

Authentic Inquiry Case Studies for Renyo Training

Case Study 1 - Jack

Jack

Jack was 16 years old and of White British heritage. He was the only young offender at the secure unit who had come from a mainstream school and a relatively stable family life. Jack had achieved some GCSEs at school. Jack was on long term sentence of 12 months for a sexual offence though no previous known offence.

Jack was described by teachers as mild mannered and sociable, rarely raising his voice or being physically aggressive. Jack was however, constantly dissatisfied with the secure unit, its system, the staff and lack of facilities. He was also dissatisfied with his weight gain which he attributed to the lack of healthy food available at the secure unit. Jack was very dependent on adult support and demanding of attention.

Jack's authentic inquiry

Jack agreed to participate in the authentic inquiry, initially attracted at the potential attention it might command from staff. Jack's topic was health and fitness – authentic because he was concerned about his recent weight gain and wanted to improve his fitness. He decided that he wanted to create a workbook on health and fitness and possibly present it to his fellow students to encourage them to increase their fitness and diet. There was a delay in Jack starting his authentic inquiry due to not being able to meet with his chosen mentor James, a member of the care staff. Jack remained committed to doing the authentic inquiry, despite initially engaging largely for utilitarian purposes, signifying sustained engagement. Jack also demonstrated agency and initiative in deciding his own topic.

Practitioners' Perspectives

The Science teacher had tried to mentor Jack, however, had to withdraw because Jack was not satisfied with her efforts. Jack did not feel that Science connected to his chosen topic associating the Science teacher with lessons and work - not related to his idea of developing his own fitness. Therefore, this mentoring relationship was not successful. Nevertheless, when Jack did eventually do his authentic inquiry with his chosen mentor, he was able to relate it to Science in a way he had not done so in the earlier stages. A good relationship with the mentor emerged as an important facilitator.

Jack's mentor James, described him as enthusiastic and driven:

'Jack was really good and he had loads of ideas..., there was no "Oh can you write it for me?" which you'd expect to find probably on a day to day basis in the schools but I think because he's interested in it he was straightaway writing it down'. (James, Jack's mentor)

This was almost the exact opposite to Jack's teachers, who described him as lazy and demanding. Ironically, however, this was also how Jack described himself with regards to learning in his very first interview.

'The same thing over and over again. It just gets boring [...] Just like I said I haven't got the motivation, I'm too lazy.' (Jack, first interview)

James indicated that the lack of time was a major barrier in the authentic inquiry. It resulted in limited access to resources such as the internet which led to frustration from both James and Jack. James reiterated what others had said: that due to being managed by the care staff team, it meant the Head of Education had little control over timetabling James and Jack together - other than an informal arrangement. This had been the source of Jack's earlier frustration and had it not been for Jack's enthusiasm for the topic, the authentic inquiry could easily have been abandoned.

Analysis

Jack's re-engagement with education during and following the authentic inquiry demonstrated that re-engagement with education and learning was not beyond the reach of even the most disengaged (or laziest) of learners. Despite Jack's dissatisfaction, resentment and dependency - given the opportunity, he was able to re-engage himself with learning. Jack's learning was characterised by his own passion facilitated by the authentic inquiry opportunity. Through this, Jack was able to reclaim some autonomy restricted by the secure context. In so doing, Jack was able to apply his competencies to other areas beyond the authentic inquiry such as becoming a young person's representative, indicating a sense of belonging or relatedness. The constraints of the secure custodial setting through its structures of line management had been barriers to engaging in the early stages. However, as the authentic inquiry served to connect Jack to his own competences, he was able to emerge as a confident and engaged learner indicating a sense of empowerment. Whilst the authentic inquiry cannot claim all credit for this, it seems clear that the opportunity re-connected him to learning which permeated his entire presence at the secure unit. Jack was developing into a confident and energetic individual who was campaigning for better nutrition at the secure unit and had volunteered as a 'rep' for his fellow residents. This case demonstrated that engaging a young offender with education in a secure context is achievable and relatively quickly - once the conditions are right.

Case Study 2 - William

William

William was 16 years old and of African American heritage. Originally from the USA, his parents and family had come to settle in England just a few years ago. William's family had high expectations of him and William felt pressure to achieve the highest of grades. William was serving a sentence in excess of 12 months for aggravated burglary with no previous known offence.

William was described by teachers as a very able and a deep thinker. However, he had declined to take his GCSEs because he did not believe in them. William had dropped out of mainstream school and in lessons at the unit he was withdrawn, quiet, tired, sad. Whilst generally compliant, William did not engage with activities.

William's authentic inquiry

William's authentic inquiry also suffered a delayed start, primarily due to the lack of time available for him to identify a mentor. William's eventual mentor, Andrew, had volunteered himself. This self-selection shaped the authentic inquiry where Andrew led the entire process. It also meant that although William complied, he did not engage in the way that was transformative or meaningful as it had been for Jack.

'Andrew told me about it [the topic] but it's like okay because there's nothing else that's really like, as realistic so I just had to go for that one.' (William, post authentic inquiry interview)

William response to the best and worst things about the process was:

'The worst thing about it? How do I phrase this? Not being able to pick on one [topic] because of what other people think.' (William, post authentic inquiry interview)

This demonstrated that not choosing the topic nor his own mentor meant that William did not experience the conditions that enabled him to engage in the authentic inquiry. William did not say anything about the 'best thing'.

Practitioners' Perspectives

Andrew was an enthusiastic mentor who was passionate about getting the young people 'skilled up' (Andrew's words) ready for release. As a member of the care staff, with limited involvement in education, the authentic inquiry meant he could be more involved. However, in William's case, this had proved counter-productive because it meant that the opportunity for the inquiry to be authentic was hindered. It resulted in William continuing to be passively disengaged and just 'going through the motions'. Andrew was coming to the process with his own aims and goals, which although well-intended, did not serve the purpose for William. This was evident in the response William gave to a question on the 'product' he had created as a result of his authentic inquiry:

'I didn't really see the end result because it's like Andrew, he did most of it, but for me I just did like most of the maintenance, look up all the research so he did all the creative stuff.'
(William)

Andrew was unable to detect that William was simply complying, demonstrating only a behavioural level of engagement. In response to being asked if the topic was William's choice, Andrew

responded:

'The topic was perfect really, because at the end of the project, he [William] kind of realised what he likes' (Andrew, William's mentor)

William was more suited to a mentor that stimulated and facilitated his thinking, like Jack's mentor had. Instruction was not suitable for William who needed greater stimulation for him to feel empowered enough to be agentic.

Although William rarely engaged in classes, a teacher identified one occasion when William had asked how the topic was going to help him:

'Because I do remember him saying to me "How does this shit help me?" and I said to him "Okay, let's look at it another way: how does it hurt you? That's perhaps what you need to think about". And we did actually have quite a dialogue about that, because he kept saying "But how does it help?" and I said "Alright, let's stop and think about life in general and wind back to before you did your crime. If you had said to yourself "How does this hurt me?" then you perhaps wouldn't have done it because if you knew that you were going to do that then consequences were going to be negative. If you pass your science GCSE nothing negative is going to come from it, potentially only positive and that's it. So stop asking how is it going to help, start thinking about "How is it going to damage me?"' (Teacher Interview)

This is an example of William attempting to engage. However, the conversation was taken in a different direction. Given William's beliefs about society and its institutions the conversation may not have encouraged engagement as he did not believe in exams. William had some strong political views, which may have been shaped because he had been exposed to different political systems in America and the UK. Taking the authentic inquiry approach, the teacher could have taken the opportunity of William's attempt at cognitive engagement to encourage him to search for the answers to his question himself. In so doing William could have explored the purpose of that particular lesson topic. It appeared that there were at least two known potential opportunities lost for engaging a learner like William: this incident in the lesson and the authentic inquiry itself.

Analysis

William had volunteered to take part, demonstrating a willingness to engage, however, William did not re-engage to the same extent as Jack. This was because William's mentor had emerged as a barrier rather than facilitator, resulting in William being disempowered further by the experience. The mentor had to be driven by the needs of the young person, highlighting the importance of relatedness and emotional engagement whereby a connection, even if it is just with one individual, becomes important. William's case demonstrated the importance of a mentor relationship which understands the young person. The authentic inquiry did not present conditions of autonomy for William and he was not able to express what he really thought or felt and so was unable to identify a topic of interest. It also showed how the structures of the secure custodial setting was not conducive in cultivating such a relationship. William had demonstrated that he was able and willing to engage when the opportunity arose, however the conditions of the secure context did not facilitate this.

Case Study 3 – Andrea

Andrea

Andrea was 17 years old, born in Britain though from a non-British background and multilingual in English, Czech and Polish. Andrea had been a victim of abuse, had a chequered educational history and, although undiagnosed, it was believed that she had a range of learning difficulties. Andrea was approaching the end of a 6-month sentence for robbery with no previous known offence.

Andrea was observed as challenging, aggressive, demanding and generally un-cooperative in lessons. Having been excluded from school without any GCSEs, Andrea had attended a PRU followed by time at a local college on a hair and beauty course. This was disrupted by her offence and subsequent sentence.

Andrea's authentic inquiry

Andrea was challenging, aggressive, demanding and generally un-cooperative. However, when Andrea agreed to participate in an authentic inquiry, she became quite excited, asking many questions – excitement is an indicator of emotional engagement and asking questions suggests cognitive engagement (Skinner et al, 2008). This was the direct opposite to teachers' reports who were convinced Andrea would not be willing to participate.

Andrea wanted to use the authentic inquiry to think about job and career prospects on her release. She wanted to produce a CV '*like the normal kids*' (Andrea's words) as her 'end product'. Andrea produced pages and pages of writing in the Red & Black notebook she was issued. Whilst much of the narrative lacked coherence and structure, reflecting teachers' reports of her communication and language difficulties, Andrea's work indicated a desire to use her multiple languages and experiences of trouble with the law to help other young people in her situation. This demonstrated behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. However, Andrea regularly complained of how the staff never helped her. These complaints could have been interpreted as a request for help, but Andrea's challenging manner made supporting her especially difficult for the teachers.

Practitioners' perspectives

Andrea found identifying a mentor difficult as she believed nobody cared. When she did eventually think of a mentor, Emily, they never got to meet before the end of her sentence. Consequently, Andrea's authentic inquiry did not progress beyond her planning stage described above. The lack of a mentor was a serious blow to Andrea and her engagement was replaced with frustration, anger, despondency and a further sense of disempowerment.

'She [Emily] didn't help me with anything. Nobody even cares.'

Andrea needed additional help in preparing her for release. She had seen the authentic inquiry as a chance to do this. The lack of help resulted in increased frustration and then a sense of

despondency. Andrea attempted to conceal this disappointment by downplaying the work she had put in.

'It's only a notebook. It's only writing. It's not like I had a job interview and that. It's just that page I could write anything I wanted, but the thing is, like - there could have been something out of it rather than just doing like 13 pages of writing and then not doing nothing [...] the plan was to go and have a look on the computer and see what jobs there are that would interest me. Obviously that hasn't happened so I just thought it was a waste. I haven't been bothered doing it again because I thought, 'what's the point?'. (Andrea)

For the remainder of this interview Andrea spoke about her anxiety at being released and of being fearful of being back in the community, when as soon as she turned 18 all the support would be withdrawn. Andrea was feeling vulnerable and frightened. Engaging her with learning after this point was difficult.

'How would you feel if you were in a secure unit, you were leaving in 2-3 days, you've got nothing in place, no house? You don't properly know exactly where you're going to live. You've got no money, you've got no National Insurance number, no birth certificate, nothing to sort myself out. I've never been 18 to know how shit runs when you're an adult, so how should I know? It's obviously going to be stressing. But they just don't give a shit.' (Andrea)

Teachers reported that Andrea would abandon tasks without explanation and accuse them of not helping. Their assessment was that she had a short attention span, needy and with a desire to control:

'Andrea will appear keen on something, she will demand we do some particular task and then after ... it could be ten minutes or it could be two days [...], she will just say 'I am not doing it', abandon it, not interested. I think it is a mechanism of control for her'. (Teacher)

However, Andrea showed that she tried to engage with lessons. Although teachers recognised Andrea had additional needs, they did not appear to connect these as a possible reason for abandonment of tasks. A second teacher reported having a good relationship with Andrea, due to giving her one-to-one attention and reflected how Andrea was responsive to the social environment. When asked if the teacher had free reign on what she could do to help Andrea's education, the teacher responded with.

'If I had free reign with her I'd wrap her up in cotton wool and take her home and protect her from all the bad people out there. I think I would take advantage of the fact that she was bilingual and try and get her to do something that... with her translating. I mean I say bilingual; I think she spoke more than two languages.' (Teacher)

Teachers perceived Andrea's troubled childhood as having affected her ability to engage. However, interestingly, teachers did not attribute Andrea's lack of sustained engagement to the pedagogical features of the classroom of the secure setting nor their own teaching styles. In some ways it reflected the 'deficit in the learner' approach. The secure setting had exacerbated Andrea's emotions and her subsequent reactions. This had impacted on her ability to maintain engagement and the support she needed was not there.

Analysis

Andrea demonstrated when given the opportunity to engage, with the right support, she could have overcome challenges. However, the conditions within the secure context meant capitalising on this was not possible. Andrea was aware of what she needed to do on release and wanted to plan for it,

demonstrating her agency in being able to assess the usefulness of the authentic inquiry to her. It offered her an opportunity to be autonomous, be herself and use her skills to her benefit. However, she was continually frustrated at the perceived lack of support indicating the importance of relatedness. This contributed further to her frustration, disappointment and fear because in some ways her competence or ability to do something for herself was compromised. The secure context had been a barrier to continued engagement in the authentic inquiry despite Andrea showing initial engagement.