



**THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING
OF PRISON EDUCATORS
WORKING IN THE UK**

March 2026

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Acknowledgements

Education Support would like to thank all the prison educators who took part in the research for this study, without whom this report would not have been possible.

Our thanks also go to Mr Adewale Adeniji for his facilitation of the focus groups, Prof Nicola Rollock and her colleagues at Nianro Consulting for their expertise and collaboration throughout the project, Dr Sharon Walker for her insights about racial justice and to Maxine Looby, UCU Immediate Past President, and Angela Nartey, UCU Policy Officer, for commissioning this important work.

FOREWORD BY JO GRADY AND MARIA CHONDROGIANNI

Teachers working in prisons have some of the most challenging jobs in education. Working with learners whose experience of life is often harsh and complex, they strive to create an environment of trust and respect, where prisoners feel motivated and supported.

Prison educators see the difference they make and feel a real sense of achievement. They transform lives and find their job really rewarding.

But this report paints a less positive picture. It finds that many prison educators feel their working lives are scarred by high stress levels and heavy workloads, leading to a decline in their mental health and wellbeing.

And it finds disturbing differences in the working experiences of Black prison educators, with racism at work a common occurrence for many.

While parts of this report make uncomfortable reading, it provides evidence that we will use to inform policy and power our union's campaign for meaningful reform of the prison education system.

We'd like to personally thank all those who contributed and make a promise that we will use your voice to press for lasting change in the sector.

Jo Grady, general secretary, University and College Union
Maria Chondrogianni, president

FOREWORD BY MAXINE LOOBY

Prison teachers work in the most demanding and under-recognised environments in the entire education sector. Despite their commitment and dedication, the very real and serious challenges they face often go unseen, unheard, and unaddressed.

Teaching in prisons is unlike any other educational setting. Many prison estates are in disrepair—plagued by cockroach and vermin infestations and crumbling infrastructure. Classrooms are frequently inadequate and unfit for purpose. Teachers are expected to deliver high-quality education to learners with a wide range of needs and abilities, often with limited resources and in conditions that are, at times, unsafe and unacceptable.

Health and safety concerns in prison classrooms are significant. Teachers regularly face exposure to psychoactive substances, experience racism as a workplace hazard, sexual harassment, threats of violence, and work in poorly ventilated, overheated rooms. These are not minor inconveniences—they are serious obstacles to effective teaching and learning.

Yet despite these conditions, prison teachers remain professional, compassionate, and committed. They teach with empathy and resilience, working tirelessly to support learners in custody—not only to achieve qualifications but to develop the emotional, social, and intellectual skills needed to rebuild their lives beyond their prison sentence. Meaningful prison education has a crucial role to play in reducing reoffending.

Prison teachers do far more than deliver lessons—they offer hope, guidance, and the foundation for change. But working in such harsh and often psychologically unsafe and distressing conditions inevitably takes a toll on their own wellbeing.

As UCU President for 2024–25, I made a clear commitment to raise awareness of the impact prison teaching has on educators' mental health and wellbeing. This research isn't just about highlighting their experiences—it's about using that insight to inform and strengthen our union's support and commitment for prison teachers.

As a union, we have a duty to ensure our members are equipped and protected. That means targeted support and training, adequate resources, and policies designed to ease the daily pressures and challenges faced by those who teach in prisons.

Their voices must not only be heard—they must be amplified, respected, and acted upon. For too long, prison educators have been expected to carry the weight of a broken system in silence, their experiences sidelined, their needs ignored. That cannot continue.

It is their professional experience that must guide us, shape policy, and drive meaningful reform. Because no one understands the challenges—or the potential—of prison education better than those delivering it every day.

Real change begins by truly listening to their concerns—and acting on them. It means standing with prison educators in the fight to transform a broken system, and ensuring their insight drives the change that is so urgently needed.

The research presented here, carried out by Education Support, is a crucial step in that journey. This is more than just a collection of data; it is a powerful body of evidence that captures the voices, struggles, and resilience of prison educators. We must now use this research to push for systemic and meaningful change within prison education

Thank you to all the prison educators who contributed to this research. Your dedication, honesty, and hard work are both inspiring and profoundly humbling.

To Education Support—thank you for your commitment to producing this important and groundbreaking research. Your work is a vital step toward lasting change.

And to the UCU staff who went above and beyond to make this possible—your efforts are deeply appreciated. Thank you.

Maxine Looby

UCU Immediate Past President

FOREWORD BY SINEAD Mc BREARTY

Education Support Chief Executive Officer

We were delighted to be asked by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) to undertake this research. Prison educators are an often-overlooked part of our education system, yet they play a vital role in shaping futures, for the individuals they teach and for all of society. Their work is transformative, as education in prisons is one of the most powerful tools we have for reducing reoffending and supporting rehabilitation. It offers hope, skills, and the possibility of a different life.

But this report asks, if those delivering prison education are stressed, unsupported, and unwell, how can we expect them to make the life-changing impact that is possible?

The findings of this report are stark and deeply concerning. We already know, through our annual *Teacher Wellbeing Index*, that our education workforce is in the grip of a wellbeing crisis. Yet prison educators are working in some of the most challenging environments imaginable. It's no wonder they have even lower wellbeing scores than both the general population and the wider education workforce. Almost half (45%) are at risk of probable clinical depression. Stress and anxiety are endemic, with nearly nine in ten reporting high stress and more than a third having taken time off for work-related mental health issues in the past three years.

These figures should alarm us all. They speak to a workforce under immense pressure, operating in conditions that are often unsafe, with racism being a regular feature of working life for those from global majority backgrounds.

The prison sector itself is facing acute challenges including, overcrowding, staff shortages, deteriorating infrastructure, and rising levels of violence and drug use. Against this backdrop, prison educators are expected to deliver high-quality learning to individuals with complex needs, often in environments that lack basic resources and stability. They do this because they believe in the power of education to change lives. But belief alone cannot sustain them indefinitely.

This research makes clear that urgent action is needed. Perhaps most importantly, stakeholders across the system should consider what the purpose of prison education is and how that purpose can be achieved. The economic dynamics of the prison education are evidently undermining the possibility of delivering on the potential impact that could be achieved. We must recognise the unique pressures of prison education and ensure that

those working in this sector have access to robust, systemic wellbeing support. That means more than token gestures. It requires opportunities for professional reflection, structured emotional support, and organisational cultures that prioritise safety and professional development. It also means addressing the structural issues that compound stress: job insecurity linked to contract renewals, inadequate communication, and the absence of clear pathways for career progression.

At Education Support, our mission is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of everyone working in education. We believe that no educator should be left to struggle alone, least of all those working in the most demanding and under-recognised environments. This report shines a light on the experiences of prison educators and amplifies their voices. It is now up to all of us: government, providers, unions, and society, to listen, to act, and to ensure that those who teach in prisons are valued, supported, and equipped to succeed.

This report is a wake-up call. If we want prison education to deliver on its promise of rehabilitation, we must create a system where educators are valued, supported, and able to thrive.

Sinead Mc Brearty
CEO, Education Support

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), in partnership with Education Support, identified a need to better understand the mental health and wellbeing needs of educators working in prisons in the UK.

This study aimed to understand the work-related experiences of prison educators and the impact this has on their wellbeing. It has explored the working experiences of Black¹ prison educators, a minority group about whom little is known, and the experiences of prison educators from other backgrounds (eg racial and ethnic backgrounds). The research also sought to understand the support that is currently available to prison educators who experience issues at work which impact on their mental health and wellbeing and what types of support are most needed.

Methodology

A mixed-methods design was used for the research, incorporating:

- 128 online survey responses from prison educators working in the UK (completed during February to April 2025)
- Four focus groups with a total of 30 prison educators to further explore issues raised in the survey and other areas (undertaken in April 2025).

Key Findings

Work-related experiences of prison educators and the impact this has on their wellbeing

- Many educators love their work. They enjoy helping learners to grow intellectually and transform into people who are valued as individuals and for their ideas. To do this, they need to create an environment of trust and respect to motivate prisoners to learn. When they make a difference, educators feel a sense of achievement and find the job rewarding. The opportunity to teach basic level skills and practical skills, and take qualifications, gives prisoners opportunities to potentially find work and, importantly, reduces the chances of them re-offending.
- Educators face specific challenges due to their work being set in prisons. Although many (65%) educators feel physically safe at work, they feel much less psychologically safe (40%). The prevalence of drugs is an issue. In the classroom, educators often have to overcome learners' negative attitudes to learning, sometimes rooted in previous negative experiences at

¹ Throughout this report, the term Black staff has been used rather than alternatives such as Global Majority staff, or BAME (Black, Asian Minority Ethnic) staff. Black staff is the preferred term for use by UCU because it is used 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.

school, the unpredictability of the day, the system of educational delivery and associated paperwork.

- The culture of their particular organisation/prison negatively affects the mental health and wellbeing of many (61%) prison educators. There often appears to be a lack of communication between senior management and educators, and between prison officers and educators. Educators' job insecurity is an issue which causes great emotional stress for many at prison contract renewal dates.
- Educators' mental health and wellbeing is characterised by high stress (89% were stressed) and high workload levels (89% rated their workload level as high). Their wellbeing was measured using validated psychological scales. Prison educators' wellbeing was found to be considerably lower than teachers working in Further Education colleges with 45% at risk of probable clinical depression (using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale). They also had lower levels of life satisfaction, feeling the things they do are worthwhile and happiness scores, and higher levels of anxiety than the wider adult population (using the ONS measure of personal wellbeing).

Differences in the working experiences of Black prison educators and those from other backgrounds

- Many instances of racial harassment were shared through this project. These were not just experienced or witnessed by staff from one particular racial background (eg Black educators) but also by educators from other backgrounds, eg white educators who are not British, and from prisoners coming from a range of racial backgrounds too.
- Educators as a whole group witnessed and experienced the most harassment from prisoners compared to their colleagues and senior management (27% had witnessed and 10% had experienced harassment from prisoners). Black educators witnessed the most harassment from prisoners and their colleagues, with misogynoir² being a particular issue for Black women educators.
- Some prison managers appeared unsure of how to deal with matters relating to the racialised and cultural identity of their staff.
- Many educators (58% in the survey and 100% of the focus group participants) considered that racism should now be treated as a workplace hazard in the same way as stress in the workplace.
- Not all prisons employed staff from different ethnic backgrounds, and not all educators had experienced racism.

² Misogynoir is a term referring to the combined force of anti-Black racism and misogyny directed towards Black women.

The mental health and wellbeing support available to prison educators and what's most needed

- Many educators (69%) did not feel well supported by their organisation. It was felt that the support offered was not systemic and very limited. One provider of education in prisons had announced weekly wellbeing time for its educators. However, this wellbeing time was not being taken as it had not been factored into their working week.
- The top three types of support available to educators were an Employee Assistance Programme (56%), return to work interviews (44%) and union membership with staff available to talk to (34%).
- There was a very strong feeling that prison educators need more mental health and wellbeing support, with some educators stating they had no support at all.
- Supervision (a confidential and structured space for educators to reflect on the emotional demands of their roles, navigate difficult situations while staying connected to their purpose) and the establishment of an independent wellbeing team/unit for use by all prison educators was requested.
- At a local organisational level, more communication with colleagues would be beneficial. This would allow educators to build relationships and provide opportunities for empathy, the sharing of experiences and practice, and to stay connected to others.

Recommendations

The following recommendations would all have a positive impact on prison educators' mental health and wellbeing:

1 Racism should be classed as a 'workplace hazard' by the Health and Safety Executive

Racism in the workplace has a considerable impact on educators' mental health and wellbeing. How these harms can be meaningfully addressed needs to be considered by organisations. It is recommended that racism should become classified as a 'workplace hazard', in the same way as workplace stress³. This would then require prison managers to undertake risk assessments, have transparent reporting systems in place, with clear stages, responsibilities and communication streams, and to take action if racism was reported or discovered by any member of staff.

³ HSE (2024). "Workplace stress and how to manage it". Health and Safety Executive. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/overview.htm>

2 Responsibility for prison education in England should be returned to Department for Education (DfE) from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Prison education is a service provided by an education provider as part of a contract to the MoJ. Managers often do not understand what is involved in providing education in prisons. They lack knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy, and do not understand the significance of learner behaviour on learning outcomes. Decisions can be made on the basis of cost to the contract rather than benefit to the individual and society. By returning the responsibility in England to the DfE, prison education would benefit by being better understood. In England and Wales, it would also open up access to professional supervision for senior leaders which is currently being funded by the DfE and Welsh Government⁴.

3 The provision of emotional support needs to be increased

Prison educators have some of the lowest levels of wellbeing in the entire education sector. They need access to evidence-based and consistent mental health support. Access to reflective practice - like professional supervision - should form a part of this due to the solid emerging evidence base⁵ around its use, and the sensitive or challenging nature of their work environment.

4 National metrics need to include prison educators

Reliable government data relating to prison educators cannot be found. Their role appears invisible in the prison ecosystem. However, national data is captured relating to the qualifications and achievements of their learners⁶ (the prisoners) and about prison officer staffing levels by HMPPS⁷. Given the important role educators play in prisons and young offender institutions, it is recommended that their roles be included in the collection of future prison workforce statistics or, in England, as part of the further education annual workforce statistics⁸.

⁴ Professional Supervision offered by Education Support. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/get-help/help-for-your-staff/wellbeing-services/professional-supervision/>

⁵ Julings, M and Cowan, G (2023). "Evaluation of the School Leader Mental Health and Wellbeing Service. Department for Education. October 2023.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fa5636b6fbf000db75885/Evaluation_of_the_School_Leader_Mental_Health_and_Wellbeing_Service_Oct_23.pdf

⁶ MoJ (2024). "Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics". 12 March 2024.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics>

⁷ HMPPS (2025). "HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2025". 15 May 2025.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025>

⁸ DfE (2025). "Further Education workforce". 29 May 2025. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce/2023-24>

5 Training in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is needed for senior prison managers

Prison managers appear unsure how to communicate effectively with staff from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and who self-identify in different ways. Whilst this finding is not original to this study, eg it was also reported by the Prison Reform Trust (2024)⁹, the need for practical EDI training is recommended. This will build prison managers' relational skills of being able to communicate, interact and build connections with colleagues and, in turn, their organisations will become more inclusive environments in which to work.

⁹ Harriott, P et al (2024). "Race to the top: A Prisoner Policy Network report on race and ethnicity in prisons". Harriott, P, Saajedi, S, Laryea-Adekimi, F, Conway, M, Francis, D and Wainwright, L. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PRT_PPN_Race_to_the_top.pdf

THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF PRISON EDUCATORS WORKING IN THE UK

1 Introduction

The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), in partnership with Education Support, identified a need to better understand the mental health and wellbeing needs of educators working in prisons in the UK.

1.1 Project aim and objectives

The aim of the project was to investigate the work-related experiences and mental health and wellbeing of educators working in prisons in the UK. The following research questions underpinned the project:

- What are the work-related experiences of prison educators and what impact does this have on their wellbeing?
- Are there differences between the working experiences of Black¹⁰ prison educators and those from other backgrounds?
- What support is currently available to prison educators who experience issues at work which impact on their mental health and wellbeing, and what types of support are most needed?

1.2 Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods research approach which involved two fieldwork stages. Firstly, an online survey of prison educators was conducted and, secondly, a set of four focus groups took place with prison educators from different backgrounds (eg racial and ethnic backgrounds) to further explore issues raised in the survey and build a more complete understanding of their experiences.

1.2.1 Survey approach

An online survey was created by Education Support to understand the health and wellbeing of educators working in the prison sector. The survey addressed areas such as workplace experiences and racial harassment. It was completed by educators on an anonymous basis (unless they volunteered to take part in the focus groups – see Section 1.2.2). All questions were agreed with UCU, and the anonymous findings shared.

The online survey was open for responses between 28 February and 28 April 2025 (eight-week period). It was promoted as widely as possible by UCU to its major stakeholders, membership,

¹⁰ Defined in Section 1.5.3

representatives and networks, including the Black Prison Educators' Network (eg by emails from head office, promotion in its newsletters, at conferences etc), with reminders sent to encourage a good response rate.

To try to reach the wider prison educator workforce who may not hold UCU membership, Education Support also promoted it to organisations with a focus on prison education, to academics, and via its website, in newsletters and on social media.

1.2.2 Survey sample

The survey received 128 responses. A breakdown of the respondents' key demographics is shown below and more details can be found in Appendix A.

Category of prison	38% worked in a Category C prison (training and resettlement prison), 25% in a Category B prison (local or training prison)
Country/region worked	87% worked in England, 9% in Scotland, 2% in Northern Ireland and 2% in Wales
Education provider (England only)	57% worked for Novus (either directly employed or via a private provider)
Job role	77% worked as teachers, tutors, trainers or lecturers. 8% were Education Managers and 6% supported the learning of students or learners
Ethnicity	78% were white staff and 22% Black staff (see Section 1.5 for a definition of Black staff)
Gender	76% were women and 22% men
Mode of employment	73% were full-time employees, 23% part-time employees and 3% were on zero-hours contracts
Hours of work	57% worked more than 30 hours but less than 40 hours per week
Highest educational qualification	43% held a postgraduate degree, eg master's degree, PGCE or equivalent (Level 7 qualifications, SCQF Level 11) and 3% a doctorate or equivalent.
Teaching qualifications	75% held a Certificate in Education (CertEd) or above
Disability	72% indicated they did not have a disability and 20% indicated they did have a disability. Of those who indicated they did have a disability, 75% said this was non-visible
UCU Membership	88% were members of the UCU

1.2.3 Survey response rate

Despite the combined efforts to promote the survey to prison educators for completion, the survey sample achieved was lower than that anticipated (n=128). This is thought to be partly due to

contractual uncertainties in the sector that made engagement difficult. The majority of respondents were UCU members (88%).

It is difficult to gauge the response rate against the population as the current number of educators working in UK prisons is unknown. In 2021, there were 1,640 full-time equivalent teachers working in the four main Prison Education Framework providers in England¹¹. In 2016, 4,000 educators were working in prisons in England, including private prisons, excluding around 1,200 ‘industry’ instructors (Coates, 2016)¹². Following our enquiries, we would estimate there are now about 2,000 full-time educators working in UK prisons, excluding around 1,800 ‘industry’ instructors and those delivering local contracts.

Given the lack of existing research around this subject, the results provide valuable insight, even though the findings can only be treated as indicative due to the small sample size.

1.2.4 Focus group approach

Focus group participants were recruited in two ways: either by indicating their interest in taking part by completing their details at the end of the survey, or by completing an Expression of Interest form hosted on Education Support’s website.

Four focus groups were held with thirty prison educators. Two groups comprised educators only from a Black, Asian or any other minority ethnic group, so they had a safe space to discuss their experiences. The other two focus groups comprised educators from a range of ethnic backgrounds, comprising predominantly white participants. All groups were facilitated by the same Black facilitator. They were held between 16-24 April 2025 and lasted approximately 90 minutes each. Attendance was incentivised.

1.2.5 Focus group sample

Thirty prison educators took part in the focus groups. A breakdown of the key demographics is shown below, and more details can be found in Appendix B.

Category of prison	43% worked in a Category C prison (training and resettlement prison), 30% in a Category B prison (local or training prison)
Country/region worked	44% worked in the Midlands (East and West combined), 20% in London and 10% in South East England
Job role	87% were teachers, tutors, trainers or lecturers, 13% were managers
Ethnicity	47% were Black (see Section 1.5 for a definition of Black staff), 40% were white British and 13% white ‘other’ (minority)

¹¹ Ministry of Justice (2021). “Additional written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Justice: Prison Education Data in the Adult Estate, EPB0075”. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/37533/default/>

¹² Coates, S (2016). “Unlocking potential – a review of education in prison”. Ministry of Justice, May 2016. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f537eed915d74e33f5bf5/education-review-report.pdf>

In contrast to the online survey, the focus groups were much easier to recruit for and were well attended.

This report, therefore, summarises the findings of both approaches to investigating the mental health and wellbeing of prison educators.

1.2.6 Anonymity of prison educators

In order to safeguard the anonymity of all educators who took part in this study, where extracts of their experiences have been included from the focus groups, only their racialised background and the region in which they work have been detailed. Occasionally, other potentially identifying information, such as the category of prison worked in, has also been removed.

1.3 Researching the career experiences of Black prison educators (research project by Nianro Consulting)

Running in parallel with this study, UCU also commissioned a further research project to investigate the career experiences and strategies of Black prison educators¹³. The combination of both these reports help to shine a light on the experiences of Black prison educators to support UCU's Black Prison Educators' Charter (UCU, 2025)¹⁴.

1.4 The prison education context

A brief summary of how the prison system is organised in the UK is given below. The findings of recent reports about prison education follow as context for this report.

The prison system in the UK is managed by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), overseen by the Ministry of Justice. It is made up of both public (state-run) and private prisons. As of October 2024, there were 124 prisons in England and Wales, 108 of which were run by HM Prison Service and the rest by private companies (eg G4S, Sodexo and Serco). There are 17 prisons in Scotland, 16 of which are run by HM Prison Service and one by a private company, and three public prisons in Northern Ireland. Prison education in England is run by the Ministry of Justice (not by the Department for Education), in Wales by the Welsh Government, in Scotland by the Scottish Prison Service and in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

In England, following the publication of the Coates review (2016)¹⁵, the responsibility for prison education was moved from the Department for Education (DfE) to the Ministry of Justice to give

¹³ Rollock, N et al (2025). "The Career Experiences of Black Prison Educators". August 2025

¹⁴ UCU (2025). "Black Prison Educators – Charter for Professional Respect. UCU, 3 February 2025.

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14811/Black-prison-educators-charter/pdf/Black_Prison_Educators_Charter_External.pdf

¹⁵ Coates, S (2016). "Unlocking potential – a review of education in prison". Ministry of Justice, May 2016.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f537eed915d74e33f5bf5/education-review-report.pdf>

prison governors flexibility and control over the curriculum to better meet the learning needs of their prisoners. At the same time, a commissioning process for education provision was introduced, where public and private companies could bid for contracts to run prisons. From April 2025 these contracts changed and are known as for Prison Education Services, formerly the Prison Education Framework (PEF).

Recent reports about prisons and prison education have highlighted a number of issues facing the sector. These include:

- A rising prisoner population and the pressures of dealing with prison overcrowding (UK Parliament, 2024)¹⁶
- Reduction in prison funding. In 2025–26, real-terms day-to-day spending by the Ministry of Justice is set to be 14% lower than in 2007–08, and 24% lower in per-person terms (adjusting for population growth in England and Wales) (IFS, 2025)¹⁷
- Retention of prison officers is a problem. In the year to September 2024, 13% of prison officers left the service, of whom over a third (34%) had been in post for less than a year (Prison Reform Trust, 2025)¹⁸.
- Retention of prison educators is a problem with 70% indicating they intended to leave in the next five years (UCU/PLA, 2021)¹⁹.
- Poor pay, lack of career development, unsafe working environments and no time or respect to do a quality job affects the morale of prison educators (Education Committee, 2022)²⁰

1.5 Definition of terms used in this report

1.5.1 Definition of racism

Racism is the belief or ideology that there are distinct races with distinctive characteristics, which gives some superiority over others. It also refers to discriminatory and abusive behaviour based on such a belief or ideology.

In the UK, denying people access to goods and services on the basis of their colour, nationality, ethnicity, religion etc is illegal and called racial discrimination (IRR, 2020)²¹.

¹⁶ UK Parliament (2024). "Prisons capacity and performance". 7 October 2024. <https://post.parliament.uk/prisons-capacity-and-performance/>

¹⁷ IFS (2025). "Justice Spending in England and Wales". <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/justice-spending-england-and-wales>

¹⁸ Prison Reform Trust (2025). "Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile". February 2025. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Winter-2025-factfile.pdf>

¹⁹ UCU/PLA (2021). "Hidden Voices – The experience of teachers working in prisons". University and College Union/Prisoner Learning Alliance. August 2021. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11726/Hidden-voices/pdf/Hidden_voices_Aug2021.pdf

²⁰ Education Committee (2022). Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity". House of Commons Education Committee. 11 May 2022.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

²¹ IRR (2020). Institute of Race Relations – Definitions. <https://irr.org.uk/research/statistics/definitions/>

1.5.2 Definition of racial harassment

Racial harassment is an incident or a series of incidents intended or likely to intimidate, offend or harm an individual or group because of their ethnic origin, colour, race, religion or nationality. A racist incident is any incident that is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person (MacPherson Report, 1999²²).

1.5.3 Definition of Black staff (UCU)

Throughout this report, the term Black staff has been used rather than alternatives such as Global Majority staff, or BAME (Black, Asian Minority Ethnic) staff. Black staff is the preferred term for use by UCU because it is used 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. Each instance of the term 'Black' staff has been capitalised to reflect a shared sense of identity and community, whereas the term 'white' staff carries a different set of meanings; capitalising the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists²³.

1.5.4 Definition of white staff

White staff includes educators identifying as white British, white Irish, and white (other minorities), eg from America or Europe. No Romany or Irish Travellers took part.

²² MacPherson, W (1999). "The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry". February 1999.
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c2af540f0b645ba3c7202/4262.pdf>

²³ Laws, M (2020). "Why we capitalize 'Black' (and not 'white')". Columbia Journalism Review. 16 June 2020.
<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>

2 The work-related experiences of prison educators and the impact this has on their wellbeing

This section details the work-related experiences of prison educators. It draws on data from the focus groups to illuminate what educators most enjoy about their jobs and the challenges they face at work. As such, it provides a useful context for understanding their workplace wellbeing and experiences of racial harassment in the sections which follow.

The profile of focus group participants can be summarised as most were working as teachers, the largest number working in Category C prisons (training and resettlement prisons), and in the Midlands area of England. Their ethnic background was 43% Black and 53% white (all groups). Further details can be found in Appendix B.

2.1 What prison educators enjoy about their jobs

The educators were asked to explain in the focus groups what they enjoyed most about being a prison educator.

The main themes which emerged from the discussions were around the opportunity to help learners take part in a transformative journey whilst in prison and help them achieve a qualification towards employment and reduce re-offending. Educators enjoyed working with prisoners, the chance to create a positive learning environment for them, building relationships with them and their families, and being appreciated for the work that they do.

2.1.1 Transformative journey for the learners

Educators enjoy the opportunity to directly help and witness their learners grow intellectually, which is stimulating for them as teachers. For this to happen learners need to be engaged, co-operative and receptive to the idea to think in new ways. It is a journey where learners can build their self-esteem and transform from being a prisoner to a person whose ideas are valued, and who is also valued as a person – which can be tricky given the penal environment of a prison.

“It's really about that transformative journey that people can go on, it's about engaging people and also fostering their cooperation ... I think it's about connecting them with an environment where they've been completely disenfranchised as they're in a penal environment. So they're not valued in any way. So when they come into a space where you set a tone, you value them, you are non-judgemental towards them, you have strong boundaries and high expectations. And then you show them the path on how they can reach those expectations, they can be excellent They are worthwhile and they are of value”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, East Midlands, England

2.1.2 Helping learners to achieve a qualification towards employment and reducing re-offending

Those educators teaching practical skills-based subjects valued the opportunity this gave the learners to potentially gain employment when they leave the prison environment. It also could reduce the learners' chances of re-offending.

“I teach forklift truck training for young offenders. In the last three months of their sentence they come to me, and I hopefully give them a qualification so that they can gain some sort of employment. And I'm lucky in that I'll pick my learners [who] want to do my course. So I have a good rapport with the lads. I can work around the prison ... I love it. I really enjoy it”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

2.1.3 Working with learners and creating a positive classroom learning environment

Educators enjoy being in the classroom, using different creative strategies to make it a positive nurturing experience for their learners which is so different to their normal prison life. This, in turn, created a sense of trust and helped with increasing their motivation to learn.

“I enjoy the purpose. I just feel like I can create some lightness there as well. And if I can just create a little bit of positivity and maybe that radiates out as well, and even the smallest change can be important in that kind of environment. A lot of laughter as well, and I think it's also really interesting to see how learners kind of get attached a little bit, so they trust you and they, they in the beginning they're always reluctant, but then a few weeks go by and you can see how they're motivated to learn. So it's just nice to witness that as well”.

White (Other Minority) Educator, East of England

2.1.4 Building relationships with learners to help them succeed

The theme of being able to build relationships with prisoners, helping and guiding them towards learning, is important to educators. This brings high levels of job satisfaction and personal pleasure when they succeed. Also, enjoying the challenge involved in helping them to change their perception of education and gain a qualification, which is rewarding for the educator and sometimes highly memorable.

“I think for me it's the challenge. I teach males, lads, who haven't had the best start in life, haven't had the best start in education, and I think it's just even changing their perception about education ... you build such a relationship with them, and you want them to succeed, and you want them to change their lives. And they actually do see the error of their ways, I suppose you could say. And I get more job satisfaction out of teaching prisoners than I ever did teaching unemployed learners”.

White British Educator, North East, England

2.1.5 Feeling appreciated by learners with limited English language skills

Many educators taught ESOL, or English for Speakers of Other Languages, or English as part of Functional Skills' courses to prisoners who need help with their English language skills. These are considered essential for prisoners to communicate with others (eg with their cell-mates), navigate the prison system, participate in class and for life in general (eg to be able to understand what is being said on television). ESOL educators felt appreciated, although not always respected. They felt they made a difference to the lives of their learners and their job was rewarding.

“What I enjoy most is being an ESOL tutor, teaching people, speakers of other languages. I think they appreciate it much more. Because I work [prison identifier removed] as well, where maybe they have a case, they have to speak for themselves, they don't speak English and English is a lifeline ... these people really need English to be able to even express what they're doing, how they got came to be arrested and whatever, and they're so appreciative of every new phrase, every new thing that they learn, I really enjoy that ... I get motivated to teach”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

2.1.6 Assisting learners with other areas of their life in prison

One educator described how she most enjoyed the aspect of helping her learners navigate the prison system when they had no-one else to support them.

“What I most enjoy about my job is when the prisoners come into my classroom, I have what's called a ‘Get it off your chest’ scenario. It's about them having the opportunity to, if they want to, disclose anything or just tell me about how they are. ... nine out of ten it's things that have happened in the prison system. And if I can help in support in any way. So an example would be, if somebody opened up and said, “well, I've been in here now for 12 weeks and I haven't had any clothes. I can't afford to get into trouble and borrow clothes off people because I don't want to. I need my things”. Then I will try and see if I can intervene with that and speak to certain people, and it just makes me happy as well”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, West Midlands, England

2.1.7 Working in outreach

Some educators worked in prison outreach. Outreach generally refers to initiatives focussing on prisoners' spiritual, practical and educational needs, so when released it helps them with their reintegration into society and can help reduce recidivism²⁴. In a similar way to educators creating a positive classroom learning environment above, educators working in outreach spoke of their enjoyment helping learners to work at their own pace, realise the value of education and to give and gain respect.

²⁴ Recidivism refers to someone who has received some form of criminal justice sanction (such as a conviction or a caution) goes on to commit another offence within a set time period. It is the underlying principle of measuring re-offending.

"I enjoy working with people and, and getting them to realise the value of education ... prison's quite a hostile environment and I like being a quite a nurturing presence for learners and kind of working with them at their own pace. I teach outreach which I quite like doing, and it sort of fits in with work I've done before I worked in prison education. So I like fitting in my education with their lives in the prison ... and get them to sort of realise the value of education and also their own skills that they already have".

White British Educator, London, England

2.1.8 Building family relationships and communicating success outside the prison

Building, or re-building, family relationships can be one way to help reduce the possibility of prisoners re-offending on release. One educator described her enjoyment in involving prisoners' families with celebrating their achievements to strengthen their relationships. Another educator working in outreach enjoyed displaying examples of what learners can achieve to others outside of prisons and communicating their success in competitions.

"We do a lot of things for families and a lot of family events. So we will get the guys' sons, daughters, and we involve them in their learning and to me, that's one of the most important things, to improve the guys' sense of self, sense of belief. And for their parents then to come in, or their family members, to see these people have actually achieved something when they're there. And like that, we've enabled and helped these guys to make these positive steps and build on their family relationships, which we all know can be quite strained. So maintaining a family bond, and to be able to do that through education, is one of the things that I particularly enjoy".

White British Educator, Scotland

2.2 The challenges prison educators face at work

The educators were asked to explain, in the focus groups, what the most challenging parts of being a prison educator were. The themes which emerged were around the prison environment (related to safety and the prevalence of drugs) and the renewal of prison contracts. Different aspects of teaching and learning were discussed, along with other forms of support which learners who are prisoners need, the lack of communication and support with management and prison officers and the experience of racism.

2.2.1 Prisons need to be safe organisations in which to work

Safety of educators

Educators are trying to deliver quality education in spaces which they often consider to be unsafe. Their ability to work effectively is often affected by instability and insecurity in the prison environment. A stable prison environment is one which has good control and order. A secure environment is one where prisoners are held securely. Reference was also made to an incident at

that time reported in the news media where a prison officer was attacked by a prisoner as an example of unsafe working conditions²⁵.

“I've been in prison for a long time, like a lot of other people have, and we should be doing some brilliant, important, transformative work. And we're not doing a lot at the moment because we're prevented because we are working in prisons that have not got stable, secure environments and often aren't safe. You know, we've all seen the news in the last three days, they are not safe places to be yet we are trying to deliver quality education, meaningful education, in those spaces”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

Drugs

The introduction of ‘spice’, or legal highs, was found to be a challenge in a number of prisons because educators have no control over its possession or use. It can affect lessons because learners could be under the influence. Learners might be absent from lessons because they are suffering the effects of their use or have been violent – when this happens the work which has been planned will not be finished and the students are at risk of disengaging from learning.

“One of the challenges I would see for us just now is the, and something we have no control over, is the introduction of ‘spice’, legal highs, drugs. We’ve got kind of an issue with a lot of learners coming up under the influence of, we don't know what they've taken so that affects their learning, or we may not see learners for a few weeks at a time because of taking drugs, or they're suffering from ill-effects, or they've been violent to others due to drugs. So I think, in a lot of prisons that I've worked in, there's a kind of drugs issue so then that can be quite tiresome if you've planned a lot of work for people to do, or you're expecting people to finish outcomes, and then we don't see them for weeks on end, or they just disengage”.

White British Educator, Scotland

A situation in a different prison was described, where security had been tightened and both the educators and prisoners were no longer allowed to use paper because there had been an outbreak of ‘spice’ and they needed to narrow down where it was coming from (spice can take a powdered form and be dissolved and sprayed onto paper for ingestion).

²⁵ Watson, G (2025). “Officer taken to hospital after attack at prison”. BBC News, 23 April 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3673kdkl76o>

2.2.2 Contracts for the running of prisons

Job insecurity at contract renewal dates

There was a strong feeling amongst the educators that the renewal of contracts to run prisons, which takes place every five to seven years, was a “major frustration” and was “very stressful”. Often, the providers of education change when new contracts are awarded. This lack of job security impacts their wellbeing as their terms and conditions of employment could be transferred across to the new provider via TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment] Regulations). Restructuring of job roles and tensions around workload, downtime and pensions are not supportive of positive wellbeing. Educators do not feel listened to, nor is the purpose and value of education sufficiently considered in prison contract considerations.

“The other thing that I find frustrating is because, working in the prison, we are contracted by companies who basically bid for the contract. So we become Tupe’d over as staff, depending on who has the contract at the time. When companies take us on, we find that we’re having to battle to get downtime, or to basically be listened to, because education comes through sort of like the private sector. It’s all about the draw-down of funding for most things that you have to deliver”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, London, England

Even once contracts had been secured, there was often the ‘drip-feed’ of information at the start of a new contract period. Staff hated this uncertainty, because sometimes they would not know what subject they would be teaching until the contract period had started.

In addition, the governors of prisons can decide to change the curriculum offered by the prison every year, with staff undergoing consultation meetings and facing the risk of redundancy.

2.2.3 Teaching and learning

Prisoners’ negative attitude in the classroom

Some learners who have grown up having gone to school in England arrive at lessons in prison with a negative attitude based on their previous experiences at school. This could be due to many factors, such as their sporadic attendance, having been a primary carer, expelled or simply left school with no qualifications. This can make them reluctant to learn and creates challenging situations for the educators.

“I teach native speakers. I’ve had students where they’ve had a negative impact in the past with the education system. They didn’t have great teachers. And when they come into the classroom, because obviously they’ve been arrested and they’ve been in prison, they carry those negative thoughts from school and carry on with that same sort of behaviour ... that has been very challenging for me”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands

This negative attitude can continue when learners want to study particular courses but discover, in order to be able to do this, they first need to complete levels one and two in English and Maths (which are usually considered to be the foundations of learning and employment).

Changing the mindset of the learners

Some learners are offered practical courses geared towards employability, such as hairdressing and forklift truck driving. Whilst prisoners are learning how to master such skills, the educators are also trying to move their mindset from previous short-term thinking before they went to prison, towards the possibility of future employment and responsibility.

“Sometimes you feel as if you are condescending towards them, when you're actually trying to help them, trying to get their mindset away from what they were doing on the outside to begin changing. For me, the first questions I get is how much would I earn being a forklift truck driver? Would it be as much as what I what I do when I'm on the out? And I try and change them from that mindset to being responsible, and thinking more of what they can get out of it [generally] rather than what they can get out of it short-term”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

Allocation of students to classes

Once a student is allocated to a particular class it can be very difficult for the educator to unallocate them or have them removed without a very good reason. So if that student does not want to learn, or their behaviour is challenging, then not only does their behaviour have to be managed by the educator, which can make them feel “*distressed*” and “*isolated*”, it can also hinder the progress of other students. Prison managers do not understand what it is like to be in a classroom with such disruptive students, whilst the educators have to follow ‘the system’, even though the learners might not want to.

“You can't get rid of a student in a classroom. Once they get allocated it's very difficult for that student to get an unallocated or removed from your course without a good reason ... but then that's having a negative impact in the classroom environment. So it's like a circle that's just never ending”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands

The ‘roll-on, roll-off’ system of delivery of education

The ability to have learners begin their course at different dates as needed (‘roll-on, roll-off’) as a system of delivery operated by prisons was considered a challenge. In a high security prison it was described as “*difficult*” due to the lack of differentiated delivery time. In local or training prisons educators described it as very, very stressful” because the curriculum was being constantly repeated - eg a class could comprise seven learners at the beginning and then within five or six weeks all seven have left, with more coming. It was also “*frustrating*” as learners could be transferred or released before they finish their qualification.

“I’m in a Cat [Category identifier deleted] prison. This means that most of the men that come to education, prison itself, are on remand. So sometimes you don't really have them in for long depending on what stage they are at with their case or if they've been sentenced. So the ‘roll-on and roll-off’ can be quite frustrating because it means that you sign, or enrol, a learner onto a course for a qualification and midway through they can disappear, either be transferred or released”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, London, England

Paperwork

In addition to the paperwork required for the ‘roll-on, roll-off’ system noted above, there were mixed attitudes found about the completion of paperwork generally. This educator felt it was unfair that work could not be completed at home.

“One thing I realised immediately was that I couldn't take any work home. So I think [the challenge] is the paperwork that you've got to complete right then and there. And how do you kind of navigate that when some of it, you're talking numbers, you're talking about reports and things that really need to be thought out properly. Sometimes you just get really stressed out, you know, in terms of just all of that”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

However, there was also the feeling from other staff that they did not want to take paperwork home in order to achieve a balance to their lives inside and out of the workplace. A training and resettlement prison had a system in place of ‘shut down days’ on the last day of the month, which allowed staff to complete their paperwork and was considered a good idea.

The bureaucracy associated with the paperwork was criticised because it was always changing which was “*really, really stressful*” because it was not possible to get into a consistent and long-term rhythm. The volume of paperwork was criticised, but it was needed to ‘prove’ what they did. In one prison, the educators were logging how they were spending their time at work on administrative tasks to make this clear to management.

Offering a varied curriculum

An educator at a high security prison described the challenges faced with keeping the curriculum offered exciting for long-term prisoners whom they see every day.

“So how do I keep them engaged and wanting to come back to my learning centre? What subjects can I offer them? Once they feel they've done everything they can do, once they've worked their way through the qualifications we have for maths and English, what else do we offer them? And that's a big challenge for us, as well as just to provide a good service to our learners, which is challenging if you're working with long-term prisoners”.

White British Educator, Scotland

Unpredictability of the day

Some educators described the unpredictability of the day as challenging (although it is recognised that others might thrive on this). Participants reported difficulty in staying on track in the face of reactive changes and the negative impact this then has on their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

“Everything is sort of done on ‘ad hoc’, most of the time. Even if things are scheduled and timetabled, when you go into work, every day is totally different, or things can present differently from what you planned for. So it does make trying to keep a system, a way of working, that kind of like runs smoothly, it can be very challenging because you’re constantly ‘on the go’, having to do things either at the last minute or, if you get a bit of [admin] time, it can easily be hijacked because there’s a ‘cover’ [lesson] needed”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, London, England

2.2.4 Offering other forms of support to prisoners

Helping prisoners to manage their emotions

Emotional conflicts in prison can also be a challenging aspect as prisoners can often be taught in the same area in a prison in which they live, and this affects their learners’ lives and so needs managing by educators, as part of their job by association.

“Some of the other challenging things are like just managing your conflicts. So you’re teaching to people in an area where they live. So you’re teaching, but you’re also managing their every day-to-day, like girlfriend’s/boyfriend issues, family issues, you’re managing the emotional side of it as well. So there’s a lot of challenges that wrap around what you do”.

White British Educator, North West, England

Balancing the offering of emotional support with not becoming too emotionally attached

It is important for educators when working with prisoners to build up a sense of trust, as this can help with encouraging them to learn. Sometimes this results in the learners feeling they can confide in the educator as they are seen as the only person that respects them, even though they have ‘committed a crime’. By gaining their trust, this can sometimes lead to the educator feeling compelled to try to help them with other matters or to try to get some further support. One educator mentioned the strategy they used to help their wellbeing in such cases was on the long drive home to reflect on what had happened and unwind.

Another educator working in a private prison spoke of the importance of not getting too emotionally attached to the prisoners, especially when they were young.

“You try not to get emotionally attached, but sometimes some of them are dead young and you think ‘oh’, I feel like I’m mother to them, why have you had this life, there’s so much more you could have done?’. I just look at them and just say ‘it’s such a shame”.

White British Educator, North East, England

2.2.5 Issues with prison management

Management not taking the safety concerns of educators seriously

Some educators felt that prison managers did not take their safety concerns related to prisoners seriously. An educator described a situation in the classroom where she felt “traumatised” after an incident which could have been avoided.

"I had a student and I could tell that there was something about that man. I told my managers, my line manager, the Head of Education, many times. I said, "the way he looks at other people, the way he looks at me, there's something wrong with him". She went "you are in a Cat [identifier removed] prison, all prisoners are like him. What do you expect?" And anyway, they ignored me. And what happened? One day he stabbed the person sitting next to him with a pen ... I was really traumatised. There was a psychologist there, they came, they talked to me. They asked me if I needed any help or whatever? But what really upset me is that they didn't listen to me because I could feel these things coming [on]. I mean, they could have been prevented".

White (Other Minority) Educator, East Midlands, England

Lack of communication between management and educators

There was a feeling from educators that there was a lack of communication between management and themselves. This particularly related to the removal of prisoners from learning registers without any reasons given.

"Sometimes we'll have prisoners that are just taken off our registers and we don't have any reasons and it's really hard to get information. I had one where he was deported. I didn't know he was deported, and it was such a shame because when I found out he'd just finished his qualification and it was such an achievement for him and he's never going to get his certificate".

White British Educator, North East, England

Another example from a music educator working in a high-security prison was where the computers had been replaced with a new system by the Ministry of Justice. However, for him to be able to teach his course, he needed to use a special music application, which was not going to be installed. He felt strongly that management should have discussed this with him because it meant that he would now have to teach learning the guitar, which was not what had been agreed. He described this lack of communication was really *"getting to me right now"*.

Management's lack of understanding about education

Some educators viewed the organisation of teaching and learning in prisons as being money-motivated and driven by profit. This can be viewed via the emphasis that management placed on the recruitment of learners to courses, the time limit on learning imposed before exams are taken, and the impact this has on the wellbeing of the educator.

"We have a lot of neurodiverse learners and we have to get them through in five weeks. And if we're not there, they make us still put them in for exams even though we know they're going to fail, which I think is awful. I think it's very money-motivated and that's all they seem to see is the profits. Getting new people in, getting exams paid for, and the learners are the lowest priority ... since I've started here, I've had my anti-depressants and anxiety meds [medications] all 'upped' due to the stress. So it's had a big impact on me".

White British Educator, East Midlands, England

Another educator experienced the communication style of managers as coercive behaviour²⁶, and believed that this mirrored the behaviour of managers more broadly in their interactions with prisoners.

Variability in how prison managers wish unacceptable behaviour to be handled

An educator who worked in two different training and resettlement prisons concurrently described the different approaches used to manage prisoners' behaviour. One prison was very strict, and if a learner did something unacceptable (eg vaping) then the educator needed to discipline the prisoner by giving them a negative IEP²⁷. If a negative IEP was not issued, then that educator would receive a warning and be questioned whether a case note had been written up or whether it was reported to a caseworker. However, at the other prison, although the systems were in place to manage behaviour, their use was not encouraged. This meant that learners could say inappropriate things in class and disrupt the class, eg with cross or sexually-overcharged words, without their behaviour being addressed. Educators were only required to report what was being said by email to management, describing the situations, even though they often did not wish to repeat what had been said.

Lack of educators working in management roles

Two educators felt strongly that educators generally could not be part of the senior management team, and that opportunities to develop further to enable this to happen were not available to them.

“We don't have representation in management. We don't have a representation in the SMT. We don't have representation at the Board. There isn't those opportunities. And I'm not saying that there needs to be positive action or anything but open it up, and make sure that the people that do want to develop, like I'm somebody, I really want to get to the top and I'm willing to work hard. I've got the quals [qualifications], I've got the experience. The thing is, you're so disheartened by what you see and hear, and things like that, and it's like if you do have people and you know that they're in it for the long haul, for the next 20 years, they're going to be a great asset. They're going to be part of succession planning and legacy planning. Why are we not making those opportunities?”

Asian or British Asian (Pakistani) Educator, West Midlands, England

One Black educator described the lack of promotional opportunities available to Black staff, despite having the necessary experience, as an issue which can cause resentment.

2.2.6 Issues with prison officers

Prison officers not taking the safety concerns of educators seriously

In the same way as educators criticised managers for not taking their concerns regarding the safety of prisoners seriously, some felt the same way about prison officers (or both).

²⁶ In the context of prisons, coercive behaviour can be described as referring to a pattern of actions or threats intended to control, dominate or intimidate another person

²⁷ IEP stands for Incentives and Earned Privileges, which is used to determine the privileges a prisoner can access, with the higher levels offering more benefits

“There were two guys. Before the lesson they were arguing in a Russian language. I couldn't understand, but I could tell that there was something going on between them. They were aggressive and everything. I called the officers, I called the managers. The officer comes in says “Are you two alright?” They said “yes we are”. Of course, what would they say? And [to] the manager I said “why don't you send one of them back to, to the wings because something may happen?” Anyway, I was ignored again. They ignored me. They [the learners] stayed in the classroom and at break-time they went to the toilet. And they had a fight in there, and one of them was injured. The ambulance came”.

White (Other Minority) Educator, East Midlands, England

This was summed up by the educator as “when you work in a prison, education comes second, security is ‘number one’”.

Navigating relationships with prison officers

The ability to navigate relationships with prison officers can be very difficult. Sometimes this works well, and good relationships are established, but oftentimes it appears not to work well, or is sporadic. Educators are dependent on prison officers for their security and safety, and for transporting prisoners to lessons and the removal of disruptive prisoners.

“Some officers are brilliant and will respect them and will call upon them for it. And then there's other officers that wouldn't even read out their appointments in their diary to send them [the prisoners] to the appointment. There's a big prison population of 1,300 men so there's a lot of movement. So prison officers, if you ring, they'll just say, “oh, they refused” and then you can be speaking to the person and they haven't. So navigating those kind of relationships is probably one of the most difficult things”.

White British Educator, Northern Ireland

Some educators felt their prison officers lacked an understanding of the importance of prison education, such as removing a learner from their classroom without explaining why (a similar criticism extended to management) and not maintaining a professional stance in front of prisoners.

Lack of prison officers

Some educators described there being a general lack of prison officers working at their prison. This meant that learners were not able to get to their lessons. It also meant that sometimes learners could not be removed from the lessons as prison officers were not available to do this.

An educator working in a high-security prison described how the lack of prison officers in a large jail with different prison categories meant another ‘house’ [or type of accommodation] had to be opened due to the increasing number of prisoners. This meant that the educators were teaching on the landings, and it was an issue for some members of her team, eg not being comfortable going into the sex offenders’ ‘house’.

2.2.7 Experiencing racism

In the two focus groups with Black educators, the witnessing of, or experiencing, racism came up naturally as part of the discussions when talking about the challenges they faced working in prisons. In the two focus groups containing educators from different backgrounds (although primarily white backgrounds), it generally did not come up as a topic until expressly asked about by the facilitator, and a few educators had not witnessed or experienced racism at all.

Racial harassment was probed in detail as part of the online survey. This is reported in Section 4.

3 The working life of a prison educator

The online survey addressed a number of areas relating to the workplace of prison educators. This section reports the findings relating to how safe prison educators feel at work, their workplace culture, and factors at work which can directly have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Three different measures were used to investigate their wellbeing and the findings detailed. All data is unweighted, unless noted otherwise.

Full details of the educators who answered the survey can be found in Appendix A. Some key points regarding the respondent groups are they comprised:

- Teachers (77%), with the majority (84%) holding a foundation degree or higher and many (75%) a Level 5 or higher teaching qualification
- Women (76%)
- Aged 51 or greater (64%)
- Had a disability (20%)
- Working In Category C training and resettlement prisons (38%)
- Working in England (87%)
- Gave their ethnic background as white, all groups (78%), and Black (22% Black). 7% were migrants.

3.1 Safety at work

Physical safety and psychological safety are two essential aspects of creating a healthy workplace. While physical safety relates to the absence of physical hazards and the implementation of safety measures, psychological safety relates to the belief that people are safe to speak up, ask questions, and share ideas without fear of judgment or punishment.

Feeling safe – physically

The survey found that **65% of prison educators felt physically safe always or most of the time, and 2% never felt safe, at work**

Of these, 13% (n=16) always felt safe, 52% (n=66) felt safe most of the time, 31% (n=40) felt safe some of the time, 2% (n=3) never felt safe and 2% (n=3) did not know.

Feeling safe – psychologically

The survey found that **40% of prison educators felt psychologically safe, and 44% did not feel psychologically safe at work.**

40% (n=51) felt psychologically safe at work, 44% (n=56) did not feel psychologically safe at work, 13% (n=11) did not know and 3% (n=4) preferred not to answer the question.

However, only 60% of educators were familiar with the term 'psychological safety', 20% (n=25) very familiar, 40% (n=51) fairly familiar, 30% (n=38) not very familiar, 10% (n=13) not at all familiar and 1% (n=1) was unsure.

Risk assessment at work

Health and safety risks must be managed in the workplace. This requires a risk assessment, ie giving consideration to what might cause harm to people to enable precautions to be taken to prevent injury and ill-health.

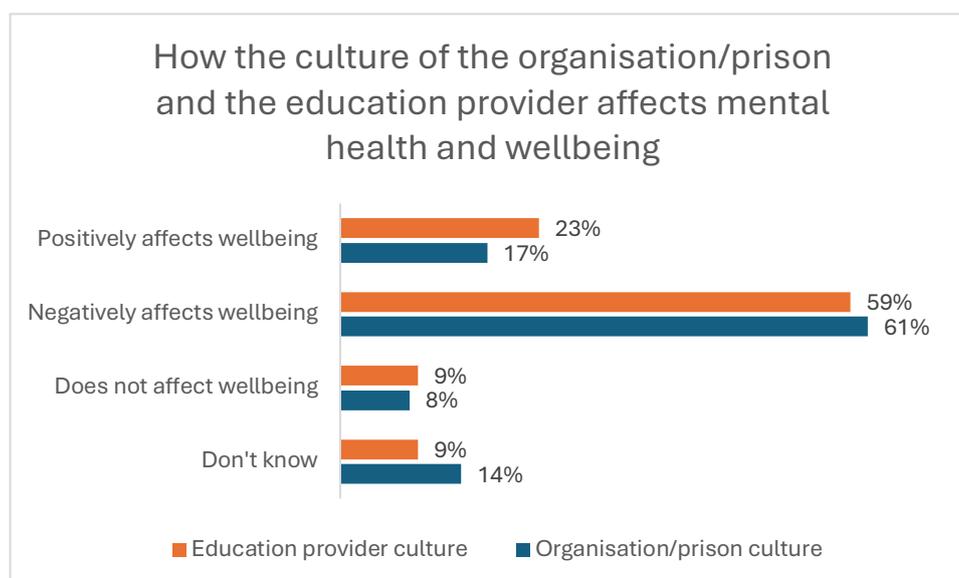
Prison educators were asked in the survey if they were familiar with the requirements to manage risk and risk assessment tools provided by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). **56% of educators were familiar with the HSE risk assessment requirements and tools**

Of these, 24% (n=31) were very familiar, 32% (n=41) were fairly familiar, 30% (n=38) were not very familiar and 14% (n=18) were not at all familiar.

However, only just under a quarter of educators (23%, n=29) felt they were being properly implemented, 44% (n=56) said they were not, 30% (n=38) did not know and 4% (n=5) preferred not to answer the question.

3.2 Workplace culture

Prison educators were asked two questions relating to their workplace culture, where the aim was to find out if there was a difference between the culture of their organisation and the culture of their education provider in relation to staff mental health and wellbeing.



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

The largest response was from educators who considered that the culture of their organisation or provider negatively affected their wellbeing:

61% (n=78) of educators felt the culture of their organisation/prison negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing

59% (n=76) of educators felt the culture of their education provider negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing.

However, a difference was found for those who considered that the culture of their organisation or provider had a positive effect on their wellbeing. A larger number of educators indicated their education provider had a positive impact (23%, n=29), than their organisation/prison (17%, n=22).

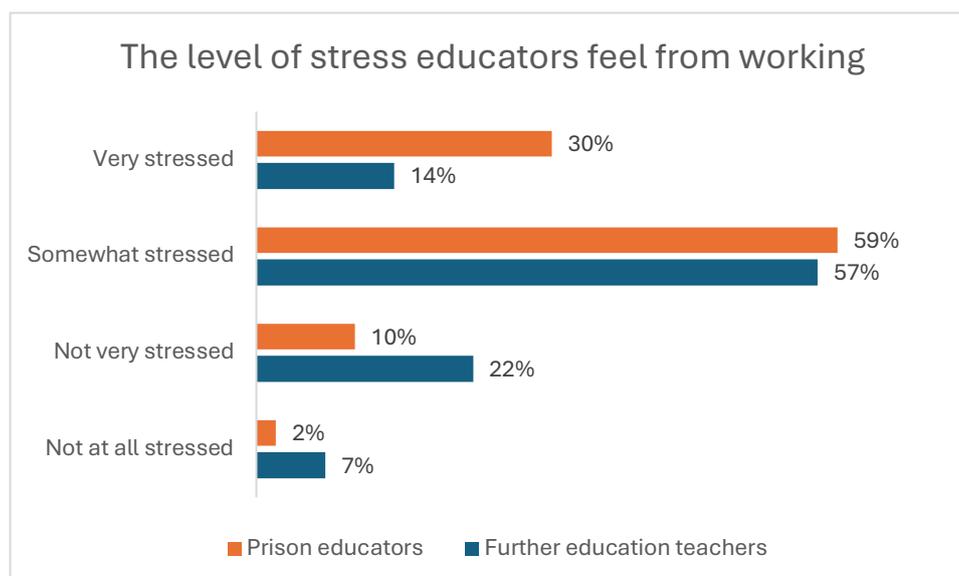
3.3 Factors which can affect prison educators' mental health at work

Stress

Prison educators were asked in the survey to indicate the current level of stress they feel from working. **89% indicated they were stressed.**

Of these, 30% (n=38) very stressed, 59% (n=75) somewhat stressed, 10% (n=13) not very stressed, and 2% (n=2) did not know.

In order to gauge whether this level of stress is higher for educators working in prisons rather than in the Further Education sector, a comparison was made. The 23% of prison educators who were employed by one of two FE colleges in this study were compared with data for educators working in the FE sector contained in the Teacher Wellbeing Index (2025)²⁸. It was found that the overall stress levels for educators employed by FE colleges and working in prisons was significantly higher than the stress levels for educators not working in prisons (89% compared with 71%).



²⁸ Education Support (2025). Teacher Wellbeing Index. November 2025.
<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

Base: All prison educators (n=128); All Further Education teachers in the Teacher Wellbeing Index 2025 (n=81)

The stress levels of prison educators using a different measure is also explored in Section 3.4.3.

Absence from work due to work-related stress or anxiety

Prison educators were asked if in the last three years they had been absent from work due to work-related stress or anxiety.

It was found that in the last three years, **38%, (n=49) of educators had been absent from work due to work-related stress or anxiety.**

Of the remainder, 58% had not (n=74), 3% (n=4) were unsure and 1% (n=1) preferred not to answer the question.

Of those who had been absent, nearly half (47%, n=23) had been absent two or three times, 20% (n=10) once, 10% (n=5) 8 times or more, 8% (n=4) four or five times, 4% (n=2) six or seven times and 8% (n=4) preferred not to answer this question.

Workload

Prison educators were asked to rate their current level of workload. **83% rated their workload as high.**

Of these, 32% (n=41) very high, 51% (n=65) fairly high, 15% (n=19) medium, 1% (n=1) fairly low, 1% (n=1) very low, and 1% (n=1) did not know.

Workload was the top reason given by the two-thirds (64%) of prison educators who had considered resigning from their role in the last year.

3.4 Wellbeing measurement

The wellbeing of prison educators was measured using the following three different tools:

- The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
- The measures of personal wellbeing used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)
- The suggested measures of workplace wellbeing recommended by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford.

The first two measures are well-established and allow comparisons with the scores for the wider adult UK population. The third measure relates specifically to workplace wellbeing.

The main findings relating to measurement of prison educators' wellbeing in this section can be summarised as:

- The wellbeing of prison educators is below that of the general wider adult population. It is also the lowest amongst education professionals (such as school teachers and teachers working in Further Education) who have long been reported as having poor wellbeing.
- Prison educators have a low subjective wellbeing score of 41.07, with 45% at risk of probable clinical depression.
- Prison educators have lower levels of personal wellbeing in the areas of life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile and happiness than the wider adult population. They also have higher levels of anxiety.
- Many prison educators experience high levels of stress (78% experienced high to medium levels of stress the previous week), which affects their wellbeing at work. However, many also find their work to be purposeful (70%) and meaningful (73%). More than half (54%) have high or very high levels of job satisfaction, but only 42% are happy at work.

These findings are now presented in more detail below.

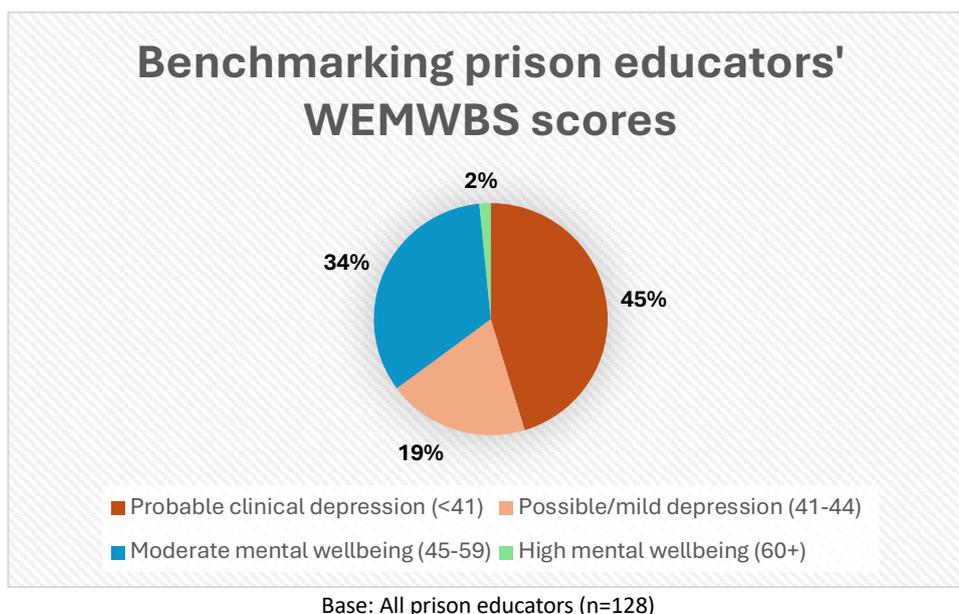
3.4.1 Measuring **subjective wellbeing** (The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS))

WEMWBS is a measure used by many different organisations, including Governments, to gauge the mental wellbeing of a population. It uses 14 questions to assess subjective wellbeing and psychological functioning of educators over the preceding two weeks. Using the benchmarking approach, scores of less than 41 suggest an individual could be at risk of probable clinical depression, scores between 41-44 possible/mild depression, 45-59 moderate mental wellbeing and 60+ higher mental wellbeing²⁹.

Overall, this population of prison educators were found to have a low score of **41.07**.

45% had a score of less than 41 which indicates probable clinical depression. For the rest of the sample, 19% indicating at risk of possible/mild depression (scores of 41-45), 34% indicating moderate mental wellbeing (scores of 45-59) and 2% indicating high mental wellbeing (scores greater than 60).

²⁹ University of Warwick (2025). "Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)". How it works, Analysis. Updated 24 April 2025. <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/innovations/wemwbs/how/>



The governments of the four UK countries publish WEMWBS scores for their adult populations. When the scores for prison educators are compared, the wellbeing of prison educators was found to be much lower than the general population.

Country	National population WEMWBS score
England	51.40 ³⁰
Northern Ireland	50.74 ³¹
Scotland	48.90 ³²
Wales	48.40 ³³

The wellbeing (WEMWBS) score for the prison educator population can also be compared with the wider population of teachers working in the UK. Using the findings from the Teacher Wellbeing Index (2025)³⁴, the wellbeing of prison educators is found to be lower than both teachers working in the compulsory school sector and teachers working in the Further Education sector.

³⁰ The 2019 national WEMWBS score for England is 51.4, as communicated to Education Support by NHS Digital's Lifestyles Team on 23 August 2021

³¹ Department of Health (2024). Health Survey Northern Ireland: First results 2023-24. 15 May 2025. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-survey-northern-ireland-first-results-202324>

³² Scottish Government (2024). "The Scottish Health Survey 2023 - Main Report. November 2024. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2023-volume-1-main-report/>

³³ Welsh Government (2025). "National Survey for Wales headline results: April 2024 to March 2025". StatsWales. 27 August 2025. <https://www.gov.wales/national-survey-wales-headline-results-april-2024-march-2025.html>

³⁴ Education Support (2025). Teacher Wellbeing Index. November 2025.

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

Job role	WEMWBS score (Teacher Wellbeing Index, 2025)
School teachers	43.48
Further education teachers	44.36 ³⁵
Prison educators	41.07

Base: School teachers (n = 1,904), Further education teachers (n = 81). Prison educators (n=128)

There was little difference found in the wellbeing scores of prison educators when comparing their ethnicity and gender.

Ethnicity	WEMWBS score
Black educators	40.18
White educators	41.33

Base: Black educators (n=28), white educators (n=100)

Base: Women educators (n=97), men educators (n=28)

Gender	WEMWBS score
Women	41.39
Men	40.64

3.4.2 Measuring **personal wellbeing** (measures used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS))

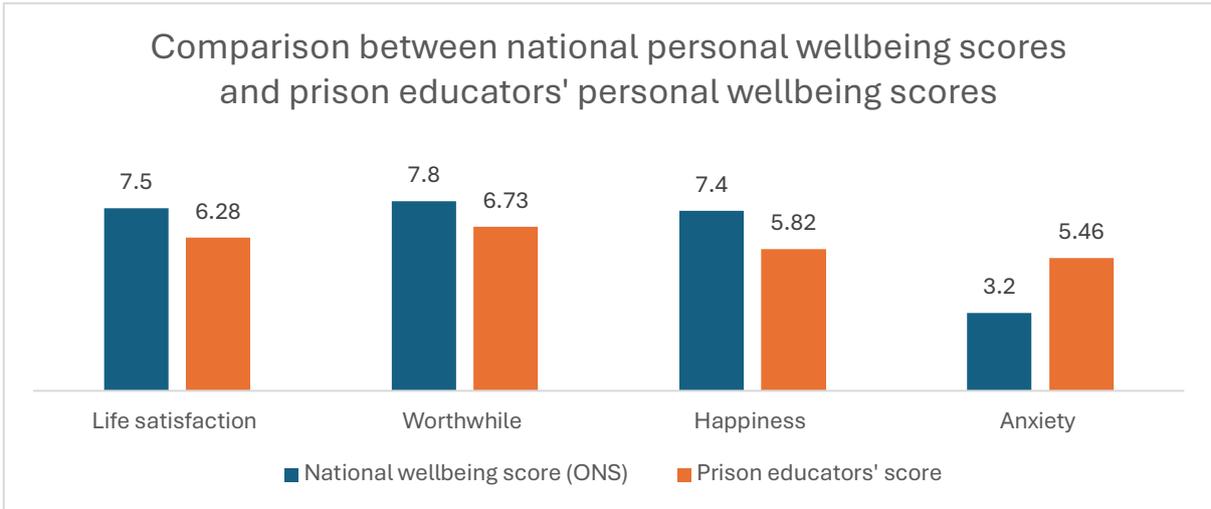
Prison educators were asked four questions about their life, the same questions by the UK Office for National Statistics as a method of measuring **personal wellbeing**. They were asked how satisfied they were with their life nowadays, the extent to which they felt the things they do in life are worthwhile and how happy and anxious they felt the day before. Respondents indicated their answers on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 was "not at all" and 10 was "completely".

Comparisons with the most recently available UK averages for January to March 2025 (ONS, 2025)³⁶ are shown below. Prison educators were found to have lower levels of life satisfaction, feeling the things in life they do are worthwhile, and happiness, than the wider adult population. They also had much higher levels of anxiety.

³⁵ This WEMWBS score relates only to teachers working in the Further Education sector. The WEMWBS score for all staff working in the Further Education sector was 44.19.

³⁶ ONS (2025). "Non-seasonally adjusted quarterly estimates of personal well-being in the UK: April 2011 to March 2025". August 2025.

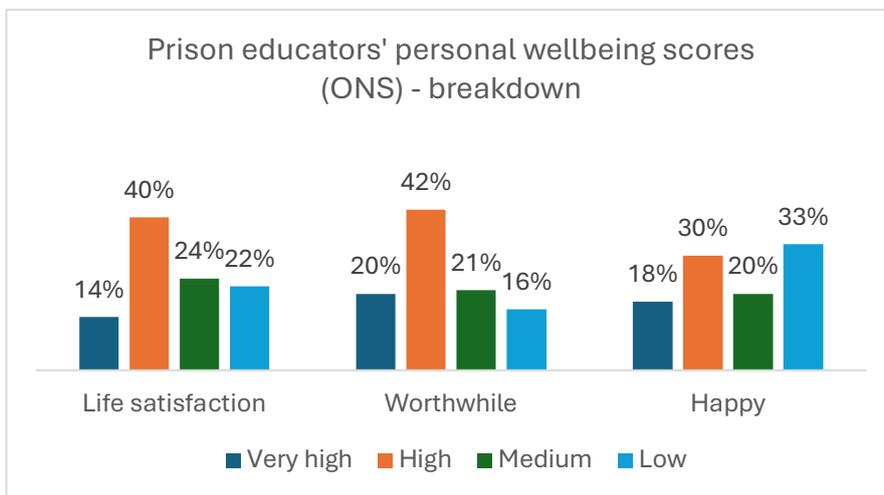
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesnonseasonallyadjusted>



Base: All prison educators (n=128); UK population taking part in the Annual Population Survey (quarterly) (n=23,490 for life satisfaction, n=23,450 for feeling the things they do in life are worthwhile, 23,480 for happiness and 23,480 for anxiety)

When the scores for prison educators are focussed upon, and using the thresholds provided in the ONS guidance³⁷ to categorise low, medium, high and very high levels of wellbeing, it can be seen that:

- 54% had high or very high levels of satisfaction with their life nowadays
- 62% felt very highly, or highly, that the things they do in life are worthwhile
- 48% felt high, or very high, levels of happiness
- 50% had high anxiety. The percentage of adults in the UK who experience high levels of anxiety is 23% (ONS, 2025)³⁸.



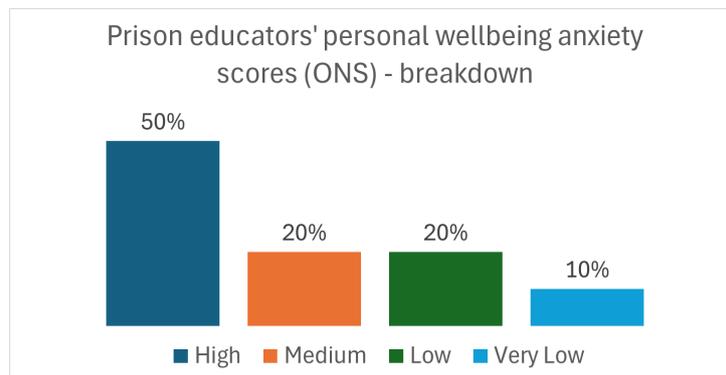
³⁷ ONS (2021). Personal well-being user guidance. 14 January 2025.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide>

³⁸ ONS (2025). Quarterly personal well-being estimates – non-seasonally adjusted. 25 May 2025.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesnonseasonallyadjusted>

Base: All prison educators (n=128)



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

3.4.3 Measuring **workplace wellbeing** (measures recommended by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford)

Prison educators were asked five questions to measure their **wellbeing at work**. These questions have been recommended for use by the Wellbeing Research Centre (WRC) at the University of Oxford³⁹. Educators were asked how satisfied they were with their job, how purposeful and meaningful they find their work and how happy and stressed they felt at work during the past week? They indicated their answers using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 was "not at all" and 10 was "completely". Again, the thresholds used to categorise wellbeing into low, medium, high and very high levels are those provided in the ONS guidance⁴⁰.

Currently national figures for workplace wellbeing are not available for comparison.

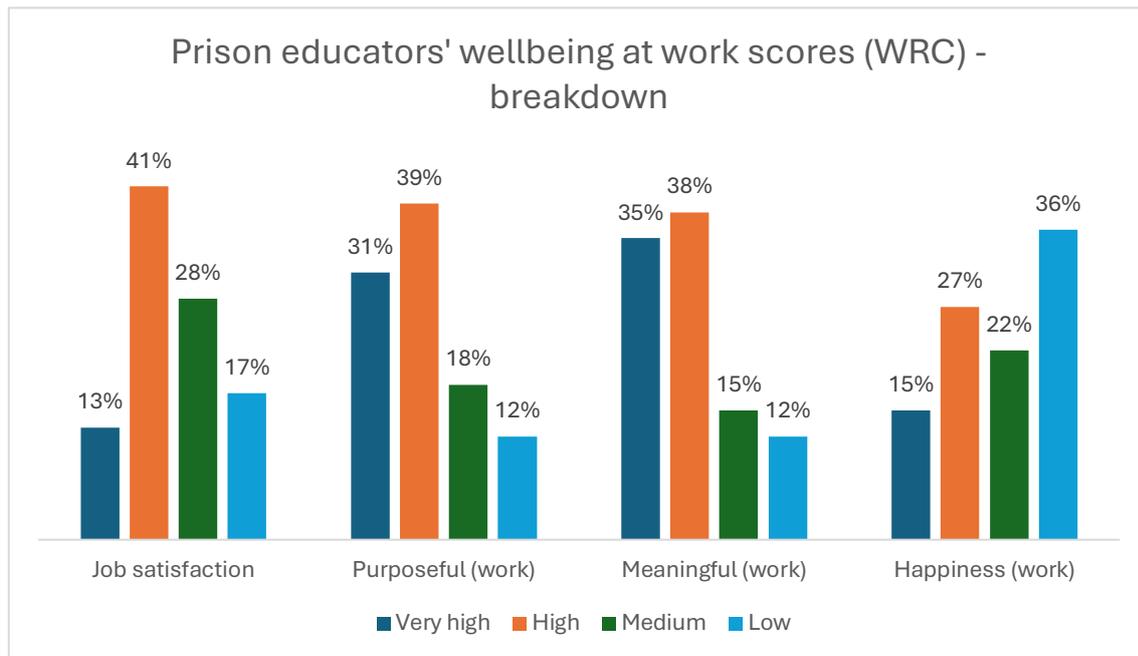
³⁹ De Neve, J-E and Ward, G (2023). "Measuring Workplace Wellbeing. University of Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre Working Paper 2303. <https://doi.org/10.5287/ora-exxjkdzym>

⁴⁰ ONS (2021). Personal well-being user guidance. 14 January 2025.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide>

When the scores for prison educators are focussed upon, and again using the thresholds provided in the ONS guidance⁴¹ to categorise low, medium, high and very high levels of wellbeing, it can be seen that:

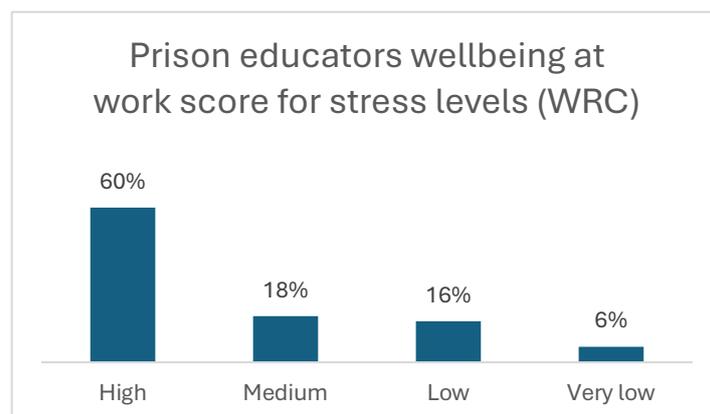
- 54% had high or very high levels of job satisfaction
- 70% felt highly or very highly that their work was purposeful
- 73% felt highly or very highly that their work was meaningful
- 42% were happy at work



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

The stress levels of prison educators at work were also measured using this methodology.

60% of prison educators indicated they experienced high stress levels at work the previous week.



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

⁴¹ ONS (2021). Personal well-being user guidance. 14 January 2025.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide>

Stress levels are considered to be an indicator of poor wellbeing at work. In the graph above it can be seen that 78% of prison educators experienced high or medium stress levels at work the previous week. This can be compared with 89% of educators feeling currently very, or somewhat stressed, from working (reported in Section 3.3.3). Both sets of findings indicate that educators experience high stress levels working in prisons.

3.4.4 Comparison between prison educators' satisfaction and happiness in their lives and at work

When the findings for prison educators' satisfaction with their life (ONS) and their job (WRC) are compared, the data was found to be the same (54% indicated they had high or very high levels of both life and job satisfaction).

When the findings for prison educators' levels of happiness experienced in their life (ONS) and at work (WRC) are compared, more educators indicated they had high or very high levels of general happiness (48%) compared to the same levels of happiness at work (42%).

4 How living with a racialised identity affects the working lives of prison educators

This section explores how living with a racialised identity (ie their sense of self related to their historical, political, social and cultural identification with a racial group) can affect the working life of prison educators. It uses data from the survey (which can only be treated as indicative due to the small sample size) and the focus groups to understand the extent to which racism is witnessed and/or experienced by educators from prisoners, colleagues, senior management and prison officers, and the effect this can have on their mental health and wellbeing.

The survey questions asked to educators were based on those used by Universities UK for polling university students about their experiences of racial harassment at university (UUK, 2020)⁴². It is recognised that the question can be posed whether white educators can experience racism (defined in Section 1.5.1⁴³) when the social system itself favours white racialised power. However, we wanted the issues with all educators regardless of their heritage and a breakdown of the findings from the survey is shown below, followed by quotations from the focus group discussions of such experiences.

4.1 Racial harassment from prisoners

The findings from the survey indicated that **27% of prison educators had witnessed, and 10% had experienced, racial harassment from prisoners.**

More instances of racial harassment were witnessed or experienced from prisoners than from colleagues, senior managers and prison officers.

4.1.1 Witnessing racial harassment from prisoners

The survey found that **27% (n=34) of prison educators indicated they had witnessed racial harassment from prisoners**, 63% (n=80) had not witnessed racial harassment, 9% (n=12) were unsure/don't know and 2% (n=2) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had witnessed racial harassment:

- Gender: 26 were women, 7 were men and one person was non-binary
- Ethnicity: 24 were white (20 white British, 3 white (other minority) one white Irish), 9 were Black (6 Black or British Black, one Asian or British Asian, and one Arab), and one preferred not to answer the question

When racial harassment had been witnessed, it:

⁴² UUK (2020). "Tackling racial harassment in Higher Education. Survey data: What are students' experiences of racial harassment?" November 2020. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Reports/tackling-racial-harassment-progress-since-2020-survey-data.pdf>

⁴³ IRR (2020). Institute of Race Relations – Definitions. <https://irr.org.uk/research/statistics/definitions/>

- Had generally happened between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took two main forms - racist name calling, insults or 'jokes' and derogatory comments/behaviours
- Was a cause of worry for 35% (n=12) of educators, compared to those who were not worried (53%, n=18), and those who have a neutral answer (12%, n=4).
- Was considered to be a problem by 65% (n=22) of educators, compared to those who did not consider it to be a problem (18%, n=6), 12% (n=4) were neutral and 6% (n=2) did not know.

4.1.2 Experiencing racial harassment from prisoners

The survey found that **10% (n=13) of prison educators indicated they had experienced racial harassment from prisoners**, 84% (n=108) had not experienced it, 5% (n=6) were unsure/don't know and 1% (n=1) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had experienced racial harassment:

- Gender: 12 were women and there was one man
- Ethnicity: 8 were white (5 white British, 2 white (other minority) and one white Irish) and 5 were Black (3 Black or British Black, and 2 were Asian or British Asian)

When racial harassment had been experienced, it:

- Had generally happened between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took three main forms - racist name calling, insults or 'jokes', derogatory comments/behaviours and verbal abuse
- Was reported to the prison worked at by 62% (n=8) of staff, all of whom were women and worked in England. It was not reported by 38% (n=5)
- When it was reported, in three cases the prison investigated the harassment and action was taken against those involved – two cases involved white (other minority) educators and one case involved a Black or British Black (Caribbean) educator. In two cases it was investigated but no action was taken due to a lack of evidence – one case involved a Black or British Black (Caribbean) educator and the other a white British educator. In two cases no action was taken at all – both involved white British educators
- The main reason given for not reporting the harassment was that staff had no confidence that the incident would be addressed
- The main feeling which educators reported after experiencing such incidents was vulnerability, but also feelings of anxiousness, upset and depression

The focus groups explored in more detail how prison educators experienced racial harassment from prisoners. Both the educators and the prisoners were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The key themes which emerged were around the tactics used by prisoners to intimidate and challenge educators' knowledge and skills, the difficulty of knowing whether such harassment was race-related or not, how it was handled, and the particular difficulties faced by Black women working in prisons.

Longer quotations have been provided throughout this section to add depth and understanding to these human stories of how staff experience such harassment.

Intimidation and direct challenge to teaching competence

Prisons are complex and hierarchical organisations. The way that prisoners act and react to the system could be due to many factors, such as they may have previously had negative educational experiences, they may distrust the system and, by default, the educators who work within it, and there may be an added element of the racialised identities of either party in the mix.

Educators described the challenges they faced when teaching English to prisoners, when they themselves were not of white British background. Their skills and competence were questioned rather than being accepted, and sometimes only accepted when validated by another (white) educator.

“I teach English as a second language and there's also another white teacher who teaches English as well. So when I go and cover a class, you know, a lot of the students actually doubt, when I'm actually correcting their grammar, that I'm actually teaching them ... but because of my own skin colour, they don't understand that I'm actually teaching them English. When my colleague comes into the classroom and goes back and repeats the same thing that I have told them, that's when they actually believe what I've actually been telling them ... Because, you know, as Black teachers [we get] “what are you doing in the classroom, you should actually be with us as prisoners, you know”?

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

“When I started with English learners, it was very, very hard, much, much harder because I had to prove myself to them and I had to convince them that I can teach them their language. They wouldn't accept a non-native speaker of English. I mean they would say, they would say “what are you doing here”? Blah blah blah. But not being a native speaker of English and being a foreign national is an asset for me now that I'm an ESOL tutor because my students accept me and respect me much more, and they feel a connection that I am one of them, and I feel safe, and I have no problems right now. But when I had to teach English guys at the beginning, it was very hard”.

White (Other Minority) Educator, East Midlands, England

Another way of questioning educators' competence related to ascertaining the length of time they had been working and teaching in the UK and their educational qualifications. Only when these have been established to their satisfaction, do they accept the educators as teachers.

“As, as an African, working with British people, white people, you always have this kind of, you, you know, you won't have that sense of belonging amongst everyone. ... You get prisoners walking up to you, telling you “what qualification do you have?”. “Do you have Bachelors or Masters [degree]?” “Have you been teaching?” “How long have you been in the UK?” You know they extract all this information from you to know the level of respect they're going to accord to you. And I've noticed it among a lot of prisoners”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, South East, England

One white educator described how Black (Asian) prisoners can use intimidation tactics to undermine her authority and, although ignored, it can cause mental stress.

“A lot of them will try to intimidate or put down or control my emotions, manipulate my emotions, tell me how I feel, so that they can try and get under my skin. It is a men's prison, usually from an Asian background. I've got no truck with it. They see that very quickly and they stop. I don't have a problem with it personally. It's just something that's become increasingly obvious as it's gone on. I ignore it and I get on with it and they treat me as I am ... but it still can be quite intimidating ... it can get under your skin and it can cause mental stress, but I try to ignore it”.

White British Educator, Yorkshire and the Humber, England

Dealing with racial harassment in the classroom

In responding to incidents which happen in the prison classroom, educators need to judge if it is race-related or not. Sometimes it is clear-cut, but at other times, it can be difficult to decide, especially if the learners are not well-known to the educator.

“When I go in as a cover tutor, the way they treat me is different the, the learners, you know they, they don't behave the way that they behave when their teacher is there. What I'm not 100% sure of is - is it because of my race or is it just because I'm not the teacher?”

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

Some prisoners use their situation in the prison environment as an excuse for their behaviour, which can affect the educator's wellbeing whilst they try to remain professional in response.

“Sometimes it's really difficult to stay all the way professional really, as we have to, especially, you know, when I get racially abused, and especially in the prison I'm, I'm currently at. And you know, the answers from the lads I get, “But Miss. I'm in a prison, what do you expect?” ... it's really difficult, or when you, when you know someone's really, really struggling and there is absolutely no way you can help him, so that's how I do find that very challenging ... makes, makes me feel sad, especially when I get racially abused because, you know, we do get prisoners from all over the world really, you know, and, and it's not nice, it's not nice”.

White (Other Minority) Cover Educator, West Midlands, England

The reporting of racial incidents

When racist incidents happen, educators can report prisoners to the management for investigation with variable results. When this is not managed effectively, it can result in educators stopping reporting the incidents when they are not taken seriously.

“The usual torment being that coming from Africa you have some racist comment from your learners making some kind of random jokes directed towards you, even if they don't say it to you directly but you, you know, who those jokes are meant for. So sometimes you report them, but when you report you also see that the system in itself doesn't really manage those reports well. So you, you just stop reporting.”

Black or British Black (African) Educator, South East, England

In fact, prisoners also have a sense of power in the classroom, as they are also able to report educators to management. It appears there may be a difference in how these are handled based on the racial background of the educator.

“People report you for flimsy, flimsy reasons to the staff members, things that ‘don't hold water’, they'll just go and report it. Maybe because of the ethnicity because they don't tend to do the same to other people you know. So I still feel that once you are from a minority ethnicity you will be treated differently from others in this society”

Black or British Black (African) Educator, South East, England

Misogynoir experienced from prisoners

Misogynoir is a term referring to the combined force of anti-Black racism and misogyny directed towards Black women. For Black educators working in prisons, this was raised as a particular issue.

“But I think the one thing that we don't talk about is, within this question, is the misogyny that comes with, with it. The misogyny towards, towards any woman working in a prison, but particularly the misogyny towards Black women from our prisoners, our students We don't challenge that at all. I don't think we acknowledge it, let alone challenge it. So that to me is a huge issue for any woman in a prison. But I think it's particularly of an issue for Black woman that work in prisons”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

The impact of misogynoir in the classroom can be difficult to handle, especially when against a Black tutor (by Black (Asian) prisoners) and can directly affect an educator's mental health.

“So I've got seven Asian male prisoners that are very much ‘Andrew Tate’⁴⁴ dominated. And then I've got a white guy and a dual-heritage lad. So today they're sitting there and they're, they're shouting “Ebola” and then laughing. So I look up, so the lad shouts again, the Asian lad shouts again, “Ebola”. So they start laughing again and I'll look up and then I, I challenge them, and ask them “what exactly, is this code for because I don't understand you?. You're shouting “Ebola” and then looking at me?”
... I kind of came out at lunchtime. I couldn't wait to get out, to be honest you just think it's alright work saying to us [that] we have to check the wellbeing of the prisoners and their mental health. But what about my mental health? ... It just made me feel I wanted to be unprofessional and tell them about themselves. And you can't. Yeah, you can't do that. So [I felt] frustrated, really, really frustrated”

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, West Midlands, England

Acknowledging the shared history of different groups of prisoners is important but so is remaining professional and firmly handling such situations. The following quotation reveals a difference in the way prisoners perceive their racialised identity as being more important than that of the Black educator.

“It also depends on some of the learners are coming from. You could tell, especially the Eastern European learners, we know that they never actually like people of colour and the fact that they've now come to education and they've got a Black teacher in front of them. You know, I

⁴⁴ Andrew Tate is a controversial British-American social media influencer who has been singled out for the effect he has had in spreading misogyny online among boys and young men by authorities in the UK

always go in with that kind of mindset, knowing what I'm going to expect, but you just got to stand your ground anyway".

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

Racial harassment is not experienced in all prisons

One Black educator reported that even though there were prisoners of different backgrounds, racial harassment was not an issue because she placed the emphasis on building relationships with learners as individuals, which then negates the possibility of racial realities.

"In terms of in the classroom, I don't have any issues with any of my learners. I have a very good relationship with anyone. It doesn't really matter whether what background they are, I treat them. I, I'd like to think that the way that I speak to each individual is with a level of respect that they know that it wouldn't really matter what colour they are. They know that I'm fair and I believe I am because I don't have any issues with any of my students, and the 'Number One Governor', plus my department, they're well aware that I, I have a very good experience or working relationship with the men in the prison, So that's a good plus. I have a good relationship with all my colleagues as well".

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, London, England

In some prisons racial harassment was not an issue as they either had very few Black staff or none.

4.2 Racial harassment from colleagues

The findings from the survey indicated that **14% of prison educators indicated they had witnessed, and 5% had experienced, racial harassment from colleagues.**

4.2.1 Witnessing racial harassment from colleagues

The survey found that **14% (n=18) of prison educators indicated they had witnessed racial harassment from colleagues**, 77% (n=99) had not, 4% (n=5) were unsure/don't know and 5% (n=6) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had witnessed racial harassment:

- Gender: 16 were women and two were men
- Ethnicity: 9 were Black (6 Black or British Black, and 3 Asian or British Asian), 8 were white (5 white British, two white Irish and one white (other minority)), and one person preferred not to answer this question

When racial harassment had been witnessed, it:

- Had generally happened between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took the main form of derogatory comments/behaviours
- Was a cause of worry for 28% (n=5) of staff, compared to those who were not worried (67%, n=12), and those who have a neutral answer (6%, n=1).

- Was considered to be a problem by 39% (n=7) of staff, compared to those who did not consider it to be a problem (28%, n=5), 28% (n=5) were neutral and 6% (n=1) did not know.

4.2.2 Experiencing racial harassment from colleagues

The survey found that **5% (n=6) of prison educators indicated they had experienced racial harassment from colleagues**, 88% (n=113) had not, 5% (n=7) were unsure/don't know and 2% (n=2) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had experienced racial harassment:

- Gender: 5 were women and there was one man
- Ethnicity: 4 were Black (2 Asian or British Asian and 2 Black or British Black) and two were white (one white Irish and one white (Other Minority))

When racial harassment had been experienced, it:

- Had either happened once or between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took the form of either derogatory comments/behaviours or being ignored or excluded from conversation or group activities
- It was not reported by any prison educator (n=6)
- The two main reasons for not reporting were that staff didn't feel able to judge whether the incident was serious enough to report and they had no confidence that the incident would be addressed
- The main feeling which educators reported after experiencing such incidents was one of feeling upset, angry and anxious

The focus groups explored in more detail how racial harassment was experienced by prison educators from their colleagues. The key theme which emerged was around microaggressions. However, not all educators had experienced racial harassment from colleagues.

Experiences of racism from colleagues (microaggressions)

Racial microaggressions are brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of colour because they belong to a racially minoritised group. Compared to more overt forms of racism, racial microaggressions are subtle and insidious, often leaving the victim confused, distressed and frustrated, and the perpetrator oblivious of the offence they have caused (Rollock, 2012)⁴⁵.

This example of microaggressions from colleagues indicate that the experience of microaggression can be located in a broader structural process of racism:

"I've had direct experience of being 'othered'. And I think, after 20 years of being in education, in higher education, universities, I think it's quite disheartening. It's mostly from staff, it's always from staff, not from prisoners ... it's things like, you know, they don't know how to say

⁴⁵ Rollock, N (2012). "Unspoken rules of engagement: Navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain". International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 25 (5), 517-532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2010.543433>

your name, or it's too difficult, micro-aggressions, and if that goes on for a long time I think what you have to do is just keep resilient and let your work speak for itself. You know since the early 20s [2020s] that you've got to work twice as hard and three times as fast. So that's just the way it is at the minute. And I think that the current political climate and things that are going on outside, like the last year, we had all the riots⁴⁶ and things, they don't help and the media doesn't, media doesn't help".

Asian or British Asian (Pakistani) Educator, West Midlands, England

No experiences of racism from colleagues

In some prisons, the educators working there did not come from different racialised backgrounds. In the extract below, the educator equated issues of racism with non-white people, even though the learners came from different backgrounds.

"With my colleagues and my team, all of us are white. I've never actually seen, you know, any different cultures etc at work within our team, even if they're delivering a course, you know from the outside ... but within the actual prison, the learners, you know, we've got a diverse range of, you know, different people".

White British Educator, East Midlands, England

4.3 Racial harassment from senior management

The findings from the survey indicated that **6% of prison educators indicated they had witnessed, and 3% had experienced, racial harassment from senior management.**

4.3.1 Witnessing racial harassment from senior management

The survey found that **6% (n=8) of prison educators indicated they had witnessed racial harassment from senior management**, 80% (n=102) had not, 11% (n=14) were unsure/don't know and 3% (n=4) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had witnessed racial harassment:

- Gender: Six were women and two were men
- Ethnicity: Five were Black (3 Asian or British Asian, and 2 Black or British Black), and three were white (3 white British)

When racial harassment had been witnessed, it:

- Had generally happened between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took the form of derogatory comments/behaviours or being ignored or excluded from conversation or group activities

⁴⁶ From 30 July to 5 August 2024 far-right, anti-immigration protests and riots occurred in England and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. This followed a mass stabbing of girls at a dance party in which three children were killed. The riots were fuelled by false claims circulated by far-right groups that the perpetrator of the attack was a Muslim and an asylum seeker.

- Was a cause of worry for 38% (n=3) of staff, compared to those who were not worried (51%, n=4), and those who have a neutral answer (13%, n=1).
- Was considered to be a problem by 88% (n=7) of staff, compared to those who did not consider it to be a problem (13%, n=1).

4.3.2 Experiencing racial harassment from senior management

The survey found that **3% (n=4) of prison educators indicated they had experienced racial harassment from senior management**, 88% (n=113) had not, 7% (n=9) were unsure/don't know and 2% (n=2) preferred not to answer the question.

Key demographic features of those who had experienced racial harassment:

- Gender: Two were women and two were men
- Ethnicity: Two were Black (one Asian or British Asian, one Black or British Black) and two were white (one white British and one white (other minority))

When racial harassment had been experienced, it:

- Had either happened once or between two and five times in the previous six months
- Took the main form of experiencing derogatory comments/behaviours
- Was reported by three educators, with two indicating the complaint was still open and being looked into
- The main feeling which educators reported after experiencing such incidents was one of feeling upset and anxious

The focus groups explored in more detail how racial harassment was experienced by prison educators from senior management. The key themes which emerged were around witnessing unconscious racism, management's uncertainty of how to deal with racial difference and misogyny.

Witnessing unconscious racism from senior managers

Unconscious racism refers to the automatic, unintentional biases that individuals hold about people of different racial or ethnic groups. In the case of a Black educator below, he became a victim of unconscious racism at a disciplinary meeting.

“So, in in my workplace, I'd say that probably half of us are white, and half of us are Black, but all the managers are white. ... I've been witness to, I would describe it as kind of micro-hostility to towards Black members of staff that I wouldn't see to white members of staff. I was supporting a colleague in a meeting who is of Black Caribbean heritage, a disciplinary meeting. It was on a sort of, on a stage, Step Two disciplinary meeting, and, the manager, who is white, informed him of the next stage and what was expected and so on. And my colleague was not, he was obviously upset, but then he was accused of being aggressive in the meeting, and he wasn't being aggressive at all ... I felt like that was a sort of moment that where, he was maybe sort of leaning on kind of old sort of tropes about, about Black

people being aggressive and yeah, I felt that was a moment of, sort of maybe unconscious racism towards one of my one of my colleagues”.

White British Educator, London, England

Management’s uncertainty on how to deal with ethnic differences

From a number of discussions, it was clear that senior management was unsure how to handle staff differences, such as culture and religion. The following quotation demonstrates a form of micro-aggression (defined in Section 4.2.2) and the impact on how the Black educator interacted with her manager and her perceived need to prove her teaching competence to do her job. This example of racial harassment suggests that prison management would benefit directly from training in equality, diversity and inclusion in order to be able to confidently and appropriately deal with all staff.

“The manager that was I was working under, he, I’ve never met him before, but he met me at during my induction and he was kind of like very careful around me. So he emailed me and he said “is there anything that we have to put in place for you? For example, do you wear the burka?” He, that’s the first thing he said to me because when you fill out the questionnaire, I’ve obviously said my religion is Islam. So the first thing he asked me was “do you wear the burka?” And then the first day he did see me, he was sort of shocked, taken aback, and that kind of gave me an idea in my head, like I don’t know if I’m going to get on with this person, I was ‘walking on eggshells’ around him. And then, after that, he would say things like he wasn’t 100% convinced that I was made for the job or, if I was, I had to prove myself to him ... so I had to prove myself that I’m an English teacher. I’ve got an English degree. I’ve got PGCE, I’m well educated”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands

There was also an example of the different approaches taken by management when dealing with racial abuse from prisoners, depending on the racial background of the educator. This is an example of ‘gaslighting’ (ie a form of coercive control where a person is manipulated into doubting their own beliefs or sanity).

“If I’m racially abused by a prisoner, and I go and report it, the management are not very, my white managers are not very, they’re not very helpful in the sense of “are you ok?” But if a white colleague is subjected to something that they don’t like, it’s “oh, come and sit down, come and have a cup of tea. Let’s do this. Let’s do that”. Yeah, I’m, I might as well just not exist. And if I say that, it’s. “Oh, you’re playing that card again”. And I was trying to explain to my manager just this week that that a comment was made in my classroom that I found, I found offensive and she turned around and she said, “oh, I think you’re just overthinking it”. Not really what I wanted to hear”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, West Midlands, England

Misogynoir experienced from a prison governor

A white educator gave a detailed account of how misogynoir (the combined force of anti-Black racism and misogyny directed towards Black women) had occurred involving her prison management. In this case a Black women educator, who taught industrial cleaning, was asked to clean the prison Governor’s toilets rather than cleaning staff who were employed for that purpose, thus not recognising her professional skills as a teacher. This suggests that misogynoir was experienced.

“We've had a tradition of Black women being employed as trainers ... Some of these women, particularly those that teach industrial cleaning, have been treated as cleaners, to the point where a Governor has decided it's appropriate to ask the female teacher of industrial cleaning to clean the Governor's toilets ... the teaching is what we're there to do, not the subject itself”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

4.4 Racism experienced from prison officers

The survey did not ask prison educators about whether they had witnessed or experienced racial harassment from prison officers. However, this surfaced as an important factor in the focus groups.

The key themes which emerged were around the overt racism and microaggressions experienced by educators from prison officers and the lack of racial diversity in the job role of prison officers.

Racism experienced by educators from prison officers

Some Black educators reported that prison officers are racist towards them, and they suffer from microaggressions and overt racism (racial discrimination that is obvious, visible and direct).

“I've had more racism from prison officers, than actual prisoners. So asking me questions like, “oh, why, why is she named [name deleted]? Isn't that white?” So, unfortunately, because I was quite new, I justified why my name is [name deleted] being a Muslim. And then the same officer asked me whether I wanted a samosa? I was like, “no, thank you”. He was like, “but you're Indian, you like samosas”. And then like from other officers, things like dog searches “oh, you don't want a dog to touch you, do you?”

Educator (Ethnicity Not Given), West Midlands, England

“I'm very much aware that I'm over-observed, interrogated, inspected by security. I definitely get the sense that there's an assumption that I must be up to something. I'll give you one quick, quick example. I don't go out during my lunch break, I tend to stay in my room and do my work. I had an appointment which was thankfully just down the road from, from where the prison is. So I went out, went to my appointment. I came back, when I came back and was in the prison, was going through one of the gates, a security officer, was there waiting, they, they unlocked the door and I thought they were coming through. But they actually held it out for me, held the door open for me, and then they told me to go over to another officer who was holding a sniffer dog. They were stood in the middle of the yard. And so they, you know, investigated me. I thought it was just a spot check for everybody, but it wasn't. They were waiting for me. And as soon as I went through, they went. There is this this over-analysis of me over-observance of me that I'm very, very much aware of the suspicion around you because of your race”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, East Midlands, England

One Black (Asian or British Asian) educator shared an experience of racism from Black prison officers.

“I have been in the past, when I was working in a different prison, many times and especially by Asians [like] myself, so that was quite a shock for me. But, but this is not the kind of thing happens with me by the managers or by the prisoners. Yes, it happens with me by the prison

officers, so I just don't understand what's the issue with them. They just do not like my face probably".

Asian or British Asian (Pakistani) Educator, West Midlands, England

And a Black educator, in a senior leadership role, discussed the direct discrimination (where the expectations of a person's job role is based on their racialised identity).

"From a perspective of being part of an SLT, I find that when other prison staff come in, or even learners, and I'm in a room with other people, say, for instance two or three other staff members, as the only Black person there. They would ask me if they can speak to the Education Manager? If they can speak to the Head Teacher? So they wouldn't assume, they'll first look around the room and then they will be directed and say, "Oh he's the Manager, or He's the Teacher, or he's the Deputy Head Teacher, so speak to him" and they're to get taken back by that, you know, because to them it would seem that hold on, that's unusual".

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background Educator, England

Lack of racial diversity of prison officers

It was suggested that the lack of racial diversity of prison officers, ie being only white men, may account for their attitudes and behaviour towards people from different backgrounds.

"The prison officers, if you see the prison officers when they're all leaving at sort of 5-5.30pm, when that shift is going out, it's the same person, just, just different versions of themselves. They all use the same language, the same rhetoric. I said if you swap out their prison guard uniform and put a football shirt on them and put a pint of lager in their hands, it's that thing. It's there's no, there's no diversity of any sort. They just recruit, they just recruit themselves over and over again. So you're kind of locked into this 'echo chamber of nastiness'".

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, East Midlands, England

"The prison I am at is predominantly I would say white, with a very small number of different racial groups in there, and I do find that because the prison officers are not diverse, just because of the nature of the area. I have seen the way that they do treat somebody of colour, which I think some sometimes, I've seen it the way that they've discriminated against them, and the way they've acted around them. I think it's been, you know, quite disgusting, to be honest".

White British Educator, North East, England

4.5 The effect of the experience of racism on prison educators' mental health and wellbeing

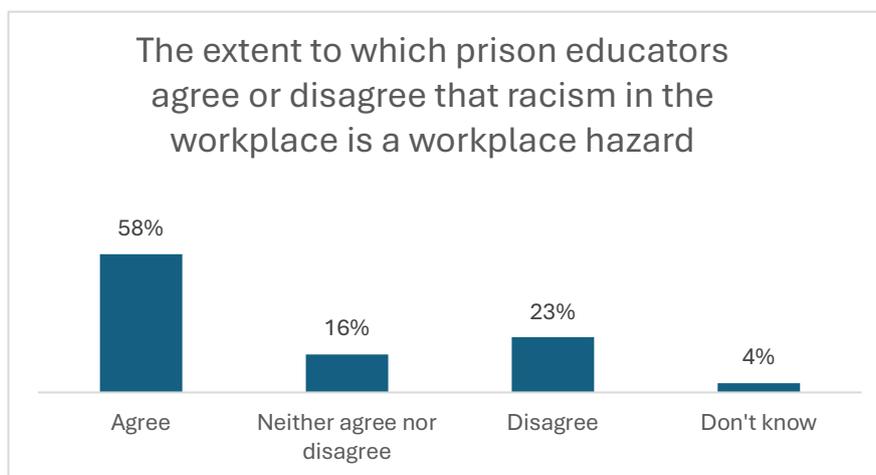
This section has given examples of the impact on educators' mental health and wellbeing of witnessing and/or experiencing racism. The main feelings reported are ones of anxiety and upset, but also vulnerability with prisoners and anger with colleagues. As one educator explained:

"In terms of trauma, racism can be very traumatic. It can affect so many aspects mentally, your confidence, your self-esteem, your mental health your physical [health]. You know, people start dressing differently or whatever, so not, not even, change who you are. So it is really important because it affects so many aspects and faculties of your being to be taken seriously because it can't even lead into your personal life where you start not be sociable, you'll start to be withdrawn, isolated".

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

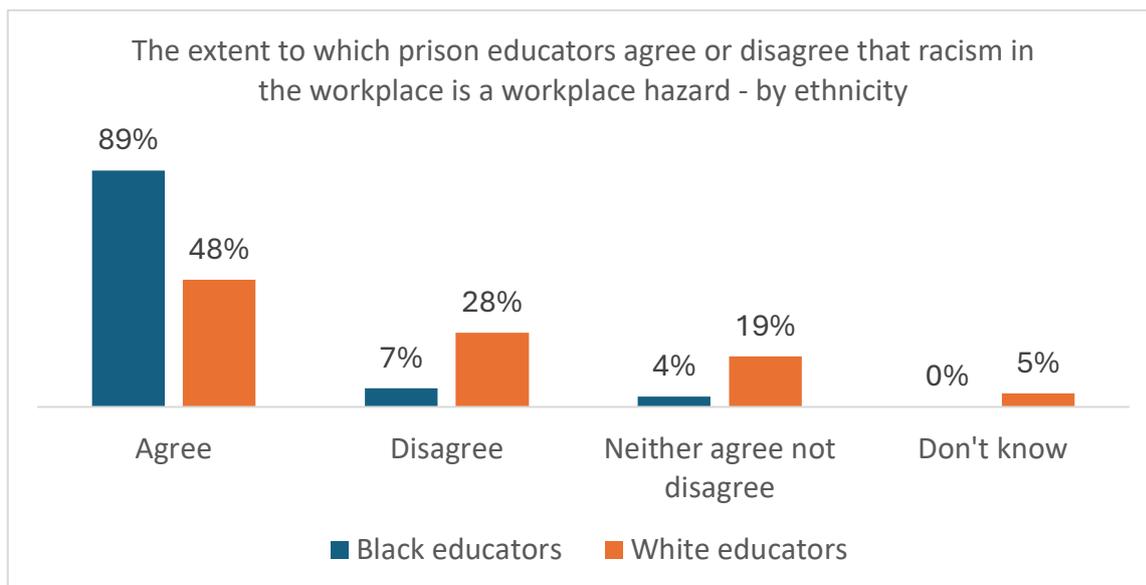
Educators' views on whether racism should be defined as a workplace hazard were probed as part of this study. Workplace hazards are potential sources of harm that can lead to illnesses, injuries or damage. Examples could be anything from work-related stress, to slips and trips, to an improperly set up workstation.

In the survey, more than half (58%) of educators agreed that racism is a workplace hazard.

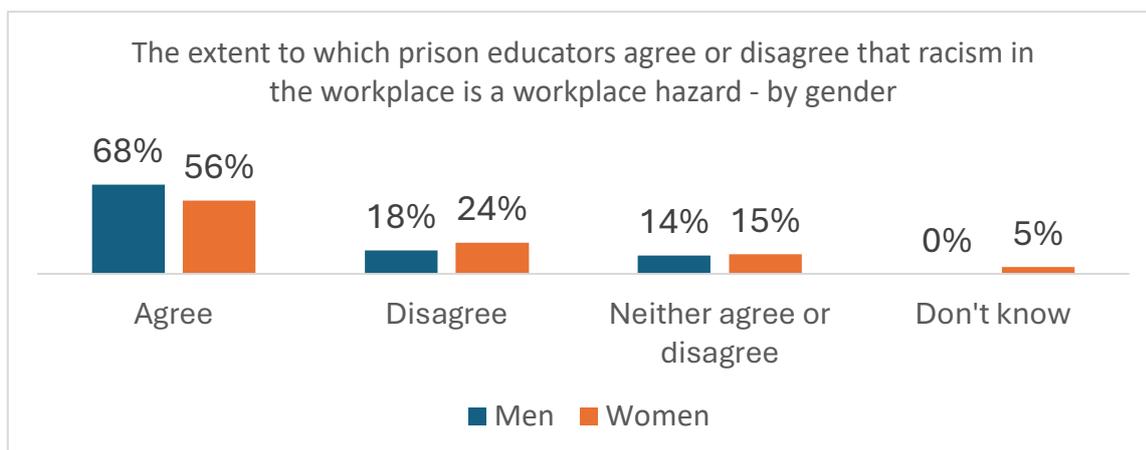


Base: All prison educators (n=128)

Proportionally, more Black educators than white educators agreed with this proposition, and slightly more men than women.



Base: All prison educators (n=128)



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

In the focus groups 100% of participants agreed that racism should be treated as a workplace hazard

"I think if, if it's blatant racism, where they actually do lash out and are racist, it's coming from a place of anger ... it is coming from a place of hatred, so it should be treated as a hazard in the workplace because of that".

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands, England

"Yes, we are often made aware that certain learners show racist behaviours"

White British Educator, Scotland

"Yes, racism is not acceptable"

White British Educator, East Midlands, England

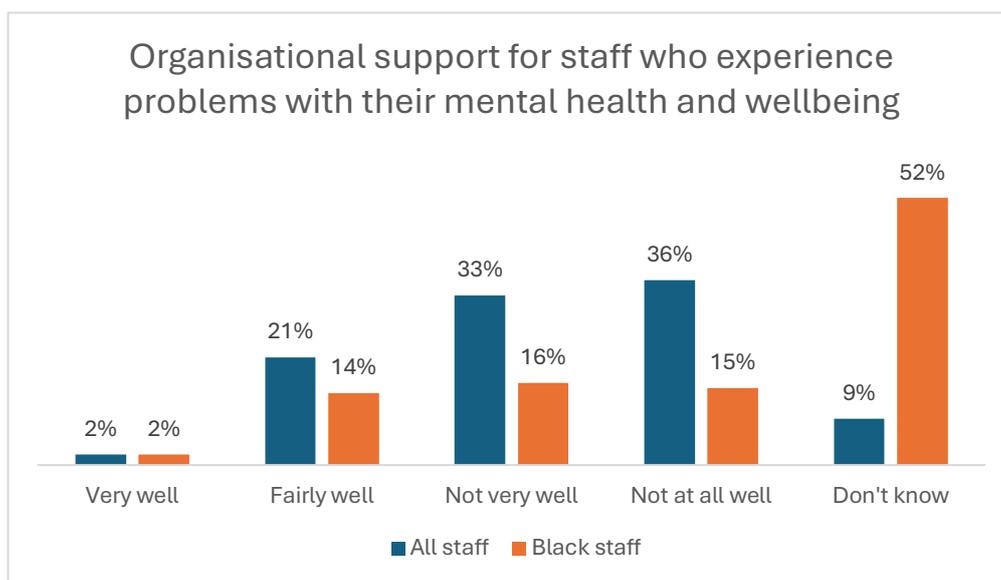
5 The mental health and wellbeing support available to prison educators and what's needed most

This section reports the mental health and wellbeing support which prison educators have available to them if they experience issues at work and their views about its efficacy. The types of support which educators consider they most need is also detailed. The findings reported are based on both the survey data and the discussions held in the focus groups.

5.1 The mental health and wellbeing support available to prison educators

Level of organisational wellbeing support received by prison educators

Prison educators were asked in the survey about the level of support staff receive, who experience problems with their mental health and wellbeing, from their organisations. They were also separately asked about level of support specifically received by Black staff.



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

It can be seen that **69% of all educators did not feel well supported by their organisation**, compared to 23% of all educators who felt well supported by their organisation.

Staff felt that **31% of Black educators were not well supported**, compared to 16% who were. However, more than half (52%) were unable to answer the question relating to the experience of Black educators.

The types of support available to prison educator

The three main types of support available to prison educators identified from the survey are access to an Employee Assistance Programme (56%, n=72), return to work interviews after a period of absence (44%, n=56) and Union people who can be talked to (34%, n=44).



Base: All prison educators (n=128)

In the focus groups, satisfaction was expressed with Employee Assistance Programmes and with the assistance of union representatives from UCU.

“Yeah, we've had a great deal of support from our college. We have an Employee Assistance Programme which I have used in the past. A colleague and I witnessed a rather violent incident and then our college paid for six weeks of trauma counselling for us”.

White British Educator, Scotland

Other types of support were also identified. These included the use of wellbeing apps, wellbeing entitlement time, access to a Staff Welfare Officer, access to a remote GP, referral to Occupational Health services, conversations with colleagues or line managers, use of a ‘sanctuary’ room (where staff can take time off if needed), having a staff wellbeing team, having a prison care team, the Female Support Network and the importance of self-care (eg going for a walk, or to the gym etc).

A number of educators also stated either that they had no support at their place of work or that there was a lack of clear signposting to any help that was available.

Prison educators' views about the support which was available to them

The support offered was criticised on three levels:

- a) That it was not seen as being systemic, ie that it does not encompass the system as a whole, which was seen as a major drawback

“So in terms of wellbeing it's not systemic wellbeing. So it's as good as your manager, your colleagues, whether you've got a Union Rep, there are brilliant pockets of examples of really good wellbeing, but they're not systemic”.

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

- b) That support was not available at the local prison level, which, given the nature of the organisations, was surprising

“So you teach the whole week and there is no, you know, ‘checking in’ ... it feels like you're just left on your own to deal with all this confusion and situations. And I'm amazed because this is prison”.

White (Other Minority) Educator, East of England

“So I just feel there's, there's nothing tangible, that it's just a word thrown out that we look after our people, mental health and wellbeing is important. But you know, So what? The words are there. But as I said “so what”? What has the organisation, or the prison, actually done to facilitate mental health and wellbeing?”

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background Educator, South East, England

- c) At the practical level of use

Two sources of support for educators were discussed in detail – wellbeing apps and a specific wellbeing initiative provided by an education provider for its employees.

PAM Assist⁴⁷ was the app most common form of support mentioned in the focus groups. This was considered the go-to place for support by management, often with very little other support recommended.

“So we have a system at work. It's called ‘PAM Assist’. So you can call the number. So if anything happens at work, as a Black female member of staff, anything happens, they just go give you the leaflet and go, “oh call ‘PAM Assist’, talk to them, they're really good”. Yeah, that's it. ‘PAM Assist’ for everything”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, West Midlands, England

However, several educators stated that they would not use this app because they did not trust it as they saw it as working *“alongside the company”* and were concerned that their personal information/circumstances would be shared. One educator said he had tried to use ‘Pam Assist’, but each time he had called there was no-one available to talk to him, even though the support offered was supposed to be 24/7.

The second form of support discussed related to the entitlement to two hours wellbeing time each week for employees by an education provider, which was welcomed. However, those educators working for this provider considered it unviable given all the daily activities which needed to be carried out such as marking, planning and teaching and learning, and there was no extra staff capacity and/or no cover which could be arranged.

⁴⁷ <https://pam-assist.co.uk/>

“We've had ours tied into our lunchtime. We're not getting them ... a lot of establishments can't offer those wellbeing hours because they can't get cover. You can't collate them and take them in a block. It's impossible for managers”.

White British Educator, North West, England

Another educator reported that it was difficult to take because she teaches in the mornings, and the wellbeing time cannot be taken in the afternoon until the men [prisoners] have gone, but this is also her finishing time). In this way it was seen as something which needed to be added into their working week rather than a benefit:

“It doesn't really happen because there's so much to do and you cannot fit those two hours wellbeing a week into anything, because, as a teacher, you have 1,000 things to do”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, London, England

5.2 Types of support needed by prison educators

There was a very strong feeling that prison educators need more support. At the wider system level in England, educators felt that the curriculum and general education skills they were providing to prisoners would be better served if prison education were controlled by the Department for Education (DfE) rather than the Ministry of Justice (the case since 2016). It would also mean that prison education would not be included in the competitive contract system, where companies need to control costs/produce a profit.

“Because we're operating under private providers ... if all of education was provided under Department for Education, maybe we will see some things a lot differently to what we get currently now and alleviate some of the stress that we go through because it's driven by profit”.

Black or British Black (Caribbean) Educator, London, England

At the prison level, the most valuable type of support requested was supervision.

“Supervision, supervision would be absolutely huge. The fact that we deal with quite chaotic and troubled people without any level of supervision, be that those of us that work on our own, on wings with people, or even go into class to teach in the morning, and you've got an empty chair because somebody's taken their own life overnight, to not have any anybody to come to you and say, “Are you ok? Do you need anything?” That's what we need, absolutely”.)

White British Educator, West Midlands, England

Opportunities for team building activities involving different employees across the prisons were also suggested to *“break the barriers we have been the multiple organisations working in a prison”.*

Other suggestions of the support needed

Establishing an independent wellbeing team

A number of educators suggested that an independent national wellbeing team/unit should be created for all prison educators to access. It could be linked to UCU, which was seen as a trustworthy organisation. This would allow educators to:

“Disclose personal information that wouldn't go anywhere else and to get some sort of help ... just sort of like have a mental health support team that's external”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands

It would also provide a different avenue of support if they felt unable to talk to their union representative.

Meetings with colleagues to share experiences/team building

The opportunity to have time and space to talk to colleagues and share experiences was seen as important for prisoner educators' mental health. This could involve colleagues in their teams.

“Having the space to just really talk, every now and then. Like have weekly or monthly meetings, where we can discuss issues that are happening in our workplace and finding, because we all have different perspectives, and finding resolutions ... it'd be good to share knowledge and share ideas”.

Black or British Black (African) Educator, East Midlands

Or it could take the form of 'shutdown days', when the provision of education does not run.

“... so that you can actually sit with your colleagues and, you know, speak about things, people that you can trust, you know, because there's not that moment to speak because it's such a busy environment. It's, it's constant ... to take off that edge of the mental health of constantly chasing your tail”.

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background Educator, South East, England

Review of the time it takes to undertake different activities

Time, or the lack of it, was a recurring theme in the focus groups. Educators felt they did not have enough time to undertake all the different tasks their job involved, and this impacted their work-life balance. Some educators wanted 'protected' time allocated for them to plan lessons, prepare materials and assess student work (PPA time) so these activities were not carried out in their own time

“So to improve mental health with and wellbeing in the workplace, I think, you know, we need to make sure that dedicated PPA time is ring-fenced”.

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background Educator, South East, England

Others stated they used their lunchtimes for work activities

“A lot of us using our lunchtime breaks to get stuff marked, or we come into work early .. some teachers have got a courses back-to-back, literally finishing one course on a Friday,

starting a new group on a Monday. And we need to give the folders, or work, marked back within two days”.

White (Other Minority) Cover Educator, West Midlands, England

One educator stated her mental health would be directly improved by the initiative ‘Project Connect’, which came into force in April but is currently expected to start in October 2025. The idea behind this is harmonise the roles of trainers and tutors with the same terms and conditions. For this educator, it would allow some of the normal contact time with the prisoners to be used instead for planning/paperwork etc, and for her to simply slow down after having taught at pace for 15 years.

“For me, it's about reducing that context, contact and the stress because that is where the stress is from over nine sessions in a classroom. I have eight women, and then they've got clients. I can be dealing with 15 women on one session, every session, so for me. what would improve my mental health? It would be the extra DD [direct duty] time and the wellbeing time, which neither have happened”.

White British Educator, North West, England

Review of the support offered by management

Educators suggested that the support offered to them by management could be improved. They wanted to have contact with managers who are empathetic, and able to communicate personally rather than via email. They wanted to feel valued and appreciated by them and within their team.

“We don't need somebody stood there with trumpets and things, shouting “oh, you're amazing”. But just that little thank you would be nice at the end of the day because you know we, we have a tough job and we don't get the rewards from management that we should do”.

White British Educator, North East, England

Regarding issues which affect staff welfare, they also wanted to be consulted by management at a much earlier stage and be able to have some input into the decisions made by them.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This research study set out to explore the work-related experiences of educators working in prisons in the UK. A mixed-methods approach for data gathering was used. The survey sample achieved was smaller than anticipated, so the quantitative findings can only be treated as indicative. This was likely partly influenced by the current renewal of contracts to run prisons and education services, with the job uncertainty which this brings. However, the focus groups were well attended by educators from different ethnic backgrounds which has allowed the experiences of Black prison educators to be further explored. The study has also investigated the support available to educators who experience issues at work which impact on their mental health and wellbeing and the types of support which they consider to be most needed.

Work-related experiences of prison educators and the impact this has on their wellbeing

- Many prison educators love their work. They enjoy helping learners to grow intellectually and transform into people who are valued as individuals and for their ideas. To do this, they need to create an environment of trust and respect to motivate prisoners to learn. When they make a difference, educators feel a sense of achievement and find the job rewarding. The opportunity to teach basic level skills and practical skills, and take qualifications, gives prisoners opportunities to potentially find work and, importantly, reduces the chances of them re-offending.
- Educators face specific challenges due to their work being set in prisons. Although many (65%) educators feel physically safe at work, they feel much less psychologically safe (40%). The prevalence of drugs is an issue. In the classroom, educators often have to overcome learners' negative attitudes to learning, sometimes rooted in previous negative experiences at school, the unpredictability of the day, the system of educational delivery and associated paperwork.
- The culture of their particular organisation/prison negatively affects the mental health and wellbeing of many (61%) prison educators. There often appears to be a lack of communication between senior management and educators, and between prison officers and educators. Educators' job insecurity is an issue which causes great emotional stress for many at prison contract renewal dates.
- Educators' mental health and wellbeing is characterised by high stress (89% were stressed) and high workload levels (89% rated their workload level as high). Their wellbeing was measured using validated psychological scales. Prison educators' wellbeing was found to be considerably lower than teachers working in Further Education colleges, with 45% at risk of probable clinical depression (using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale). They also had lower levels of life satisfaction, feeling the things they do are worthwhile and happiness

scores, and higher levels of anxiety than the wider adult population (using the ONS measure of personal wellbeing).

Differences in the working experiences of Black prison educators and those from other backgrounds

- Many instances of racial harassment were shared through this project. These were not just experienced or witnessed by staff from one particular racial background (eg Black educators) but also by educators from other backgrounds, eg white educators who are not British, and from prisoners coming from a range of racial backgrounds too.
- Educators as a whole group witnessed and experienced the most harassment from prisoners compared to their colleagues and senior management (27% had witnessed and 10% had experienced harassment from prisoners). Black educators witnessed the most harassment from prisoners and their colleagues, with misogynoir⁴⁸ being a particular issue for Black women educators.
- Some prison managers appeared unsure of how to deal with matters relating to the racialised and cultural identity of their staff.
- Many educators (58% in the survey and 100% of focus group participants) considered that racism should now be treated as a workplace hazard in the same way as stress in the workplace.
- Not all prisons employed staff from different ethnic backgrounds, and not all educators had experienced racism.

The mental health and wellbeing support available to prison educators and what's most needed

- Many educators (69%) did not feel well supported by their organisation. It was felt that the support offered was not systemic and very limited. One provider of education in prisons had announced weekly wellbeing time for its educators. However, this wellbeing time was not being taken as it had not been factored into their working week.
- The top three types of support available to educators were an Employee Assistance Programme (56%), return to work interviews (44%) and union membership with staff available to talk to (34%).
- There was a very strong feeling that prison educators needed more mental health and wellbeing support, with some educators stating they had no support at all.

⁴⁸ Misogynoir is a term referring to the combined force of anti-Black racism and misogyny directed towards Black women.

- Supervision (a confidential and structured space for educators to reflect on the emotional demands of their roles, navigate difficult situations while staying connected to their purpose) and the establishment of an independent wellbeing team/unit for use by all prison educators was requested.
- At a local organisational level, more communication with colleagues would be beneficial. This would allow educators to build relationships and provide opportunities for empathy, the sharing of experiences and practice, and to stay connected to others.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations would all have a positive impact on prison educators' mental health and wellbeing:

1 Racism should be classed as a 'workplace hazard' by the Health and Safety Executive

Racism in the workplace has a considerable impact on educators' mental health and wellbeing. How these harms can be meaningfully addressed needs to be considered by organisations. It is recommended that racism should become classified as a 'workplace hazard', in the same way as workplace stress⁴⁹. This would then require prison managers to undertake risk assessments, have transparent reporting systems in place, with clear stages, responsibilities and communication streams, and to take action if racism was reported or discovered by any member of staff.

2 Responsibility for prison education in England should be returned to Department for Education (DfE) from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Prison education is a service provided by an education provider as part of a contract to the MoJ. Managers often do not understand what is involved in providing education in prisons. They lack knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy, and do not understand the significance of learner behaviour on learning outcomes. Decisions can be made on the basis of cost to the contract rather than benefit to the individual and society. By returning the responsibility in England to the DfE, prison education would benefit by being better understood. In England and Wales, it would also open up access to professional supervision for senior leaders which is currently being funded by the DfE and Welsh Government⁵⁰.

3 The provision of emotional support needs to be increased

Prison educators have some of the lowest levels of wellbeing in the entire education sector. They need access to evidence-based and consistent mental health support. Access to reflective practice - like professional supervision - should form a part of this due to the solid emerging evidence base⁵¹ around its use, and the sensitive or challenging nature of their work environment.

⁴⁹ HSE (2024). "Workplace stress and how to manage it". Health and Safety Executive.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/overview.htm>

⁵⁰ Professional Supervision offered by Education Support. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/get-help/help-for-your-staff/wellbeing-services/professional-supervision/>

⁵¹ Julings, M and Cowan, G (2023). "Evaluation of the School Leader Mental Health and Wellbeing Service. Department for Education. October 2023.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fa5636b6fbf000db75885/Evaluation_of_the_School_Leader_Mental_Health_and_Wellbeing_Service_Oct_23.pdf

4 National metrics need to include prison educators

Reliable government data relating to prison educators cannot be found. Their role appears invisible in the prison ecosystem. However, national data is captured relating to the qualifications and achievements of their learners⁵² (the prisoners) and about prison officer staffing levels by HMPPS⁵³. Given the important role educators play in prisons and young offender institutions, it is recommended that their roles be included in the collection of future prison workforce statistics or, in England, as part of the further education annual workforce statistics⁵⁴.

5 Training in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is needed for senior prison managers

Prison managers appear unsure how to communicate effectively with staff from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and who self-identify in different ways. Whilst this finding is not original to this study, eg it was also reported by the Prison Reform Trust (2024)⁵⁵, the need for practical EDI training is recommended. This will build prison managers' relational skills of being able to communicate, interact and build connections with colleagues and, in turn, their organisations will become more inclusive environments in which to work.

⁵² MoJ (2024). "Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics". 12 March 2024.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics>

⁵³ HMPPS (2025). "HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2025". 15 May 2025.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025>

⁵⁴ DfE (2025). "Further Education workforce". 29 May 2025. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce/2023-24>

⁵⁵ Harriott, P et al (2024). "Race to the top: A Prisoner Policy Network report on race and ethnicity in prisons". Harriott, P, Saajedi, S, Laryea-Adekimi, F, Conway, M, Francis, D and Wainwright, L. Prison Reform Trust.

https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PRT_PPN_Race_to_the_top.pdf

APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Table 1: Category of prison worked for

Category/type of prison	Category of prison	Number of respondents	Per cent
High security/closed prison	A	17	13%
Local or training prison	B	32	25%
Medium security prison	-	4	3%
Training and resettlement prison	C	49	38%
Open prison	D	11	9%
Young offenders' institution	YOI	11	9%
Prefer not to say	-	3	2%
Other	-	1	1%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 2: Country/Region of work

Country/Region	Number of Respondents	Per cent
England - East of England	8	6%
England - East Midlands	14	11%
England - London	18	14%
England - North East	5	4%
England – North West	11	9%
England – South East	14	11%
England – South West	5	4%
England – West Midlands	26	21%
England – Yorkshire and Humberside	12	9%
Northern Ireland	2	2%
Scotland	11	9%
Wales	2	2%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 3: Education provider (NB England only)

Education provider	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Yes – Milton Keynes College	20	18%
Yes – Milton Keynes College, via private provider	1	1%
Yes – Novus	59	53%
Yes – Novus, via private provider	4	4%
Yes – PeoplePlus	19	17%
Yes – PeoplePlus, via private provider	-	-
Yes – Weston College	5	4%
Yes – Weston College, via private provider	-	-
No – Private provider	4	4%

Base: all respondents working in England (112)

Table 4: Job role

Job role	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Tutor/Trainer/Teacher/Lecturer	99	77%
Cover Tutor	3	2%
Deputy Education Manager	4	3%
Education Manager	6	5%
Hub Manager	5	4%
Learning support/Student support	8	6%
SENCO	-	-
Other	3	2%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 5: Age group

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Per cent
18-25	3	2%
26-30	2	2%
31-35	3	2%
36-40	4	3%
41-45	13	10%
46-50	18	14%
51-55	21	16%
56-60	29	23%
61-65	25	20%
65+	6	5%
Prefer not to say	4	3%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 6: Gender

Gender	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Man	28	22%
Non-Binary	2	2%
Woman	97	76%
Prefer not to say	1	1%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 7: Gender being the same as assigned at birth

Gender the same as at birth	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Yes	123	96%
No	2	2%
Prefer not to say	3	2%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 8: Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Arab	1	1%
Asian or British Asian – Bangladeshi	-	-
Asian or British Asian – Indian	2	2%
Asian or British Asian – Other	-	-
Asian or British Asian – Pakistani	3	2%
Black or British Black – African	3	2%
Black or British Black – Caribbean	13	10%
Black or British Black – Other	2	2%
Chinese	-	-
Mixed – White and Asian	-	-
Mixed – White and Black African	-	-
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	-	-
Mixed – Any other Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background	2	2%
Other Ethnic Group	2	2%
White British	86	67%
White Gypsy or Irish Traveller	-	-
White Irish	4	3%
White Other	7	6%
Prefer not to say	3	2%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 9: Migrant status

Migrant status	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Yes	9	7%
No	117	91%
Prefer not to say	2	2%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 10: Subjects taught

Subjects taught	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Functional skills (English)	29	23%
Functional skills (Maths)	32	25%
ESOL	15	12%
Business Administration, Management, and Professional	11	9%
Hospitality, Sports, Leisure, and Travel	8	6%
Health, Social Care, and Public Services	3	2%
English, Languages, and Communication	14	11%
Science and Mathematics	3	2%
Visual and Performing Arts and Media	7	5%
ICT	17	13%
Foundation Programmes	5	4%
Humanities	10	8%
Engineering, Technology, and Manufacturing	2	2%
Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy	5	4%
Construction	4	3%
Retailing, Customer Service, and Transportation	4	3%
Land Based Provision	-	-
Music and Radio Production	2	2%
HGV/Fork-Lift Truck Training	2	2%
Rail Track Training	-	-
Not listed	32	25%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 11: Length of time in current role

Length of time in current role	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Less than 2 years	20	16%
2 years or more, but less than 5 years	31	24%
6 years or more, but less than 10 years	33	26%
11 years or more, but less than 15 years	19	15%
16 years or more, but less than 20 years	16	13%
More than 21 years	9	7%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 12: Mode of employment

Mode of employment	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Full-time	93	73%
Part-time	29	23%
Hourly paid	1	1%
Zero-hours contract	4	3%
Not listed	1	1%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 13: Average number of hours worked per week (on or off-site)
(work means any task related to their contract of employment)

Hours worked	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Less than 10 hours	10	8%
10 hours or more, but less than 20 hours	5	4%
20 hours or more, but less than 30 hours	20	16%
30 hours or more, but less than 40 hours	73	57%
40 hours or more, but less than 50 hours	18	14%
50 hours or more, but less than 60 hours	1	1%
60 hours or more, but less than 65 hours	-	-
More than 65 hours	1	1%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 14: Highest educational qualifications held

Highest educational qualifications	Number of Respondents	Per cent
GCSE or equivalent (Level 2 qualifications, SCQF National 5)	3	2%
'A' levels, 'AS' levels or 'T' levels or equivalent (Level 3 qualifications, SCQF Level 6)	3	2%
Higher apprenticeship, HNC or equivalent (Level 4 qualifications, SCQF Level 7)	10	8%
Foundation degree, HND or equivalent (Level 5 qualifications, SCQF Level 8)	28	22%
Degree apprenticeship, undergraduate degree eg BA or equivalent (Level 6 qualifications, SCQF Level 9-10)	20	16%
Postgraduate degree, eg Masters' degree, PGCE or equivalent (Level 7 qualifications, SCQF Level 11)	55	43%
Doctorate or equivalent (Level 8 qualifications, SCQF Level 12)	4	3%
Not listed	-	-
Prefer not to say	5	4%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 15: Teaching qualifications held

Teaching qualifications	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Postgraduate Certificate in Education/PGDE (Level 7)	37	29%
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (Level 6)	16	13%
Diploma in Teaching (Further Education and Skills) (Level 5)	9	7%
Diploma in Education and Training (DET/DTLLS) (Level 5)	13	10%
Certificate in Education (Level 5)	21	16%
Certificate in Education and Training (CET/CTLLS) (Level 4)	15	12%
Award in Education and Training (AET/PTLLS) (Level 3)	19	15%
I am currently working towards gaining a teaching qualification	9	7%
I do not hold a teaching qualification	9	7%
Not listed	6	5%
Prefer not to say	7	5%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 16: Disability

(The Equality Act 2010 considers a person to be disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. What substantial and long-term mean: substantial is more than minor or trivial - e.g. it takes much longer than it usually would to complete a daily task like getting dressed; 'long term' means 12 months or more – e.g. a breathing condition that develops as a result of a lung infection. There are special rules about recurring or fluctuating conditions, for example arthritis)

Disability	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Yes	25	20%
No	92	72%
Prefer not to say	11	9%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 17: How a disability is described

How a disability is described	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Visible	1	4%
Non-visible	18	75%
Both visible and non-visible	5	21%
Not listed	-	-

Base: all respondents (24)

Table 18: Caring responsibilities

Caring responsibilities	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Yes	38	30%
No	83	65%
Prefer not to say	7	5%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 19: Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Asexual	-	-
Bisexual	3	2%
Gay	2	2%
Heterosexual	111	87%
Lesbian	1	1%
Pansexual	2	2%
Not listed	-	-
Prefer not to say	9	7%

Base: all respondents (128)

Table 20: Religion

Religion	Number of Respondents	Per cent
No religion	35	27%
Christian (all other Christian denominations) – see more below	68	53%
Church of England	33	49%
Church of Ireland	-	-
Church of Scotland	-	-
Baptist	3	4%
Methodist	5	7%
Catholic	17	25%
Brethren	-	-
Presbyterian	1	1%
Protestant	-	-
Other Christian denomination	9	13%
Buddhist	1	1%
Hindu	-	-
Jewish	1	1%
Muslim	6	5%
Sikh	1	1%
Any other religion not listed	-	-
Prefer not to say	16	13%

Base: all respondents (128)

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS – DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

Table 2: Category of prison worked for

Category/type of prison	Category of prison	Number of respondents	Per cent
High security/closed prison	A	4	13%
Local or training prison	B	9	30%
Medium security prison	-	-	-
Training and resettlement prison	C	13	43%
Open prison	D	1	3%
Young offenders' institution	YOI	3	10%

Base: all respondents (30)

Table 2: Country/Region of work

Country/Region	Number of Respondents	Per cent
England - East of England	1	3%
England - East Midlands	5	17%
England - London	6	20%
England - North East	1	3%
England – North West	1	3%
England – South East	3	10%
England – South West	1	3%
England – West Midlands	8	27%
England – Yorkshire and Humberside	2	7%
Northern Ireland	1	3%
Scotland	1	3%
Wales	0	-

Base: all respondents (30)

Table 3: Job role

Job role	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Tutor/Trainer/Teacher/Lecturer	26	87%
Cover Tutor	0	-
Deputy Education Manager	2	7%
Education Manager		
Hub Manager	2	7%
Learning support/Student support	0	-
SENCO	0	-

Base: all respondents (30)

Table 8: Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of Respondents	Per cent
Arab	0	-
Asian or British Asian – Bangladeshi	0	-
Asian or British Asian – Indian	0	-
Asian or British Asian – Other	0	-
Asian or British Asian – Pakistani	3	10%
Black or British Black – African	4	13%
Black or British Black – Caribbean	5	17%
Black or British Black – Other	0	-
Chinese	0	-
Mixed – White and Asian	0	-
Mixed – White and Black African	0	-
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	0	-
Mixed – Any other Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Background	1	3%
Other Ethnic Group	0	-
White British	12	40%
White Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0	-
White Irish	0	-
White Other	4	13%
Prefer not to say	1	3%

Base: all respondents (30)