

PUTTING EDUCATION AT THE HEART OF CUSTODY? THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN ON EDUCATION IN A YOUNG OFFENDER INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This paper draws on the views of children and young people in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) to explore education provision in the youth secure estate from their perspectives. The paper includes research findings from work undertaken in a YOI as part of the *U R Boss* project, based at campaign group The Howard League for Penal Reform. The research comprised a questionnaire (n=47), discussion groups (n=25) and one-to-one interviews (n=4) with children serving a sentence in one YOI in July 2012. Nine in 10 of the children surveyed had been excluded from school. Nearly all felt they had had the opportunity to participate in educational activities at the prison, but their views about the education provision varied. The findings highlight how listening to the experiences of children expected to participate in education provision, helps to think about how the provision might be improved to best achieve what it set out to. They can be a key source of information about the barriers to the effectiveness of current education provision in prisons holding children. These barriers include some fundamental issues associated with engagement with education in a prison environment. Education provision could achieve a lot more. Rather than simply achieving functions of control and management and meeting minimum legal and contractual obligations, it should seek to enable young people to make positive developments in their own lives. The most popular learning activity amongst participants in the current research, the Raptor project, stood out as an activity in which the children felt they had positive opportunities for learning, the potential for increasing levels of responsibility and, eventually, opportunities to leave the prison for short periods of time. This type of opportunity was the exception, not the norm, but is suggestive of the type of educational experience that could help some of the most vulnerable children move on from negative prior experiences of formal education.

Keywords

Youth justice, young offender institution, education, participation