London Review of Education
Volume 12, Number 2, July 2014

EDITORIAL

Education, training, and employment in prison and post-release

Education in prisons presents a special challenge. In contrast to education in other contexts, in prisons the over-riding institutional purpose is to provide secure detention, not to further education and training, though this is a secondary goal. Prisons exist to sequestrate people convicted of breaking the law from mainstream society. Activities within prisons reflect this situation. Additionally, learners in prison tend to have a history of social exclusion, including an unsatisfactory relationship with education prior to their conviction. In consequence, education in prisons is dogged by a number of related problems: it is fragmented and poorly co-ordinated; prisoners frequently have highly distinctive needs; provision is very different from provision elsewhere; it has to address the impact of sentencing, court appearances, and a criminal record; teachers tend to be isolated; the number of learners and teachers is small compared to those in mainstream education, which mitigates against the development of an evidence base that reflects the particularities of education within the criminal justice system.

There is a paucity of research on the nature and effectiveness of education, training, and employment for people in prison or serving sentences in the community, yet this is an important topic. It is well theorized and documented that social inclusion in general, and gainful occupation in particular, are likely to reduce offending. From the perspective of reducing offending it has long been recognized that it is necessary to address the factors which increase the likelihood of offending. Desistance theory (e.g. McNeill, 2006) is the most recent and coherent thesis to articulate this position. The evidence that is beginning to accumulate within this framework hints at a range of ways in which education and training may promote desistance, which take us beyond the more obvious benefits of enhanced skills and qualifications. Beyond this there are human rights arguments for the importance of education, training, and employment for people in the criminal justice system.

This special edition offers an international focus on this international problem, representing authors from Scotland, Ireland, England, Australia, and Norway.

The paper by Vorhaus provides a strong context for this special edition in the case made for education and training in prisons from a rights perspective. Often, arguments for the value of education in prisons are couched in terms of the potential to reduce offending. Yet, as Vorhaus argues, what happens if education and training fail to reduce offending? Does that mean that they have no value? Vorhaus takes a philosophical stance in his survey and considers international conventions and principles on prisoners' right to education and how this right might be defended from an appeal to education as a means to an end and as a human right.

Costelloe and Warner take issues around prisoners' right to education forward in their consideration of the contrasting approaches to prison education and how the different perspectives held about individuals in prison influence and shape the educational offer. In particular they argue for education in prisons to draw on models of learning from adult and community education, in contrast to those that adopt employment-based or offence-focused perspectives. The discussion centres on the disparate application and understanding of education between European documentation and recommendation and how it is applied. Similar to the paper by Sams, Costelloe and Warner provide a strong case that those involved in prison education should view the whole person, rather than the prisoner, and provide a rich educational experience rather than a range of skills.

Rogers *et al.* provide an account of the aspirations and realities of prison education for those aged under 25 in the London area. The paper offers an insight into the nature of prison education in a wide-ranging discussion of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, training, organizational perspectives, and educational aims of prison education. It presents detailed information on points that are often discussed in the absence of adequate evidence. For example: information about the levels at which learners are assessed at initial assessment, as contrasted with the levels at which learners are gaining qualifications; evidence on achievement rates; and evidence on the factors that make for successful courses. Although many prisons are working hard to offer good provision, education is constrained in terms of the options available, the length of courses, and the level. These issues are particularly pertinent for under-25s held in custody if prisons are to provide viable support for young prisoners as they move back into society.

After Rogers *et al.* have drawn attention to the narrow curriculum offer for under-25s in the London area, which was beset with low-level qualifications and a lack of progression, it is refreshing to read Sams's account of a project-based approach to education across seven Scottish prisons. Building on ideas from Curriculum for Excellence, which sought to challenge teaching and learning within schools, the approach taken here is to enrich the prison education curriculum by focusing on promoting strengths and aspirations among the prisoners together with the development of pro-social identities. Contrasting examples of project-based approaches are given, all of which place an emphasis on the learner and lead to a publicly exhibited outcome. Central to this new way of working has been the involvement of external organizations and the development of innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Important, too, was the aspiration to change the perspective of teaching staff so that they also saw the value of creative approaches to learning for the development of their own practice. Whilst Sams acknowledges the lack of a longitudinal evidence base to assess the impact of these programmes, the qualitative evidence included here does suggest that there is much to be learned from this more creative perspective on prison education.

Roth and Manger investigate an issue of central importance in prison education, that of learner motivation. Even in Norway, where prisoners have the right to access education up to upper secondary level, only 54 per cent enrol in education, although it should be noted that this considerably exceeds prisoner enrolment in education in England and Wales, which is estimated to be below 33 per cent. Graffam *et al.* confirm prisoner participation rates in education and training to be a concern in Australia too. Roth and Manger remark that a number of studies have observed that the motivations for engaging in education in prison tend to be different from those observed elsewhere, as a result of the particular experiences of education of the learners but also because of the situation in which they find themselves. This substantial survey of Norwegian prisoners provides insight into their motivations to engage in education and training and how these vary by factors such as age, reading ability, and sentence length. It also employs a questionnaire that can be replicated in other countries.

Finally, Graffam *et al.* provide rare information about the impact of a pre- and post-release vocational education and training (VET) programme on the employment rates of prisoners on their return to the community. Governments appreciate the value of VET for addressing prisoners' skills gaps and its potential to improve employment rates on re-entry. Indeed, policy in England and Wales has made it explicit that the core purpose of prison education is to enable employment on release. In this Australian context, sustained support enabled prisoners to achieve similar rates of employment on release compared with other adults in the community accessing Job Services Australia. Although only slightly less than 20 per cent of the prisoners on the VET programme achieved employment for at least 13 weeks during the monitoring period, they had very low re-offending rates. Graffam *et al.* make the point that transformative change requires a network of support to enable a personal and lifestyle change. The VET they describe involves such a network, resonating with desistance theory.

The papers in this special issue touch on the range of subjects central to education and training in the criminal justice system, from that of rights to the nature of curriculum content and learner motivation, to VET and re-entry. They share a desire to explore the value of education for people in prison and on release and reveal a complex set of issues and a further set of questions.

Reference

McNeill, F. (2006) 'A desistance paradigm for offender management'. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 6 (1): 39–62.

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