

Research Project Title:

*The Perspectives of Prison Educators on the Education
System in Irish Prisons*

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Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking Dublin Business School for enabling me to further my education. Secondly I would like to thank all the lectures throughout the three years for all the guidance and help and a special thanks to Dr. James Brunton for putting up with us all for three years and for all the guidance, assistance and help he gave me and for always being there when needed. I would also like to give an enormous thank to my Social Science class without them none of these would have been possible, they have made the whole three years extremely enjoyable. I would also like to thank Mathew Clinton for his inspirational help throughout my degree. I need to say a special thank you to all the participants who took part in this research study. I also need to thank all my family for putting up with especially over the last couple of months.

Abstract

This research study will aim to examine the Prison Educators perspective on prison education in Irish prisons. It shall explore the perspectives of teachers that work in Irish Prisons. It will examine their views on prison education in a number of areas including benefits of education, the prison curriculum and their professional background. The participants have all worked within the prison environment for a substantial number of years and have worked in a number of the education units such as Male, Female and Juvenile Centres. The study was conducted using qualitative analysis and analysed using thematic analysis. The results show the participants to have positive regard towards their students and overall good feeling towards the education system. However the participants did discuss negative aspect of the career such as the conditions of the prisons, the security issues and disruption to education. This research study supported much of the literature done in the area surrounding prison education although there has been less research done in the area of the educators perspective on education.

Introduction

Reasonability and Running of Irish Prisons

The responsibility for the Irish Prison System lies with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The prison system operates within this department as an executive agency. It is headed by a Director General supported by 7 Directors. A non-executive Prison Authority Interim Board provides advice and guidance in the management of the prison system. The Prison Service also takes due account of the UN and European Conventions on Human Rights, UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. (www.irishprisons.ie). There are fourteen institutions in the Irish Prison system, with eleven traditional “closed” institutions and two open centres which operate with minimal internal and perimeter security. The Training Unit, in Dublin is a “semi-open” facility with traditional perimeter but minimal internal security. It is supposed to be drug free and generally for prisoners nearing the end of their sentence. Female prisoners are accommodated in the purpose built “Dochas Centre” in Dublin which houses the majority of female prisoners while the rest are located in a separate part of Limerick Male Prison. (www.irishprisons.ie).

The Irish Prison Education Service is made up of a partnership between the Irish Prison Service and a range of educational services. Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and the Public Library Services make the biggest contribution to the Prison Education Service.

The respective VEC committees in each county in which a prison is located provides teachers for that prison.

Each of the education units (school) is staffed by a Head Teacher and a number of full and part time teaching personnel. Other agencies that contribute to Prison Education are the Open University, which allows prisoners to access distance education courses at a degree level and caters for approximately 100 prisoners annually, The Arts Council which helps to organise workshops and guest writers and artists and other third level colleges such as the National College of Art and Design are also involved in Prison Education. (www.pesireland.org)

The curriculum is designed to suit the educational and personal needs of those participating in the service. Attendance at school is voluntary in all prison education units.

The aims of the Education Service are as follows:

To provide a high quality, broad and flexible programme of education that meets both the individual and group needs of those in custody through helping them:

- Cope with their sentence
- Achieve personal development
- Prepare for life after release
- Establish the appetite and capacity for lifelong learning

The Co-ordinator of Education within the IPS holds the responsibility for the education of all prisoners. Policy is generally taken from the Council of Europe (Recommendation Report Education in Prison, 1990) and the Strategy Statement for the Prison Education service for

2003-2007. (www.pesireland.org) The City of Dublin VEC also provides an Organiser of Education for the six prisons.

Within the Irish Prison System there are 14 education centres. These are in Dublin – Arbour Hill, Mountjoy, and St. Patricks Institution for Juveniles, Wheatfield, Training Unit and Cloverhill Remand Prison and the Dochas Centre for females. In Portlaoise there is Portlaoise and the Midlands, Castlerea in Roscommon, Shelton Open Prison in Arklow, Wicklow, Loughan House in Cavan and the prisons in Limerick and Cork. In several of these prisons there are several units within the main jails such as protection units and other segregated areas. This means the education providers have to provide some form of service to prisoners who cannot mix with other prisoners and where conditions are often even worse than in the main body of the jails.

The Department of Education and Science provides the allocation of teacher to the prisons through the VEC's. (Directory of Prison Education 2006).

Participation in education within prisons can vary a lot due to many factors such as access, facilities, turnover of population and segregation. "A sample week in November 2008 shows participation in education varied from 97% in Portlaoise to 19% in Clover Hill education unit. Other figures show - Arbour hill – 77%, Castlerea – 48%, Cork – 47%, Mountjoy-36%, St. Patricks Institution – 50%, Dochas – 70%." (Directory of Prison Education 2008, pg.7)

History of Education in Irish Prisons

Education within Irish Detention Facilities has dated back to as early as the 1920's. A book written by Niall Osborough is one of the earliest illustrations of education within Ireland and

examines life along with education within an Irish Borstal. A borstal was an institution for young male offenders which first began to operate in the Irish Republic around 1906 and closed in the mid 1950's (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O245-borstal.html>). Reports issued in the late 1920's covered education within the institutions, however these reports around this time failed to clearly define what was covered under the term education. "The Report for 1927 mentions educational training but it is difficult to determine what this amounted to" Osborough (1975:45). Education within the borstals became compulsory for all offenders and classes were staffed by voluntary teachers. "By 1933 educational classes were apparently compulsory for all boys and in 1935 the Report says that the "ordinary education classes (including singing) were supplemented that year by classes given by voluntary teachers" Osborough (1975:45). The reports issued at this time still failed to clearly define what educational classes were taking place, how they were organised or how they were taught and fails to offer a clear picture of education within an Irish Borstal. It was not until 1950 that a somewhat clearer picture of education was outlined in a report "The matter of educational deficiency is first referred to at length in 1950" Osborough (1975:70). The 1950 report highlights the low standard of all inmates' educational attainments. The aim of the borstal was to rectify this low education standard by implementing "an altered programme of religious and secular education" Osborough (1975:70). "Each inmate thus received continuous instruction throughout his sentence. Subjects taught included reading, writing, composition, simple grammar, arithmetic, history, geography, letter-writing, catechism and Christian doctrine Osborough (1975:70)

The Irish Borstal highlights the beginning of education within the Irish Prison System; however there has been a gap in the literature since as that no literature has fully examined the education within prisons in detail like Osborough's account. One of the difficulties in doing this literature review is the dearth of literature surrounding the Irish Prison Education

System. The literature surrounding prison education in Ireland mainly examines how education is to be carried out within an institution and the effects it has on prisoners.

Educational Learning in a Total Institution

Prison “by its very nature is abnormal and destructive of the personality in a number of ways” (Council of Europe, 1990, pg.15) and education has the “capacity to render the situation less abnormal, to limit somewhat the damage done to men and women through prison” (Council of Europe, 1990, pg.13).

Prison education and its effects and attributes have been debated for many years. The Council of Europe has suggested that education within prisons help to make the prison environment a more bearable experience, while Foster suggests that prison helps both the individual and society as a whole and Duguid research supports Fosters thinking that prison education can affect and improve the behaviour of criminals.

Writers such as Fleming (1988), Goffman (1961) and Fisher examine the environment of prisons where education is taking place and discuss issues such as what is necessary for education to take place in a total institution. Goffman (1961) suggested that characteristics necessary for adult education are freedom of action, autonomy and self-determination and that there is a lack of these within a total institution. Fleming’s (1988) work also discussed what is required in order for education to take place “In order to have a full, free participation in discourse there must be freedom, equality, tolerance, justice and a valuing of rationality” Fleming (1988:10). Fishner’s work suggested that education needed to take place in a safe, stable and peaceful environment and questioned if these types of conditions actually existed within the prison environment (Fisher, 2000). However Gramsci disagreed with the ideas of Fishner, Fleming and Goffman and stated that sites of adult education can be very broad and

that the conditions outlined above do not need to be in place in order for education to be successful. He even established a school himself while incarcerated in Ustica prison (Mayo 1999).

Education as a Human Right

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (Article 7, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)

The Irish Penal Reform Trust, an independent non government organisation committed to improving rights for prisoners, operates under the principle of, 'imprisonment as punishment and not for punishment', as they believe that the loss of freedom that incarceration inflicts on the individual should not be accompanied by additional punishments while in the prison. They believe the rights of the prisoner, as set out in international laws such as the European Convention on Human Rights, which Ireland is signed up to, should be respected and prisoners should be treated with dignity and without being subjected to cruel or inhumane treatment. They argue that Ireland's human rights record in relation to prisoners has been criticised by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (C.P.T.) after a visit to Ireland's prisons in 2006, and the UN Human Rights Committee in 2008. The criticisms were in relation to slopping out practices, the poor physical conditions of the prisons, the ill treatment of prisoners by the prison staff, the shortage of health care facilities, and chronic overcrowding.

Foster stated that education in prisons must be provided as a human right (Foster, 1981). Foster believed that like food and physical exercise, education is a human right and should be available to all at some level (Foster, 1981). Fosters idea that education in prisons is a basic human right has been supported by the United Nations, which stated that individuals in prisons hold the same human rights and fundamental freedoms outlined in the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right to take part in education aimed at the development of the human personality.

(<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NEWSEVENTS/Pages/Prisonersrighttoeducation.aspx>)

Conditions of Irish Prisons

Despite a number of new prisons being built in Ireland in the last two decades a large percentage of Ireland's prisons, such as Mountjoy, Limerick, Portlaoise, and Cork prisons, were built during the Victorian era. Mountjoy prison in Dublin which is Ireland's largest prison was opened in 1850, and has been the topic of much political debate, due to the overcrowded and dilapidated conditions in which prisoners are held. The cells in the jail are made for a single person, though after a change of direction in policy around the early 1980s, which saw the view of imprisonment go from one of a troublesome but sometimes necessary punishment, to a view of prison as an effective form of punishment for offenders, it saw the Irish Government for the first time in 1983 change the 1947 prison rules, to allow for the accommodation of more than one prisoner per cell. Kilcommins, O'Donnell, O'Sullivan, Vaughan (2004:233).

The 2009 report by the inspector of prisons Judge Michael Reilly paints a grim picture of prison conditions arguing that the prison, despite only having a bed capacity of 489, has, through placing bunks in cells designed for one person, increased the prisons bed capacity to 573: placing 164 prisoners in cells with other prisoners. At the time of the 2009 inspection there were 680 prisoners in the prison and the surplus 107 prisoners were sleeping, up to 8 to a room, and on mattresses in reception and shower areas in the prisons basement Reilly (2009:8/9). Judge Reilly states this was of such concern to him that he contacted the Department of Justice to inform them of his thoughts that such a practice would inevitably

lead to loss of life. The problematic conditions in the prison aren't limited to overcrowding, and Reilly's report argues that the conditions of the prison itself are appalling. He argues there is a serious lack of facilities, and as a result prisoners live in conditions which he argues are a breach of their rights as they are inhumane and degrading. He argues the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to have previously stated this, Reilly (2009:21/22). Prisoners in Mountjoy, as well as in Cork and Portlaoise, according to the Irish Penal Reform Trust account for 30% of the Irish prison population (www.iprt.ie), and due to these prisons having no in cell sanitation are forced to use buckets as toilets while in their cells. They have no access to toilet facilities at night and thus have to keep human waste in their cells until they can use slop out facilities the next morning. Reilly argues prisoners often are 7 to a cell and thus prisoners are forced to sleep in cells with buckets of waste from up to 6 other prisoners present, and must eat their meals in the same cells. The buckets which were usually un-covered often double as rubbish bins and are regularly emptied in bins on the prisons landings. Judge Reilly says he personally witnessed these bins leaking fluids on the landings. Wash facilities on the landings are filthy, toilets are often blocked and prisoners have no privacy while in the wash areas, Reilly (2009:22/23). Prisoners have no access to a laundry to wash their clothes and must hand wash them in buckets and dry those using makeshift washing lines in their cells. He also found the prisons facilities, including the exercise yard, the recreation areas and some of the landings to be filthy, while cells were filthy, lacking furniture, with soiled and torn mattresses, broken windows, and often infested with mice and cockroaches, Reilly (2009:24). In his previous 2008 report into Mountjoy, Reilly highlighted his concerns about drug abuse and violence in the prison. He argues despite the best efforts of staff who have greatly reduced the flow of drugs into the prison, the level of drug use is alarming, Reilly (2008:37). He also pointed to a rising level of violence and intimidation among prisoners which he attributed to the existence

of gangs in the prison, a lack of facilities leading to boredom among prisoners, drugs, overcrowding, and the inhumane conditions being contributory factors in the rising levels of violent incidents. Judge Reilly in his 2009 report points to a number of incidents which occurred in the prison between 2008 and 2009 including riots, a hostage situation and the murder of a young man who was stabbed to death showing no change from the previous year, Reilly (2009:11). Due to the conditions in the prison, Mountjoy according to Reilly, fails in its duty of care to the prisoners, he argues “From my observations and from my conversations with a wide cross section of people – prisoners, staff and service providers I am satisfied that, despite the efforts of management and staff Mountjoy Prison cannot, at present, provide safe and secure custody for its prisoners. It is questionable as to whether the prison provides a safe environment for staff to work in”, Reilly (2009:7). The inhumane conditions in Mountjoy Prison have been subject to debate for decades, O Mahony argues. The prisons visiting committee in 1984 voiced concern about the conditions in which prisoners were being held, they argued “many of the hot and cold water taps do not operate..... In some cases the entire toilet areas are continuously flooded. We consider that these conditions are degrading and a disgrace to any community. This situation cannot be excused, more particularly as it has obtained for years” O Mahony (1996:103).

Keeping prisoners in the type of conditions which prevail in Mountjoy Prison is a serious issue, obviously because as Reilly points out, they are in breach of internationally recognised human rights such as Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. But other issues arise as a result of such conditions, such as, the impact these conditions have on the prisoner’s psychological well being, and the impact on prisoner’s attitudes to the state. Undoubtedly being subjected to the conditions of Mountjoy Prison would have damaging consequences on the emotional well being of those exposed to it. However in his Report Judge Michael Reilly also focused on the positive aspects of life in Mountjoy Prison,

including that of the Education Service. He stated that there was a positive atmosphere regards to teaching and that the teachers had positive relationships with both the prisoners and the prison staff, he continued on to say that the school facilities were adequate and that the Home Economics kitchen had been recently refurbished. Reilly discussed the positive aspects to the education programmes in Mountjoy, in the period of September 2007 to July 2008, 202 inmates received awards in FETAC, Open University, Junior and Leaving Certificate. He also mentioned the good relationship between teachers and prisoners and the positive atmosphere in the school. He did mention however that the school was not large enough to cater from the prison population and does not operate to its full capacity due to a variety of issues.

Influence Background has on Prisoners

O Mahony's study of Prisoners in Mountjoy Prison is not a complete representative of prisoners in Ireland, due to the fact that those serving sentences in the Mountjoy only accounts for just over a third of Ireland's prisoners. However it showed that the vast majority of the prisoners (81%) in the Mountjoy complex were from Dublin and all of those from Dublin were from areas which O Mahony describes as being characterised by, "Having a high proportion of corporation housing and high levels of unemployment", O Mahony (1997:39). He also found the prisoners had a low level of education, and a large percentage had a history of imprisonment in their families, O Mahony (1997:49/51). Studies have shown low educational achievement to be a serious problem among the poor in Ireland, where 50 % of children from unskilled manual labour backgrounds leave school without their leaving cert compared to just 3 % of children from professional backgrounds, Share, Torey, Corcorn (2006:26). O Mahony (2002:623) argues, 96% of the prisoners had not sat the leaving certificate, and of the 4% who did the Leaving Certificate had done so in the prison education

system. Giving the importance of education in determining ones opportunities in the labour market, this is a significant finding and something which needs to be addressed through constructive approaches to imprisonment. An important issue to be considered in relation to the idea of the over-representation of the poor in Irish prisons, is the fact that, Mountjoy Prison at the time of O Mahony's study, accounted for over a quarter of the Irish prison population, O Mahony (1993:119). Yet despite this, only six of the prisoners who took part in the study, came from areas which have a mix of working class and middle class areas, and none of the sample came from areas which would be considered middle class areas, O Mahony (1997:39/40). This clearly shows the links between poverty, low educational achievement and imprisonment, and on this evidence it is clear that the role of education in the reform of prisoners in Irish prisons is paramount.

Prison Curriculum

Within his work Foster (1981) discusses the idea surrounding the development of a curriculum for prison education. Foster (1981) was aware that developing an prison curriculum is subject to certain constraints that are different to the outside world but that these must be tackled accordingly, and that the ideas and changes in adult education in the outside world must be reflected in prison. Foster (1981) suggested that certain beliefs should be taken into account while discussing prison education. Foster (1981) stated that crime demands a reduction of attention, that education should be available at a minimum level to all and that the 'deviant' required special and extra attention (Foster 1981). The beliefs outlined above practically the concept of education have the intention of preventing offenders from reoffending and providing humane confinement. When developing a curriculum Foster (1981) suggested that four factors need to be considered; the wants and needs of the proposed students, the constraints both practical and ideological must be considered, the curriculum

must provide choice and the opportunity for progress to all its students and what Foster (1981) highlighted to be extremely important in the context of a prison curriculum that it correctly reflects the universe of ideas and practices it represents.

Policies, plans and strategies are very much a part of the public service today but this was not so in the 1980's. Due to a collective effort by those involved in Irish Prison Education in the 1980's, encouraged greatly by the then Co-ordinator of Prison Education in the Department Of Justice, Kevin Warner, the 1984 document *Education Policy in Prisons and Places of Detention* was issued.

Adult education was seen as the appropriate approach to the education of those in prison in Ireland with the aims, methods, courses and activities within prison considered essentially the same as in adult education outside.

The education curriculum of Irish Prisons caters for both adult and juvenile students. Each prison education centre in Ireland caters for the particular needs of the students contained therein. St Patricks Institution for juvenile offenders offer a variety of subjects up to the Junior and Leaving Certificate, along with subjects such as crafts, pottery, parenting and social studies, they also offer literacy classes and a large range of FETAC awarded courses. Mountjoy male prisons curriculum ranges from basic adult education to degree level courses, students can also sit the state examinations. The education unit of Mountjoy applies a liberal model of Adult Education where there is student autonomy in subject choice, voluntary student participation, a broad curriculum which has an emphasis on meeting the educational needs of all its students and the ability of students to identify their own needs. (Irish Prisons Service Education and Library Directory, 2009). Literacy work is a large part of each education unit's curriculum, both as a subject itself and as an element of other subjects.

Importance of Education

Foster (1981) argues that the importance of education for prisoners cannot be overemphasised; he argues that education plays a major role in helping prisoners serve their time and remain sane while doing it. Foster's work also proposes that the role of education does not only benefit the individual but also the community and society which will receive him back once released (Foster, 1981). Foster (1981) examined the influence education can have on a number of aspects within a prisoner's life, such as relationships, a sense of membership, widening horizons "the ladder" and self respect. In the area of relationships Foster (1981) works outlines the findings the education plays a vital role in this area and that part-taking in education opens the prisoner up to a whole new range of relationships. The student prisoner is brought into contact with a wide range of teachers, male and female and this presents a chance for the inmates to see the world from different views. Foster's work has shown that the student prisoners value the interaction with the teachers and that each teacher's different perspectives on prisoners are vital to the education process (Foster, 1981). Membership or a sense of belong is often viewed as an extension of relationships. Foster (1981) suggests that education allows for the prisoner to feel like they are engaging in an activity that is viewed as normal and the same as the outside world, he also states that the feeling of membership is strongest when it is accredited with an official body such as the Open University Foster (1981). Foster recognises the added importance of education within the prison environment, he notes that education should widen awareness and improve the choices of those who take part and that this had even more potency in the prison system Foster (1981). Self-respect in relation to education was also examined within the study and it was stated that many prisoners associated their self respect with their education, "Many prisoners expressed close links between their educational activity and their sense of self-respect". Foster (1981:66). The prisoners interviewed spoke with great respect and passion

about a new path of self discovery because of the educational programmes they took part in, while some saw their current educational activity as a means to separate them from their lives of crime and punishment. Foster's (1981) work discussed above is a series of notes on education's influence on a prisoner's life and is a summary of conversations with a range of different types of prisoners "were answering the basic question: Why is education important to you?" Foster (1981:66). Foster (1981) continues on to note that not all prisoners gave "equal weight to all answers". Foster (1981) stated that prisoners from deprived areas talked about "new horizons" when they spoke about what education meant to them, long sentenced prisoners referred to as "lifers" spoke about education in terms of "milestones and progress", the convict who had previously been a professional speaks about education as a way to "use a qualification to "sidestep" into some other occupation and the young offender who had left their previous education due to drugs or crime "who saw academic work as a way of regaining his previous position and the lost soul "grouping for some way to protect himself from the worst effects of prison life". Foster (1981:66)

Although Foster (1981) speaks at great length of the benefits of prison education he also highlights the negative consequences that education may have on a prisoner. Foster notes that education as shown above can affect and change people and that this amount of change can certainly involve a certain amount of risk (Foster, 1981). Foster suggests that the negative aspects of choice and widening horizons do have a flip side; to give a person a new world of choice can and sometimes cause delight but also confusion and may sometimes result in rejection causing further institutionalisation. Foster continues on to say that a serious repercussion of giving an individual the opportunity to succeed and progress also sets them up with the opportunity to fail and this can be quite daunting Foster (1981:67).

Benefits of Prison Education

Duguid (1981) like Foster (1981) examined the effects of education on inmates compared with those who didn't take part in education while incarcerated and the ways in which it influenced them both in prison and upon release. Duguid (1981) himself stated in his work that he saw a huge difference in the prisoners who took part in the educational programme in Matsqui; he commented on the major change in the verbal written and communicating skills of the individuals along with the growth of analytical abilities and self-confidence. Duguid (1981) examines the effect education has on prisoners from an intellectual and behavioural stance, he explores the idea that prisoners feel alien in the world of education and view the world in black and white "the tendency among prisoners to see everything in good/bad, us/them terms, with virtually no shades of grey" Duguid (1981:150). Duguid (1981) discusses the idea of the dual identity within his work where the individual must be both prisoner and student, where the individual must be a prisoner in order to survive in the harsh environment and also a student when taking part in education. Duguid (1981) noted that the students themselves have become aware of the duality and have viewed their student self as the better aspect of their personality which they would prefer to continue with once released Duguid (1981).

Duguid's (1981) research is on a follow up study of the Matsqui Program conducted between 1979-1980 and studied the attitudes and careers of seventy-five students which had completed a minimum number of courses and remained out of prison for at least six months. Duguid's (1981) observations along with the research examined the area of cognitive-moral development and post release behaviour. Duguid (1981) found there were significant changes in the men's thoughts on law, politics, criminal behaviour, family and friendship Duguid (1981). Through the research certain aspects were present as to how the individuals

had benefited from taking part in the educational courses, as there were strong indications that increased perception and thinking skills led the students to be more able to avoid criminal patterns of behaviour Duguid (1981). Another important finding of the research was that the men had discovered a new ability to choose friends more wisely and noted that their circle of friendship had expended greatly. The statements above highlight that some of the important benefits to take from prison education are the individuals improved decision making process and their “ability to analyze life situations from a reasoned perspective” Duguid (1981:151).

Post-Release Behaviour

Within the study post-release behaviour was also looked at and it examined the success of release of men who had taken part in the educational programme versus those who hadn't. Forty Five out of seventy five men located and interviewed who had taken part in education while incarcerated were employed or going to education full time, and there was a wide range of occupations represented. There was also an indication of upward mobility for the ex prisoners who had completed in two or more years of university courses (Duguid, 1981). The research also compared the post release behaviour of the individuals with those who has not taken part in the education programme on offer with the prison. Seventy-four ex students were compared to the same number of prisoners who were realised during the same intervals, who were in the same prison but had not taken part in university programme. “Of the university group, eleven (15%) were reincarcerated during the three year period, while thirty five (48%) of the non-student group found their way back to prison” (Duguid, 1981, p.152).

Duguid continues on to suggest that there is evidence that strong supports the concept that criminals are different from the average person and that the difference show themselves in

terms of behaviour and that the base of these differences lies in deficits in cognitive development and moral reasoning (Duguid, 1981). Duguid also goes on to suggest that traditional prison environments only aggravate the differences in criminals and that the “problem is one of development and can be logically addressed through education” (Duguid, 1981, p.153).

Teaching Perspective

Randall Wright’s (2008) *In the Borderlands*, explores education in a prison from the perspective of a correctional educator. Unlike the literature discussed above Wright analyses the experiences of being an educator in a correctional environment. A theme throughout Wright’s work is that the majority of teachers feel totally unprepared for what lies ahead of them when they begin working in a Prison System, Wright states that the majority of educators never planned to work in a prison system but just fell into the job by accident. He discussed that most but not all came from an educational teaching background and that teaching in a prison environment is completely different from any other type of teaching setting. Wright discussion of a teacher’s perspective of prisoners is an important concept, he discussed the idea the teacher’s have their own social and political perspectives of the prisoner and this can affect how they interact and how they teach. An educator can over or under identify with a prisoner or the prison system and this too can affect their teaching methods. He also suggested that many teachers discussed having preconceptions of prison from what they say in the media and movies and that many of these conceptions were wrong and their ideas had to be looked at again once they began working within the system (Wright, 2008).

Aims

This thesis will examine the prison educator's perspective on prison education within Irish Prisons. Educators could include a wide range of people including prison staff, library staff, outside education providers, IPS policy makers. Having realised that the research question was bigger than was first thought, the research will aim to solely examine the perspectives of the classroom teacher. If the thesis had chosen to interview other people within the service it would have received different perspectives, however the research has chosen to focus on the teachers within the classroom. Throughout the examination of the Irish Prison Education system, the research discovered there is no typical prison, typical student, nor a typical teacher and realised it was beyond the scope of this thesis to focus on all the varying categories of educator and so this thesis shall focus on teachers who teach in the Male, Female and Juvenile Education Units within the Mountjoy Complex in Dublin.

Methodology

The research method used in this study was qualitative. Qualitative Analysis was chosen due to the study been focused on the perspectives of teachers within the Irish Prison Education Service, and in order to gain a full understanding of their perspectives the method of qualitative analysis was chosen due to the data rich material it enables the research to collect. Semi structures interviews were chosen as this allowed participants to express their thoughts but also insured they covered a certain number of areas.

Participants

Four women and two men were interviewed for the research study. Due to confidentiality reasons they are addressed using labels (Interviewee's 1-6). Access to the participants was gained through an informal relationship the researcher had in the field. The participants interviewed were selected due to the job within the field; the participants are both male and female to eliminate gender bias. Participants ranged in age from mid thirties to early fifties. The focus of the study was on educator's perspectives therefore their chosen career was of t importance rather than age and gender. The background of the participants is extremely varied. They had all been working with the prison service for quite a substantial period of time. All of the participants were fully cooperative and eager to participant. The participants however were concerned about confidentiality and were reassured by the researcher the all interviews would be anonymous and destroyed once the data had been recorded.

Apparatus

All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. This was established as the best possible way to obtain the interviews and insure the data was safely collected and protected.

Procedure

The research aims to examine the perspectives on education within the Irish Prison System from the educators who work within in. The interviews took place in a building on the grounds of the Prison; it did not take place within the prison itself. Each participant was interviewed on their own for confidentiality reasons. The researcher introduced themselves and informed each participant the reasons for completing the interviews that it was for an educational research study of The Perspectives of Prison Educators on the Education System in Irish Prisons. The researcher then went through the confidentiality agreements. The interviewees were asked then ask if they still wished to part take in the study and asked to sign a consent form. The interviewees were also informed that they could stop at any time if they did not want to proceed and did not have to answer any questions that might cause them to feel uncomfortable and that there was no time limit and could take their time. The participants were also informed that the interviews would be recorded on a Dictaphone as this was the most efficient way to record the data. Each of interviewees where asked the same eleven questions and given the chance at the end to add anything if they felt they wanted to.

The study explored some key issues which include:

1. Professional Background
2. Views on Prison Education
3. Experiences of teaching in Prison Environment
4. Teaching within different Prison Educational Units

Method of Analysis

The method of qualitative analysis used within this research is Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is said to be the fundamental method of qualitative analysis Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic Analysis is a method used to “identify, analyse and report themes with data” Braun & Clarke (2006:79). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to become familiar with the data and allows for social and physiological interpretation of the data. Thematic analysis provides the researcher with rich data and interprets many aspects of the research topic Braun & Clarke (2006:78). Thematic analysis was chosen for this study as it said to be one of the simplest methods of analysis to understand however it allows for rich interpretation of the data and is one of the fundamental methods of qualitative analysis.

Limitations

Within this study there a few limitations that arose. The study was conducted with a small number of participants from the prison and therefore cannot be taken as a complete representation of the perspectives all of educators in the prison service. To gain a full understanding of an individual’s perspectives on the chosen topic can be considered quite difficult and a more experienced researcher may have been able to gather more in-depth data.

Ethical Concerns

In conducting the research some ethical issues arose for the participants. The participants consent was needed to carry out the research and were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix). The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that it was to gain a better perspective of education in prisons from the point of view of those who worker there. The participants were provided with confidentiality forms signed by the researcher that explained that the research was being carried out for academic purposes and that the data

received would be safe guarded and would only be used to complete the study and then would be disposed of correctly. The participant's identity would also be protected by refereeing to them as Interviewee's 1 to 6 and the name of the prison they worked in would not be mentioned in the study. The participants were informed that if they felt uncomfortable at any time throughout the interview they could terminate it.

Results Section

This section of the study will analyse the data collected. Due to the well educated nature of the participants they were able to articulate their thoughts and feeling surrounding prison education extremely well.

Professional Background

The professional background of the participants varied slightly, however the majority of the participants came from educational or teaching backgrounds. Many of the participants had quite varied types of third level education, P4 stated *“I had a BA in Geography and Anthropology and H. Dip in Adult and Community Education before I began working in the prisons”* Several had Masters degrees and two had PhD’s. The participants mostly entered the prison as young teachers and had worked as full time or part time teacher before; P4 had worked in both primary and vocational schools *“I worked in a Primary School and then a Vocational School before being assigned to the Prison service”*. The participants expressed that they had been interested in the area of disadvantaged before they began working within the prison service and P4 had a keen interest in the area of adult education *“I have always been interested in the area of second chance and adult education particularly in areas of disadvantaged”*

The participants did express that many of them had not applied to work in the prison on purpose but had either been offered the job or fallen into the vocation accidentally, P4 was approached *“Well I was approached by a man, who at the time was the Education Organiser in the Department of Justice, with special responsibility for education in the prisons. He suggested I apply for a job teaching with the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee in St Patrick’s institution”*. While P2 applied through the VEC and she was not aware the job

vacancy was in a prison until the interview *“I only found out the teaching position was in a prison setting after I sent in my application as most of the jobs were in VEC schools”*

A majority of the participants spoke of not having fears of entering into the prison education service but were looking forward with anticipation to what the system would have in store for them. P1 expressed having very little concerns entering into the prison system *“I had no pre conceived notions or fears about it before starting. I was a young teacher with no experience of working with adults and was excited for the challenge”*.

P5 spoke of the opportunity as being a new challenge and experience *“I decided to go ahead purely for the experience of the interview. When I was offered the position I thought I would give it a go”*

Views on Prison Education

The participants spoke of the importance of education within the prison service from the view point of how it improved the life of the prisoner both while in prison and when released. The participants described education within the prison as being essential as many of the prisoners have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the majority of the students have had very little experience with education on the outside and often the experience they do have with education on the outside was extremely negative. P3 stated how she thought the prison could be a good place to begin a positive experience of education, *“they’ve had very bad experiences with education if any experiences at all so it can be a good if not unusual place to show them that education isn’t all bad”*. Participants spoke of how mainstream education had often failed their students and the importance of providing education to people that had been let down by a system that should have been there to support them. P1 outlined why she felt the education system had failed her students *“the school system in Ireland has failed*

them. It either wasn't relevant to them, wasn't flexible enough in the way it's delivered or gave up on them too easily when they met problems"

The importance of the educational curriculum within the prison system was a common theme throughout the interviews. All of the participants expressed the importance of having a curriculum that provided a wide range of subjects to suit the needs of all the students *"We carried out research into the needs of the prisoners and a programme was devised that was a combination of practical information and advice on available support services along with classes exploring issues such as anger management, self esteem and communications"* The participants spoke of the education and curriculum allowing the students to participate in subjects that they find interesting and relevant to them *"Students can suggest a subject that hasn't previously been offered and provided that a core group of six students express an interest, then the head teacher will try to add that to the timetable"* The interviewees spoke of the wide range of varying subjects available within the educational units in the prison and stated that there is often subjects available that would not be in mainstream schools, *"there's the leaving and junior cert subjects and the open university along with subjects that wouldn't be offered in mainstream, like beauty care, leather craft, stain glass and jewellery."* P6 suggested that the combination of choices available to the students was important *"I believe there is a good mix of practical & academic subjects offered at all different levels to suit mixed abilities"*

The participants spoke of the varying subjects and the educational setting allowing the students to achieve potential they never knew they had *"as with the awful experiences most of them had with education in the past the school actually helps and encourages them to discover talents they never knew they had"*. The participants discussed the wide range of recognised certificates, exams and degrees available as being important in the personal growth of their students. P6 stated how important these achievements can be for the students

“The lads love doing modules that have a cert on completion, it makes them feel like they have really achieved something” Participants spoke of how the accessibility to the education units in the prison helps the students to began what may be their first real attempt at education or a chance to further their previous educational achievements, P5 discussed how the variety of modules to help the students with education *“Students can sit their junior and leaving certs, have the opportunity to partake in the Open University degree courses, do FETAC level courses and classes that will really benefit them such as addiction studies, self esteem building, etc.*

The participants discussed that education is important on a number of various levels, P2 spoke about how education can be beneficial on different levels *“helps them pass their sentence in a constructive way, provides an opportunity to improve on previous educational achievements, offers certification, provides a safe environment for students to integrate, diffuses tension and promotes self esteem”*.

The participants spoke highly of the importance of education system with Irish Prisons; however they did communicate that there were issues surrounding the education within the service. P3 discussed the concept of working within a secure unit and how it is different than teaching in a main stream school due to the security issues *“Prison is a multidisciplinary setting. This means that school can’t commence with just teachers we must have officers to man the school”* The concerns surrounding security and the effect it had on education was mentioned with the interviews. P6 spoke of how education can be disrupted by a student being moved unexpectedly due to security concerns *“The welfare of the prisoner seems to be at the bottom of the list of considerations while security is at the top. It leads to a lot of disruption to the provision of education. Students about to sit Leaving Certificate exams for example can be transferred to a different prison in the weeks or days before the exam and*

given no notice” The concerns surrounding security have also prohibited the introduction of the growing technology sector into the prison service, P1 talked about how the new technology could be beneficial to the students *“there is a suspicion around the use of IT so there is no chance to keep up with the opportunities that new technology could bring to the lives of prisoners.”*

Experience of Teaching in a Prison Environment

Throughout all the interviews the participants all had extremely positive feelings towards working within the prison service, P5 talked about how much he enjoyed his work *“I really enjoy my job, I’ve been here such a long time but every day is different and I love the lads”*.

P2 discussed how she felt she has grown up in the job and that she has great respect for her students and that she has learnt a lot from them *“I feel I have grown into this job, I was initially apprehensive about teaching in a prison until I realised I teach students who happen to be prisoners. I have learnt a lot from them as much as I might expect they learn from me”*.

The participants all had a great respect and praise for their students and all extremely enjoyed their job; P4 felt it was extremely rewarding to see the change in her students in the classroom *“I love that while they are in class students often forget that they are prisoners”*.

P6 discussed how he can see that his students are like any other group of students and doesn’t view them as prisoners *“I see that our students are the same as any group of adult learners, they have mixed abilities, learn at different speed and have different experiences to bring to class”*

The participants all agreed that the actual teaching in the prison is the enjoyable part and it is the other problems that can make the job difficult *“teaching in the prison is extremely rewarding, it is the conditions and treatment of prisoners that cause the problems”* The

participants spoke of how any negative experiences they had with teaching in the prison never came from their students but more from the system they had to work in *“Teaching in prison is often a very frustrating experience due to the challenges of the system students can have trouble getting access to the school due to the whim of prison staff”*. P5 discussed the lack of services for the students can be really difficult when you are trying to help your students as much as possible and there’s very little to work with *“there is a shortage of psychological and psychiatric support for troubled prisoners, and the waiting lists are so long, it’s hard to try help a student when there’s nothing to help him with”*

The appalling conditions within the prison themselves was a concern that effected the participants teaching experiences, P4 talked about some of the conditions of the prison and how difficult this can be *“life inside is very difficult for the students and staff, conditions are awful, I am sometimes asked to see one of them on a protection landing where they are on 23 hour lock up, no room to see them, no facilities .This is a particular awful aspect of my job as you do feel totally helpless in this situation and all you are able to do is maybe just to give him an A4 pad and pen or a few books”*. The conditions of some of the prisons themselves were also an issue discussed in the interviews. The participants talked about how some of the prisons themselves are in awful conditions for both the staff and more importantly the students *“the prison conditions are appalling, the lads can be living in cells with five other grown men, there’s no proper sanitation, protection for some of the lads means being on 23 hour lock up and all this can makes the environment hard to teach in as you’re trying to do your best for the lads against such a harsh system*. P4 also discussed the same harsh conditions in her interview *“the conditions are atrocious, how the fellas even get up in the morning and come to the school after everything that can go on is amazing, if you were to see the conditions they’re living in you wouldn’t believe it”*.

Teaching within Different Educational Units

The majority of participants I interviewed have worked in the educational units within different prisons such as the Male, Women's and Juvenile. Participants spoke about the differences of teaching within these units and the differences of the students they teach. P1 spoke about the different profiles of the students and how you need to use different teaching styles *"I found differences mostly due to the prisoner profile. The challenge as a teacher when working with prisoners serving a long sentence is to deliver courses that help to alleviate the boredom of prison, maintain interest for the student through variety, allow him to see progression in his studies, while working within the resources of the teachers' skills and the limits of the prison system"*. While P4 spoke about working with prisoners serving short sentences or waiting on impending release *"the challenge is to deal with students who may be transferred or released at any time, therapeutic classes like art and physical education are mixed with pre release and vocational classes. And this combination ideally helps the student to deal with his present situation while beginning to think of life after release"*. Participants also discussed how gender and age of students can affect the experience of teaching in the prison, P3 spoke about teaching physical education and how the different students react to it *"The older fellas are a lot more interested in keeping fit then the women and some of the younger lads are really interested in nutrition and their physical health so you can see a big difference when you have different students."* P2 spoke of how female prisoners can sometimes find it more difficult than males to cope with their sentence and this can alter the teaching dynamics *"Women prisoners tend to be far more emotional than their male counterparts, many find it hard to cope with their sentence because they have children or other domestic issues to deal with, men just get on with it."* The participants noted that there are quite different teaching dynamics for each of the prisoners groups just like in a main stream school and just because they are prisoners doesn't mean they are all the same, P6

discussed this is in the interview *“People sometimes think that because they are all in prison they are all scumbags and have the same deviant personality, but that is not the case at all. The majority of the prisoners are in there because they’re poor and come from dysfunctional backgrounds and crime and drugs is the only way of life they know”*.

Discussion

This section of the research will be used to examine and critically analysis the finding of the study. It will discuss the participant's interviews and also draw on the previous literature. The findings supported some of the previous literature and also highlight a gap in the literature.

Education in Irish Prisons

All of the participants viewed education in prisons as essential on a number of different levels. The participants discussed education in the prison as being beneficial in a number of ways such as it helps them pass their sentence in a constructive way and help them to stay sane; the concept of passing their sentence constructively is outlined in the aims and objectives of the Prison Education Service. Participants spoke about education allowing the prisoners to leave prison with educational achievements and help them readjust to life outside. The Council of Europe in 1990 justified education in prison on three grounds: bringing a degree of normality to life within prisons, addressing educational disadvantage, and offering prisoners the possibility of redirection their lives (Council of Europe, 1990:15). Duguid (1981) highlighted the importance of education achievements in life after prison in his post release behaviour study, which showed that prisoners who took part in educational training while incarcerated showed less signs of participating in criminal activity. The participant all had positive regard towards education and to their students and this was supported in Judge Michael's Reilly's report on Mountjoy that stated there was a positive atmosphere in the educational facilities of Mountjoy prison.

Prison Curriculum

The Prison curriculum was generally agreed to be of major importance to the participants in relation to the benefit to their students. Each of the participants highlights the need to have a curriculum that accommodated and understood the needs of the students. This supports the work by Foster (1981) that when developing a prison curriculum the proposed students need and wants must be taken into consideration. The participant's interviews showed the significance of having a curriculum that provided the students with a range of subjects that allows for personal and educational growth, this also supports the work of Foster (1981) that suggests a prison curriculum should aim to provide humane incarceration and prevent the prisoner from reoffending. . The findings from the interviews with the participants seems to be that the aims of the Education Service, as mentioned at that start of this thesis are being broadly met by the education units in each prison. The Irish Prisons Service Education and Library Directory (2009) stated that the education and prison curriculum enables the students to develop autonomy and according to Goffman (1988) autonomy, freedom of action and self determination must be in place in order for educational learning to succeed. The participants discussed the wide range of subjects and courses available and how their students really benefit from participating in a course that is accredited and how their students really enjoy getting certificates for their work. This claims can are supported by Foster (1981) who discussed that a prisoner can develop a strong feeling of membership when the education he is partaking in is supported by an official body such as the Open University.

Professional Background

Almost all of the participants interviewed spoke of how they had not actually planned or considered working in the Prison service. The majority of the participants discussed how they

had just discovered the career path unintentionally. This coincides with Wright (2008) who stated that the majority of prison educators fall into the career accidentally. Wright also discussed the idea that many of the educators were unprepared for what they would expect when they began to work within the Prison system. This concept was also present within this research study as many of the participants spoke of being unaware of the job they actually applied for and deciding to just give it a go. Wright (2008) discussed in his work that many of the educators had preconceived notions and ideas on prisoners and working in a prison environment. However Wright's (2008) claims were not entirely supported by the interviews as the participants discussed not having fears or notions entering into the prison but rather an excitement of the challenges that lay ahead. Wright (2008) discussed within his work that educator's perspective of prisoners is extremely important within the educational process; the data received within this study supports that finding as those who work within the area have also had an interest in the area of disadvantaged and are able to adapt their teaching methods depending on the prisoner profile.

Conditions and Educational Disadvantaged

The participants all discussed the issues surrounding educational disadvantage as a concern in the prison system. The participants spoke about many of their students having had negative experiences of education on the outside and prison is for some of them their first real attempt at education. This was a strong theme throughout O Mahony's (1997) work, which stated that majority of the prison's occupants were from low socio-economic backgrounds and that prisoners had low levels of education. The participants spoke of the educational system on the outside failing the prisoners by not meeting their needs and giving up on the students when encountered with problems, these thoughts are supported by Share, Torey and Corcorn (2006), who stated that individuals from manual labour backgrounds tend to leave school

substantial earlier and in higher numbers than those from professional backgrounds. Judge Michael Reilly (2009) did substantial work in the area surrounding the conditions of Mountjoy and highlights the inhumane conditions the prisoners were living in and how there were major problems of overcrowding, sanitation issues and lack of facilities. The difficulties caused by these problems within the prison system were also supported by the participants within this study. The participants also discussed the conditions in the prison service as a concern for influences on education and for the prisoners themselves. They described conditions in many of the jails, one in particular as being atrocious and said it was a miracle the students could participate in education at all as they live in such horrific conditions.

Conclusion

The research study through its interviews with educators has supported much of the existing literature in this area. However it has also added to the previous literature as it examines the education from the personal view point of the educator who works in the prison system on day to day basis. There has been some literature surrounding education in prisons but less research done on how the people who actually work in the area feel about it on a personal and professional level. It has examined the perspectives of educators in Irish Prisons and has shown that they thoroughly enjoy their career and their students, that they believe education is essential and that their students deserve a chance at education.

Appendix 1.

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your history of working and teaching in the prison?
2. Could you tell me position in the prison and how long you have been teaching there?
3. Could you tell me your thoughts on providing education in the prisons?
4. Could you tell me your thoughts on the education system in Irish prisons?
5. Can you tell me about your experiences of working in a prison environment?
6. Have you worked in any of the other educational units, such as male, females, juveniles?
7. Could you tell me if you noted any differences teaching within different units?
8. What do you feel about the conditions in Irish prisons?
9. What do you feel are the major benefits of providing education in Irish Prisons?
10. Could you tell me what you feel are the major disadvantages/flaws if you feel there are any in the Irish Prison education system?

Appendix 2.

Consent Form

To whom it may concern,

This research study is for educational purposes only. All interviews will only be used for the purpose of this research study; they shall be safeguarded by the interviewer and disposed of after use. All participants will be given complete confidentiality and shall be referred to as participants throughout the study

Signed

Date.....

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