Research Article

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The Transformative Power of Education as a Means of Enabling Former Offenders to Live Meaningful and Productive Lives

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Abstract: Kaur (2012) raises the question, how can education be more inclusive and representative when catering to diverse groups and students? Does our entitlement to human kindness cease once incarcerated, and are we to be forever banished to the outskirts of society? The majority of offender education research assesses success or failure through mechanistic, objective and calculated criteria. Statistically, offenders repeatedly underachieve in primary and secondary education; offenders who partake in some form of adult and post-release learning continue this pattern, and face other non-learning barriers that impact on participation and accreditation outcomes (Prison Education Trust, 2018). Departing from conventional modes and methods of teaching, this article examines the transformative journeys of former offenders, and considers the role of education in supporting them to lead more productive and meaningful lives.

Keywords: Transformative; offender[s]; education; ETE (Education, Training and Employment); prison; dialogue; time; relationships; productive

1 Introduction

This article is based on a four-year Ph.D. investigation (O'Connor, 2019). The original research began in February 2015, the inquiry documented the learning experiences of former offenders. Every participant who contributed to the original research was a former offender with a history of substance misuse. After experiencing imprisonment in 2002, followed by ten years working as a tutor and mentor

for youth and adult offender services, in 2014, I set up Hope Education and Support Services in Bradford, West Yorkshire. The Community Interest Company delivered an alternative pre-employment/education programme for ex-offenders and drug and alcohol service users. As a former offender, my experiences and insight enabled and supported other non-conventional ways of working. My pedagogy and work, founded on dialogical honesty, integrity, and equality, was used to support the men throughout the study. The article will 'flesh out' the participants' in ways that animate them as human beings', which encapsulated their 'biographical and emotional complexities' (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2020, p. 65).

At this moment in time, we are no nearer breaking the cycle of offending. According to the Ministry of Justice (2013), the quality and lack of education, resulting in poor educational attainment, play a crucial role in initial offending and later life criminality (Wright, 2013). One of the primary reasons attributed to an education system, systemically at blame for the continuing failure to connect in meaningful and productive ways with the offending community, is the demand by the government, politicians, and other power elites to obtain data ground in numerical and mechanistic processes of perceiving reality. Therefore, we have to work with research and data that only touches the fragmented surface of those most isolated and astray in mainstream society. As a result of this approach, we are nullifying rich narrative and interactions; offender biographies are being pigeon-holed into politicised statistical and theoretical frameworks. Joseph and Gunter (2011, p. 12) emphasises how politically motivated inquiry continues to adopt a 'misguided search for structural characteristics in an attempt to define and locate the gang'. As suggested by West (2016, p. 37), 'understanding lives from the inside out requires time'; only then can we accurately interpret and make sense of interconnected layers etched across the different periods spanning our existence.

At the heart of this article are the narrative extracts of some of the men researched, who, as a result of the teaching and learning, had destructive ontologies and

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worldviews transformed to enable them to live as more productive and contented social citizens. When starting the research, the participants were, in many cases, overwhelmed by a sense of 'ontological insecurity' and 'existential crisis' (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2020, p. 253). By creating a bridge into the lifeworld of the 'other', with honour and respect, and accepting them unconditionally (Rogers, 1961), education was dislodged from the grasp of approaches and pedagogies that stifle personal enhancement and development; detailed are paradigms of education that supported the human condition to flourish. In this article, the term 'transformative learning' is used to describe, explore and theorise subjective and ontological growth for former offenders. The men expressed in their own words the extent to which I influenced their lives through the unfolding educational process. By using my own life experiences to help the men make sense of the biographical narrative as best we can, the research participants described becoming accepting of their pasts and hopeful for the future. Freire (1996) noted that the student and the teacher experience transformation through the nature and intimacy of dialogue. In Palmer's (2000, p. 52) opinion, the facets of one's pedagogy, defining and most impactful, cannot be discovered in isolation; authentic learning is a stream of momentary subjective entanglement, connecting teacher and student, regardless of place or context.

2 Theoretical background

Statistics paint a dismal educational outcome for most offenders. Moreover, despite the importance of education, there remains a continuous and consistent failing of offenders (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Most research, based on statistical information, provides little hope that the life chances of offenders can be improved. In the view of Jewkes (2011), it is the lack of knowledge and understanding that continues to isolate, marginalise, and treat offenders as second-class citizens. More broadly, Reay (2017), highlights the changes in the political system since the 1960s that have contributed to working-class educational underachievement. As a result of the inherent class-bias and the conveyed falsehood of a meritocratic system, impoverished youth have become further excluded and ostracised; this affecting later life opportunities and prosperity.

Throughout the last two decades, political ideology and rhetoric have shaped penal education's focus and rationale. Reflecting wider social attitudes and political

agenda, the 1980s and much of the 1990s witnessed the demise of correctionalist and penal welfare approaches to crime; criminal justice policy prioritised 'social equality, social security, and social justice' (Garland, 2001, p. 99). With individual accountability and rational choice now dominating penal and political discourse, research was primarily conducted through calculated, objective and mathematical analyses; this dehumanised and vilified those who act and live non-conventionally. Thus, regardless of social context and setting, offender education has replicated the broader business aims and ethos of assessing penal and community offender learning success through the mantle of statistical accredited percentages and reengagement into some form of employment. The emphasis on enhancing inmates' work ethic and skills was more recently highlighted in the report by Pedder (2017, p. 10), which stated that many offenders lacked the 'soft skills necessary to gain and keep employment and there were no courses in the prison addressing this gap'.

Although there is clear evidence supporting government attempts to raise educational standards, hence addressing the gap in socioeconomic attainment (Narey, 2004), there has been an inconsistency in the rationale and types of education deemed suitable for current and former offenders during the previous three decades. Anne Owens, a former Chief Inspector of Prisons (2008-09, p. 46), agrees with these perceptions, suggesting that in general, current ETE provisions are inefficient and do not address the individual needs of the client; she stated the 'provision of education was often of insufficient quality to stretch young men to achieve their potential' (Wright, 2013, p. 27). Her comments support a generalist view that if offenders are to become employable, greater emphasis must be placed on developing intrinsic aspects of the person; this can then be used as criteria to measure success, rather than the traditional and academic perspectives, which are currently used. The government acknowledged this in the research by the Ministry of Justice (2013) titled 'Transforming Rehabilitation: a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending'; this paper denoted the persistent and general lack of understanding concerning what works best (Wright, 2013). In the view of Darke and Aresti (2016, p. 26), co-created knowledge involving the lived experiences of former offenders will help to 'bridge the gap between the so-called expert knower' and worldview of those being investigated. In valuing the voices of prisoners, offenders adopt the role of researcher, either working in collaboration with established criminologists or through training to become criminologists themselves.

According to former British Prime Minister David Cameron (2016), conservative approaches of managing

offenders through the sterile mantle of ‘lock ‘em up’ or ‘let ‘em out’ debate has ‘often got in the way of real change’ (Costelloe, 2014). In the main, the current education system has failed to address the complex and unconventional learning requirements of those who struggle to adapt to orthodox learning modes. By continuing to research and inform through lifeless epistemologies, politicians and educators continue to disguise their unknowingness. I concur with West (2016), who writes that ‘there can be a thick political and ideological skin between what the powerful believe is happening or acceptable and the reality of people’s experiences on the ground’. Through objective and dehumanising methods of inquiry, data is ground in quantifiable and statistical formats. In consensus with Szifis (2021, p. 15) ‘these studies fail to get to the heart of the matter – what does education actually do? What does it mean to people who are in prison? And how does it relate to their lives inside?’ In this present-day climate, we are no nearer finding a balance to working productively with offenders in conventional teaching environments; research remains sparse and inconsistent.

As echoed by Warr (2016, p. 22), while acknowledging the ‘benefits of staying occupied and of achievement for prisoners who have previously no educational attainment’, when released, much of the accreditation is ‘largely meaningless’. In the view of Reay (2017, p. 11), the education system is ‘enmeshed in, and increasingly driven by, the economy, rather than one that is capable of redressing economic inequalities’. Further, I agree with Formenti and West (2018, p. 244), who, questioning orthodox ways of knowing, propose that ‘transformation, even in the academy, requires faith in the possibility of illuminating a truth or in developing deeper understanding, even when driven by postmodern scepticism’ [see also, Mezirow (1991); Taylor and Cranton (2012); Cranton (1996); Dirkx (2002), and Tisdell (2003)]. Coates (2016, p. i), in her review titled ‘Unlocking potential. A review of education in prison’ asks ‘what are the current levels of prisoners’ educational attainment; and what happens when education is assessed as not good enough? She says that a key driver of education should be to ‘unlock potential’ and act as a means of reengagement into productive social pathways. Otherwise, as explored in the research by Crewe, Hulley and Wright (2020, p. 290, 292), when residing in a state of ‘nothingness’, we can find ourselves trapped in the form of ‘temporal vertigo’; enhancement is thus stifled, we become rooted in an ‘otherwise intangible sense of time in some kind of physical reality’.

Since the Coates review, numerous research projects have shown the transformative potential and impact of alternative, unconventional approaches to offender

teaching and learning. Various prison initiatives have revitalised penal education by creating a learning space that brings together undergraduate students, practitioners, and serving inmates. For example, Ward and Fogarty (2019), write passionately and assuredly about the power and potential of rehabilitative, life-defining and transformative role of education. In their research, they criticise the dominant and primary focus on employment and accreditation that shapes offender learning; this is not prioritising the essential needs of that person. Therefore, learning must amount to more than the short-term elation of academic achievement; persons need to be rehabilitated and inspired from the inside out, with a greater appetite and determination to exist as nonoffending citizens. Moreover, when performed within a sacred ‘opening communicative space’ (Wicks and Reason, 2009, p. 244), teaching and learning increase the probability of supporting and enabling the immeasurable transformative potential education holds.

In 2019, the most recent annual report published by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons indicated that only a third of adult male prisons offered inmates purposeful activity, including education. Furthermore, despite the correlation between prison education and a reduction in reoffending, ‘little is known about how participation in college classes post-release can help members of that group avoid reoffending and progress them toward desistance despite the burden of social stigma and other negative influences’ (Runel, 2017, p. 895). Warr (2016, p. 30) offers an insight, asserting that individual needs have become inconsequential to the requisite to manage, monitor and supervise risk offenders. He goes on to suggest that:

Prisoners have become to be seen as transformative risk subjects whereby there is a conflation of the needs and risks of prisoners at the same time as structural needs, such as poverty or inequality, are divorced from notions of their riskiness (Warr, 2016, p. 20).

3 Methodology

The men who took part in the research were former offenders with a history of substance misuse. In addition, every volunteer had previously been engaged with drug and alcohol misuse programmes, and had previous involvement as a service client with other ETE provisions. Due to the non-conventional approach adopted, this study did not confine itself to one specific research setting. Data was collected through two primary sources, informal Dicta-

phone conversations and written narrative. Dictaphone conversations with the men took place in several other locations, such as in the fields and farm area where some of the manual work occurred. At different points in the study, the research volunteers were spoken to and asked to amend and clarify any contradictions of events and happenings they considered to be misrepresentative of their learning and lives; they were routinely consulted and spoken to privately. The length of taped conversations and the time allocated to each participant or cohort discussion depended on the client[s]; they decided each taped interview's start and finishing time. All the research volunteers in the study were male, between 18 and 65 years of age. Moreover, all of the men were raised in the working-class community of Bradford in West Yorkshire, with English being the primary language. Over a three-to-four-year period, we met once or twice a week. Besides this, there were also weekly one-to-one mentoring sessions with individual group members. Additionally, for two years, twice a month, we arranged group outings; the location of the excursions was discussed and agreed upon by the group. Data was gathered without pre-planned questions or schedules.

Because they were volunteers in the investigation, they were free to leave or take time away from the inquiry; they could return at any time to resume their participation. Also, due to the complex biographies of the men, periods of absence from the research process were anticipated. When overcoming substance misuse and its association with mental illness, my research volunteers could have potentially relapsed and removed themselves from the study at any time (Chorlton and Smith, 2016); any action taken would have adhered to ethical guidelines and protocol. More generally, if they wanted to withdraw from the inquiry, this did not affect their right to continue their involvement in the education provided. Drawing on personal insight and knowledge, I embraced the constant slip-ups and setbacks amongst the cohort; this contributed to making the investigation unique. Together we learned how to tolerate each other and respect the many differences which existed; the men always found a way to resolve firmly held viewpoints and opinions. My reasoning for this flexibility; it was never my intention to silence the men. It was vital that they conversed, communicated, and acted authentically, passionately, and with conviction (O'Connor, 2021).

Autoethnography was used as the primary research methodology; this enables me to locate my personal experiences of offending within the wider social and political context in which my offending behaviour took place and help my clients appreciate the extent to which similar per-

sonal, social and economic barriers have impacted their lives. Generally, 'criminologists tend to present their analysis in the form of inhuman data', why? 'So no one will care, keep it statistical, inhuman, no compassion' (Bosworth et al. 2005, p. 259). By allowing relationships to evolve naturally with the volunteers, they were encouraged to express themselves honestly and openly. The research focused on personally significant experiences and pivotal moments in life, including learning and education, which often have little value or go unnoticed in offender research and study. In agreement with Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), if we are to challenge the hostile rhetoric and demonisation of disadvantaged minorities, including former offenders, I find it implausible to remove emotions, subjectivity, and uniqueness from literature and theoretical construction; this has been perceived as fatalistic among traditional modernist theorists and scholars. As a methodological paradigm, autoethnography opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto) and the collective (ethno) where the writing (graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Rather than feeling the need to suppress the richness of the researcher's experience, the narrative of the men was liberated in numerous genres of writing; it became imperative to the process; through multiple layers of writing, personal experiences were connected to the wider social and cultural context.

Also used in the original research was narrative inquiry; the transcribed data presented occurrences and instances of microscopic detail that often go unnoticed (Attard, 2012). Overcash (2003) emphasises how narrative accounts permit participants the opportunity to recall events and interpret them from their perspective; it also enabled the necessary time and freedom to reflect and make sense of the men's stories. Therefore, experiences that continue to evoke sensations and feelings can be captured; even those lasting a split second in time become a source of data. Because of this, something of greater significance arose, the subject became owner and author of their story, and they were permitted the freedom to recollect sensitive happenings without feeling the need to conceal moments of immense significance. The stories aimed not to present a structured and analytical format. Due to autoethnography's intent and theoretical propositions, it was crucial that the research volunteers articulated in their own words the extent, if any, I had influenced their lives through the unfolding educational process. As told by Attard, (2012, p. 169), the dialogue presented my research volunteers with the opportunity to give 'meaning to their lives through the stories they tell'. Clandinin and Connelly (1990, p. 4) give emphasis to the importance of

the 'mutual construction of the research relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories'.

For almost five years, I interacted with the men in a manner that blurred the boundaries between myself and the men I worked with (Gershon, 2009). For example, my unorthodox teaching style enabled me to practice by way of care and friendship towards the students and clients. Furthermore, although most offender senior managers would enforce that such interactions remain strictly professional, structure and expectations were implemented informally. Remaining on the perimeters, when you feel touched by an authentic sensation, one which leads you into a world of intrigue, is denying yourself moments, which otherwise seldom reveal themselves; you must remain open to their possibility (Schutz, 1967). Granted, disagreements and petty quarrels occasionally arose. However, through group discussion dialogue, they were resolved; my responsibility as a researcher and mentor was to deal with and rectify appropriately.

4 Research finding

The findings that emerged detailed and theorised the transformative potential of education to support former offenders to live meaningful and productive lives. The investigation aimed to ensure the research volunteers' voice was listened to and respected; this was a fundamental entitlement for those who took part in the study (Stickle, 2013). Due to the nature and aims of the research and the methodology employed, I documented two in-depth story narratives with Mark and Craig. Four additional research volunteers agreed to participate in the inquiry; the data was used alongside the two main research narratives. Although they contributed significantly, their transformative learning journeys played a lesser role in the final thesis. The rationale for choosing these six men was decided on their offending status, previous learning experiences, and willingness to assist collaboratively in the inquiry. Other factors such as time-commitment[s] and their motivation to support the research focus were also considered. Further, each participant appreciated that the investigation I undertook was enigmatic and ambiguous; Ellis (2004) described the early stages of autoethnographic inquiry as like going 'into the woods without a compass'. Besides the main cohort of research participants, numerous other individuals attended and took part in the teaching and learning; their experiences were not used in the final research.

By allowing them the unrestricted time to flourish and discover, the men were emboldened and progressed into other forms of education and service user voluntary roles they believed were unattainable. I evidenced and bore witness to changes of immense magnitude. As a group, we challenged the education system's rigid objectivity, trialled and sought alternative strategies, and placed purpose and meaning over targets and outcomes. A collective entity brought together through unplanned circumstances; we evolved with mutual respect and understanding.

From the training room to where we collaboratively explored offending behaviour, childhood happenings and numerous other aspects of adversity and existence, to the manual toil and labour undertaken on the farm, we learned side by side within the sanctuary of a supportive ambience and community of practice (Lave, 2006). Working in harmony towards a common cause fostered transformational benefits (McNiff 2002); although subtle, they were progressive and ensured continuity of development, belief and hope. When engaged in a caring, compassionate and authentic manner, 'a common sense about reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1971, p. 37) emerged; 'moments' and 'movements' of progression (Rogers, 1961) were substantiated and documented in the course of the research. Terry communicates further on this in the extract below.

Terry: Tuesday, September 22nd, 2015: Yes, because in our group, I know it is only a small group but the people who are there are there because they want to be, not because they have been forced into it. When you are not being forced into it, you look at it differently. If you are forced into it (education), you think, f*** that. Especially when you are younger, you rebel against it, don't you? You play up to your teacher and stuff, and end up getting detentions and that sort of s***. But up there (at the farm), it is a more relaxed informal social gathering, rather than an intense education.

I was first introduced to Mark in April 2013. One of the main case study participants, we met during his graduation for another service programme in Bradford; he had successfully completed a twelve-week alcohol reduction programme. Speaking to the staff, they felt that everything had been done to support Mark; they spoke of numerous challenges they had faced. A key figure and role model to other service users, he would often be their voice; being abusive, inpatient and challenging were all the attributes that defined him. I was aware of the reputation which preceded him. Throughout his childhood, he spent extensive periods in the care system. Over several years, he suffered horrific abuse; those in authority silenced these heinous actions. A repeat offender, more than a decade of his life had been spent incarcerated. Trapped in a cycle of

offending and substance misuse for over three decades, he had attended several rehabilitation centres across the country. Working with Mark for approximately four years, I extracted a substantial period of narrated data: first entry 4th July, 2013, last entry 26th September 2016. Soon after meeting Mark, he fell into a period of relapse. When waking in the morning, Mark, like many other demoralised souls, occupied a monotonous world; he found himself residing ‘in a universe suddenly divested of illusion and light’ (Camus, 2005, p. 4). Through written narrative, he expressed his feelings of desperation and bleakness. Questioning his existence, it was clear he was unable to foresee any happiness and contentment; he was consumed with feelings of desperation and despondency. This is conveyed in the two narrative extracts below.

Mark: Wednesday 14th August, 2013: I find it hard to look to my future. I want to be right; I want a life. I want things that I have not had. I look at people with envy. I would love to live life right, but I don't. Why can't I? I have done so much talking, I am f***ed in my head, and I am still in this s***. I have been told to get a grip, give yourself a shake. If I could manage this, I would not be writing this down; the way I feel now is s***. I really don't know why I can't cope with life. If anyone can make sense of what I have written, then good.

Mark: Sunday 5th January 2014: The drink is overpowering me and is taking over my life. I want my life back, which I am getting slowly. If it was not for Colin and Jane, I would have given up. I even thought about ending my life, but that is not going to happen. The people in my life have given me hope. But in saying that I am upset a lot of the time. I get through it because I think of my future and all the people that have put so much time in for me.

During these turbulent periods, I related to his pain. His eyes are filled with self-hate and desperation; detached from the world, he was emotionally and psychologically tortured. He tells me he feels lost, he is situated within a world unique to him, and only he knows just how miserable that world is. My gut instinct, informed and stemming from my lived experiences, is often my only form of wisdom and knowledge. Unsure of what to suggest at that exact moment in time, my main priority was to find ways to support him. Having suffered from depression myself, I can directly relate to the dark, distorted and plagued reality in which Mark found himself. Rowe (1995, p. 77) maintains that ‘no one escapes depression’, and ‘the experience of depression can be the very worst experience you can ever have’. Just before my incarceration in 2001, I did not believe my life would amount to anything, and I had resigned myself to the fact that I would remain in the mis-

erable existence in which I had found myself trapped. The following reflection is an extract from my autobiography.

When awaking in the morning, I would struggle to deal with the life I was involved in. Rooted in a deep depression, I was unable to imagine any hope and meaning. On many occasions, all I wanted to do was stay in bed and hide under the duvet. The thought of having to venture into a public place, surrounded by strangers monotonously engaging in their daily routines, ignited sheer panic. When you feel life is almost not worth living, everything and anything has the potential to tip you over the edge. We become fragile, and where possible, seek places to hide from the hive of mainstream activity. You fear people and dread having to engage in a conversation; you want to become invisible, hoping that you can avoid anyone and everyone.

Mark spoke about his early learning experiences, including the physical, racial and verbal abuse suffered. In the first extract below, he revisits this painful period of childhood. As an adult, I believe these traumas and adverse learning happenings manifested in how he presented himself to figures of authority throughout adulthood. The second extract is taken from my autobiography and recounts similar experiences of abuse at the hands of primary educators. When I source moments in my own life that influenced the work I undertook with Mark, I am drawn to the following period from around the age of about six years old. Having just been reunited with my siblings after a period spent in care, I was vulnerable, scared and emotionally fragile. I had also developed a severe speech impediment, which further alienated and silenced my identity (O'Connor, 2021).

Mark: Thursday 4th July, 2013-I hated infants from f***ing day one. I could not stand it, every morning I used to cry. I found it difficult to learn, I hated school. I was bullied, and I hated it. I was getting picked on and brayed (assaulted) by the teachers. During school, I could not read and write; I tried to focus on what they were writing on the board, I could just not get it. The teacher used to come up to me, and with the knuckle of his finger, he would smack me on the top of the head. I would be rubbing my head and crying, and he would say shut up crying it was only a tap. They never wanted to help you. These days they call it dyslexia, in them days, they called you a dumb c***.

Researcher: The first time I was removed from her class was because I was unable to pronounce her name when the school register was being taken. The embarrassment was immense, my confidence was shattered, the disappointment was overwhelming; my faith and trust within the concept of an inclusive education system was lost. Even today, recalling this particular experience, evokes feelings of anger, sadness and a sense of unimaginable regret; these humiliating experiences as a young boy never leave you. When Miss Lisa first used her catchphrase ‘O'Connor get out of the room and come back in when you can

say my name properly”, I felt rooted to my chair. I could not move my legs, partly due to the shock, tinged with immense shame and degradation. This sadistic ritual continued on a daily basis, the situation never improved; nor, did I ever pronounce her name.

I never tried to overcomplicate my role with Mark or the other men; it was quite simple; education needs to be neither formulaic nor overly prescriptive. Instead, I offered myself over a substantial period, supporting and guiding the steps they took towards new adventures; I hoped they would discover a more satisfying and fulfilled existence. Far too often, the men highlighted that what mattered to them became lost in translation, pre-service objectives took priority, their needs being overlooked and neglected, and what they wanted was unimportant. Warr (2016, p. 19), writing about the concept of penal ‘education and emotional geography’, describes the ‘resulting emotional contours evinced when people space and environments interact’. He says that despite offender education’s repressive, stifling and punitive ambience, the ‘emotional space’ fosters the capacity to evoke dynamic interactions that transcend the individual beyond the physical spaces and restrictions; for these periods, they become intellectually, psychologically and emotionally liberated.

It is impossible to nurture a culture of learning by force or coercion. How they perceive others needed to be respected; the inquiry demonstrated the value of time and acceptance. Freire (1996, p. 29) says the subjugated masses have, over countless years ‘internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility’. By investing and devoting time, I found that the nurtured relationships contained depth and substance. Further, it was important that they perceived themselves as valued, cared for and appreciated. I accepted their uniqueness and imperfections, as they did mine; I embraced unreservedly the contours, ebbs and fallibilities inherent and defining of their beings. One of the first group members, Martin, recognised and appreciated the togetherness of the cohort. In the account below, he acknowledged the depth and breadth of dialogue unifying and binding volunteers.

Martin: Friday August, 8th 2014: I don’t know. It is just such a more relaxed environment. I mean, I really liked college, and I understand why college education has to have a structure, but to me, it can’t be the only way. I mean, some people don’t like that formal structure. I don’t mind it personally, but I am liking the informal structure more than the formal. Because people are chipping in (verbally contributing), and you are hearing stuff that you would otherwise normally not hear. Like today when people were writing about things which have changed, we oddly

came up with the same pattern. So, you would not get that from college.

Regardless of academic ability, the research volunteers’ voices, needs, and aspirations were embraced and respected at all times; therefore, they were my equal as individuals. I agree with Schutz (1967) that for reasons difficult to explain or theorise, there were instances when something happened, I became drawn into a spiritual and intuitive interchange. I can only describe this as an authentic meeting of minds, and a connection was made between myself and some of the people with whom I worked; captured ‘within the flow of duration there is only a living from moment to moment’ (Schutz, 1967, p. 51). Over time, essential to personal growth and transformation was the willingness to commit oneself to the process. Described by Tillmann-Healy (2003, p. 734) as ‘friendship as method’, the men who had begun the inquiry as strangers flourished, and the research investigation nurtured and sustained friendships external of the farm and training room; unity, bonding and understanding entailed the men display ‘compassion, giving, and vulnerability’. This is emphasised below:

Craig: Wednesday 9th September, 2015: We are supporting each other, and it is understanding. You feel comfortable in talking about your situation; nothing is held back, everyone sharing their problems, and the deepest problems what they have got, probably what they would not talk to other males about or other people about. And for males to feel comfortable with others and to talk about their problems, in truthfulness, it is good because you know that you are not alone in your problems, and plus you can help each other.

Even though strong attachments were formed, unveiling and disclosing deep personal meaning, the expression of feelings and thoughts was never expected; I knew that my greatest ally was time, which would determine the degree to which the volunteers felt comfortable in conversation. Deemed irrelevant and overly time-consuming to many of my former colleagues, investing quality time and treating all clients with dignity and respect was the hook that often gained me access into their world; it is worth noting that this also involved giving something of myself. The notion of time, which featured prominently in the research, proved to be much more significant than the numerical value and usefulness to plan everyday existence. Allowing the necessary time is portrayed by Mishler (1990, p. 426) as not a ‘weakness but rather a hallmark of interpretive research in which the key problem is understanding how individuals interpret events and experiences’. When working with adult offenders, the concept of time must be acknowledged as paramount in the structure of learning.

The research volunteers described how time-bound interactions and service user engagement were not conducive to self-enhancement and growth; they were neither attainable or achievable as a short-term objective of education.

Ospina et al. (2004, p. 63), in their research titled 'From Consent to Mutual Inquiry', spoke of the importance of time throughout research inquiry. In particular, they highlighted the necessity of 'taking the time to work through relationships' with participants. Allowing the men, albeit cautiously, the necessary time to embroil themselves emotionally, spiritually and wholeheartedly in the process supported the ethic that dialogue was never forced or demanded. As theorised by Buber (1947 [2014], p. 126), even in silence, communication pertains to a certain logic and reason; we reflect on the essence of our existence. He also says that 'man becomes most inexorably a question to himself, and just because the question pitilessly summons and draws into play his most secret life, he becomes an experience to himself. At a basic level, I found credence in the view by Ellis (2002, p. 400) that what works best 'is to listen to another's perspective – to try to really listen – and then add to what they're saying rather than challenge it'. The research volunteers spoke passionately about the influence of my role; the men accepted me, and spoke of the rewards of compassionate community learning. As time passed, created was an ambience, capable of touching the lives of these misunderstood and reckless personalities, I developed a greater appreciation of how their histories impacted their present perceptions and circumstances. After years slipping back into periods of relapse, something changed; Mark began to internalise notions of hope and optimism.

Mark: Friday 9th January, 2015: There is a good atmosphere between everybody. Everybody gets on, and everyone understands about everyone else's problems, and there is no judging. No one judges anybody else, it is all supportive. I have been to other services where it is all about the individual, wherein our group it is about us (collective), and I get a lot from it. Although I am speaking for myself, I can guarantee you that if you speak to the rest (other group members), they will tell you the same as what I am telling you. Most other groups and services patronise you, whereas now I feel that I am finding myself, and I feel like I know where I am going now.

When void of time restraints and with a little encouragement, there began an uncomplicated exchange of dialogue, wherefore gratifying the simplistic necessities of the men who have by some of my former colleagues been depicted as feral, unnatural and deviant in nature. Through the years, created were the conditions for evolving and unfolding vibrant discussion, the strength of

congruent interactions (Rogers, 1961), which engaged me into the world of the other, supported a more intuitive knowing; hence, as researchers, we must never 'look behind the door. The way experiences are told are in a sort of remote way, sometimes even in third person' (Niemeijer and Visse, 2016, p. 173). By encouraging them to express, instead of simply describing events and circumstances, insightful data was collated; the presence of 'previously silenced voices', and the 'overwhelming intensity of emotions spoken', evoked and unearthed heartfelt dialogue (Mizzi, 2010, p. 11). For Mark, Craig and the other research volunteers 'a mindful transformative learning experience' required that they made an 'informed and reflective decision to action his or her reflective insight' (Mezirow, 2012, p. 87). Yorks and Kasl (2002, p. 181), write about the impact of conscious lived experience as a means of provoking 'reflection and critical reflection', essential for cognitive maturation. I found that 'when we honor that voice with simple attention, it responds by speaking more gently and engaging us in a life-giving conversation of the soul' (Palmer, 1998, p. 32).

By allowing the relationship with Craig to grow and blossom as friends, I found that autoethnography complemented this way of working. For example, on Monday, 9th November, 2015, Craig communicates that "I would like to think that you view me as a friend or someone whom you are helping". This, I believe, highlighted the respect and genuineness nurtured between myself and Craig; it also moved me nearer to 'knowing the wholeness of the person' (Buber, 1957, p. 124). The building of friendships was a key feature in the cognitive and emotional maturation of the men in the research; they stood tall and proudly shared the message of hope. Recalling their journeys, they stressed the importance of keeping focus and vision; no man should be afraid of the unknown. More significantly, it helped the men to challenge their internalised fears of change. Supporting this is Armstrong and Ludlow (2016, p. 13), founders of the 'Learner Together' prison project, who, by establishing a sacred space to authenticate the depth, meaning and intimacy of relations, established an environment that championed 'symbolic social inclusion in a place of exclusion'.

In general, Mark, Craig and the other research volunteers described how transformative learning was negated and compromised in teaching and learning environments that perpetuated power relationships. Theorist Hannah Arendt (1998 [1958], p. 2000) writes about power as something never owned by any individual. She believes it is founded and maintained through the resilience and common cause of the group or social movement; as a concept, power 'springs up between men when they act

together and vanishes the moment they disperse'. Within the academic space we practiced, nothing of rank and status survived; it was left behind. A discontented and disgruntled figure, Craig spoke of wanting to work with somebody who genuinely cared; he believed I had a duty and obligation to invest time. He described how the concept of power is utilised and abused to enforce cooperation and compliance when attending offender and substance misuse services:

Craig: Friday 29th May, 2015: The point is, you don't have any control over me, you don't have any power about where I live, you don't have any power about my medication, which I am not on anymore. People hold that as power because that is their little broker. You will come and jump through this if you want your medication. You will come and jump through this if you want a house. My last education place, to get to the bit what you actually need, you have got to go through all the bull s*** first. And you (Colin) are just giving us the stuff what we need right now to move on, not all the s*** what we already know. Like you will go through (at other services) a six-week course, just to get to the last week to get something what you need, you do know what I mean?

All the participants agreed to the transformative potential and power of education; demonstrated was a capacity for personal growth. Mark, Craig, Terry, Martin, and the other participants moved into some form of pathway in which they harboured a passion and personal interest; some of the men also achieved or enrolled into more traditional forms of education and training. As stated by Frankl (2004 [1959]), being productive and contented through employment, deed or task amounts to much more than any associated financial reward or incentive received. Mark and Craig discovered how to live constructively and contentedly without acquiring or being pushed into monotonous paid employment; they were successful in gaining voluntary work placements they had previously perceived as being unattainable. The participants felt compelled and inspired to contribute back to the community; they all exceeded expectations in their successful roles as volunteers. As highlighted by Frankl (2004 [1959], p. 85), we should never lose sight of the fact that 'life does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete'. Moreover, less prescriptive and measurable outcomes were narrated to demonstrate individual progression and maturation; these changes, rewarding and imperative in the shorter-term, also support stability and entail longer-term benefits. These included remaining abstinent, refraining from further reoffending, improvements in confidence and self-esteem, and feeling more hopeful and optimistic. Towards the end of the research, the men described their lives as having a purpose, meaning, and

sense of contentment. In the first extract below, Mark speaks about his hopes and aspirations after being accepted as a volunteer working with former offenders. In the second extract, Craig conveys with pride his new volunteering role working as a mentor with former offenders with a history of substance misuse.

Extract one.

Mark: Tuesday 29th September, 2015: Well, I would hope to get a full-time job, mentoring and doing this type of work. But I am not looking at that yet, I just want to get in there (start volunteering) and learn as much as I can because there is plenty to learn, because you are always learning and get some type of qualification under my belt. I mean, when I apply for a job, which is hopefully going to be next year, I will be applying for that job confidently, with a view that I am going to get this job. I know there will be other applicants for the job, but he will have just come out of college, or he has just been to university. They (employers) want to see some experience and where he (worker) has come from.

Extract two.

Craig: Wednesday 29th April, 2015: Because I am clear minded, I can be the person I want to be. I have not got the stress of drugs, needing, wanting, having to get money to keep your habit, having to spend money, just to feel normal. And then when you have had it your head is clouded, so you can't be the person you want to be because it (life) is squashed down. And then when you get off, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel, you can see things that you could not see before, you see your behaviour.

Researcher: Wednesday 29th April, 2015: So, is there is light at the end of the tunnel now?

Craig: Wednesday 29th April, 2015: Yes, I am nearly at the light at the end of the tunnel. Twelve months ago, I could not even see a tunnel it was dark. I am seeing a bright future, if I knuckle down and put some hard work in, it does not just come free, does it?

5 Conclusion

My research demonstrated the transformative potential of education when teaching and learning is neither influenced nor dependent on accreditation's financial incentives and profits. Without the direction of traditional structure and pedagogy, tending to the basic human necessities of the men was where this inquiry started; this was always going to be the foundation of the research. In

working with the men, created was an interpersonal space 'where minds meet and new understandings can arise through collaborative interaction and enquiry' (Cummins, 1994, p. 45). Formenti and West (2018, p. 117) speak about ontological and psychological movement and growth; these momentary instances, often fleeting (Rogers, 1961), are 'rooted in the quality of our relationships with actual people'.

The finding from the research expands on the growing body of literature that is moving offender learning in an innovative, exciting, and new direction. It also builds on the assumption by Coates (2016, p. 38) that society should endeavour to seek new ways to access the 'untapped potential' of offenders; largely unknown, research by tradition has tended to view the role of offender education in the narrowest of contexts. On a wider social, educational and political scale, the research highlighted the potential longer-term benefits of community-based offender learning; this ensures that offender education 'does not stop at the prison walls' (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016, p. 11). This is important given the point made by Ludlow, Armstrong and Bartels (2019, p. 29), that 'despite some recent policy drives to extend support "through the gate" (e.g. in the UK, Coates, 2016), most relationships in prison, including educational relationships, terminate abruptly upon release'; this research demonstrated the role of learning relationships post-incarceration. Broadening research and learning to include the voices of minorities seems the only conceivable way to bridge the gap in understanding 'what works'; negative stereotypes and assumptions alluding to the learning pedigree, aptitude and potential of offenders must be challenged through the appropriate methodological inquiry and context. For education to reach out and embrace those who fear habitual learning pedagogies and practices, the article urges teachers and other offender practitioners working across different professional and vocational sectors to reflect on other means and modes of teaching that may support transformational growth and development.

For Mark, Craig, and the other research volunteers, autobiographical suffering, vulnerability, and fear manifested in a harboured anxiety about what their future held, something all too common in a service user's life. However, deconstructing this adversity in an educational context over numerous years enabled the men to make sense, as best they could, of the biographical narrative; the research participants described becoming accepting of their pasts and hopeful for the future (West, 2016, p. 35). This client-centred ethos emboldened the cohort to rise against the repressive external regimes, partly accountable for their unjust social status. Moreover, this teaching

haven and sacred 'opening communicative space' (Wicks and Reason, 2009, p. 244), ignited and instilled a sense of optimism, hope and a yearning to lead a more productive, nonoffending life. On my own, I neither changed the behaviour nor thinking of the research volunteers. However, through tailored education support, unburdened by time restrictions, a meaningful relationship developed, which encouraged some of the men to transcend through numerous 'moments of therapy', within a learning context (Rogers, 1961).

As highlighted, much of the research exploring how best to work with and educate offenders stems from government penal inquiries and investigations; the type of data, narrative and vision detailed positions the offender's needs secondary to the economic and employability-focused curriculum. In agreement with Warr (2016), Coates (2016), and Ludlow, Armstrong and Bartels (2019), a radical rethink is required regarding the role and purpose of education given offenders' complicated and adverse backgrounds, learning barriers, and the hostile employment attitudes towards former offenders seeking employment. As evidenced in this article, learning can amount to much more than accreditation; it can captivate offenders, challenging them to overcome personal biases, which they come to recognise and appreciate as negatively affecting their ability to live more productively and meaningfully. To live contentedly was represented by the men as their ability to feel happy, fulfilled, joyous, and proud of the personal steps they took. Through a yearning to discover the meaning of life, learning for the volunteers became relevant, transformative and invigorating (Rogers, 1961; Frankl, 2004 [1959]). Thus, other less established means of knowing need recognition and acceptance in mainstream academia and theory and require a more comprehensive inclusion.

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