

PUTTING EDUCATION AT THE HEART OF CUSTODY? THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN ON EDUCATION IN A YOUNG OFFENDER INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This paper draws on the views of children and young people in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) to explore education provision in the youth secure estate from their perspectives. The paper includes research findings from work undertaken in a YOI as part of the *U R Boss* project, based at campaign group The Howard League for Penal Reform. The research comprised a questionnaire (n=47), discussion groups (n=25) and one-to-one interviews (n=4) with children serving a sentence in one YOI in July 2012. Nine in 10 of the children surveyed had been excluded from school. Nearly all felt they had had the opportunity to participate in educational activities at the prison, but their views about the education provision varied. The findings highlight how listening to the experiences of children expected to participate in education provision, helps to think about how the provision might be improved to best achieve what it set out to. They can be a key source of information about the barriers to the effectiveness of current education provision in prisons holding children. These barriers include some fundamental issues associated with engagement with education in a prison environment. Education provision could achieve a lot more. Rather than simply achieving functions of control and management and meeting minimum legal and contractual obligations, it should seek to enable young people to make positive developments in their own lives. The most popular learning activity amongst participants in the current research, the Raptor project, stood out as an activity in which the children felt they had positive opportunities for learning, the potential for increasing levels of responsibility and, eventually, opportunities to leave the prison for short periods of time. This type of opportunity was the exception, not the norm, but is suggestive of the type of educational experience that could help some of the most vulnerable children move on from negative prior experiences of formal education.

Keywords

Youth justice, young offender institution, education, participation

Transforming Youth Custody

Thinking about education in prison has been on the recent policy agenda of government. The United Kingdom coalition government between 2010 and 2015 sought to make significant changes to the composition of the youth justice secure estate in England and Wales. They proposed a new network of Secure Colleges, the first of which was planned for 2017 on a site in Leicestershire, next to the existing HMYOI Glen Parva (MoJ, 2014). The apparent motivation for this new approach was the poor level of education in prisons for children. The government response to the consultation on their Transforming Youth Custody Green Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2014) highlighted several particularly concerning findings in relation to the educational achievements of children in prison:

'Latest figures suggest 86% of young men in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) have been excluded from school at some point, and over half of 15-17 year olds in YOIs have the literacy and numeracy level expected of a 7-11 year old. Research also indicates that 18% of sentenced young people in custody have a statement of special educational needs.' (MoJ, 2014:3)

The high rates of exclusion from school for children prior to custody have previously been documented by Cripps and Summerfield's (2012) review of findings from two HMIP reviews on the resettlement provision for children and young people and the care of looked after children in custody. However, government recognition of these problems has not usually been so forthcoming. The proposal for a new network of secure colleges would apparently put "education at the heart of youth custody".¹

Developmentally appropriate education and skills provision is vital to help children move on from life after prison (McAra & McVie, 2010; Youth Justice Board, 2014). What this might look like in practice, and what children have to say about the education they receive has been sidelined during political discussions over whether we have a Secure College (network) or not. Whilst the Secure College plans were quietly abandoned by government (Hansard, 2015), interest in increasing the number of hours spent in education provision has remained. The number of hours spent on education doubled from 15 to 30 in August 2015, with 60% of these hours being 'protected' as part of a new 'core day' (Youth Justice Board, National Offender Management Service, NHS England, 2015).

The reasons for this increase in the quantity of education are multiple, but the changes take place in a context in which the numbers of children in custody at any one time have dramatically reduced in recent years, whilst re-offending rates remain stubbornly high (see Bateman, 2014). There is no reason to suggest that the priority given by the secure estate to security and control is changing, but there may be a recognition that something different needs to be done. The appointment of a previous secretary of state for education as the secretary of state for justice, following the general election in May 2015 appears to have helped continue the emphasis on education and employment (BBC News, 2015).

¹ Other proposals in the coalition government's 'at the heart of' series included "Putting students at the heart of higher education".

The Youth Justice Board has education, training and employment as the third of seven identified national 'resettlement pathways' (Youth Justice Board, 2014). The stated main objective is to "provide all young people with suitable and sustainable education, training and employment throughout their sentence and beyond" (Youth Justice Board, 2014: 4). This is laudable, but worthy of exploration from the perspective of children experiencing the education provision inside prison.

About the research

This paper draws on research undertaken by the author when working as part of the U R Boss project, a youth justice participation project funded by the Big Lottery Fund and hosted by The Howard League for Penal Reform. Access to Young Offender Institutions for the purposes of research, information gathering or discursive, participatory work can be very challenging, particularly for employees of prison reform groups with a reputation for airing their views about the state of our nation's prisons. The author of this paper's involvement in a Youth Justice Board working group on access to college education for children in prison, also attended by senior staff from Young Offender Institutions, helped facilitate access to a YOI. The aim of the research was to find out what children's experiences of education in a YOI were like from children themselves.

There were three methodological elements to the research: a questionnaire, a discussion group and one-to-one interviews with individual children accommodated on different wings of the prison, including one on the Care and Separation Unit.

The questionnaire asked participants 18 questions about the type of educational activities they were involved in at the YOI; whether they were in education prior to entering the YOI; whether they had ever been excluded from education; about their educational qualifications; what courses they had been on at the YOI; what kind of help and support they had received to help them find education and employment; what kinds of education and employment plans they have for after the YOI; potential barriers to these plans and, what else the YOI might do to help them. Eighty-five questionnaires were distributed by YOI staff at the end of June 2012. Respondents filled in the questionnaire of their own volition. These were either handed directly to young people attending education classes in Warren Hill during the final week of June 2012 or placed under their cell door. Forty-seven questionnaires were returned by participants, a response rate of 55%. There was no extra support provided for filling out the questionnaire. Whilst respondents did not need to write much, they would have needed to be able to read the questions. Not every participant responded to every question, so question response numbers reported in this article may not always equal 47.

Five discussion groups were facilitated over three days in July 2012. Each lasted up to two hours, the duration of the morning and afternoon education slots, to fit in with the prison regime. There were 24 discussion group participants in total, an average of five children attending each discussion group. Themes explored were the same as those covered by the questionnaire, with scope for the discussion to flow in ways determined by the participants. Because the groups were live discussions between humans, the precise nature of conversation varied between the different groups, depending on the level of

engagement of the participants, their curiosity and degree of comfort with the set-up and their fellow participants. Each of the discussions was facilitated by two members of staff from the U R Boss project at The Howard League for Penal Reform. One facilitator tended to facilitate discussion while the other was responsible for note-taking. The purpose of the project and that participants' anonymity would be respected was explained to each group. These groups lasted one or two hours each, focused on exploring the questions attached and were carried out with a member of YOI staff present. The presence of the YOI staff member was a condition of the discussion groups taking place and may have impacted on the responses of some of the children.

Also completed were four interviews with individual young people on three different wings, including one on the Care and Separation Unit, colloquially known as 'The Seg' owing to the segregation of its inhabitants from the mainstream YOI population. These individuals had been deemed unsuitable for group work by the management team. These individual sessions took place subject to the agreement of the individual child. Whether or not they were asked to participate would have been the decision of the senior member of prison staff facilitating the research. The research may have therefore excluded the involvement of children experiencing the most difficulties in the prison at the time. YOI staff were not present for these meetings with young people. A brief outline of the context for each of the four children interviewed in segregation appears at several points in the text, relating to points made about experiences of, or attitudes towards, education in the YOI.

Taken together, the research engaged with up to 75 children detained in the YOI, around half of the population there at the time. The reason it is not possible to be precise about the number of different individuals engaging with the research is because there was no way of matching discussion group participants to questionnaire respondents. Individuals attending the discussion groups were asked whether or not they had completed the questionnaire but only half a dozen indicated that they had. Findings from the questionnaire, discussion groups and interviews were presented to the management team at the YOI later in the same year. This report, including the questionnaire, can be found on the U R Boss website (U R Boss, 2012).

In terms of how the sample was selected, questionnaire respondents did so of their own volition and returned completed questionnaires in a blank envelope. Potential participants for the discussion groups were recruited from education classes.

It should be noted that the research took place before some of the effects of the government's budget reductions had impacted on staffing levels across the secure estate and before the YOI was 're-rolled' to become an adult prison the following year.

Ethics

There are complex ethical and moral issues to consider when undertaking work of this nature with children in custody. A key issue is the ability of child participants to consent to their involvement in the research (NSPCC, 2013). It was important that participants were able to participate voluntarily in the research based on informed consent. However,

the very nature of a prison environment in which an individual is being detained against their will, raises questions about the concept of voluntary engagement.

With regards to the questionnaire, respondents chose to complete the questionnaire in their own time. With regards to the discussion groups, the opportunity to be involved was communicated to children in the YOI by prison staff. Likewise, the opportunity to be involved in the interviews was mediated by a member of staff. This has implications for how the opportunity was communicated to the child prisoners. In this respect, the researchers were dependent on the prison staff involved in communicating with the children. Mutual trust and respect between the researcher and the prison staff is useful here. Overall, as a representative of a youth justice participation project, with a belief in children as experts in their own experiences, the need to "let young people speak for themselves, subject to appropriate safeguards" (Williams, 2006) underpinned the approach to the research. Therefore, it was explained to participants that if anyone wanted to leave the room, or they wanted to terminate the discussion or the interview, they could do so at any point.

There was no incentive offered to the children to participate in the research. Based on initial responses of those that did participate, a key reason they were pleased to be involved was to be out of cells at a time they would have been "on bang up". The opportunity to meet different people, have different discussions and break up the boredom seemed to be key motivating factors for their involvement. It was also explained to participants that what they said would be anonymised and not attributable to them as individuals. A key issue here was the presence of an officer in the discussion groups, as requested by the prison management.

There are broader issues regarding the presence of a project such as U R Boss in the prison environment. Because the project was based at a well-known prison reform campaign group, it is possible that the prison's management might use it as a way to demonstrate that their practice was in some way being approved by the organisation. The possibility that our presence as researchers might be used as a way to legitimise the institution or its practices constitutes a dilemma when working for a penal reform charity. This is perhaps one small example of a reformer's dilemma and the extent to which change can occur when researchers and reformers must co-operate with the existing system in order to gain access.

Findings

The following section summarises some of the findings from the report, highlighting key themes and points for thinking about the broader role that education in prison can play for children in prison. The findings are drawn from responses to the questionnaire, the discussion groups and the interviews. Key findings discussed here include:

- Perceptions and experiences of education. Many of those that engaged with the research stated that their prior experiences of education had been extremely negative. Despite this, education and qualifications remained important to their perceived chances of subsequent employment.

- The issue of choice is important here. If children are expected to willingly engage in education provision, the choice provided needs to be meaningful.
- There are various practical barriers that exist to limit access to children's choices.
- Partly as a result of the barriers, the way education is provided in prisons does not engage children as well as it might.
- The children's experiences of education in prison raise questions about the nature of education provision in the 'secure estate'.

Before exploring these themes further, it is worth considering the context in which these children are participating (or not) in education, particularly their previous experiences of education.

Pre-custody education experiences

Consistent with previous literature (Cripps & Summerfield, 2012) a disrupted experience of education prior to entering custody was a common theme with young people who participated in the work. Of 45 respondents, nine out of 10 (89%, 40) had been excluded from education, 63% of which were permanent exclusions. This was consistent with the findings from the focus groups, in which nearly all respondents reported having been excluded from mainstream education, and the larger sample size in a study by Cripps and Summerfield (2012). Over a quarter (27%, 12) of 45 questionnaire respondents said they were last in school aged 14 years or under. The remaining 33 respondents said they were last in school aged 15 years or over. In terms of the institutions they had been excluded from, the questionnaire identified that nearly all those that had been excluded (38/40) were from a school. Seven of the 40 had been excluded from a pupil referral unit and three had been excluded from a further education college.

In the first focus group, all four participants had been excluded from school, two of them permanently, one of these stating that "I was excluded almost every day". Some participants expressed a lack of interest or engagement in structured or formal education and had clearly had prior negative experiences of classroom environments. Others recognised that they had missed out by being excluded from education previously:

'I kept getting kicked out...I didn't like people telling me what to do. I wasn't interested in school at the time. Now I'm older I think differently.'

'I got kicked out in Year 9. I lost focus. I was intelligent. I never got into trouble with the police until I went to a PRU.'

'It was fun at the time, but I didn't realise 'til it was too late...You end up chilling with your pals on the street and you have bare time on your hands and you end up getting in trouble.'

In one of the focus group sessions, all five participants were unanimous in the belief that education provision at Warren Hill could not make a difference to them. One had strong views that education was just a waste of time relative to his goal of earning money:

'You don't need education in your life, you need money.'

Another participant qualified this by saying that education in custody could make a difference, but only if the support provided is sufficient.

'[Education can't make a difference] unless you're on a long sentence...I've had help and completed Level 2 Horticulture.'

Overall, most participants' lives had been characterised by unhappy, irregular and/or inconsistent experiences of education. More than four in 10 participants (20, 43%) did not state any previous educational attainment.

Choice

Given the frequency of negative prior experiences of education, it is unsurprising that respondents tended to have low expectations of the education they would receive in prison. However, the issue of meaningful choice and activity were themes that respondents returned to consistently in the discussion groups. The questionnaire findings indicated that participants felt able to choose which courses they wanted to study: 38 respondents said they were able to choose what course they wanted to study, 30 of whom said that they were able to get on to the course they wanted to. Four respondents said they were not able to choose their course of study and five did not respond to this question.

However, the group work allowed more discussion about the extent of the choice that participants could actually exercise. Whilst individuals had been asked for their preference about which courses they most wanted to attend, their options were limited considerably by the type of course available at the time:

'I didn't get the choice I wanted, which was radio, media and gym. Instead I got Maths, English and ICT.'

'I wanted to construction, but had to do Maths instead. Then I went on radio.'

'I wanted to do mechanics but had to do education...'

'Sometimes you don't get all you want, you make back-up choices. There's lots of choice, but they need more.'

Some participants had strong ideas about what they wanted to study or train in and had been left disappointed by the restricted options available.

'When I first came in I wanted to do geography, history and German but they don't do them here.'

'There should be more education - more options available...a barbering course - there has to be one person who can do hair properly here - the

hairdresser who comes here has one hour to do everyone on the whole wing. Plumbing. Woodwork.'

'I wanted to do languages but there was only one copy of the Spanish CDs in the library and it wasn't there.'

Choice was particularly constrained if participants already had attained GCSEs. Twelve respondents said they had GCSEs, eight of whom said they had five GCSEs graded A* to C. Five respondents had NVQ Level 2 or a BTEC First Diploma. Three respondents had a NVQ Level 1 or a BTEC Introductory Diploma. A common response referred to the lack of education provision for those willing and able to study beyond GCSE level:

'It's good quality [the education], but only up to GCSEs.'

'If you've done GCSEs, or if you don't want to do them, there isn't much else. If people are working at their age-level and they've done GCSEs then they're at a disadvantage.'

'Yes [there was a choice], but I've done most of my GCSEs already.'

Discussion group participants commented that doing higher qualifications is possible, but that this was subject to having sufficient self-confidence and self-motivation:

'You can do distance learning - Open University. That's alright but you have to feel confident.'

In addition to possessing this self-discipline in the prison environment, it was also necessary to have access to a teacher qualified to teach above GCSE level. This relied on more external factors, such as good fortune:

'I'm doing AS Maths and I can only do that cos there's someone who can teach me that here.'

There was a lack of consistency regarding access to a suitably qualified tutor. Without this support, one boy explained that he found the prospect of self-directed learning in prison too daunting to contemplate:

'They offered me A-levels; I refused to do it. I work better face-to-face. They only offered me study on my own, without a teacher.'

These experiences raise important points about the lack of support available for the significant minority of children in prison who do have a track record of educational achievement. This is similar to the situation in the adult prison estate which struggles to provide meaningful educational opportunities to men and women across a wide spectrum of educational achievements and different motivations to learn (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2014).

One participant suggested the idea of 'taster courses', to give people choice about what they might want to do more of and ultimately help people "to find their own path". A conversation with senior staff highlighted the administrative barrier to making curriculum changes. For example, if the YOI wants to make a change to the curriculum this has to be agreed with the education service provider, together with the Education Funding Agency (the Department for Education's delivery agency for funding and compliance and the Youth Justice Board (YJB)). One focus group participant noted a recent change to the curriculum that meant he could no longer access his chosen subject of drama:

'My plans? Performing arts [in response to a question about what he wants to do at college]. But drama isn't on the curriculum now...It used to be.'

It is worth noting here that because there are multiple stakeholders involved in contemporary YOI education provision (including the YOI, the Youth Justice Board, the Education Funding Agency and the education provider) changes to education provision in YOIs can be very difficult to bring about.

Barriers

In addition to some restrictions on the practical choices they could make, participants identified different types of barriers, including their difficulty in concentrating in the prison environment, especially if they felt others were being disruptive:

'I can't focus. You need to put people that do want to work in a place they can concentrate.'

'Here I've found I can't really learn...I just can't concentrate.'

'I just don't like being in groups really. Don't like being around other people.'

These responses raise fundamental questions about what education provision really means for these children in prison. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves about the day-to-day lived reality for children in prison. Drawing on research presented in 'Life Inside', a report on the daily lives of 15-17 year old males in prison, it is clear that around half have experienced time in care, or substantial social services involvement, compared to 3% in the general population (NACRO, 2003, cited by The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2010). A quarter of the boys report suffering violence at home and 1 in 20 report having been sexually abused (YJB, 2007). Three in 10 boys report having a recognised mental health disorder (YJB, 2005), compared to 1 in 10 in the general population (ONS, 2005, cited by The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2010:8). Relationships with others can therefore be affected. As recent inspection reports have shown, the levels of self-harm, suicide and general violence have increased considerably in YOIs in recent years (Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons, 2014; 2015).

A key barrier identified by discussion group participants was the nature of their risk assessment, which could severely limit their educational options:

'I have a high risk assessment, so there's not much I can do. I can do different stuff but it's all based around education (not practical activities). I don't wanna do education. I kick off a lot and just walk out.'

'I'm high risk. I can't do things like mechs (car mechanics) and cookery...I want to do cooking...I do FLL (Foundation Life Learning) instead.'

'I put down for horticulture when I arrived - I was low risk when I arrived. I waited two and-a-half months for nothing.'

Nine respondents to the questionnaire said they had barriers getting in the way of them making plans for education and training. Reasons given were related to being in prison itself, to their offence, to mental health problems, a lack of GCSEs or issues with their Youth Offending Team. Most questionnaire respondents chose not to answer this question. Just four respondents stated that there were no barriers getting in the way of their plans for education or training. A psychological barrier to engaging with education for some was that they had bigger problems to worry about, including family issues and/or no accommodation on release. For example, when asked about his plans following release, one boy stated:

'I ain't got nowhere to go when I come out. Accommodation is a big problem for me. I don't know where I'm gonna live.'

Issues such as uncertainty about where they are going to live after being in the YOI, can affect how children feel about themselves, their lives and their perceptions and motivations about education and learning. Those children experiencing some of the biggest barriers to accessing education in the short term were those receiving education on unit or 'Ed on Unit'. The research included interviews with four young people receiving 90 minutes of education in their cells each day, Monday to Friday: 45 minutes in the morning, 45 minutes in the afternoon. The brief biographies of four individual boys below outline something of their experiences relating to education and have been interspersed throughout the remainder of this article. The first outlines a little of the context for Chris, for whom education was a distant concern, at least partly because of his concerns about his own personal safety in the prison environment (as with all other names used in this article, Chris is not the participant's real name).

1) Chris - 15 year old black male from London

Chris was receiving education separately in the segregation unit for his own protection. He had experienced difficulties in the YOI due to his recorded gang affiliations with other inmates.

He received two 45 minute sessions each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. One session focused on English tuition and the other focused on Maths tuition. Chris had previously been permanently excluded from school. He had been in a Pupil Referral Unit before being remanded to HMYOI Feltham. From there he had been transferred to his current YOI.

For Chris, formal education barely featured on his personal radar, despite its daily presence in his life, at least on weekdays: "I don't feel settled here so I'm not even thinking about education." Chris explained that he had other things to worry about, namely his own personal safety, before concerning himself with his educational development. A bigger issue for him was the lack of physical activity available as part of the regime in segregation: "You're not allowed to go to the gym on this unit."

For Chris, the distance between his present state and voluntary engagement in education or some form of productive learning appeared to be great. This was in contrast with Paul, an older boy also receiving education segregated from the rest of the prison community.

2) Paul - 17 year old white male from Kent

Paul was receiving education on unit due to his own disruptive behaviour in group classes. Like the others we spoke with receiving education on unit, he received two 45-minute sessions of tuition each day; once in the morning, once in the afternoon. At the time of the research, he was working towards Maths level one and English level two.

Paul had only been at the YOI for one month having recently been transferred from a Secure Training Centre. Like the vast majority of the boys who participated in the research, he had previously been excluded from school. He had then been sent to a Pupil Referral Unit, but stopped attending when he was 15 years old.

Despite these prior negative experiences, Paul was relatively optimistic about the education provision he was receiving in the segregation unit and in the prison more generally: "The subjects I'm doing here will be helpful for me."

Concern about accommodation in the community following a spell in prison was an issue for some boys. For others, there were concerns about the consequences for their education when they moved on to their next, adult, prison. Transfer of records between institutions can be delayed and incomplete at times and continuity of education provision for individuals can suffer (Ofsted, 2010). This was indeed related to one of David's concerns as a 17 year old in the segregation unit soon to 'celebrate' his Birthday.

3) David - 17 year old white male from Kent

Like Paul, David was receiving education on unit because he had assaulted someone in the YOI. He was unique amongst the boys in segregation at the time for studying towards his Economics GCSE. Whilst it initially appeared that this was a subject he had himself chosen, he was disappointed that his choices were constrained by the limitations of what could be offered by the available tutor: "I can only do what the one-to-one tutor can offer."

Prior to his spell in a YOI, David attended a Pupil Referral Unit for about a year. His main concern in relation to his education was his impending move to a different prison, particularly as this would be his first experience of an adult prison: "I'd like to go back to mainstream education in (this) prison but I'm 18 so I'll get shipped out to a different prison soon."

Despite efforts by the institution to get each of these segregated children engaged in education, each discussed their disengagement from education both before and during their time in prison. This is problematic when it is clear the re-offending rate by under 18s leaving YOIs is so high. Of those released from custody during 2010/11, 72.6% were reconvicted within 12 months (Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice, 2013). Ofsted's review of arrangements for learning in custody and on release found that children often did not have personal education plans on arrival in prison and that arrangements to continue education when they returned to the community were unsatisfactory (Ofsted, 2010).

One of the main topics of conversation in the discussion groups focusing on education was actually food, hunger and nutrition. This echoed the findings from Life Inside (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2010) where one of the most frequently voiced concerns of boys in prison was the amount and quality of the food on offer. Together with the hypermasculine context and the frequent threat of violence, the lack of food was a recurring theme amongst the discussion group participants. Each of these elements fundamentally impacts on what and how individuals learn in such environments.

The most positive comments by children about the educational opportunities available in the YOI were reserved not for the formal education classes but the 'Raptor' project. This project allowed the children to work with, and care for, birds of prey living at the prison site. Responses from participants who had been involved with the project were extremely positive. For example, Matt, one of the four children interviewed in segregation, was extremely enthusiastic about this project.

4) Matt - 17 year old white male from Kent

Matt was receiving education on unit for a month or two due to his vulnerability to attack from others being held in the same prison. He felt the need to complete GCSE English so that he would have three GCSE's and thus be eligible for a mechanics course. For him, the experience of education in the segregation unit appeared to be an opportunity to focus in a way that had not been possible in the mainstream education provision: "I got more done in Ed on Unit than in class." He was also unique amongst the boys in prison in expressing a preference for more exam-based assessment for courses. Despite this, his real passion, the thing that had really captured his imagination, was the Raptor project, which sought to build skills and confidence in the boys through working with birds of prey:

"Raptor is one of the best things I've done since I've been here...on Raptor, I'm learning something new, I never knew it existed before."

That these comments were made by a child who had been receiving one-to-one education segregated from the rest of the YOI population highlights its potential for engaging even some of the most vulnerable and disaffected children in prison. Another participant in one of the discussion groups was also very enthusiastic about the Raptor project:

'Raptor is [the best thing offered here] - it's unique - you can't do it at any other prison.'

In addition to enthusiasm from the children held in the YOI, staff at the YOI were also proud of the project and the attention it had received from outside the prison in the community. As visitors enter the prison, colourful promotional material about the project had been placed in a prominent position. In addition to on-site activities, some children in the YOI had been allowed out on Release on Temporary License (ROTL) to attend local events with the birds of prey. Ofsted was also sufficiently convinced about the educational value of the project to present it as an example of good practice:

'[it]...uses care and display of predatory birds to engage young people who traditionally don't engage in learning activities. The Raptor Project builds self-confidence, personal development and team-working skills and improves academic skills such as English and mathematics.' (Ofsted, 2014).

This link identified by Ofsted between informal learning opportunities in the prison environment and educational skills is an interesting one. It could not be confirmed by the current research but if enthusiasm for engaging in an activity is a proxy measure for subsequent involvement and success, then it was clear that the feelings of those engaged in the Raptor project were exceptionally positive relative to other learning opportunities available.

It is important to note that only a small number of children could be involved in the Raptor project. Three survey respondents stated that they had been involved with Raptor. One discussion group participant and one interviewee stated that they had been part of the project. An associated problem of the project's desirability was that it could only be available to a small number of children in the YOI at any one time. In addition, the children had to have retained 'gold' status for a certain period of time, which involved maintaining an excellent behaviour record. This was a challenge for some of the children especially those for whom confrontation was a regular occurrence. Together with food, a child's current earned privilege status was one of their main concerns for day-to-day living in the prison.

Discussion

The current research highlights the importance of listening to children about their experiences of education in order to understand more about the effects of the provision they are receiving (see also Smith, 2011; Little, 2015; Creaney, 2013; NYA, 2011). The findings reveal different attitudes and motivations amongst children in apparently similar circumstances and highlight the importance of understanding that with education provision, as with other services, that one size cannot fit all.

Listening to the children held inside the YOI about their experiences of education before and during their spell in prison provided a greater understanding of the challenges they have faced, and continue to face in accessing education appropriate for their needs. This small scale study also highlighted the very individualised nature of the educational needs of the children in the YOI at the time. It is possible, indeed likely, that those children who did not participate in the research had experienced, and were experiencing, even greater challenges in accessing educational experiences.

The general picture of severely disrupted prior educational experiences is crucially important as it has been found that "pathways out of offending are facilitated or impeded by critical moments in the early teenage years, in particular school exclusion" (McAra & McVie, 2010:179). It also raises fundamental questions about what education for children in prison can realistically achieve when things have gone so terribly wrong in the community. It is surely unrealistic to expect much from educational provision inside prison when the pupils have such terrible experiences of the mainstream education system.

The Youth Justice Board's objective for the 'Education, Training and Employment' resettlement pathway requires that:

'Education provided during custody should be in line with resettlement planning and available education, training and employment in the community.' (Youth Justice Board, 2014)

This seems sensible, and perhaps necessary, from the perspective of providing continuity between educational provision inside and outside prison, and in the interests of equity and fairness. However, some discussion group respondents felt that the education provision bore too much resemblance to the very thing they had responded so badly to before: "This is a prison, not a school. They're teaching us like we're in a school."

It might be tempting to conclude that very little can be achieved through formal education provision in prison, at least as currently configured. Results from a Freedom of Information request submitted by *Children and Young People Now* magazine show that there were just 119 GCSE passes in public sector YOIs in 2010/11 compared to 232 for the previous year, a drop of almost half (49%) (Puffett, 2012). This information simultaneously highlights a problem and yet also shows why it might be important to retain education provision in prisons for children. Between the two data collection periods, the number of education contact hours required of providers dropped from 25 to 15 hours per week. These crude figures thus suggest that children in YOIs achieve more with more contact time, supporting the case for more formal education time.

However, this last point reduces educational achievement of children in prison simply to a matter of counting GCSE passes. We know from what the children said in the current research that the greatest levels of enthusiasm for education and learning experiences were reserved for the Raptor project. The unique enthusiasm for the Raptor project amongst the children in the YOI demonstrates that even the most disaffected children can engage effectively with learning opportunities inside prison.

However, the time, space and resources involved in providing the project made this the exception rather than the norm across the youth secure estate. A more common scenario was that, for a variety of reasons, children could not exercise their preferred educational choice. This lack of choice was evident for those outside the relatively narrow band of studying at GCSE level. This left those with poor levels of educational attainment undertaking some qualifications with little use or relevance in the community. It also means that those already with educational attainment at GCSE level were poorly catered

for. These students are equally important as they can be unhelpfully grouped together as 'young offenders' who are assumed to be educational underachievers or unable to learn. These types of label serve as a barrier to these children's potential achievement, in addition to well-documented barriers such as living within a culture of "mutual mistrust, fear, aggression and barely submerged violence" (Crewe et al., 2014:56) and restrictions to learning opportunities associated with their assigned risk level or privilege status.

These other fundamental challenges in the lives of the boys - issues of greater concern to them than whether or not they attend an education class - connects with the work of learning theorists such as Maslow. Maslow's hierarchy of needs model (1987) suggests that human beings are not motivated by any higher level needs (love and belonging, self-esteem, self-actualisation) until the more basic, lower-level ones (physiological needs, safety needs) have been met. Maslow's model is useful in helping to identify why certain young people, due to insecurity and trauma, might become 'stuck' at the lower levels and might not achieve higher level 'self-actualisation'. Maslow's ideas are also supported by Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives which suggests that one cannot effectively address higher levels until those below them have been covered.

These learning theories challenge the idea that education can play a useful role in the rehabilitation and resettlement when basic welfare needs remain so gravely unmet. Since the period in which discussion groups were held in the YOI, safety concerns in different YOIs (HMIP, 2014; 2015) and indeed prisons more generally (Prison Reform Trust, 2015) have increased. Consistent with other resettlement studies, the issue of accommodation on release was an issue for some of the children.

However, simply because some lower order needs are not met it does not necessarily follow that learning cannot take place. More recent research tested Maslow's theory by analysing survey data of 60,865 participants from 123 countries between 2005 and 2010, representing every major region of the world (Tay & Diener, 2011). The research findings suggest that even though the most basic needs require (and get) the most attention, one may not need to fulfil them in order to be able to gain benefits from the other (met) needs. In this sense our needs can work independently of each other. However, in prison, the context makes it much more difficult for individuals to feel that their safety and social needs (love, support) are met, along with needs such as 'respect', 'mastery' and autonomy (see, for example, The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2010). Blog posts written by children and young people with experience of the criminal justice system on the *U R Boss* website (U R Boss, 2015) also describe some of these unmet needs, and will be the subject of a separate paper.

Again, this raises questions about what we understand by education and learning in the prison environment. If we take a view of education as a form of liberation, as the "practice of freedom" (Freire, 1976), then a prison fundamentally fails the basic test of a learning environment. Institutions dominated by concerns of security, control and fear cannot possibly provide adequate effective learning environments in these terms. According to Rogers (1969, cited by Jarvis, 2004) the goal of education is to help individuals become a fully functioning person. In order to do this, Rogers suggested self-directed, experiential learning in a social context that is not too oppressive for the learner.

Again, as multiple government inspection reports tell us (see, for example HMIP 2014, 2015), current YOI environments fail in fundamental ways to offer this opportunity to its child learners. A recent inspection report for HMYOI Wetherby, for example, notes "discernible deterioration" (HMIP, 2015a:6) in safety levels with "concerning levels of violence" (HMIP, 2015a:6). In relation to education, the report notes that activity "...was poorly allocated, take up was too low, and attendance was poor, which all contributed to needlessly negative outcomes" (HMIP, 2015a:5).

Despite government plans to put education at the heart of custody, doubts remain about the real ethos and aims of the proposed Secure College. These doubts exist not just among criminal justice campaign organisations and academics, but some Members of Parliament too:

'I would like to apply the duck test to secure colleges. The duck test is that if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. Looking at the Bill, if it looks like a prison, feels like a prison - particularly in the light of the planning application - and is staffed like a prison, it is probably a prison.

It is odd that, although the Government claim that secure colleges will put education at the heart of youth custody, neither the Bill nor the consultation response contains any detail about teaching, education, staff or qualifications.' (Hansard, 2014)

Changes to the quantity of education provided in YOIs (in the form of contact hours) could be very important. Just as important will be the quality of this education, and the extent to which it is able to meet the variety of needs amongst the children who find themselves in our prisons.

Concluding comments

The research highlights the importance of listening to children in prison about their experiences of education to find out what needs to be improved. Whilst the YOI staff and education provider sought to do their best to provide educational choices to engage children in the education provision provided, in many respects the provision could not meet the education and learning needs of many of the boys held there. This was due to a number of factors associated with the boys' prior negative experiences of education provision outside the prison, the type of environment that prison is, with its dominant focus on security and control over welfare and education and the inability to address the variety of learning needs with a relatively narrow curriculum. This is particularly the case for those boys on short sentences. For some boys, their pre-occupation with other more fundamental concerns to do with their own personal safety or their accommodation after prison, seemed to inhibit their motivation for engagement with the education provision on offer.

The experiences of these children tentatively suggest that it was possible for a small number of them to have positive learning experiences inside such a secure environment,

despite what can often be a hostile environment that mitigates against educational development. However, the Raptor project was very much the exception than the rule in our prisons for children and only available to small numbers of participants at any one time. As recent inspection reports indicate, our YOIs are currently a long way from being the type of environments that education specialists would advocate as suitable site for learning. Any achievements by children themselves therefore largely occur despite, not because of, the system they find themselves subject to.

This research highlights some of the individualised educational needs of the children in the YOI at the time and some of the barriers in meeting them. These barriers can be considerable and pose questions for how we understand and provide appropriate informal and formal educational experiences for children in prison.

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