

**14<sup>th</sup> annual Liam Minihan lecture, hosted by Irish Prison Education Association (IPEA),  
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**The potential of education for people held in prison**

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## INTRODUCTION

I'm pleased and honoured to be asked to give the Liam Minihan lecture. It is now over 20 years since Liam died: I still recall him very vividly as a passionate, committed, innovative and capable adult educator, and (in his own quiet but determined way) penal reformer; for him, as for many, the two things went together.

I'm not just honoured to give this, the 14<sup>th</sup> Liam Minihan lecture, but rather daunted when I look at the list of those who have given previous lectures – just looking at the first three: Professor John Coolahan; William Rentzmann, Director General of the Danish Prison and Probation Service; and the father of Irish criminology, the late Paul O'Mahony. There were also campaigners in different fields like Peter McVerry, Erwin James, Michael O'Flaherty, and many more...

Looking at the themes of these speakers, I see that several have dealt mainly with an educational theme. But it is striking that a much higher number looked further afield and addressed some aspect of the wider criminal justice system, and especially penal policy. And that is as it should be: the work of education in prison is inextricably bound up with larger issues in penal policy. I mention this because, while my concentration will be on the education of those in prison, I will also be drawn into discussing the prison system and its shifting thinking and shifting policies, which of course impact on education.

However, my main focus will be on adult education – what we mean by it, its distinctive philosophy and approaches, the depth and breadth of it, and its enormous potential for the men and women held in prison. Yet, the achievement of that potential will be facilitated or hampered depending on the policies being pursued in the wider penal system, what we might call the penal climate. The penal climate tends to be a mixed bag, a bit like the other climate, and especially Irish weather, and can vary widely from time to time, with sudden storms and periods of calm. Like the weather, the penal climate tends to have serious effects on many things, including the quality of the harvest that you in education try to gather, not to mention your morale!

## DISCOVERING ADULT EDUCATION

I'll speak a bit more about penal climate later, and indeed what I see as *penal climate change*, but for now I want to talk about adult education. Perhaps I can do that best by telling how I personally stumbled into that field and discovered it to be quite different to the post-primary teaching I had been doing in Cork and in London.

So, long ago, in the early 1970s, I was teaching English in a comprehensive school in North London, working in particular with the 'C' class kids, the ones falling behind academically and otherwise disengaged and, in truth, not made very welcome in the school. Then, in 1975, I left London and went to do a three-month course in Manchester called 'Teaching the slow learning child in the ordinary school', no euphemism there.

However, when I finished that course in the summer of 1975, I did not return to post-primary schooling. That summer saw the launch of a unique national adult literacy campaign in Britain, which sought to address what was then a substantial but largely hidden problem of reading and writing difficulties among the adult population. It was spearheaded by the BBC with a series of TV programmes called *On the Move*, designed as much to encourage men and women to seek help in their local areas as to actually teach via the TV programmes. In conjunction with the BBC, adult education centres and Further Education Colleges throughout the country put on classes to respond to the people who came forward. Then, and in subsequent years, thousands did seek help, and to that extent at least the campaign was a success and a major breakthrough. That summer, I applied for and got a job teaching literacy in a Further Education College in Manchester, and so became part of this national campaign.

Whatever my students in Manchester learned or didn't learn from me in the following years, I learned a huge amount. I learned that adult education was very different in many ways to the work I had been doing in schools. The adult literacy 'campaign' was very exciting and enabled many to throw off burdens of fear and self-doubt that had oppressed them for years. I learned that those who came forward seeking help with some aspect of reading or writing were very often remarkably bright and interesting people who had usually kept their problems well hidden. I learned to build learning with them around their strengths and interests; to use different methods as they suited different people, and to encourage them to pursue their own objectives; to draw on their life experiences and culture; to let them learn at their own pace and in their own way; to let them help and support each other.

We found that writing like that of Paulo Freire<sup>1</sup>, who worked with poor rural Portuguese speakers as they acquired literacy in Brazil, was actually very relevant and very insightful in industrialised Manchester. Following Freire, we attempted to facilitate people in discovering that language was theirs, their means to express themselves, understand and change the world, and affirm themselves, their lives and their communities.

It was clear that what these men and women got from participating in education was far more than the technical skills of reading and writing. Vastly more important was the positive change in their sense of self - 'I'm not stupid after all, I can learn', 'I have things to say, a story to tell'— and the confidence that grew with that. So often also, they had a sense of a great burden being lifted from them, they would tell you 'I thought I was the only one'. Certainly, they learned skills, but it was the less tangible personal developmental aspects, and the relief and new perspective achieved, that were much more important.

I did a Masters in Education by research, where I explored with 18 adult literacy learners their perspective on their problems, the causes and effects, and also their experience of learning. What I found striking was that those I interviewed saw *the overcoming of stigma and growth in self-confidence* as the most important things to come out of learning, rather than the technical improvements in reading and writing.

My study was a little thing, done for my own interest. However, there was a major research project conducted at that time which evaluated the national adult literacy campaign. It was carried out by two men based at the National Institute of Adult Education in Leicester, A. H. Charnley and H. A. Jones. Their original plan was to do quantitative testing, but very early on they realised a qualitative approach was much more meaningful. In 1979, they produced what became a very famous book, *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy*<sup>2</sup>. The title is important: they found that the most important success in the eyes of the adult students themselves was not improvement in literacy skill as such, but what they called "the enhancement of self-image".

What adult literacy students saw as their achievements obviously varied, but the most important in the eyes of most were, as Charnley and Jones put it, "in the affective personal or social achievement domains", things like how they felt about themselves, confidence,

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<sup>1</sup> Two of Paulo Freire's most influential books were: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972) (both Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).

<sup>2</sup> A. H. Charnley and H. A. Jones (1979) *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy* (London: The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit).

self-esteem, capacity to relate to others and the world. And, importantly, the researchers saw such developments as “synonymous with the general aims of adult education” (p.178). American writers such as Jack Mezirow<sup>3</sup> describe such breakthroughs with terms such as ‘emancipatory learning’ and ‘transformation’.

However, these less tangible things are not very susceptible to measurement, or accreditation. And the key thing in evaluation in adult education – to borrow a phrase I learned many years ago from another Leicester adult education professor, Bill Forster – is to ‘make that which is important measurable, rather than that which is measurable important’. Managerialism, whether in the fields of Justice or Education, tends to go for the measurable rather than the important. I’ll touch on this matter again, and on the way accredited courses can be prioritised over non-accredited learning. It is important to be clear about our concept of success. So, it was with these things in mind that Charnley and Jones said “the literacy campaign was not a matter of skill-training but of adult education with special reference to literacy” (p.178). Their idea of adult education, one that is widely understood, is about a much wider and deeper development of the person than just the acquisition of certain knowledge or skills.

#### THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE: EDUCATING ‘THE WHOLE PERSON’

The Council of Europe had a similar concept of adult education in the community, which they transposed in the exact same terms into their policy document on education in prison: “Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context”<sup>4</sup>. That idea of offering education to ‘the whole person’ is one of the things that underpins the Council’s stipulation that those in prison should be offered “a wide curriculum”, or “a comprehensive programme of education”. (A further rationale for providing a wide range of educational activity in prison is a very practical one: different aspects of education attract different people and so participation is encouraged; and once people join in for one thing, they often then move on to others).

The Council of Europe, by the way, is clear that education in prison has wider purposes than trying to get prisoners to stop committing crime, or, for that matter, trying to get them into jobs. It sets out three ‘justifications’. The first is to limit the damage done to men and women through imprisonment, i.e. to help them cope with and survive the experience. And,

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Mezirow and Associates (1990) *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe (1990) *Education in Prison* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe), available on [www.epea.org](http://www.epea.org).

since a very high proportion of those in prison have had very limited and negative past educational experience, they are seen to be now entitled to special support to address their educational disadvantage; that's the second purpose. The third is to support them in turning away from crime.

The United Nations<sup>5</sup> has very similar thinking and echoes the Council of Europe clearly, asserting that education in prison “should be aimed at the full development of the whole person requiring, among other things [and this is an interesting and extensive list] 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.” The UN report reiterates: “All persons [in prison] should have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality”. So, the United Nations echoes very closely Council of Europe thinking and policy.

#### WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

So, what is it that men and women get out of education while in prison? And does their experience match these aims? This is one area where there is actually some good research, both internationally and in Ireland. The aforementioned Professor William Forster went into several prisons in England and asked university students why they studied and what they got out of it<sup>6</sup>. They described a great range of “rewards” that they obtained from their study. Forster noted in particular how they emphasised the effect “upon their personality and attitudes”; “commented on the marked feeling of cultural change”; and *valued being regarded as students rather than prisoners*. So, as with the adult literacy students earlier, the most significant achievements were, not skills or knowledge or qualifications as such, but rather less tangible things in the affective and social domains.

In the intervening years, education in prison in England has been narrowed and diminished in many ways, to a focus on skills in the workplace in particular. But I am very heartened by this month's issue of the *Prison Service Journal*, a ‘Special Edition’ devoted to ‘The Transformational Potential of Prison Education’. It is full of testimony from people such as former prisoners, eminent criminologists (Alison Liebling of Cambridge among them) and

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<sup>5</sup>Victor Muñoz (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](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/11session/A.HRC.11.8_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>William Forster (1990) ‘The Higher Education of Prisoners’, reprinted in *Yearbook of Correctional Education 1990*, edited by Stephen Duguid (Burnaby, Canada: Simon Fraser University), pp.3-43.

the Prisoners' Education Trust, which supports study in prison and after it. All of them, in one way or another, make the case for the wider and deeper form of education that I have been speaking about.<sup>7</sup>

Centred on the University of Bergen in Norway, a lot of research has been conducted into education in prison in the five Nordic countries, looking, for example, at matters such as prisoners' educational backgrounds, preferences and motivations. Their research also reinforces the need to keep in mind the broad purposes of education to which I've already referred<sup>8</sup>. OK, that's the Nordics, we know they are better at everything! But we also know that when it comes to prisons, the USA are the pits. They imprison 2.3 million people, often in appalling conditions, and so on.

However, a recent interesting book called *Voices from American Prisons* by Kaia Stern<sup>9</sup>, who directs the Prison Studies Project in New York and teaches at Harvard, is very critical of the prison system in the United States: its dehumanisation, isolation and 'social death', and the *thinking* that underpins it. What I found most interesting is what those she interviewed in prisons had to say about how education had helped them, and themes similar to those in Europe emerge: typical is the Boston University student in prison who says it "does so much more than teach. It builds self-esteem... creates hope... opens doors in life that were once closed... we found that there are people in the world that actually care about us... want us to success" (p.165).

And, for any doubting Thomas who must have numbers, and for whom recidivism is the only issue, she cites the very extensive research there is on this in the USA, including longitudinal studies: time and again, in study after study, participation in education is associated with reductions in recidivism by significant amounts. Very interestingly, this pattern appears most marked the higher the level of education: "the higher the degree attained, the lower the recidivism rate" (p.161). So, the decision by the Irish Prison Service in recent years to abolish the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) course in Portlaoise Prison, to cut Open University (OU) participation by more than half, and to prohibit Masters courses with the OU would hardly seem to be best practice, or evidence-based policy. Desistance from

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<sup>7</sup> HM Prison Service of England and Wales *Prison Service Journal*, May 2016, No 225, available from the website of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, <http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/psj.html>

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

<sup>9</sup> Kaia Stern (2014) *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, education and healing* (London and New York: Routledge)

crime is not the primary purpose of education in prison, but education none-the-less supports that process as well as anything, and better than most.

So, for those who ask ‘What works?’ and call for ‘evidence-based policy making’, the answer is startlingly clear in relation to education in prison. Good extensive research in many countries points clearly to a wide and deep form of education, that includes but goes well beyond skills training or accredited courses, that follows the adult education model, that tunes into what the Council of Europe and the United Nations have to say about the matter. In Ireland, unusually, there is some excellent research in this field. In just asking the question, ‘What do people in prison get from education?’ we can point to at least four high-quality PhDs, those by Anne Costelloe<sup>10</sup>, Cormac Behan<sup>11</sup>, Jane Carrigan<sup>12</sup> and Geraldine Cleere<sup>13</sup>. While each of these researchers interviewed people in different prisons, and each was concerned with answering different theoretical questions, they all probed in different ways why those in prison participated in education, and what they got out of it. In Geraldine’s case, she also went down the wings in Mountjoy and talked to some of those who never participate, and she also talked to men in the Pathways Project who had been released.

I’m just going to give a small flavour of comments from their interviewees, and I’m mixing up quotations from the four studies. Suffice to say that all the comments again point beyond instrumental purposes of education to its benefits in relation to surviving the ‘detrimental effects’ of prison, personal development in its widest sense, or gaining some hope for a ‘good life’ or ‘making good’ in the future. In other words, what those in prison say they get out of education (in Ireland as elsewhere) matches very clearly what the Council of Europe and the UN envisage:

At first, it was like something to do, ya know something to keep me occupied. And then sort of it just progressed.

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.

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Costelloe (2003) *Third Level Education in Irish Prisons: Who Participates and Why?* Doctoral thesis, Open University.

<sup>11</sup> Cormac Behan (2014) ‘Learning to Escape: Prison Education, Rehabilitation and the Potential for Transformation’ in *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry*, Vol. 1, No 1, available at [www.jper.uib.no](http://www.jper.uib.no)

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Geraldine Cleere (2013) *Prison Education, Social Capital and Desistance: An Exploration of Prisoners’ Experiences in Ireland*. Doctoral thesis, Waterford Institute of Technology.

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.

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.

The school is an oasis... an oasis of civility which one doesn't always find at the end of the stairs...

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.

Doing the education has made me realise I am an individual, separate to anyone else. Like the school has given me more information, not just about learning from books but also about myself and how to deal with situations. Like I'm not wearing blinkers or as one-tracked as I usually was.

Motivation is often complex and multi-layered, and this final longer quotation conveys this:

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 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.

There are two other insightful Irish sources (among many available) that I want to refer to, one a research report titled *Unfamiliar Voices* by Aislinn O'Donnell into the NCAD course at Portlaoise Prison, the other an account of being drawn into education while in prison. The NCAD ran a course in Portlaoise for nearly 25 years until it was terminated in 2011. Drawing on interviews from many people involved over the years, and in particular those in prison or who had been in prison, Professor O'Donnell aimed to "evaluate the qualitative nature of the educative experience as narrated by key stakeholders, thus offering a richer story than one that might be offered through more restrictive criteria of evaluation born of performance and audit based models of education" - so taking an approach very much like that of Charnley and Jones in relation to the adult literacy campaign. I think her report gets



across in remarkable fashion the ‘success’ of that (non-accredited) course for the many long-term prisoners who participated.<sup>14</sup>

There are many accounts by men and women who are or have been in prison which document their experiences of very significant awakening or change through some kind of education. It is important that we pay attention to them in particular to understand this *process*, and how the triggers for the breakthroughs can vary hugely. There is a classic description by Jimmy Boyle telling how he discovered something extraordinary in himself through pottery in Barlinnie Prison in Scotland<sup>15</sup>. I’m going to take just one such account, a short article by Martin Keane, who wrote about his experience of education some 20 years ago; I think his story is quite typical and highly illustrative.<sup>16</sup>

Having been expelled from school without any qualification at the age of 15, he “dabbled” in various subjects in the school in Mountjoy in order “to pass the time”. Then, something like transformative change came for him when he spent over three months rehearsing for and performing in a play. It was, he says, “exhilarating, and gave me a massive confidence boost”. He began to take learning more seriously and in time began OU study in Wheatfield. He later obtained a degree – but the crucial breakthrough that moved him forward happened in drama. This was at a time when non-accredited activity like drama and accredited courses like the OU had parity of esteem, each was seen as a possible route by which people could progress.

The overwhelming logic of research, experience and progressive policy point to prison systems offering every possible learning opportunity to all prisoners. Here’s an interesting quotation, I wonder if anyone knows who said it: We should “consider the prisoner as primarily an adult in need of education and only secondarily as a criminal in need of reform. “[Education’s] *aim is to extend to prisoners as individuals every type of educational opportunity that experience or sound reasoning shows may be of benefit or of interest to them*”. They are the words of a Director in the Federal Bureau of Corrections in the USA in 1931<sup>17</sup>. Facilitating interests is crucial. John McVikar, once a heavy-duty gangland leader in England (who became an academic sociologist), said: “ nowadays it is not so much that I find

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<sup>14</sup> Aislinn O’Donnell (2011) *Unfamiliar Voices: A Review of the Legacy of NCAD’s Art Programme in Portlaoise Prison, 1987-2010*, available at <http://www.ncad.ie/school-and-community-outreach-programme/portlaoise-prison-fine-art-programme-1987-2011/unfamiliar-voices-a-review-of-the-legacy-of-ncads-art-programme-in-portlaoise-prison-1987-2010>

<sup>15</sup> Jimmy Boyle (1977) *A Sense of Freedom* (London: Pan Books), pp. 250-1.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Keane (1995) ‘Within the Walls’ in *The Adult Learner*, pp.28-31.

<sup>17</sup> Austin McCormick (1931) *The Education of Adult Prisoners* (New York: The National Society of Penal Information).

crime repugnant as that I am *more interested in other things*<sup>18</sup>. Shouldn't a prison service be encouraging interests, trying to open every possible door, not restricting or closing openings and making things conditional?

## PENAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Good learning can happen in even the most oppressive or restrictive prison, some people can survive the worst conditions – the American experience, among others, shows us that. Yet, such exceptions do not take from the basic fact that more and better learning will thrive in a better penal climate; and the more punitive and the less humane the climate, the less good learning will there be. So, penal climate is important, it affects the extent to which the potential offered by adult education can be optimised.

Some criminologists, like David Garland<sup>19</sup>, tell us that there has been a shift in recent decades from traditional thinking and practice around prisons – which he calls 'penal welfarism' - to "more punitive... more security-minded... more offence-centred, more risk-conscious" ways of doing things (p.175). If you think about it, penal-welfarism is something of a contradiction in terms – it means controlling people on the one hand, and helping them on the other – but that precisely describes the traditional approach. I think it very much describes the thinking at least (if not always the practice) in Ireland up to the mid 1990s. The Whitaker Report of 1985 reflected the essence of this policy when it said there should be "minimum use of custody, minimum use of security and normalisation of prison life", but the thinking can be found in other Department of Justice policy documents, like one in 1997 which said there should be a rebalancing of "the care/custody balance" in the direction of more care. The establishment of three open prisons (now reduced to two), the Training Unit and the Dochas Centre are very much products of this more restrained outlook. The Dochas Centre, planned in the mid-1990s, is probably the last major initiative of this kind in our prison system. By the way, the introduction of education into our prisons in modern times, which commenced in Shanganagh Castle in the late 1960s, is another example of this traditional approach.

Criminologists, no more than economists, don't always agree with each other, and there is a debate about how far there has been a shift towards greater punitiveness and so forth in the Irish penal system. I think there has been penal climate change, but there are also penal

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Stephen Duguid (2000) *Can Prisons Work? The Prisoner as Object and Subject in Modern Corrections* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p.92.

<sup>19</sup> David Garland (2000) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: University Press).

climate change deniers. My view is that there has been some significant negative changes in the past 20 years, most of which have adversely affected the learning opportunities open to those in prison. I would also recognise some partial recovery in recent times, but only very partial when compared to the extent of the regression.

In that 20 year period, the prison population more than doubled (although it has dropped back again, by about one-third of the increase). Prison conditions, never the best in general, have worsened in several important respects: cell-sharing, for example, went from 28% to about 60%, but now eased to just under 50% - but this is still in blatant defiance of the European Prison Rules.<sup>20</sup> Several prisons have become unmanageably large, and education facilities have not kept pace with the addition of big new cell-blocks, so that for many in prison access has been greatly reduced (I'm thinking in particular of Castlerea, Midlands and Wheatfield).

However, in some ways the most significant shift may be found in the way officialdom perceives the men and women held in prison. Gone are the days when even the Department of Justice (in a 1994 report) spoke of those in prison as “valued members of society” (whether they ever treated them as such is another matter, but at least the thought was there and was good). Garland’s description of the shift captures well, I think, what has happened in Ireland: those who commit crime are “less likely to be seen in official discourse as socially-deprived citizens in need of support; they are depicted instead as culpable, undeserving and somewhat dangerous” (p.175). It is important to stress that what is envisaged here is a significant *change of emphasis* in the penal climate, rather than any absolute change. And I would also want to acknowledge that there has been some recovery in the perception of and attitude towards people in prison in very recent years; yet, in my view, there has been an overall regression in that 20 years. The way in which we now treat 18 to 21 year-olds in the prison system (youngsters who in the past were included in the term ‘juvenile’) is one striking example of such regression: we scatter them now around the closed adult prisons with no regard for their level of maturity or vulnerability.<sup>21</sup>

This regressive shift has an effect on what it is that education can achieve. Maybe it is best to develop this point in a more European context, recalling the wide purposes and wide curriculum that the Council of Europe and UN (and indeed the EU) envisage for those in prison. On this theme, Anne Costelloe and I wrote an article titled ‘Prison Education Across

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<sup>20</sup> See Rules 18.1 to 18.10 of the Council of Europe’s *European Prison Rules* (Strasbourg, 2006). Available at [www.coe.int/prisons](http://www.coe.int/prisons)

<sup>21</sup> See Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2016) *Developing Inside: Transforming Prison for Young Adults: A New Approach to the Unique Needs of Young Adults (aged 18-24) in Prison*, available at [www.jcfj.ie](http://www.jcfj.ie)

Europe: Policy, Practice, Politics’ in the *London Review of Education* a couple of years ago.<sup>22</sup> It looked at four ways in which education in prison tends to be reduced or diminished from the wide and deep approach I’ve talked about. These four limitations in the education provided relate to diminutions in the perception of the person in prison, as I’ll briefly try to explain. I think at least aspects of each of these four trends can also be found in Ireland.

Firstly, if we think of the people in prison as *undeserving* (one of the features Garland noted), that for a start makes us dis-inclined to provide too much good education. I’m of the view that such attitudes were in part behind some of the severe cuts to educational provision, and reductions in access, in Irish prisons a few years back. At its crudest, the depiction of men and women in prison as undeserving can be seen in language such as that used by a former Minister of Justice who referred to prisoners in general as “thugs and scumbags”. However, the perception of them being undeserving is there also, perhaps more subtly, in approaches which see education as *a privilege* or reward for compliance, rather than *a right* to which they are entitled as set out by the Council of Europe and the UN.

A second way in which the education offered can be narrowed or hollowed out arises in particular when we only see the person as an ‘offender’. There can be a tendency then to over-focus on programmes that are presumed (and often without too much evidence to back them up) to ‘address offending behaviour’. There is a classic salutary tale from Canada that should warn us of the folly of restricting education in this fashion, when the highly successful Humanities programme run by Simon Fraser University in British Columbia was terminated by the federal authorities, to be replaced by courses deemed to more directly tackle ‘criminogenic’ factors.<sup>23</sup>

A third way in which prison education tends to be diminished and narrowed is when there is an over-focus on, or prioritisation of, training for work. The perception of the person is mainly as someone who must be made to work - faint echoes here maybe of the concept of ‘hard labour’ from olden days; and stronger echoes of some more modern welfare policies, especially in Britain. In England, Lord Filkin, at one time a junior Minister for Offender Education in the Blair government, said: “The sole priority of education is to get offenders

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Costelloe and Kevin Warner (2014), ‘Prison Education Across Europe: Policy, Practice, Politics’, in *London Review of Education*, July 2014. Also available in Eoin Carroll and Kevin Warner (Eds.) (2014) *Re-imagining Imprisonment Across Europe: Effects, Failures and the Future* (Dublin: Liffey Press), and on [www.pepre.ie](http://www.pepre.ie). The sources of quotations given in the following paragraphs can be found in this article.

<sup>23</sup> See Stephen Duguid (1997), ‘Cognitive Dissidents Bite the Dust – the Demise of University Education in Canada’s Prisons’, in *Journal of Correctional Education*, Vol.48, No.2 (June 1997), pp.56-68. See also Stephen Duguid (2000) *Can Prisons Work? The Prisoner as Object and Subject in Modern Corrections* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

into work – anything else is a means, not an end”. With this outlook, important elements of education are ignored or reduced.

I often contrast Lord Filkin’s thinking with that of K. J. Lang, for many years Director General of prisons in Finland. After setting out the severely deprived backgrounds of most of those in his prisons, he said that all the efforts of the prison system “should be analysed as to their ability to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner”. It is hard to think of two more contrasting ways of thinking than those of Lord Filkin and K. J. Lang. Lang’s “support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner” are very much in tune with the adult education approach, and its wide and deep aims, that I spoke of earlier. Yet, it worries me when I see when I see traces of ‘Lord Filkinism’ in our prison system: for example, in differential payments to some of those in work or work-training as compared to those in education (in clear breach of the European Prison Rules); or when I see in the guidelines for Open University selection in Irish prisons that a course applied for must lead to “work-related skills”.

Finally, education in prison tends to be limited when there is an over-emphasis on accredited as opposed to non-accredited courses and activities. The logic of the wide aims set out for prison education geared to developing ‘the whole person’, the logic of Council of Europe and UN policy documents, the logic of research and experience in Ireland and elsewhere is that learning opportunities in prison should be as wide and as open as possible. Very often, the things that ‘work’ for people in prison, that connect with them, that spark a flame and get them (in McVikar’s words) “interested in other things” are those that are not easily measured or accredited. Often, breakthroughs come in areas such as the arts (like the drama Martin Keane spoke of in Mountjoy, or the film-making of Jonathan Cummins in Portlaoise Prison<sup>24</sup>) or in social interaction (one of the big strengths of Home Economics), or in health and well-being activity (say, yoga or Red-Cross projects) or in reflections on oneself, one’s life or society (such as sociology, philosophy, and so on). Or what about the crucial intangible aspects of literacy learning I spoke about early on – growth in self-confidence and overcoming stigma – how do you measure those?

Awareness of the dynamics of learning, especially among adults, underpinned policies which gave ‘equality of esteem’ to accredited and non-accredited courses alike for many decades. It is of concern that accredited courses now seem to be prioritised - and the pressure seems to be coming as much from the world of education as from that of justice. But when I see

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<sup>24</sup> See Aislinn O’Donnell and Jonathan Cummins (2014), ‘Speaking Truth to Power: *Parrhesia*, Critical Inquiry and Education in Prison’ in Carroll and Warner, *op. cit.* See also Aislinn O’Donnell (2011), *op. cit.*

‘accredited education’ mentioned in the current overall strategy for the Irish Prison Service, but no mention of non-accredited education, then that worries me. I worry that the educational effort in prisons, which used to be a bird flying on two wings, is now trying to fly on just one wing. That doesn’t work very well, ask any bird.

## CONCLUSION

These reductions or diminutions to education that I have been speaking of arise largely from particular ideologies or ways of thinking that break with what I would see as the best traditions in both adult education and progressive penal policy - two traditions, by the way, that are remarkable complementary. There are, of course, other barriers to participation in education, often quite literally physical ones. There can be a lack of proper educational facilities, or reduced access to them because of segregation or overcrowding or prison staff shortages.

I’ve tried to get across the full potential education offers people in prison, by referring to research and analysis and the experiences of those held in prison, and by drawing on the perspective one finds in the Council of Europe and elsewhere. Yet, in my view, one of the very best statements as to what prison education is about can be found in a 2007 brochure produced by the European Prison Education Association (EPEA), the mother organisation of the IPEA. Under a heading ‘What we stand for’, it calls on us to look beyond narrow objectives. I can think of no better way to finish than to quote a small part of it:

The EPEA promotes a student-centred approach to prison education, one that is focused on the development of the whole person... this can be best achieved by providing a liberal education within a broader curriculum... 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... 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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> European Prison Education Association (2007), *European Virtual Prison School/ Grundtvig Multilateral Projects* (Drammen, Norway: EPEA).