

THE RE O P E R



The Career Experiences of Black Prison Educators

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March 2026

REPORT

Within the department you know we're kind of like this little separate bubble from the rest of the main prison. So within that, you know, the [group of] people that are in there [provide] a beautiful opportunity to set a culture that is separate to the hardcore nature of the prison environment. We can cultivate something different.

Chloe (prison educator)

There's very poor resourcing of prisons for actual rehabilitation. You know, a lot of it is designed to kind of subdue men and to divide them and keep them unhealthy. What an unhealthy system and situation!

Omar (prison educator)

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A foreword by Jo Grady

This report contains groundbreaking research, looking at the career experiences of Black educators in our prisons.

Based on face-to-face interviews with Black prison educators, it finds a workforce motivated to join the profession, to change lives and give back, to motivate and support Black prisoners in a system broadly deemed to be unjust.

But this research also finds a workforce facing poor and unsafe working conditions, unsupportive managers, vulnerable offenders often with mental health or addiction issues and the challenges of a career path warped by racism.

The point of this research must be to push for radical reform to the system, and the testimonies of Black prison educators it contains must be used to shape it.

I'd like to personally thank all those who spoke out, including those who felt forced to leave the profession because of the stress and grind of their daily working lives.

On behalf of our union, I promise to use your insight to campaign for the real and lasting change both educators and prisoners deserve.

Jo Grady
general secretary
University and College Union

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A foreword by Maxine Looby

Black prison educators face a unique and often invisible set of challenges — challenges that have gone unrecognised, unsupported, and under-researched for far too long.

Operating at the intersection of education, custodial sentences, and systemic racism, these educators carry a weight that extends beyond their formal job descriptions. Their work is vital. Black teachers in prisons deliver far more than qualifications; they offer lifelines, hope and recognition. Through personal and social development programmes, identity-affirming content, and decolonised curricula, they create opportunities for learners to reconnect with their humanity, reclaim their narratives, and imagine life beyond prison walls. These educators model resilience, provide hope, and hold space for transformation — often under conditions that are emotionally taxing and structurally inequitable.

Yet while they are expected to uplift, inspire, and reform, Black prison educators themselves are not immune to the very systems they seek to challenge. They, too, experience the daily realities of structural racism — limited opportunities for progression, isolation in predominantly white prison institutions, and the burden of being both representative and role model for prisoners. There is often an unspoken expectation that they will serve as cultural bridges for Black and racially minoritised prisoners, offering understanding rooted in shared heritage and lived experience. While this connection is powerful, it also places an emotional and professional toll that is rarely acknowledged, let alone supported.

Despite these systemic barriers, Black prison educators continue to lead with empathy, professionalism, and unwavering commitment. They foster emotional intelligence, promote critical thinking, and challenge narratives of deficit. They open doors — not just to education, but to self-worth and determination, identity, different choices and new beginnings. And yet, their leadership remains significantly underrepresented at management and leadership level. Few Black educators occupy positions of power within prison education. This absence is not due to a lack of talent, experience or capability, but a reflection of deep-rooted institutional inequities that must be addressed if we are serious about justice — both inside and outside the classroom.

As UCU President (2024–25), I made a clear and unapologetic commitment: to bring the voices and experiences of Black prison educators to the forefront — not just to raise awareness, but to drive lasting change. This means building powerful networks of solidarity, crafting bold policies that confront systemic inequities head-on, and demanding more — more recognition, more support, more leadership opportunities. Our work as a union must be rooted in action, not just intention. Together, we will challenge the status quo and build a future where Black educators in prison settings are valued, protected, and empowered to lead.

This foreword honours the labour, love, and leadership of Black prison educators. It is a call to recognise their struggles, amplify their voices, and remove the barriers that continue to constrain them. For without them, the promise of prison education — as a tool for transformation and liberation — remains incomplete.

Thank you to all the Black prison educators who generously gave their time, insight, and experience to this research. The work you do is not only transformational — it is both

humbling and inspirational. Your courage, commitment, and leadership light the way for change.

To the entire team at NIANRO Consulting for your patience and unwavering dedication to developing this vital piece of work. Your expertise and care have shaped this project into something powerful and lasting.

The UCU staff members who went above and beyond to bring this work to life. Your commitment to justice, equity, and meaningful change continues to drive our union forward.

Maxine Looby
UCU President (2024-2025)

Acknowledgements

The NIANRO team would like to thank the prison educators who took the time to speak with us for this research. We recognise that, in many cases, this meant reliving challenge and trauma and hope that we have done justice to their experiences. We would also like to thank colleagues at UCU including Jo Grady, Angela Nartey, Maxine Looby and Ronnie Kershaw for their support throughout.

Terminology

UCU use the term 'Black' in the political sense to refer to people who are descended through one or both parents from Africa, The Caribbean, Asia, (the Middle East to China) and Latin America. It refers to those from a visible minority who have a shared experience of oppression. While we recognise this usage, we have used the term "Black, Asian and minority ethnic" and, on some occasions "racially minoritised" in the body of the report to remind the reader of the diversity in history, demographic and experience of these groups and how they are positioned within UK society

Executive Summary

Aim

- ➔ This research examines the career experiences and strategies of a largely invisible demographic of instructors: those teaching offenders within UK prisons. Specifically, it is interested in why racially minoritised prison educators enter the profession, their experiences once there and how their experiences might be affected by race and racism.
- ➔ Little is known about this demographic of educators including their number within the wider prison education population, their distribution across the prison estate or their career trajectory. This study, commissioned by UCU, the union representing these teachers, offers an initial glimpse into their experiences.

Findings

- ➔ We spoke with 24 educators in total. A small number of these had left the profession. They represented a mix of classroom based and/or outreach provision. The majority were based outside of London.
- ➔ Our findings paint a bleak picture of educators' career experiences. While they were motivated to enter the sector to "give back" and, in several cases, help those who shared their racialised identity, their work was characterised by a series of challenges.
- ➔ The prison regime, inadequate and often unsafe teaching space and unsupportive managers were identified as creating persistent stress and hindrance to their ability to teach effectively. Opportunities and processes surrounding promotion were opaque and educators expressed concerns that white colleagues and those lacking substantive experience of prison education were most likely to progress in the career ladder.
- ➔ We were also struck by the reports about the offenders themselves. These were men who presented with mental health issues, learning difficulties, addiction and aggressive behaviour. Our sense was of a demographic left behind or underserved by society whose principle engagement with education, boundaries and adult life skills was through the educators involved in this study.

Implications of the findings

- ➔ Despite widespread and dedicated recruitment campaigns which included support from the Mayors' Office for Policing and Crime, other criminal justice organisations and the later offer of vouchers, take up to the study was slow. We suspect this was influenced by a series of demands on colleagues' time including a second project running concurrently to this one which involved the same respondent group and structural changes within the sector which impacted educators' contracts and therefore priorities.¹ This set of experiences has led us to position the project as a pilot study offering a series of themes for discussion and potential future research.

¹Most notably, the Ministry of Justice announced in April 2025 the results of a competitive commission of prison education contracts known as the Prison Education Framework. This would have had a direct result on prison providers and, as a result, educators' contracts and terms of employment.

Context

The government website for the prison and probation service states that being a teacher in prisons is not “your average education role”. It explains that educators aim to help adults and young adults (aged 15 to 21 years) gain the confidence and skills they are expected to need when they eventually leave custody, reconnect with family and reintegrate into society (His Majesty’s Prison & Probation Service, accessed 2025). The subjects taught vary and can include developing functional skills in English and Maths, vocational or trade skills in barbering, hairdressing, catering and construction and, life skills such as budgeting and time management. In short, prison education is seen to play an important role in supporting the rehabilitation of offenders and, ideally, improve their prospects for future employment.

PRISON EDUCATORS

Relatively little is known about the experiences of prison educators, their overall number within the prison estate or their characteristics (UCU & Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA), 2021). Recent figures submitted as evidence to Parliament by the Ministry of Justice indicate that there were 1640 full time equivalent educators employed across the four main prison education providers² (MoJ, 2021). However, this is not an accurate figure. UCU & PLA caution that it does not include tutors teaching in Welsh prisons or in some contracted out prisons. Figures reported in 2016, though dated, indicate that the number of educators then was around 4000 (Coates, 2016).

UCU and PLA carried out a survey to better understand the profile of prison educators and their experiences of working within prisons (UCU & PLA, 2021). They received responses from just over 400 prison educators. Around three quarters of respondents (73%) were female and a similar proportion of the overall number were aged 45 years and over (UCU & PLA, 2021). This reflects a tendency for this population to enter prison education later in their careers. Over 80% of survey respondents identified as white British with the remainder coming from a Black, Asian or other minority ethnic background. The report’s authors argue that this contrasts with the general trend within further education where around 16% of staff are from these backgrounds. They also note that approximately 18% of the sample held a degree or other postgraduate qualification as their highest qualification and around one fifth possessed a PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). This corresponds with earlier research which highlighted that prison educators are a highly qualified group (Rogers, Simonot and Nartey, 2014) with prior experience of education and teaching including within further education colleges, secondary schools and private training providers (UCU & PLA, 2021).

Prison education as a profession is beset by challenges given both the nature of the environment and learners’ particular needs and difficulties. In an educational video produced by the charity Education Support, Stephen Boyce discusses his typical day as a prison educator. Like many educators, he tends to teach for three hours in the morning and then another three hours in the afternoon. Facilities are limited. There is no internet and mobile phones are forbidden in order to prevent prisoners attempting to access them (Education Support, 2017). While remarking that elements of the role could sometimes be fun, he is clear about the limitations:

¹ Milton Keynes College, Novus, People Plus and Weston College.

...there are lots of limitations working in prisons but also some great challenges. You have to look at these limitations as challenges and work out ways of getting around... not around them but working with them and working to your advantage with them. Teaching in a prison is a real vocation... [emphasis in original]

Stephen's comments can be viewed in the context of a 2018 study examining the experiences of 288 prison educators (Meek & O'Connor, 2018). The findings make for sobering reading. The authors report teaching staff feeling undervalued, under supported and under-resourced. Notably, they point to an expansion of the teaching brief to include duties more commonly associated with uniformed prison staff including escorting prisoners and carrying out security checks. They also discuss the ways in which the mechanics of the prison regime work to deprioritise education and the challenges of dealing with offenders:

Their classes are disrupted by a regime which fails to prioritise – or even facilitate – education. They are left alone and are required to manage violent and difficult behaviour, drug use and mental health problems in their classrooms, typically for lengthy periods of time with no comfort breaks or administrative assistance. They lack support from uniformed staff and senior managers and morale is low.

Meek & O'Connor (2018: 1)

These experiences naturally beg the question of why educators are drawn to working in prisons. The aforementioned Hidden Voices report published by UCU and the Prisoner Learner Alliance (2021) reveals that prison educators are motivated to join the profession to make a difference. They are committed to supporting offenders to build their confidence and self-esteem and to helping them take a new direction in their lives. Education is seen as integral to this.

However, the challenges experienced once in the role often outweigh initial motivations and retention remains a problem across the sector. A report published by the House of Commons Education Committee expressed concern about the degree of attrition amongst prison educators and the number of vacancies. They note a tendency for appointments and more money to be offered to agency workers rather than long-standing and serving teachers (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022).

When asked about the improvements they would like to see to the sector, educators point to the need for ring-fenced lesson preparation time and career development opportunities that complement the specifics of the role and the broad range of issues presented by offenders. Quite reasonably, they wanted to be able to teach without concerns for their safety. They also want to meet, collaborate and network with educators from different prisons and the wider education sector as a means of supporting and learning from each other (UCU & PLA, 2021).

BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITY ETHNIC PRISON EDUCATORS

Little is known about the specific experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic prison educators. Available evidence indicates that Black educators in particular are underrepresented within the profession relative to the number of Black prisoners. Racially minoritised educators are also underrepresented at senior management levels including amongst the education provider workforce (see for example UCU & PLA, 2021).

While they have in common experiences with the wider prison education population, video interviews with Black prison educators carried out by the University and College Union (who funded the present research) reveal that they are often in a minority within the workplace

and experience racism and racial microaggressions from white educators. They also point to a series of concerns about career progression arguing that opportunities tend to be afforded to white peers or those who are not from the prison educator sector (UCU n.d.1; UCU, n.d.2).

The present research seeks to offer greater insight into the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic prison educators. Specifically, it is interested in the relative role of race in shaping their experiences and the strategies they use to help them manage the work environment.



Methodology

This research explores the workplace experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic prison educators including their motivations for entering the profession, reasons for continuing in the role and whether they had considered leaving. We were also interested in how they might practically cope with anticipated or actual challenges they faced in the prison environment. In order to obtain a broad set of experiences, we also sought to speak with those who had left the sector.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In addition to carrying out a detailed literature review, the summary of which is included in this report, the team also spent time learning about prison education and the role of prison educators in order to help inform the design of the research tools. We met with UCU's recently established Network of Black prison educators in order to introduce the project and to hear directly from them about the types of themes they felt we should include in the study. Two members of the team visited prisons, one in London and one outside of London, during which we observed lessons and spoke informally to a small number of offenders. We spoke with hub managers who shared useful contextual information about changes in prison education and the relationship of the major education providers with prisons. We also established a small advisory group of educators to provide feedback on the initial interview schedule and to support the recruitment process. The aim was to build our understanding and accurately reflect the language and culture of the sector within our research process.

RECRUITMENT

Calls for respondents were shared on social media, via racial justice and prison-related organisations, email groups and networks. We also drew on our professional networks with those working in policing and the criminal justice system to facilitate reach. UCU posted calls to its mailing lists and to its WhatsApp group of Black prison educators though we acknowledge that these are small, self-selecting groups and may not represent the wider Black prison educator population in terms of diversity of experience and views.

Respondents were able to indicate their willingness to take part in the project in two main ways: by responding via the email or via the QR code provided on the call for respondents. The latter took them to a project information page and Calendly form where they could indicate their availability for an interview. Consent forms explaining confidentiality, how the data from the interviews would be used and respondents' right to withdraw were shared and signed prior to the interview.

There was considerable volatility in responses to our call. In brief, despite repeated postings and reminders, take up was slow and even when we did receive interest, respondents often failed to show up to interviews despite confirming with us the day before. Following discussion with UCU, and despite reservations about the potential ethical implications, we later offered a £30 voucher to encourage participation. We also increased the number of evening slots for interviews to coincide with educators' typical work schedule. UCU continued to provide support by carrying out a number of direct telephone calls to educators listed in their database, however, the ultimate impact of these cumulative actions on numbers remained limited.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

We carried out one-to-one semi-structured qualitative interviews with 24 prison educators. Interviews were conducted online and each lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. They were recorded using both digital recorders and AI. The AI generated transcripts were later read and edited for accuracy. The majority of the coding was done by longhand, identifying common themes and areas of dissonance as relevant to the research objectives.

A summary of respondents is provided in Figure 1. To protect the anonymity of each educator, we have aggregated categories to a generalisable level rather than providing the detail we have available. Accordingly, location is recorded as Greater London or outside of Greater London rather than naming specific regions. Length of service is recorded under three headings: five years or less, six to 10 years and 10 years or more allowing us to speak to those who were relatively new to the service as distinct from those who had several years' experience.

With regard to ethnic group, UCU use the term "Black" in the political sense to refer to racially minoritised or underserved groups. While we recognise this usage, we sought to allow space for the different ways in which racially minoritised groups are positioned and treated within the workplace. Therefore, we asked respondents to self-define their ethnicity and initially considered these descriptions in relation to the emerging findings. We have amalgamated some of these categories, merely as a heuristic device for the purposes of this report and to protect individual anonymity.

Figure 1. Profile of prison educators involved in the study

	Pseudonym	Location	Ethnicity	Years' experience	In post or Leaver	Classroom/ Outreach
1	Ama	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
2	Charlotte	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Outreach
3	Chloe	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
4	Emily	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	6 to 10 years	Current	Classroom, Outreach
5	Emma	Outside G. London	Withheld	10 years or more	Leaver	Classroom
6	Ethan	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Outreach
7	Geraldine	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	6 to 10 years	Current	Classroom, Outreach
8	Grace	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	6 to 10 years	Current	Classroom, Outreach
9	Hannah	Outside G. London	Withheld	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
10	Isabel	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Current	Classroom
11	Jasmine	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Current	Outreach
12	Leila	Outside G. London	South of East Asian	10 years or more	Current	Classroom
13	Leomie	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
14	Lucas	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	10 years or more	Leaver	Classroom
15	Maya	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Current	Classroom
16	Mona	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
17	Ola	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
18	Olivia	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	10 years or more	Leaver	Classroom
19	Omar	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
20	Paul	Greater London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Leaver	Classroom, Outreach
21	Sophia	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Current	Classroom, Outreach
22	Susan	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	5 years or less	Current	Classroom
23	Tasha	Outside G. London	Black African or Caribbean	10 years or more	Current	Classroom
24	Zahra	Outside G. London	South or East Asian	5 years or less	Current	Classroom

Figure 1. shows that most respondents currently work as educators although as we will explore in the findings several of these had considered resigning from their position. Four respondents were “leavers” and no longer worked within the profession. We were able to speak to several educators (75%, n=18) who worked in various areas outside of London. This was important given our assumption that the majority of Black prison educators would be located in London in line with their distribution in the population data.

Eleven of the 24 respondents (46%) had been an educator for five years or less so were relatively new to the position. Ten [42%] had worked as a prison educator for 10 years or more. In line with available demographic data on prison educators, the majority of our respondents were women with men making up just 17% of the respondent group. These patterns in distribution are similar to those reported by UCU and the Prisoner Learner Alliance in their survey of approximately 400 prison educators (UCU & PLA, 2021). Those of Black African or Caribbean heritage comprised 63% (n=15) of the educators we spoke with. Those of East and South Asian heritage made up 29% (n=7) of the sample.

Within the prison, teaching can take place within a designated classroom space or the educator goes to the offender(s) on the wing or some other space. This is referred to as outreach. Around two thirds of the educators we interviewed taught within rooms allocated as classrooms.



Findings

This section is organised to correspond with prison educators’ career trajectory from point of entry to potential or actual departure.

We begin by discussing how they became aware of prison education as a profession and their motivations for applying to the role. The following section describes the context in which they work, their views and assessment of prisons, prison staff and the prisoners themselves.

Then we discuss the conditions in which they work (Workplace conditions), specifically: teaching space and resources; pay, promotion and progression; relationship with managers and education staff; paperwork and racism. In Workplace conditions, we note that while some respondents highlighted aspects of the role they enjoyed, the number and details of the challenges took precedence in our conversations with them. Finally, in ‘Strategies to manage workplace issues’, we consider how they manage in light of the challenges and close by examining their thoughts about or reasons for leaving.

LEARNING ABOUT PRISON EDUCATION AS A PROFESSION

Many of the respondents we spoke with entered prison education having completed several years in a prior and often related profession. That is, most had a teaching background and, in many cases, a degree and specific teaching qualifications (also UCU & PLA, 2021). However, becoming a prison educator was not part of a carefully curated career plan rather, as the following extracts reveal, respondents had learnt about prison education by chance:

....I wasn't looking or seeking anything to do with the [prison] business. I didn't even know about prisons to be honest with you. (...) it just so happened (...) someone from the prison spotted me at an event...Maya

*...I was looking at some sort of teaching post and it was a jobs' fair that [education institution] was having. (...) I'm thinking, "I wouldn't mind (...) you know teaching (...) that seems alright". I never even thought of offender learning. Didn't even cross my mind. So, I got there and realised, "Oh my God, this is (...) prisons (...)". [It was] very accidental. (...), it wasn't something that I was particularly going out to look for. I hadn't even heard about sort of offender learning.... **Sophia***

Despite their lack of prior awareness about the profession, both Maya and Sophia had worked as educators for over 10 years implying that they had maintained some ongoing commitment to the role. Another respondent, who we have not named here to protect their anonymity, described learning about prison education during their PGCE programme which also had provided the opportunity to work with young people whose backgrounds mirrored those they would later work with in prison. In this case, prison education felt like a natural segue from their experiences during teacher training.

THE ATTRACTION OF PRISON EDUCATION

As mentioned, prison education was rarely a concerted or deliberate choice. However, respondents revealed that it gave them the chance to utilise and consolidate skills acquired from positions held prior to entering the sector. The flexibility of the role was attractive to those who had personal or other commitments. Geraldine, for example, describes being able to juggle work around a family situation:

*[A family member] was [ill] and [they] needed lots of hospital appointments and I kind of changed my life to fit around [them]. I thought I need a job where I could just be in one place, so I could get to [them] if anything happened. So, I started looking and I got with an agency... **Geraldine***

For Omar and Hannah, the decision to become an educator corresponded with a period in their lives when they were exploring new ventures. Yet, even in these cases, the choice to enter prison education was a somewhat ad hoc decision. Omar, for example, spoke of "...giv[ing] it a go" and Hannah of a desire to simply "do something different" with little explicit consideration or awareness of what the work entailed. Similarly, prison education allowed Leila to change the course of her career although she also spoke of a desire to find a position where she could help others:

*...[family member] always used to say to me that "remember education is the key to everything and never give up on your dreams (...)". I thought from that point if I can't do what I'm doing, maybe I should go back into something that I can incorporate what I'm doing and then give it back to the public. **Leila***

Zahra's motivations to become a prison educator correspond with Leila's. One of the educators with a teaching background, Zahra questioned the extent to which she was making an impact within the compulsory education system. Prison education seemed to offer a more effective way of utilising her skills and, importantly, of affecting change:

I wanted to go into prison education, as corny as it sounds, to make a difference because I think with schools... it's kind of like everyone goes through the same process and you think, "am I making a difference? Is there anything that I could offer that other people can't etcetera". But with prison education, it just seems like that (...) of a lot of people, for example, have fallen through the net in the past through whatever reason and so, it's

trying to give them opportunities that they may not have had and you hope that it'll make a difference to not only their lives but I guess their family members' lives... Zahra

Chloe, who had also taught within the compulsory education system, went further in her justification arguing that neither it nor the penal system were effective. In her view, both were “massively authoritarian”.

Emma, who had been located in a prison outside of London, described having had prior knowledge of the prison sector through voluntary work. However, it was her faith that eventually made her decide to be an educator:

you should be doing something with that (...) faith. It should be outward. (...) I look upon [prison education] as my vocation (...). It was my whole vocation for life.

This notion of giving back or contributing to a greater good was a theme that was raised across a number of the interviews and corresponds with the findings of previous research on the motivations of prison educators (Rogers, Simonot & Nartey, 2014). For our respondents, motivation tended to be informed by three overlapping themes: an intrinsic recognition or appreciation of education and the opportunities it could afford; a concern about incarcerated Black, and sometimes Asian, men and, finally, what we describe as a commitment to advance or support the Black community. For Black respondents, this latter motivating factor was intrinsically connected with having a shared or collective racialised identity and, as a result, an understanding of the experiences and the systemic barriers that could come with this:

...I had always been interested because I thought, 'there's [sic] just so many people in our society who need that extra help'. So, I thought it would be a really good thing to do. And in terms of career development, I thought, [it] added another string to my bow. But I think the driving force was "but for the grace of God" - not that I ever had a criminal background or anything - but there are just so many people who have been in prison that shouldn't actually be there. Paul

Both Paul's and Zahra's earlier extract convey a sense of injustice: a concern that the system does not operate fairly. In this context, a shared racialised identity served as a point of cohesion narrowing or inflecting the absolute distinction between offender and educator. Grace also speaks to this:

There are a lot of Black and Asian men locked up behind the bars and when I see them and because (...) I'm a mother as well that hurts me a lot. It does hurt me a lot when I see white lads as well. I mean they're all the same. It's not about the colour but because the ethnicity and because of the cultural value, I can relate more or they can relate more to me. [emphasis added] Grace

We explore this relationship between the offenders and educators in greater detail later in the chapter Working with offenders and, specifically, consider the role of race and gender in shaping this dynamic.

EXPERIENCES OF WORKING AS A PRISON EDUCATOR

The section is divided into two parts: Working with prison staff and offenders and Workplace conditions. In the first, we examine the educators' views and experiences of working with prison officers and the impact of this on their teaching. We then discuss educators' relationships with offenders which are variably nuanced, rewarding and challenging.

Prison staff and offenders

Unsurprisingly, respondents described prisons as complex, difficult environments in which to work although moments of reward sometimes existed in the relationships they forged with offenders and other education colleagues. However, the findings indicate a relatively dichotomous relationship with prison staff.

Working with prison staff

Respondents rarely described a constructive or collaborative working relationship with prison officers, a view compounded by the perception that officers themselves had questionable backgrounds and motivations for accepting the job. Lucas, one of the four respondents who had left prison education, explained that a dubious past tended to have a bearing on the relationships prison officers forged with offenders:

The officers sometimes they're kind of dodgy in the first place, I would say, and they kind of become even more dodgy in a prison. Don't forget also they're in a very difficult environment with some of the most difficult people. So, generally the population are [sic] good but sometimes you get some really difficult ones like [name of prisoner]. (...) he's a very intelligent kind of prisoner and he's very good at manipulating people. I've seen officers run round for him, you know doing their little chores. Lucas

Paul, like Lucas, had left the profession. He also remarked on prison officers' backgrounds, making a connection between individuals with a perceived longstanding ambition to hold a position of authority and, amongst some, a predilection toward punishment:

A lot of them have retired but there were many officers in those days who (...) [had the view] (...) "hang them high but don't rehabilitate them, they don't deserve this". So they were often working against us which was awful. You got a minority who were working with us. (...) even up to last year sometimes I was saying... many of us would say, "aren't we supposed to be working on the same side?" (...) you still get some officers...it tends to be the younger officers who tend to be more willing to engage with the education department. I think a lot of it had to do with (...) that unfortunately one got and sometimes still one gets a category of person, it could be of either gender, who either didn't get to join in the Armed Forces (...) but the appeal is always to do a job that involves wearing a uniform, a job that carries authority. Paul

As Paul explains, the view held by some officers that prison should be a place of punishment as opposed to rehabilitation served to undermine prison education and, by implication, prison educators themselves. Both he and Hannah, a classroom based educator working outside of London, described how the prison regime, that is the management and co-ordination of prisoners' movements across the estate, impacted on education:

If there's something going on in the prison (...) for example, if the prisoners have got an appointment, then they'll end up missing the whole of their educational section because it's quite hard to get somebody to escort them one-to-one when their appointment's

finished. So they end up missing the whole of the session and that's to do with the regime. (...) I would say that would be the most challenging. Hannah

... one of the problems (...) was the officers often used to get the men to the classes quite late. It might be that they brought them up if you were lucky 6.15pm, 6.30pm so they would have lost half an hour (...). Sometimes, it might have been as late as quarter to 7 almost 7pm and then they would be taken back at 7.15, 7.30. Paul

Sophia builds on the point conveyed by Paul and Hannah, insisting that officers at her prison also failed to manage offenders in line with stated protocol:

[My] number two [challenge] is probably having to deal with prison officers who don't particularly do their job. And as we've had major staff turnover and some prison officers that come down to education don't necessarily know the routines down there. Their job is to supervise these lads and [they are] not necessarily supervising them especially when we're talking about not vaping in the classroom and yet they allow the lads to come off the wing vaping (...) and I know this could stop because there are other prisons who have gone vape free with no vaping, no smoking, no nothing. Sophia

Isabel was concerned about leaving her safety in the hands of prison officers most of whom, in her opinion, were not physically fit enough to be sufficiently responsive when the situation demanded it:

...I'm not saying that the security when something kicks off...I know they're there and [I] can press the buzzer and they take about five minutes to get there because most of them are not fit ... They sit down there and they get a cup of tea from [the] canteen like they're having a comfort break like this just taking their time ... (...) you get some really good officers, really good officers. Yes, and a few managers within the prison that [are] really good. The rest of the officers? God help me! Isabel

As we will examine in the sections that follow, prison officer diligence and reliability was just one aspect of a series of challenges that educators faced.

Working with offenders

Offenders presented with a wide range of behavioural issues, mental health needs and learning difficulties which shaped their relationship with educators, classroom dynamics and the likely extent of their educational progress. However, irrespective of their status, offense and presentation, educators worked to establish particular relationships and interactions with them that went beyond the formalities and power dynamics of their relative roles. The interviews with Sophia and Isabel, both of whom had worked within prison education for over 10 years, exemplify this point well:

I don't look at them as criminals. I look at them as learners. They happen to be in this particular environment which is a closed environment. Again, I always tell my lads you know, "I'm your educator. I'm not your incarcerator. So, my relationship with you is a whole lot different than your relationship with prison officers. My mandate is to enrich your life and give you things that you might not have been exposed to or learned when you were on the outside..." Sophia

That's how I saw myself, as a facilitator of learning. I don't like the word teacher. I still don't because it sounds a bit too academic for me but a facilitator of learning. Isabel

Sophia's use of "my lads" as opposed to using the definite and more distancing definite articulate "the" [i.e. the lads] along with foregrounding their identity as learners, works to reframe the power differential between the two groups. It also conveys Sophia's investment in and connection with them. Both Sophia and Isabel spoke about working in relationship with offenders and later proceeded to delineate the significance of their role as Black women in informing this dynamic. Isabel spoke of feeling "a connection" when she arrived in the classroom and seeking to portray the significance of this in her work, a move that was not necessarily understood by white colleagues:

...when I got in the classroom, I just felt a connection and I just got it and I dress that space to make it represent me as a Black woman. I feel opposition to that because most of the colleagues where they (...) appear to be white or in a certain way and back then (...) some of them you know didn't like what I was doing, [felt] a bit uncomfortable by what I was doing, but I still did. I weren't [sic] going to make it dilute me as a person. Isabel

Sophia was sensitive to how, as a Black woman, she could be perceived by offenders but pushed back on this positioning instead foregrounding values which centred on respecting her role as a teacher, the environment she had created within the classroom and, a sense of responsibility amongst the prisoners:

I will become mother, girlfriend, baby mama, you know, and I tell them and because my big thing is I like to (...) keep my classroom very tidy and everything is all in its place and because I want them to come down and see that this is a safe environment (...) where you know they can sit there and not think that anybody is going to judge them or look at them in any derogatory way. So, I tend to kind of make them responsible for keeping that environment as clean and as tidy as when they walked into it and they walk out of it and leave it the same way. (...) I tell them (...): "I'm not your mother. I'm not your girlfriend. I'm not your baby mama. I'm not your piece on the side. I am your teacher and I am not any woman that's going to pick up behind you. So, you need to do this yourself!" And they get it. Sophia

Isabel and Sophia's comments situate teaching as a person-centred endeavour that extends beyond the prescribed curriculum. They talk about helping offenders develop skills which they perceive as essential to navigating life. Race and gender matter to both women, though in slightly different ways, in how they position themselves, relate with prisoners and the (teaching) environment they create.

Disrespect, aggression and fighting

However, Sophia and Isabel's approach stood out against the widespread accounts we heard from other respondents about offenders' aggression and volatility. Prison educator C, who was relatively early on in her career as a prison educator, was reluctant to work with younger prisoners:

My worst thing was when (...) the agencies said they needed someone for under 18s and I've heard about the under 18s and I said, 'I'm not going there'. And they said, 'Well, you can't say that just based on what you've heard unless you experience it yourself, then really you shouldn't sort of have prejudgement'. So, I thought, 'Okay, well there's some truth in that'. And I did [a few] weeks and then I said, 'No' because I wanted to hit one of them and I thought, 'No, it's time to go.' The disrespect was not for me. I went back to the 18s, the 21s. [Prison educator C, outside of London]

Olivia, who no longer worked as an educator but had been in the profession for some time, mirrored Prison educator C's comments explaining that offenders not only "talk back at you (...)" but they could be rude and aggressive and went out of their way to be intimidating. This was stressful and exhausting and even though during the lesson she put on "a strong face", afterwards she needed a drink to calm herself down. Similarly Jasmine, a London based educator of several years' standing, told us that some prisoners would spit at and swear at members of staff heightening existing tensions. She also disclosed that prisoners often asked educators and other staff to bring in illegal items, such as drugs, from outside of the prison. These requests, though reported, seldom resulted in sanction:

...we're seeing a lot of offenders who are really bad getting rewarded for no reason. So those are a lot of the things that I find challenging that sometimes your hands are tied and you can't do anything about ... [someone] actually giving you a letter with a list of drugs to bring in and you've reported it, you've done everything you need to do and then you're seeing that particular person rewarded in a different way. It doesn't feel that there's no sanctioning [sic], you know, across the board. It doesn't always seem that it's fair...Jasmine

Outreach was perceived as a way of managing learners who had behavioural challenges, were likely to get into fights or who might be reluctant to engage in classroom based group sessions:

... in classroom you will have young men and you can expect the dynamics would [sic] change very frequently. You can and you cannot expect anything all the time. So, when you're in outreach I think [learners are] much more supportive and cooperative with the teachers. They trust you more because you give them one-to-one contact that has been missing in their lives. They feel very special when they get the one-to-one. Most of the issues which I find for these learners are that they have never been in proper group setting. Grace

However, regardless of the teaching location, educators were also challenged by the nature of prisoners' individual cases and schedules which limited their ability to provide consistent education (also see Working with prison staff). This, along with mental health and behavioural challenges, disproportionately impacted those prisoners who were on remand or in for relatively short sentences.

Self-harm, suicide and death

Respondents were in consensus about the prevalence of mental health, emotional challenges and addiction issues amongst offenders. Prisoners presented with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm and sometimes had drug problems. Educator B, who was based outside of London, felt a sense of responsibility about the failures of the prison system especially in light of the number of deaths that had occurred where he worked:

...you've got guys that are dying sometimes you know we had about [a number of] deaths last year and you know I think you [as an educator] think that you're part of that. Prison Educator B

As Educator B intimates, educators generally felt ill-equipped to deal with such challenges. Leila, who is based at a prison outside of London, explains:

There should be more training for staff in terms of the challenges that we're facing with the prisoners. So, when it comes to the self-harm, when it comes to the emotional

baggage that these prisoners have, whether it comes to them, I know they have all the professionals around them, but at the end of the day, as educators, we see the prisoners [most of the] time. (...) up to six and a half hours a day, banged up in a classroom: three and a half hours in the morning, 3 hours in the afternoon, hardly any breaks. We get to see them more, but what training do we have? We don't have any training when it comes to their baggage. We've only got the training of the education system, but we don't have the other training that they [prisoners] expect us to deal with.

Leila makes a compelling case for educators to be trained to deal with offenders who self harm and present with “emotional baggage”. Her comments also reveal a sense of vulnerability and need not just on the part of the prisoners but also for those teaching them yet our interviews did not reveal a clear picture of holistic support for either the offenders or prison educators. This may be a topic worthy of further study. Rather, we heard of instances where though there was protocol in place, it was not followed consistently. This was the case for Ola, who like Jasmine who we discussed earlier, reported following protocol when “a student is under the influence or something (...)” only to find it was not necessarily followed.

While outreach as opposed to classroom teaching was sometimes used as a means of managing certain offenders, this was also the case for Art which tended to be used as a pseudo therapeutic tool. We have removed pseudonyms from each of the extracts that follow in light of the sensitivity of the subject:

They often will send people to me [the art department] who have rather severe mental health issues, including people that are significantly self-harming, suicidal

[prison educator A, outside of London]

The prison uses art as a kind of mental health therapy, a cheap form of mental health therapy... (...) I enjoy that I can actually you know provide some creative relief for people there. [prison educator B, outside of London]

Overall, educators described a volatile environment where they were left to teach and problem-solve with inconsistent support either from prison officers or, as we will discuss later, their hub or education manager. As we saw earlier, this left Chloe critical of both the compulsory education system and its ability to support those “kids who are getting kicked out of the classroom” and prison reform arguing that each had “minimal positive impact”. Omar, felt similarly, arguing that prisons were too poorly resourced to be able to prioritise rehabilitation and instead seemed to be designed to “subdue men and divide them and keep them unhealthy”.

WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

This section considers the work-related conditions including the physical space in which educators were expected to teach and teaching resources; pay, promotion and progression; paperwork; educators’ views of their relationship with other education colleagues and their experiences of racism. We close the section by exploring the ways in which prison educators seek to manage and respond to the challenges they face.

Teaching space and resources

As already discussed, prison educators had to be prepared for offenders’ unpredictable and sometimes aggressive behaviour and have strategies in place to manage the prevalence of learning difficulties and mental health issues they presented with. Classroom based teaching

was subject to the vagaries of the prison regime and the timeliness of prison officers in manoeuvring prisoners to and from classrooms and, outreach was often used as a mechanism to manage reticent or especially challenging offenders. Alongside these difficulties, educators frequently struggled to find teaching space that was suitable for instruction:

We teach in some dodgy situations. Sometimes some wings...there's no classroom so you're literally on a landing in the corner. You pull up a few chairs and you're with the guys on a landing. Now you can imagine what that's like. You're trying to...everybody's coming over, they're vaping, they're having full conversation with your guys. [Yet], you're trying to teach. It's terrible. **Charlotte**

As Charlotte explains, when there was no physical classroom, educators had to improvise or make do with finding ad hoc space in which to teach which, in turn, invited disturbance from other prisoners. Paul described having to pass lesson content to an offender through a cell door because the only rooms available were in too poor a condition to use:

I was having to (...) stand outside [one man's] cell, pass through whatever work he needed to do, discuss with him what he needed to do, and try my best to actually teach him...

Paul went on, in the interview, to detail the effort he made in order to find suitable teaching space:

*...I would try [to] run around the wing trying to see if there might be an available room but most of the rooms on the wings weren't equipped for teaching. They're often in a poor state. Some were...or many presented a health and safety hazard as well. (...) Sometimes it might be that the desks were all the way down here [gestures to demonstrate their low height] (...) or there might be some kind of sofa in there which was low slung and you weren't well anchored but you just had to do the best you could. Sometimes, there might be the odd room where there might have been a desk, (...) [or] any kind of table which was filthy (...) I would clean [it] up and try to teach whoever it was in there. Most of those rooms because they weren't equipped for teaching, couldn't actually [allow] (...) more than three students at a time...**Paul***

Emily, who offered both classroom and outreach based teaching sessions, corroborates Paul's experiences. She explained that while these environmental challenges impacted teaching they also represented a serious safety concern:

...we have been going on to the wings to teach in makeshift classrooms and you know they're not nice. Sometimes they're not clean and we're not safe. [I often teach on the top floor]. [Sometimes] there's [sic] two officers about on the landing, sometimes there's not, but they're very busy (...) and sometimes you can't even see them. And I know that sometimes they probably don't have the full complement of staff because sometimes you can't see an officer. The room that I was teaching in for many months (...) had no [internal] windows. (...) It's supposed to have a window to the landing so that the officers, should they be about, are able to see what's happening in the classroom. But my room didn't have that so, anything could have happened in the classroom (...) nothing has happened, but the risk was definitely there. **Emily**

Line or hub managers were regarded as unsympathetic and unsupportive in the face of these experiences. Paul told us that managers denied that conditions were as bad as he had described and Charlotte explained that their presence, albeit not necessarily welcomed, was

in fact contingent on whether teaching took place in a classroom or outreach context:

*... in the education block when the tutors are in the classrooms, managers are always coming in. (...) they're just giving them a lot of grief. But outreach, the managers don't come out. When we're on the wings teaching - the outreach teachers - the managers don't come out to see us. **Charlotte***

*When she did raise concerns, managers dismissed the difficulties as a mere characteristic of outreach teaching: "Oh, wait, it's just that's outreach education. You have to make the best of it" **Charlotte***

The lack of healthcare and teaching resources was also raised as a problem by some respondents. Jasmine explained that health related support was often contingent on funding and assessment processes out of their control. Emily, a London based teacher, told us that educators often took matters into their own hands:

*I work for [an] education establishment. Ask me how much money they spend on resources! Everything that I have, I bought for myself. And I don't mind doing that. I really don't mind. **Emily***

Those, like Emily, who were committed to supporting learners ended up spending their "...own money buying glasses from [high street bargain store] because people [offenders] come in saying they can't see" because of the long wait to see the optician.

Pay, promotion and progression

Some educators told us that, notwithstanding the challenges, they obtained a degree of personal satisfaction from the work they carried out with prisoners. However, as mentioned earlier they largely felt unappreciated and unsupported by hub managers who were described as showing up when not needed and lacked appropriate managerial and leadership skills:

There is general unrest amongst staff anyway. There just is a general mismanagement, sloppy style, inconsistency, poor you know role modeling. It's just awful. It's poor pay as well, you know so there's just general upset and

disgruntlement amongst the staff. So, to a level, there's a bit of a shared experience [amongst educators] in that sense. [name withheld]

This lack of support also pertained to career development which, educators reported, was characterised by a lack of transparency and institutional barriers that were often shaped by race:

*I think most of us are aware that when it comes to management at certain levels, it's all white in [name of education provider]. So, if the prison population is significantly non-white (...) that should be reflected in their management structure (...). It's a ceiling for us because either we become hub managers or we stay as tutors and the hub managers have been in post for years a lot of them. (...) We don't get opportunities to act up you know and get you know experience in supervisory or management level roles. **Emily***

Similarly, Mona complained that "We [Black and minority ethnic prison educators] always kind of hit that glass ceiling" despite the extra labour required to build relationships with white offenders and staff. Susan, though in post for less than five years, was able to point to the unfairness in the system and felt undervalued for her contributions:

Those that moan the most seem to get heard. And I just got on with my job. I would be in early. I'd be in quarter to 7. I'd be leaving there like 6pm sometimes, sometimes half past 6.

And it was after I left I thought, “I’m never doing that again because no one appreciates it”. No one appreciates it because it’ll be someone that does half the job and they get promoted. They get offered a job. They get an opportunity to climb up the ladder.

Relationships with managers and education staff

This section builds on themes raised previously about the nature of the relationship between the hub manager and educators. Given the tone of the comments, we have elected, in several instances, to remove the pseudonyms as a further way of ensuring respondent confidentiality.

We noted a recurring theme of favouritism by managers which, in respondents’ experience, manifested in who was offered promotion opportunities, who was supported and whether rumours about individuals were enabled or shut down:

It’s [sic] just a lot of favouritism in the workplace. There’s a group of people that are basically located upstairs. They look down on the teachers located downstairs and it’s like a division that’s been created. And I usually don’t take sides. I’m in the middle. I just want to get my job done and go home. But I’ve kind of analysed both groups, and what I’ve noticed is it’s very cliquey upstairs and the majority of people upstairs are managers and other teachers I don’t like or get along with... They sort of make them just start rumours and it’s just not a nice environment to work in. It’s very bleak.

Prison educator E

*The management, if they like you, [you] get all the help and you get all the support and if they don’t like you, you know it. You know which staff the managers like and which staff they don’t. Yes, it’s obvious, it’s obvious as day and night. **Charlotte***

Respondents describe a sense of ‘them and us’ with managers as perpetuating division and unfair practices. Prison educator D explained how poor management spread and was often copied by staff members:

*...I do believe unfortunately, the way the hierarchy is set up in the management usually you know it will be the horrible people that become managers is what I see... The managers will lose all their integrity. Well, you know they say they have [integrity] but they haven’t got any. Usually they lose it all and you know they’ll [be] doing [wicked] things whatever to cover their back whatever ... The kind of rottenness in those departments usually comes from managers I would say and the weaker members of staff get corrupted. **[Prison educator D]***

Such behaviour increased distrust and the sense of working in an unsafe environment. Educator C explains:

.... working with [certain] staff members that make[s] the job very difficult in itself. (...) some of my other colleagues that I’m quite close to are not having [sic] supportive or pleasant members of staff. And I think that puts you in a vulnerable position because you’re spending more time with prisoners because I’m teaching them in the classroom. And sometimes it’s a bit scary to say this, but I feel more safe with prisoners than I do with some staff members. Yeah, because my students sort of like they don’t get me in trouble... they don’t back chat. They don’t start rumours.

Emma expresses a similar sentiment when she discloses that she does “actually” like working with the prisoners because “for most of the day, I’m actually nowhere near my manager”.

Educators also reported inconsistency and a lack of transparency in the ways that grievance or capabilities were handled and Paul voiced concern that performance management processes disproportionately affected racially minoritised educators. This may warrant further examination. One respondent felt her work and lessons were subjected to increased scrutiny. Another reported hearing that she was likely to be made redundant at very short notice. Support from the Union was seen as inconsistent in some of these situations.

Paperwork

The amount of paperwork was repeatedly raised as an encumbrance on educators time and, apart from Omar who stood out amongst those we spoke with because he barely had any, was met with frustration and incomprehension about its ultimate purpose:

*Some of our paperwork is just ridiculous... it's a spreadsheet and it's a progression report and some of the paperwork that they give us there isn't enough time to do that paperwork and you're taken up during your lunch hour (...) You know, I have to look and scrape every little bit of time in order to make sure that I get the paperwork that they want from me done and given to my hub manager or whatever the case may be. And like sometimes a lot of this paperwork is duplicated. **Sophia***

*When they start a course, there's [sic] six separate pieces of paper they have to fill in for each learner. Yes. Six. Six different documents! **Charlotte***

The amount of paperwork was particularly annoying for Charlotte who argued, "Ofsted don't look at that paperwork. It's a waste of time". Paul had worked in prison education prior to documentation becoming the norm and, in his view, the stark contrast and impact on teaching between the two periods was evident:

...with the changes to funding and what [with] particularly the Conservative governments that we'd had for so many years (...)... [came] the introduction of more and more documentation. Everything that you could possibly think of had to be documented. It's always about what they see, what they deem as being proof that people are learning, that people are attending but it's just gone through the roof. I'm not so naïve as to think that you can't have any kind of documentation. Of course, you have to have some kind but they turned us into I think (...) accountants and office managers, and the worst thing is (...) teachers are actually spending far more time on documentation than actually teaching and learning.

Racism

Given the small sample size, we have avoided recounting specific examples of racism to avoid identification of individual respondents. However, we note that the examples shared with us related to subtle forms of denigration and judgement that could be categorised as "everyday racism". That is, educators did not report explicit incidents where racism or skin colour was discernibly announced. We note, however, respondents' comments about promotion and progression which were seen to be biased in favour of white colleagues.

Everyday acts of racism included prolonged stares or comments about traditional or religious dress and, in one case, the mishandling of this attire during standard security checks by prison officers. And Paul and Omar, despite their longevity in the role, reported being mistaken for prisoners on more than one occasion. However, as Lucas explained, racism generally made itself felt through an "unspoken (...) undertone" that was very hard to prove.

Unsurprisingly then, educators were often uncertain whether or not an incident was racist and, in any case, did not know to whom they should report it.

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE WORKPLACE ISSUES

The challenges of the prison environment, lack of support from managers, ongoing difficulties in finding reasonable and safe spaces in which to teach along with the issues presented by offenders themselves, naturally took a toll on respondents' well-being. Many spoke about how hard it was to switch off and leave these stressors behind:

*Psychologically and emotionally, it drains you. It drains you so much that you can come home and you just lie down so exhausted that you sleep. And that's because like I said, we have not got the training ... So, the first few years, it was fine. And I was (...) running around, you know, trying to chase things up and trying to help everyone do their job etcetera: things that weren't even in your job description. And I realised I was doing too much, and I needed to take a step back when I'd come home ... and that's when it dawned on me, 'Leila, you need to stop. You need to take a step back, you are bringing too much home that you can't do' ... I was bringing that emotional baggage back home with me. **Leila***

*The prison stays with you. When you go home, it stays with you. I feel like (...) I get to spend most of my time at work in a prison and then I get released, I go home and I go back to work 12 hours later. So, I just feel like I'm a prisoner myself in a way like it's basically...I would say it's another form of being institutionalised. **Ola***

Coping strategies varied. Charlotte, who was relatively new to the profession, used physical activity and drew on her faith as a coping strategy:

*I go to the gym three times a week. I go to the gym and all my frustration is taken out in the gym. I [have a faith] as well. So, I pray, I pray a lot every morning, every night (...): 'Lord, please do not let me lose my mind'. **Charlotte***

Charlotte also took notes of every formal and ad hoc meeting or instruction from her line manager so that if she was ever questioned about her decisions or actions, she was able to provide written evidence as a means of corroboration. This act – a protection mechanism – speaks clearly to the low levels of trust in the relationship. Emily, like Charlotte, also drew on her faith as a form of protection and as a way of deflecting the lack of support and appreciation she received from managers. She explained that this helped to look after her mental health:

*I do have a strong belief in God. I think I remember reading somewhere that people who believed in a higher power and the rest of it tended to have better mental health in a way because we've got something to pin everything on (...) you don't then let everything rest on you because I don't mean [to say that] I don't care if my superiors don't rate or appreciate what I'm doing because God sees it ... So, I would say that my mental health in that respect is alright. **Emily***

Leila, who earlier detailed the weight of the emotional baggage this work inflicted on her, responded by seeking to reduce her hours and, by introducing a thought experiment predicated on her mentally locking the environment away as she locked the doors of the prison on her exit home:

I would take deep breaths and say, 'Right, this is it now. This is your work. You are leaving it here. You are going home to your [partner], to your children. You're going to have a nice dinner and we're going to chill' ... I would then put the radio on full blast and drive home and that would be my time to like you know recharge myself. And that's how I did it because like I said, there is no training for us is there? Leila

Chloe, though relatively new to the role, told us that one of the reasons she had been able to sustain the work thus far was because "I've literally kept my head down and just kind of sucked it up". Unsurprisingly, given their experiences, several of the respondents we spoke with had considered leaving their post. We examine this theme in the section that follows.

LEAVING THE PROFESSION

Four of the twenty-four respondents we spoke with had left the profession due to workplace grievances or disputes. However, several others had considered leaving or had attempted to do so. Ola regretted turning down a position external to the prison sector, insisting that if that same opportunity were now available she would "jump at it straight away". Emily considered that it might be beneficial to leave since while she enjoyed working with the prisoners, the same was not true of her experience with managers. She reasoned that if "they were to find a reason to sack me (...) then maybe I would have the impetus...I'd have to think of something else".

Tasha, who was based outside of London and had worked as a prison educator for over 10 years, wished she had left sooner:

I wish I'd not stayed on because prison education has declined and I think everybody's vying for positions. There's no money. There's no funding. So, you're the last person on the pecking order to get training and not just for myself, but everybody, you know. It needs a renaissance. I think prison education, it's struggling.

Like Tasha, Mona had thought of leaving even though by comparison she was relatively early on in her career. She had even sent an email to her manager to that effect:

I have [thought of leaving]. It's been more to do with just like the difference in the way we're being supported and it's more with the paperwork side of things. I did actually say to the manager, I did mention about leaving saying 'then maybe I'm not the (...) tutor you need here then if it can't be done' I wrote... I wrote a long-winded email to tell [them] (...) how I felt with other issues going on that again they didn't take seriously.

Ola, also new to the role, spoke of wanting to leave in the first couple of years and only remained in post because she had found mentorship and support from another educator who was facing their own difficulties: "we just vent to each other whenever something happens and I feel like it is a form of therapy". Yet, despite this, it was clear that the role had taken its toll:

I've definitely reached a stage in my career, in the prison system as a Black educator where I just don't really care anymore what happens. I don't care anymore. Like I've reached the point where I've taken a lot of things that have happened at work and I've continued to be resilient but there's nothing that I can do from here onwards ... I'm not going to say I'm giving up but I've completely stopped caring as much as I did at the start. I'm not as passionate.

Discussion

Our findings paint a bleak picture of prison education (UCU & Prisoner Learner Alliance, 2021; Meek & O'Connor, 2018; Rogers et al, 2014). Educators face poor, unsafe working conditions, unsupportive managers, vulnerable offenders often with mental health issues and the challenges of a static, opaque career path.

Our research has revealed additional challenges and considerations with respect to Black, Asian and minority ethnic prison educators. They are motivated to join the profession due to a wider commitment to giving back or, in many cases, supporting Black men in a system broadly deemed to be unjust. Race sometimes acted as a point of cultural cohesion, understanding and empathy increasing educator's commitment to foregrounding life skills that they hope will hold offenders in good stead when released. Racism, where mentioned, was seen to manifest in subtle form through a disregard or disrespect by white colleagues for respondents' cultural interests and practices. Racism and race were mainly mentioned in the context of managerial decisions about promotion, where it was viewed as a persistent barrier to progression. The fact that the management team of one education provider was predominantly if not exclusively white, was seen as evidence of the lack of transparency in promotion and implied disinterest in foregrounding offenders' cultural needs given the ethnic mix of the prisoner population.

In line with previous research about prison educators, respondents shared accounts about the difficulties in being able to carry out basic teaching duties due to inappropriate and often unsafe classrooms. This was compounded by a lack of teaching resources leading some educators to take on the expense and time of purchasing content themselves.

The most damning of our findings pertain to both the offenders themselves and education managers. Offenders presented with a complex range of challenges including mental health needs, learning and behavioural difficulties. This sometimes manifested in aggressive and intimidating behaviour and prison officers, if available, could not be relied upon for timely intervention and support. Addiction was also a problem with some respondents sharing accounts of offenders being under the influence of drugs and also requesting that educators and other staff bring in drugs from the outside, an act which is unlawful. Though educators reported following protocol to report such instances, they told us it was rarely followed.

Even in the context of accounts about suicidal ideation and death, we were most struck by educators' experiences with education managers. They consistently reported a lack of support, harassment and a failure to make promotion and progression opportunities transparent. Managers were often portrayed as incompetent, inefficient and as pivotal in cultivating a climate of distrust.

Understandably, these cumulative experiences took a toll on educators' health and well-being. Some mentioned relying on their faith as a way to cope and a small number of our respondent group had already left the profession at the time they took part in the study. Several others regretted not pursuing earlier opportunities to leave or held leaving close in their sights.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PRISON EDUCATORS

We asked respondents about the changes they felt would improve their experiences. Some suggestions speak directly to issues of race but others are relevant to the entire prison educator population and mirror those from previous research (e.g. UCU & PLA, 2021; Meek & O'Connor, 2018). We note that many have policy, financial and practical implications:

- Black, Asian and minority ethnic prison educators should visit each other at their prisons as a way of fostering a deeper community and more support for each other
- Introduce a buddy system for Black educators so that they can offer one another peer support
- Fund and introduce therapy for Black prison educators led by racially minoritised therapists attuned to the complexities of race and racism
- Introduce training for prison educators so that they can better support prisoners' presenting with mental health and other needs
- Embed improved recognition and understanding of cultural and religious practices, traditions and festivals across the prison estate
- Implement fair promotion processes that will increase ethnic diversity amongst management teams
- Union processes and decisions need to be transparent and consistent during grievance and related processes
- Less paperwork and remove duplication of content
- A requirement for dedicated lesson preparation time which is not impinged upon by paperwork
- Appropriately qualified and trained managers

AREAS REQUIRING FURTHER INVESTIGATION

We have identified several areas that the education providers themselves and/or UCU as the union representing the sector may wish to explore further.

- How can data be better used to assess the number and profile of prison educators?
- How might providing educators with tools and skills in psychotherapy support their practice. For example, what minimum skills would be helpful and how might this substantively improve relationships with and outcomes for offenders?
- What are the potential benefits of introducing clinical supervision for educators to support them in their role?
- What practical inventions can be introduced to improve the safety of educators within the prison environment?

There are also matters which sit beyond the purview of this research, the providers and the union and speak to the need for policy reform within the compulsory education system, parenting and social support:

- Early interventions in education to support those most in need

- Mental health support for young people, especially men, in the education system
- Parenting skills for underserved populations
- Initiatives to support young people, especially young men from underserved communities, engage beyond their immediate environment

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Produced by University and College Union, Carlow Street, London NW1 7LH

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