

Prison education across Europe: policy, practice, politics¹

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The nature of the education offered in prisons varies greatly. Provision can be focused narrowly on limited objectives, such as training for employment or seeking to 'address offending behaviour'. On the other hand, where prison education follows the policies of the Council of Europe or the European Union, which are drawn from the traditions of adult education and life-long learning, it becomes a more comprehensive and transformative experience for men and women held in prison. Underpinning these different approaches are two very different perceptions of those held in prison: one sees merely 'an offender', while the other recognizes 'the whole person' and his or her membership of society. Where narrow and negative concepts of the men and women held in prison prevail, one tends to find severe limitations on the quality and quantity of the education offered. Four such 'curtailments' are discussed.

Prison education; correctional educational; transformative learning; adult education

Introduction

The provision of some form of education for those held in prison has been a common feature of the modern penitentiary since its inception. In Europe today, virtually all countries have education available in at least some of their prisons, although there is great variety in what is provided. This paper identifies and examines two of the root causes of this variation: firstly, different understandings of the aims of, and possibilities afforded by, education in prison; and secondly, the fact that the type of education provided in different countries mirrors the attitude to people held in prison in that country. It is argued that the way prison education is conceived and *how* the person in prison is perceived are two sides of the same coin.

The paper begins by outlining, in broad-brush fashion, some of the main approaches to prison education in Europe, contrasting in particular those based on an adult- and community-education perspective with those which adopt employment-focused or offence-focused approaches. It is held that learning grounded in an adult-education philosophy offers a far richer and more authentic form of education. Such education can facilitate changes in a learner's perception, attitudes, and worldview that are more likely to be truly transformative and lasting. The second part of the paper is an analysis of different concepts of the imprisoned person. It explores how the more negative or restrictive of these concepts hollow out and curtail the kind of education offered.

An illustration of how the perception of men or women held in prison shapes the education offered may be seen in comparing two 2005 publications, from the Norwegian and British governments. Norway's White Paper on education in prison, *Another Spring* (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005), takes a wider and more holistic view of the prisoner's needs than a Green Paper on the same subject in England, *Reducing Re-offending Through Skills and*

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Employment (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). What comes across most strongly in the Norwegian document is that the person in prison is primarily a *citizen*, entitled as such to *rights* to education. However, in the English document, he or she is primarily an *offender* and the concern is with 'outcomes', the primary one being to stop or reduce re-offending, a far narrower perspective. Regarding the person in prison as a citizen or member of society reflects a 'penal welfare' or characteristic Council of Europe way-of-thinking; seeing him or her mainly as an offender is a narrower perspective more in keeping with the 'culture of control' or 'new punitiveness' (Garland, 2001; Pratt *et al.*, 2005).

Approaches to prison education

Seeing the person in prison as a citizen, a member of society, is central to the Council of Europe's penal policy in general and its prison education policy in particular. The Council's policy on prison education is set out most fully in *Education in Prison* (Council of Europe, 1990), and this is endorsed strongly in the *European Prison Rules* (Council of Europe, 2006). Imprisoned men and women are regarded as entitled to a form of adult education that those in the community outside should have available to them.² The Council of Europe sees adult education as 'a fundamental factor of equality of educational opportunity and cultural democracy', and sees it as promoting 'the development of the active role and critical attitudes of women and men, as parents, producers, consumers, users of the mass media, citizens and members of their community'. (Council of Europe, 1990: 17–18)

This wide view of the role of adult education is emphasized also in the most recent European Union Council policy statement on lifelong learning:

In the period up to 2020, the primary goal of European cooperation should be to support the further development of education and training systems in the Member States which are aimed at ensuring: (a) the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens; (b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue. (European Union Council, 2009: 1)

Returning to the Council of Europe's policy, adult education is 'seen to be about participating and experiencing rather than about the passive absorption of knowledge and skills; it is a means by which people explore and discover personal and group identity' (Council of Europe, 1990: 18). Thus, a key recommendation in *Education in Prison* is that all prisoners should have access to a wide curriculum, the aim being 'to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context' (Council of Europe, 1990: 8). The approach here is very clearly to see the person in prison as a full citizen and as a 'whole person'. However, developments in prison education in some countries suggest a distinct retreat from that holistic perception.

In Council of Europe policy, prison education is understood to have a further role, in addition to those just described – that of counteracting the negative impact of the institution, limiting 'the damage done to men and women through imprisonment' (Council of Europe, 1990: 15). All these important functions lie behind the Council's assertion that 'education shall have no less a status than work within the prison regime and prisoners shall not be disadvantaged financially or otherwise by taking part in education'. (Council of Europe, 2006: 28.4)

While such policy on prison education is clear, provision (and the philosophy behind that provision) varies considerably across countries. In places, comprehensive programmes of education that are well-resourced and based on Council of Europe principles are offered to all in prison, while elsewhere there are only patchy offerings of weak and narrow forms of learning.

The different approaches to education in prison evident across Europe can be categorized in three broad typologies (European Commission, 2011). First, provision is embedded in a traditional

and wide mainstream secondary school curriculum, but oriented towards the interests and needs of adults. Second, training programmes are focused more on employability than traditional education and are almost exclusively centred on basic skills and vocational training. Third, programmes are offence-focused and provide courses influenced directly by the prison context (this is elaborated in more detail below). Of course, combinations of these elements exist, with countries giving different weightings to the different types of education. It is important to note here that, while each of the above is essentially different, they are viewed by some as being interchangeable, and are often all lumped together under the label of 'education'. Such variance in provision and philosophy continues even while individual countries remain signed up to well-defined Council of Europe and European Union principles and policies.

Understanding the difference between education and training is crucial. In essence, training is the learning of a skill, learning how to do something, and is focused on employability. Education, on the other hand, is concerned with understanding, and with the values generated from that understanding, and is focused ultimately on developing the capacity for critical reflection. Training tends to be measured by what you can do when you have completed it; education is measured by what you know and your ability to apply and analyse that knowledge. This is why we contend that much of the employment-focused 'education' provided in some countries does not constitute education as it is understood generally in the field of adult education, or indeed 'prison education' as understood by the Council of Europe.

A crucial quality of the adult education approach is that it is an end in itself, not just a means to an end as is the case with employment-focused and offence-focused courses. The essence of adult education is that it facilitates the learner in developing as a 'whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context' (Council of Europe, 1990: 8). In this process, adult education promotes significant creative and critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987), the development of which can lead to profound and lasting change in a person's conscientization³, worldview and direction. This 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow, 2000) entails three significant dimensions – psychological, convictional, and behavioural – which lead to and mirror three incremental changes in the learner. These are changes in understanding of the self, changes in belief systems, and changes in behaviour (Clark, 1993). Its potential for prisoner education is the same as in the community outside and lies in the learner's capacity to transform perceptions of self and others. It is these perceptions that determine the way people act.

To illustrate this further, it is useful to analyse various approaches to adult literacy-learning in Europe. Once again, even the labels used tell us much about the attitudes held and, while to the non-educationalist the distinction may seem subtle, they are telling. For example, in England, literacy learning is referred to as 'basic skills' or 'functional skills' and in the field of prisoner education it is equated with employability and up-skilling the prisoner. 'Basic skills' are synonymous with the concept of functional literacy. This concept sees literacy to be a cognitive skill; the ability to read and write. It is a skill that can be taught, just like learning to drive, and nothing more.

In Ireland, with its emphasis on the adult education approach, the conceptualization of literacy is based in the ideal of critical literacy. This view of literacy considers it to be intellectual transformation. It is more than the simple acquisition of a skill. Instead, through the process of acquiring that skill, the learner's cognitive and intellectual development are enhanced and transformed. Proponents would suggest that 'reading is understanding the world, writing is reshaping it' (Hughes and Spark, n.d.). In this way, literacy is seen as an empowering and powerful tool used to reshape our lives and the world in which we live. We contend that adult education in general (and, accordingly, prison education grounded in the adult-education tradition) operates in much the same manner and is of similar fundamental importance (Bailey, 2004).⁴

The curtailment of prison education

Limitations to the education offered to those in prison arise, in particular, when they are *not* perceived as citizens, members of society, or whole persons. When men and women in prison are represented merely as ‘offenders’, seen mainly in relation to the labour market, demonized, or thought of as ‘other’, then a full and appropriate form of education will tend not to be offered to them. The term ‘offender’ is particularly offensive, being both one-dimensional and negative, as if there were no other aspects to prisoners’ lives and personalities (Costelloe and Warner, 2008).

A ‘culture of control’ and a ‘new punitiveness’ are seen to dominate penal policy in English-speaking countries of late. Such thinking and attitude gives us a very different picture of those in prison to their positive characterization by the Council of Europe. Punitive thinking holds diminished and very negative views of the person in prison. Consequently, even where education is offered there will be a tendency among authorities holding such views to restrict this provision in a number of ways, notwithstanding the urgings of the European institutions. Four examples of such curtailment or distortion of provision are given below. It should be noted, however, that in many places several of these restrictive attitudes may operate together.

The ‘criminogenic’ curtailment

If the person in prison is seen and thought of only as a criminal or ‘offender’, this can lead to a concentration on ‘programmes’ that claim to ‘address offending behaviour’, to the neglect of learning that facilitates personal development in a wider and deeper sense. This may mean a narrowing of educational aims, curriculum, activities, and methods. It may also mean that programmes are offered not to all prisoners but only to some groups who are ‘targeted’ as likely prospects for a reduction in re-offending.

The classical example of the abandonment of education in the arts and social sciences in prison in favour of offence-focused programmes comes from British Columbia in Canada in the early 1990s. Federal authorities stopped funding highly successful ‘humanities’ courses that had been provided in prisons for some 20 years by Simon Fraser University. Instead, the authorities wanted an education that concentrated on ‘criminogenic factors’ through programmes such as cognitive skills, anger management, and addiction. Ironically, subsequent research funded by the Canadian Correctional Service itself indicated that the humanities courses had, in addition to their general educational benefits, been much more effective in reducing recidivism, the supposed objective of the new courses (Duguid, 1997; 2000).

Yet, Canadian offence-focused ‘programmes’ have been exported and have had significant influence in parts of Europe, often displacing more conventional education, particularly in Britain, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries. Clearly, what happened in Canada amounted to a narrowing of perspective whereby the person in prison came to be seen mainly as an ‘offender’, rather than as a ‘whole person’ with all the strengths and weaknesses, relationships, experiences and potential, hopes and fears, that being a ‘whole person’ implies. Consequently, opportunities for people to develop via a fuller education were lost.

Curtailment of provision to ‘the undeserving’

If people in prison are regarded in a very negative way, perhaps as ‘career criminals’, or (as an Irish Justice Minister once described those in his care) as ‘thugs and scumbags’ (see Lonergan, 2010), then there will seem little point in offering them quality education. For education is about drawing out talent, ability, potential and creativity. If one is blind to such positive qualities in people, then one will not be inclined to support genuine education for them.

For most of the last three decades, adult education was a strong feature of the prison system in Ireland, with a high level of teaching resources funded by the Department of Education, good funding for other aspects from the Department of Justice, and strong support generally from prison authorities. For many years, more than half of all prisoners participated in education, about half of these on a very intensive basis. Facilities varied from prison to prison, but for many years virtually all prisoners had access to education if they wished and a wide range of learning opportunities was available, with especially strong activity in basic education, university education, and the creative arts.

Much of this provision remains, due in particular to the ring-fenced allocation of teachers from the Department of Education. However, the support of prison authorities for prison education has been less evident in recent years. Most aspects of the Irish Prison Service finance for education were cut in half between 2008 and 2010, while appropriate facilities for education are now often not provided when new prison accommodation is built and, for hundreds of prisoners locked up for 22 or 23 hours each day, access to education is clearly impossible.

Without doubt, a crucial factor in this undermining of education in Irish prisons is the more negative perception of the prisoner held by those running the system ever since the emergence of a 'punitive turn' in Ireland in the late 1990s. Both the administrative and political leadership, at least until recently, routinely described the entire populations of particular prisons, or of the prison system as a whole, in terms that depict them *all* as dangerous, violent, and a threat to the public. Such imagery is not supported by the evidence, but is, of course, reinforced by similar discourse in part of the media (Warner, 2011). Very recently, there have been some indications of less blinkered and less punitive attitudes, but for several years many of those running the prison system saw little sense in supporting developmental educational activity for people who they could not envisage developing. This attitude applied especially to costly courses like university education, and to what were seen as frivolous activities such as the creative arts. In 2008, 141 men and women studied at university level in Irish prisons, through the Open University and the National College of Art and Design. By 2013, that number had shrunk to 49, as was revealed in a parliamentary answer (Dail Eireann, 2013).

The 'employability' curtailment

Another way in which the 'whole person' in prison is reduced to just one aspect of his or her personality is when the focus of support is restricted primarily to vocational training, the apparent idea being to help them get jobs upon release (Downes, 2011).⁵ Even this narrowed aim is often only a pretence, and the reality in many prisons is that the 'training' offered does not correspond to labour-market requirements, the 'working day' is far shorter, and digital exclusion means that a vital requirement for most jobs in the community is prohibited. A UK Home Office study of basic-skills provision in prisons concluded that most prisoners who found employment post-release were returning to a previous job or had obtained work through family or friends (Harper and Chitty, 2005). Furthermore, when those prisoners who re-offended were asked about possible factors that could have caused this, their most common responses related to drink or drugs and lack of money. Fewer linked their offending to problems with employment; their difficulties were obviously more complex and deep-seated (see also Schuller, 2009).

Clearly, many in prison need the opportunity to develop in a range of ways, beyond training for a specific job, if they are to overcome difficulties and give themselves a better chance of obtaining *and retaining* employment. Yet a concentration on training for work fits easily with having a diminished view of the man or woman in prison. It also fits with attitudes in welfare policy which see work, especially hard manual work, as an appropriate punishment generally for the poor and marginalized

who are seen as lazy and feckless. A concentration on work and training for work is widespread in European prisons, and notably so in Eastern Europe and England.

This outlook is evident in England, as illustrated by the words of Lord Filkin, then Minister for Offender Education, who said, 'The sole priority of education is to get offenders into work – anything else is a means, not an end' (OCR, 2005). Consequently, important elements of education are ignored or reduced. For example, there has been a serious undermining of the arts in English prisons, and Paul Clements (2004: 169) speaks of how 'the reduction of opportunity in prison to engage with the arts, [has been] replaced by an instrumental agenda concerning basic, key and cognitive skills'.

Regarding work as a punishment is common to many social policies in Britain and is clearly bound in to a negative stereotyping of those at the sharp end of such policies. In August 2011, Alan Travis, writing in *The Guardian*, reported that: 'Unemployed offenders face a full week of unpaid work, including the possibility of hard manual labour, under plans to toughen community penalties as an alternative to prison'. In the same edition, a commentator depicts the thinking of the political leadership in relation to those receiving social welfare, saying: 'that there is a degenerate rump at the bottom of society, and no point getting hot and bothered about any apparently harsh or intrusive treatment meted out to them. They are, after all, nothing like the rest of us' (Harris, 2011).

Curtailement by measurement

Another form of curtailment of education in prison is one which arises in education generally beyond the prison walls, although its common source may be seen in 'managerialism', a feature David Garland (2001) identifies in penal policy and which he classifies as one of the 'indices' of the culture of control. Bureaucratic attitudes, whether in prison systems or in the wider world, can give rise to curtailment by measurement where the focus of education provision is on 'making the measurable important, rather than making the important measurable' – and so, the box-tickers in head-offices devise impractical forms for the practitioners to complete.

The associated emphasis on cost-effectiveness is a worrying trend for many prison educators, as they are aware that the outcomes of complex educational processes can be very challenging to measure and frequently fall beyond the scope of economic analysis. Given the complexity of the learning process, and because learning is not confined to the prison classroom, it is almost impossible in reality to single out and identify certain outcomes that can be attributed to specific educational initiatives or processes. Moreover, the lack of clarity as to what comprises education in the prison context can make it even more difficult to establish which activity it is that makes a difference or is most effective. Furthermore, by concentrating on returns to the state rather than gains by the individual learner, only part of the picture is drawn. Regardless of such significant issues, 'difficult-to-measure' (but highly valuable) interventions are in danger of being sidelined in favour of less complex, 'easier-to-measure' ones (Garland, 2001: 6–20).

In this way, some of the most important progressions that can take place through education, and those that are particularly important in a prison context, can be marginalized. This deeper learning is not recognized and consequently not valued, at least in the eyes of the bureaucracy, as it is not very amenable to measurement. Such progressions include becoming aware of new potential within oneself, finding new interests, growing in self-confidence and self-esteem, and growing in understanding, in particular in social and civic awareness.

Managerialism also tends to hamper one of the defining characteristics of adult education, the distinctive methodology of adult learning and teaching. For example, adult-education methods traditionally respect the life-experience of the learner and see this experience as a valuable resource in the learning process. The starting point is always what you know rather than what

you don't know. Adult educators also tend to be trusting of the judgement of the learner, and accept that he or she should have a substantial say in what is studied, how it is studied, and how learning is assessed. Such methods are difficult to square with a form of education that focuses narrowly on the restricted range of skills or knowledge stipulated by bureaucracy. Even more critically, such adult education methods are hardly reconcilable with the various negative ways of thinking about people in prison.

Conclusion

In 1990, the UN General Assembly adopted Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners which outline the need to treat prisoners with respect and recognize their rights and freedoms as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1990). They included specific reference to the right of prisoners to take part in 'cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality'. This suggests the same kind of wide curriculum and broadly aimed education outlined by the Council of Europe, and in speaking of the 'full development of the human personality' it echoes the Council of Europe's concept of 'the whole person'.

However, in many locations in Europe, the education offered to people in prison has been reduced and hollowed out by a retreat from a wide concept of education, and by a failure to recognize the full personality of the imprisoned person. The curtailment of education and the diminished view of the prisoner are closely related issues. Education in prison across much of Europe is often far less than it can be, as a result of two related over-simplifications: rather than seeing 'the whole person' in the prisoner, we see only the criminal; and rather than offer adult education in all its challenging richness, we offer only a limited range of 'skills'.

The late K. J. Lang, long-serving Director General of the prison system in Finland, had a deep sense of those in his prisons as people – the lives they lived, their backgrounds, their personalities, their needs. Remarkably for someone in his position, he identified their greatest need as being to improve their self-confidence. He said, 'all our efforts when organizing correctional services should be analysed as to their ability to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner' (Lang, 1993: 9). The kind of education methods and activities that would flow from such a perspective (not to speak of the different penal policy) would be radically different from those that, for example, merely think of 'addressing offender behaviour' or of 'getting offenders into work'. Neither the people in prison nor the learning opportunities offered to them should be so crudely simplified or reduced.

Notes

1. This article was first published in Carroll and Warner (2014).
2. Various other international bodies uphold the right to education, including the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Charter of Fundamental Rights enforced through the Lisbon Treaty, and the United Nations General Assembly. The 4th International UNESCO Conference on Adult Education declared the 'right to learn', which included 'the right to read and write ... to question and analyse ... to imagine and create ... to develop individual and collective skills'.
3. Conscientization, or critical consciousness, is considered by many to be one of the main goals of adult education. According to Freire, it is manifest 'by depth in the interpretation of problems, self-confidence in discussion, receptiveness, and refusal to shirk responsibility' (Freire, 1973: 30). He suggests that education can develop the critical capacity to 'help men to assume an increasingly critical attitude toward the world and so to transform it' (Freire, 1973: 13).

4. Inez Bailey (2004: 198) states that 'adult education can make a major contribution both in meeting the skill requirements of a rapidly changing workforce, as well as improving social cohesion and equity in the emergence of a broadly inclusive and proactive civil society. The inclusion of a philosophy of literacy as broader than just workforce development distinguishes literacy in Ireland from the market-driven rhetoric that is dominant in UK and US policy in this area.'
5. The following comment on the English Green Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) in a recent book based on research funded by the European Union Commission questions this overemphasis on employability: 'While a national strategic approach to access to lifelong learning in prison is to be welcomed in this English example, it nevertheless remains a concern that the goal of employment subordinates other legitimate goals of lifelong learning—such as active citizenship, social cohesion and personal fulfilment. An EU Commission conception of access to lifelong learning operates with a broader lens and includes all citizens and therefore encompasses prisoners and prison education within its ambit of relevance' (Downes, 2014: 196–7).

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Both Anne Costelloe and Kevin Warner have many years' experience in prison education in Ireland, and understanding of the field across Europe. Each has been a chairperson of the European Prison Education Association (EPEA).

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Kevin Warner chaired the Select Committee that formulated Council of Europe recommendations on education in prison (1990), received a PhD for research into penal policy in Nordic countries (2009), and was a contributor to the policy paper, *The Irish Prison System: Vision, values and reality*, issued by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2012). He is now an adjunct lecturer in the School of Applied Social Science at University College Dublin.

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