel a vulnerable child on the pathway to serious criminal offending. The book also demonstrates the unique opportunity that schools have to identify young people most at risk of a future criminal career, with the potential for much earlier intervention.

Dr Sutherland's book is well-ordered and clearly written and constitutes a series of fascinating accounts of young offenders' school experiences. It will be of interest to teachers, social workers, criminologists and policy makers alike, and is highly recommended.