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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE ON CRIME PROBLEMS
(CDPC)

Select Committee of Experts on Education in Prison
(PC-R-EP)

Preliminary Report
on the International Seminar on Strategies for Education
within Prison Regimes
(Wiston House, Sussex, 3 - 5 July 1984)



The Open University

Home Office Prison Department

International Seminar on Strategies for Education Within Prison Regimes
July 1984

An international seminar, sponsored by the Open University in association with the Home Office Prison Department, was held at Wiston House, Sussex, England from 3 - 5 July 1984. The participants included representatives from a broad spectrum of countries throughout the world with experience in prison management and educational administration as well as people from legal, judicial, research and academic backgrounds. It was thus possible to discuss within an international framework, the strategies that might motivate the content and direction of prison education in the future. In due course a full report of the proceedings and conclusions of the seminar will be published. Meanwhile, this brief preliminary report has been prepared in order to provide an advance summary of the main themes and conclusions of the seminar.

The seminar was arranged in recognition of the rising importance and status of education in prison regimes and in the context of the current focus of interest in the subject at national and international level. The Council of Europe, in particular, has decided to promote a detailed study of prison education in Europe and the seminar was seen, in part, as an opportunity to make a major contribution to that from a global standpoint. The sponsors were also conscious that against the background of the increasing emphasis on education as a rehabilitative resource and the enrichment it offers to regimes and the personal experience and capacity of people in custody, the time was ripe for a radical re-assessment of its roles and potential. It was hoped too, that a representative gathering of experts would provide an opportunity to disseminate information and provide an international basis on which co-operative endeavour could be mounted for future work in this important field.

The seminar was opened by Dr J H Horlock, Vice Chancellor of the Open University and introduced by Mr C Train, Director General of the Prison Service.

Seminar Themes

The seminar programme envisaged a progressive approach to the subject in that, having examined the broad social and penal contexts in which it is practised, it would be possible to concentrate on the main elements and then to focus upon specific areas of activity that seem to have special relevance for future work and progress. The underlying criteria of the seminar were that realism and the management capacity to bring proposals

to fruition in a relevant and acceptable way were paramount in any approach to penal questions. The introductory paper and presentation (Kenneth Neale) were thus concerned to establish on a wide canvas, the philosophical, political and moral factors that have shaped the purposes and quality of penal practice. Education, it was argued, had inherent attributes that, consistent with social attitudes and the aspirations of public policy, could be developed to optimum advantage in promoting positive and sensible treatment objectives in contemporary regimes. In elevating the roles and status of education it would be essential to comprehend the realities of operational circumstances, the constraints of political policy and to carry conviction with staff and prisoners as well as the public at large. Change, the essential ingredient in more relevant and comprehensive approaches to the problems of crime and delinquency in modern societies, is nevertheless often seen as threatening in its practical dimensions. That necessary process could be inspired and moderated by the liberating and civilising influences of education.

Against the background of the theme-setting introduction to the context and issues within which prison education must function, the seminar turned its attention to the organisation and management of this activity. The disciplines of this approach were expressed in a statement (Alan Baxendale) and ensuing discussion about the formal and informal bases of its authority, structure, management relationships with other administrative elements in prison organisations and the infra-structure of services and resources needed to support the function of prison education and the nature of its accountability. That was followed, logically, by an examination of the policy and practice of prison education in various countries initiated on the basis of prepared statements by participants from France (Jean-Pierre Monnereau) and Denmark (Hans Henrik Brydensholt). From this comparative approach the seminar turned to an analysis, led by British participants (Arthur Pearson and John Steel), of the elements of prison education with special reference to curriculum content, methodology and certain discrete areas such as remedial education and the particular needs of women and young offenders.

The subsequent sessions of the seminar were devoted to subject areas that had been identified and selected as offering valid opportunities for useful progress with co-ordinated strategies on a broad front and for reflecting the prime objectives of penal treatment in an educational context. The discussion on research and evaluation was stimulated by contributions from academics working in England and Canada (J E Thomas and Stephen Duguid) in widely differing roles. The session on Education Beyond Prison led by participants from Hong Kong (Thomas Garner) and Canada (Lucien Morin) concentrated on the wider aspects of outside educational opportunities, post-release arrangements for continuing education and links with outside organisations concerned with education.

The final session was devoted to consideration of the overall results of the seminar and the prospects for progress and co-ordination of the various proposals that had been made. It is, naturally, impossible, within the narrow compass of this summary to do more than make brief reference to the main themes of the discussion and the proposals that emerged. Prominent among the main strands in the discussions were the central themes of education within the developing philosophy that underlies the important transition from rehabilitative treatment towards regimes primarily designed to promote re-socialisation and to minimise the deleterious factors inherent in custodial experience. In considering the basis on which prison education is managed it emerged that, so far as one can generalise in widely disparate circumstances, community based arrangements were more common and preferred, largely on grounds of relevance and resources, to service based education. Interesting comparisons were made with the organisation and management of other specialist prison services such as medical or catering and with the basis of the arrangements for religious practice and services. Special emphasis was placed on the advantages, even need, of ensuring that developments in regime services such as education were manifestly consistent with and responsive to social realities and political priorities. There was also, it was strongly argued, more scope to improve the basic administration of education especially the records concerning individual prisoners involved in the education programmes.

So far as practice and the curricula were concerned it was acknowledged that the available resources and subject matter had already been usefully exploited. Several participants averred, and there was general acceptance of their view, that variety, versatility and an approach that engaged the interests and skills of a wide range of prison staff were important to positive progress and the role of education as a motivating factor in prison regimes. It was seen as important to integrate the education services into the overall management and the general thrust of penal objectives in order to optimise their influence and capacity to contribute.

The role of research in challenging the validity, propriety and effectiveness of prison treatment was manifest but had not, so it seemed to several participants, as yet asserted itself in the education context in any significant degree. It was advanced strongly that there was much more scope in grappling with the problems of personal development, skills training and maturation all of which were relevant to the difficulties of coping with the problems of criminal behaviour.

Apart from building research into the design of specific education projects there was a need for more broadly based empirical and evaluative research to strengthen the roles, credibility and coherence of education philosophies in prison treatment. Through carefully designed research into the results of the education regimes in prisons it might be possible to illuminate some of the intangible factors and practical disabilities that impede the prospects of delinquents in finding a viable place in society in general or in conforming with its accepted norms. In general there was a great deal of information about prison education but it had not yet been informed or co-ordinated by research and analysis.

It was interesting that although the different cultural backgrounds of the countries present at the seminar posed questions about the basic approaches to crime and punishment, education, along broadly similar lines, was seen as a prime element in the processes of correctional, rehabilitative or re-socialising treatments. It was one of the areas of regimes that seemed to offer the prospect of an approach grounded in a common philosophy of practice constrained only by structural and resource considerations. It was on this ground that systems with an essentially disciplinary approach and others with more liberal attitudes could coalesce. It was central to the strength of education programmes and purposes that they could transcend the conflicts in attitudes to crime and punishment and the controversies about the philosophical purposes of the regimes. Generally speaking, education was seen as less vulnerable than most other regime activities to changing operational and economic circumstances or even the caprices of fashion and style in prison treatment.

Proposals for future action

As a result of the deliberations during the seminar consideration is now being given to the possibilities of making progress with the proposals that were made and generally endorsed. Beyond the broad re-affirmation of the traditional roles and philosophies that have inspired prison education, these proposals were aimed at enhancing the usefulness and validity of education in prison regimes. In summary these proposals were:-

1. The need to establish an international centre to co-ordinate information about the practice and experience of prison education throughout the world, including the provision of a data bank.
2. The organisation of a network of correspondents across the world who would liaise in matters concerning the promotion and improvement of prison education.
3. The development of relevant research programmes based on international co-operation.
4. The promotion of an International Journal of Prison Education.
5. The dissemination of the results of the Open University seminar through a published report which would be communicated to the Council of Europe and other international organisations. Participants were asked to report developments in their own countries arising from the work of the seminar.

Pending the publication of the full report of the seminar, which will include the texts of all the papers presented and summaries of the discussions at each session and overall conclusions, enquiries should be addressed to the Open University (Mr G Normie) or the Chief Education Officer's Branch at the Home Office (Mr A Pearson).