

'There is nothing for me': a qualitative analysis of the views towards
prison education of adult male prisoners convicted of a sexual
offence.

Jane Slater

PhD student, Nottingham Trent University

Professor Belinda Winder

Nottingham Trent University

Dr Anne O'Grady

Nottingham Trent University

Professor Phil Banyard

Nottingham Trent University

Abstract

This current study examined the perceptions and lived experiences of prisoners (n=24) who do not engage with prison education. UK (United Kingdom) and international research highlights prisoners who attend prison education programmes have lower recidivism rates and increased employment opportunities upon release (Bozick *et al.*, 2018; Abeling-Judge, 2020). This qualitative study interviewed adult males who are serving a custodial sentence for a sexual offence in England and Wales. The data was analysed thematically with two key themes emerging from the rich dataset: (i) *Poor quality education*, highlighting the limitations of prison education and lack of quality provision; (ii) *we are sex offenders*, explored non-engagement with prison education due to their '*sex offender*' label. The findings highlight how current prison education provision needs to focus on a programme of study relevant to an individual.

Keywords: prison education; sexual offence; qualitative; thematic analysis; prisoners; education

Introduction

Prison education in England and Wales aims to give prisoners the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment, and become an asset to their communities (Ministry of Justice, 2019). The Ministry of Justice (2018) asserts the prison education system should focus on putting prisoners on the path to employment when they are released. Although employment has been highlighted as one outcome of participating in prison education, there are other benefits for prisoners. Clark (2016) suggests prison education should address deeper personal and social development needs rather than simply focusing on job skills relating to a specific employment route. In addition, prisoners who participate in prisoner education are 32 percent less likely to re-offend when compared to prisoners who do not attend education whilst incarcerated (Bozick *et al.*, 2018). Despite there being several reasons to engage with prison education, over recent years there is evidence of a declining picture of engagement, with a drop of 12% in the year 2017-18 in England and Wales (Skills Funding Agency, 2018).

Prison education

Prison education has the potential to provide personal growth and development for a prisoner; education can build personal skills along with confidence, which has been identified as crucial for long term desistance from crime (Terry and Cardwell, 2015). Additionally, engaging with prison education provides mental health benefits for prisoners as prison life can be difficult and education gives them purpose and can relieve the boredom often associated with prison life (Hughes, 2009). Furthermore, engaging with prison education has been shown to have a calming effect on prisoners and can provide an incentive for good behaviour (Ross, 2009). Moreover, prisoners may engage with prison education to help them cope with the pains and deprivations of prison life (Maruna, 2010). Therefore, prison education can be seen as a potential break from the prison culture, a space where prisoners

can interact with others as learner as opposed to prisoner (Szifris *et al.*, 2018). Thus, education can improve prisoners' behaviour whilst in prison and can significantly contribute to the development of the person as a whole (House of Commons, 2022). The positive transformative potential of prison education, then, can provide wider benefits beyond employment that improve prisoners' lives such as their ability to cope with prison life or improved family relationships (Nichols, 2021). Therefore, engaging in prison education can be a positive way to help prisoners cope with their sentence and limit the damages of prison life (Behan, 2014).

Although prison education is accessible to all prisoners in England and Wales, numerous factors inside a prison establishment make attending education an option that is only available to 25% of prisoners (Schuller and Watson, 2009). The 2019 Annual Report by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons noted that staff shortages and operational constraints had reduced prisoners' access to education, and work. The report also states there are too few activity places in some prisons, or they were not filled or not used effectively (HM Chief Inspector, 2019). Interestingly these challenges pre-date the Covid19 pandemic which saw the whole-scale shutdown of education provisions in prisons and significant challenges to establishing a meaningful education offer (OGL, 2022). Education courses are constantly being interrupted, cancelled, or changed at short notice (Farley and Pike, 2018). In addition, security restrictions, and inconsistent staffing can prevent prisoners from accessing education, resources, and support (Lee *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, these constraints often result in prisoners not completing their education course or not wanting to engage with prison education in the first instance.

Employment

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Education and Employment Strategy (2018) proposes prison education is geared towards employment for prisoners upon release. Thus, prisoners should

be able to engage with education, achieve valuable skills that can enable them to gain employment and turn their backs on crime, reaping huge dividends in the long run (Atkins, 2021). Although education by itself does not help prisoners gain employment, education can help prisoners gain the necessary skills and qualification that an employer may be seeking. The MoJ (2018) argues a prison education system should be about putting prisoners on the path to employment when they are released, as opposed to a prison education system that produces qualifications that lack currency in the labour market. The employment market is constantly changing, with a growing demand for higher levels skills, as such, basic level qualifications, which make up a significantly majority of the current prison education offer, are insufficient to enable individuals to gain meaningful employment in today's job market (Flynn and Higdon, 2022). Therefore, to enable prisoners to access greater employment opportunities, education provision must deliver much needed qualifications that employers want.

The reality for many formally incarcerated prisoners, however, is that they will be unlikely to be able to secure employment when released from prison and this is especially true of prisoners that have been incarcerated for a sexual offence (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Prisoners with a conviction for a sexual offence face more barriers in finding and maintaining employment upon release than prisoners with other convictions (Tewksbury and Mustaine, 2009). Just having a criminal conviction has been identified as a significant barrier in obtaining employment, for example, (Visher *et al.*, 2011) with many employers saying they would reject an individual with a criminal conviction (Unlock, 2018). Arguably, prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are seen as the most unemployable demographic (Blessett and Pryor, 2013) and are dependent on finding employers willing to employ them.

Stigma and labelling

The term *ex-offender* has been described as one of the most stigmatising statuses in Western societies (Goffman, 1963), with prisoners convicted of a sexual offence being the most stigmatised (Tewksbury, 2005). Thus, prisoners who have a conviction for a sexual offence have a dual stigma that is reinforced (Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013). Prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are often perceived by society as risky and dangerous (Burrows, 2016) and are judged and stigmatised by society based on their offence rather than their character (Hudson, 2013). Once an individual has a conviction for a sexual offence, this consumes them and takes away any other identity they may have for example, father, brother, or even human being (Harding, 2003), resulting in prisoners being negatively labelled by society. Thus, the label of *sex offender* becomes their master status (Becker, 1963) and overrides any other identity they have. The label of *sex offender* has a significant impact on a prisoner's position in society and this label could last potentially their whole lifetime and is more pervasive than labels imposed on prisoners without a conviction for a sexual offence (Ievins and Crewe, 2015).

In the general prisoner population, prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are often despised by other prisoners and occupy a position at the bottom of the prisoner status hierarchy (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014). Moreover, by having the label of *sex offender* this makes these prisoners vulnerable to sexual assaults and violence (Ireland, 2002). Prisoners with convictions for a sexual offence are seen as vulnerable inside prisons and experience an ongoing threat of victimisation (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010). This negative attitudes by other prisoners and prison staff could lead to social isolation and this is more prevalent in prisoners convicted of a sexual offence. As such the stigmatisation prisoners convicted of a sexual offence receive in prison, reflects the stigmatisation they experience in wider society (Hudson, 2005; Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013).

This research centred on prisoners who are incarcerated for a sexual offence, who do not participate in prison education. This research does not consider the narratives of prisoners who actively engage with prison education. This article is taken from a larger study that focuses on prisoners incarcerated for a sexual offence and their narratives encompassing prison education. In this article, I report the findings of a research project which aims to gain a deeper understanding of why prisoners do not participate in education.

Method

Participants

Participants comprised of 24 adult male prisoners currently serving a custodial sentence following conviction for a sexual offence. All the participants are housed in prisons in England, with nine participants from a local B category prison and fourteen participants are from across two C category prisons. The criteria to enable a prisoner to participate in this study was they were not currently engaged with education and are currently serving a prison sentence for a sexual offence conviction. Although the criteria states that they must not be participating in education, some of the participants may have engaged with education during this sentence or during a previous sentence. Once a participant volunteered, they were checked by the researcher to ensure they matched the criteria for participation.

The mean age of the participants was 39 (SD: 14.44), which is comparable to the current prison population with 32 per cent being in the age bracket 20-39. The levels of education for the participants consisted of (n=7) 29% at Level one, GCSE/O Level (n=3) 12.5 per cent, Level two (n=6) 25 per cent, and Level three or above (n=8) 33 per cent. The prisoner participants who are Level two or above in this study is 58 per cent, over half of the participants. Eight per cent (n=2) of the participants had been unemployed before

incarceration and 92 per cent (n=22) were in paid employment before entering prison. The sentence length of the participants ranges from 20 weeks to 99 years. For 37.5 per cent (n=9) of the participants, this was their first time incarcerated, 37.5 per cent (n=9) had been to prison between one and five times previously, 12.5 per cent (n=3) of the prisoners had been incarcerated between six and ten times before, and 12.5 per cent (n=3) participants have been in prison over 11 times previously.

Procedure

Prior to commencement of this study ethical approval was sought, and gained, from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service National Research Committee and Nottingham Trent University. Recruitment was conducted over a six-month period across three different prison sites. Posters were used to recruit participants and were placed on the walls of residential wings in each prison. The posters had an additional tear off slip where participants could add their details to volunteer. An appointment was made with each participant who volunteered in a dedicated room where the prisoners could talk openly about their experience. In line with HMPPS regulations, participation in this study conferred no additional benefits or payment for prisoners.

Semi-structured interviews with participants were conducted on a face-to-face basis with the first author. The mean length of time for the interviews was 46 minutes (SD: 16.45) and were recorded on a password protected dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview schedule allowed the researcher to explore the participant's feelings, motives, and views concerning prison education (Jupp *et al.*, 2003). The interview schedule was developed to gain an understanding of the participants experiences of, or lack of experience of, prison education and to develop an understanding of their life in prison. Participants names were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used.

Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to identify emergent topics within the qualitative data as a means of translating meaning of individual experiences from the qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). TA was chosen because it is a flexible method that allows the researcher to determine the themes from the data. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step rigorous procedure of: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and writing up. The first step of familiarisation entailed the researcher reading and re-reading each of the interview transcripts, along with listening to the transcripts.

Subsequently, codes were generated from the data set by the researcher, the codes were grouped together which identified themes in the data. Boyatzis (1998) suggests that a good code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. The focus of the analysis for this article were determined by the participants, themes were identified through a rigorous process where the researcher created a thematic framework as indicated in table 1 which contained several prospective themes. Extracts from the participants' narratives were grouped together to identify codes which then emerged to create theme headings. Once the final themes had been reviewed and agreed by the researcher, extracts from the dataset were chosen which accurately illustrated each theme, enabling the researcher to build a valid argument by referring to the literature, with the final analysis creating an overall story (Braun and Clark, 2006). Whenever an idea for a title emerged, it was noted in a journal. Inspiration came from personal experience, the literature, participant data, and insights gained in the field. Each title change reflected a more refined understanding of some aspect of research. Rather than seeking to establish an objective "truth", the ambition was to co-create e new knowledge and understanding alongside participants (Eisner, 1991

Findings

The interpretative process identified two main themes *Poor quality education* and *We are sex offenders*. The themes are presented in table 1 below

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Theme 1: Poor Quality Education

The first theme emerged as the participants discussed their thoughts, feelings and understanding of prison education. The central part of this theme is focused on how the participants believed prison education could not help them as there were shared concerns over the quality of education because they thought it was not as good as the education provision found in the community. They described how the education courses on offer inside prison did not provide the knowledge and qualifications they wanted or needed. In addition, participants believed education had nothing to offer because of the limited choice of courses available and described a lack of progression opportunities and barriers in accessing higher levels of education.

Nothing to Offer.

The participants believed the qualifications offered in prison education were basic. They explained how the education courses offered in prison were low level, as highlighted in the extract below:

'[education] can offer you a functional skills Level two in English which is basically similar level to GCSE, the only difference is the GCSE seems to have a lot more study which means that at best you are at the same level as a 16-year-old school leaver in the knowledge and their qualifications has a lot more weight than yours.....There's just such a limited choice and if you're slightly more academic there's pretty much nothing for you and that's always disappointing, so you've got a lot of people who are

reasonably smart who are just stagnating in prison because there is nothing for them'

(P 13: line 208-209)

The participants believed the levels of education offered in prisons were basic and unchallenging, with the levels being compared to those of a 16-year-old. Several participants highlighted they thought qualifications gained in prison were less complex when compared to qualifications gained in outside colleges, for example GCSEs (GCSEs are examinations undertaken by school leavers in England), and thus were seen as irrelevant. Warr (2016) argues that qualifications that are not comparable to GCSE level are insufficient to make prisoners an attractive employment prospect. The educational offerings in prison are overwhelmingly basic, leaving many prisoners unable to engage with education because they already have a basic level of education. The Annual Report from HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2014) argued the range of learning opportunities for prisoners were not always accredited at a high enough level, with many providing only a Level one qualification.

'If you've got GCSEs in anything then I think you're pretty much stuck, you can't go no further' (P 11: line 151)

For participants who had reached the levels of education offered through standard prison education, there was very little, if anything for participants to do in education. Champion (2013) argues prison education courses are outputs that are often bitesize accreditations and are offered at low level, with few opportunities for prisoners to progress. Due to the limited choice of education courses there seems to be little offering for participants leaving them feeling disappointed and feeling overlooked.

'I've done everything the education system can throw at me, if there's something else that I can do that will help my chances out there, I'll go for it' (P 1: line 191)

Prisoners who have successfully passed an education course found little opportunity for them to participate further, leaving them with nothing educationally for them to do. As the participants narrative confirms, educational courses in prison are very limited in what they offer. This leaves many prisoners feeling like the education in prison is of poor quality. The participants discussed how they would have liked to study a higher-level course whilst they were in prison. A study of prisons in England and Wales reports that a fifth of prisoners would have preferred to study at a higher level than offered in prison (Coates, 2016). However, participants who tried to access a higher-level course through distance learning realised they were not easy to access, leaving them feeling frustrated. When the participants applied to start a distance learning course, there were many obstacles in their way.

'The only way that you can do a Level three course here is to apply to do an OU distance learning but it's a case of getting the funding etc which takes forever and a day I've known people apply for funding and they have waited and waited and waited an awful long time' (P 23; line 63- 65)

This extract highlights the difficulties that many participants face when applying for distance learning courses. The application stage can be difficult to navigate, and it takes a long time to obtain funding, as a result many participants lose motivation. Several of the participants emphasised the long waiting time and slow progress of their application when applying for distance learning courses. To enable participants to participate in a distance learning course, funding is a requirement, this too was a waiting game, as one participant stated:

'It's very difficult to access PET in some prisons – I said twice I have had to ask for forms...I didn't hear back from PET so I can only assume that the forms weren't processed' (P 13: line 765)

There were concerns over forms that should have been processed but these seemed to have got lost in the system, which resulted in participants being unable to access distance learning courses. Applications for funding in 2014-15 were approximately 14 per cent of the UK prisoner population (Clark, 2016). Such low application rates could be attributed to the difficulties upon application. Added to the difficulty in accessing distance learning courses there appeared to be a consistent lack of communication when applying. Consequently, many participants felt disillusioned by the application process which was a cause of concern.

'I've enrolled with Open college [university]; I have signed up for it, but I haven't received anything for it yet...I applied for funding, but it took them 8 months to even post it back' (P 11: line 126)

'I have thought about open university courses but not many people will tell you about it, they say "I'll get back to you" but they never do, I find it very difficult to get onto courses' (P 6: line 123)

In addition, the participants were often not informed of the progress of their application and often waited months for a response. The waiting period could be a consequence of prison education because the current education system is more suitable for short courses and low-level courses and not explicitly set up for funding distance learning courses (Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, there was no help available for the participants when applying for distance learning course in prison, further exacerbating the challenges of communication during the application process.. Those participants that did manage to sign up for distance learning were frustrated at the waiting period as one participant explained:

'I signed up in the first week for distance learning and I'm still waiting. So, nothing really happens quickly' (P 19: line 157)

Distance learning courses was not easily accessible plus there appeared to be little information regarding the application process, from enrolling onto the courses and not being updated on their application. Although education in the prison environment does give prisoners the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications, the educational courses provided do not always offer the skills and qualifications that the prisoners want or need.

Not the Same Quality Education

The participants were anxious around the quality of education that was on offer in prisons, both in terms of the courses and the quality of the teachers. Several participants did not believe the education they received in prison was of the same standard as they would receive on the outside, as one participant stated:

'I think they do have to accept that if you do prison education it's never going to be the same quality as you get on the outside' (P 13: line 505)

This extract highlights how there was a common belief amongst the participants that prison education was inferior compared to mainstream education. The Council of Europe (1990) suggest prison education should 'resemble adult education outside prison' (p.3). However, the participants did not believe education in prison resembled the education on the outside; they believed they were disadvantaged because they are in prison. In addition, the education courses were often short and were delivered over a brief period.

'They cut the courses too short and tried to cram everything in, they cut it by two or three weeks, and you wasn't learning enough and a lot of us were failing...so they extended it to six weeks' (P 20: line 138-140)

As participants explained, their reflecting on their previous experiences of education courses in prison, they stated how the courses were not long enough to learn, thus, the participants

thought it was a waste of their time participating. In addition, there was also the issues surrounding teaching staff as participants did not think they were qualified to teach.

'The maths teacher is the former motor mechanics teacher, so these aren't necessarily the people that had gone into teach maths or study, you've got a science teacher teaching business, so I think that's part of the problem you've got in prisons is that I don't think the same standards are always there' (P 13: line 586-591)

The extract above highlights how teachers in prisons may deliver courses which they are not specialised in. This is the reason the participants believed they are not getting the same quality as they would if they were outside. Wilkinson (2017) suggests there is a lack of subject specific qualifications, resulting in prison teachers' qualifications that do not match those of teachers in mainstream education. In addition, a UK-wide review of prison educators in 2009 identified many teachers working in prisons who lacked appropriate knowledge and understanding of the skills and practices required to work in the challenging environment (Centre for Social Justice, 2009). Prisoners did not believe the education staff cared about teaching them because the education department was a business and education was just a way for the prison to make money. The education courses were not about gaining knowledge but were about passing the course.

'I think it's more about ticking boxes to be honest, a lot, it's very rare that you'll get a fail, they seem to guide the learners and almost give them answers if you like, if they're struggling they seem to give certain individuals the answers, I've seen that quite a few times and it seems to be cos they get paid for results sort of thing...I would imagine they don't want them to fail because they don't get paid for it' (P11: lines 139-144)

There is the belief that education is a business and exists to make money as opposed to educating the prisoners. Many prisoners reflected that previously they had gained a pass result, even if they were not at the required standard. Rogers *et al.*, (2014) stated two thirds (62%) of prison educators criticised prison contracts because the funding is dependent on results. Undeniably, education courses do rely on participants passing the course because of gaining payment through results, with several participants referring to education as being about ticking boxes and not about providing a quality service to the prisoner. Champion (2013) notes payment by qualifications sounds practical, but the reality is that it leads to a tick box culture. Therefore, passing courses resulted in prisoners gaining copious amounts of certificates, which they felt transformed them into holding no more meaning than a joke, as exemplified below:

'A lot of people who do get these certificates aren't worth anything, in many cases they are just bits of paper... the jokes about prison education departments being certificate factories' (P 13: lines 258-260)

The certificates gained in prison education are seen by the participants as worthless and were not taken seriously by the participants. Warr (2016) argues the danger of gaining certificates in prison can set prisoners up to fail because they will realise, beyond the prison walls, those basic certificates are meaningless. This sentiment is why the participants believed there is no value to the certificates because there are so many of them given out, making them just bits of paper. As a result, the participants believe the education provisions in prisons was not comparable to education courses outside of prison, therefore believing education in prisons adds no additional value to them upon release.

Theme 2: We Are Sex Offenders.

The second theme *We are sex offenders* transpired as the participants discussed how they felt discriminated because of their conviction. Because of their conviction is for a sexual offence, many participants believed there was no point in engaging with prison education because it could not help them when released. The participants believed because they have been incarcerated for a sexual offence, the label as a *sex offender* now became their identity and, as such, they believed they would not be accepted back into society when released.

Stuck With a Label.

The first part of this theme highlights how participants viewed themselves with a new identity as they discussed how they were now a *sex offender*, several of the participants viewed their current *sex offender* status as negative, as one participant explained:

'[prisoners] who in their heads who probably have lost all opportunities to do these things because there's this kind of mentality that once you're convicted of a sexual offence, that your written off' (P13: lines 738-740)

Once an individual has a convicted for a sexual offence, they lose hope of being anything other than a *sex offender*. The stigma and discrimination that is placed on individuals incarcerated for a sexual offence can have a significant impact on their position in society (Ievins & Crewe, 2015). This has a negative impact on a person's well-being because they now belong to an excluded group (Kellezi *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the status of a person convicted of a sexual offence consumes any other identity the person may have (Harding, 2003). It appears being labelled a *sex offender* has negative repercussions for the participants. They perceive themselves as being stuck with a label, and this label become their identity thus participation in education appeared to be a pointless exercise.

'You never get rid of the title, you are stuck with it for the rest of your life because when I walk out of them gates and I am a free man it doesn't matter cos I'm still a sex offender, whereas when a murder walks out them gates he's a free man cos he's done his time, we've done time but were still punished for it, once you have come to prison like this, you are labelled and you are stuck with that label for the rest for your life and there nothing that you can do about it' (P24: lines 294-299)

The participants are aware of how their sexual offence conviction is perceived differently when compared to other prisoners without convictions for a sexual offence. Due to their conviction, the participants believe they are branded for life whereas if they were convicted of a different offence, such as murder, they would not be labelled in the same way. Saunders (2019) argues individuals who have convictions for other serious crimes such as murder or violence are often considered sympathetically and given more support of successful resettlement in the community. Whereas those with convictions for sexual offences, the label *sex offender* becomes their master status and thus, this label stays with them forever (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, they are continually punished for their crime and the participants feel they are stuck with a label for life, along with the negative connotations associated with this label.

'There's a lot of people who have the mindset that well it won't do me any good especially in this prison being a sex offender...they've[prisoners] got the mindset that it doesn't matter what I do because I'm a sex offender and they are automatically labelled' (P 23: lines 147-150)

Because of the *sex offender* label, the participants lose hope of becoming anything other than someone who has a conviction for a sexual offence and thus, they will never become an active member of society. There has been some discussion regarding the impact that the term

sex offender has on a person's well-being and self-worth (Willis, 2018). It appears that once the participants take on board this label, they take on a different mindset and this label defines them and as such the participants accept this label as their reality.

'You've got some really good people in here, really gifted people who in their heads have probably lost all opportunities to do things' (P 13: line 737)

The implications of accepting the *sex offender* label have a negative effect on the prisoner's identity. Many participants have accepted defeat in the sense they believe they may never be given the same opportunities as others who do not have a conviction for a sexual offence. Consequently, a person convicted of a sexual offence faces a more challenging time in re-establishing any positive identity within society (Manza, *et al.*, 2004). In the participants' minds it seems like they have given up as they do not believe society will give them a chance at being anything other than a person convicted of a sexual offence as exemplified in the following extract:

'No matter what you're still a person at the end of the day, you've still got rights but not many but some rights you know' (P 21: line 269)

Individuals with sexual offence convictions are judged to be less worthy than others but they want society to know there is still a person behind their conviction. Consequently, the participants believe no one cares about them because they are continually judged on their conviction. Individuals with a conviction for a sexual offence are almost always portrayed in the media as negative, with demeaning words like beast and predator which imply that the individual is dangerous (Sample and Bray, 2006). Unsurprisingly people with a conviction for a sexual offence are typically depicted as a homogeneous group throughout reporting by the media (Sample and Bray, 2006). Hence, participants question the point in trying to

become a member of society when they are not given the opportunity to become anything other than someone convicted of a sexual offence.

'Realise what you've done and realise you are only human' (P 3: line 270)

The human aspect of the person is lost, prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are human beings who make mistakes, but some mistakes are unforgivable by society. If society will not forgive this prison cohort, the participants identify engaging with education as pointless. Many practitioners, colleagues, academics, and policy makers continue to label and define people by possibly the worst thing they have ever done (Saunders, 2019). Consequently, the participants feel it may be detrimental to be released back into society and find it easier to stay in prison rather than risk reintegration back into society, which is exemplified in the extract below:

'There's more in here, less struggles plus they are safe and not being called a sex offender in the community... People get out and they are scared, it's a big thing, it's a tainted stain' (P 18: line 644-648)

Participants consider being incarcerated a safe option due to perceptions of being labelled a *sex offender* by society. Being with others who have similar convictions makes them feel safe as they can be themselves without judgement from others. Laws and Ward (2011) argue prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are often denied the basic needs to live decent lives. Therefore, it is quite understandable why prisoners convicted of a sexual offence feel scared of being released back into society and being identified as someone who has a conviction for a sexual offence. The fear of being exposed as a *sex offender* stopped them participating in education.

No One Will Employ Me

The participants believe they would be disadvantaged when they were released regarding job opportunities because of their conviction for a sexual offence.

'When you get out and are a sex offender and try and get a job, it's going to be hard as fuck...so, when you get out and you apply for a job and it comes up sex offender, they're not going to give you a job' (P 14: line 166)

Prisoners convicted of a sexual offence acknowledge that gaining employment upon release will be hard if not impossible because of their conviction. Research has highlighted how some employers would not consider hiring prisoners convicted of a sexual offence at all, regardless of the circumstance or type of offence (Brown *et al.*, 2007). During discussion, the participants were worried about applying for employment because they would have to disclose their conviction to their employer. A general criminal record can be a barrier to employment (Ministry of Justice, 2018), but the label *sex offender* can add intensity to the stigma experienced (Brown *et al.*, 2007). In disclosing a conviction for a sexual offence, it seemed to be the preconceive notion from the participants, employers would not be willing to employ people with convictions for a sexual offence as stated in the extracts below:

'I am now labelled a sex offender and certain jobs for me in the community aren't realistic' (P 17: line 427)

'There's a lot of business out there that will look and go you're a sex offender, we don't want you' (P 19: line 426)

It is acknowledged by the participants that having a conviction for a sexual offence is going to reduce the chances of them becoming employed. There is also the added worry because they will have a limited choice in where they can become employed upon release. The perception was that most employers would not be willing to employ prisoners because of

their conviction for a sexual offence. Research suggests individuals convicted of a sexual offence do experience more barriers in gaining employment than prisoners without sexual offence conviction (Brown *et al.*, 2007). The participants believe because they are labelled *sex offender*, they are not wanted by employers which can make it exceedingly difficult to find suitable employment and therefore, expressed the difficulty of making plans as they are unsure of the options available to them. Employment for a formally incarcerated person has been to be found invaluable in the re-entry process but there appear to be numerous barriers in securing employment due to their prisoner status (Visher, *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, due to this prison cohort having an extremely challenging prospect of finding employment upon release compared to other prison cohort, it is vitally important to have an education programme that is tailored to the needs of this prison cohort and their employment needs. It was widely accepted amongst the participants that it will be extremely challenging for them upon release.

'With my conditions it will be very hard for me to get a job and 99% of people in this prison because of what it is, if you make one of these my licence conditions, you're going to make me employable' (P 24: line 242)

'My big worry is applying to university, and I disclose I've been convicted of a sex offence' (P 13: line 645)

Sexual offence convictions carry numerous restrictions, these are placed upon individuals when they are released which will affect more than just employment. Having licence conditions can signal those prisoners convicted of a sexual offence are dangerous and risky regardless of their risk level (Digard, 2014). The participants worry about other applications when released, such as university, because they may reveal they have a conviction for a

sexual offence. There is a genuine fear of being exposed as a *sex offender*, this leaves prisoners convicted of a sexual offence with feelings of.:

'You've got three people all with the same qualifications and skills and 2 haven't got a criminal record and I have, who is going to be the first of the list who's not getting the job?' (P 24: line 257)

It can be argued that in a strained employment market there is no guarantee of employment. However, the risk of being unemployed when released was amplified because not only had the participants served time in prison, but they also had a conviction for a sexual offence. As such, there was an overall understanding that the chances of employment upon release were zero. Essentially the participants were unemployable, and they had given up hope on their future and for this reason they did not chose to participate in education courses.

Discussion

The participants narratives gave rise to two themes: '*poor quality education*' and '*we are sex offenders.*' There seemed to be barriers for participating in prison education because of two main reasons. First, the participants did not believe prison education would be of benefit for them because the qualification levels that are offered in prison were of little value for them. Second because the participants have convictions for a sexual offence there appeared to be no motivation for them to participate in prison education. This was because the participants accepted the label of *sex offender* along with the negative connotations that comes with the label.

Through the narratives, it is evident that they felt their education needs are not currently being met. Whilst the government encourages prison education and implies that it should be at heart of the prison system (Coates, 2016) the reality is, the educational offering available

are aimed at prisoners who have very little education. The education courses are described by participants as being short and more of a tick box exercise of getting bums on seats rather than providing a quality education experience. Low levels of education are compared with mainstream education, and the qualifications that are gained in prison were not considered useful outside of the prison gate. This led participants to question the quality of education which resulted in them believing that prison education was not the same quality as mainstream education. Although education does have wider benefits for prisoners (Terry and Cardwell 2015; Nichols, 2021) prison education generally does appear to focus on employment for both the prison and prisoners.

Employment has been highlighted as something that prison education should focus on (Ministry of Justice, 2018) and employment is a positive route to enable prisoners to turn their backs on crime (Atkins, 2021). Although employment has a positive outcome for prisoners, the participants highlighted the difficulties in becoming employed in the current competitive employment market. First, the participants identified that the qualifications offered in prison did not meet the specifications of the employment market. In addition, participants identified significant barriers to employment because of their convictions.

Evidence does suggest that prisoners with convictions for a sexual offence have difficulty in obtaining employment upon release (Visher *et al.*, 2011; Tewksbury and Mustaine, 2009).

The participants believed there was no point in participating in prison education because of their label of *sex offender*. The stigma of sex offender is well known, and the participants have lost hope in their future because once an individual has been identified as someone with convictions for a sexual offence this renders them unemployable.

The findings of this study highlight the current gap in educational provisions for prisoners convicted of sexual offences. It is evidence that prisoners would like an emphasis should be placed on prison education to offer higher levels of learning opportunities beyond Level two to all prisoners; offering recognised qualifications that will help prisoners to gain employment, training, or education upon release. It must be acknowledged that the prison populations are diverse and offering a 'one size fits all' approach to prison education does not meet the needs of those who may wish to participate. It should be important for the education provision in prison to take account of the diversity of the prisoner population and seek an educational offer that meet the needs of each individual prisoner. At present, Ministry of Justice reporting procedures provide analysis on all prisoners as a homogeneous group which prohibits analysis of educational attainment of prisoners with convictions for a sexual offence as a distinct group. Subsequently, prisoners convicted of a sexual offence may need additional or a different programme of study relevant to their conviction. Education is so important for many reasons and there should be courses available that will benefit all prisoners.

This study is based around prisoners convicted of sexual offences, identifying the reasons why they choose not to participate in prison education. However, care should be taken to ensure this prison cohort are not marginalised even more than they are already. This prison cohort are at the bottom of the prison hierarchy and care should be taken not to widen the hierarchy gap. The findings highlight the qualifications delivered in prison education offer little benefit to prisoners convicted of a sexual offence.

Limitations

The limitations of this article come from the participants who volunteered. It is possible that the interviews only appealed to those who had knowledge of prison education, enough to form an opinion. In addition, individuals who are likely to volunteer may be more confident in taking part in an interview, whereas those who are less confident may not volunteer for the research which could result in a section of the prison cohort not having a voice. As previously stated, this study is limited to prisoners who do not take part in prison education only and does not consider the opinions of prisoners who do participate in education.

Recommendations

Prison education should not fall into the assumption of 'one size fits all' and should mirror mainstream education as much as is reasonably possible. Those in prison should not be at an educational disadvantage and should have the same opportunities as those not in prison. Prisoners with convictions for sexual offences have restrictions to what they can do and where they can work when they are released. Education courses should reflect these restrictions by offering prisoners educational courses that reflects the individual prisoner.

References

- Abeling-Judge., D. 2019. Stopping Out and Going Back: The Impact of Educational Attainment on Criminal Desistance Among Stopped-Out Offenders. *Crime & Delinquency*, 65(4), 527–554
- Atkins, C., 2021. A Bit of a Stretch: The Diaries of a Prisoner. Prison education: Chris Atkins gives a learner's perspective | Tes.
- Becker, H. S., 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York, NY: Free Press.

- Behan, C., 2014. Learning to escape: Prison education, rehabilitation, and the potential for transformation. *Journal of Prison education and reentry*, 1(1), 20-31.
- Blagden, N., and Pemberton, S., 2010. The challenge in conducting qualitative research with convicted sex offenders. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 49(3), 269-281.
- Blessett, B., and Pryor, M. 2013. The invisible job seeker: The absence of ex-offenders in discussions of diversity management. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 433-455.
- Boyatzis, R. E., 1998. *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.
- Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve post release outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(3), 389-428.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. 2013. *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. CITY: Sage.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brown, K., Spencer, J., and Deakin, J., 2007. The reintegration of sex offenders: Barriers and opportunities for employment. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(1), 32-42.
- Burrows, J., 2016. Fear and loathing in the community: Sexual offenders and desistance in a climate of risk and 'extreme othering.' *Moving on from crime and substance use: Transforming Identities*, 153-174.
- Centre for Social Justice (London, England). Prison Reform Working Group, and Aitken, J., (2009). *Locked up potential: a strategy for reforming prisons and rehabilitating prisoners*. Centre for Social Justice.
- Champion, N., 2013. *Smart Rehabilitation-Learning How to Get Better Outcomes*. London: Prisoners' Education Trust.

- Clark, R., 2016. How education transforms: Evidence from the experience of Prisoners' Education Trust on how education supports prisoner journeys, *Prison Service Journal*, 225, 3-8.
- Coates, S., 2016. *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prison*. London, United Kingdom: Ministry of Justice.
- Council of Europe., 1990. *Prison education and training in Europe: current state-of-play and challenges*. European Commission.
- Digard, L., 2014. 'Encoding risk: Probation work and sex offenders' narrative identities.' *Punishment & Society* 16(4), pp. 428–447.
- Farley, H., and Pike, A., 2018. *Research on the inside: overcoming obstacles to completing a postgraduate degree in prison*.
- Flynn, N. and Higdon, R., 2022. Prison Education: Beyond Review and Evaluation. *The Prison Journal*, 102(2), pp.196-216.
- Goffman, E., 1963. Stigma and social identity. *Understanding deviance: Connecting classical and contemporary perspectives*, 256, 265.
- Harding, D. J., 2003. *Jean Valjean's dilemma: The management of ex-convict identity in the search for employment*. *Deviant Behaviour*, 24, 571-595.
- HM Chief Inspector of Prisons., 2014. *Annual Report 2013–14*. London: Crown Copyright. http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/10/HMIP-AR_2013-14.pdf. Accessed 2nd February 2022
- HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2019) Annual Report 2018–19, London: HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2018–19 (publishing.service.gov.uk).
- Hudson, K., 2005. *Offending Identities: Sex Offenders Perspective of their Treatment and Management*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Hudson, K., 2013. *Offending identities*. CITY: Routledge.

- Hughes, E., 2009. *Thinking inside the box: Prisoner education, learning identities, and the possibilities of change*. In B. M. Veysey, J. Christian and D. J. Martinez (Eds.), *How offenders transform their lives*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing. 87-103.
- Ireland, J. L., 2000. "Bullying" among prisoners: A review of research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 5, 201-215.
- Ievins, A., & Crewe, B. (2015). 'Nobody's better than you, nobody's worse than you': Moral community among prisoners convicted of sexual offences. *Punishment & Society*, 17(4), 482-501.
- Jupp, V. Davies. P. and Francis. P., 2003. *Doing Criminological Research*. London: Sage.
- Kellezi, B., Bowe, M., Wakefield, J.R., McNamara, N. and Bosworth, M., 2019. Understanding and coping with immigration detention: Social identity as cure and curse. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(2), pp.333-351.
- Laws, D. R., and Ward, T., 2011. *Desistance from sex offending: Alternatives to throwing away the keys*. Guilford Press.
- Lee, C., Farley, H., Cox, J., and Seymour, S., 2017. Tackling Indigenous Incarceration Through Promoting Engagement with Higher Education. In *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education* (pp. 169-188). Springer, Singapore.
- Manza, J., Brooks, C., and Uggen, C., 2004. *Public attitudes toward felon disenfranchisement in the United States*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 68(2), 275-286.
- Maruna, S., 2010. *The great escape: Exploring the rehabilitative dynamics involved in 'Changing Tunes.'* Retrieved from Changing Tunes:
<http://www.changingtunes.org.uk/The%20Great%20Escape%20Prof%20Shadd%20Maruna.pdf>. Accessed 24th February 2022
- Ministry of Justice., 2018. *Education and Employment Strategy*. Education and employment strategy (publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed 30th November 2022

- Ministry of Justice., 2019. *Prison Education & Library Services for adult prisons in England Policy Framework*. prison-education-library-services-policy-framework.pdf.
(publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed 13th August 2022
- Nichols, H., 2021. *Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- OCL (2022) Education recovery in prisons, Available from Education recovery in prisons - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) Accessed 30th November 2022
- House of Commons., 2022. Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity. Prison Education [7414].pdf
- Ricciardelli, R., and Moir, M., 2013. Stigmatized among the stigmatized: Sex offenders in Canadian penitentiaries. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 55(3), 353-386.
- Ricciardelli, R., and Spencer, D., 2014. Exposing 'sex' offenders: Precarity, abjection and violence in the Canadian federal prison system. *British Journal of Criminology*, 54(3), 428-448.
- Rogers, L., Simonot, M., and Nartey, A., 2014. *Prison Educator: Professionals Against all the Odds*. London: UCU and IoE.
- Ross, J., 2009. *Education from the Inside, Out: The Multiple benefits of College programs in Prison* (pp.42). New York, USA: Correctional Association of New York.
- Sample, L. L., and Bray, T. M., 2006. Are sex offenders different? An examination of rearrests patterns. *Criminal justice policy review*, 17(1), 83-102.
- Saunders, L., 2019. Working with people with sexual convictions A presentation given to the 2018 Perrie Lectures. *Prison Service Journal*, 241, 32-36.
- Schuller, T. and Watson, D., 2009. *Learning through life: Inquiry into the future of Lifelong Learning* (NIACE)
- Skills Funding Agency., 2018. *Further education and skills*: November 2018, London.

- Szifris, K., Fox, C., and Bradbury, A., 2018. A Realist Model of Prison Education, Growth, and Desistance: A New Theory. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(1), 41-62.
- Taylor, C., 2014. *Brain Cells: Third Edition*, Surrey: Prisoners' Education Trust.
- Terry, L. and Cardwell, V., 2015. *Understanding the Whole Person: Part One of a Series of Literature Reviews on Severe and Multiple Disadvantage*. Revolving Door Agency.
- Tewksbury, R., and Mustaine, E. E., 2009. Stress and Collateral Consequences for Registered Sex Offenders. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, 15(2).
- Unlock., 2018. Ban the Box. <http://www.unlock.org.uk/projects/employment-discrimination/ban-the-box>.
- Visher, C. A., Debus-Sherrill, S. A., and Yahner, J., 2011. Employment after prison: A longitudinal study of former prisoners. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(5), 698-718.
- Warr, J., 2016. Transformative dialogues (re) privileging the informal in prison education. *Prison Service Journal*, 225, 18-25.
- Wilkinson, J., 2017. Leading as a socially just practice: Examining educational leading through a practice lens. In *Exploring Education and Professional Practice* (pp. 165-182). Springer, Singapore.
- Willis G.M. and Letourneau E.J., 2018. 'Promoting accurate and respectful language to describe individuals and groups.' *Sexual Abuse* 30(5) pp. 480–483.

TABLE 1

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1: 'Poor quality education'	1.1. Nothing to offer

1.2. Not the same quality education

2: 'We are sex offenders'

2.1. Stuck with a label

2.2. No one will employ me
