

Grundtvig Project : Effective Induction for Prison Teachers

Focus Groups Report: France



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Both focus groups were held in January 2010, one led by Isabelle Gour (9 people) and one by Laurent Duhamel (8 people). The teachers represented a range of different working situations: where they work, their activity (teaching, supervision), their seniority (highly experienced staff, staff with moderate experience, or beginners with recent induction experience) and their statute (primary or secondary school teachers, with or without specialist training).

Isabelle Gour and Laurent Duhamel have transcribed the interviews. An initial analysis was conducted March 5 by Isabelle Gour, Laurent Duhamel, Jean-Luc Guyot and Daniel Beauvais. This is shown below.

1. Teaching and Learning

1. What types of information about Prisoners' backgrounds - educational background, learning difficulties, psychological/mental health problems - would help you do your job more effectively and why?

- School and training, in schools or other establishments, level of education, date of end of studies, breaks in schooling, training courses leading to professional qualifications or otherwise.
- Similarities/differences that exist between learning pathways in France and in foreign countries, knowledge of schooling in other countries.
- Other educational pathways: for example in a community home (approved school)
- Interruption in offenders' learning paths: dropout
- Psychological care, rehabilitation, health treatment, hospitalization

Information on prisoners' background is lacking on the whole, and teachers feel the need for knowledge on offenders' extra-curricular background, on curricula and qualifications overseas, and educational equivalents in France.

2. How do you currently assess student educational level and their progress in prison? Would you benefit from training in this regard? What kind of training would you like to see?

Assessment

There was only discussion of the **diagnostic assessment** of offenders' educational level. It varies greatly from prison to prison, occurring:

- during induction and notably in the detection of illiteracy phase - this being common practice in every prison.

NB The period between assessment and entry into schooling/training may be long and a source of error.

- during observation periods or during *in situ* learning.

General remarks

- The various assessment tools available to teachers (Efore CD-ROM, for example) are often readapted (in individual prisons or regionally).
- Assessment of low-level skills proves difficult (lack of tools, no common approach), and the same is true for teaching at secondary level.
- Teams are called upon to create their own assessment tools.
- Assessment of juveniles is more even and systematic due to compulsory schooling.

Training

- Need for team work towards common practice at regional level, but also a need to adapt tools.
- Assessing low levels, especially illiteracy.
- Work on the consistency between initial assessment (at induction) and the second one on entry into training

NB The importance of team work for appropriating tools, but also adapting them to the context. The absence or lack of elements for low-skilled levels remains a perennial problem.

3. How do you motivate and encourage prisoners to engage in learning? To what extent is this process encouraged and supported by the prison authorities?

The prime motivation is a reduction in sentence. Motivation related to learning is based on **clearly defined objectives** (notably diplomas) **and requirements**.

Approaches vary according to contexts and teachers, for example:

- the need to find at what level to engage with the learner, to make learning enjoyable;
- to provide activities that awaken interest and lead to formal learning;
- or conversely to progress from school work towards activities such as writing or drama workshop;
- offer down-to-earth learning (offenders' daily routine, integration, release, projects, etc.);
- Do not compartmentalize learning, offer means of branching out.

Encouragement and support from the Prison Administration Department (PAD)

This raises the question of **partnership** with them on the following points:

- Starting with induction and throughout imprisonment prison staff must be able to orient offenders towards schooling;

- Status of school in 'competition' with other activities including work and vocational training.
- Enable offenders to have other activities, but also to have flexible access to schooling: after work, flexible working hours;
- The presence of teachers in various committees and meetings with prison management;
- Compulsory work in prison management.

4. What is the content of the curriculum in your prison? Do you think the current curriculum is adequate? What would you add/change?

(The first focus group took the word education in the academic sense, the second focus group was asked about the choice of this term and has also responded on the school level. The term 'curriculum' (*programme éducatif*) is also rejected because it does not correspond to any reality and refers to a rigid programme that does not meet offenders' needs. It also refers to school activities that do not concern them.)

- Prison administration thinking is seen as based on certification but ignores offenders' needs. This approach has repercussions on the number of teachers employed. The same exam can be sat several times throughout the year.
- Difficulty in defining a framework when training is not exam-oriented. This is true for low-skilled learners: illiteracy for example, but not for French as a Foreign Language (FFL) where a set framework exists.
- Need for a skills benchmark. Further work is needed on the present common knowledge and skills programme, but which neglects low-skilled levels.
- Need to work with partners in an educational project sitting within the overall project of the prison consistent with the labour sector, the socio-cultural sector and vocational training.

5. What specific teaching and learning approaches do you adopt in your prison? Do you think these are adequate? What would you change?

In the approaches mentioned we note:

- Linking to the outside world by working on press reviews on all topics. But some contexts are too highly charged or related to sensitive events and should be avoided.
- Establish a relationship, a dialogue based on trust, show understanding.
- Awareness of offenders' characteristics: lack of schooling, rejection of schooling and society in general. Concentrate on offenders' attitudes towards learning.
- Practising mediation.
- Positive recognition of work (work experience?)
- Focus on success
- Individualization
- Building on offenders' experience

The approaches mentioned do not explicitly refer to a **specific pedagogical approach**. A first analysis shows that the majority of teachers tend to act intuitively or instinctively rather than in a conscious manner.

6. What is the balance between one to one tuition and group teaching? Do you think the current balance is correct? What works best (methodologically) for both approaches?

There is no tuition strictly in prisons, the practice is prohibited. But the demand is real. In some learning contexts such as reading, it is unavoidable. Discussion on this point focussed on:

- Difficulty in working collectively, notably for juveniles; such socialization and learning to 'give and take' are a separate agenda;
- Courses are often based on an initial collective element followed by a one-to-one approach;
- A one-to-one approach is facilitated by the use of computers;
- Juveniles act more competitively in collective contexts; adults are more given to peer help.

Overall finding: the teaching approach has to be group-oriented for offenders. No specific approach has been clearly identified.

2. Prisoner Psychology and Health

1. Do you need/want more information on mental health issues of Prisoners? How would this help or hinder you?

- The answers point to the need for more information but this is not always forthcoming from the health partners. Teachers need to know about mental health disorders – ethnopsychiatry is mentioned
- Analysis shows the difficulty in building a satisfactory interpersonal framework, in short **how to act with them**. This framework is built around the dividing line between both parties that each has to respect: i.e. what is permitted and what is forbidden.
- Past experience with a child psychiatrist was cited – at random – as having proved useful.
- Multidisciplinary meetings offer a wider view on the topic in question. The example is given of offenders displaying different attitudes to different teachers, regardless of the latter's' professional competency.
- Analysis of specific contexts (isolation, same sex environment, emotional deprivation, an imposed multicultural existence) although real, was not expressed.
- Requests for training are linked less to offenders' individual psychology and more to analysis and understanding of the prison context and the social interaction it dictates.
- Suggestion to work on the boundaries of a strictly teacher-offender relationship. 'We are not therapists', has been said.

- Need for basic training in interpersonal communication, not clinical textbook knowledge.

2. Have you experienced manipulation by Prisoners? Did you know how to deal with it? Have you been given training in this area? If so, who provided the training?

- Yes, this is a permanent factor, which is nonetheless tolerable because if the teaching framework is clearly defined, there is little room for manipulation.
- The role of teachers and their status require them to implement the most suitable interpersonal framework possible to fit the learning needs in the given context. They run the risk of meeting requests that can be **physical demands** (lending a phone for a personal call) or **emotional demands**.
- Training in Agen tends to over exaggerate the risk of manipulation. Experience on this point is essential. Local Heads of Training (LHT) inform teachers on the risks of manipulation, both newly appointed ones and even those with extensive experience. Vigilance is required as one can easily slip into 'bad habits'.
- A need is expressed for support and even formal training of how manipulation may occur, how to deal with it and adopt an appropriate professional stance.

3. Is it important to know the Prisoners' criminal record? What sort of information would be useful and why?

- Opinions are divided: some professionals think they need to know, others think they should not know. Nonetheless, everything is known in time, it is said.
- Not knowing such facts avoids prejudicial attitudes towards offenders.
- Access to criminal records of a sensitive or threatening nature should be allowed – via contact with Local Heads of Training – especially if circumstances require it.

4. How do you manage a group situation where some prisoners may have mental health problems and others don't?

- Education is seen as a right, but one cannot penalize a group's progress by allowing persons at risk to disturb it.
- Need for a one-to-one approach towards learners within the group.
- Peer help and support within the group, particularly among women offenders, can alleviate this problem.

3. Security

1. Were you provided with formal training regarding security issues prior to starting work in the prison?

- The training received in Agen is mentioned but does not seem sufficient.

- Training / information in prisons when teachers take up office is qualified as effective especially as it is carried out along with a group of new prison officers. It is important to visit all places, even the watch towers. The Local Head of Training completes this training.
- Supply teachers – whose numbers may be high – receive very little training since the LHT does not have sufficient time to devote to them.
- Informal contacts with prison officers enables vital information about events.

2. Who provided this training and what form did it take? (i.e. which areas were covered, how long did it last?)

- As seen above, teachers already in post provide training, while supply teachers have to rely on informal discussions.

3. Were you given a paper copy of security guidelines when you started as reference? If yes, who provided these?

- The LHT ensures this step and some have developed guidelines with extracts of texts concerning safety. An LHT may also oblige teachers to give their signature as proof of receipt.
- Reference is made to rules on letters and also on items that may not be brought into prison that could affect prison security and also endanger the safety of teachers themselves.
- The prison management may suggest or oblige teachers to carry a warning device with them.

4. Do you think the training provided was adequate? If not, what sorts of issues would you like to have seen covered? Please be specific and relate your answer to questions and problems you had as a new prison teacher.

- Talks on security given by prison directors at the beginning of the school year have proved useful. Heads of security may also induct new teachers.
- It would be interesting to supplement information received in Agen with training at a local level in the form of visits of the prison premises enabling a view of the 'route' offenders travel upon arrival.
- Awareness of the attitude to adopt when problems arise is deemed necessary. How to handle a dangerous situation or one that is likely to degenerate.

5. Do you receive regular updates to security training? How often do these take place?

- In both groups the answer is 'no'. The only items discussed are notes on safety.
- Group 1 returned spontaneously to the question of psychology and how to ensure security in certain circumstances.

6. Did you make any mistakes in relation to security when you first started? How could you have been prevented from making such a mistake?

- Examples are given of keys and mail, but the seriousness of these 'errors' is not always expressed. A distinction is made between errors bearing consequences (keys) and those that do not (chewing gum, chocolates at Christmas).
- The problem of moving around the prison with offenders and the corresponding regulations involved were also mentioned.
- Vigilance and a permanent awareness of being in a prison context are required, and an understanding that 'wheeling and dealing' is an integral part of prison life.

(The term 'mistake' was challenged; teachers wishing it to be qualified more as 'forgetfulness' on their part, and not something that might be qualified as deliberate.)

7. Would better 'intelligence' (i.e. knowledge) of prisoners' criminal convictions, mental health status help in managing classroom discipline? If yes, tell us how you think it would help?

- Regarding mental health the response is 'yes'.
- The problem is posed by a participant in terms of 'group management' more than 'discipline'.
- Sometimes management reports a particular case or refers specifically to sex offenders. But such information cannot be taken into account all the time because the situation would prove unworkable.
- Teachers state they rely on the relevant staff for background knowledge, but think a common sense attitude in this context can also be applied.

8. Do you feel there is any tension between your role as a teacher and security considerations? If yes, please tell us what they are.

- Tensions related to the use of computer media (USB sticks, CD-ROMs, etc.) and changes in regulations.
- Highly monitored offenders are mentioned who cannot be integrated with other offenders as are those banned from any kind of communication.
- Differences in regulations regarding doors being closed or not, and whether teachers should or should not possess keys, are also mentioned
- A certain amount of flexibility is required to allow for things to work smoothly.

4. Prison Teacher Networks

1. Would you find it helpful to have access to an electronic forum which links prison teachers and acts as a source of advice and information for the profession?

- The principle of a forum meets with approval, but with some reservations. The present situation leaves teachers doubting its usefulness, its validity.

- The forum run by the INS HEA is mentioned – and the good intentions to use it that are voiced during the training session, but there is no subsequent participation. It offers little content related to everyday situations.
- Teachers say they are aware of certain forums, official and non-official ones, in France and abroad.
- They think that an online community would work better if there were face-to-face meetings. (Such meetings once existed, but stopped five years ago.)
- Difficult to work in common via forums since prison environments differ greatly: short-stay prisons, medium security prisons.
- A certain mistrust and lack of interest regarding forums – peculiar to France – is mentioned.

2. How would you use new means of communication in a teachers network? What issues do you think you could debate and resolve with these new means of communication?

- Overt interest for access to documents for an adult audience, and for a foreign adult audience (non French speaking), and for catalogues of mock exams.
- Wish to be able to consult projects, those they describe as 'realistic' and which have been successful in other establishments. This is not to adopt them as such (specific circumstances in each prison would not allow it) but to use them as a springboard, in other words a transferral of good practice.
- Wish to access a platform that is regularly updated, with a system of alerts by email or newsletter (monthly) that points users towards the forum or resources that are at their disposal.
- A forum in which one can bring up such and such a problem that one encounters and find the solutions that others have adopted.
- *[Note: reading between the line in these replies, it would seem that an official forum is not wanted (big brother syndrome). However, a social network would seem to be the answer: more a peer exchange of information, and with even the suggestion of using it to plan leisure activities for teachers, such as weekends away.]*
- Need expressed for one-to-one communication at a regional level. Exchange on use of tools, etc. to be carried out nationally.
- State that adult learners need to be familiar with internet. One may thus suppose that they, the teachers, need to browse the internet to gather material.
- In the same vein, the suggestion is put forward of seeing a teacher using internet in the classroom displaying sites on a big screen for learners.
- Mention is made of autonomizing learners who can enrol for exams on line by themselves. This would avoid the present situation in which teachers do this at home, in their own time.

3. How can teachers in prison - as a community - encourage government aid in implementing/setting up networks for teachers in prison?

- Out of context reply: express dissatisfaction at number of teaching posts that are suppressed and the pressure exerted on teachers to put quantity before quality.
- Requesting help from government sources is judged to be of no use.

4. How much time would you, as a teacher, be ready to devote to communicating with other colleagues at a distance from home - to help you in your work?

- No precise reply in general on the length of time, but a willingness to devote time on this score if a 'serious solution' that was manned full-time, were set up, and with easy access (login, etc.)
- An hour a week is one suggestion put forward.
- The idea is also put forward of some sort of open space that would not be 'set up like a prison' (a parallel drawn between passwords seen as keys).

5. Are you currently involved in any prison teacher networks?

- The network represented by access to the Learning Management System (LMS) run by the INS HEA is mentioned. It is seen as closely tied to training sessions and is useful only in that context, and not beyond it.
- scoultentole – an non-profit making association – is quoted. It seems to be dormant since 2004. It is undergoing a facelift to become <http://e-efore.org/>
- <http://e-efore.org/>: the time colleagues devote to running the project is not 'recognized' as such – problem of voluntary work. Need for a full-time post.

6. Are you aware of the European Prison Education Association? If yes, do you think it does a good job of representing you?

- Greater Paris region (Isabelle – Porcheville) : 3 out of 9 persons are aware. Rest of France (Laurent – Avignon-Le Pontet) : 0 out of 8.
Total 3 out of 17 persons aware of EPEA = **18% (1 out of 5 approx.)**
- Informal exchanges that occur during EPEA events seem appreciated more than the formal talks it offers.
- Problem of minutes from events published in English is put forward.
- Interesting out-of-context remark: the influence of the European Prison Rules is seen as positive. Thanks to these rules, quality labelling has been attributed to induction units and these, it is thought, could serve as a 'model' with which to invite other countries to come and witness what France is doing in this field. This would in turn offer recognition of the role of teachers in prison and enhance their public 'status'.