

County Governor of Hordland seminar to mark the retirement of Torfinn Langelid, Bergen, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2011: 'The Right to Education behind bars'

## **Norwegian prison education looked at in a European context**

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In the letter announcing this seminar, Kjellbjorg Lunde, Terje Manger and Paal Breivik stated: "Torfinn Langelid has, all his professional life, advocated practice based on professional knowledge in line with basic humanistic values", and they envisaged the seminar exploring such matters in relation to prison education. I want to attempt to reflect on Torfinn's contribution and thinking, while linking these to what I see as some of the core Nordic and European principles that apply to both penal policy and prison education.

I'll begin in a different place. Last summer, while on an island off the west of Scotland, I read in a newspaper what the American writer, Alice Walker, had to say about joining one of the ships that hoped to bring humanitarian supplies to Gaza. She speaks of 'eldering', which is really a made-up word meaning being an 'elder', but I like the word because it suggest doing, action. She said:

Why am I going on the Freedom Flotilla 2 to Gaza? I ask myself this, even though the answer is: what else would I do? I am in my 67<sup>th</sup> year, having lived already a long and fruitful life, one with which I am content. It seems to me that during this period of eldering it is good to reap the harvest of one's understanding of what is important, and to share this, especially with the young. How are they to learn, otherwise?<sup>1</sup>

The one qualification I would add to that is that we who are a bit older must also learn from the young, as well as they from us.

Now, why did Alice Walker's statement immediately remind me of Torfinn? A little while ago, in an exchange of e-mails discussing the principles in Council of Europe policy documents, he said to me:

I have to tell people again and again about what has been done in the past, because they don't know. But, as a Norwegian writer once said, we have to win the world

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, "This is why I sail", in *The Guardian*, 25 June 2011.

every day, we have to fight for peace every day, we have to fight for democracy every day.

It seems to me that, for Torfinn, particular principles, such as those to do with prison education, are part of broader universal principles like peace and democracy. Just as, by the way, Council of Europe statements on prisons and prison education and other matters derive from the bedrock principles of democracy and human rights, on which the Council was founded.

When Norway suffered those terrible events in Oslo and Utoeya last July, I exchanged texts with Torfinn. In one of these he again asserted: “We must fight for democracy every minute. We must never give up.” Echoes, no doubt, of your Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, who said the response to those events would be more democracy, more openness. The point I’m making here is that the knowledge and values that should apply to the education of those in prison are part of a larger whole, concerning democracy, openness, inclusion, tolerance and so forth.

I wish to focus in now on prisons and prison education. Just a few weeks ago, at the European Prison Education Association (EPEA) conference in Manchester, I told Torfinn that I’d met a bright young Dutch prison teacher but was surprised to discover she was unaware of the Council of Europe policy document, *Education in Prison*. Maybe that was reasonable, it is over 20 years old now and some of it is rather dated. Yet, the EPEA was founded to promote a form of prison education in tune with that document’s principles and recommendations. However, Torfinn found the lack of awareness unacceptable. He said: “We have to tell them again and again”.

So, in the spirit of ‘telling you again and again’, I think it is appropriate this afternoon that I briefly talk about *some* of these key principles and insights that relate to prisons and prison education. The ideas I wish to highlight are at the heart of Council of Europe thinking, but also deeply embedded in Nordic countries. I expect, and hope, that I am preaching to the converted. I can’t claim to be able to set out all of the important and relevant principles, but I will talk about a few of them.

I suggest that there is a certain unity in thinking and values between the Council of Europe and Nordic countries. In fact, I strongly suspect that it was Nordic influence that largely shaped the *European Prison Rules*, rather than the other way around. But, I am also struck by how the *European Prison Rules* (the Council of Europe’s main policy document on

prisons) and *Education in Prison* are so complementary to each other, they mesh together very well. I think this is because core values are common to both. Nordic penal policy and policy in relation to prison education in Nordic countries, mesh in the same way, and this is especially evident in Norway. And both, in turn, are very in tune with Council of Europe thinking.

In *Education in Prison*, the Council of Europe set out some principles in relation to the education of those incarcerated, including:

- All prisoners should have access to education
- Education in prison should be directed towards ‘the whole person’
- A wide curriculum should be offered in prison
- Education and work in prisons should have equal payment and status
- Adult education teaching methods should be used in prison.

This approach, set out in *Education in Prison*, is also supported in the *European Prison Rules*.

We get to the heart of things when we look at the purposes or aims of prison education. The role of education set out in *Education in Prison* is not simply or even mainly to reduce recidivism. Three main purposes of prison education are identified. Its first function is “to limit somewhat the damage done to men and women through imprisonment” (1.8, p.15). The document then continues:

Secondly, there is the argument based on justice: a high proportion of prisoners have had very limited and negative past educational experience, so that, on the basis of equality of opportunity, they are now entitled to special support to allow their educational disadvantages to be redressed. A third argument that may be put forward is the rehabilitative one: education has the capacity to encourage and help those who try to turn away from crime.

I wish to look at each of these three aims in turn. The first role is based on a criminological assumption: rather than thinking ‘prison works’, it is assumed prisons damage people, and everything possible must be done to minimise that damage. This idea is also at the heart of the *European Prison Rules*, reflected in phrases such as using prison “as a last resort” and “minimising the detrimental effects of imprisonment”, wording that also occurs frequently in Nordic penal policy statements. Much the same thinking lies behind concepts like ‘normalisation’, and the deprivation of liberty in itself being the punishment – concepts that recur time and again in Nordic policy.

The second role set out for prison education, the one based on justice and equality of opportunity, has resonance in the provision of education generally outside the prison walls, especially in social democratic societies. This role is connected also to wider penal policy, where the deprived backgrounds of so many of those in prison is recognised – for example, in Nils Christie’s idea that in prison we find people with “bad nerves, bad bodies, bad education” and so should offer “education resources” and try to “improve their general conditions and soften their pain”.<sup>2</sup>

We find this approach also in the view of K. J. Lang, who was once Director General of the prison system in Finland. He said that, because of the dreadfully deprived background of the majority of prisoners, “all our efforts... should be analysed as to their ability to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner”.<sup>3</sup> I find that a remarkable (and quite wonderful) statement from a Director General. However, this second role for education brings to mind, in particular, the idea that the man or woman in prison is a citizen, and as such is entitled to education *as a right* – thinking that underpins the Norwegian White Paper, *Another Spring*.

The third role suggested for education in the Council of Europe document is that of helping and encouraging people in prison to find a way-of-life away from crime. What is envisaged here is primarily developing the positive potential in people, helping them become “more interested in other things”, rather than focusing on their deficits and confronting their ‘offending behaviour’. This is the hopeful optimistic view of people and their potential that is a characteristic of adult education generally.

This third role also corresponds to the broad view common in European and Nordic penal policy which, rather than narrowly focusing on the individual’s faults and individual’s responsibility to change, recognises that broader support is also critical, such as in the areas of housing, relationships, addiction treatment, and the provision of an education geared towards wide personal development. There are many examples of this broader approach, such as in the 2008 White Paper in Norway, the Krami projects in Sweden, and the educational precursors to Krami in Denmark, such as ‘production schools’. This awareness of a broad social context is there too in the writings of one Torfinn Langelid, going back to the

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<sup>2</sup> Nils Christie, *Limits to Pain* (Oxford, 1982), p.48.

<sup>3</sup> K. J. Lang, “What kind of prisoners do we meet in the 1990s?” In *Beyond the Walls: Report of the 4<sup>th</sup> EPEA Conference, Sigtuna, Sweden, June 1993*, p.67. Available on [www.epea.org](http://www.epea.org)

early 1990s where he cited among others the research of Inger Marie Fridhov. The importance of research seems to be another constant in Torfinn's work from far back.

A key factor in these penal and educational approaches is the relationship of the person in prison to the wider society. The man or woman in prison is a citizen, a member of society, and as such retains crucial rights, including the rights to education, work, health services and culture; the 'import model' opens the prison walls towards society. In the *European Prison Rules*, as in Nordic policy generally, there is much emphasis on prison regimes having a focus on maintaining links with the community during a sentence, and on the prisoner's return to, and reintegration into, society. At the EPEA conference of 1991, held in that other Bergen, in The Netherlands, Torfinn stressed that "imprisonment makes problems worse", because it weakens the bond with the wider society. He also said that "the period immediately following release is the most difficult period", and emphasised the multiple nature of the problems facing those released. His response, of course, was to focus on the need for co-operation between social institutions.

Such thinking led to action, especially in the areas of day-release and post-release support, so that prisoners can continue outside the education begun inside. But education is never seen in isolation, there is always an awareness of the need to deal with multiple inter-linked problems. Similar concerns recur in Torfinn's contributions to EPEA conferences in subsequent years, in places as far apart as Blagdon and Budapest, in CEA publications in North America through the 1990s, and in joint Nordic publications in the past decade.

One other thing that stands out when you look over that writing, and which is very much in line with Council of Europe thinking, is what I would call *the wide perspective*, whether in relation to resettlement after release or education. In looking at resettlement in society, Torfinn recognises that there are many dimensions to it, all of which need to be worked on. Rehabilitation, he says, "takes into account all aspects of the individual, i.e. development of the personality, socialisation, access to employment and social benefits."<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Torfinn's idea of prison education is also a wide one; it wants to offer many different ways of learning, one of the key recommendations of *Education in Prison* as well. So, he said also in 1991 that in prison education we should "-in addition to imparting knowledge – emphasise socialisation, the development of social competence, good working

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<sup>4</sup>Torfinn Langelid, "The Way to a Better Life – ways of building bridges with the community", p.130. In *Bending Back the Bars: Report from 5<sup>th</sup> EPEA Conference, Blagdon, England, October 1995*. Available on [www.epea.org](http://www.epea.org)

habits, and insight into oneself and one's society".<sup>5</sup> Then, over a decade later, he and other Nordic colleagues conceived of prison education encompassing "knowledge, skills, social development and attitudes",<sup>6</sup> clearly seeing the 'whole person' the Council of Europe refers to. One aspect of prison education that Torfinn felt needed developing in Norway was the area of the arts. Ever pragmatic, he came to Ireland many years ago to see what he could learn from us in that regard, starting a pathway that many others have followed since.

So it is that the concept of education in Council of Europe policy is what I would call a wide and deep kind of education. This, it seems to me, is what we find also in Torfinn and in Norway. But it is just as important that there be recognition of the reality of prison and what life is like for people sent to prison. A prisoner involved in an education project in Norway once said: "In prison there are two forces that act on you and fight to control you". He described the destructive force as "prison culture", what the Council of Europe might call 'the detrimental effects of imprisonment', but he said:

The other force pulls in the opposite direction... It can be your family life, it can be all the things you dream of and hope you will be able to achieve. Just a little support from this positive side can be all that is needed to draw you out of lethargy and passivity, and enable you to build something up that can counterbalance the destructive force.<sup>7</sup>

Education should be a part of that positive force. It should be one element that delivers on those crucial principles which are reiterated often in Nordic prison policy, "normalisation, integration, openness and responsibility".<sup>8</sup>

I began by quoting Alice Walker, who saw herself in a "period of eldering", reaping "the harvest of one's understanding of what is important". It seems to me that those of you directly involved in or supporting prison education in Norway have come to understand what is important to a very high degree, and have acted on that wisdom. Thomas Mathiesen has been a very strong critic of prisons in Norway and elsewhere, and it is very important to have such critics. Yet, writing earlier this year about prison education in Norway, he said:

And what about education? Yes, education in prison has grown since the early 1970s. Today there are educational facilities in all Norwegian prisons. This is one of the relatively few major real successes of the Norwegian prison system. Many

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<sup>5</sup> Torfinn Langelid, "From Education to Freedom: the importance of interagency cooperation". In *Yearbook of Correctional Education 1991* (Institute of Humanities, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver), p.32.

<sup>6</sup> *A laere bak murine: Nordisk kartlegging av fengselsundervisningen* (Nordisk Ministerrad, Kobenhavn 2003), p39.

<sup>7</sup> Torfinn Langelid, "From Education to Freedom", cited above, p.34.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *A laere bak murine*, cited above, p.37.

prisoners follow educational courses. Education is apparently appreciated by prisoners.<sup>9</sup>

So, if prison education in Norway is satisfactory to even such a severe critic as Thomas Mathiesen, it must be very good indeed.

You in Norway have carried further than anywhere I know the core principles set out in the Council of Europe's *Education in Prison*. One of your elders, Torfinn Langelid, has played no small part in that development. I hope he will continue 'eldering', sharing his understanding, especially with the young. (And, maybe, he will also stay open to learning from the young). I have little doubt that he will keep telling you important things, "again and again", and "fighting for democracy everyday".

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mathiesen, "Scandinavian exceptionalism in penal matters? Reality or wishful thinking?" In *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Penal Policy and Practice*, edited by Thomas Ugelvik and Jane Dullum (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp.13-37.