

THE WAY FORWARD

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The first step to improving the quality of life [of a prisoner] is to improve today, and although it cannot be proven that a prisoner who is engaged in learning will gain long-term benefit from doing so, he or she is gaining benefits during the hour or two during which they are learning. The immediate benefits are communicating effectively with a teacher and with fellow learners, focusing attention, learning a skill, not being disruptive, not offending, not being anti-social. These benefits cannot be denied. (West, 1997, 141).

The above observations on education in prisons serve as a useful starting point to anyone wanting to look closely at the role of education in our prisons today. Whilst West does not engage with the very complex issues relating to the ‘linkage’ between education, rehabilitation and recidivism, she clearly implies that there is a relationship as, presumably, the offender who lacked communication skills, suffered attention deficits, had no skills, and was anti-social has a means of re-gaining ‘something’ via education. This final chapter will look at some of the thorny issues concerning prison education, issues that have characterised it since ‘educating’ prisoners first became ‘fashionable’ in the nineteenth century. It will also offer views on education in prisons as a form of empowerment for the individual prisoner which may open up the debate on whether it is more appropriate to ‘correct’ or ‘educate’ in prisons, thus asking what is the way forward for prison education? The chapter suggests there are three stages or steps forward, which could be taken for those practitioners and policy-makers concerned with ‘educating’ prisoners.

Firstly, however, it is worth making one small but significant point. Most penal practitioners, policy-makers and academics interested in the area of penology talk about *prison* education. Germanotta (Davidson; 1995; 106), invites us to think about *prisoner* education and it seems that the implications are quite profound if applied both in theory and practice (Reuss, 1999). Prisoner education is about *people* learning in a particular setting, - a prison setting - and once that distinction is made, education programmes in prisons can be seen as something that may offer benefits and

opportunities to individual prisoners – *as people*. Alternatively, if we begin to talk about ‘prisoner’ education, does this *encourage* the view that prisoners really do suffer from some kind of cognitive deficits?

Analysing educational programmes and activities, or assessing their ‘effectiveness’ according to a particular criteria (and there are many) with this in mind *personalises* the process and shifts it to the domain of the individual prisoner rather than focusing on the demands of the prison or the policy-makers. The planning of prisoner education, its implementation and evaluation therefore need careful consideration for no other reason than that it is people who are on the receiving end of any policy decisions which are made – this becomes more than obvious if, as has happened in the past, traditional courses in a prison education department are cut and there is ‘nothing else’ for the prisoners to do, or ‘nothing else’ that they *want* to do.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN PRISONS

Why do we have educational courses in prisons? What is their purpose and whose interests do they serve? These seem to be the most obvious questions to ask about prisoner education and yet they are amongst some of the most difficult and complex to answer allied as they are to much broader questions about imprisonment as a form of punishment, and allied to whichever theories about crime and criminals seem to be most popular at any one time. Attitudes and ideologies pertaining to imprisonment in general impinge upon the provision of education in prisons shaping expectations and assumptions about whether or not the prisoner will be able to lead a ‘good and useful life’ on release. Where does prisoner education ‘fit’ into this scheme of things? Is it meant to be part of a programme of ‘reform’ or ‘treatment’, is it ‘correctional’ or is it something to be appreciated by ‘the lucky ones’ as the Woolf Report pointed out (1990; 382)?

The functions of education in prison mean different things to different people. The penal reformer may see it as a means of ‘softening’ a harsh regime; Prison Service staff may see it as a means of keeping prisoners occupied; security staff may see it as

a 'risk'; education staff may see it as a vocation; whilst, for some prisoners, it simply passes the time. For the most part, these functions can be seen in a positive light with positive outcomes to be gained (with the exception of concerns of Security), for all. There is little doubt that if education provides *all* the above, then it is indeed integral to prison life and educational opportunities should be extended wherever and whenever possible as opposed to being curtailed.

Following Williford (1994), in questioning precisely what the role of education in prison has been for the last two hundred years, it is possible to identify that role as having been perceived as mainly correctional. Describing education programmes as initially vehicles for rehabilitation and/or reformation, Williford (1994; viii) goes on to cite the so-called medical models where education had a potential role in 'curing' the offender and the cognitive-deficits model, where education would 'correct deficiencies in problem-solving, interpersonal and social skills'. The use of words such as, 'treatment', 'intervention', and phrases such as, 'referring appropriate candidates for training' characterise the literature on these kinds of 'education' programmes. Williford further points out that following discussions with 'educators, prison officials and prisoners', such models do more harm than good, particularly as programmes which fall under the umbrella of 'cognitive skills' rarely seem to have attained the goal of reducing (re)-offending behaviour.

In developing Williford's point, it does seem to be somewhat artificial to attempt, through cognitive skills programmes '...to assist offenders in rehearsing both new behaviour and new thinking skills' in thirty-five sessions over eight to twelve weeks, six to eight in a group (specified in training for cognitive skills staff) using overheads, pictures, role-play and scenarios. Whilst well-meaning enough and not disputing the fact that these courses too may 'work' for some prisoners some of the time in some circumstances, the practice and delivery of the courses seems to ignore the *life-history and personal identity* of the prisoner. It is therefore hardly surprising that such courses do not achieve the goal of reducing offending behaviour, particularly in the light of comments from educational practitioners and prisoners. (Reuss, 1997).

From suggestions that prison education is no more than a 'symbolic prop in the drama of rehabilitative services' (Thomas; 1995; 39), to the more personalised 'I

knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life
'(Malcolm X quoted in Germanotta; 1995; 109), the range of differing views, agendas
and ideologies in place in prisons render the correctional model and its desire to
promote 'positive changes in the direction of more pro-social thinking' more than just
a little unworkable. The promotion of such 'positive changes' *takes time* because
people do not always accept the 'new' as easily or as readily as others may wish them
to – the process is long, slow and sometimes very painful, especially if you are a
prisoner serving a long sentence.

In research assessing the 'effectiveness' of a course in higher education within a
prison setting, (Reuss, 1997), it became apparent that analysing the role of education
with a view to its capacity for 'changing' the prisoner's offending behaviour was
essentially problematic because there are different views as to the merits of attending
educational courses whilst in prison. On the one hand there is the prevailing view that
education is a 'lifeline for people serving long sentences' (Wilce; 1996), whilst the
opposing view suggests that it is a privilege and not a right for the undeserved, paid
for by taxpayers whose money should be better spent. It does seem to be the case that
most people feel that any education programme delivered to those imprisoned should
be of benefit to the prisoners; but what the general public do *not* always appreciate or
understand are the 'inherent difficulties' in doing just that (Flynn and Price; 1995; 3).
Providers of such a service are also, as Flynn and Price indicate, working within
institutions whose 'function' is to '...deprive offenders of freedom and to facilitate
order and control', so the 'aims' of education and the 'aims' of imprisonment stand in
direct opposition to each other.

This is the paradox that characterises the provision of education in prisons where the
conflicting interest and ideologies of the penal system and the education system,
instead of reaching some kind of compromise through what Jones and d'Errico call
'accommodation' (1994,13), lose sight of the individual prisoner who wants to learn
something for personal benefit. This confusion makes any attempt at offering a 'way
forward' problematic. It seems therefore that existing attitudes have to be assessed
and understood with regards to the demands upon the 'providers' because there are in
place long-standing views about prison and prisoners and if, for example, the general
public have any views at all on the matter, they are likely to be grounded in what is

culturally and ideologically acceptable as pertaining to the ‘treatment’ (in its widest sense) of offenders. This can be evidenced when those who have received ‘schooling’ in prison, re-offend on release. The courses in question would be deemed to have ‘failed’ because they did not rehabilitate. Learning for learning’s sake seems not to be an option that is welcomed or encouraged for those imprisoned. How then can the public’s appetite for a combination of punishment, deterrence, retribution and rehabilitation be satisfied? What is the contribution that education in prisons can make?

Educational programmes are often ‘measured’ against rates of recidivism to determine their effectiveness or ‘success’ rate, as opposed to a more radical interpretation of education as empowerment. The question that has to be asked is whether measuring the ‘success’ of a course of education in prison according to the rates of recidivism is any longer appropriate because, if prisoners views are to be listened to, then the very fact that some of them are faced with having to do specific courses whilst in prison to address offending behaviour, is in itself sufficiently ‘de-motivating’. In other words, they will not attend such courses if they have no choice in the matter and in some cases attendance on such courses is akin to admitting guilt (cf Wilson, 1999). This is problematic for those prisoners awaiting or on appeal. Prisoners themselves are well placed to comment on the actuality, and the *first step forward* is to encourage other people to *listen* to them:

F: Look at in here; you might come down to education, to this class and find the teacher’s talking crap all the time; you leave ‘cos you can’t handle it, so you’ve lost out on something ...

B: No it’s not like that – you choose. It’s about self-fulfilment. You don’t know if the teacher’s going to be crap until you’ve been on the course, you don’t know that beforehand ...

F: ...but how many of us in here would choose to go on, say, the Anger Management course? That’s like Sociology and the guy’s a prat, so nobody goes ...

B: That's totally different, it's part of the system. If you want a Cat. C, you go on his course, if you want fulfilment for yourself, you come here. (Reuss, 1999, 123).

These comments are about educational provision in prisons – *as perceived by prisoners*, and more importantly, *as experienced* by them. It seems to us that any assessment of the role of education in our prisons should not be undertaken without taking their views into account in the sense that any *future* plans or policies for the provision of education could be made whilst listening to prisoners about what kinds of education they have had in the past and what kind of education they themselves need for the future. A further dimension to the 'problem' of providing education in prisons is that the role of education in prison is often underestimated in terms of education's capacity or potential to empower the prisoner.

EMPOWERMENT

Empowering the prisoner is not about 'making smart cons smarter'. A basic dictionary definition claims that empowerment is not just about 'giving power or authority to', it is about 'giving ability to' and 'enabling'. It is with the process of 'enabling' that prisoner education can usefully be aligned and the *second step forward* is to ensure that practitioners do not misconstrue the meanings associated with 'empowering' prisoners.

The potential for 'traditional' education courses to empower the prisoner in terms of providing opportunities through education for 'individual attitude change' (Duguid;1990:113) is often overlooked. What seems to be important currently is to provide courses that satisfy prison management KPIs as indicated in the introduction to this book. But again, it is worthwhile to think about 'what changes?' when looking at education's capacity to empower, as the question most asked of educational practitioners in prisons, closely followed by the questions 'How can you show it?' and 'How do you know if they've changed?' In thinking about the change-prisoner-education relationship we do the prisoner and ourselves a grave disservice in placing 'the change' beyond the prisoner's person or 'outside' of him/herself. The key to our

understanding of the processes at 'work' in education lies in our understanding of 'change' because 'What changes?' in prison education practice often metamorphoses into 'What works?' in penal policy.

For something to 'change', there is implicit a desire to 'make or become different' and in a prison classroom context, the making and becoming different refers, for the most part, to the prisoner. Is the prisoner-student who completes the course the 'same' as the one who started it? If practitioners can say 'No', then we do have to recognise that something has occurred. Whether we call that something 'change' or not is a matter for some debate because use of the word 'change' seems inappropriate. It encourages prison educators and practitioners to have expectations which cannot always be met, thus adding to the belief that still 'nothing works' (Martinson; 1974).

Attending any course of education in any setting concerns personal growth and development as people acquire new knowledge through the *social* and interactive processes of learning. Prisoners are not immune from these processes, but in a prison education setting, people are all too anxious to seek changes in offending behaviour, as stated above, changes in personal attitudes, changes in lifestyle, changes in world views and so on. 'What changes' is all too often linked to issues of what should constitute a correctional programme of education that will stop offending behaviour. Now whilst this may be highly desirable, it is not always attainable for many complex reasons, so the 'way forward' in prisoner education is better served by considering the empowering potential of education *for the prisoners* in relation to personal development and growth through learning *from choice*.

It is possible, as research has shown (Reuss, 1997; Pawson and Duguid, 1998), to focus on learning outcomes of individual choice, responsibility and decision-making as parameters which underpin a variety of prisoner education programmes geared to the individual needs of the individual prisoner.

Prisoners are individual people and their motives for attending education whilst in prison are governed by the choices and decisions that anyone makes in a continually evolving social context involving other people. Prisons are not 'static' places, they may well be viewed as tragic places or even barbaric places, but within their walls are

people whose sense of self, personality or identity is embedded in who they 'were' before entering the prison. If those imprisoned are to retain and/or regain a sense of personal worth and integrity in a world where exclusion and marginalisation of offenders are the 'cultural norm', then educational practitioners in prisons will have to refocus their aims on issues of self-actualisation and empowerment.

The biggest problem that HM Prison Service seems to have with this, is that of resourcing coupled with the very practical issues of providing suitable courses for those on remand or those within the dispersal system. If a prisoner is only going to be in a particular prison for a 'short' period of time, how can this be reconciled with the demands of any standard educational course, for example, planning and structuring a course over a number of 'terms' or 'semesters' where examinations may have to be taken at a specified time of the year? This is a very real problem both for the provider of the course, for the prisoner-student taking it, and for the prison. However, if it is acknowledged that short courses can also leave something of an impact upon those taking them by virtue of the fact that there is something to do beyond the walls of a cell, then surely the co-ordinating and designing of such courses is worthwhile – as long as the prisoner does not feel coerced into taking a course simply to satisfy bureaucracy.

Taking account of the prisoners' own views on education helps to delineate more clearly the role of prison education in terms of empowerment in relation to the manner in which education is currently practised. Just as Cook and Hoskison (Morgan, 1999), Havel and Mandela (see introduction) intimated at the capacity for education and education staff to 'get things done' - either for the prisoner on a 'transformative' level or as a means of instigating change at a more practical level within a prison system - the men in Reuss's study had a wealth of experience of prison education programmes because they were in the dispersal system serving long sentences, and many had attended a wide variety of courses in a wide variety of prisons as 'strategies for survival' (Cohen and Taylor; 1972).

What the following comments show is that for some prisoners, being involved with educational provision - at any level - helps them retain a degree of *choice and control* in what they do whilst in prison. This is important from their point of view because it

gives them a feeling of responsibility and autonomy in decision-making in respect of their own futures - provided that the course(s) on offer are not thought to be serving the interests of prison management. Choice and control also form the basis of the *third step forward* in prisoner education:

Tim: From a personal viewpoint it [education] helps to pass the time constructively and to remain mentally active. Generally speaking it depends on the particular inmate, whether they are taking part to learn a new skill or just filling in the time as an alternative to the menial labour on offer.

Trevor: It gives you hope for the future.

Kenny: Education offers the chance to catch up on subjects that were missed 'on the out'. I want to broaden my thinking on subjects I did not even know existed. To me education in prison is good, it stops me turning into a recluse and becoming institutionalised; this is the only prison I've been in that gives a choice of education programmes, other prisons have basics - maths, English, writing skills.

These kinds of comments again lead to questions raised earlier: What does the prisoner want from education? What does the prison want from education? What does the wider community want from education in this environment? Sadly, many prisoners believe that current provision does not serve their needs or interests at all, serving *only* those of the prison:

Allan: It's to do with the philosophy of dispersal. Dispersals are for the garbage of society as far as officers are concerned; that's all you are and the garbage of society should not get a degree course. It's that simple - they think it's too good for us, but if the course was called Reasoning and Rehabilitation or Anger Management, then the status quo is maintained. They don't like us to do education, in my opinion, they'd rather have us in the workshops ...

Matt: I won't go. You wouldn't get me in them, working for them. I'd rather do something for me. It's smart cons they don't want. The screws hate it you see, if they think you know more than them.

Allan: I reckon if they could shut all education down, they would. It's a threat you see.

The 'rewards' which prisoners obtain from attending courses range from providing an opportunity to 'blank off' prison life, as we can see from what prisoners themselves have to say, to idealistic pursuit of education for education's sake. It is this kind of attainment in educational terms that can seriously transform the prisoner's sense of self to the extent that 'success' in this area of prison experience counterbalances the felt experience of a sense of personal failure and loss of self-respect. This is where empowerment lies, in acknowledging that the outcomes of learning for each prisoner-student are *unique* and occur as a result of the way in which s/he has *synthesised* what has been learned into personal life experience. If post-release behaviour is to be affected or 'changed' in any way then it seems to follow that it will be determined by the prisoner's engagement with what has been learned and by the circumstances and situations which arose at the time of learning. In short, practitioners need to think carefully about the *context* of learning before being desirous of specific outcomes relating to reducing offending behaviour. *Learning* to 'think differently' does not have the same implications for prisoner education as having been *taught* to 'think differently'.

The elements which make up the third step forward involve *choice and control* in what prisoners do whilst in prison, as stated above. They form the basis of empowerment grounded in equality and tolerance. However, some observers may see this as a form of *confrontation or challenge* to the 'system' that can resonate through all that a prisoner may say or do throughout a sentence. A fifth element to be aware of is *cynicism* which can characterise the attitudes of everyone associated with educational provision in prisons from prisoners themselves who adopt a 'cynical-plus' attitude in that they are profoundly aware of their situation and the expectations that others have of them through to prison civilian staff who know that prisoners will 'go along' with any sentence plan as long as it means a reduction in sentence. This

cynicism manifests itself on the part of the prisoner who 'responds' to those who represent the 'system' by colluding or conforming with their demands whilst at the same time decrying the worth of any 'correctional' programme to fellow prisoners and/or prison reformers: 'Well, look at like this, when some of us get out, we're gonna be really smart at what we do best'.

The prisoners who adopt this attitude are mirroring the sentiments often expressed by prison officers, because these kinds of attitudes *are expected* within a prison environment. The prisoners here are resorting to the same kind of stereotyping of themselves that is also expressed beyond the prison walls, and awareness of this response to their labelling by others is important for those concerned with restoring self-esteem via education. For many in prison it seems that if you 'play the right games', you get the 'right prizes'. If you appear to agree with those who represent authority, you will benefit, regardless of what you might actually believe. It is also a way of convincing yourself that you have retained some degree of control in the choices that you make.

The way forward in prisoner education cannot be considered without recourse to prisoners and choice, control, confrontation, challenge and cynicism. Together they form the basis of understanding empowerment in appreciating how education can help prisoners and encourage them to make informed decisions about their lives. Restore choice and individual control, reduce the potential for confrontation, challenge and cynicism in the prison. (Reuss, 1999, 125).

Education in prisons needs to be seen as something more than rehabilitative in the sense that it should simply assist in reducing offending behaviour. It has to be seen as something that has worth for the prisoner by the prisoner. If, as a result of attending a course in prison, offending behaviour 'stops', then all well and good; if an 'alternative future' is opened up for the prisoner through education, then all well and good; if attitudes, values, problem-solving skills and reasoning skills are enhanced, then all well and good. If social awareness and political consciousness are heightened, as they so often can be through higher education courses in particular - why is this seen as a problem? Why is it seen as a 'luxury' to provide the necessary resources, for example, for 'on-site campuses' in our prisons? Could it be that as a society for whom prison

represents the ultimate form of punishment, we cannot bear the thought of intellectual 'power' shifting in favour of the offender, that we cannot accept freedom to learn for those prisoners who want to learn and for whom something might 'work' whilst doing time?

This classroom is the most beautiful place in this prison. You can be yourself, you're respected, you can almost imagine that you're not in prison. (Duke, 1998).

For the most part however, the prevailing view tends to follow the pattern described by a prisoner who conducted a small study on prison education whilst serving his sentence:

There are those prison officers, politicians, Governors, Board of Visitors members, et al. who will quite openly state that in their opinion, any form of education or training for inmates is a direct dereliction of authority, and an insidious plot by a 'Bunch of Liberal Outsiders' to pamper and indulge convicted felons who would be better 'amused' breaking rocks or digging ditches. (Richards; 1993).

Ultimately the way forward in prison education cannot be separated from a strategy that seeks to reform the penal system itself, and this in turn cannot be separated from the broader social and political context within which prisons have to operate. To achieve the policy and practice agendas we have outlined prisons have to stop being places where politicians can appear "tough", and prisoners in turn have to be offered opportunities that have hitherto been denied to them. This is not mere idealistic posturing, but a passionate belief stemming from prolonged exposure to the practice of educating prisoners, and seeing for ourselves the transforming power of education.

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