

'How can we better join up policy and research?'

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Kevin Warner, School of Applied Social Science, University College Dublin,
kevinwarner47@gmail.com

I'm an educationalist who became a sort of criminologist. And I've developed rather strong views on both education and penal policy.

In exploring links between research and policy it is crucial to ask what a particular policy is essentially seeking to do, and what assumptions underpin it. We need, for example, to be clear what we mean by 'education'; the same term can be used for very different kinds of learning. We need to try to understand what really happens when a person is imprisoned; and also how the policies of mass incarceration actually affect our societies.

I want to mention four things I've learned about adult education and prisons, four 'truths' as I see them. They are principles or wisdom that should preferably be incorporated in policy. But, if not, they should be recognised by researchers at least. For me, all four have some personal link with England.

First of all, I worked in Manchester in the late 1970s (ok, I'm rather old) as an adult literacy teacher at the time of a major national adult literacy 'campaign'. What I learned from that work, and indeed from some research I did then, was also what Charnley and Jones eloquently describe in a book that came out at the time called *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy*.¹ The title is significant. What success meant most of all to adult literacy students they interviewed was not the acquisition of technical skills, but radical and positive change in how they saw themselves: growth in self-confidence, overcoming stigma, a more positive sense of self, these really deep and important things.

Then I learned a second set of things from Professor William Forster of the University of Leicester. In research conducted around 1980, he asked Open University students in five

¹ A.H. Charnley and H.A. Jones (1979), *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy* (Cambridge: Huntington Publishers Limited).

prisons what such study meant to them.² These men emphasised, not passing exams or getting degrees, but gains in personality, attitudes, self-respect, having a life-line to the outside world and coping with the ‘mortifications’ (to use Goffman’s word) imposed by the institution. So, just as ‘affective personal achievements’, rather than cognitive achievements or skills, are stressed by adult students in the community, they seem even more important to students in prison. These successes are, of course, more difficult to measure. Much later research into prison education finds similar things – like the work of Anne Costelloe,³ Anita Wilson, Stephen Duguid, the researchers at the University of Bergen and others, and two very fine PhD theses on prison education completed in Ireland in the last year or so, one by Jane Carrigan and one by Geraldine Cleere.⁴

A crucial insight we should take from such studies is that, in evaluation, the critical thing is “to make the important measurable, rather than the measurable important” – a phrase I first learned from Bill Forster. Managerialism usually fails to recognise this, with its obsession with simplistic targets (targets that are often not the most relevant).

Thirdly, here is a copy of the *European Prison Rules*. They were revised last in 2006, but without changing the essentials that can be found in this version from 1987. I focus on a copy from 1987 because it was mainly written by Ken Neale from the Home Office in London (it’s always good to know of Britain doing positive things in Europe!). At their core is an explicit acknowledgement that imprisonment always has “detrimental effects” – the very opposite to the idea that “prison works”, which has come to dominate in the English-speaking world.

In the Council of Europe *Rules*, the recognition that prison almost invariably damages people means that everything possible must be done to reduce the harm of imprisonment – through treating men and women in prison with dignity, trying to make prison as close to normal life on the outside as possible, providing serious levels of purposeful activity for all, facilitating contact with family and the community outside, and so forth. Even with such

² 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.

³ Anne Costelloe (2003), *Third Level Education in Irish Prisons: Who Participates and Why?* Doctoral thesis, Open University.

⁴ 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. Geraldine Cleere (2013), *Prison Education, Social Capital and Desistance: An Exploration of Prisoners’ Experiences in Ireland*. Doctoral thesis, Waterford Institute of Technology.

efforts, prisons will remain destructive places for most, and so should be used as a last resort, so goes the thinking. I wonder if Ken Neale and the *European Prison Rules* have been somewhat forgotten in their country of origin?

Fourthly, a principle in another Council of Europe document states: “Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context”.⁵ This approach to education in prison is the basis on which the Council of Europe asserts that all prisoners have a right to a wide programme of education that is based on adult education thinking and methods. So, we are talking here about far far more than training for jobs or imparting particular skills to targeted groups.

As far as I am concerned, when penal or prison education policies diverge from principles such as those I have outlined, we come up against questionable concepts. So, for example, the idea that education in prison should be judged on whether it can be shown to have reduced re-offending – the core of much American research in particular - is naïve nonsense. For a start, education has larger purposes. Moreover, the idea fails to take into account the destructive reality of imprisonment, and what may be happening to people in prison in the 20, 22 or 23 hours of the day that they are not in education. Prison itself is not neutral, but deeply ‘criminogenic’: the best way to avoid people coming back to prison is not to send them there in the first place.

So, research needs to work from the knowledge of what prison actually is and how it impacts on men and women, rather than what some politicians and some bureaucrats say it is about. And we need to understand how education can be a source of deep transformation in adults and not only a matter of training for work or acquiring certificates.

Research that tunes into these realities is most likely to be fruitful. And one of the best ways we can learn through research is to hear the voice of the person who is or has been in prison (the ‘insider’ research already spoken about), or for the ‘outsider’ (like most of us here, I suppose) to really listen to that voice.

⁵ *Education in Prison*, Recommendation No. (89) 12 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 13 October 1989 and explanatory memorandum (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1990). Available at http://www.epea.org/uploads/media/Education_In_Prison_02.pdf, accessed 19/9/2014.

