

Educating 'the whole person': a wide and deep role for prison education

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Keynote talk to 14th EPEA Conference, Iceland 5th to 8th June 2013

1. The Council of Europe report on education in prison

One could say the EPEA was conceived in Oxford in 1989, the initiative in the first place of an English prison teacher, Pam Bedford (now Pam Radcliffe). It then had a rather long gestation. An *ad hoc* Committee was formed two years later, in Bergen in The Netherlands, but we cannot really say an organisation was properly born until Sigtuna, in Sweden, in 1993. In Sigtuna, there were two developments that made clear the EPEA was launched as a proper organisation: the EPEA constitution was adopted, and the first EPEA tee-shirts appeared (produced, as far as I remember, in Norwegian prisons).

From the beginning, an important intention was that the EPEA was there to support prison educators *on the ground* through European co-operation, i.e. the teachers, librarians, trainers, artists, etc., who are in daily contact with people held in prison. A key influence in the formation of the EPEA was the report on prison education adopted by the Council of Europe in 1989, called *Education in Prison*.¹ It centres on 17 recommendations. More than twenty years later, some of that document looks a bit out-of-date, but *the concept of education* proposed in it rightly remains a core aim of the EPEA. Some of the recommendations are as follows:

All prisoners shall have access to education, which is envisaged as consisting of classroom subjects, vocational education, creative and cultural activities, physical education and sports, social education and library facilities; (Rec 1)

Education for prisoners should be like the education provided for similar age-groups in the outside world, and the range of learning opportunities for prisoners should be as wide as possible; (Rec 2)

Education should have no less a status than work within the prison regime and prisoners should not lose out financially or otherwise by taking part in education; (Rec 5)

A crucial recommendation is number 3, which I will focus on a lot this morning. It states:

¹ Council of Europe, *Education in Prison* (Strasbourg, 1990). Available on www.epea.org.

Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context;

I'd like to dwell on a couple of other aspects of *Education in Prison*. The report itself speaks of "two overall complementary themes":

"firstly, the education of prisoners must, in its philosophy, methods and content, be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in the society outside; secondly, education should be constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside community and to enable both groups to interact with each other as fully and as constructively as possible". (p.14)

Early on, the report argues that education in prison has a much wider purpose than trying to get prisoners to stop committing crime, or, for that matter, trying to get them into jobs. It states:

Firstly, prison is of its very nature abnormal, and destructive of the personality in a number of ways. Education has, among other elements in the prison system, the capacity to render this situation less abnormal, to limit somewhat the damage done to men and women through imprisonment.

Secondly, there is an 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 disadvantage to be addressed.

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. (p.15)

So, the kind of education envisaged by the Council of Europe covers a wide range (think of all those segments of education listed earlier), and these should be offered to all prisoners. It should also have a very broad role, modifying the effects of imprisonment on men and women and offering a chance of development to citizens who often have not had this chance before, as well as helping them look to their futures after prison. And the education we are supposed to offer can be seen as a *deep* kind of education, in that it seeks to develop the person at many levels – "the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context". By the way, that exact phrase was not made up by the members of the Select Committee on education in prison, but taken directly from a much earlier Council of Europe document about what adult education in the community should be doing.

2. Making work ‘the sole priority’

So, perhaps you’ll understand, then, how I was a little concerned when I saw what the theme of this conference was to be, with its particular focus on preparing people in prison for work. That, of course, is a vital aspect of prison education – vocational education, you’ll recall, is one segment of the education that is to be offered and listed in recommendation 1. But it is only one of several key areas. And, knowing the EPEA and the people who work in prison education, maybe I should be reassured there is no plan to limit or restrict what prison education tries to do.

However, I am aware that in many places there are very strong pressures – coming often from politicians and senior administrators – to limit prison education in a number of ways, and one of these ‘curtailments’ is to say the main purpose of prison education is to train people for work. Take, for example, Lord Filkin, who was recently ‘Minister for Offender Education’ in England. He said:

The sole priority of education is to get offenders into work – anything else is a means, not an end.²

I have a lot of problems with statements like that, not least the use of the offensive term ‘offender’. Even if you wanted to prioritise employment (and ignore other critical needs such as housing, or overcoming addiction, mental illness or social exclusion), wider development of the person is often needed if they are to get, and hold on to, jobs. Such wider development may include, for example, acquiring some general education, achieving a more positive sense of self, or being able to engage more fully in social life.

There are other problems with too narrow a focus on getting people in prison into jobs. Training in prison is often not very well geared to the labour market, it seldom includes sufficient familiarisation with information technology, and in many countries ‘the working day’ in prison is anything but – for example, in Ireland, people in prison are locked up for so much of the day that they will be lucky to be in training workshops for three or four hours. The most glaring lack of reality, however, in a large number of European countries at present, is that the jobs are just not there, and certainly not for those coming out of prison, given their demographic profile and socio-economic background.

² This is reported in *Offender Learning and Skills News*, OCR, February 2005.

3. 'To redress the self-esteem of the prisoner'

However, the most important point is that to over-focus on teaching prisoners skills for work is to neglect wider and deeper dimensions of education. In contrast to Lord Filkin, I would like to offer a different perspective, this time from a former Director General of the prison system in Finland, K. J. Lang. After a detailed and insightful description of the troubled backgrounds, life-experiences and needs of those in his prisons (his "clients", as he called them), Lang made this statement:

First of all prisoners/clients need to improve their self-confidence. Therefore all our efforts when organising correctional services should be analysed as to their ability to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner.³

It should be noted that Lang advocated this role – "to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner" – for the prison service as a whole, not just for the prison education sector. But it is certainly a role that is very appropriate for education. I would suggest everything in prison education should be a means to this end, not the end Lord Filkin prescribes. Of course, to get a job and earn one's living is one important way to gain self-confidence and boost self-esteem, but it is one among many. It makes no sense to put all our eggs in that one basket.

4. The undermining of prison education

There are a number of ways in which prison education can be reduced and hollowed out, can be diverted from the wide and deep role it should have. One of these narrow paths is Lord Filkin's, let's call it *an over-focus on employment*. I'll mention three others briefly. There can be *an over-focus on addressing offending behaviour*, where the task is to try to divert the person from criminal ways by rather confrontational methods. There can be *an over-focus on the measurable*, on those aspects of education which can be most easily assessed by bureaucracy, to the neglect of more significant personal development that is more difficult to measure – such as building self-confidence, or redressing self-esteem. Finally, in many countries now, where punitive approaches dominate, there tends to be a very negative and demonised perception of the man or woman held in prison, such that

³ K. J. Lang (1993), What kind of prisoners do we meet in the 1990s? in *Report from the 4th European International Conference on Prison Education, Sigtuna, Sweden 1993*, pp.65-68 (Norrköping: Swedish Prison and Probation Service). Available on www.epea.org.

they are *seen to be undeserving of educational resources*. We need to guard against all these restriction.⁴

5. Other voices

For the remainder of my talk, I wish to draw on other voices which reflect what I call the wide and deep possibilities of prison education: the wide role education in prison can have, the protection and redress it can offer, the opportunities for real change it can open up. Some of these voices reflect the wisdom of those who have worked in the field for many years. The most insightful, however, are the words of prisoners themselves, sharing their reflections as to what it is they get from prison education. These words are drawn from a selection of research projects.

Bill Forster was a Professor of Adult Education in England who took a great deal of interest in prison education. Well over 30 years ago, he asked men in five prisons in England what they felt they had gained from studying with the Open University in prison.⁵ They described a great range of “rewards” that they obtained from their study. Bill noted in particular how they emphasised the effect “upon their personality and attitudes” (p.25); “commented on the marked feeling of cultural change” (p.26); and valued being regarded as students rather than prisoners. Among the comments they made were these:

They say that all criminals are inadequate – well, I’m adequate in this.

My sort of crime you did for the excitement and the hope that you might get away with it. School was a dead loss, and I don’t remember getting away with any exams. While I’m in here I find these ideas exciting and I can pass the exams with no bother.

I use this course to regain my self-respect... It’s a life-line, it reaches outside. I’m a member of the University and that means that I’m still a member of the human race.

Many valued study as “an antidote to a sentence”, echoing the importance the Council of Europe gives to “minimising the detrimental effects of imprisonment”. Bill Forster says: “The concentration required removes the student from prison for a while... [makes] ‘time’ pass quickly and this was a theme returned to over and over again.” (p.28)

⁴ These curtailments are discussed more fully in Anne Costelloe and Kevin Warner (2012), *Prison Education across Europe: policy, practice, politics*. Paper presented to the Scribani conference, *Imprisonment in Europe: Common Challenges, Diverse Policies and Practice*, held in Trinity College, Dublin, 5 – 7 September.

⁵ William Forster, *The Higher Education of Prisoners*, reprinted in *Yearbook of Correctional Education 1990*, edited by Stephen Duguid (Burnaby, Canada: Simon Fraser University), pp.3-43.

Anne Costelloe also undertook PhD study of why people study at university level in prison and found a similar range of motivations.⁶ She classified these in order of importance:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Alleviate boredom | 87% |
| 2. Self-development | 87% |
| 3. Sense of achievement | 84% |
| 4. Get a job on release | 84% |
| 5. Use time in prison constructively | 84% |
| 6. Make family proud | 54% |

Clearly, most students had multiple reasons for study and recognised many benefits from it. Many were influenced by the prison context, 'push' factors as she calls them:

When I first came here, I was never in prison before, I found time was dragging... Now I do it for myself, to get a sense of satisfaction, I'm not looking at the end, at a degree, but each step on the way is an achievement in itself.

I was sick of sitting around listening to all the drug talk, non-stop, banging on every hour of the day, it was wrecking me head.

I was doubled-up with this fella and all he did was think and talk about drugs and robbing. But then I could tell him I had an essay to do and he'd shut up most of the time.

It opens you up, it's adding to your knowledge and making you know more and question more, it makes you more than a junkie or whatever, a robber or a scumbag that others might think... I've learned a lot of things and how it's alright to know things and explain yourself.

Studying has given me a more positive spin on things. I feel I can do anything I want to now. I'm looking forward to using it when I get out.

There were also 'pull' factors in their motivations, such as getting a job after release, but for many a complex of factors were at work:

It's going to be hard enough getting a job with a criminal record but harder still without a qualification. It's a good reason for getting a degree while in prison.

My motivations for studying in prison are many; the combination of boredom, wanting to please others and restore some of their pride in yourself, and awareness that your offspring may someday look to you for assistance with their studies, being

⁶ Anne Costelloe, (2003) *Third Level Education in Irish Prisons: Who Participates and Why?* Doctoral thesis, Open University.

conscious of your own ignorance and lack of knowledge, a stubborn streak which keeps you going in the face of adversity or when told you're not capable, wanting to keep your head down and get on with things quietly, as a means of escape, anything to keep your mind focused and as far removed from reality as possible, to promote a sense of self-confidence, to experience the pleasure of learning and gaining knowledge simply for its own sake, not to mention costing the authorities money.

Just this year another PhD research project in Ireland, by Jane Carrigan, looked at “prisoner learners’ perspectives of prison education within the total institution”.⁷ It is pertinent to use Goffman’s term ‘total institution’, to remind ourselves of the extent to which the prison controls and damages the person – and the extent to which education can modify these effects. Jane Carrigan’s life history approach reveals very important insight into how imprisonment today is actually experienced by those incarcerated. She elaborates on the ‘mortifications’ (another Goffman term) they experience, especially reduced access to family and friends, and the loss of a sense of safety. Not surprisingly then, Carrigan, like earlier researchers, notes that the prison school is seen as an important place where “you’re free for a couple of hours” (Robert, aged 38), or “a kind of sanctuary” (Alan, 35) in relation to the rest of the prison, but also where prisoners feel respected and “treated as a human being” (Frank, 30).

Jane Carrigan, like Anne Costelloe, identifies numerous ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors which bring people in prison to education. Some expressed their motivations thus:

When I’m studying... it’s not as if I’m in prison. It’s just the door is locked, you know what I mean, as if it’s just a bedroom really that you’re sat at home studying. (Frank, 30)

I have two teddy bears in there now that I made... when I get a family visit, I don’t like walking out empty handed to the kids... so whatever I want to make I hang on to, they look great, they’re better than what you get in the shop. (Michael, 19)

When you come up here they don’t treat you like you’re a prisoner. They just treat you like you’re normal... I get treated with respect when I come up here... treated like an adult. (Chris, 23)

You can do every subject that you want and you might have nine in a class. And a teacher that is qualified to teach in any school teaching you. Go outside and try and do that. Not a hope. I mean it’s going to cost me if I want to do me degree outside, a

⁷ Jane Carrigan (2013), *Prisoner Learners’ Perspectives of Prison Education Within the Total Institution of the Prison: A Life History Methodological Approach*. Doctoral thesis, St. Patrick’s College, Dublin.

couple of grand. And I mean I can get it started in here, I can get it in here for nothing. (Kevin, 54)

6. Nordic research

I have been drawing on the reflections and insights of men in prison in England and Ireland to argue that we need to keep in mind the broad purposes prison education can serve, and especially the crucial 'personal development' (and, indeed, personal survival) role it can play. But we can also find the same message elsewhere. Ole-Johan Eikeland, Terje Manger and Arve Asbjornsen from Bergen, along with others from across the Nordic countries, have conducted extensive research into prisoners' educational backgrounds, preferences and motivations.⁸ Their findings correspond very closely with what I've been describing in England and Ireland.

These Nordic authors state: "‘To spend my time doing something sensible and useful’ was the most important motivating factor in all five countries. In Sweden, Norway and Iceland, more than four out of five prisoners gave that reason as very important" (p.187). Other strongly motivating factors were learning about a subject, and 'to make it easier to get a job after I am released'. Once again, we see that, while training for a job is an important goal for prison education, it is only one among several, and not necessarily the most important motivating factor.

7. Other wise voices

I now wish to move towards a conclusion by drawing on some other wise voices from the international sphere, who tell us what is essentially the same message, which I have expressed as keeping a wide, and deep, role for education in prison. This also means, conversely, not allowing ourselves to be restricted to narrow goals (like focusing mainly on jobs), or the fashion of the moment (like satisfying managerialism's thirst for measurable results, or prioritising 'programmes' that claim to 'address offending behaviour'). There are many authoritative voices advocating that we hold to a broader view, but I will just conclude with words that come out of California and Costa Rica and, finally, with wisdom I recently found in a little EPEA booklet.

⁸ Ole-Johan Eikeland, Terje Manger and Arve Asbjornsen (Eds.) (2009) *Prisoners' Educational Backgrounds, Preferences and Motivation* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers).

15 years ago, there was a symposium in the mountains of Utah, involving prison educators from Europe and North America, its purpose being to “draft a theoretical framework for prison/correctional education”. Carolyn Eggleston took on the unenviable task of drafting a sort of ‘manifesto’ that reflected the discussion that took place.⁹ This is part of what she wrote:

If one theme emerged over and over again in our discussions, it was the need to develop and maintain a holistic view of prison/correctional education and its place in our society... We as prison/correctional educators can and should:

maximize the potential of individuals in criminal justice systems;

minimize the damaging effects of incarceration by helping individuals to cope;

enhance the process of de-stigmatization and normalisation, supporting the concept that prisoners are people;

build the foundation for successful reintegration...

create and maintain linkages with the community...

promote humanization of institutional cultures...

address the needs of the whole person... (p.10)

A fellow American, Thom Gehring, has over the years, stressed the importance of what he calls “humanities and social science curriculum components” in prison education. Describing “central principles and aspirations”, he lists strategies he believes we should accept and ones we should reject.¹⁰ Part of what Thom advocates is that we:

ACCEPT

Cultural literacy and critical thinking skills, in addition to basic and marketable skills to... help students ‘think their way through life’s problems’.

⁹ Carolyn Eggleston and Alice Tracy (1999), *Towards a Renaissance of Prison Education: International Preconference Symposium*, in *Yearbook of Correctional Education 1998-99* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota).

¹⁰ Thom Gehring and Scott Rennie (2008), *Correctional Education History from A to Z* (San Bernardino: California State University).

Social education and learning in the humanities, which link human values, behaviour and individual responsibility.

Clarity for personal development and social responsibility, based on tolerance and reciprocity...

REJECT

The 'basic and marketable skills only' approach, which can result in 'criminals with job skills'... (p.23)

Looking beyond training for jobs is a core theme of a very impressive United Nations report in 2009, *The right to education of persons in detention*, written by Vernor Munoz.¹¹ A crucial part of this report is that it discusses education in prison in a context of promoting human rights, and sees the right to education as part of 'the right to development'. A core message of the report is:

Learning in prison through educational programmes is generally considered to have an impact on recidivism, reintegration and, more specifically, employment outcomes upon release. Education is however much more than a tool for change; it is an imperative in its own right. (p.2)

The UN Report notes that "the provision of education for persons in detention is inherently complex and, where it does take place, it does so in an environment inherently hostile to its liberating potential" (p.5). Major challenges include limited resources for education, "the damaging impact of detention" and "low levels of self-esteem and motivation of learners". Part of this complexity and hostility comes from the objectives of the prison system itself. The report says: "Frequently aimed at the 'criminality' of those detained [prison systems] demonstrate a concomitant reluctance to recognise their humanity, their potential and their human rights." (p.7)

The UN Report notes that many models of prison education are not based on "the concept of human dignity of all persons" (p.7). It says: "human dignity, core to human rights, implies respect for the individual, in his actuality and also in his potential" (p.7). Therefore, prison education

¹¹ Muñoz, V. (2009). *The right to education of persons in detention, report of the special rapporteur on the right to education*. Retrieved from the website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/11session/A.HRC.11.8_en.pdf

should be aimed at the full development of the whole person requiring, among other things, prisoner access to formal and informal education, literacy programmes, basic education, vocational training, creative, religious and cultural activities, physical education and sport, social education, higher education and library facilities. (p.7)

Later on, the report reiterates:

All persons should have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality” (p.9).

So, in words that resonate very closely with those of the Council of Europe some 20 years earlier, the United Nations advocates a wide and deep approach to prison education based on human rights and human dignity. Yet, in my view, one of the very best statements as to what prison education is about can be found among the publications of the EPEA (supported, in this case, by the European Union Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Programme). A 2007 brochure produced by the EPEA contains a page titled ‘What we stand for’.¹² It calls on us to look beyond narrow objectives. I can do no better than to quote the core part of it:

WHAT WE STAND FOR

The EPEA promotes a view of prison education that is grounded in adult and community education... we believe that adult education has the capacity to transform a person’s perception of self and others, and it is these perceptions that determine conduct and behaviour. In this way, adult education has the power to transform prisoners’ lives by enabling them to understand, critique and question their perceptions, assumptions and world view.

The EPEA sees education as a moral right that meets a basic human need, and within this perspective, personal development is considered to be an aim, a process and a result of prison education.

The EPEA promotes a student-centred approach to prison education, one that is focused on the development of the whole person... Without doubt, this can be best achieved by providing a liberal education within a broader curriculum. In this way, the EPEA recognises the power of education to transform the lives of prisoner students by broadening their sense of possibility, expanding their sense of a larger humanity, liberating them from the confines of unexamined assumptions, and providing them with a language of critique and possibility.

¹² European Virtual Prison School/ Grundtvig Multilateral Projects (2007), *European Prison Education Association*. (Drammen, Norway: EPEA).

In short, the EPEA proposes that prison education can support the prisoner towards successful re-entry into society by cultivating a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation necessary for active citizenship. Importantly, we advocate that prison education should not be limited to the acquisition of work-related skills and the upgrading of qualifications but incorporate the opportunity for a significant change in understanding and worldview.