Conflicting demands in prison education and the need for context-specific, specialist training for prison educators: an account of the work of the Initial Teacher Training project for teachers and instructors in London prisons and offender learning

Julia Jeanes,
Institute of Education,
LONCETT

Jeremy McDonald,
Institute of Education,

Margaret Simonot
City & Islington College

Abstract

Prison Education is regulated by legislative and institutional requirements as are other kinds of Learning and Skill provision, but it is also fundamentally affected by the custodial requirements of the British Legal system. This, together with the relative isolation that teaching staff face within an organisational culture which is peculiar to each prison, produces a learning culture that is very different from that of general Further Education. This paper discusses initial findings of the LONCETT Prison Education Research Project (2008), which aims to identify the specific professional training needs of prison educators in London.

Findings from five of the eight prisons in London highlighted two main pedagogic issues that emerged as key aspects of prison education practice which require both specialist training input and further research: the fragmentation which characterises the learner experience; and the emotional stress produced in this environment, which impacts both upon prisoner-learners and teaching staff.

Key words
Prison Education, Prison Teachers and Initial Teacher Education.

Introduction

Research into the nature and organisation of offender education within prisons has been minimal. Although there is a growing literature on the recent policy decisions aimed at transforming offender learning in the UK (McDonald, 2008), very little work has been carried out on the distinctive needs of those who teach in prisons. This paper is based on evidence gathered by the London Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (LONCETT) project while investigating the professional development needs of teachers working in London prisons. It aims to give an account of the development of the project, the initial findings and the formation of a London network for teachers and instructors in prisons. Collaboration has been an important element in the project and the research process has involved cooperation between professionals in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in general FE colleges, the voluntary sector, the Offender Learning and Skills Service and professionals working and teaching in London prisons.

Project aims and key research questions

At the outset it was agreed that the project should seek to specify *what it is that a prison educator has to do that is different or over and above what teachers in other areas of the lifelong learning sector have to do.* Subsequently, practitioners and managers identified three main areas of concern, and the research was designed to explore the following questions:

- Which pedagogic concerns are specific to prison education and to the teacher training associated with it?
- What effective strategies can be developed to address the concerns above through development of ITE and CPD materials and new forms of training?
- How can the isolation of trainee teachers within prisons be reduced and replaced by a network of communities of practice? (Lave & Wenger's term, 'communities of practice' (1991), is used to refer to the shared and developing practices of newly established networks of practitioners who are teaching in London prisons)

In the initial stage of the project the research focused on identifying the organisational and cultural characteristics of the prison environment. This created a basis for defining some of the key elements of a context-specific, specialist pedagogy for prison education. The second stage of the project is focused on an evaluation of new, contextualized teacher training programmes, which have been produced by the project for use with different groups of teachers and instructors. The evaluation will judge the effectiveness of newly developed training materials and of the programmes themselves in terms of how well they help to equip new and existing teachers and instructors for their role, and improve their teaching competence in this demanding environment so as to better meet the huge range of offender-learners' needs.

The context for the research

Provision and access to education by offenders within London prisons is determined by two factors; the structure and ethos of the custodial environment combined with the 'dual' identity of the individual as learner and offender. A fundamental contradiction which recurs throughout the literature on prison education (Corston, 2007; McDonald, 2008; McNicholl, 2008) and in anecdotal accounts of practitioners is the conflict between the prisoner primarily as an offender and only secondarily as a learner. The conflict arises in the wake of the recent political decision to align prison education with general further education, and the transfer of responsibility for prison education to the DfES in 2001, and then subsequently to the Learning and Skills Council in 2006. (HMSO, 2005; DfES, 2006; LSC, 2007). These changes have produced organisational divisions and tensions within prison education which continue to affect the ability of education and training providers to fully meet their objectives, as the recent House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report (2008) has highlighted.

Whilst it is recognised that all learning environments are at least to some extent unique - depending on purposes, management structures, funding, types of learners and environment - it is arguably the case that, due to the custodial function of prisons, the educational provision that is offered to learners is woven together with the practical requirements of incarceration of offenders in ways that produce a learning environment which is indeed unique and one which is also particularly challenging. The context for the research, which was undertaken to underpin the teacher training curriculum development objectives, is thus extremely complex.

Many teaching staff will have followed traditional training routes through the voluntary sector into teaching in prisons, but it appears that no training customised to the particular needs of those teaching in prisons is currently available within the new government ITE framework. Due to the relative isolation of different prison environments, teachers employed in prisons have had few opportunities to come together within networks to share and discuss practice. A further aspect of this separation is that education and training classes in prisons are taught and delivered on the one hand by teachers employed by the Offender Learning & Skills Service (OLASS) who deliver what is seen as traditional education (basic skills: Language, Literacy and Numeracy, art and some 'leisure' activities) and on the other by staff, mainly employed by the Prison Service, who teach PE and vocational subjects in the prison workshops. Each group has different conditions of service and tends to have allegiance to rather different kinds of culture, tradition and ethos regarding learning, teaching and training.

Research methodology

The research design had to take into account a number of constraints, including the very restricted access to sites where prison education and training takes place, and the fact that prisons generally, and different categories of prisons, each have different systems for organising and managing education and training provision. Furthermore, conditions of service vary for different categories of teachers, trainers and instructors within and across different prisons. In addition, prison educators have extremely variable experience, training and qualifications, and there is great variability in the range of subjects taught in different prisons.

The three researchers involved in the interview process frequently had a prior link to the people they interviewed. This ranged from being part of a voluntary provider of education to having trained some of the teachers in earlier ITE courses. The process of data collection was cumulative, and opportunities for extending the range of interviewees were taken when appropriate (e.g. one prisoner was interviewed when the opportunity arose.) Evidence presented in the initial report drew on a number of sources, including:
- an ethnographic case study based on one Category B male local prison (McNicholl, 2008)
- semi-structured interviews with a sample of fifteen staff in a cross section of roles in prison education in London prisons, including both managers and practitioners, the latter employed both as teachers by OLASS and as instructors by the Prison Service.

Theoretical framework

In order to characterise and better understand the particularity of prison as a learning environment, it was decided to use a framework which focused on the situated and social nature of learning in particular contexts, as developed in the ethnographic work of Lave and Wenger and others who have explored processes of learning in workplace settings (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Fuller and Unwin, 2002; Rainbird et al, 2004; Fuller et al, 2005). The associated concept of community of practice (Wenger 1998) was also valuable in suggesting ways of addressing the problem of isolation faced by many prison educators through the development of networks of prison education practitioners.

Key findings from initial stage of research

The interview data was analysed using a procedure of thematic analysis based on the work of Cooper and McIntyre (1993). Themes emerging from an initial analysis were grouped under a set of headings that included organisational, cultural and pedagogical factors. This followed a typology suggested by Fuller and Unwin (2002) in their study of restricted and expansive learning environments in a school-based teacher training/professional development setting. Presenting the themes in this way allowed their relative importance to be examined and gauged as factors which impinge on the context of prison education, the training needs of staff, and the possibilities for creating a positive learning environment within which prisoners can learn and progress. The factors are summarised below.

Organisational factors include: the pivotal role of the Prison Governor in determining the extent to which a custodial setting can be managed to create positive conditions for learning; the rigid, hierarchical structure within which education often has low priority; security procedures, overcrowding and 'churn'. ('Churn' refers to the frequent turnover and constant movement of prisoners, which, especially in London where overcrowding is severe, makes learning fragmented and discontinuous.) Added to this, prison educators have until very recently lacked professional status and clear routes into employment. Procedures in the classroom are further affected by the very variable availability of initial assessment data and ILPs (individual learning plans) as essential tools for tracking and establishing continuity in learning.

Cultural factors include the confined, time-bound, physical environment – entirely different from other environments. This makes for an unsettled learning environment marked by disruption and discontinuity. External circumstances weigh heavily on prisoners' lives and have a significant impact on feelings; and this gives rise to high levels of 'emotional load' affecting the dynamics of learning and teaching. There is, in other words, a conflict between the prisoner-learner's relatively fragile identity as learner and the dominant, legally imposed status as offender.

Pedagogical factors include discontinuity in individual learning and fluctuating patterns of attendance. Learner groups are frequently characterised by an extremely wide range of individual needs, which require a greater degree of differentiation than is generally needed in mainstream education settings. Prisoners typically have a relatively fragile identity as learners, and often have low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and poor basic skills. Teachers have limited access to internet resources and therefore it is difficult for them to find ways of making teaching resources and content relevant. A major factor affecting teaching and learning is the need to manage and deal with the 'emotional load', the practical and emotional support needs that prisoners bring with them to class, which affects both learner and teacher and the 'emotional climate' in the prison classroom.

These factors create a shifting background against which teachers are struggling – successfully in many cases – with the conflicting requirements of their role. Although such conflicts may be present in other FE settings such as vocational learning, the tensions are heightened in prisons by the highly unpredictable length of study, the constraints imposed by security codes of practice and the knowledge that, whereas the learner in a traditional Lifelong Learning Sector can see a distinction between their life as a learner and as an adult citizen. Within the prison these boundaries are less distinct since life outside the classroom remains still within the confines of the prison.

Key themes for the second stage of research
Organisation of a prison education network for professionals working in offender learning in London has provided a valuable opportunity for a re-examination of the initial research findings. Discussions with practitioners at the first network meeting have both confirmed the findings and led to the emergence of two key themes which need to be more fully examined in the second stage of the research. We believe that these issues significantly shape the potential and purposes of prison education. They cluster around two interlocking themes, and are posed here as questions for prison educators and teacher trainers, as follows:

1. how to deal with the fragmentation of learning in prisons, recognise different kinds of achievement, and build continuity in individual and group learning?
2. how to acknowledge, understand and deal with the 'emotional load' which prisoners bring to the classroom, and the ways this can inhibit and distort learning? Linked to this is the need to understand the emotional demands which are made on teachers in prison education settings, and teachers' needs for both formal and informal support and professional debriefing in order to deal with and process the effects of these demands.

The first of these issues continues to receive attention as part of the current agenda (also noted in the Public Accounts Committee report (2008)) for improving the quality of prison education (e.g. ILPs are reported to be working quite well within certain prisons as a means of structuring individual learning but effective systems for transferring valid information about learners between prisons have yet to be developed). This theme will feature centrally in the on-going work of the project.

The second theme – that of the 'emotional load' which burdens learning and teaching in prison – has yet to be researched. The concept of 'emotional labour' originates in the work of Hochschild on the emotions involved in the work of flight attendants who are required to manage their own feelings 'in order to sustain an outward appearance that produces in others a sense of being cared for in a convivial, safe place'. (Hochschild, 1983: p. 7) In analyzing the personal costs involved in such emotional labour, Hochschild notes the dangers of self-estrangement or alienation which can accompany the commodification of feeling as part of a job role. More recently work has been carried out in relation to the emotional content in the work of service workers, air traffic controllers, police men and women, and nurses. Arguments have been made for including emotion management awareness in the training of nurses as 'emotionally intelligent practitioners' (Hunter and Smith, 2007).

Comments by prison education practitioners suggest that there is a relatively urgent need for official recognition of the stress caused by the emotional labour of prison educators and for the establishment of formal systems of support alongside the informal support which they may or may not have access to. One teacher linked this aspect of the work to that of nurses:

> 'Prisoners open up a lot to teachers, like to nurses – for example, if they're feeling suicidal.'
>
> (Contribution to Network Meeting discussion)

The 'emotional load' was a consistent theme in the interviews and network meeting discussions with practitioners, and there is evidently a particular need for new teachers to be prepared, trained and supported in dealing with the emotional stress associated with their work. One young teacher recently employed by OLASS graphically described the dilemma of trying to bridge the gap between a prisoner's need for support and continuity in learning, and the inadequate tools and materials at her disposal:

> 'My brain is falling in half – how do you do what is required? Instead of nurturing, holding, you begin to make demands, and that is difficult. The development of skills is essentially an emotional [process]. It doesn't happen immediately, it happens over time – you can't just tick boxes.'
>
> (Contribution to Network Meeting discussion)

Teachers recognise the effect that personal circumstances and history as well as the internal conditions in prison can have on prisoners' emotional state and on their approach to learning in prison. In the case of prisoners this background can mean poor educational attainment at school, it can mean not being able to concentrate for worry about one's children, or because of drugs or mental illness; it can mean being unable to sit in the same room as others as a result of abuse or previous violence inflicted on them. One prison teacher described his role as follows:

> 'We come from a very different place: dealing with someone who is damaged, needs support to enter the process of learning; balancing previous experience that is often very, very negative. Therefore the problem starts way before. We're dealing with people who can't sit still for 10 minutes. A women's prison, a male teacher: that is already a huge set of issues. You ask them to do something – that sets off another set of issues.'
>
> '…you have to …provide a place where they can start thinking about learning, reach a basic agreement about how to sit in the same room.'
>
> (Contribution to Network Meeting discussion)

The implications of these issues for the training of prison educators will be further explored in the second and later stages of the research. It is clear that awareness of the issues, some understanding of what James and Biesta (2007) refer to as 'disposition' (i.e. what contributes to a prisoner's 'readiness' or 'approach' to learning), as well as a strategic ways of managing the emotional content of the teacher-learner exchange, should form part of prison educators' training.

Conclusion

To date, resources for use in PTLLS courses to support the process of dealing with the fragmentation of learning and carrying the emotional load have been produced and are available on the LONCETT website http://www.loncett.org.uk. A further initiative has been to set up and support network meetings of prison educators in London as embryonic 'communities of practice' among practitioners who have hitherto been relatively isolated. The capacity to develop teaching and learning strategies and share good practice is a fundamental focus of the new network. As well as providing a much needed forum for discussing and disseminating good practice in this specialized sector, such networking is already also proving to be a valuable dimension of the research process. Evidence from discussion groups at the first LONCETT network meeting for prison teachers which focused on the 'fragmentation of the learning experience' and 'the emotional load' of prison teachers highlights the need to investigate the conditions and circumstances in which teachers are working, and the relationship between teachers and other professionals within each prison.

The project also wishes to encourage the establishment of cross-departmental links between staff in any one prison to achieve a picture of the whole learner and to provide space for staff to share concerns with each other. Structured space for reflection on the teaching experience would alleviate some of the stress created by carrying the emotional load.

The research findings so far, including the factors which characterise the prison learning environment, will be used to inform the evaluation of forthcoming Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector training courses for OLASS teachers and Her Majesty's Prison trainers. The findings will be re-examined in the second stage of the research in the light of further emerging issues and themes from the second set of interviews and focus group discussions.

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