Building Bridges Across Diversity:
Utilising the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme to Promote an Egalitarian Higher Education Community within Three English Prisons

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ABSTRACT

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme is a unique prison education programme that brings together ‘Inside’ (prison) students and ‘Outside’ (university) students to learn collaboratively through dialogue and community-building exercises within the prison walls. Challenging prejudices and breaking down social barriers, the programme provides students from diverse backgrounds with a transformative learning opportunity. Drawing on the critical pedagogy of Paolo Freire and the teaching practice of bell hooks, Inside-Out instructors engage in ‘teaching to transgress,’ enabling students to understand experientially the ways in which every day and commonplace environments are shaped by privilege and inequalities. The programme was founded 20 years ago by Temple University criminologist Lori Pompa in collaboration with incarcerated men at Graterford State Correctional Institution in response to the racial injustice and mass incarceration that characterized the US criminal justice system. Durham University criminologists introduced Inside-Out to the UK in 2014, at three very different prisons: a men’s category A (high security) prison, a men’s category B (medium security) prison and a women’s prison. A decade on the government’s introduction of the Widening Participation agenda in higher education (HE), with levels of inequality in and access to HE, particularly within Russell Group Universities, is persistently high, Inside-Out challenges this lack of diversity in HE head on. This article explores how the Inside-Out ethos and pedagogy are powerful means through which inequalities rooted in gender, ethnicity and privilege can be exposed and challenged within the unique prism of the prison setting. Quantitative and qualitative data from three years of programme delivery across the three prisons will be drawn upon. The article will argue that the Inside-Out model can overcome social barriers and prejudices to embrace and celebrate diversity; support students to critically explore their own beliefs and identities; and go on to utilise this educational experience to foster social change on both sides of the prison walls.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Inequality, Inside Out, Systemic Bias

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INTRODUCTION

*Inside-Out moves beyond the walls that separate us. In a more literal sense, it moves, actually, through the walls. It is an exchange, an engagement—between and among people who live on both sides of the prison wall. And it is through this exchange, realized in the crucible of dialogue, that [the walls that] separate us from each other – and sometimes, from ourselves – begin to crumble. The hope is that, in time, through this exchange, these walls—between us, around us, and within us—will become increasingly permeable and, eventually, extinct—one idea, one person, one brick at a time. All of our lives depend on it (Lori Pompa, Inside-Out founder, 2013, p. 7).*

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme is a pioneering prison education programme that brings together ‘Inside’ (prison) students and ‘Outside’ (university) students to learn collaboratively through dialogue and community-building exercises within the prison walls. Challenging prejudices and breaking down social barriers, the programme provides students from diverse backgrounds with a unique opportunity to study together as peers and as equals behind the prison walls. Inside-Out is a very simple concept: people come together to talk about and wrestle with issues that are important to them. However, it is the setting in which classes take place, behind the prison walls, that makes it profound and for many participants, a transformative experience. Drawing on the critical pedagogy of Paolo Freire (1996) and the teaching practice of bell hooks (1994), Inside-Out facilitators engage in ‘teaching to transgress,’ enabling students to build academic knowledge together while simultaneously learning experientially the various ways in which every day and commonplace environments are shaped by privilege, difference and inequality. Inside-Out emphasises the importance of developing dynamic, ethical and flexible partnerships between university and prison staff and students, explored further below, which then deepen the conversation about, and transform our approaches to, issues of crime and justice.

The programme was founded 20 years ago by Temple University criminologist Lori Pompa in collaboration with incarcerated men at Graterford State Correctional Institution in response to the racial injustice and mass incarceration that has characterised the US criminal justice system in recent decades. Durham University criminologists introduced Inside-Out to the UK in 2014, at three prisons: a men’s category A (high security) prison, a men’s category B (medium security) local prison and a women’s prison. These three prison populations contrast markedly from each other and from Durham University – an elite higher education (HE) institution. Outside students consistently report that they consider the Inside-Out module to be ‘life changing’ and the highlight of their degree programme; whereas for Inside students, their increased confidence in oral and written skills along with a broader (re)igniting of the desire to learn are highlighted as key outcomes. Furthermore, both prisoners and prison staff report that the programme has a positive impact on prisoners and the wider prison environment.

A decade on from the government’s introduction of the Widening Participation agenda in higher education (HE), with levels of inequality in and access to HE, particularly within Russell Group Universities, persistently high (Boliver, 2016), Inside-Out challenges head-on this lack of diversity in HE. At the same time, Inside-Out supports the recommendations of the recent Coates review of prison education (Coates, 2016) in that it provides for a small but growing number of prisoners whose educational needs currently are not being met within the prison estate.

This article explores how the Inside-Out ethos and pedagogy are powerful means through which inequalities rooted in gender, ethnicity and privilege can be exposed and challenged through the unique prism of the prison setting. We have gathered a range of qualitative and quantitative data from three years of programme delivery across the three prisons. This includes individual student evaluations, Inside and Outside group debriefs, students’ reflective writing, facilitators’ reflections and demographic data. With the permission of participating prisons, all students who engaged in the programme were informed that, with their agreement, anonymised evaluation data and reflective
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