Education in Prison: Studying through distance learning
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Every year, an estimated 4,000 prisoners study through distance learning (Schuller 2009). Due to staffing, financial and other resource implications, most prison education departments can only focus on basic skills and therefore distance learning offers the ‘educated’ prisoner opportunities to continue their learning career (Hodkinson 2004; cited by Hughes 2010). Despite interest in the association between education and crime (e.g. Groot & van den Brink 2010), prison-based education and prison-based distance learning in particular have not received much research attention (Hughes 2012). The small body of work in this area is growing however as evidenced by Education in Prison. This book presents the findings of Hughes’ qualitative study of prisoners’ experiences of distance learning in

1 Often, this requires the prisoner to fund his or her own education, though some academic institutions (e.g. the Open University) may offer fee waivers or funding for prisoners and the charity, the Prisoners’ Education Trust, offers grants for distance learning.
2 Not all prisoners who undertake distance learning are educated (or seek to be educated) to university level; some may have completed the prison-run learning programmes and may be seeking to gain secondary education qualifications.
prison (funded by Birmingham City University and the Prisoners’ Education Trust). From a pool of nine prisons, 76 respondents who had undertaken courses funded by the Prisoners’ Education Trust completed questionnaires, and 47 were also interviewed about distance learning and its unique benefits (e.g., variety of topics, expert tutelage) and challenges (e.g., motivation, independent learning).

In Chapter 1 (Introduction), Hughes provides a brief summary of research and policy concerning prison education and sets the scene for the research (describing the political landscape at the time and the methodology of the study). Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, examine the personal and institutional factors which ‘push’ prisoners towards distance learning and those which ‘pull’ them away from education. Chapter 4 explores the interaction between education and identity — how education influences self-perceptions and how self-perceptions can also sabotage the learning process. In contrast to Chapter 4’s focus on the self, Chapter 5 turns to the other actors in the learner’s life (both within and outside prison and including family, friends, fellow prisoners and prison staff) and how they can impact on the learning process and how this learning may influence the prisoner’s wider network and environment. Chapter 6 focuses on the future — how learning and education may impact aspirations, direction, opportunities and identities post-release. The final Chapter 7 (the Conclusion) draws together the threads in the previous chapters and makes a number of policy suggestions for encouraging engagement with education in prison.

The book is written in a clear and engaging manner with consistent signposting to themes and chapters. Hughes makes good use of quotations and refers to supportive theoretic and research evidence when appropriate. Surprisingly, given the overall quality of the book, the discussion of methodology is limited. For example, no information is given regarding the questionnaire items and the interview questions and therefore the quotes provided are decontextualised. It is interesting that the author refers to the importance of context in relation to decisions to study or not but does not refer to how the context of the interview may have influenced responding. While Hughes admits in the introduction that the ‘students’ stories have inevitably been filtered and shaped by myself, and my role as a researcher in developing, participating and influencing the overall process cannot be ignored’ (p. 10), little reflection is undertaken on this issue.

Hughes’ work is a valuable reminder that behind each statistic is a person and that behind each enrolment (or not) on an educational course, there are multiple personal, social and environmental determining factors. The strength of this book is bringing to life the educational histories of these individuals and allowing us to learn from their failures, false starts and (most importantly) their successes. If you are interested in facilitating the learning of disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups, this book will be of interest to you. While Hughes makes links between prison-based education and adult learning in the community, there are also parallels with learning in a widening access institution: I am by no way implying that students at the University of Bedfordshire are criminals or that they will one day continue their education behind bars... However, they may have very similar educational life histories to Hughes’ participants. For example, some may come from families or communities with a ‘counter-school culture’ (Willis 1977) or no previous experience of higher education. Some may have had negative experiences at school (being more interested in friends than in education and experiencing conflicts with teachers) and others may have had an undiagnosed learning disorder which they feel held them back. Most importantly and I would argue, most commonly, many may lack academic confidence. To ‘push’ towards education, Hughes, or rather her interviewees, emphasise the importance of having a subject of interest and a suitable learning approach, of deconstructing psychological barriers to learning and building up academic confidence and self-esteem (elements embedded within our University’s Cre8 framework). The prisoners’ narratives also include some cautionary advice. They demonstrate how institutional policies and attitudes and those of other prisoners and staff can undermine self-confidence and motivation to engage in education. Students and staff can also inadvertently create an environment unsupportive of learning by focussing on the outcome (grades) to the exclusion of the learning process (development of transferable skills). It can also be challenging for the staff member balancing numerous responsibilities to focus upon what is important — facilitating the students’ learning experience — and this may be evident to students. The University of Bedfordshire goes to great lengths to demonstrate the value and importance it places on the learner’s experience and its commitment to education but this diligence must be continuously monitored and maintained.

To conclude, this book is not a ‘good practice’ guide or evaluation of current interventions in prison, but provides an insight into the diverse experiences of learners (whether they are prisoners or not). It demonstrates the life-changing capacity of education to restore ‘spoiled identities’ and form ‘new’ and valued ones (Hughes 2012) and if nothing more, is therefore an inspiration to teacher practitioners. It is up to the reader to determine whether and how they can make best use of this insight in their own role.

References

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