

The 'Word' on Education in Prison: Radio Wannu

Nathalie McDermott describes an innovative training project with links to the world outside.

"From my point of view, I've just come out ... I'm on probation...the help that I got from probation before I came out was zero, and the information I'm getting from them is minimal and a lot of the help that I got before I got out came from CARAT workers, drug workers, people that had nothing to do with probation, I hadn't even spoken to a probation officer..."

Mark Williams in discussion with Prisons and Probation Minister Paul Goggins, on 'The Clear Spot', Resonance FM, a live radio programme on the resettlement of prisoners, produced by Williams shortly after his release from HMP Wandsworth.

In the context of a rising prison population and an overburdened probation service, the crisis of unmet need for education and training in prison, and the resulting lack of prospects for most prisoners on release as described throughout this issue, the Prison Radio Project (PROP) offers a ray of hope. PROP is an initiative of the educational media consultancy Radio for Development (RFD), which has formerly worked on communications projects in developing countries. The Prison Radio Project was launched with 'Radio Wannu' at HMP Wandsworth in January 2004 by Cherie Booth QC and Paul Goggins MP, Minister for Prisons and Probation. Since then the project has established itself as an integral part of life at HMP Wandsworth, and has become a catalyst for reflection about the importance of communications within the prison. A new post of prison Communications Officer has been created to further work with RFD so that management responsibility for the radio project can be transferred shortly to the prison itself. RFD has also successfully brokered a partnership between HMP Wandsworth and Lambeth College, resulting in the delivery of a nationally recognised qualification in radio production at no cost to either the project or to the prison. RFD intends to take a lead on the replication of this model in other prisons throughout the UK.

This project at HMP Wandsworth is based on the idea that radio is a uniquely effective medium to reach and engage the prison population – many of whom have lower than average reading skills and have lost confidence in mainstream education provision. Programmes on Radio Wannu are made by and for the prison community at Wandsworth. Our programmes are also an effective way of enabling prisoners and officers to 'have their say' – an especially useful exercise during the process of performance testing.

The Prison Radio Project comprises four interdependent activities: the broadcasting centre, the learning centre, the production centre and support on release.

Broadcasting centre

Radio Wannu broadcasts from radio studios at the end of D Wing for up to five hours a day. Radio Wannu's output is largely speech-based, with an emphasis on encouraging crea-

tive, responsible and positive activity within the prison population. Recent broadcasts, for instance, have looked at the reading mentoring scheme, 'Toe by Toe', and the work of 'Fathers in Prison' with its emphasis on responsible parenting and support for family visiting sessions.

Learning centre

Lambeth College is currently delivering a BTEC National Award in Media (Radio) – the equivalent of an A-Level – to our core team of twelve broadcast trainees over a period of six months. In addition, a wider group of 'support workers' are working towards a Key Skills in Communications qualification, based on their work along the Wings as researchers and reporters for the radio station.

Production house

The project is now responding to commissions for audio materials to support a variety of prison activities. For example, the Induction Department saw a need for more accessible and user-friendly information for newly arrived prisoners. An Induction CD has been produced through the project and is now provided to every new arrival, together with a CD walkman player. The project is currently working on the production of this CD in Arabic, French, Spanish and Urdu, the four main languages spoken among HMP Wandsworth's 400 foreign national prisoners.

Support on release

PROP offers prisoners support beyond their time on the course, encouraging their personal ambitions for further training or employment. The progress of the first PROP trainee to be released from HMP Wandsworth, Mark Williams, has provided an encouraging example. When Mark joined the Prison Radio Project, he was in the middle of an 18-month sentence; it was his fourth time in prison. He had lost his job and his home and was despondent about his future on release; he couldn't see a way out of the pattern of drug-use, crime and prison. However, from the outset of the course it was clear that Mark had a talent for radio production, and he emerged as one of the most promising and motivated students. He was soon leading the group in script writing for investigative packages on prison and resettlement issues and more creatively through radio plays.

As a result, PROP offered Mark a 4-week paid placement at RFD on his release in April 2004 (prior to completion of the BTEC course). Each week, he spent some time with a different radio station/media organisation to gain experience in the field. During this placement, Mark made programmes about prison and the problems facing ex-offenders on the outside which were broadcast on local and community radio stations. His series of eight audio diaries was broadcast on XFM (part of Capital Radio). PROP also provided Mark with information about drugs counsellors and housing issues, and his mentor supported him in dealing with these issues whilst completing the placement.



Mark Williams, far right, in the studio

His placement culminated in an extremely successful feature-length live radio programme on Resonance FM about the resettlement of ex-offenders (quoted at the beginning of this article). Mark presented and produced the programme, which took a frank look at the problems facing ex-offenders on release, and examined the effectiveness of existing measures to ensure they don't go back to prison. His live guests included the Prisons & Probation Minister Paul Goggins MP and Big Issue founder John Bird.

On listening to the programme, Heather Purdey, the course director of the well-regarded journalism MA at City University, said "I thought the programme – and more particularly Mark – was utterly brilliant! Mark's presentation is amazing. He sounds fantastic and is a real natural. He has a great future."

Mark is now working for an independent production company, and applying for salaried positions in commercial radio.

Future plans

We feel that our first Prison Radio at HMP Wandsworth has been extremely successful. In the process of setting it up, brokering and managing key relationships and completing the first BTEC course we have learned a great deal about meeting the challenges involved in such a project. The response from the prison community at all levels has been highly positive and we are confident that other prisons around the country will be excited to develop similar projects in their facilities.

Over the next two years we plan to set up and manage another prison radio station in a new prison. During this time we will develop a model for a more rapid expansion of prison radio stations around the country, and devise a system for supporting ongoing quality of the stations we set up which are then handed over to the prisons to manage. We will also continue to develop our outreach programme with a view to providing af-

ter-care to all prisoners who have completed the BTEC course whether they subsequently leave the prison or remain inside. In addition we will continue to support other communication projects within the prisons, such as CD production, and look at ways to commercialise these activities where possible.

The radio station in Wandsworth prison has been funded by the prison itself and by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Our work on PROP has been supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and we have also been supported by the Network for Social Change with funds for the installation of new production equipment. However, we will need additional funds to be able to carry out further development of RFD over the next two years; meet the set up costs of the next radio station in a new prison; and continue development of PROP.

In Mark Williams' radio feature on prisons and resettlement, he cited statistics proving that for many offenders, prison functions just as 'a revolving door'. In the programme John Bird, ex-offender and founder of 'The Big Issue', voiced an alternative vision of prison as a place of education, training, and personal transformation away from old patterns of doing the 'business' of crime: "If you can educate people, and you can socially change them while they're inside... actually prisons could be great places."

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