

# Against the Narrowing of Perspectives: How Do We See Learning, Prisons and Prisoners?

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## Abstract

*In order to offer some context for themes set for this conference, alternative answers to the three-part question are explored. Ways of seeing learning, prisons and prisoners are each looked at in turn, and in each case an argument against a narrowing of perspective is made. We can view learning in the adult education tradition as geared to "the whole person," or we can resort to deficit models such as seeing primarily the student's weaknesses, or, indeed, seeing a person mainly as an offender. A definition of, and principles for, an adult education approach to literacy are put forward. Then, different models for viewing prisons are set out: The currently-dominant punitive model, which pushes the idea that prison works and denies the detrimental effects of imprisonment; and an alternative based on the philosophy of the Council of Europe and illustrated in the European Prison Rules. The deficit view of learning and the punitive model of prison each rely on a diminished view of the person held in prison, in contrast to, say, Nordic perspectives, which recognise people's humanity and citizenship.*

## Introduction

This paper poses alternatives in relation to the three-part question set out in the title above. In doing so it offers some context for themes set for this conference: Life-long learning, recidivism and rehabilitation, the purposes of prison education, the crucial area of literacy. A sense of what is happening

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internationally, at least in some “Western” countries, is given. Two different penal philosophies or models are juxtaposed, one derived from what many in Europe consider an excellent source of “best practice” on both prisons and prison education – the policy documents of the Council of Europe – and the other from what is clearly the dominant outlook in many of our countries at the moment, what might be termed the “Anglo-American” perspective, which is associated with mass imprisonment (Garland, 2001) and what has been called the new punitiveness (Pratt et al, 2005).

Talk of models in this way involves, of course, generalisation and simplification, but if we keep that qualification in mind it can be helpful, can provide a framework against which to think about things, identify general trends and characteristics, and clarify our own views. The paper will look, in turn, at ideas about learning, about prisons and finally about prisoners. But, it will be argued, how we see prisoners, whether we see people or offenders, is the critical indicator of where we stand on the divide between two worldviews.

### **Learning in an adult education perspective**

In relation to all three topics – what learning is, what prisons should be doing, how we regard the people held in prison – the essential argument here is against a narrowing of perspective. A problem of narrowing in education clearly exists in the wider world beyond prisons, as when people are seen mainly in labour market terms. This reflects a social outlook that can dovetail with the punitive trend in penal policy. For example, in further education in England there is a tendency to limit somewhat the concept of education to skills and that is reflected in the very title of the body now overseeing the education of people in prisons – the “Offenders Learning and Skills Unit.” To explore a different philosophy, the paper will turn to Education in Prison, the set of recommendations and report adopted by the Council of Europe in 1989 (Council of Europe, 1990). Such “European” thinking is then practically illustrated by examining the approach to adult literacy adopted by NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency, in Ireland.

There are two overall complementary themes in this Council of Europe report:

“... Firstly, the education of prisoners must, in its philosophy, methods and content, be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in 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).

The interaction between prisoners and the community will be touched on again later. But, to look at the first theme, and drawing on what is seen as a characteristic of adult education generally, a key recommendation of this report is that "Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context" (p. 8).

One implication of such a wide concept of education (p.13) is that the curriculum offered should be very broad-ranging; as well as the regular classroom subjects and vocational education, creative and cultural activities, physical education and sports, social education and library facilities are seen as essential segments (p.7). A recent report on prison education in Nordic countries similarly asserts that education and training should be broadly defined (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005, p.15). A rationale for the wide concept of education promoted in Irish prisons is also available (Warner, 2002a).

There was a time, in Europe at least, when such thinking was almost taken for granted. Looking at North America and elsewhere in recent decades, however, these views are to a large extent out of fashion. A fascinating story in this regard is that told by Stephen Duguid (2000) as to how the clearly-successful Humanities Programme run by Simon Fraser University in British Columbia prisons was discarded in 1993 by the Correctional Service of Canada on the grounds that it did not directly address criminogenic factors. Ironically, subsequent research (surprisingly funded by the CSC) made very clear that the humanities courses, aside from other benefits, actually beat those that attempted to directly address offending behaviour even at their own game: Students who took the Simon Fraser arts, social science and similar courses achieved far greater results in relation to staying out of prison than the CSC's own recidivism prediction devices would have suggested.

The point here is not to disparage those educational efforts in prisons that seek to help people directly address their problems in areas like substance-abuse, anger-management, thinking-skills, preparing for release or otherwise getting their lives together in any way. But it is to question an over-reliance on such courses. Again, it is the narrowing of focus that is the problem and an Irish colleague and I have written about that elsewhere (Costelloe and Warner, 2006). European Directors and Co-ordinators of Prison Education, meeting in Malta in 2000 to re-evaluate the Council of Europe report ten years on, took the view that such courses be offered in addition to the wide curriculum set out

a decade earlier, but they criticised the 'displacement' of more general education by such courses (Warner, 2003, pp. 9-10).

The crux of the issue is what we see as the purposes of prison education (also flagged as a theme of this conference). In many settings nowadays the simplistic assumption is made (though probably more by people outside education than within) that the sole or over-riding purpose of prison education is rehabilitation or, as the title of this conference might imply, addressing recidivism. There are two major problems with this view. The first is that it is very unrealistic, especially in the context of a pattern of much greater and deeper imprisonment in most Western countries. Even in the best of scenarios, education can only be a small part of the totality of impact of the prison on a person incarcerated. What else may be going on in a prison that works against any positives education can provide? The presumption seems to be made that we can measure the impact of programmes because the rest of the prison regime is neutral in its effects. But such a presumption seems naïve in the extreme, for it is clear that prison, far from being neutral, is generally in itself criminogenic – by the very act of imprisoning someone you add to the chances that he or she will commit further crime. Further, as is suggested elsewhere, there may be other even more negative counter-influences associated with the prison, such as:

- abuse by other prisoners
  - humiliation by staff
  - inhumane conditions
  - further alienation from society
  - barriers to work, housing and other forms of integration, upon release.
- (Warner, 2000b).

How can we judge education by recidivism rates when even some of these factors are at work? Even in Nordic countries, where the prison systems are among the best, they fully and explicitly recognise the detrimental effects of imprisonment. Why can we not do so in prison systems that fall well short of their standards? The negative effects of prisons will be returned to again.

The second problem with an over-focus on rehabilitation is, once again, a narrowing of perspective. The approach discards other crucial purposes of education in a prison context. Once more the Council of Europe report is helpful here, where it sets out three main functions for prison education:

"Firstly, prison is by 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 redressed. A third argument that may be put forward is the rehabilitative one: education has the capacity to encourage and help those who try to turn away from crime" (p. 15).

The first of these, the normalising function, recognises that prisons, by their nature, damage people; education can help in the reduction of that damage, can help prisoners "cope with their sentences" – a phrase that is listed as the first aim of prison education in the strategy statement for prison education in Ireland (Prison Education Service, 2003). The second function is simply the lifelong learning view, the idea that education has something to offer everyone, whether in prison or outside, and especially those who have had limited opportunities before. It is questionable penal policy, and dubious education policy, to ignore or downplay these other roles for prison education, which is what happens when the focus is narrowed too much to the rehabilitative role.

### **Adult Literacy**

Good adult education (or life-long learning) in the community also maintains a wide, and deep, perspective. Inez Bailey (2004) notes the role given to adult education in Irish society:

"... 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 U.K. and U.S. policy in this area" (p.198).

While acknowledging the possible over-simplification of such a description, it is useful to help us ask whether the education we offer is primarily for

“workforce development” or has the larger goal of “personal development”

Exploring adult literacy may make this issue a little more concrete. The definition used in Ireland, as set out in NALA's Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (Derbyshire et al, 2005), states:

“Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

Good practice in adult literacy starts with the needs and interests of individuals. It is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills” (p. 3).

The philosophy underpinning this way of thinking about literacy is also set out:

“Adult basic education in Ireland is based on a belief that effective learning builds on the wealth of life-experience which adults bring to their work on literacy development.

At the heart of this approach is the understanding that ‘A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker’”(Frost and Hoy, 1985). Adult learners bring to the process of learning a knowledge and understanding of themselves, their community and the wider society. They wish to engage with their teachers as equals and support each other as fellow learners....

The work and writing of a number of key thinkers have informed this approach, in particular Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and Jack Mezirow” (p. 9)”

Such a concept of literacy has implications for the method of working. Teachers, says Bailey,

“... discourage the deficit model – identifying a learner’s weaknesses in order to develop an individualised learning – as it often reinforces the feeling of failure experienced by learners when they attended school. Instead, practitioners are trained to identify both strengths and weaknesses and to develop programmes that build on the individual’s strengths while addressing their literacy problem” (p. 211).

The principles of good adult literacy work are agreed by members of NALA as follows:

“Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.

Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Learners have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wish to learn.

Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work.

Learners’ knowledge and skills are vital to the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Learners should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision. Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly” (p.4)”

Others may use different terms to those used by NALA, but the crucial issue is whether literacy (and other) teaching is a wide and deep process in the manner outlined here – whether there are major elements of personal development, of raising of awareness, of engagement with the student’s own life, language and culture, and whether the student has a major say in what is studied, how it is studied and how it is evaluated. On the other hand, approaches to literacy provision that are largely confined to the functional and the technical, or that follow pre-set programmes inflexibly, or that concentrate on weaknesses rather than strengths, or are so unappealing that they must be made mandatory to get students to attend, represent far too narrow and diminished a concept of literacy.

So, we need to ask ourselves whether we pursue a deficit model in relation to literacy or other life-long learning, or the learner-centred, even learner-directed (p.11), approach outlined here. And, if the quality of work outlined above is deemed appropriate outside the prison, why should the members of our communities who are in prison be offered anything less?

### **Prisons**

The second concept to be examined via alternative models is the prison itself. It is difficult to find a better statement of what prisons should be doing than that set out in the European Prison Rules (EPR), a range of standards and principles

agreed by European countries in 1987 through the Council of Europe [See Note 1 below], and in particular Rules 64 and 65 which state:

64. Imprisonment is by the deprivation of liberty a punishment in itself. The conditions of imprisonment and the prison regimes shall not, therefore, except as incidental to justifiable segregation or the maintenance of discipline, aggravate the suffering inherent in this.
65. Every effort shall be made to ensure that the regimes of the institutions are designed and managed so as:
  - (a) to ensure that the conditions of life are compatible with human dignity and acceptable standards in the community;
  - (b) to minimise the detrimental effects of imprisonment and the differences between prison life and life at liberty which tend to diminish the self-respect or sense of personal responsibility of prisoners;
  - (c) to sustain and strengthen those links with relatives and the outside community that will promote the best interests of prisoners and their families;
  - (d) to provide opportunities for prisoners to develop skills and aptitudes that will improve their prospects of successful resettlement after release.'

Central to this thinking is the presumption, once again, that imprisonment greatly damages people: Suffering is inherent in the deprivation of liberty; the detrimental effects of imprisonment are presumed to occur, especially through a loss of self-respect or sense of personal responsibility due to incarceration. It is from this awareness that the idea that prison should be a last resort, and the Scandinavian idea that there should be the least possible intervention in people's lives, derive. Even the pithy statement by a British Home Secretary, David Waddington, that "prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse" might be seen to hold this understanding of prison (Lewis, 1997, p.109). Rule 64 essentially implies "don't use prison unless you really have to, and if you do, try to let it restrict people as little as possible." Rule 65 outlines what prisons should try to do if people have to be sent there.

Note that the first three of the four objectives set for regimes in Rule 65 might all be seen as defensive, focused in various ways on minimising the negative effects of imprisonment. Imprisonment is, in this outlook, something



akin to surgery – it is necessary at times but, because of its destructive side-effects, it should be used only where necessary and then its negative impact should be modified as much as possible.

The problem with much current thinking about prisons, especially by those advocating its increased use and asserting that ‘prison works’, is that this detrimental nature of the prison is denied. However, Danish, Finnish and Swedish policy documents on prisons do recognise the negative reality. In Denmark, a key Principle involves ‘protecting the inmate from aggression or damaging influences’ (Ministry of Justice, Denmark, 1994, p.13). In Finland, the ‘Principles of Enforcement of Prison Sentences,’ echoing the EPR, state:

“The prison sentence shall be enforced so that the punishment will involve only deprivation of liberty. The harmful effects caused by the loss of liberty shall, as far as possible, be mitigated” (Ministry of Justice, Finland, 1994, 1.4).

In Sweden, reference to ‘the detrimental consequences of deprivation of liberty’ is almost a constant theme from the Prison Treatment Act of 1974 to present-day policy statements. A 1996 official Swedish policy document, *The Way Back*, baldly states:

“The modern Swedish view is that, preferably, people ought not to be locked up. To deal with offenders by keeping them in the community is considered the best way of getting them to lead crime-free lives” (Kriminalvårdsstyrelsen, 1996, p.3).

As recently as 2002, a publication of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service continues to assert this last-resort principle:

“The basic approach of Swedish criminal policy is that sanctions involving deprivation of liberty should be avoided whenever possible, since such sanctions do not as a rule improve the individuals chances of re-adapting to a life of freedom. Furthermore, non-institutional care is both a more humane and cheaper form of care than care in prison” (Kriminalvården, 2002, p.15).

Such policy is principled, balanced and realistic. But it goes against the grain of much current penal policy elsewhere. The tendency is to deny or downplay aspects (a), (b) and (c) in the roles set for prisons in Rule 65 and, even

in regard to (d), the wider concept of resettlement is often now displaced by a more limited focus on rehabilitation. Rehabilitation tends to narrow attention to addressing offender behaviour and gives less recognition to other matters the term "resettlement" implies, such as housing, the re-establishment of relationships, work and self-esteem – all of which are crucial factors in what happens to the ex-prisoner beyond the prison.

To return to the purposes of prison education for a moment, it is worth noting that, if we see the role of prison widely as including all four aspects identified in Rule 65, then that validates a much fuller role for education with prisoners than a concentration on recidivism. As educators we can surely contribute, for example, to the requirement to treat people with dignity and according to the acceptable standards in the community while they are in prison; to minimising the detrimental effects of imprisonment (as noted earlier); and to sustaining and strengthening links with family and the larger society outside. On that last point, it may be recalled that promoting interaction with the community is one of the twin-themes of the Council of Europe report, *Education in Prison*.

Yet the truth is that, in many countries, this wider perspective as to what prisons should be about – based on realism as to the nature of prisons and on a recognition of the citizenship of the prisoner – is all but abandoned, at least on the political level. A punitive model holds sway, which I have characterised elsewhere as having three key, and interlinked, features:

- (1) negative stereotyping of those held in prison
- (2) vengeful attitudes
- (3) massive increases in the use of incarceration (Warner, 2002b, p. 731).

The scale of imprisonment has been increased to Gulag proportions in the United States, where the number held in custody crossed the two-million mark by the year 2000 (Wacquant, 2005). But the trend is very strong elsewhere too, notably in Britain. Moreover, what Rod Morgan, writing about England, calls the "depth" of imprisonment has also increased. By this he means levels of security, surveillance, and restriction, lack of autonomy, and so on, which clearly undermines all aspects of the regime objectives set out in the EPR. Most tellingly, Morgan notes that

"minimising the risk of breaches of security appears currently to be given such primacy that preventing crime – the object which Woolf [in the official

report on prison disturbances in April 1990] insisted should be common to all criminal justice agencies, and which in a prison context necessarily involves investment of trust and the taking of some risk – seems in many respects to have been lost sight of” (Morgan, 1997, p. 1185).

So, to the charge made earlier of denial about the real and destructive nature of imprisonment, one can now accuse the punitive model of contradiction in claiming that far heavier security supports a reduction in crime. Yet the apologists for the prison works approach continue to maintain, at least in their official presentations, an intense focus on rehabilitation and on reducing recidivism. Why is this so? It may come down to how those men and women we lock up in prison are perceived. It suits the political mood to negatively stereotype them, to depict them as more violent and intractable than they are – and especially as “other” than the rest of us. We are also invited to see them one-dimensionally, only as offenders, and the over-focus on rehabilitation facilitates this narrow perspective. Other aspects of their lives and personalities, their complexities, their problems and their qualities (aspects of the whole person, in other words) are screened out. Dwelling only or mainly on the offence of the offender facilitates the ignoring of other aspects of the individual and takes attention away from how the prison itself may be criminogenic, may itself be a source of crime. How we see the prisoner is the final element to be examined.

### **The Person Held in Prison**

We return to Ireland for an example of a significant shift in an official view of the men and women held in prison, a change that comes in the wake of the “new punitiveness.” That new political mood came a little later to Ireland than to the U.S. or Britain, so that in 1994 a major policy statement issued by the Department of Justice, *The Management of Offenders*, can still be seen as very much in tune with the EPR philosophy. There are several references in that Irish document to prisoners as members of the community,” and a key statement that “those in prison remain valued members of society” (p.22). Essentially, this is an assertion of the humanity and citizenship of those in custody, and a view that sees them as part of the rest of us, not as excluded or “other.”

Yet, by 2001, some of this sense of inclusion is gone. A Mission Statement published then says of the role of the Irish Prison Service that it “encourages and supports prisoners in their endeavouring to live law abiding and purposeful

lives as valued members of society" (Irish Prison Service, 2001, frontpiece). We now envisage prisoners endeavouring to become valued members of society. So, by implication, we are not now required, as before, to value them as part of ourselves, regardless of their actions, attitudes or endeavours. The official view of them has moved from unqualified inclusiveness to one that is very qualified indeed. It appears that focusing on law-breaking excuses us, once again, from acknowledging people's rights and essential humanity. And the critical problem with this is, once more, not the attempt to address the law-breaking as such, but the over-focusing on this aspect to the exclusion of others, i.e. the narrowing of perspective.

However, while there has in this way been some weakening in Ireland in the official view of the prisoner, some of the thinking of the EPR does remain in Irish policy. As in many other places, we find mixed models in policy and practice. Only some of the Nordic countries seem to retain clear-cut and full awareness of prisoners as people, to afford them sufficient respect and recognise their worth as individuals and as members of the larger community (attitudes to prisoners not unlike the NALA view of learners that was outlined earlier). One crucial litmus test as to whether we see prisoners inclusively or not is whether prisoners can vote in elections: they may not do so in Ireland or Britain, they invariably can in Nordic countries – as they can, indeed, in much of the rest of Europe, east and west [See Note 2 below].

So, it seems that at the heart of both a good approach to adult education and good penal policy is recognition of people's full humanity, their individuality, autonomy and potential, and acceptance of them as full members of the larger society. Good education and good penal policies thus complement each other, as they do in the documents of the Council of Europe. Conversely, there is an obvious tie-in between penal policies that follow the punitive model and the narrower versions of prison or correctional education, which pander to the negative stereotyping of prisoners by limiting the focus to offending behaviour, or which in other ways offer an education service that is less than fully respectful of the whole person. Whether we are dealing with a prisoner in the overall context of the prison, or a learner who happens to be in prison, deficit models – which in each case over-concentrate on what is deemed to be wrong or missing – are to be avoided as far as possible in favour of broader approaches to imprisonment and to education that recognises the common humanity of our fellow-citizens in prison.

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### Endnotes

- Note 1: In January 2006, the Council of Europe adopted revised European Prison Rules, which were meant to enhance the 1987 rules. The updated rules are generally in tune with the earlier version, although there are some shifts in emphasis. The idea that prison should be used 'as a last resort' is now emphasised, but reference to 'the detrimental effects of imprisonment' is no longer explicit, although it could be argued that this concept is still implied. Download from [www.pesireland.org/Downloads.htm](http://www.pesireland.org/Downloads.htm)
- Note 2: As this paper is being revised (January 2007), large government advertisements on 'Postal Voting by Prisoners' have appeared in Irish newspapers, proclaiming a new category of postal voter. People in prison may, from February 2007, register as voters in their home areas and vote by post from prison in future elections and referenda. This seems an important step forward for Ireland's mixed penal model.

### Biographical Sketch

**KEVIN WARNER** studied at Cork (BA), Liverpool (M.Ed) and the London School of Economics (M.Sc. Econ). He taught in schools and adult education in Ireland and England and has been Co-ordinator of Prison Education in Ireland since 1979. He chaired the Council of Europe Select Committee that produced *Education in Prison* (1990), was the first Chairperson of the European Prison Education Association (1991-96), a Fulbright Scholar at The Center for the Study of Correctional Education at California State University, San Bernardino (1995), and International Representative on the CEA Board (1997-2001). He is currently engaged in research on how the penal policy of Nordic countries resists the excessive punitiveness found elsewhere.

## HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

### **Ideological Statement of the CEA's Ally in Europe, the EPEA:**

#### **An Exemplary Political Platform**

The Recommendations of the Council of Europe (R[89]), which have been at the center of European Prison Education Association (EPEA) activities, follow:

1. 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;
2. 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;
3. Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context;
4. All those involved in the administration of the prison system and the management of prisons should facilitate and support education as much as possible;
5. 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;
6. Every effort should be made to encourage the prisoner to participate actively in all aspects of education;
7. Development programmes should be provided to ensure that prison educators adopt appropriate adult education methods;
8. Special education should be given to those prisoners with particular difficulties and especially those with reading or writing problems.
9. Vocational education should aim at the wider development of the individual, as well as being sensitive to trends in the labor market;
10. Prisoners should have direct access to a well-stocked library at least once per week;
11. Physical education and sports for prisoners should be emphasised and encouraged;
12. Creative and cultural activities should be given a significant role because these activities have particular potential to enable prisoners to develop and express themselves;
13. Social education should include practical elements that enable the prisoner to manage daily life within the prison, with a view to facilitating the return to society;
14. Wherever possible, prisoners should be allowed to participate in education outside prison;
15. Where education has to take place within the prison, the outside community should be involved as fully as possible;
16. Measures should be taken to enable prisoners to continue their education after release;
17. The funds, equipment and teaching staff needed to enable prisoners to receive appropriate education should be made available. (Nordic Council of Ministers, [2005]. Nordic prison education... Copenhagen, Denmark: Norden. pp. 132-134).

In part as a result of its advocacy of these important principles, the EPEA has become one of the most important correctional education professionalization organizations. Its international conferences are held every other year.

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