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Special Edition
**The Transformational Potential
of Prison Education**

Editorial Comment

The theme of this special edition of *Prison Service Journal* is 'The transformational potential of prison education'. This is a particularly timely edition given that Dame Sally Coates is completing her review of prison education, a review that aims to place education at the heart of attempts to rehabilitate prisoners and improve the effectiveness of prisons.

The topic of this edition will resonate with many for whom education has been a route through which they have transformed their own life chances or personal identity. The expansion of university education and the increased access to and value placed upon education and training means that this is a means through which people can shape their own future.

In prisons, a similar story is told by many. The Chief Executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, Rod Clark, offers an overview of prison education and its benefits in his article. Many individuals who have learned to read and write, gained qualifications and even completed degrees in prison will attest to the life changing potential of prison education. There are some particularly strong examples of that in this edition, notably in the article by Jason Warr, who is now a lecturer in criminology but started his university education whilst serving a prison sentence.

There are a number of contributions to this edition which offer examples of innovative education that engages prisoners in new ways, achieving outstanding outcomes. This includes Ruth Armstrong and Amy Ludlow's account of the Learning Together programme, which involves university students and students in prison completing a course together. They argue that this not only provides and enriching educational experience, but transcends social barriers and changes the ways that participants can view themselves and the world around them. A similar argument is also presented by Sacha Darke and Andreas Aresti who are involved in a Learning Together programme in London, but also represent the British Convict Criminology movement, which seeks to actively engage prisoners and others who have an interest in the experience of prisoners in criminological study and research. Other initiatives covered in this edition include the teaching of philosophy, described by Kirstine Szifris, and a horticulture course evaluated by Geraldine Brown, Elizabeth Bos, Geraldine Brady, Moya Kneafsey and Martin Glynn. The work of the Hardman Trust, who fund education and training for individual prisoners, is assessed by Amy Barron, who argues that it is not only

the material support that individuals respond to but it is also that they have succeeded in a competitive process and that the Trust have recognised their value and potential.

The two articles by Shaun McMann and Alison Liebling take a broader approach, exploring the fundamental values represented in prison practice. McMann, who works for the Open University, argues that distance learning can facilitate profound changes in identity and behaviour, this he argues is a true representation of the rehabilitative ideal. Liebling draws upon the theology of the Dalai Lama, suggesting that learning, both individual and organisational should not be solely instrumental in order to increase productivity, but should also be directed towards moral and personal growth.

Although this edition clearly promotes the value of education, it is not blindly evangelical. A number of the contributors are critical of some of the uses and practices of education inside and outside of prisons. It is recognised that social institutions, such as prisons schools and universities, reflect social power and inequality and indeed are a medium through which this can be entrenched and maintained. For example, prisons over-represent those from poorer backgrounds and young black men, while universities over-represent those from privileged backgrounds. Another challenging question that many contributors engage with is about what kind of individual and social transformations is prison education intended to realise? In particular, whether education is concerned with producing effective workers and consumers or whether it is concerned with less instrumental personal growth and enlightenment.

'The Transformational Potential of Prison Education' is therefore both a celebration and a provocation. For individuals and potentially more widely this may be a means for personal growth and self-actualization. It may be a means through which social barriers can be eroded and challenged. However, education does not sit in a vacuum, it is an institution that exists within a social context. It can be a medium through which social divisions and problems can be played out and realised. The aim is for this edition to offer material that will encourage positive practices, without avoiding uncomfortable questions.