

## 'Teaching English In Youth Custody'

**Chair: Catherine Walter**

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### **Report by Scott Sherriff**

#### Introduction

Probing key issues encountered by policy makers and practitioners working to deliver English teaching in the context of the youth criminal justice system, Catherine Walter (author and lecturer of Applied Linguistics at Oxford) chaired a panel that comprised of:

- Karen Chouhan (experienced teacher of English in prisons)
- Ross Little (Training and Development Officer at The Howard League for Penal Reform)
- Mike Waldron (strategic consultant to the charity A National Voice)

#### Karen Chouhan

Karen illustrated how education represented a lifeline for those she worked with. Her students were respectful and supported each other well. Indeed, they saw their ESOL classes as something of a haven in which they would converse with their tutor in a way they felt unable to with the wardens.

Yet, from a pedagogical perspective, Karen found working in the prison creatively suffocating. She wrestled with a curriculum that was ill-suited to the needs of her students. Some struggled to find a point in learning, particularly those facing deportation, leading Karen to question whether the purpose behind English teaching in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) was imperialist or realist. She described a tipping point which sees the ESOL teacher begin to question the institutionalisation of learners and start to challenge the authorities responsible.

Grateful for the introduction to a range of issues regarding culture and equality that working in YOIs provided, Karen suggested the way forward was to consider what the philosophical underpinning of education is in this context, coupled with holistic approaches seeking to support those working in the sector.

### Ross Little

Ross's work on the 'U R Boss' project saw him canvassing the opinion of young people who had been affected by the youth justice system. Most expressed a happiness to be involved in learning, primarily because it gave them an opportunity to be out of their cells, socialise with others and gain qualifications and skills.

Though this did result in real achievements in some cases, this was the exception rather than the rule. There was a paucity of places on vocational courses in YOIs. The choice of courses offered was very restricted. High turnover of staff within the institutions was also not helpful. There emerged a 'what's the point' factor among those questioned, precipitated by the length of their sentence.

Further statistics revealed the enormous challenge to those entrusted with the teaching, given that 9 out of 10 students in YOIs had been excluded from education. Gaps in prior learning are a significant obstacle.

### Mike Waldron

Describing tonight's gathering as the beginning of a virtual network that will provide the opportunity for policy makers, practitioners and end-users to come together and share ideas, Mike offered an image of three intersecting circles; one around youth, one around education and one around the criminal justice system. With the aid of the British Council and the launch of a Ning platform, people now have a forum to share ideas and move things forward.

### Questions From The Floor

"It seems like the real problem is regime change. How can you change a regime that is so entrenched?"

Changing the culture of organisations is a challenge. A network of teachers is so vital in affecting this process. Their capacity to exert influence on the officers working in the system is significant. Pressure needs to be brought to bear on a triumvirate of decision makers- the regime heads, the educational providers and the educational funding agency. With the strength of a network behind you, discussions with these decision makers are more likely to yield more positive results.

“Why does education in prison come in one day units?”

Lessons are generally scheduled for the morning but not the afternoon. It would be more beneficial if education in YOIs worked like a school with a range of subjects. There is a gap between the nature of the provision required and what the regime thinks is best for the student.

“If you, Karen, had to get out to save yourself, how do you think other people can stay working in prisons without going mad?”

Karen had reached a stage in her life when she needed a change. In order to avoid burnout, Karen suggested doing the job part-time. The sense of isolation that she at times felt in her role will, it was hoped, be mitigated by developing a network of professionals willing to share advice and support.

“How long did you teach in the prison, Karen, and did you learn anything you were able to apply to non-offender settings?”

Karen learnt a lot that was useful for her teaching in wider contexts. She was no longer blasé about issues surrounding diversity and was more knowledgeable on different countries and cultures.

“What happens after the young offenders leave the prison and what provision is there when they go into the community, provided they are allowed to stay in the UK?”

The Howard League for Penal Reform operates a legal advice line, with 26% of the calls relating to resettlement. They also provide a guide to resettlement law, to give practitioners an understanding of the legislation and to assist young

people in learning about the law themselves, and advise on accommodation and the disclosing of criminal convictions.

The panel identified a systematic failure of the current system as being the lack of consultation with young people while they are in custody and wider discussions about their circumstances and what they might do next.

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“Where are prisons recruiting their ESOL tutors? Is there a problem with recruitment? Are there advantages to working in prisons?”

Recruitment is usually franchised out to colleges and they will handle the offender learning programmes.

“How do you influence the two agendas of ESOL provision in relation to prisons in the case of the payment by results system and the fact that colleges are involved with the recruitment of that provision?”

The Howard League for Penal Reform said that there might be a window of opportunity to influence the development of payment by results in light of the pause announced by the Ministry of Justice since the Cabinet reshuffle in the Autumn.

Mike said it would be wise to bring some of these big contractors into any dialogue.

The fundamental problem with payment by results is the constantly changing time scales within which you are expected to get results. The goalposts keep changing. Small organisations cannot afford to wait lengthy periods before they get paid. Therefore those who are best placed to deliver the provision are, on economic grounds, unable to do so. Whilst the government may show a preference for dealing with large contractors, it is not always the best for end-users.