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Latest thinking on engaging young offenders with education and learning in a secure custodial setting

Adeela ahmed Shafi, Senior Lecturer in Education, School of Education, University of Gloucestershire

Okay. Thank you very much. As introduced by Lord McNally, I'm Adeela ahmed Shafi, from the University of Bristol. As an academic, we don't get out very much, so it's really good to be here. We're normally stuck in our dusty little offices, as we're often accused of. So it's really an honour for me to talk a little bit about my PhD research. We've been given the grand old time of five minutes, to condense five years of research into, but I will try my best, and just go through the, sort of, real headlines for you.

So my research was focused on engaging young offenders with education and learning in a secure custodial setting. It was conducted in one secure children's home in England over a five year period. It was an in-depth case study, so really exploring the thoughts and feelings of the young people themselves, and the adults that worked with them, to really get an in-depth understanding of the engagement, and understanding the nature of engagement in young people in that particular setting.

I won't have nearly enough time to talk about all of what's on my slides, so I'll leave those for you to, sort of, as a, backdrop, and just talk through some of the headlines. Okay, the key headlines, for me, were that educational experiences for the young people that I was working with were not great. They reflected previous findings, so nothing really that new there, apart from the fact that actually this really does need urgent attention.

What was, again, as an academic, what was particularly interesting for me, with a background in psychology, was that actually what really characterised the nature of disengagement in the young people I was working with, were the amount, or the impact of emotions, and the role that played in their engagement, or lack of it rather. And those emotions were very much shaped by the relationships that they had within the secure custodial setting, with their peers, teachers, and the care staff.

And that really came together in terms of how they engaged with education. So this seemed to me to be the nub of understanding education, and how to re-engage them. Bearing in mind that we're not just talking about learning to read and write, but actually re-engaging them with the purpose of education, which was to improve the quality of their lives, to change and transform their lives. So not just about getting some qualifications but actually much deeper than that which is really, as an educationalist, that's really what I'm interested in.

So after five years of study, I'm feeling really down about it. At the beginning, I was pleasantly surprised that actually it is possible to re-engage these young people with education and learning, and actually pretty quickly as well. So that was what was really encouraging, and I explored that a lot further. And through the process of authentic enquiry, there's an academic definition up there, but I'll give you the everyday definition, which is really about hooking a young person into education and learning. So through something that they are particularly interested in, and using that as the key. So it's authentic because it's about that and it's an enquiry because they've directed.

Now this is not just aimless learning about something you fancy the look of, but more about how it can then connect to the curriculum. So for example, I had a young lad, who I was working with,

interested in health and fitness, was really concerned about his weight gain whilst he was in custody, due to a range of reasons. And didn't want to engage with learning, education, at all. But through his authentic enquiry, actually towards the end, which was only a few months later, actually he was engaging in a science assignment, contributing to his GCSE, on health and fitness, and how to calculate calories. And then, drawing on maths and English, to communicate his ideas.

So actually that was really exciting, and it wasn't just the only who was engaging, all of them engaged though, or course, to varying degrees. And that was really very much dependent on a range of things. And what I've got here is this fancy diagram that I've come up with, but really, in essence, what it meant - and if I was to break this down, and there's a research briefing outside that you can take home with you - is that the task had to have value for the young person, which meant that actually they've got to be interested in it. That relationships were really, really important, and that relationship with their mentor and the staff, really helped them to navigate their learning, and it seemed to be crucial. Help them navigate their learning, through the management of their emotions, really helped them with that gave them the autonomy to take charge and responsibly for their learning. So those were the, key things.

The sad thing is, the barrier was the secure custodial setting itself, and that's the bit that I move onto now. And that's, sort of, the key conclusion, particularly for my time here, is that the secure custodial setting itself created the barriers. And what I mean by that is, the way the secure custodial setting was set up, meant that communication was difficult between the education and care staff. And that made it really challenging, particularly when I'm saying that relationships are important.

And some policy suggestions. Again I'm trying to navigate all that research into a really small space in time. Some key points, really, that I'd like to draw on, but the bottom two is what I'm really interested in. Is, perhaps, the secure estates can consider using authentic enquiry, as a way to instil a unit wide culture, which is concerned with education and learning. And I thought that was key, because it is culture that needs changing if we want to focus on education, which goes beyond qualifications and skills, and be transformative and life changing.

And one way I thought that could be done, is through providing some sort of autonomy, perhaps for the headteacher, or for senior managers, in each custodial setting, to be able to decide what is best for their learners, to re-engage them. So I've done a whistle stop tour, talked really fast, and I hope to, sort of, present you some of the key things, and I'm very happy to talk about this later on in the break, or whenever we get a chance. As you can imagine, I'd like to talk lots about it because like I said, it's not very often we get out.

So thank you very much, and I'm sure that was much longer than my time allowed.

Adeela Shafi's PowerPoint presentation can be downloaded from the following link:

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