

Educators as empowerers:

a small-scale study of opportunities to expand the scope of ITT programmes, with a particular focus on prison education

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the scope of initial teacher training (ITT) programmes at UK universities and the extent to which they prepare teachers to empower learners outside of mainstream, compulsory schooling. Education is widely considered as a human right and an essential tool for social mobility, with the power to ‘enrich human capabilities and change behaviour’ (Cohen 2011: 4–5); in this paper, we explore the limitations of that in reality, considering educational provision, opportunities for funding and attitudes towards adult education. The paper compares attitudes towards school education and prison education, examining the potential for greater cohesion and the importance of rehabilitation. We draw on evidence from the literature; our own experience as ITT students and, subsequently, secondary school teachers; and a collaborative trainee teacher and prison learner programme between the School of Education, University of East London, and the prison HMP Isis. The paper concludes by discussing the potential for future, more inclusive ITT programmes which consider the role of education outside of schools, the implications of this and recommendations for the future.

KEYWORDS

PRISON EDUCATION
TEACHER EDUCATION
EMPOWERMENT
ADULT EDUCATION
ACCESS TO EDUCATION
PRIVATISATION.

‘Every prisoner [is] a learner, every prison a place to learn’

Prisoners’ Education Trust (2018)

INTRODUCTION

Teaching can, in its simplest form, be described as a process ‘in which knowledge and skills are transmitted’ (Cohen 2011: 4). Within initial teacher education, teachers learn that this transmission takes place formally through the scope of pedagogy and theories of learning, devised over many centuries. These concepts are able to be applied, practised and critiqued within mainstream secondary education placements as well as

through university study. Teaching outside of mainstream education remains barely considered through initial teacher training (ITT), with the focus very clearly on compulsory primary and secondary schooling. Furthermore, where alternative education provisions are considered, the focus is largely on the theoretical scope of education rather than the practice of teaching within these areas. Through self-directed initiatives and experiences, such as a university-led

prison education experience, teachers are able to learn that educational provision is diverse, and education can and should take place outside of the school gates, in all corners of society. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ‘everyone has the right to education’ (United Nations 1948); therefore, it can be considered insufficient and discriminative that ITT is bounded by the walls of a school classroom. The value of education, the learning establishments and questions

surrounding accessibility will be discussed through this consideration of the roles of educators in forming 'good people, living reasonably happy lives' (Mortimore, 2013: 28).

EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION

The concept of empowerment has been a growing 'focus of research in the social science and educational literature' (Kreisberg 1992). No longer focusing primarily on the gender and peace movements seen in the late twentieth century, it has furthered its connections to education and employment; this has facilitated increasingly prominent debates, as each generation, culture and geographical area faces different economic, educational and careers challenges than in past spaces and times. Kreisberg (1992: 2) stated that the education system is 'seeking new directions for restructuring' and should prioritise creating positive empowerment amongst its variety of learners. Though students in England must now remain in education or training until the age of 18, there has been no major 'restructuring' to accommodate this change, suggesting there continues to be a need for 'positive empowerment'.

Kreisberg (1992: 18) explores how 'most research' concludes that people are 'disempowered' within society, and how this facilitates social problems. Since then, Otto et al. (2017) have further explored the difficulties of empowering 'young people in disempowering times', notably referencing the impacts of inequality and economic disadvantage. Shor (1992: 4) theorises that students' rebellion against the traditional knowledge process, which can cause misbehaviours and withdrawn attitudes to education, is one cause of disempowerment. These behaviours can be seen within wider society and the prison environment, and are not exclusive to secondary education. Today's sense of disempowerment has arguably been bred since the 1980s, when notable politicians and policy makers intensified pressure

on academia within schools (Cohen 2011). This escalation of expectations and scholastic pressure has been seen as leading to increased resistance and inadequate progress, especially where teachers' motivations for academic success have been in contradiction to the ambitions of students. Interestingly, Gibb (2015), on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) in the UK, states that 'education is the engine of our economy', and social resilience, character and morals follow. Furthermore, it has been seen that the use of performance levels and grades has decreased empowerments and motivations (Shor 1992: 91). This may suggest an impact on passion, drive and success for not only students, but teachers as well.

Although schools' mission statements within the UK are often generalised to appease all stakeholders, Cohen (2011: 4–5) states that teachers all work for 'human improvement', describing how the teaching occupation works to 'transform minds, enrich human capabilities and change behaviour'. Despite Nicholson (2016: 19) exploring how 'the purpose of education differs over time', schooling has always ensured that students learn to solve problems, deal with their feelings and present with honesty. These social expectations are referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' by Nicholson (ibid.). They often differ from the core curriculum and extracurricular activities provided within schools, though the skills they offer are clearly interlinked. It could be argued that these social expectations have an impact on the empowerment of learners: confidence in social and educational situations can prevent feelings of disempowerment and powerlessness. Shor (1992: 14) adds how education teaches students about social situations and implores them to use the past, present and future to understand 'their place in the world'. These skills should facilitate empowerment and may be bettered through individual growth within an active, social and student-centred environment.

Dewey (1899 [1916]) noted that children are born motivated learners and so this should remain through the education system. In practice, it would be difficult to both define motivation and categorise large numbers of learners in secondary education in this way. This begs the question: at what point do children become 'unmotivated learners', and are 'unmotivated' learners able to be successful learners at all? Potentially, this could then impact on an adult's perception of education, thereby discouraging any continued learning. The learning processes within school could, instead, be negotiated together between teacher and student. Students who understand the reasons behind their work are often more motivated and produce better outcomes, giving a sense of fulfilment and achievement and reducing any negative connotations of education.

The prescriptive nature of today's compulsory education is often led by the teacher and 'no longer open-ended and unpredictable'; it is heavily controlled, standardised and self-contained (Lesch 2009: 6). It could be said that this makes learning highly unnatural and impractical for the world outside the classroom, eliminating 'natural curiosities' (Dewey [1899] 1916). This leads us to question the structure of schooling and whether it truly reflects the learning process, and arguably the disempowering impact of this is more severe for adult learners already existing in the outside world. Dewey (1899 [1916]: 29–32) implores that 'there is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning', going on to describe the education system as an 'embryonic society', something which is self-contained. This assumes that there is more of a focus on the academia whilst the value of social learning, or learning outside the prescribed boundaries of compulsory education, is often overlooked. Having discussed the impact on social skills for empowerment, it may be fair to state that this could affect employment and mental health alongside morals and values.

School has forced 'childhood and adulthood to become increasingly separate entities' (Lesch 2009: 108). Until the end of the Middle Ages, children were present in 'adult life' and were not required to be supported daily by the school. Lesch (2009) concludes her work by stating that schools should indeed connect themselves more with 'the world of work'; that learning subject matter does not provide empowered, motivated and good citizens. This idea is backed by developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner's, support of apprenticeships which ensure the gap, created by schooling, between childhood and adulthood, is bridged (Gardner 2011). This indicates a polarity between childhood and adult education, where adult education is primarily focused on a specific outcome or linked to a clear career path.

Without a complete upheaval of the schooling structure, it would be difficult to go back to the ideas of the medieval school where learning took place out in society and was not discriminated by age. Gibb (2015) even noted that the purpose of education is to prepare for life as an adult, though it does not provide any 'follow-up' should this fail. This notion leads on to the discussion of adult education, which has changed a lot over the past 40 years. Foley (2004) explains how community-based education has become 'largely self-supporting' and adult education as a whole is 'much more business-like'. Adult education is often formal and privatised with a preliminary focus on collaborative problem solving or specific skills for corporate development or growth, usually leading to a qualification of some kind (Finger & Asun, 2001: 135). This type of learning is often workplace-based within targeted fields of practice, so, for unemployed people, subsidised or funded adult education may be inaccessible. Finger & Anun (2001) explore a scenario where adult education is 'assigned [to] special risk groups' such as offenders, unemployed citizens or women, though it could be said that this

may 'fragment the field' further.

PRISON EDUCATION

The early 1990s saw an overhaul of prison education. With teaching tendered out to universities, FE colleges and private organisations, there was a more directed approach towards a culture of rehabilitation. Trounstone (2008: 674) suggests that the aim of prison education today is to 'enlighten [prison learners] on what society says is the "best" way to be, to teach socially accepted behaviour as an antidote to crime', promoting personal development within the framework of society's accepted norms. The formalisation of prison education such that prison learners are enrolled on nationally recognised courses 'mirrors a shift in education generally in the UK, away from the ethos and freedom of the professional practitioner towards measurable outcomes' (Forster & Forster 1974: 105). Whilst this transference towards formal learning enables learners to gain formal qualifications, Flusfeder (2004: 34) argues that current provisions fail to 'respond to the individual needs of prisoners... and [their] range of needs, including emotional and behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties and criminogenic factors'. In this sense, prison education has the potential to belittle the intrinsic value of education in favour of increasing employability and 'giving prisoners something outside of their immediate circumstances to think about' (Flusfeder 2004: 34). Conversely, the Ministry of Justice Re-offending Analysis (2014) reveals a reoffending rate of 26% for learners having participated in prison education, and 19% for those in receipt of a Prisoners' Education Trust grant providing the opportunity for 'a distance learning course or to purchase materials for arts and hobbies' (Ministry of Justice 2014: 1). This is a product of 'the strong links between employment and reoffending' and evidenced commitment and raised aspirations through completing education programmes (Coates 2016: 56). These findings suggest that prison

education faces many of the same challenges as mainstream education: whilst programmes struggle to be individualised, they are largely effective in enabling learners to develop basic skills and qualifications where funding is available (UCU 2015). It is fundamental that 'employability should not drive the entire focus of the curriculum' but where it serves to complement broader education, it facilitates more tangible and aspirational progress (Coates 2016: ii).

The DfE's 'Improving Offenders' Learning and Skills' initiative focused on improving the quality of learning provision and increasing funding for prison education by 47% over the programme (Prison Reform Trust 2003: 3). Though this was designed to create greater rehabilitative opportunities for prison learners on the premise that 'releasing potential and achieving excellence are certainly as relevant to prison education as to any other educational provision', still only one-third of prisoners have access to education at any given time (Prison Reform Trust 2003: 2). With half of prisoners reporting that they have tried to get onto courses, but never heard the result of their application, and others who 'would like to do education, but either what they wanted to do was not available, or they weren't allowed to do it (e.g. Open University courses)', the system appears to disempower and demotivate potential learners, perhaps putting the most vulnerable and least resilient at risk of total disengagement (Prison Reform Trust 2003: 16). In a context where '50% of prisoners in the UK are functionally illiterate' (Moss 2017) – that is they have a reading age of less than 11 years old – and 'do not have the skills required by 96% of jobs', it feels as if compromised access to education challenges the constitutional right to education (Natale 2010: 2). It is well documented that GCSEs in maths and English are imperative for obtaining employment, and an inability to access these, particularly within institutions which seemingly promote and rely on rehabilitation, fails motivated learners

and undermines the nature of the prison system as a whole. Therefore, whilst the focus on vocations as means of solving issues of unemployment, and reducing reoffending rates, should be effective – a different type of education, solving a different type of problem – the lasting impact is limited without basic numeracy and literacy qualifications. As a trainee teacher, the value of mainstream education becomes even more significant – both in reducing the chance of young people entering the prison environment and providing them with a free, full and rounded education which they may never again have the opportunity to access.

Accessibility must also be considered beyond the realms of provision. Flusfeder's (2004) findings revealed that prisoners engaged in education can expect earning of £3.50–£5 per week, to be spent on items from the prison canteen, whilst those who work expect to earn £10–£15 and have greater flexibility on their time, and access to showers, phone calls and visits. With prison education claiming to be grounded in themes of well-being, social and human capital, creating financial disincentives to engage in education goes against its rehabilitative aims (Prisoner Learning Alliance 2016). Wivell's (2018) documentary *Prison* highlights the importance of access to money as a currency for larger purchases, such as mobile phones or weapons, and thus one's status both within the prison and outside. Thompson (2016) also discusses the ways in which cash can be manipulated beyond prison borders, influencing life, and crime, within the prison itself. In our own experience of prison teaching, learners were often made to choose between education and visits, excluding those who had committed friends and family. This, too, widened the division between those who had external support networks and those for whom education was the least worst option. This issue of organisation and timetabling simultaneously fails learners and demotivates teachers, depriving both groups of consistent, clear and

reliable expectations. Whilst it is a difficult balance to create, and despite an inability to project the rules of compulsory mainstream education on to autonomous adults, there is a desperate need to widen access to prison education and, in doing so, better demonstrate its value.

Perhaps the issue of access is part of a wider, more entrenched problem:

when we think of education, we usually associate it with the formal education of children, adolescents and young people... [A]dults are also recognised rights-holders. The right to education is, like all other human rights, universal and applies to everyone. (Right to Education 2018)

With only 4% of UK adults actively participating in education (DfE 2017), and figures dwindling, the apparent focus on an 'understanding that adult education is important for the whole society' is questionable (Powell et al. 2003). Prison education finds itself somewhere between compulsory mainstream education and adult learning, though with much greater access compared to their adult peers. Whilst many contend that prisoners should not have access to free education, Rentzmann (1974: 63) reminds us that 'prisoners do not constitute a cross-section of the average population... typically they will be rather poorly equipped and will have had bad experiences with the ordinary educational system'; in this sense, prison education becomes more about redemption and facilitating 'victories to become motivated to start and stick with the course of education'. Knowing that 'education is just one of those activities that have a preventative effect of crime beyond any reasonable doubt', and that criminals 'are people who function and react just like the rest of us in most areas of life', the issue with the provision of education lies more squarely with adult education, not prison education (ibid.: 59). This indicates the potential for problems when inmates leave prison; having become engaged and motivated by education, they are not able

to access it without adequate finances or employer-based training which currently accounts for 70.9% of UK adults in education. In mainstream education, we teach children that education is their human right, and it remains so into their adult life: 'if we want humans to behave as humans, we must treat them as humans' (ibid.: 63).

Our experience of being teachers of prison education was frustrating. Coming from a mainstream school environment, we are aware of the challenges of funding, curriculum, disengaged learners and the fact that education is not the only thing going on in these people's lives. However, we learned to appreciate the mentality surrounding compulsory education – that it is the right of these children, that it is necessary, and that is deserved. The more we learn about prison education, the more acutely aware we are of issues of access, differentiation and continuity beyond prison. Suddenly the freedom of the outside world appears limiting, without the support to complete qualifications and genuinely recognise how those are put into play. As teachers, it's challenging. You are very few people's priority and you're limited by prescriptive qualifications, in a rigid environment, where there's a huge potential for creativity. But, even more frustratingly, these issues mirrored much larger ones in society. The issue is about what to do 'when society does not have sufficient capacity to offer large parts of the population a basic – not to mention higher – education, why on earth should prisoners of all people have such a right?', but one relating to a universal right and universal attitude of rights, not privilege (ibid.: 59).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

It is widely acknowledged that 'education has the best chance of turning lives around' (O'Mahony 2017). The University of East London (2018) argues that 'successful education is built on strong... teaching. Learners need highly skilled specialist teachers to inspire and challenge them.'

However, this attitude rarely extends beyond mainstream education, and the UK teacher training framework does not serve to challenge this. We would agree with Trimmer et al. (2015: 74) that initial teacher training 'is overdue for an overhaul', exploring the in-between spaces, separated from mainstream education, which are not explored through the training process. Even within the mainstream system, there is a plethora of different types of students, schools and pedagogies experienced. Throughout our training year we were involved with special educational needs (SEN) schools, pupil referral units and prison education; however, none of this is compulsory, our experiences were brief and self-directed, and many of our peers have not had these opportunities nor were they even aware of them. We would propose a longer training course to allow for formal placements with alternative educational provisions, widening the scope of teachers' understanding of education and developing their experience and levels of qualification.

We advocate the need for increased awareness of teacher responsibilities beyond the GCSE grade, the school gates and even life after the classroom. Though Cohen (2011: 5) states that 'many argue that teachers should instil obedience and respect for authority', our experience of prison learning is that these skills need to be qualified through the wider social, cultural, political and economic environment; this cannot be solely a product of school education. This echoes the need for a more collaborative, society-based approach to teacher education and a constant consideration of 'what happens next?'. ■

CONCLUSION

Initial teacher training ultimately prepares new teachers for a career in mainstream education. Though qualified to teach in a prison, or a special needs school, most teachers do not complete their training with adequate experience or confidence to explore alternative provisions. In a

context of teacher shortages, it could be argued that the training priority should be with compulsory education; however, prisons are facing similar challenges, and a 'lack of funds means education is frequently disrupted' (Phillips 2017). Our experience and wider opinion are unanimously in favour of the fundamental need for rehabilitative prison education – that which should 'aim to develop the whole person' (Council of Europe 1990: 8) and be 'constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside community' (ibid.: 14). For this to be achieved, there is a need to achieve greater consistency, opportunity and accessibility of highly qualified teachers within the prison environment, reframing the teaching profession as one which is society-based and places value on teaching which exists beyond the curriculum. Within a period of relative austerity, it appears unlikely that we will see any major changes in either the school or prison education sector immediately, and prisons are likely to find themselves a secondary priority. Presently, engagement with teacher education may be a solution to better integration of mainstream teacher education with alternative provision, but the short-termism continues to raise questions surrounding how genuinely rehabilitative this is for prison learners. Where many learners have 'very bad attitudes, very low motivation and rock bottom confidence' with regard to education and their academic ability, brief projects are unlikely to provide the consistency and normalisation of education needed to both engage and succeed in prison education. Our research points to a need for better educational integration across wider society: an attitude where schools, prisons, adult learning, and special needs provisions are not viewed as entirely separate entities or career paths, and education is seen as a more holistic vocation which benefits from a broader and prospective mindset. ■

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