

Education and Security—When the twain do meet!

SEAN WYNNE

Abstract

It was visitors in the main who used to observe on leaving the prison that they were surprised by what they found. On being pressed to elaborate, they would talk of their surprise at finding the prisoners "normal" and the prison officers likewise. But more perceptively, they remarked on the easy relationship they detected between these two groups and similarly between teacher, prisoner and officer.

Demanding of more careful and in-depth consideration were the frequent observations by visiting educators with wide experience of prison education. Their views stuck with me. In summary, they were saying that something unique and special was happening in the top security prison where I was working as the leader teacher among a teaching staff of thirty.

All agreed that it had something to do with the type of education activities that were going on and the nature of the prison regime. What follows is my "hunch" as to what was at the heart of the unique and special nature of what was happening. Undoubtedly there has been an intriguing relationship between education and security in the top security prison in the Republic of Ireland throughout the decade 1985-1995.

Early Years: Oppressive Security

The prison in question housed subversive prisoners who had committed offences related to the "troubles" in the North of Ireland. Typically these offences were possession of weapons, explosives, armed robberies, murder of policemen, kidnapping, etc. These men—and only men were incarcerated here—were regarded as highly committed to a "cause" but very dangerous. And extremely hard to contain. Thus the primary objective of the prison regime was, in simple terms, to prevent escapes at all costs. A target that could be easily measured.

And there were some spectacular escapes in the 1970's and equally spectacular failed attempts. The national government saw these as a public humiliation and an indication to the international community and its neighbor, Great Britain in particular, that the Irish Republic was "soft" on terrorism. Hence the message to prison management was clear, unambiguous and all encompassing—these men were to be kept inside whatever the cost, financial or otherwise. Furthermore the stability of the State was perceived to be at risk. Government had the backing of public opinion in its drive to impose a tough regime; these "terrorists" must be kept behind bars at any cost. And there was a cost. For more than a decade, at least up to the mid-1980's, a regime was in place which was obsessed with developing and implementing a security system that was escape proof.

Equally determined were the cohort of inmates (all members of a paramilitary organization) to escape. Seeing themselves as Prisoners of War, their first objective was to escape. This group of one hundred and forty men was organized along military authority structures. The group did not communicate with the prison authority except through authorized personnel, i.e. their Commanding Officer. Likewise prison officers of ordinary rank were forbidden by prison management from interacting with these prisoners.

The prison regime was a punitive one. Systems were put in place to achieve iron-grip control. What ensued

were tight, intrusive and oppressive practices. Prisoner movements to and from exercise yards, landings and sections of landings were rigidly timetabled. Yet prisoners could not have watches. The ratio of officers to prisoners was three to one. It was often said the only thing that money was spent on in the prison was barbed wire and steel gates. Prisoners were being constantly and closely observed. They were subjected to frequent unannounced searches at the times most inconvenient for inmates. Officers, in the main, did not mingle with prisoners. Mostly they occupied steel cages from where they observed behaviors and where possible, listened to conversations. Also present on the landings were police and armed soldiers who patrolled the perimeter wall.

The highly charged atmosphere of oppression and suppression often exploded in violence. The systematic efforts to impose physical, if not psychological, control on the inmates caused incessant conflict. Alarm sirens went off several times a day. There were frequent riots, many attempted escapes—and a few successful ones.

The prisoners' own regime, too, contributed to this hellish existence. There was a policy of non-cooperation with the prison authority and no communication with officers. One prisoner described this policy in practice:

...I had great difficulty yielding in any way to the prison authorities. Gaolers were to be despised and that was the norm. No discourse with any member of the prison administration right from the governor down to the ordinary screw, none! (Prisoner T.E., 1995).

In fact, to engage in any friendly chat with the "screws" attracted the suspicions of colleagues. Likewise, officers who were seen to be friendly to these inmates attracted similar suspicions of being "sympathetic" to the "cause" and therefore a threat to security. It was therefore as non-personal a co-existence as one could imagine between two groups of human beings.

Undoubtedly at the heart of this conflict was the question "who was running the jail?" Two systems, the prison

regime and a paramilitary organization were embarked on a head-on collision course over power and control.

The Mid-Eighties: Arrival of Teachers

For upwards of a decade the scenario just described persisted. In 1984, education was introduced formally, if slowly at first. The prisoners had requested it and had given a commitment on the safety of teachers. Prison management, for their part, promised to facilitate civilians coming to the prison. This was done with a fair degree of reluctance and scepticism, it has to be said. It was anticipated these intruding teachers would pose a huge threat to security. How far off the mark and yet how accurate these fears were! If absence of escapes and attempted escapes was the measure of success, then the prison was never more secure. There have been no escapes and only one attempted escape since education was introduced. A paradoxical situation would develop resulting in what Ian Dunbar called "dynamic security." This concept will be examined later.

Introduced to the prison was a broad-based education program with a wide range of options to the learner. The usual examinations on offer to adults in education in the community were available to and taken up by the inmates. The paramilitary prisoners almost to a man, participated in this education program. Participation in education was a high status norm of this prisoner-group.

If teachers were to set about implementing the adult education model to which they were committed, a major shift to a more normal prison set-up would have to take place. There would have to be less control from security personnel. For instance, classrooms would be "free-spaces" with no security presence. Students' learning and study materials would have to be respected so cells could not be ripped asunder in searches every second morning.

The atmosphere of conflict had to change or civilians' safety could not be guaranteed. Nor could education take place if a process of normalization was not permitted. For this latter to proceed, the behavior of the prisoner organization, too, would have to alter. They would have to start talking to officers and show them some of the respect that their teachers were showing.

The Normalizing Curriculum

Three areas of the curriculum played a vital part in normalizing the prison regime; the creative arts, physical education and the Visiting Speakers' Programme. And to a lesser degree the Open University Programme. Also of importance was the location of the classrooms. These were in the heart of the prison and scattered throughout every landing. As a result, teachers were always coming and going and thus maintained a highly visible presence in the body of the prison.

And what has happened over the decade since was just that; "imperceptible infiltration" was how one senior management person described the role of education vis a vis the prison regime. Education allied to other influences, managed to bring about the gradual removal of the shackles of an oppressive security system and in its place created a dynamic security. Education succeeded in having the prison operate a dynamic security regime

based on the three principles outlined by Ian Dunbar—individualism, relationships and activity (Dunbar, 1985).

A paraphrase of his thesis might read as follows: In any organization, it is the people who count. Successful prison regimes concentrate on the individual staff member and the individual prisoner. Of crucial importance are the relationships not only between prison officer and prisoners but also between the prison and the outside community. Activity is fundamental in achieving and maintaining control and security. A prisoner idle in his cell is a dangerous person. Dunbar's three principles were implemented through the education programs and teaching methodologies in the prison.

Individualism

It was deliberate policy on the part of teachers to use first names when talking to prisoners and officers alike. Every officer manning a gate, (teachers had to pass through thirteen gates to get to the classroom area) was addressed by his first name.

In the tradition of adult-education, the learners' needs were checked out. Education started with and valued the individual's history and experience. Programs were devised through a partnership of teacher and learner. The other dimension to this was that the student had then to take responsibility for his own learning. He played—and was made to feel it—a crucial role in decisions about himself. Despite the group pressure to become involved in education, it was still the *individual* who had to commit himself.

A very telling factor in developing this sense of individualism was the participation by inmates in a broad expressive arts program. In the painting course initiated by National College of Art and Design, the leading Art College in Ireland, expressing the "self" was the focus of the work encouraged by the teachers/artists. Likewise prominence was given to expressing the "self" in music, creative writing and drama classes. Again a prisoner's perspective:

The classes were totally new and different to anything I have experienced and I gradually began to learn the values of the imagination, movement, mime, improvisation and vocal exercises in freeing up the personality... Very steadily I began to shed the sharp angles which were a feature of my early education and training and I was becoming a better person for it (Prisoner T.E., 1995).

Highlighting of the prisoner's individuality was one of the aims of the frequent writing workshops conducted by visiting writers. Participants were encouraged and facilitated to tell in writing their own story, in the broadest understanding of that concept.

Playing parts in many plays that were staged permitted the men to safely experiment with the multi-dimensional side of personality, in the process affirming their individuality.

Relationships

Education played an even more telling part in changing the climate of relationships in the prison. First of all prisoners talked to one another about different matters. Now they had another common bond, other than the paramilitary activities they were imprisoned for. Small study

groups sprung up especially among those following the same Open University courses. But also those making music together—music sessions, a group activity but individual member's contributions were essential. Drama class highlighted the individuality of each participant; respect for one another was more in evidence as a result.

I found myself remarkably at ease, and began to identify the needs of others for living, as I was acquiring very gradually a new approach to human relations... A complete change in attitude and a new flexibility in relationship has clearly established itself within me because of the drama classes, and I can now relate to the problems of others and to the responsibilities carried by the prison authorities. This is something I never thought I could acquire, especially being in this place, doing the sentence I have hanging over my head and yet I have achieved it all without any loss of integrity on my own part and I have learned truly that yes indeed, 'stone walls do not a prison make nor iron bars a cage.' What a wonderful feeling! (Prisoner T.E., 1995)

The greatest impact was to be on the prisoner-officer relationships. It became an unwritten rule in classes that prisoners did not talk in disparaging terms about officers. Teachers themselves were seen to be respectful to all officers irrespective of rank or function. Officers in their turn could see that these so-called monsters were being treated as normal human beings and that the prisoners responded accordingly. The general wisdom among security personnel at all levels had been that the teacher-student relationship would dilute the security atmosphere. Nobody, they felt, could relate on a one-to-one basis like teachers did and not be compromised as a result. Gradually security staff realized that despite the development of these normal relationships between teacher and student, no escapes or attempted escapes were ensuing. In fact there were to be no more attempted escapes after 1985, the year education proper was introduced to the prison.

Imperceptibly officers were "sucked" into the whole activity and process that surrounded education. Frequently prisoners would ask officers to deliver queries or messages to teachers. Or they would request the officers to be on the "look-out" for a particular teacher, they (the prisoners) wanted to consult on some topic. Carpentry workshops had been withdrawn for security reasons; consequently prisoners who undertook the managing and staging of the drama productions had to hold regular discussions with individual "trades" officers about the design and the making of sets, procurement of props, costumes, etc. It did not make good sense to be doing this the formal way through the official channels.

Other officer roles came to the fore: library, school and gym. And all of this involved daily, even hourly, face-to-face contacts between numerous individual prisoners and the officers holding these positions.

Thus the softening of the rigid structure of relationships began with prisoners having to communicate with officers who held positions involved with education to eventually the "man on the gate." This latter would often

be requested by a prisoner to pass on an oral message to an individual teacher, or the presence of a teacher in the prison would be verified through him.

Being a maximum security prison, the outside community involvement had been minimal. Education through an innovative Visiting Speakers' Programme introduced many and varied people to the prisoners and prison officers. Sporting and cultural groups began to visit the prison on a regular basis. Teams, drama groups and music bands all entered the system. After performances or lectures, visitors mingled socially with the prisoners and enjoyed light refreshments. Exchange of ideas, writings, songs and just conversation was a feature of these relationships with the community outside.

Activity

Only limited workshop-crafts were allowed (leather and mirror work). So in fact the only positive, enriching activity for prisoners was provided by education.

Involvement in regular education programs imposed its own form of control. Classes required inmates to plan their use of time. The control that followed was emanating from "within." What followed were an enhancement of the work of the prison officer and also the life of the prisoner.

And still no escapes or attempted escapes! The story goes that the "prisoner escape committee" had all but disbanded because most of the members were just too busy "thinking" about other matters, namely, education.

Views of the Prison Management

Here's how one of the Governors at the time recently described the evolution:

In the beginning there were daily reports being brought to me from prison officers on the landings about the behavior of teachers—laughing, joking, on first name terms with prisoners. 'These people could be used by prisoners' was their most frequently voiced fear. Education made us change our minds; we gradually came to the realization that if teachers were to teach, they had to establish a relationship with their students.

Despite the pressures on him from his own staff to make teachers "conform" to the prison's perspectives on relationships and security, this same Governor held his nerve. Gradually trust in teachers began to grow and he removed their escorts. These latter were supposedly for teachers' own safety. In truth, their role was to keep an eye on teachers.

It is the view of the present prison Governor—who was head of operations in those years and a most ardent believer in security above everything else—that the relationship between teacher and prisoner is their (teachers') security. He described how the regime of "hands off" or "barrier handling" and protective cages made officers look "silly" (his expression) when many young female teachers were mingling unafraid and unharmed among these feared terrorists. So cages were gradually dismantled. He believed that education had directed prisoners' energy elsewhere, namely, away from conflict with his staff and from planning escapes.

Some years after the teachers first became involved, his superiors asked the Head of Police in the prison to

explain why things had become so "quiet" in the prison. He briefed himself on the education provision and the extent of prisoner involvement. Taking into consideration all the other variables at work in the prison, his report pointed to education as the major agent of change.

At this juncture it is worthwhile reflecting on what adult education theory and prison education policy offers by way of explaining or supporting the main claims made in this paper.

Education: A Liberating Force

Well respected adult education theorists, Paulo Freire, Malcolm Knowles, Jack Mezirow and Carl Rogers all maintain that human beings are continuously being acted upon and in return act upon their environment, understood in its broadest meaning. Another expert in the field, Peter Jarvis puts it succinctly:

...human beings are not merely the passive recipients of social pressures acting upon them, they are also able to act back upon their world and become agents who contribute to the processes of social change (Jarvis, 1995)

For Freire, education is not a neutral process. Learners can create their own roles rather than accepting meekly ones prescribed by others. Although his views emerged in a quite different context—that of Latin America—in my opinion, it is not stretching his perspective too far to apply it to the situation under discussion. There is some validity, I submit, in comparing Freire's ruling elite to the prison regime and the prisoners to his oppressed. Even further, can one not apply this same categorization to the prisoner group themselves where an imposed culture (that of a paramilitary organization) is being reacted to, albeit subconsciously?

Mezirow shares Freire's view of education as a liberating force. His perspective transformation theory describes how the individual learner's constructs of reality change when these are out of step with the individual's experience. This perspective transformation which comes about as a result of reflecting on the situation, and he sudden but more frequently it is a gradual process.

Turning to prison education policy, one notices that it, too, puts the learner center stage. One element in particular ought to be acknowledged as playing a significant part in explaining the change in prisoner and officer perceptions. And that is, the defining of prison education as a "partnership" in which prison staff is acknowledged to play a significant role (Dept. of Justice, 1984).

Jarvis likewise locates individuals in their socio-cultural milieu and maintains that as learners, they can become agents capable of acting back upon their environment in their attempts to affect change.

Rogers highlights the "self" and the learner's need for self-development and self-direction. He uses the term "self-actualization" to emphasize the self and the need for self-development and self-direction.

Knowles and Rogers share a common view, the primacy of the "self." The former's theory of andragogy attaches huge importance to the role of "self" in the learning process:

For this reason, adults have a need to be treated with respect, to make their own decisions and to be seen as unique human beings... Adults tend to resist learning under conditions that are incongruent with their self-concept as autonomous individuals (Knowles, 1983).

Conclusion:

It is therefore evident that adult education, in its ethos and methodology, facilitates Dunbar's three principles. However, it would doubtlessly be naïve and simplistic to claim that education by itself brought about the quiet revolution in the prison regime. Other influences of considerable significance were also at play. For example, the appointment of a Governor who had liberal views on how prisons should be run. But it must be noted that education was in place before his arrival and, in the view of this observer, the "thawing" process was already underway. The introduction by him of a more humane regime, where as much freedom as possible within the security walls was given, had a significant impact on officer/prisoner relationship. One prisoner, who was a self-styled soldier and notorious for his aggressiveness to prison staff, remarked "How can I fight a war with a man like this (the new Governor)?"

Talking about the general picture in Irish prisons, Warner describes how the negative perceptions of education by prison officers receded over time. Talking about the introduction of education to Irish prisons for the first time, he recalls:

At times there was tension between the functions of security and those of education. In time, mutual suspicions... have receded and the complementarity between the work of both sides has become more appreciated (Warner, 1993).

His observations are borne out by the experience of this writer. Warner's is the story of the larger picture, mine that of one special type of prison in the system. Where education and security have had a unique relationship.

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Biographical Sketch

Sean Wynne is the supervising teacher at the newly opened Midlands Prison in the Republic of Ireland. He spent many years as the supervising teacher at Port Laoise Prison in the Republic of Ireland.