

A report on education in prison education essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Prison education has been described as the Cinderella of UK education (Grubb, 2005) and it is the sector which I began working in two and a half years ago in my first teaching post. In common with other new teachers I was enrolled on a Cert. Ed. course at my local college, however it quickly became apparent that the challenges which I faced within this environment were different from those encountered by my mainstream FE colleagues and that the training and guidance which I received as part of my Cert. Ed. studies, though useful for many aspects of my work, was not sufficient to prepare me to teach effectively a cohort containing large numbers of students with either a lack of interest in, or an innate hostility towards, education.

This essay will seek to identify how this environment differs fundamentally from mainstream further education, and will consider these differences affects offender learning. It will examine the causes and effects of widespread disaffection and consider methods of reengagement and control. Finally the consequences of allowing a cohort containing large numbers of students with specialised needs to be taught by generically trained teachers will be considered.

Custodial education is viewed as an adjunct to the prison's primary purpose of secure containment (Irwin, 2008; Wilson and Reuss, 2000) and Simonot, Jeanes, McDonald, McNicholl and Wilkinson (2008) highlight the elementary issue that within the custodial setting the principle identity of those participating in education is that of offender rather than learner. This conflictual definition influences all aspects of prison learning and limits the ways in which prison teachers can seek to reengage the disaffected. The

regime in prison is strictly enforced, rigid, unaccommodating and therefore uncomplimentary to learning; further the student profile presents additional challenges to the prison teacher with the presence of extensive and significant educational needs. It is paradoxical that such a diverse cohort of students should be situated within an environment which is essentially antithetical to learning and these elements combined mean that (Simonot et al., 2008, p. 7).

Furthermore, prison education must answer to two masters, the Learning and Skills Council and the Prison Service, and this situation leads to inherent tensions as the operational requirements of the prison must often take precedence over learning. These factors, combined with the isolation which teaching staff may feel as 'guests' within a total institution, produce a learning culture which differs greatly from that experienced in general further education.

Research shows that 49% of male and 33% of female prisoners were excluded from school, with 52% of men and 71% of women having no qualifications at all. Additionally, high numbers (65% numeracy, 48% Literacy) have basic skills at or below Level 1 (Bromley Briefings, 2009, p. 16). But the challenge for prison education is greater than merely raising the basic skills level of a significant proportion of the inmate population, the reasons behind this lack of achievement must be understood if prison educators are to teach effectively.

Within the prison population 20-30% of inmates have learning disabilities or difficulties (Ibid., p. 3) with 7% having an IQ of less than 70 and a further

25% with an IQ lower than 80(Ibid., p. 35); dyslexia is three times more common than in the general population (Ibid) and since there is no systemised procedure for identifying those prisoners with learning disabilities or difficulties their needs are frequently undiagnosed and unmet (Talbot, 2008, p. 63). Additionally, high numbers of inmates suffer from mental health problems; 70% of sentenced prisoners suffer from at least two mental health disorders, and within this group large numbers have a psychotic disorder (Bromley Briefings, 2009, p. 37). Finally 75% of inmates have a dual diagnosis of mental health issues combined with drug or alcohol misuse (Ibid., p. 39).

Prisons have been described as (Parkinson 1997, p. 16) and it is here that society places some of its most damaged members; the Chief Inspector of Prisons recognised that (Owers, 2007, p. 7).

Whilst the mainstream FE teacher may also have students with emotional or psychiatric problems, prison teachers face a cohort where this is the norm and yet receive no additional training to cope with the “ emotional load” (Simonot et al., 2008, p. 6) which students bring to the classroom. Although, as Eggleston (2003) recognises, good teaching is universal, there are particular challenges which make prison education unique. The implications for students and teachers will now be considered.

Prison lecturers face a concentration of disaffection which may stem from a number of causes. Many students are likely to have had poor educational experiences in which their needs were inadequately met (Schuller, 2009) and the causal relationship between mental disability in school, social exclusion

and challenging/offending behaviour is well known (The Dyslexia Institute 2005).

Mental disability is a term used to describe a range of completely different conditions, broadly grouped under the umbrella terms intellectual disability and psychiatric disability. Students with an intellectual disability may struggle with complex information and problem-solving and may exhibit behavioural problems within the classroom which may manifest itself in an inability to follow rules and routines (UNODC, 2009).

The Department of Health (2001) defines learning disability as:

Students with intellectual disabilities are a diverse mix and there are degrees of disability: mild, moderate, severe or profound with each presenting different abilities/needs as well as different levels of challenging behaviour. This behaviour may manifest itself in diverse ways such as hostility/aggression, anti-social behaviour or introversion and is described by Emerson (2001) as:

Just as students with intellectual disabilities have a broad range of abilities, needs and behaviours, so those with psychiatric disabilities are also a diverse mix with conditions which may range from the mild, such as anxiety disorders, through to depression and more serious conditions such as bipolarism and schizophrenia. The more common disorders, such as depression and stress/anxiety disorders, may cause students to have low self-esteem and lack of confidence which may lead to emotional and behavioural problems within the classroom.

The mentally ill learner may experience greater anxiety when learning basic skills than other students (Owen, 2006) and concentration and memory may be affected by both their psychiatric condition and by the medication taken to treat it. Typically students may experience changes to their behaviour which can cause difficulties within the learning environment (Ibid). Whilst it is not a given that those suffering from mental disabilities will display indicators of disaffection within the prison classroom, the link between school exclusion and the prevalence of mental disabilities (whether intellectual or psychiatric) within prison is strong and presents the prison educator with a cohort which is likely to have suffered unsatisfactory educational experiences and to need new approaches to reengage them in learning. The causes of disaffection and their implications for learning will now be examined.

Disaffection is a complex phenomenon which may be influenced by diverse, interrelated factors and may manifest itself in numerous ways, from disengagement from learning activities through to antisocial or disruptive behaviour. Heathcote-Elliott and Walters (2000) conceptualise a continuum of disaffection ranging from mild to severe, and suggest that mild forms of disaffection may be positively adaptive and (p. 7). Whilst milder forms of disaffection may manifest themselves in quiet disengagement, lack of cooperation or underachievement, more active disaffection may be exhibited through disruption or absence from class. Titmus (1993) also views disaffection as existing within a continuum but considers that there is no clear distinction between disaffection and affection for learning, but rather

there exists a range of attitudes running from great enthusiasm through indifference to.

The causes of disaffection are considered to be varied and interrelated with some of the principal factors suggested as being: low self-esteem (Andrews and Andrews, 2003), broken families (Heathcote-Elliott and Walters, 2000; Vizard, 2009), Poverty (McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair, 2007), drug use (Parker, 2007), and involvement in crime (Ball and Connolly, 2000).

Heathcote-Elliott and Walters (2000) have proposed that indicators of disaffection fall into three broad domains – cognitive, behavioural and affective, and that . Lack of goals and low expectations are identified as cognitive indicators of disaffection which may lead to behaviours such as avoidance (for example class absence or disengagement) or confrontation/disruption which in turn may create affective feelings of alienation, estrangement, disempowerment or low self-esteem.

If this is true then it is natural to consider the complexity of engagement or disaffection beyond these loosely connected realms of behaviour, cognition or affect and by doing so recognise the historically-situated individual as existing within contextual variables (i. e. personal and social circumstances) that may, at any time, alter an individual's engagement in their learning. In this way it is possible to consider whether the student's position on the disaffection continuum is fixed or whether it is subject to change, and if so what sort of influences are likely to bring about such a change? Since there is no single example of the disaffected student the answer to this question is likely to change with each individual of whom it is asked and there is,

therefore, no single way of reengaging disaffected students but rather a range of methods which must be considered.

Many approaches to reengaging the disaffected exist and in a setting as complex as the prison environment it is likely that a variety of differentiated techniques will be needed to successfully engage learners in any given class. Since the cause of an individual's disaffection is likely to be unique, approaches taken will need to vary and will require different skill sets as well as different approaches to pedagogy and curricula.

Despite the prevailing need to help students to overcome diverse learning barriers, much of prison education still utilises objectivist epistemological 'chalk and talk' methods (Education and Skills Committee, 2005, p. 64) based upon didactic pedagogy. For those for whom this approach may well reignite past feeling of inadequacy or low self-esteem and lead to the classroom becoming again a place of frustration and humiliation which duplicates previous school experiences (Forster, 1998, cited in Bayliss, 2003). A lack of prior educational attainment does not require that students be taught using primary methods and for those who have previously shunned education, or seen it as a source of failure, this approach may well make it appear again an unattractive choice. In order to reengage these students, a more learner-centred, constructivist approach should be considered.

Knowles (1984) identified that traditional pedagogic practices, which fail to recognise that adults feel the need to be self-directing, may produce tension, resistance and feelings of resentment. In contrast, andragogy acknowledges

adults as self-guiding and needing to understand the reason for learning something before they learn it.

The andragogical model views adult learners as autonomous with a problem-centred, contextual approach to learning and possessing intrinsic motivation. Andragogic approaches to teaching typically focus upon creating a climate which is favourable to learning and involve students in creating their own learning experiences, for instance planning activities, diagnosing their own learning needs and forming learning objectives.

Whilst such a humanistic approach is likely to reduce or eliminate some of the negative reactions which disaffected students display towards formal learning, it is likely to be ineffective for those without strong cognitive control and is not appropriate for all learning situations. Pratt (1988) recognised that an individual's life situation affects not only their preparedness to learn but also their suitability for andragogical learning experiences, and since any learning experience is likely to be highly situational, an individual's behaviour may vary within different learning situations.

For those students and situations for which an andragogical approach is inappropriate, other strategies for reengagement must be considered. Whilst there are a number of elements which may impact upon a student's affection or disaffection for learning e. g. teacher, content, environment and process, the 'emotional landscape' of the teacher/student relationship may play a vital role in repositioning the student on the continuum of disaffection.

The forming of emotional bonds is an intrinsic aspect of human relationships (Perlman, 1979) and It has been suggested that good student/teacher relationships are exemplified by such qualities as mutuality, flexibility, collaboration, interdependence and emotional investment (Bain, 2004, Tiberius and Billson, 1991). Indeed the importance of the interplay between teachers and students should not be underestimated as vulnerable students, in particular, may attach great weight to a positive relationship with their teacher (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002).

In order to be effective teachers need to forge trusting and honest relationships with their students which are cooperative and democratic; indeed Houle (1972) describes education as being a cooperative rather than an operative art. Within such a relationship students are likely to exhibit strong learning behaviours and to be more attentive and proactive in their learning (Tiberius 1994). For this to be effective the reciprocal nature of the process must be understood with a development of mutual trust between the student and teacher. Poor prior learning experiences may hinder the development of a trusting relationship, and in this instance the teacher must take the lead until students are “ sufficiently confident to become full partners in the process (Ibid). Within the custodial setting, with its limitations upon personal interactions (Simonot et al., 2008), the forming of positive, trusting relationships with students may not be possible and in the absence of any other viable strategy for reengagement teachers may be forced to merely seek to control behaviour.

Controlling the most tangible indicator of disaffection, disruption, requires all of a teacher’s skills if the outcome is not to be a negative one for the

student. Fontana (1985) suggests three approaches for dealing with disruptive behaviour within the classroom – behavioural, cognitive and managerial. The behavioural approach is concerned with the identification and elimination of inappropriate behaviours and focuses on what students do along with the context of their actions. This approach utilises consequences to either support or suppress behaviour and relies upon events or actions which are anterior to the behaviour to signal what the consequences (positive or negative) will be. Altering the antecedents through for example, classroom organisation, behaviour rules or contracts may be a method of changing the behaviour and exercising control.

Within the prison setting the behaviourist approach is the most commonly used, with the use of antecedents (primarily the use of contracts and rules for classroom behaviour) and consequences (formal warnings and dismissal from classes). This approach is engendered by the prison environment with its emphasis on rules and discipline but makes little allowance for the context within which behaviour occurs. Heathcote-Elliott and Walters (2000) caution that viewing disaffection as a ‘disease’ with symptoms which can be cured with appropriate treatments risks labelling the student as abnormal or deviant, and “downplays the social and structural forces that may influence the development and course of disaffection” (P. 2). However, it may be an oversimplification or misconception, based upon the notion that individuals have a natural inclination towards learning, to assume that if they do not want to study that it must be because of negative past experiences or environmental/social factors, indeed for some not wishing to study should be viewed as normal human behaviour rather than a pathological condition.

In contrast to classical behaviourism, contemporary behaviourism recognises the importance of the environment in influencing and maintaining behaviour with feedback from both teachers and classmates providing a 'social mirror' which can influence behaviour as well as students' self-perception and confidence (Frude and Gault, 1984). Westmacott and Cameron (1981) recognise the importance of context in their 'ABC' model of behaviour, and consider that whilst utilising antecedents and consequences is effective, background events (the context within which the behaviour occurs) must also play an important part, with a recognition that situational factors are also likely to contribute to behaviours both good and bad. Since disruption implies a context as well as an activity all such behaviour must be considered within the context in which it occurs and recognition must be paid to the emotional dimension of the learning situation.

Emotions have an important part to play in student's learning and behaviours, research on neurobiology and the learning process suggests that the parts of the brain which process emotions are intrinsically connected with those which store and process new information (Zull, 1998). As a result, learning which takes place in an emotional context is likely to be altered by these emotions. Goleman (1996) recognised that the learning process may be hindered by negative emotions, for example anxiety or anger, which modify the student's ability to effectively process information. Conversely, anxiety may be lessened by positive emotions which may encourage the student to be more proactive in the classroom and develop positive learning behaviours such as asking questions and challenging assumptions (Caine and Caine, 1994).

Simonot et al (2008) recognise that the emotional state of the prisoner-student is one of the factors which distinguish prison education from mainstream further education, with inmates having “ emotional needs unique to this environment” (p. 15) which can affect their ability to learn. To effectively teach students with this level of need requires specialised training, and yet this is not the case in prison education.

The effects of this lack of training on both students and teachers will now be considered.

Offender learning has been identified as the least effective of all learning and skills sectors by Ofsted (2008), with 24 per cent of provision judged inadequate (p. 60). As outlined previously, teachers within this sector face a concentration of disaffection rooted in many causes, and whilst it is acknowledged that teaching staff must teach extremely disturbed students, “ some of whom should be in secure mental institutions, some have severe personality disorders, others unpredictable behaviour” (Bayliss, 2003, p. 166) as well as high numbers with intellectual disabilities and other learning difficulties such as dyslexia, staff are not adequately trained and it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that high levels of disaffection are experienced and that prison education is deemed as failing.

The Prison Reform Trust (2007) highlights the problems that those with learning disabilities suffer within prison but states, incorrectly, that there is no screening or assessment to identify inmates learning needs. In fact some attempts are made to identify learning difficulties, but the diagnoses are pointless if trained staff are not available to offer support to those in need;

for instance the DfES (2004, p. 15) states that all offender learning providers must have a trained dyslexia assessor available, however there is no requirement for staff to be trained to support learners with dyslexic problems once diagnosed.

A recent study concerned with initial teacher training in offender education identifies that the experience and qualifications of prison educators is varied and “ not always consistent with their roles” (Simonot et al., 2008, p. 19) and that many teachers do not have suitable qualifications to support students. The report also highlights the need for teachers within this environment to become ‘emotionally intelligent practitioners’ in order to deal with the “ emotional load” (Ibid., p. 4) which students bring with them to the classroom.

Other areas within the post-compulsory sector provide training and guidance for front-line staff in dealing with these issues; for instance, the 2002 HEFCE funded project ‘ Student Mental Health’ recommends that staff should receive training in mental health awareness in order to be confident when encountering these issues, and states that training is critical in order to provide “ appropriate levels of assistance for those staff supporting students in such circumstances” (Student Mental Health, 2002, 4. 1. 1), and yet “ teacher training in prisons is inconsistently accessible as a result of varying degrees of access to training...” (Simonot et al., 2008, p. 19)

Without such training staff may fail to recognise the basis or cause of classroom behaviours and respond inappropriately, thus reinforcing student’s feelings of disaffection, or placing themselves, the student or others in danger. Since the prison classroom may well be the prisoner’s final

experience of formal education it is vital that the teacher be “ a help, not a hindrance” (Eggleston, 2003 p. 6)

For any teacher to face such high levels of disaffection without adequate training is challenging, for teachers new to the sector who may be placed within this environment with not only no context specific training, but possibly with no generic teacher training either it is particularly daunting. For these teachers the only support or training they receive may be that which they receive informally from their colleagues and managers (Simonot et al, 2008), a method of training which Eggleston (1991) describes as “ dangerous and frustrating” (p. 16). Not only is the current system unfair to teachers, but it risks further alienating a group of students who may already be indisposed towards learning and who need contextually-trained teachers to reengage them in meaningful and productive study.

Conclusion

Whilst those teaching within mainstream FE are likely to encounter disaffected students who may present challenges within the classroom, teachers working within the prison environment are faced with a cohort which contains large numbers of students who have not succeeded within formal education, and have high incidences of mental disability both intellectual and psychiatric. The learning needs of these students are so complex that specialist training is required if students are to be effectively reengaged and supported. Prison teachers currently receive only generic teacher training and so are reliant upon ad hoc guidance from colleagues or are simply left to “ fend for themselves” (Eggleston, 1991, p. 16). For those students with special educational needs or previous poor experiences of the

classroom this situation is likely to further alienate them from study and is likely to be one of the factors which led Ofsted to describe some prison education as ineffectual and inadequate. For the prison teacher this lack of training may result in inappropriate provision being provided for students and the use of crude behaviourist methods of control which are likely to reignite students' feelings of disaffection. Since there is a clear link between successful education and a reduction in reoffending (Education and Skills Committee, 2005; LSC, 2006) improving the educational offer to this disadvantaged and disaffected group of students is not only the right thing to do but also in the interests of wider society.