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# THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN YOUNG OFFENDERS' INSTITUTIONS: A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

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## Are we turning a blind eye once a child enters the YOI?

Any civilised society should only send a child to prison in the most serious of cases. The 'school-to-prison pipeline' is well-documented in the [literature](#) and the process of school exclusion can therefore place them onto a pathway into offending and the criminal justice system. Given that specific groups of learners are more likely to be excluded than others, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those from global majority populations, school exclusion is arguably a social justice concern. [Research](#) points to the fact that the education system more broadly is inadequate because it displaces children who have the most complex needs, resulting in children with unmet needs being further disadvantaged, or to use a different phrase, they become [educationally marginalised](#).

Our review of the existing literature has found that a failure to adequately screen children for SEND when they enter a Young Offender Institution (YOI), stems from poor educational leadership. We argue that each child entering custody should undergo a comprehensive screening assessment, including an assessment of literacy, numeracy and, where necessary, a screening check to identify if further assessments are required. The results of these assessments should enable education providers within custodial settings to develop an individual learning plan for the delivery of education for each detained child. Our review of international literature has identified a haphazard approach to the initial screening for SEND of children being held in custody. The process of screening is often not robust,

resulting in undiagnosed needs and gaps in knowledge not being identified. Programmes of education are therefore not matched to individual learning needs and learners and teachers are often not aware of the learning plans.

Research by [Hughes et al.](#) highlights that children in the youth justice system are more likely to have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. [Oser](#) also identified that mental health issues are more prevalent within this group of young people and found evidence of low educational aspirations. This is unsurprising given that learners in YOIs are likely to have disengaged from education prior to incarceration. In the United Kingdom (UK), [evidence](#) from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Department for Education (DfE), highlighted that social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are prevalent among the young offender population.

## Change starts at the top

A recent [report](#) by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) highlighted several systemic leadership failings in relation to education in YOIs, including lack of curriculum ambition for learners, lack of staff expertise, lack of prioritisation of education and educational provision which does not address gaps in learners' knowledge. In addition, given the fact that many young people who end up in youth justice settings have literacy difficulties, the report found that not enough attention was being given to reading development. This report, along with the [research](#) that we have reviewed have highlighted that educational provision in YOIs lacks the priority that it

deserves. The role of education in the rehabilitation process is well documented in research, but often learners are expected to enrol on courses which they do not want to study, and which do not align with their future goals. The curriculum is often narrow and opportunities for vocational education and day release to undertake work placements in the community are limited. Classes are frequently cancelled, and learners do not have enough opportunity to shape their educational journeys. Incarcerated learners spend too much time in solitary confinement and there is a lack of access to technology to support learning. Classrooms are often noisy and unsuitable for neurodiverse learners and there is a lack of staff with specialist qualifications and training, resulting in lack of suitable in-class adaptations. We view these issues as public social justice concerns and the systemic issues that we have highlighted mean that too many children are being let down by a youth justice system which views them first and foremost as offenders rather than children.

### Education for social justice

In line with [Case and Hazel](#) we argue that incarcerated young people should be viewed as children first and offender second. [Ross Little](#) has emphasised the importance of listening to children's voices in YOIs.

Following our review of the literature, we have addressed these social justice concerns by developing a framework (see [Figure 1](#)), that leaders in YOIs could adopt, and which, we suggest, will then help to foster a consistent approach to the leadership of education in YOIs globally.

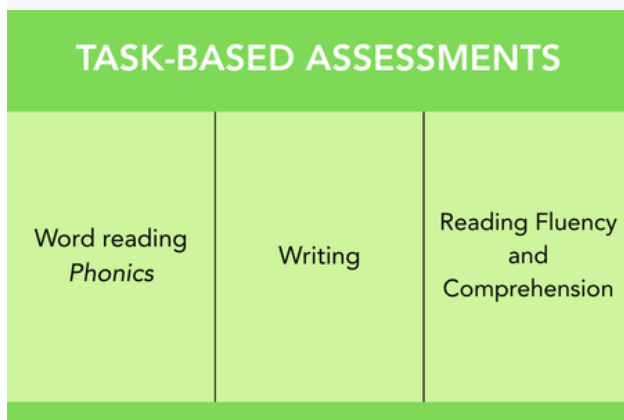


**Figure 1** Inclusive Education Framework for YOIs

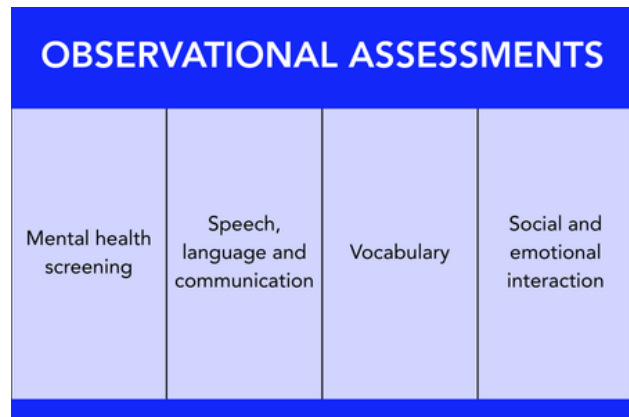
Leadership is central to educational provision within YOIs. Leaders should identify and address barriers to access, participation and achievement and develop robust quality assurance and quality enhancement processes to ensure continual improvement. The model identifies culture as a separate strand because it is critical that there is a culture which recognises the value of education both for rehabilitation and for self fulfilment. Leaders should review the curriculum to ensure that it is broad, ambitious, future-focused and sequenced. A strong emphasis on vocational education and work placements in the community should be evident, as well as opportunities for curriculum enrichment and personal development. A focus on staff training will require financial investment and we also recommend the introduction of specialist teacher training routes that provide pathways into prison teaching. The principles of partnership working should be embedded within a model of education, so that young

people’s voices are actively sought and shape curriculum design, assessment and evaluation. For learners with SEND, partnership working with health, social care and other external agencies, in line with the principles of the [SEND Code of Practice](#) will ensure that learners get the support that they need, at the right time. Bespoke interventions, particularly to support reading development, play a key role in ensuring that gaps in knowledge are addressed. Finally, more robust screening of SEND (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)) will enable educators to design a curriculum which aligns with learners’ needs.

Robust and detailed assessments of word recognition skills, writing skills and reading fluency and comprehension through task-based assessments will enable prison educators to identify gaps in knowledge ([Figure 2](#)).



**Figure 2** Assessment framework A – Task-based assessments



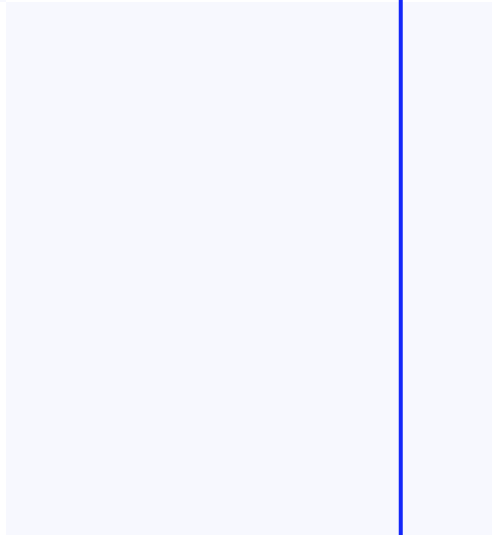
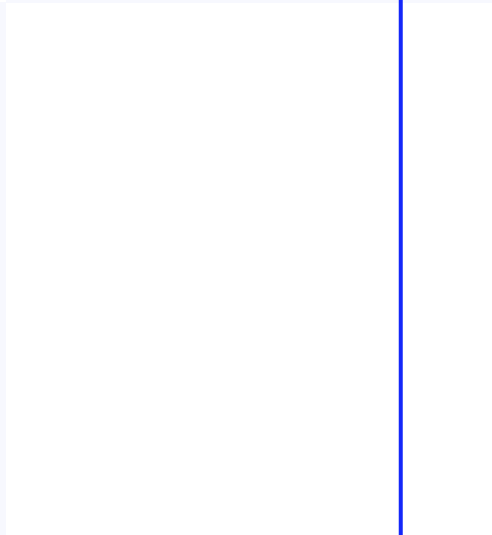
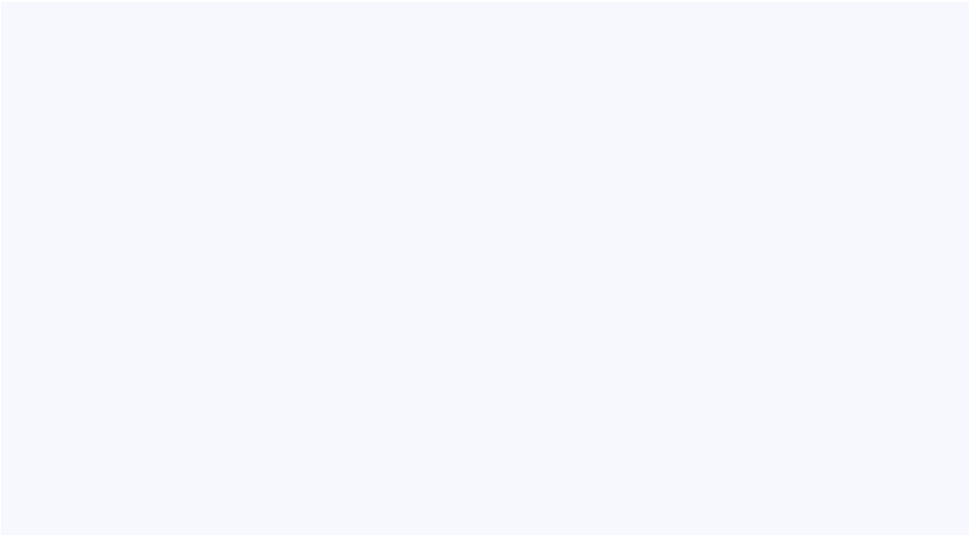
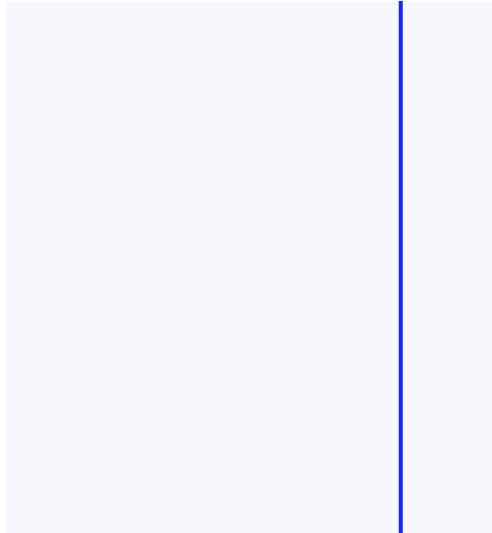
**Figure 3** Assessment framework B – Observational assessments

Observational assessments of young people’s mental health, speech and language, vocabulary knowledge and social and emotional interactions are more robust than learner self-reports ([Figure 3](#)) and will enable educators to design targeted interventions to support any identified needs.

### Our final thoughts

We have outlined some of the issues associated with education in YOIs and we have argued that, given the role of education in rehabilitation, these are matters of public concern as well as matters of social justice. We have suggested frameworks to address some of these concerns. Finally, we argue that the education system outside of youth justice settings and prisons needs to be radically transformed to make it more inclusive. The current education system displaces those who are already disadvantaged and, arguably, positions them in a ‘school-to-prison pipeline’. In the current [curriculum and assessment review](#), there needs to be a razor sharp focus on the principle of education for social justice and the implications of this for the curriculum and assessment structures that underpin the

education system. An education system which has social justice at its heart should lead to reduced exclusion rates and a reduction in offending.



# Focus On

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