

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS

A KEY CONCEPT IN CONSTRUCTING THE REGIME FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS AT HMYOI LANCASTER FARMS

When I took charge as the first governor of HM Young Offenders Institutions at Lancaster Farms I asked myself, 'Have kids changed?' What would be needed today in a regime for young unconvicted and convicted prisoners? In asking this question I was reflecting on my memories stretching back to happy days spent as an Officer at Lowdham Grange Borstal. I recalled a bustling regime where discipline, care, protection and rehabilitation were an integral part of the organisation and its culture. I remembered going out on isolated working parties with groups of prisoners, taking 20 or more to Saturday afternoon sport and supervising association of 60 or more prisoners in the full knowledge that there were few other staff on duty. I also recalled much good humour and how interesting I found the work. In those days I felt a sense of confidence when I performed my duties, so why did I feel so much apprehension during the run up to the opening of HMYOI and Remand Centre Lancaster Farms. Had kids really changed? The evidence to hand seemed to indicate they had.

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES OF OTHERS

The main reason why we at Lancaster Farms were apprehensive was that we were aware that Moorland and Brinsford had both experienced serious disorder within a short period of opening. Both of those establishments had opened full of optimism. Both were new establishments offering good facilities. They each had a highly motivated staff. Their respective governors and management teams were every bit as professionally skilled as we were. So where did the answer lie. Was it simply the nature of the population? We needed more first

hand information and this is exactly what we set out to obtain.

My team and I made several fact finding visits to other Young Offender institutions in England and Wales. We discovered the presence of some common problems. The most significant of these was the prevalence of bullying. No establishment we visited was free from the curse of bullying and at two establishments we were made aware of several gross assaults having taken place. Although we saw much by way of initiatives to tackle bullying, we did not find anything which totally satisfied us. We wanted to establish a fully integrated strategy which was analytical in the sense of identifying the root cause(s) of bullying, was understood and accepted by both staff and prisoners and provided effective solutions. Other common problems which we found were graffiti, litter, noise and some filthy conditions. More disconcerting however, was the discovery that there was a general lack of control in the handling of young prisoners and lack of confidence amongst staff. These problems were widespread with the exception of three establishments we visited where the staff were clearly in charge. However, in two of these establishments, relationships between staff and prisoners lacked the training and rehabilitative ethos we sought.

One establishment we visited depressed us more than any other, for it appeared to us that its staff had lost faith and were in desperate need of some new and invigorating philosophical impetus. When they recounted their bad experience (a riot) it became clear that at this stage we all lacked an adequate framework from which to evaluate what had happened. Yet until their experience could be explained properly there was little prospect of avoiding these problems in opening Lancaster Farms.

David Waplington is Governor of HMYOI Lancaster Farms and opened it as an institution for young offenders.

BULLYING AT THE HEART OF IT

The question of staff/prisoner relationships has always been fundamental to control in Young Offender establishments. I remembered an organiser of the Samaritans in prison remarking that we had gone very far in improving our national system of Suicide Prevention but could probably go no further unless we looked at relationships within prison. With this statement in mind I called into the office of Suicide Prevention at headquarters. By now I was also aware that many of the problems of self harm and even some of the suicides among young offenders were related to bullying. Whilst I was there, Alison Gomme, now Governor of Erlestoke, suggested that I contacted a group called 'The Trust for the Study of Adolescence'. She had been using this group to help with Suicide Awareness training. Not quite knowing what to expect I telephoned the offices of the Trust. I spoke to John Coleman, their Director, and later to Juliet Lyon, their Course Organiser. They were understanding, helpful and sympathetic. What was more important they were interested and sufficiently brave to invite my team to meet them.

The Trust is a relatively small organisation devoted to the study of adolescence as a definite stage in human development. Normally their work involves non offenders and this factor alone opened up for us the opportunity of considering an alternative perception against which we could test out many of our experiences and beliefs about young people in prison.

Our first meeting with the Trust proved to be enlightening and very constructive. The importance of understanding adolescence in order to work successfully with young people was agreed. As we would be taking lads up to their 21st birthday, we had some reservations about adolescents fitting this group. After some thought however, our collective experiences told us that inadequate social training followed by early institutionalisation often resulted in repetitive immature behaviour. We suspected this was indicative of retarded development and therefore further evidence to support the study of adolescent development generally.

TRAINING FOR STAFF

Arising from our first meeting we decided on the development of a course for all our staff entitled 'The Nature of

Adolescence: Understanding and Working with Young People'. We knew we had about 150 unified grades to train and we also wanted the Trust to develop a strategy for working alongside us for up to two years in the hope that with their help we would gain a greater insight into the dynamics of the modern teenage culture and as a consequence be better qualified to direct and control it.

The cost of the training provided by the Trust required me to find £24,000. By this stage I had sufficient faith in them to know that the quality of delivery would be worth the outlay. More importantly, I was also aware that they were keeping their charges to an absolute minimum, because they felt the project was worthwhile too. It was clear that we shared many of the same values and working together has always felt a happy partnership. Raising money is never easy, particularly for a brand new project, but thanks to equal sponsorship from the Suicide Awareness Unit, my own Area Manager and the Prison Service College, the money was found.

ADOLESCENCE IS A UNIQUE STAGE IN LIFE

From the earliest days working with the Trust served to further confirm for us the importance of recognising the significance of adolescence among young people in prison. It was clear that we could expect adolescents to behave differently from adult prisoners and that this behaviour would be better explained by understanding adolescents rather than through ascribing it to being 'bad'. This perspective was of tremendous importance because it has enabled us to develop and retain a positive view of prisoners even when they behave badly.

We had decided that all our staff should be trained in understanding the nature of adolescence and in handling adolescents. We also decided that managers must be trained first. We felt it was very important that managers should have these skills in order to support and coach junior staff. We were also mindful that this particular strategy embodied elements of a 'management vision'. We were offering our staff a strategy which would help them to do their job better than ever before. It would also help to prevent prisoner disorder. Management commitment was essential and it had to be visible, and sincere.

Juliet Lyon and John Coleman from the Trust were joined by four of our staff in developing and delivering the course. The Lancaster Farms tutors were our Training Principal Officer - Colin Midwinter, our Senior Officer in charge of Pre-Release - Merv Williams, one of our Senior Officer PEIs - Jim Hughes and Kevin Brown our Senior Probation Officer. An early decision we made was to issue a certificate of attendance to every member of staff who completed the course. An important decision which has helped emphasise the place of this training in relation to our everyday work.

The course that we have developed over the last 15 months lasts for almost three days. It explores adolescent development, adolescence in the family, the adolescent peer group as well as how working with adolescents affects staff. It looks at some of the problems of adolescence and the problems of adolescents in prison.

REACTION OF STAFF

Staff reactions to the course have, overwhelmingly, been very positive. A common comment is that it enhances and expands the knowledge gained through experience of working with young prisoners. I have attended the course myself and am convinced that it makes a significant addition to the knowledge of most staff. For instance, I found the concept of adolescence as a time of transition from childhood to adulthood to be of practical help. I find myself assessing whether a prisoner is behaving like a child and wants firm direction or whether he is in an adult mode and requires more tact and patience. I also no longer just search for simple causes such as system failures when disorder threatens. The course also I believe communicates our recognition that our staff are intelligent people who do a difficult job.

Lancaster Farms is a busy Remand Centre but we have managed to keep the Adolescence Training running. More than 100 of our own staff have received the training and certificates of attendance are prominent throughout the establishment. Recently, our courses have been joined by staff from other Young Offender establishments. Onley and Brinsford being in the van as usual. One of the Brinsford Senior Officers is now a qualified tutor, providing some welcome relief for staff at The Farms as we have volunteered to pilot National courses at the Prison Service

College. So far we have run two National Training Courses, which were attended by 36 staff from a wide range of Young Offender Institutions. Early feedback from these pilot courses suggest that they were well received by the majority of staff and a significant portion were extremely enthusiastic.

Another development of the Course has been its extension to female young offenders with our Director, Tony Pearson commissioning the Trust to develop similar training focused on adolescent females.

A SAFER ENVIRONMENT CREATED

Does it work? At this stage it is hard to be precise in identifying the contribution made by T.S.A. to the regime at Lancaster Farms. During our first year of operations we accommodated 6243 receptions and 5948 discharges. Our Court commitment is extensive and all our Courts bar one are a long way from the institution. We had only one assault which led to a member of staff having to go off duty, no member of staff has so far been seriously injured or scarred as a result of an assault by a prisoner. We have no vulnerable prisoners wing or unit. We do have many prisoners who in other establishments would be so located. We have not had any prisoner disorder which required our staff to use force. We have not had any suicides, and had up to 37 cases of recorded self harm, most of which have been very minor cases. We have very little vandalism and no graffiti. Our anti-bullying surveys indicate that there is less bullying here than in other Young Offender institutions.

I could cite much other evidence but the most important result is probably the most difficult to prove. Staff here see and treat young prisoners as individuals. Young prisoners respond so well to this that we frequently forget we are a Remand Centre and judge ourselves against more stable Young Offender institutions. Reassuringly, two of the new training courses have now been run at the Prison Service College attended by staff from many other Young Offender establishments. They have received positive evaluations from the vast majority of staff who attended. After the success of these courses it was decided that there should be a 'National Launch' of the new training this Autumn at which it will become recommended training for all prison staff working with young offenders ■