# **Accepted version**

# **A final version of this article appears in** *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversity in Education Special Issue: Educating the Incarcerated*

# **Inside Out Literacies: Learning About Literacy Learning with a Peer-Led Prison Reading Scheme**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since 1997, adult literacy education has been of increasing interest to UK policy makers amidst perceptions/claims of a causal relationship between attainment in literacy and positive economic participation, social inclusion, and life chance transformation. With further regard to the associations documented between low literacy attainment and participation in criminal activity (Morrisroe, 2014; Canton et al 2011), it is no surprise that literacy education is currently high on the UK government’s agenda for prison reform (Coates 2016). However, research in the field of Literacy Studies suggests that many prisoners who identify as beginner readers, report feeling alienated by formal education which, it is argued, is too often ‘done to them’ (Wilson 2007:192) failing to take sufficient account of the social identities learners bring to their learning or how they want to use literacy to bring about change in their lives. This has resulted in deficit models of the prisoner as learner that impose ‘spoiled educational identities’ and fail to engage prisoners as active, agentic participants in their learning. In this paper, we draw on data produced in the qualitative phase of a year long study across the English prison estate of Shannon Trust’s prison based reading plan, to explore alternative approaches to prison literacy education that challenge the traditions of formal education and put learner identity and aspiration at the heart of the beginner reader learning process. The qualitative phase of the project involved twelve focus groups across eight prison settings and included 20 learner and 37 mentor participants engaged in the Shannon Trust peer-reading programme. We listen closely to the voices of learners and mentors describing their experiences of peer to peer learning and plug in Anita Wilson’s concepts of *educentricity* and *third space literacies* to read participants’ experiences of formal and informal literacy education. We make use of this analysis to identify and describe a ‘grounded pedagogy’ approach that pays attention to learning as social practice and enables prisoners to re-imagine themselves both as learners and social actors and to begin to connect their learning to self-directed desistence identity building. We conclude with a consideration of the implications of this work for prison literacy teaching and the potential role of grounded pedagogy ideas in the development of more provocative approaches to prison teacher education.

**Keywords**

 **Adult literacy, adult learning, prisons, literacy, new literacy studies**

**Funding:** This work was supported by a grant from the Shannon Trust

# **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last two decades, adult literacy education has been of growing interest to policy makers in the United Kingdom (UK) as perceptions of the causal relationship between attainment in literacy and positive economic participation, social inclusion, and life chance transformation have become increasingly ingrained in international discourses about education and productivity. Studies aiming to make empirical connections between crime and education (Machin et al 2010), have prompted some commentators to suggest that low literacy attainment might be a risk factor for participation in criminal activity with claims from some researchers that approximately 48% of adult prisoners have reading abilities equivalent to that of an 11-year-old (Morrisroe, 2014; Canton et al 2011). It is therefore no surprise that literacy education is currently high on the UK government’s agenda for prison reform (Coates 2016). However, research in the field of Literacy Studies suggests that many prisoners who identify as beginner readers report feeling alienated by formal education which, it is argued, is too often ‘done to them’ (Wilson 2007:192) failing to take sufficient account of the social identities learners bring to their learning or how they want to use literacy to bring about change in their lives. This has resulted in deficit models of the prisoner as learner that impose ‘spoiled educational identities’ and fail to engage prisoners as active, agentic participants in their learning. We contextualise this failure within a wider policy framework for literacy education and draw on data produced in the qualitative phase of a year long study across the English prison estate of Shannon Trust’s prison based reading plan to explore alternative approaches to prison literacy education, that challenge the traditions of formal education and put learner identity and aspiration at the heart of the beginner reader learning process.

# **CONTEXTS FOR PRISON LITERACY**

## **Adult Literacy Policy in the UK**

For the last two decades, adult education policy in the United Kingdom (UK) has been increasingly concerned with the relationship between adult literacy levels, economic productivity and national prosperity and the need to improve the former to better secure the latter. Such a preoccupation has not been isolated to the adult education sector nor to the UK, and chimes with broader political interests to align the purpose and outcomes of education with the perceived needs of the world of work. In their work on higher education policy, Jones and Thomas (2005: 618) describe this new emphasis as a “utilitarian turn”, in which the former (education in all its guises) must become “increasingly receptive to developments in the latter,” foregrounding, they argue, the economic function of education whilst back-grounding potential for personal, social, cultural or civic benefit. The development of adult literacy policy in the UK policy has its roots in government concerns about the UK’s performance in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1997 (OECD, 1997). IALS had been established in 1994 with three overall aims: to produce meaningful comparisons between countries; to understand the relationship between literacy and economic indicators of wealth and wellbeing; and to inform and influence policy decisions. Following publication of the results the then Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) commissioned Claus Moser, Chair of the Basic Skills Agency, to produce a report on how to “tackle the vast basic skills problem in this country. Moser’s report, *A Fresh Start* (DfEE, 1999) attempted to define the scale of the problem “something like one adult in five in this country is not functionally literate” (1999:1), its roots, “a sad reflection on past decades of schooling” (ibid) and its consequences, “one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy” (ibid) and recommended ten elements to be taken forward in a new National Strategy for Adult Basic Skills, including a new curriculum and a new system of qualifications.

The subsequent Skills for Life (SfL) strategy (DfEE, 2001) responded directly to these recommendations by forcefully re-iterating the economic drivers/imperatives identified by Moser,

*Combining the effect of lower incomes, reduced productivity, poorer health and the cost of consequential benefits and welfare services, some have estimated the cost to the country of poor literacy and numeracy skills to be as high as £10 billion a year. (SfL, DfEE, 2002: 5)*

The strategy then defined, and regulated through subsequent legislation, ‘priority’ groups of individuals who would be the focus of SfL, the kinds of activity they were to engage in, who would teach them, what they would be taught and the targets they were expected to reach in terms of progression demonstrated and qualifications gained. The priority groups were described as: unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment; and other groups at risk from exclusion, including parents and those identified as living in disadvantaged communities. Having characterised the ‘problem’, a framework of curricula, assessment and teacher training were developed as prescription.

## **Defining literacy**

Whilst ideas about literacy and the importance of its acquisition sat at the heart of the SfL initiative working definitions remained oblique and must be ‘read’ or re-constructed through the relationship of the strategy to the IALS tests and the representations of literacy and literacy education that can be gleaned from the SfL curriculum, assessment strategy and wider implementation framework. This included a complex diagrammatic of teacher training qualifications in combination with monitoring and inspection of ‘input’ (what teachers must know and what students were taught) and ‘outcomes’ (what learners achieved) by multiple government inspectorates including the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO), which was later replaced by two regulatory bodies Lifelong Learning UK (LLSUK) and Standards Verification UK (SVUK).

In their critique of the IALS testing process, Barton and Hamilton describe an emphasis on literacy as a set of skills or cognitive competencies that are transferable across contexts;

*In the study it is assumed that the meaning of literacy is contained in the text items in interaction with the formally described information-processing features of the task required by the test. Under this model, these meanings should be culturally invariant and features of the wider contexts in which such texts would normally be used are of no importance (Barton and Hamilton, 1998:381)*

They recognise in the IALS testing regime, a manifestation of Street’s description of literacy as a de-contextualised ‘tool-kit’, or ‘autonomous’ (Street, 1995) set of skills, in reading, writing, speaking and listening, that once acquired, enable the holder to ‘function’ effectively across a range of contexts. Having provided the momentum for a government response by defining the problem of adult literacy in particular terms, we see that these ideas provide organising principles that play out both through the Moser report and the SfL initiative that is subsequently set in motion (McDougall et al 2006, Kendall and McGrath, 2014). Crowther et al (2001) use the metaphor of the ‘literacy ladder’ to describe the models of educational practice that grow out of ‘autonomous’ model thinking. The literacy ladder describes a linear process of ‘becoming literate’ with the learner moving mono-directionally, from a deficit or ‘illiterate’ identity position at the bottom towards the promise of ‘literacy’ at the top as they acquire skills and competencies at each rung. These skills and competencies are represented as context neutral and universally relevant and pace and rate of progression is managed, monitored and regulated through a progressive series of summative, externally assessed national tests. Many exponents of this variety of literacy link its successful acquisition to enhanced productivity and envisage benefits both for the economy and for individual workers. “Businesses in the new hyper-competitive global capitalism” argues Gee (2000: 46) in his critique of the New Capitalism “march to the drumbeat of distributed systems…there is no centre. There are no individuals. Only ensembles of skills stored in a person, assembled for a specific project, to be reassembled for other projects, and shared” (ibid). Thus, improving the literacy ‘levels’ of the worker comes to be seen as an essential aspect of economic advancement and prosperity and literacy as ‘commodity’ becomes central to a political agenda that links literacy with economic productivity (Sanguinetti 2000, Gee 2000).

These ideas are rehearsed and reproduced in a review of policy documents relating to the prison sector in the UK, demonstrating the traction the autonomous model finds in the sector. Here ‘autonomous’ ideas re-surface in both the underpinning rationale for the Offender Learning and Skills Service in 2008 and the Coates review of prison education in 2015:

*The proposition is a straightforward one: ensuring offenders have the*

*underpinning skills for life...and have developed work skills, will enable them to meet the real needs of employers in the area where they live or will settle... (DIUS, 2008)*

*The importance of core employability skills, such as communication and reliability, as well as basic skills such as literacy, has been identified by research with employers who take on former offenders. Many employers…say that the ability of individual prisoners to present appropriately, be organised, accept and provide feedback in a positive way, and engage constructively with colleagues is an important factor in their hiring decisions. (Coates, 2016:54)*

Conceptualisations of both prisoners as learners and literacy as a strategy and context for learning are closely bound within what Olssen and Peters describe as a broader political turn informed by the tenets of neo-liberalism: the self-interested individual; free market economics; commitment to laissez faire regulation of markets; and commitment to free trade (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Within this paradigm, they argue, the role of the state is to create “the conditions, laws and institutions” (2005:214), the very conditions of possibility, for ‘the market’ to persist in the terms outlined above. As such, education as a state funded technology of marketisation, becomes a locale for the creation of “enterprising and competitive entrepreneur[s]” (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 315).

What is especially significant for the purposes of this paper, is the kinds of learning encounters and transactions that manifest for ‘priority groups’, most especially those in prison and secure settings, as neo-liberal subjects and recipients of ‘autonomous’ literacy education.

##  **‘Priority Group’ Learner identities**

We have discussed elsewhere (Kendall and McGrath 2014) the relative positioning of teachers and learners within a literacy ladder model and the limiting roles and identities that such a model makes available to each. Within such a model teachers, we have argued, are seen as experts situated at the ‘top of the ladder,’ their literate identities produced and reified through achievement of qualifications. Students, by contrast, are positioned at the bottom of the ladder with inexpert ‘illiterate’ identities and must be guided upwards by teachers. In this transaction, Brass argues, learning is defined in “technical and behavioural terms” with the teacher taking up a “manager of learning” role (Brass, 2014:122) concerned with “classify[ing] and diagnos[ing] populations of workers and the potential risks in managing them. Discourses of efficiency and quality, for example, regularize academic practice, narrowly defining values and successes to render them measurable. (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 7 cited in Brass 2014:122). This resonates closely with Malcolm and Zukas’ much earlier description of the teacher as ‘psycho-diagnostician:

…the role of the teacher is firstly to diagnose the learners’ needs, for example by identifying or taking into account learning styles or skills, or other individual predispositions…Secondly, the teacher must facilitate their learning by using techniques, tools and approaches which meet those needs.’ (Malcolm & Zukas 1999:3)[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘Teacher’ and ‘Learner’ are understood to have entirely different (binary) relationships with literacy expertise, expert and inexpert respectively. However, these are not simply neutral categories and the inexpert literacy identity is represented pejoratively, in some way ‘spoiled’ in its otherness to a more successful literate, preferred alternative. Street has called this the ‘great divide theory’:

…illiterates are fundamentally different from literates. For individuals this is taken to mean that ways of thinking, cognitive abilities, facility in logic, abstraction and higher mental operations are all related to the achievement of literacy: the corollary is that illiterates are presumed to lack all these qualities, to be able to think less abstractly, to be more embedded, less critical, less able to reflect upon the nature of the language they use or the sources of their political oppression. (Street, 1995: 21)

This conceptualisation surfaces in the characterisation of ‘illiterates’ in recruitment campaigns where we are invited to recognise a ‘stumped’, ‘anxious’, ‘panicky’ (LSC Black Country Move On campagin, 2004) adult, or a threatening gremlin on their shoulder (see SfL Gremlins campaign) continually on the cusp of exposing a ‘spoiled’, ‘illiterate’ identity for which they must feel shame and work with teachers to ‘fix’ (Kendall and McGrath 2014).

## **Literacy, Identity, Criminality: Prisoners as Literacy Learners**

The ‘problem’ of prisoner literacy is most often informed by large-scale reviews that tend to draw significantly on the kinds of discourses about literacy and learners described above. Making use of the approaches to assessing and testing literacy favoured by the OECD, and critiqued by Barton and Hamilton, large-scale quantitative studies undertaken over two decades have repeatedly reported concerns about prisoners’ attainment in literacy. In 1998 analysis of outcomes of initial diagnostic assessments designed for 9-10 year olds suggested that “60% of prisoners had problems with literacy and 40% has severe literacy problems” (Clark and Dugdale, 2008). Similarly, in 2002, the Social Exclusion Unit reported that 80% of prisoners had writing skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year-old child; the equivalent figure for reading is 50% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002:6). In 2008, a Prison Reform Trust (2008) study suggested 48% of prisoners had a reading level at, or below, Level 1 (the expected national school leaving level, GCSE, for 16 year olds in England is level 2). In 2015, the Prisoners Education Trust (PET) reported analysis of the then newly released government data sets on prison literacy,

*“In the first set of comparable figures for over a decade, the government has published data revealing that 46% of people entering the prison system have literacy skills no higher than those broadly expected of an 11 year old child. This is three times more than the 15% of people with similar skills levels in the adult population generally” (PET, 2015).*

This contrast between the literacy skills of prisoners and the general adult population has led to intense scrutiny of the relationship between ‘illiteracy’ and crime, particularly as the prison population has risen by on average 3.6% since 1990 in (Berman, G. and D. Aliyah 2013 cited in Morrisroe, 2014). Reviewing a decade of literature on the relationship between literacy and crime Morrisroe concludes that ‘low literacy’

*“holds a relationship with crime because it exacerbates risk factors associated with offending: negative experiences of education, exclusion and truancy, poor attainment and poor employment outcomes all hold a relationship with poor literacy skills. This perspective also takes into account that low literacy narrows opportunities available to young people and contributes to outcomes that are associated with offending behavior” (2014:22).*

Whilst this perspective resists assertion of a simple causal relationship between literacy and crime and captures a wider spectrum of conditions that might combine to influence offending behavior, the autonomous model of literacy binaries, ‘presence or absence’, ‘privation or abundance’, ‘high or low’, nevertheless persists.

Pulling together the ideas discussed above, a number of important ideas converge to create public discourse, what Gee (2011) might call Big D discourse, about prisoners, literacy and identity: that literacy can be isolated and defined as a skill set and measured to create meaningful distinctions between illiterate (deficit and spoiled) and literate (sufficient and profitable) identities; that the individual is responsible for becoming literate; that literacy learning needs are technical and can be diagnosed and learning solutions, managed by teachers, can be prescribed; that the ‘problem’ of prisoners’ ‘illiteracy’ is a persistent and highly visible one; that illiteracy and crime are relational in some way; and finally that fixing illiteracy will help fix crime. At the centre of these ideas, positioned at the nexus of illiterate and criminal identities, is the (projected) individuated but spoiled neo-liberal subject, the illiterate prisoner, unable to achieve social and economic inclusion in the heavily marketised context of a post-release world of work. The responsibility of the state is to provide a ‘fix’ but the responsibility of the ‘illiterate’ is to participate in a process of skills acquisition so that s/he is better equipped to take up an economically productive ‘included’ (normalised, unspoiled) identity. Clark and Dugdale’s 2008 review of the role of literacy in offending behaviour, *Literacy Changes Lives*, draws on evidence from the Ipsos Mori *Crime and Punishment Study* to illustrate the degree to which this Big D discourse has become assimilated into a popular public psyche. Two thirds of the Ipsos Mori respondents, they reported, believed that under-18s who have offended and who cannot read, should receive compulsory education rather than custody (2008:6). Whilst a preference for teaching over punishment might be considered a progressive response, the endurance of ‘the problem’ of prisoner ‘illiteracy’ coupled with a rising prison population and a stubborn re-offending rate for adults released from custody of 46% (MoJ, 2016), questions the efficacy and impact of the ‘fix’ that was set in motion by SfL policy to engage meaningfully with the ‘problem’ of this particular ‘priority group’.

## **Getting critical – re-thinking literacy, re-thinking prisoner identity**

Clark and Dugdale’s (2008) review of the role of literacy in offending behaviour cautions against ‘overstating’ a link between literacy and criminal behaviour (2008:3). Bringing together evidence from Australia, Sweden and the UK they argue that whilst prisoners’ literacy levels are lower than the general population, the prison population is not representative of the general population. Prisoners tend to be young males from low socio-economic groups and when compared with these specific groups literacy levels are shown to be similar. The authors challenge what they see as over simplistic linking of unemployment and offending arguing for more nuanced understandings of how unemployment might contribute to the social and economic conditions of crime. Rejecting literacy as a panacea for crime prevention they suggest that studies of prisoner literacy merely affirm the existence of wider social challenges that exist for particular sections of the UK population, “it should not be forgotten that if prisoners represent a section of society, it is a section with acute and often ignored needs” (Clark and Dugdale 2008:9). This assertion is supported by recent analysis of the Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) data sets that have replaced the OECD’s IALS benchmark assessment tests. This work draws attention to the relationship between attainment in literacy and social and economic inequality:

*The primary source of inequality in educational opportunities lies in the unequal access to a range of resources that exists between families of different backgrounds. As a general predictor of adult skills, education affects literacy directly and it is strongly associated with skills use. Education likewise plays an important role in mediating the effects of family origin on an individual’s career and literacy. Even after controlling for all the other variables in the model, the use of skills at home and in the workplace still has a notable effect on literacy. This points to some evidence regarding the consequences for skills of long, sustained periods of high unemployment (Scadurra and Calero, 2017:19.*

These claims resonate with the ideas drawn from the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which offer an alternative to the autonomous model and the restrictive binaries that it makes available for prisoners and their literacy identities. Researchers working within this alternative paradigm treat language and literacy as ‘social practice’ rather than technical skills learned exclusively in formal education. This orientation argues Street “requires language and literacy to be studied as they occur naturally in social life, taking account of the context and their different meanings for different cultural groups” (2001: 17). Barton and Hamilton’s (1998:7) five tenets offer a useful summary of the principles that underpin this position.

* *Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.*
* *There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.*
* *Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible, and more influential than others.*
* *Literacy is historically situated.*
* *Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.*

*(Barton and Hamilton, 1998:7)*

Central to NLS is the idea that literacy is not a context free, technical skills-set but a range of practices (plural literacies) deeply embedded in social and cultural interactions. Learners may bring their own definitions about literacy to the classroom space that reflect their participation in ‘non-school’ contexts and are quite likely to be ‘literate’, in varying ways, in specialist domains outside the classroom. Adult learners are recognised as experiencing functioning adult lives that involve participation in a variety of communities of practice that in turn, mediate literacies (acting in and on the world) and texts. This perspective politicises literacies and make it possible to begin to see how social identities, race, class, gender etc., intersect to position individuals in (positive or negative) relation to more or less powerful literacies, for example standard forms of English language or the ‘schooled’ practices that must be demonstrated in statutory assessment tests in English in the UK at the ages of seven, eleven and sixteen (Peim 1996, Bennett et al 2012, Kendall & McGrath 2014). Through the NLS lens then it becomes impossible to identify, isolate and ‘test’ a set of technical skills that are discrete from a more holistic notion of reading and writing practices. Drawing attention to the complexity of practice participation, Pardoe & Ivanic (2007) identify nine aspects of a literacy practice: topics and issues; purpose; audience; style and design; flexibility and constraints; roles; identities and values; modes and technologies; actions, processes and interaction; collaboration and use of sources. This helps clarify the distinction made between the autonomous and NLS lenses, that rather than skills exercised by individuals in isolation, literacy is always already context bound the “listener/reader, speaker/writer are seen not…an isolated individual, but as…social agent, located in a network of social relations, in specific places in a social structure” (Kress: 1990:5). This closes down as unhelpful the ‘literacy ladder’ metaphor of literacy expertise identified above and opens the possibility that an individual (teacher or learner) might be expert in one domain of practice and inexpert in another. Teachers similarly are sometimes expert and sometimes not. As Smith contentiously suggests “…professionals…who do not read and write anything outside of work-related material should perhaps not be called literate; if they’re not working they don’t read and write. (Smith 1989: 354). Teachers will not, cannot and neither is it desirable that they should, seek to ‘know’ all that it is possible to know about the broader field of multiple literacies and thus they must become researchers and learners within this field, acknowledging and exploring the literacy profiles of learners and they ways in which they may be expert in their life-world literacy domains. Malcolm and Zukas refer to this kind of teacher as a ‘critical practitioner’, a model that contrasts with the practitioner as psycho-diagnostician discussed above:

The educator as critical practitioner…adds a critical, social, political or ideological dimension on the process of reflection. In this sense it takes the process beyond the psychological and interpersonal, locating the practitioner in a social and, to varying degrees, political context. (1999:2)

Indeed, the two models can be seen as two ends of a continuum of ‘ways of knowing’ (Malcolm and Zukas 1999b: 2) about educational processes/practices and thereby, of what it means to be literate. Furthermore Street argues,

*if language is always contested, negotiated and employed in social interaction then the appropriateness of particular uses and interpretations have likewise to be opened to debate. It becomes impossible to lay down strict and formal rules for all time, and the authority of particular users – whether teachers, grammarians or politicians – become problematised. We all, as it were, take possession of language again rather than being passive victims of its entailments” (Street, 2001:19).*

As such, an NLS perspective problematizes the idea of a fixed and ‘spoiled’ ‘illiterate’ identity. Informed by NLS, Wilson has developed the concepts of ‘third space literacy’ and ‘educentricity’ to help think through prisoners’ relationships with literacy and literacy education in the specific context of prison.

Wilson uses the idea of ‘third space’ to understand the spaces prisoners create and sustain (Wilson chooses the term ‘defend’) between the powerful and pervasive ‘inside world’ practices that represent the constant presence and authority of the security regime, (to which prisoners are inevitably subject whether they choose to inhabit those identities or not) and the personal practices that link to and extend out of the social cultures of ‘outside world’ identities and communities and which prisoners may be keen to assert and protect:

*On the one hand, prison tries to push prisoners into an institutional space which prioritizes institutional literacy, while, on the other hand, prisoners resist by defending their personal space with contextualized literacies that carry the traces of outside world practices and activities. From what appears to be a no-win situation, the tension is resolved by the selective amalgamation and colonization of institutional space and situated literacy/ies which both constitute and are constitutive of a third space (Wilson 2000:70)*

Creating, occupying and ‘defending’ third space, Wilson contends, is an important act of controlled choice that enables prisoners to forge a sense of self and identity that makes it possible for them to create little d ‘figured worlds’ (Gee 2011) that enable them to see themselves as more than just ‘prisoners’. The notion of agency, of taking back and asserting some form of personal choice, influence or control is just as important, Wilson argues, in relation to how prisoners experience Education in prison. She uses the term ‘educentricity’ to describe the positions individuals or groups take up in relation to Education – the collection of ideas, concepts, values and attitudes that define their meaning making (little d ‘world figuring) about Education and inform the ways they position themselves (and indeed the ways they are positioned by others) in relation to it. Educentricity in her words is

*the way in which certain groups or individuals position education within the parameters of their own personal and professional experiences which then go on to influence the opinions, perceptions and understandings of the education of others – who are of course doing the same thing! From this position each group or person compares and contrasts, judges and assesses the position and meaning of education in other worlds, using their own experience as a yardstick by which to measure others (Wilson 2007: 192)*

Thinking with ‘educentricity’ enables an exploration of how prisoners may experience education in the prison context. For many prisoners, Wilson argues, “education is something that has been done to them, taken away from them, imposed, ordered, required. It is an experience that stays with them, something by which they are judged, something by which they critique their own ability and something that goes on to influence the way they perceive themselves long after their involvement with the school system and something which subsequently forms the basis of their educentric position.” (Wilson, 2007: 191) Thus, they may take up an educentric position that is suspicious or sceptical of the motives of formal education – which works with a very different educentricity - and its capacity to respect or reflect their world-view and aspirations. Wilson does not however advocate uncritical acceptance of the version of educentricity invoked by many prisoners, indeed she suggests that to “support only the negative educentricity of prisoners towards education – such as poor spelling, bad hand writing, non-affirmative experiences” would be a disservice that fails to offer a “chance to see education as something much broader that can be interesting and useful.” Neither does she feel it productive to install or impose an alternative educentric position, for example that held by practitioners or policymakers, this she suggests may represent an equal disservice “in a world swamped with qualifications, portfolios and records of achievement, do we have the right to encourage them to believe that such will automatically negate the prison record that they also have to carry around?” (Wilson, 2007: 198). Her solution lies at the intersection of educentricity and third space:

*where education in the conventional sense – a serious business, intent of raising standards, core curriculum and identifiable outcomes – moves to a place where ‘teachers treat you like individuals’…’where I can blether with my mates’…and as a place ‘to get away from cockroaches’. It has less to do with learning and more to do with the maintenance of a social identity. (Wilson, 2007: 199)*

For Wilson then, literacy education in the prison context is defined as practice that combines recognition of, and respect for, the educentricity/ies that individuals bring to learning as starting points for new learning. New learning should create ‘third space’ opportunities that enable Learners to build little d figured worlds that imagine social identities that are both meaningful to them and useful for them.

**From ‘Spoiled’ Identities to ‘Desistence’ Identities**

Like the theory of multi-literacies outlined above, the concepts of third space and educentricity emphasise the idea of mobile identities made and re-made through participation in complex social and cultural practices. Researchers working in the field of desistence argue that “the rehabilitation of offenders depends crucially on the construction of a more adaptive narrative identity” (Maruna, 1997; Ward and Marshall, 2007:280). These researchers argue that the capacity to build a ‘desistence narrative’, to imagine new stories about who they are and who and how they might be in the future, is vital to a prisoner’s chances of successful and sustained rehabilitation. Successful literacy education in the prison context would therefore need to be orientated toward supporting Learners to build new literacy identities in ways that are sensitive to the issues described above. In accordance with this view, Wilson and Reuss (2000) argue for the adaptation of the term ‘prisoner education’ as opposed to prison education, to encourage a culture that regards education as an option for the Learner to engage in agentically and one that is central to and connected meaningfully with their preferred social and cultural practices.

# **TOWARDS NLS PEDAGOGIES: THINKING WITH SHANNON TRUST’S TURNING PAGES READING PROGRAMME**

What might literacy education predicated on these ideas look like? A year-long longitudinal study of Shannon Trust’s new Turning Pages Reading Programme (TPRP) suggests that the Shannon Trust approach may offer a starting point. Resisting traditional binaries of expert/inexpert, normalised approaches to pacing and framing learning and allowing learners to connect their learning to their everyday lives, the study suggests that TPRP opens up productive spaces that provide possibilities for third space learning.

The TPRP is a peer delivered programme through which adult prisoners support and mentor other prisoners who self-identify as ‘struggling with reading’, with the aim of improving their reading, usually outside the formal structures of ‘Education’ or offender learning services and without the intervention of professional teachers. The programme is aimed at prisoners who are reluctant to engage with classroom-based teaching and who prefer a one-to-one approach. Learners have a minimum of five twenty-minute sessions with their TPRP Mentor each week. Sessions are private and Learners progress at their own pace.

The TPRP programme was commissioned by Shannon Trust in 2013 and is designed specifically for adult learners. TPRP is underpinned by a synthetic phonics approach and is attuned to the needs of adults learning to read in the nuanced context of a prison setting. TPRP comprises five stand-alone manuals and thirty Readers matched to manual levels. Readers include fiction and nonfiction and include mentor generated content. There is no element of formal assessment before or during the reading programme and all Learners progress through the manuals in a defined order. Although being primarily a reading programme, the manuals also facilitate elements of comprehension and writing development. On completion of each manual the Learner receives a certificate.

This paper draws on the qualitative dimension of a twelve-month national study of the TPRP in use across all regions of the English prison estate. The study, undertaken independently by Birmingham City University, made use of a mixed methods approach and was undertaken in two phases. Phase one of the study sought to explore reading gains made by learners over a sixth month period across 30 of England’s 49 adult prisons. This drew on an autonomous model of literacy to judge learning gains and made use of quantitative methods in the form of pre-validated tools that measured skill acquisition (WIAT II; Wechsler, 2005). Phase two made use of an NLS approach to understanding effectiveness and focused on Learners’ and Mentors’ self-expressed perceptions (Gee’s figured worlds) of how they felt working with TPRP had impacted on their capacity to act in and on the world, both in relation to their experience of life in prison and their aspirations for the future. In total, 57 prisoners (20 Learners and 37 Mentors) at eight prisons participated in phase two of the study in a combination of individual, paired and focus group interviews. This included participants from all types and categories of prison except high security.

Ethical approval was sought and gained from the University ‘s Health and Life Sciences ethics committee in addition to the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). This included permission granted by prison governors to record interviews to enable transcription and analysis.

**Thinking with Theory**

To analyse the data we ‘plugged in’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013) theoretical thinking tools from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2011) to explore the ‘little d’ (Gee 2011) figured worlds, that is to say the “socially and culturally constructed ways of recognising particular characters and actors and actions and assigning them significance and value” (2011:205), participants constructed as they shared their experiences of how working with TPRP had impacted on their capacity to act in and on the world, and the ways these accounts played in and out of the Big D discourses explored above. We also drew on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to help explore Learners’ and Mentors’ self-expressed perceptions of how working with TPRP had impacted on their capacity to act in and on the world, both in relation to their experience of life in prison and their aspirations for the future.

Learners and Mentors reflected thoughtfully on the role that the TPRP scheme had played, and or continued to play, in helping them to exercise some form of agency in relation to their experience of prison and their hopes and aspirations for the future. In their talk participants often mobilised discourses of change representing the success they achieved with TPRP as a catalyst for (world) figuring new narratives of self, identity narratives that enabled them to *be,* or imagine a future self, differently: a better parent; better prepared for work; or more capable of making independent choices. Here we illustrate these themes with extract from the data.

**Becoming a better reader**

Learners shared, and were motivated by, a common understanding that becoming a better reader would enable them to act in and on the world in new ways. For male participants this was most often related to aspirations relating to work:

*If you can’t read you can’t get nowhere in life you know, you’ll just be on the dole for the rest of your life, I don’t want to be like that, I want to do something with my life now, I want to change for the better not for the worst you know, I’ll take as much of this as I can whilst I’m in jail and it’s better for me, I don’t care what people think about us I just wanna better myself you know and this is a step in the door sort of thing you know what I mean? Progress (L)*

Whilst female participants identified a much wider range of perceived benefits relating to developing parenting roles, maintaining relationships with friends and family on the outside, intellectual challenge and increased independence: -

*Now I can help my kids with their reading because before when they asked me I wouldn’t have known how to and obviously for me to get jobs and that it’s helped me really a lot (L, female)*

*To…read my own letters from family because I don’t have phone calls really and it’ll help me to read my own letters and not depend on someone else to read my letters for (L, female)*

However, some male Learners also identified with the perceived benefit learning to read would have for their parenting and the relationship with their children: -

*I’ve got a daughter and I can use this to sit down with her, just sit with her read to her and actually help her with her homework (L, male).*

The idea of not having to “depend on someone else” extended beyond the purely practical and, whilst the number of female Learners in the study was very small their conceptualisations of independence are worthy of further exploration in terms of the insights they offer about reading, identity and social interaction and the magnitude of the personal, social and emotional investment Learners might be making when they sign up to TPRP. Contributions made by one particular learner, Alice, illustrate this. Alice had recently completed all five TPRP manuals and brought her certificates to the focus group. She was relatively young, in her mid to late twenties and a mother. She indicated elsewhere in her contributions that this was not her first experience of prison: -

*Erm work obviously helping children with their homework and day to day things, like there’s a lot of things you’ve got to read before you can do it so like cooking instructions erm say if you’re travelling…you need to be able to read right from wrong really*

In the first quote the Learner moves quickly from the pragmatic benefits of *negotiating* and *participating* in the world more efficiently, helping with homework, following recipes, travelling around, to a more fundamental, conceptual idea of *reading the world* that she describes as ‘read[ing] right from wrong. For Alice the idea of interpreting the textual world directly without the mediation of others seemed like something that had become, perhaps relatively recently, important to her.

*Yeah I think independency [sic] is one of, like a good word for it as well because it’s good to have your own independence not rely on other people and that’s what I’ve had to do quite a bit, rely on other people helping me when I need it which now I still have to make sure I’m right but I feel a lot better in myself cos I ain’t gotta keep asking other people because I’m quite an independent person.*

For Alice working successfully with TP and TPRP ropened up opportunities to act agentically and to recognise and represent herself as the independent person she felt herself to be, to make claim to an independent identity. Here she talks about how her growing confidence around taking decisions and acting on her own initiative, albeit tentatively, had changed not only the way she worked but the nature of her interaction with colleagues at work;

*I work in Stitch in Time and we have to make bags but when we work at lunchtime we can make other things and you have to read the instructions and how to do it and next steps and I have to still ask for help, but that’s because I don’t want to read it and [find out] I’m doing it wrong because it’s a lot of work otherwise but erm yeah but otherwise if I didn’t know how to read and I haven’t done none of this I would have took up a lot of their time by having to ask them ‘what’s it saying there’ but now I just read it myself and then go to them and say am I doing it right?*

*so I still have to get a bit of help to make sure I’m right but it’s made my confidence a lot better [which is] why I’m doing reading*

Alice’s new experience of agency and independence was echoed by male Learners with one describing the pleasure of reading his own letters: -

*It’s not so embarrassing because before I used to go and ask people if I had a letter can they read it for me…since I’ve been doing TPRP I can read it, I can read it to meself so it’s private, it’s not shared*

In addition, male Learners often referred to an increase in self-confidence for example visiting the library independently*, "I never thought I’d go there.”*

As a result of working with TPRP, these participants appeared to have accrued new resources (cultural capital) that enabled them to make new meanings for themselves, independently and in ‘private’, and generate new possibilities for personal and social action and interaction (social capital).

### Previous experiences of formal education

Alice’s assessment of the gains she had made with TPRP contrasted starkly with participants’ accounts of learning in formal adult education: -

*“You feel isolated in big groups, just sat there like looking at a piece of paper thinking I can’t do this”*

*I’ve been to college, outside college, but they put you in a room there and tell you to get on with the work they don’t do like one to one and it’s easier when you’ve got one to one work it’s better you know you need more time;*

Learners described feeling lost, isolated or exposed in big groups, ill-equipped to navigate the literacy requirements of completing forms for college and felt they had gained very little from the experience of formal education. Some felt they had never had a positive experience of education, whilst others felt they had wasted opportunities in the past:

*…teachers at school didn’t have time for you…I need a one on one…with a big class I couldn’t really learn…;*

*I done 14 years of education and I haven’t really learnt nothing from education;*

*…when I was in school I thought I’d be the jack the lad I’d do this and I’d do that and I didn’t want to learn but now I look back and I think I just wasted all that time when I could have learned and I wouldn’t be in the position I am in now stuck in here with nothing…you know what I mean…*

As an outcome they drew heavily on the kinds of dominant Big D deficit discourses discussed in detail above, to describe how their experiences of formal education had left them feeling inadequate, “stupid” or “dumb”.

### Learners on Mentors

In contrast to Learners’ descriptions of teachers they had worked with in the past Mentors were characterized as patient, understanding and trustworthy.

*They’ve got time…don’t rush at it and always time to listen…I need a one to one…with a big class I couldn’t really learn; (L)*

*You gotta trust him because you can’t read and write very well (L)*

That Mentors were non-judgmental, discrete and trustworthy, which seemed to be of central importance to Learners who recognized their own potential vulnerability as prisoners who were also literacy learners, mentors acknowledged that in some prison environments self-improvement through education was associated with a “stigma against knowledge [that] leave[s] some people thinking you’re like a screwboy…you’re on side with them you’re not one of us.” As such, many guarded the privacy of their TPRP sessions “yeah because it’s private, you know.”

The ‘peer status’ of the mentor was also important to Learners who felt that they were ‘on the same side’ with Mentors proactively willing and able to see things from the perspective of the adult Learner learning in a prison context:

*If you’re doing it by yourself you haven’t really go the willpower to do it…having someone there gives you that little…; (L)*

*They can see that you’re a bit stressed…; (L)*

As such many Learners reported that working in TPRP pairs was a transformative experience - “[My] confidence is much better…when I come in here [to the prison] I’m really bad [sic]…”(L) that enabled them to imagine new possibilities for the future:

*I don’t want to be in me fifties and think I could have been something…I actually wanna be something…*

*When I first came in to jail I was depressed and I thought what’s the point in learning…this is the time to do it…to progress with me reading and writing in jail as well not just for them so that I can get a job in here, because if you can’t read the signs in the workshop or cant fill in the forms or this that and the other you cant get nowhere even in jail, it’s hard isn’t it.*

Learners’ enthusiasm for their Mentors and the quality of the mentoring process were matched by the effort, energy and commitment mentors seemed to invest in the TPRP programme. The picture that emerged from TPRP interactions was a of a sensitive, generous, informal pedagogical experience negotiated proactively between Learner and Mentor according to their unique blend of need, knowledge, skills and concept making around what constitutes a good learning experience. We have termed this ‘grounded pedagogy’, to capture the inductive, intuitive way Mentors, described the way they approached the mentoring process, determined how best to respond to individual Learners and designed pedagogical encounters without recourse to formal teacher education or extant theory. This concept making, focused on locating and refining practice within the social context chimes with the ‘critical practitioner’ approach (Malcolm and Zukas,1992) described above.

### Developing ‘grounded pedagogies’ – towards third space pedagogies?

This focus shaped and constituted mentors world figuring about the kinds of pedagogical encounters they wanted to make available to learners. Mentors recognised that establishing trust with Learners was fundamental to the success of the TPRP programme:

*“If a learner can’t trust you then they’re not willing to do the work, they won’t open up, they won’t let me in. They need to have that absolute trust that you’re their friend or buddy and that you’re not there to take the piss out of them” (M)*

Mentors were also sensitive to the fact that Learners might be vulnerable to the judgements and ridicule of the wider prisoner community, where dominant educentricities might couple a willingness to learn with adherence to institutionally preferred identities and educentricity;

*I’ve got one chap who’s very, very good now and is doing extremely well in the reading programme but if someone else is at that table with me he just shuts up and he just can’t…he doesn’t like the idea of someone else knowing what level he’s at because he thinks he’s struggling.*

Mentors talk suggested that this might be more of a risk in the context of a male prison environment: -

*In general it’s (*TPRP*) quite respected because it’s a predominantly adult prison so there’s less of that stigma against knowledge but it does er leave some people thinking you’re like a screwboy, you’re on side with them you’re not one of us, but that’s very rare, it has happened in the past where people have thought that. Yeah I’ve been called that once but that was by a very closed minded young guy who was just angry because I was trying to tell him not to destroy something.*

As outlined above Mentors understood that structuring each mentoring session to suit the needs of the Learner was a crucial aspect of mentoring role and responsibility. Participants discussed their decision making in relation to the words they use around assessment and they instead refer to the progress checks that are central to the TPRP manuals and how these checks challenge previous negative connotations that surround assessment. The way Mentors choose to tailor feedback also illustrates this:

*They get scared of the word test so we never call it a test we always call it an assessment…just to see that we’re understanding what we’re reading… to make sure we’re understanding what we’re reading as well as being able to decipher what we’re reading. We can use it basically as a footstep to say, well we’ve learned this but… (M)*

Mentors also discussed what they referred to as the “comprehension problem”, their perception that whilst TPRP supported Learners to de-code effectively supplementary work on comprehension was required. They reported acting under their own initiative to “add comprehension ourselves” in pursuit of an enhanced Learner experience.

Mentors’ rationales for paying close attention to comprehension shared some of the characteristics of a social practice perspective. Their accounts made distinctions between different sorts of activities and the different purposes and actions that might be associated with each, for example the practice of reading for “pure enjoyment” was contrasted with the more ‘schooled’ assessment practice of doing a “set of comprehension questions”. Differences were expressed as a “difference of technique”. They also recognised reading to be an active process requiring some effort on the part of the reader to engage and make meaning, “As readers ourselves, I will sit and read a book and I sometime think did that actually sink in?”

Whilst Mentors spoke at length about their concerns with providing high quality support for Learners they were equally keen to assert that they did not want to foster a culture of dependence. They offered perspectives on Learner development that appeared to be highly attuned to Learner’s self-expressed quests for achieving greater independence. They recognised and respected that Learners were heavily reliant on their mentor for all the reasons discussed above but were equally as keen to encourage Learners to adopt an independent mind-set both in relation to who mentored them and how they approached their learning:

*You’ve got to get people used to the idea that this is something that they can continue with regardless of who’s teaching them kind of thing sort of thing:*

Learning to facilitate TPRP in this way was understood to be an important aspect of learning how to be an effective Mentor.

**CONCLUSION**

Whilst many Learners were very positive about the impact they felt Shannon Trust and TPRP was having on their it is important to caution against over-statement of the impact a reading development intervention might deliver in isolation. Castleton, like Scandurra and Calero (2017) and Clark and Dugdale (2008) discussed above, warns us not to background or obscure the kinds of social and economic complexities that researchers often notice in the lives of adults and young people who have not previously been successful in schooled literacy (Castleton, 2001). Her work reminds us that literacy ‘deficits’ are likely to be deeply entangled with wider structural (social and economic) inequalities and suggests that the nature of schooling, the state of the labour market, opportunities for retraining, perceptions and treatment of mental health and issues related to housing and accommodation for low earners are among the many contextual issues likely to have impacted on Learners lives and access to and success in education previously. She argues therefore that attending to literacy development alone will not resolve the structural inequalities that may have contributed to Learner’s trajectories to prison and suggests that these contextual factors may continue to frame their experience beyond the prison gate.

As discussed above Wilson shares similar concerns and asks ‘how do we validate prisoners’ abilities without necessarily drawing them back in to the educentricities of policy and practice’ (Wilson, 2007: 198) which often position them, through a discourse of deficit, as failing/failures.The answer Castleton suggests is to focus on ‘change’, by which she means

“how people can and want to use literacy to bring about change in their lives, then literacy, and consequently the people looking for support, can be viewed in a far more positive light. Emphasis is then given to what clients have, what contributions they can make, and perhaps are making already within their networks, rather than on what they lack. Such a framing allows for recognition of the ways in which people use literacy as a resource shared by members of communities of practice in which participants assume different roles for different purposes”. Castleton (2001:66)

The data explored in this paper suggests that working with teaching and learning strategies like those facilitated through TPRP can provide adults with starting points for change orientations that impact significantly on their world figuring and concept making about identity. We begin to illustrate here how important these gains are in terms of opening up opportunities for reflection on being (*who am I?*) and doing (*how do I want to be in the world?*) which in turn lead to new possibilities for action: being more independent, exercising agency through decision making, working towards a future goal. Whilst these new capacities will not resolve the structural relations that will inevitably continue to position Learners and Mentors in social and material ways on release they may have the potential to support greater resilience, the beginnings of desistence identity building and a re-adjusted educentricity.

In this respect, it is possible to suggest that approaches like that adopted by TPRP, whilst no panacea for the range and complexity of challenges Learners and Mentors face, may begin to facilitate the kind of education (with a small ‘e’ to connote the ‘grounded’ informal, un-schooled experiences identified above), at the meeting point of ‘educentricity’ and ‘third space’, that Wilson argues to be a necessary condition for prisoners to reconnect with learning. TPRP does this by enabling Learners to *re-identify* as learners by stepping back from deficit accounts of what they can’t do, *de-familiarise* the ‘norms’ of formal Education about to how, where and when to learn, and *recognise* instead the conditions within which they can be successful. As such we argue, there are important lessons to be learned from this ‘inside’ prison approach for teachers, mentors and other professionals working with adult literacy learners in ‘outside’ settings.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)