

Exploring Prison Educators' Perspectives on what Strategies they deem Effective when Supporting Prisoners as Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Prisons have supported prisoners through education for the last two hundred years (Morin, 1981). The number of Irish prisoners accessing education during their sentence is rising. Both the purpose of education and how prisoners are taught has changed dramatically over time (Gehring & Eggleston, 2007), from a purpose based on confinement and punishment to one based on the rehabilitation of inmates (Crewe, 2012). Many factors can impact teaching and learning in Irish prisons and how prisoners are supported through education. Factors like sentencing, substance abuse and the prior knowledge of each prisoner plays a huge role in how the prison population are supported through teaching and learning (Costelloe & Warner, 2008). This article is part of a larger study that explored the strategies' educators use to support prisoners as learners, and the context-specific considerations that influence teaching and learning in Irish prisons.

This topic was chosen out of personal interest in prison education. Having completed a placement in a large Irish prison, the researcher wanted to explore this area of education in more depth. It is an underrepresented area of education which the researcher felt deserved

attention. The overall aim of the study was to examine prison educators' perspectives on prison education and what teaching strategies they use and deem effective when supporting prisoners as learners. In particular, the study examined teaching and learning in prisons through an extensive literature review, investigating the impact the physical environment of a prison has on supporting prisoners, to examine educators' experiences teaching in Irish prisons and what strategies they use to support inmates as learners.

CONTEXT

It wasn't until 1950 when prison education was documented (Carrigan, 2013). Prison education is a unique form of education with many context-specific factors that the literature fails to highlight, this study sought to gain an insight into how these context-specific considerations impact on the teaching and learning within Irish prisons. This research study gives an insight into the Irish prison curriculum and policies surrounding prison education both nationally and internationally. The purpose of prison education and education within prisons has changed greatly over time and with that came a number of curriculum and policy changes also (O'Donnell, 2013). From a change in purpose of what was once based on confinement and punishment of prisoners to one based on the rehabilitation of inmates (Crewe, 2012), both the curriculum and policies have changed and adapted to facilitate significant shift in purpose over the years.

In Ireland, the specific origin of prison education is uncertain. Gehring and Eggleston (2007) suggest an origin dating back to the early 1920s but Osborough (1975) would argue that the first signs of education in prisons can date back to as far as 1906 in what he describes as Irish Borstals. A borstal was an institution for young offenders, which began in England and made its way to Ireland in 1906. During this time the curriculum was based on punishment and policies meant that education within Irish prisons was compulsory (Behan, 2008). This paper highlights empirical data surrounding prison education and how Irish prisoners are supported as learners from seminal texts to anecdotes by prison educators. This research will add to the already existing body of knowledge surrounding prison education giving an in-depth insight into the Irish prison system highlighting the importance of prison educators and their role in supporting prisoners as learners. It became clear to the researcher that there is limited empirical data available surrounding Irish educators' views and opinions on how best to support prisoners as learners. Although research has been conducted on prison education, it does not focus on what methods educators deem as being most effective when supporting prisoners through education (Warner, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was taken as this study seeks to understand prison educators' perspectives on how to support inmates as learners in the form of a basic interpretivist study. This research is grounded in an interpretivist or social constructivist paradigm as it is a small - scale study and the research seeks to gain an understanding into prison education. Purposeful sampling also known as criterion sampling was used (Merriam, 2009). The nature of the exploratory research question guiding this project meant that participants were asked to give a rationale for strategies they use when supporting prisoners as learners, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best approach for acquiring data. According to Kvale (2007) interviews are flexible research tools which can be used to gather a range of different types of information and data including, views, opinions, factual data and personal narratives which makes them useful as a means of data collection especially for this research as it seeks to gain an understanding into prison education, encouraging insightful views as well as factual data.

Meetings with seven prison educators were arranged in their organisation where the semi-structured interviews took place and if that was not possible interviews were conducted over the phone. Before each interview was conducted the participants were made aware of their rights and a consent form was signed. All interviews were recorded on a voice recording app on a mobile phone and were stored on the researcher's password secured laptop, Once the interviews were conducted, the transcription process began. Documents, names of participants and organisations were all anonymised during this process. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Many open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to talk and give their views as well as factual data. Presumptions and the researcher's bias about the topic were not disclosed within the interview process.

Once the interviews and transcribing process was complete, data analysis began. Data analysis began with careful reading of the seven transcripts. Ideas and concepts that appeared to be relevant were then written down to try and make links and to see if they could be grouped together in any way. This process is known as the defragmenting of the text to try and establish categories (O'Leary, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies and methods used by educators to support prisoners as learners. Five clear themes emerged from the interviews; the purpose of prison

education, prison pedagogy, the role of the educator, the physical environment and context-specific considerations. As this is a snapshot article presenting key findings from a larger dissertation, this article will explore just one of the themes outlined here; context-specific considerations drawing on empirical data from the prison educators.

CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

SENTENCING

There are a number of external factors that are out of the control of prison educators which effects how they can support the prison population as learners, one of which being sentencing. Participant C explains how the inmates in their prison are offered a *“broad curriculum like they can have access to many different subjects and opportunities”* but this is not the case for everyone. Participant A highlights the fact that *“we are probably one of the only schools in Ireland where you could have someone for over fifteen years in your class”*. Participant E explains how she had a student for a number of years in her class, *“he was in my class for 10 years that’s another thing actually you could have the same student for ten plus years, that is something which is very unique to prison education”*. The broad-based curriculum can become very narrow for someone attending prison education for fifteen or more years. *“The opportunities become very limiting for someone you’ve had for over ten years”* explains participant G. *“The curriculum for somebody like that becomes very narrow because like after nine, ten years what else can they do? They started at the bottom and there’s nothing more they can do at the top”* outlines participant A, who feels like the curriculum is actually quite restricted for someone serving a life sentence. The literature sees prison education as offering a wide curriculum to inmates (Burnett & Maruna, 2006) but they fail to mention how limiting it can be for *“lifers”* who are trying to be supported as learners.

Another issue raised with sentencing in regard to teaching and learning for inmates was around the concept of being stuck to a time – bound curriculum. Due to sentencing, a prisoner might have to serve two years or ten, this in turn affects what courses they can do and how they can be supported through education. Participant D discusses how they support prisoners around this concept of a time – bound curriculum, *“you have to try and deliver as much education to them and give them as many opportunities based around how long you have them for really”*. The length of a prisoners’ sentence is out of control of the educator (Hughes, 2009) but can have a significant impact on their daily teaching and learning work.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The level of drug use within prisons is something which can cause challenges for educators when supporting inmates as learners. The high levels of drug usage are something unique to prison education. The use of drugs in Irish prisons is a massive problem with over 70% of the prison population having drug addiction problems (Reilly, 2008). Participant B explains that often inmates can be *“more chaotic with drug use”*. Participant D outlines that *“no matter what any of us do, drugs always get into the prison, it’s a huge problem”*. Reilly (2008) highlighted in his report, that the use of drugs in Irish prisons is high regardless of how hard staff work to reduce the internal drug flow.

Participant A gives a brief insight into the use of drugs at her workplace, *“we have a medical unit which is a place they are sent to, to begin a detoxing programme for drug use”*. *“Education is provided in the unit and often the lads can be quite erratic and distracted over there”* explains participant A. Participant G highlights that *“they have grown up with addiction problems and when they come in here it’s no different, trying to teach them while they are high can prove very difficult.”* Drug use is a huge problem when educating prisoners as they can be unpredictable, erratic, uncooperative and distracted (Warner & Costelloe, 2008). Participant E recognises that *“their addiction isn’t their fault, so we still give them the same opportunity and chance to gain an education and hopefully beat their addiction.”* It is obvious that drug use is a major factor in prison education, but as participant E said regardless of drug use, prisoners are still given the upmost support to by all of the educators to gain an education.

THE PRISONER’S PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Along with sentencing and substance abuse, the prisoner's prior knowledge and educational experiences need to be taken into account when supporting the prison population as learners. All interviewees suggested that respecting prisoner's prior knowledge is a crucial element of supporting them as learners. Participant G outlines that *“they come with a lot of knowledge, it might not be academic knowledge, but they are very intelligent and that type of knowledge needs to be acknowledged as well.”* Participant B explains that *“it’s about identifying the existing skills and go from there.”* Hughes (2009) suggests that criminals can be very ego – centric so it is important to acknowledge and appreciate their prior experiences and knowledge.

Their prior knowledge might include having little or no education, having done their Leaving Cert or even going to college. Unfortunately, most of the Irish prison population have low or poor literacy levels. Participant F highlights that *“almost everybody we work with would have a literacy issue.”* Participant C explains how *“I bring in literacy wherever I can to try and improve*

the such low levels they have.” All participants identified literacy issues within the prisons they work in. This has been an ongoing issue for a number of years. Morgan and Kett (2003), state that over 53% of the Irish prison population were on literacy level one or less regarding the National Literacy Levels. This can prove a difficulty when supporting prisoners as learners.

As stated above, prisoners could have low literacy levels or have sat their Leaving Cert and these two students could be in the same class so when educating the inmates educators need to be aware of the mixed ability levels within their classes. Participant D acknowledges these differences, *“in any given class you have vastly different educational needs and prior knowledge, some lads can’t read or write.”* Participant E echoes this by saying that *“you will get all mixed abilities in your class from those who are unable to read, to a person who has done their Leaving, this is hard but both have to be accommodated for.”* Participant C explains how this level of mixed ability is accommodated for, *“well I basically plan for each individual in each lesson because they are all at different stages in their learning, so differentiation is central to my teaching and to supporting them.”* A level of differentiation is used to support prisoners through their learning in a mixed ability class. Each group of students has a wide range of abilities from learners who have sat their Leaving Certificate to those who cannot read or write (Warner & Costelloe, 2008). Differentiation is a big element of prison education, catering to all the needs of the learners (Coyle, 2008). The prisoner's prior knowledge is something which needs to be acknowledged and understood when supporting them as learners within the classroom. Low literacy levels and mixed ability classes need to be accounted for when educating Irish inmates.

Prison educators work in an environment in which there are context specific considerations which influence how educators approach teaching and learning: sentencing, substance abuse and prisoners’ prior knowledge. These considerations are unique to prison education and educators must be flexible and adaptable professionals to support prisoners as learners.

CONCLUSION

Sentencing, substance abuse and the prisoner's prior knowledge as well as the physical environment need to be taken into account when educating prisoners. All participants explicitly mentioned the impact context specific considerations have on supporting inmates as learners. Prison education is a unique form of education which needs to be explored and this study will add to the already existing body of literature, highlighting educators' views on what strategies they deem effective and how prepared they feel supporting prisoners as learners. Five interviews had to be conducted over the phone due to the location of Irish prisons, this made the

process of transcribing more difficult. This research is a small qualitative study so the data being analysed could be interpreted differently by different people and in turn cannot be generalised.

The researcher recommends that further research surrounding the educators' perspectives should be carried out. This study focused on the opinions of educators on what methods they deem effective, it would be recommended that prisoners voices are heard, and further research be conducted focusing on prisoners' views on education, what strategies works best for them when being supported as a learner. As well as this, a comparative study should be conducted in the future comparing the impacts of the physical environment in different Irish prisons as according to the findings presented, some prisons have access to different resources. A final recommendation from the researcher would be to re-introduce direct training for educators working in the prison system. Training for future prison educators and even current ones would be of huge benefit to both educators and prisoners. This article has shone a light into prison education in Ireland and highlighted the methods educators deem effective when supporting prisoners as learners in a physical environment, an environment described by participant A as "a rose in a bed of thorns".

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