Prison teachers matter: a study of the roles, identities and knowledge bases of teachers working in English prisons.

Gerry Czerniawski
University of East London, London, UK

This paper reports on the initial findings from interviews with 20 teachers working in Prisons in England and is part of a wider three-country study (Germany, Norway and England) that focuses on the roles, identities and knowledge bases of prison educators. Prison populations are increasing with an estimated 10.1 million people incarcerated worldwide (ICPS 2013). In England and Wales the cost to the economy of prisoners re-offending is estimated at between £9.5 billion and £13 billion a year (PRT 2013). However, while international studies reveal the significance of education programmes in lowering rates of recidivism (RAND 2013; Wade 2007; Allred et al 2012) little is known about the professional identities and knowledge bases of this fragmented, heterogeneous occupational group of prison-based teachers, and how their education/training (sic) might be linked to their efficacy as prison educators. The three countries chosen for this small-scale, foundational, qualitative research project offer significantly different models of prison education, underpinned by neo-liberal, social-democratic and corporatist values found in England, Norway and Germany respectively. The relationship between these values associated with three different northern European social welfare 'regimes' (Esping-Anderson and Myles 2009) provides an invaluable, and as yet under-researched, context in which to examine the relationship between the professional learning of prison educators and its potential impact on prisoner recidivism. The study poses two research questions:

1. What professional learning activities do prison educators experience and value?

2. How might Teacher Education, within the context of reducing prison recidivism, address the future professional needs of prison educators?

This foundational study draws on established, qualitative research methodology associated with comparative research (Brock & Crossley 2013). Semi-structured interviews are used to capture the perceptions on the roles, identities and knowledge of prison educators. Layder's adaptive theory (1998), Hargreaves and Fullan's (2013) conceptualisation of professional capital and Goodson and Cole's (1994) work on identity will inform the analytical framework for this study.