

Widening and Deepening the Education We Offer Those in Prison: Reflections from Irish and European Experience

BY KEVIN WARNER

Abstract

Achieving the potential that educational activities offer to prison regimes depends highly on adopting what the Council of Europe report *Education in Prison* (1990) described as "a wide concept of education." By offering a wide variety of "learning opportunities" to prisoners, we can attract a large number of them into education and also better address the needs of "the whole person." Of course, much depends also on the quality of what is provided, here the key factors seem to be using adult education methods and the best educational practices in the community for client groups similar to our prisoners. This paper will describe the programs and the specific objectives and organizational arrangements that underpin those programs.

Introduction

Whatever other shortcomings our prison system in Ireland may have (and they are substantial!), we have at least succeeded in winning the voluntary participation of over half of all prisoners (sentenced and remand) in education, and a much higher percentage of long-term prisoners, on the basis of our adult education/wide program approach. Importantly, this approach concurs very closely with the "treatment objectives" of the *European Prison Rules* (Council of Europe, 1987), as seen by analyzing and comparing the objectives of prison education and the EPR. It is also in line with the European Union social policy of counteracting "exclusion," and supports the idea (most strongly held in Nordic countries) that the prisoner is a part of the community.

Such an approach to prison education contrasts, obviously, with other views as to what its role and scope are. For example, in many places (and in North America, in particular) education is given a narrower, criminogenic-focused, task. Elsewhere, education provision may be largely restricted to vocational training and/or literacy teaching, and perhaps just one or two other areas, and so, inevitably, draws fewer prisoners into its classes and activities.

Participation in Irish Prison Education

My starting point is what appear to be high rates of voluntary participation in education among all groups of prisoners in Ireland. Of course, international comparisons of participation rates are difficult to make for a variety of reasons, not least because what is covered by the term "education" varies greatly from country to country. In Ireland, there are separate organizational structures for work and most work-training (which are provided by prison officers), and what we call the Prison Education Service (largely composed of educational agencies from the community, but does involve prison personnel). So, when we in Ireland speak of participation rates in education, we are usually referring to the latter Service and do not include most vocational education in those figures. On the other hand, education participation figures for us do include elements which might not always be counted elsewhere,

such as *structured* physical education, artistic activities, social and health education courses and pre-release courses.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, we can look at participation in education in prisons in Ireland. Participation is defined as taking part in at least one formally organized class once per week, but it is important to note that most participants join in education on a daily basis. Indeed, for most who are counted as participants, education is their main activity within prison. Surveys which are conducted twice yearly have consistently shown for more than a decade that over 50% of all prisoners (remand and sentenced) participate in education. (Ireland has about 3,200 people in custody, about 700 of whom are between 16 and 21 years old.) One of the largest prisons, Mountjoy, has very limited facilities in general, including educational. A new remand prison, Cloverhill, has no classrooms. When these two larger prisons are excluded from calculations, participation in education in the remaining 15 prisons is well over 60%. When we look only at sentenced prisoners, or at medium or long-term prisoners, the figures go higher again. For example, prisons as different as an open center for juvenile males (Shanganagh Castle) and some closed prisons for long-term adult men (Arbour Hill, The Curragh) would all consistently have participation rates of well over 80%.

It is clear that such a high involvement in education by prisoners has many benefits. First of all, it helps to stabilize life for the prisoner, to help him or her ward off the detrimental effects of imprisonment and at least help set the basis for progress in outlook and lifestyle. Such widespread educational activity is also helpful in terms of improving the atmosphere in prisons (and most dramatically in high-security prisons), although successful education programs in prisons require organizational back-up and a degree of flexibility from prison management (Wynne, 2001).

There are probably many reasons for this high degree of participation in education by Irish prisoners. The flexibility and support of prison management, as just mentioned, is clearly important. So, too, is Ireland's general adherence, up to now, to the prescription in the *European Prison Rules* (Rule 78) that there should be

equality, in terms of status and remuneration, between education and work as regime activities. Of great importance, also, has been the fact that the Department of Education in Ireland has consistently provided significant allocations of teachers (215 whole-time equivalents in 2001/02) for work in prisons. Just as vital is the fact that these teachers are employed by educational authorities in the wider community and bring with them a sense of proper educational standards. (I believe there is also close integration between these teachers and others who work in prisons—this cooperation being facilitated by the fact that the teachers volunteer and are specially recruited for prison work and are given considerable training in this task.)

These resource and structural matters would not be sufficient without getting the “philosophy” right. The approach to prison education in Ireland has, at least since the early 1980’s, been very explicitly one of adult education. In this, the way prison education is seen is very much in line with the report *Education in Prison* (1990). What is meant by an “adult education approach” has clearly evolved over the decades, and now includes much more attention to addressing offending behavior, preparing prisoners for release and focusing on addiction issues than previously. The most important feature of adult education is *participation*, that is the student is given a significant say in what is studied, how it will be studied and how it is evaluated. It also means the student is encouraged to bring his or her life-experience into the learning.

Adult education is also characterized by its wide focus on the overall personal development of the student—rather than more narrowly, say, on learning specific knowledge or skills, or passing certain tests or examinations. *Education in Prison* (1990) expressed this perspective by drawing on phrasing used previously by the Council of Europe in relation to adult education in the wider society: “education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context” (1990 Recommendation 3). In seeking to address the needs of “the whole person,” then, there is immediately a requirement to ensure a wide curriculum. Issues and needs arising from crime and imprisonment can widen the program further. On a practical level, if the aim is to attract into education as many participants as possible, then the greater the range of options on offer the greater will be the response. All these factors converge to support the idea that we should take a very broad view to what we allow and promote in prison education. This “wide concept of education,” along with the adult education methodology and other factors described above, is seen as crucial to the achievement of high voluntary participation in education in Irish prisons. I would like to look in more detail at what this means in practice.

The “Wide Concept of Education”

The wide-ranging perspective as to what should be included in prison education is evident in Recommendation 1 of the Council of Europe Report, *Education in Prison*:

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. (1990)

That is, indeed, a large requirement, bearing in mind that “all prisoners,” or at least all those who are sentenced, must be offered this range of options. Each of these headings merits a chapter subsequently in the report and it is clear there that even *within* each of the separate headings of “physical education,” “social education,” “creative activities,” etc., quite a range should be offered.

For example, within *physical education*, we have made huge efforts in Irish prisons in recent years (only partly successful) to move beyond body-building, and the “macho” culture associated with that, to cover the other components of physical fitness also: cardio-vascular endurance, flexibility, body-composition. Moreover, we are not just trying to develop fitness, but to deepen the activity of physical education by developing skills, knowledge and attitudes also (Physical Education Development Group, 2000). To take another learning opportunity, that of *literacy teaching*, teachers in our prisons try to keep the wider perspective that is very much a part of policy and practice for adult literacy work in the community at large. This involves teaching students not just how to read, but to express themselves, in the words they are familiar with, in writing also; and to address, not just technical literacy difficulties, but also issues of self-confidence and self-image, which are often damaged for those who have literacy difficulties (Kett, 2001). A subject like *cooking* (taught in almost all our prisons) can offer skills for living; can offer self-confidence; can promote teamwork; can counteract the damaging social effects of eating alone in cells (the norm in Irish prisons); can be a vehicle for exploring health, nutrition, parenting or gender issues; can be a means to achieve qualifications; or can prepare students for vocational training in catering.

Writing in the *Penological Information Bulletin* of the Council of Europe (1998), I set out a rationale for such a wide curriculum in terms of the many different educational needs that might need to be addressed. The educational needs of prisoners can be categorized in many different ways, but one grouping could be as follows:

1. Qualifications:
 - Vocational
 - Secondary
 - Other certification
2. Living Needs:
 - Health Education (e.g. AIDS)
 - Relationships
 - Expression (as through the Arts)
 - Leisure (e.g. Sport)
3. Needs Arising from Imprisonment:
 - Release of tension
 - Keeping the mind active
 - Maintaining family contact
 - Community contact (e.g. visiting speakers or performers)
 - Self-worth

Clearly, the education offered in some prison systems does not address very many of these needs. Too often,

educational provision is confined to offering qualifications, at times even confined to vocational qualifications. In particular, those elements grouped under "Living Needs" frequently go unmet—and these are often the very things that go deepest in the individual and can set positive development in motion.

Appendix I offers three examples, from quite different prisons, of the kinds of programs we offer in Prison Education Units in Ireland. A "Directory of Prison Education" is available which lists the programs in all but one of our 17 prisons. To try to give a sense of the style of teaching that is offered, Appendix II describes three particular courses or projects.

Objectives for Prison Education

I listed earlier a number of factors which contribute to relatively high participation in education in nearly all our prisons in Ireland. I have, however, dwelt on one critical factor above others: the wide program of education offered to prisons in the hope of meeting as many of the needs and interests of prisoners as possible. Clearly, offering as much choice as possible will help to "pull in the numbers," but is there more to the rationale for such a wide curriculum? We see the extensive range of courses and activities as also justified in terms of educational objectives, and, moreover, in terms of the "treatment objectives" advocated in the *European Prison Rules*. It is to these policy underpinnings that I now turn.

First, the official objectives of the Prison Education Service in Ireland, objectives which have evolved over the years through consultation with the education partners and which are set out in the Department of Justice's 1994 policy document, *The Management of Offenders*. Prison education aims

To provide a high quality, broadly based and flexible programme of education to meet the needs of those under sentence through helping them

- (i) To cope with their sentences,
- (ii) To achieve personal development,
- (iii) To prepare for life after release,
- (iv) To establish the appetite and capacity for further education after release.

Official aims and objectives invariably tend to be lofty and ambitious and, just as invariably, the reality tends to fall somewhat short of the high aspirations. However, they are important in offering a sense of direction and in validating good practice on the ground. Such objectives are important in freeing education staff to take initiatives of many different kinds and in affirming the wide and varied program they offer. While they are very general, some nuances in these objectives may be noted.

The Prison Education Service sets out as its first task—helping prisoners "to cope with their sentences"—something that would not be an educational objective on the outside, and which may not always be explicitly stated (although it can be implicit) in relation to penal policy generally. What this objective recognizes is the reality that prison tends to damage people and efforts need to be made (by all disciplines, presumably) to minimize the damage. It

should be obvious that the person overwhelmed by prison will be unlikely to progress in any way. Thus, a prisoner might speak of his need to "keep my head together," of "not cracking up," or getting "cooler" when engaged in something like art. Often, education, like other services, may be able to do no more than help a prisoner "keep his head above water," especially in a short-term situation, but this may be no small feat. It is important to recognize this reality and to support any work within regimes that can help "minimize the detrimental effects of imprisonment" (Council of Europe, 1987, Rule 65). Education contributes to this, and to enabling prisoners "cope with their sentences," in particular in areas like the arts, physical education, aerobics, yoga, and many "normalizing" activities from computers to cooking, but also through virtually all other subjects, courses and activities.

Another point is that the second objective—helping prisoners "achieve personal development"—is a very wide, and possibly a very deep, one. It is certainly more far-ranging than the objectives often set for education in the community, and indeed often set for penal policy in general. But the phrase, which is taken from a government report on our prisons in the mid-80s (The "Whitaker Report"), does encapsulate the well-recognized orientation of *adult* education in general, with its focus on "the whole person," and supports the wide-ranging curriculum.

The third and fourth objectives listed above look to the time beyond the prison, in tune with Council of Europe and other penal perspectives, but there is a specific education dimension to this in seeking to have educators "establish the appetite and capacity for further education after release." The imperative to help prisoners prepare for, and successfully manage, their lives after release implies that educators must work in close cohesion with other disciplines who also should have this focus.

The "Treatment Objectives" of the Council of Europe

We have seen that giving educational activities a major role within regimes, and allowing education to be a very wide-ranging and varied phenomenon, is strongly supported by Council of Europe recommendations, as expressed in the 1990 report, *Education in Prison*. Even more importantly, the main "policy document" of the Council of Europe on prisons in general, the *European Prison Rules*, concurs fully with this perspective, as can be seen if we look at the "treatment objectives" set out in these Rules.

There is a clear assumption in the *European Prison Rules* (EPR) that, in general, prison damages people and should be used as a last resort, and, where used, *the "suffering inherent" in imprisonment should be minimized*. (EPR, 1987). Fulkens (1988) says of the EPR that, following the revision of 1987, they now

explain, as it were: if you go on using imprisonment you have at least to try hard to make it as harmless and as positive as possible for the prisoners. Therefore: listen to them, take account of their opinions, make them co-operate and assume responsibilities; on the other hand, do not be over-ambitious as to what can be achieved

or what can be promised, but offer prisoners consequently realistic and attainable opportunities, chances, activities and help which meet their needs and stimulate their interests.

This brings out some crucial characteristics of the EPR philosophy which can be seen more fully in the Rules quoted below. One is the idea that there may be some scope in prisons to *offer prisoners opportunities to develop themselves* (although this is not to deny “the detrimental effects of imprisonment,” not should the scope for such positive action be exaggerated—the overriding fact is that prison is usually a destructive process). Another feature of the EPR is the advocacy of serious *participation by the prisoner based on respect for his or her human dignity*. Tulkens says,

What comes to the fore in particular is that prisoners should be listened to and their agreement or willingness should be sought in connection with decisions. This means... the prisoner should no longer be seen as an object of treatment but as a responsible subject.

These core features of the EPR may be found in Rules 3, 64 and 65. Rule 3 states:

The purposes of the treatment of persons in custody shall be such as to sustain their health and self-respect and, so far as the length of sentence permits, to develop their sense of responsibility and encourage those attitudes and skills that will assist them to return to society with the best chance of leading law-abiding and self-supporting lives after their release.

The idea of “treatment” here is clearly quite different from the narrower medical usage of their term. It has both defensive and more positive qualities; it recognizes that the negative psychological, social and physical effects of imprisonment must be held in check as much as possible, while whatever openings there may be for personal development must be taken.

To summarize, then, the three key features of the *European Prison Rules* perspective that I have highlighted all open the way for different aspects of education:

1. prisons tend to damage people, and this damage must be minimized,
2. prisons should offer opportunities to prisoners to develop themselves,
3. “personal responsibility” and active participation should be fostered among prisoners with a view to their “resettlement” in “self-supporting lives.”

Taken together, these different roles lend backing to the idea of making wide-ranging education, of the kind we at least attempt in Ireland, available to prisoners. In particular, the methodology of adult education which offers choice and participation in decision-making to the student, is exactly what is needed to promote the habit of personal responsibility. It may also be noted that these requirements of the regime correspond very closely with the objectives of prison education in Ireland, set out earlier.

The *European Prison Rules* follow through on this view of regimes in relation to education. Rule 77 says: “A comprehensive education programme should be ar-

ranged in every institution to provide opportunities for all prisoners to pursue at least some of their individual needs and aspirations.” And, as noted earlier, Rule 78 grants education “the same status and basic remuneration within the regime as work.”

Interaction With the Community

It is clear from the *European Prison Rules* that prisoners are seen as members of society, or of the community at large, even if they are temporarily somewhat cut off from it. This is clear from the strong concentration on “resettlement” urged on regimes.

This outlook, then, lends support to one of the two major themes in the other Council of Europe document, *Education in Prison*, that “education (in prison) should be constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside community” (P.1.5). That “interaction” is suggested in many ways throughout the report: teams, performers, speakers, groups coming into the prison as part of educational activity; prisoners going out, whenever possible, as part of an education or training program. Moreover, it is also continually made clear in this report that the norm outside is the least that can be expected inside in relation to provision, standards of teaching, library service, etc. Such community interaction adds a further dimension to the role of education in prisons.

We find in Ireland that education plays a vital role in promoting, for the prisoner, a sense of belonging to the wider community. Given that alienation from society is generally such a key element in criminality, this is an important role. It is helpful that most of those who provide education in our prisons (teachers, librarians, artists, etc.) are employed by outside bodies. More important is the sense they hopefully convey of providing a service that is the same, or close to the same, as is provided in the world outside. This contributes greatly to the effort toward “normalization” which William Rentzmann (1996) describes as one of the crucial features of a good prison regime.

Much of this might seem to those of us in Irish prison education so obvious as not to merit mention, were it not for some very contrary attitudes and policies gaining credence in recent years. Most noticeably in the United States, but also to a lesser extent in Britain and Ireland, it is often evident now that prisoners are *not* always regarded as members of the community; they are sometimes seen as other than us, and are often virtually “banished” in policy and practice. These views are reinforced by very negative stereotyping of prisoners, and by language and commentaries that engender fear and promote attitudes of revenge. Clearly, such attitudes run completely counter to the philosophy of the *European Prison Rules*.

The choice in policy and practice is between attitudes of “inclusion” and “exclusion,” to use terminology which is very current in the European Union. The EU expends a great deal of money and effort in attempts to reduce the “exclusion” of marginalized groups from society, including funds toward integrating ex-prisoners.

Nordic countries, in particular, hold strongest to the idea that the prisoner is still a citizen, still a member of the community, and we have much to learn from them about following the implications of that view into practice in penal institutions (Svensson, 1996). Whatever the context we are in, education has the capacity to reduce alienation and promote normalization and inclusion among those held in prisons.

Appendix I

Example 1:

Fort Mitchel (Closed prison mostly for male juveniles, 16 to 21 years old, but holding about 10% over 21. Population: 100):

- Computers
- Health Education
- Physical Education
- Creative Writing
- Art, Photography, Ceramics
- English, History, Geography
- Home Economics, Crafts, Parenting
- Literacy, Basic Education
- Woodworking, Woodturning
- Alcohol and Drug Awareness
- Addiction Counselling
- Pre-Release Course
- Post-Release Support Unit for Juveniles
- Mathematics
- Music
- Horticulture
- Yoga

Example 2:

Portlaoise Prison (Maximum security prison for adult males, including paramilitary prisoners and leading "gangland" prisoners. Population: 170):

- Yoga
- Computers
- Music
- History
- Physical Education
- Signwriting, Cartooning
- Photography
- Environmental Studies
- Educational Guidance
- Literacy, Basic Education
- Mathematics, Basic Numeracy
- English, Creative Writing
- Home Economics, Home Crafts
- Technical Drawing, Engineering Theory
- European Languages: German, French, Spanish, Irish
- Pre-Release Course
- University Courses: Open University
National College of Art & Design
- Business Studies
- Sociology
- Geography
- Art
- Drama, Speech
- Film Production
- Chi-Kung

Example 3:

Wheatfield Prison (Medium security for adult males, holding two separated groups of about equal size, one of which consists of sex offenders and other prisoners on "protection." Population: 360):

- Art, Photography
- Literacy, Basic Education
- English
- Social Studies, Sociology
- Music
- History
- Drama
- Geography

- Physical Education
- Irish
- Mathematics
- Open Learning Center
- Metalcraft, Design, Technology
- Information Technology, Computers
- Home Economics, Health Education
- Open University
- Pre-Release Work
- Post-Release Support Unit
- Computers
- English
- Horticulture
- Science

Appendix II

The *Dillon's Cross Project*, in Cork City, offers pre- and post-release support for prisoners in Cork Prison, but a special feature is that members of the prisoner's family—usually a wife or partner—also follow a similar course in an outside community venue. The course covers areas such as Home Management, Jobskills, Health and Personal Development and runs for 14 weeks. Prisoners will usually do most of the course within prison but then complete the later part of the course, along with their partners, on the outside. We feel this course, and the way it is organized, is especially helpful in enabling prisoners make the transition back into life on the outside.

The "Moving On" course is run at Shanganagh Castle, an open place of detention for 16 to 21 year old young men on the outskirts of Dublin, and this course is fairly typical of pre-release courses run in our prisons. Because stays in this center can be very short-term and release dates are somewhat unpredictable, it is felt that this pre-release course is best run very intensively over a few days. It is a multi-disciplinary course and grew out of meetings between teaching, psychology, probation and chaplaincy services to examine ways of working together more effectively. Essentially, the course aims at helping the young offenders examine the issue of staying out of trouble and "moving on" with their lives after release from prison. They do this through group exercises, discussion and art activities. Usually, ten are chosen from applicants for this course, on the basis of their motivation to remain crime free on release from prison.

The "Moving On" course is offered several times a year. A typical course will offer at least a day on each of the following topics: Preparing to work as a group, Finding work, Leisure time, Training and education, Parenting, Addiction and pregnancy and birth, Lifestyles.

A third course concerns long-term adult men at Portlaoise Prison, our highest security prison. There, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), a university-level college, has run an advanced art course since the mid-80s. It covers painting, drawing, some three-dimensional work and film-making. The students are generally paramilitary prisoners or others convicted of very serious crimes. The focus of much of the art activity is an annual exhibition of work by the students on this course, either in the college in Dublin or in one of the major galleries in Dublin. Art, in this context, can often be a vehicle by which the men explore their own lives and find new dimensions to themselves. Over the years, the course has facilitated great change and development. Several of the prisoners who took

this course have gone on, after prison, to study at art college, or to work in the art field and exhibit to critical acclaim. Others have become less absorbed in art after release but yet may have been profoundly influenced by the course.

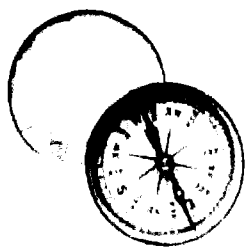
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Biographical Sketch

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