

## Research Briefing No. 33

# Engaging Young Offenders with Education in a Secure Custodial Setting

### Key Findings and Implications for Policy Makers

Young offenders have been described as being disengaged with education and learning. The secure custodial setting presents an opportunity to re-engage young offenders by understanding the nature of their disengagement. Key findings of this PhD research are that:

- A focus on improving the educational experiences of young offenders should be a priority in secure custodial settings.  
Previous educational experiences of young offenders are negative, characterised by boredom, disengagement and school dropout, reflecting the findings of previous research in this area.
- The nature of disengagement in young offenders is distinct requiring appropriate responses for successful re-engagement.  
Emotions and relationships particularly characterised the nature of disengagement in young offenders. Understanding and responding to this was an important aspect of successfully re-engaging young offenders with education and learning.
- Re-engaging young offenders in a custodial setting with learning that was authentic and relevant to them was possible through a process of authentic inquiry, providing certain conditions are met. Authentic inquiry is a process of inquiry, action and knowledge generation to build personally relevant knowledge useful



towards achieving a specific outcome. The conditions which need to be met include relevance of the task, a supportive mentor and enabling autonomy and agency in learning.

- The secure setting needs to take measures which facilitate the conditions for successful re-engagement.  
The structures of the secure custodial setting can act as a barrier to engagement with learning in terms of managing emotions, relationships with peers, teachers and care staff. Flexibility in these structures can result in considerable gains for effective re-engagement.

### The Research

The number of young offenders aged 10-17 years with custodial sentences since 2008/9 has dropped dramatically from over 3,000 to just over 800 in 2016. This drop is welcomed, however, it does mean that those in custody represent some of the most troubled young people in the UK.

Research has shown that the educational experiences and attainment of young offenders entering

the secure custodial setting are negative and low attainment is the norm. However, it has been shown in the literature and this research that young offenders valued education but had struggled with school as an institution. This resulted in them becoming disengaged with education and learning, presenting increased risk of dropout and offending. Interventions which seek to improve specific skills, such as literacy or numeracy, have had limited success, therefore, this research presents an alternative opportunity. This research provides new evidence on understanding disengagement in young offenders and offers a way to re-engage them with education and learning during their time in custody. Re-engaging young offenders with education and learning can increase the chances of continued engagement when transitioning back into the community.

### Research Design

This research study used qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of dis/engagement in young offenders, an ethnographic case study in one secure children's home was designed, spanning 3 Phases:

- Phase I – consisted of semi-structured interviews with 16 young offenders, observations and field notes. The aim was to explore their educational experiences, their view of themselves as learners and to understand facilitators and barriers to their learning.
- Phase II – 5 participants were invited to take part in in-depth case studies which consisted of an authentic inquiry process, designed to build personally relevant knowledge which could also be useful to

them in the secure setting. Data on the process was collected from interviews with the participant, their authentic inquiry mentor and 3 teachers, totalling 25 interviews plus observations and field notes. The aim was to explore how and to what extent young offenders could be re-engaged with education and learning.

- Phase III – this consisted of data from the mentors, teachers and the Head Teacher totalling 7 interviews. The aim was to understand the barriers and how the secure unit could facilitate re-engagement with learning.

### Further Information

There are implications for policy as the secure context presents particular challenges for young offenders and their engagement with learning. Conversely, the secure context can also facilitate re-engagement with learning if the conditions described can be met. These conditions can be nurtured within the existing structures of the secure context by:

- Ensuring that education within the secure setting is responsive to the nature of disengagement in young offenders through improved training and professional development of teachers and care staff
- Using authentic inquiry as a cultural approach to re-engaging and re-connecting young offenders to the curriculum
- Providing autonomy for Head Teachers, as senior managers, to be innovative in their attempt to re-engage young offenders as a priority aim across the custodial setting

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