

## The learning and transformative potential of the social library in prison

### Il potenziale formativo e trasformativo della biblioteca sociale in carcere

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#### Abstract

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This article presents the outcomes of a doctoral research focused on the prison library service, which is recognized as essential within prison context to support the growth of the prisoners in a holistic sense. Within the theoretical-scientific framework of experiential learning, transformative learning, adult learning in prison and prison library, the library service was re-interpreted and organized, starting from the social library model, as a learning device capable of promoting self-directed-learning processes from a personal and organizational transformative perspective.

**Keywords:** adult education in prison; informal education; prison libraries; learning device.

#### Sintesi

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Il contributo presenta gli esiti di una ricerca dottorale in cui l'attenzione si è focalizzata sul servizio bibliotecario penitenziario, riconosciuto come essenziale all'interno dei contesti penitenziari per supportare la crescita in senso olistico dei ristretti. All'interno del framework teorico-scientifico dell'*experiential learning*, del *transformative learning*, dell'*adult learning in prison* e della *prison library*, il servizio bibliotecario è stato re-interpretato e organizzato, a partire dal modello di biblioteca sociale, come un dispositivo formativo in grado di promuovere processi di auto-apprendimento in ottica trasformativa sia personale che dell'intera organizzazione penitenziaria.

**Keywords:** educazione degli adulti in carcere; educazione informale; biblioteche penitenziarie; dispositivo formativo.

## 1. The Educational Dimension in Penitentiary Institutions

The importance of supporting and implementing the educational dimension in prison context has been made explicit since 1948 with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent legislation and policy texts (Council of Europe, 1990; 2004; 2011; EPEA, 2015; Unesco, 2000; 2015; Unodc, 2015). In the recent book “Education in Prison. A literature review” by Unesco Institute for lifelong learning (UIL, 2021), building on what has been explicated in the past decades on the education-prison binomial at the international level, the need is made explicit to adopt an integrated approach between the formal and informal educational dimensions, thus structuring Prison Institutions capable of supporting and promoting positive processes of interaction, socialization and learning, anchoring themselves in values of openness, democracy and inclusiveness. In fact, restricted people, from the moment they first set foot in the detention facility until the moment they leave, gain experience, (de-)learn and generate new cognitive structures (Mezirow, 1991) by interacting with the *prison community*’ cultural values and (explicit and implicit) rules of the context. The informal and embedded educational dimension, found manifestly or latently throughout the penitentiary context, whether in daily actions or during activities, turns out to be the predominant one during the detention period, as well as essential and functional for the acquisition of new knowledge, rules and skills. Consequently, in order to support the conscious management of the learning processes of the restricted people, each space/moment requires the adoption of a specific educational approach to be followed.

Referring to the principle of the situated approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the cultural critical approach (Foley, 1999), it would appear to be crucial and necessary to create the conditions within prison institutions for restricted people to be effectively granted the opportunity to play an active role and thus be able to become aware of new possibilities, new behavioral patterns, and develop the skills necessary to manage their personal growth processes (Champion & Noble, 2016). The situated approach recognizes that learning is a social phenomenon involving human beings, capable of knowing through participation, experience and taking an active role in the context to which they belong. The second approach instead argues that the most powerful learning occurs when people struggle with the oppression that surrounds them in order to make sense of what is happening to them and to find solutions to that problem.

To try to accomplish what has just been made explicit, the entire penitentiary system must commit to reviewing prison policies as well as the roles and functions of internal actors, investing in the necessary human and material resources, identifying the already in place devices which need to be enhanced and developed, creating a rich and heterogeneous educational offer as well as targeted educational services, and, finally, encouraging a culture within penitentiary institutions that enhances educational processes by putting subjects and their needs at the center (Del Gobbo, 2016; Federighi & Torlone, 2015; Pampaloni, 2023).

## 2. The Challenges of Education in Prison

Although the importance of education within prison settings is recognized for the purpose of reintegration of restricted people into society, thanks to an analysis and interpretation of elements (theoretical and empirical) that emerged during doctoral research, it was possible to outline four main challenges that education within penitentiary institutions faces:

1. the impediments of different nature that do not allow participation of the restricted

- population to structured and formal/ non formal learning opportunities;
2. the structuring of educational offer of any kind;
  3. the evaluation of the impact of educational action on restricted people;
  4. the mismatch between the educational model declared by correctional institutions and the one acted out.

With respect to point one, there can be three types of impediments that limit the participation of restricted peoples in educational activities (Biao, 2018). The first two impediments, situational and institutional, are related to that set of implicit and explicit rules that regulate the access and quality of restricted people's participation in a specific context, experience or opportunity. They are impediments, therefore, beyond the control of the individual and are related to the internal organizational conditions of penitentiary institutions. The third type of impediments, dispositional, are based on personal attitudes or dispositions toward education. The literature (Federighi, 2016; Finaly & Bates, 2018; Warr, 2016) highlights how restricted people are often not inclined to participate in educational activities, both formal and nonformal. Due to prior negative experiences or the complete lack of such experiences, restricted people often find it hard to understand the potential of such activities to modify and/or develop certain aspects of their self. Two additional elements that relate to what has just been explicated are: the subjects' perceived sense of inadequacy, which is created given the low levels of educational attainment and potentially affects restricted people's ability to participate in various educational and cultural activities, and the idea that education is not needed and indeed participating in educational activities can be detrimental to one's reputation within the prison context.

With respect to point two, it is internationally recognized that one of the greatest challenges of education is to structure a broad and heterogeneous offer that corresponds to real needs and interests of restricted people. Instead, often "the process of analysis concerns a general and macro level that is not detailed on individual needs but concerns general aspects referring to the type of inmate population within a given institution" (Basilisco, 2016, p. 122).

An additional challenge is the complexity of evaluating the effectiveness of the implemented educational actions (point three). Davis et al. (2013) correlated the formal educational dimension to the lowering of recidivism. On the other hand, it is much more complex to succeed in evaluating the nonformal and informal educational dimensions, both because of the lack of structured tools to assess learning achievements according to specific indicators and the absence of ad hoc trained personnel to carry out monitoring and evaluation actions. Finally, it is complex to be able to assess the nonformal and informal educational dimensions, since the outcomes of a complex educational process, composed of several educational actions, will be found over a medium to long time frame.

With respect to point four, Lizzola (2013) recognizes how an element that affects the mismatch between pedagogical goals and the management practices implemented within penitentiary institutes is the under-staff of all professional figures operating within penitentiary institutes, especially the staff of the educational area, that leads pedagogical officers to often disregard their main task (Benelli & Paleani, 2019). Additional organizational and managerial constraints of penitentiary institutions are inherent in the lack of funds to devote to educational and cultural activities:

- the impossibility of offering the educational opportunities to the entire restricted population since, for example, there is often a maximum (stringent) number of places available;

- the difficulty of expanding the territorial network to offer ample educational opportunities;
- the “blurring regarding the underlying institutional responsibilities [...] to fulfill the task of individualization of punishments” (Oggoni, 2019, p. 394).

### 3. The Prison Library Service

In order for learning processes and growth of subjects to be activated, restricted people must be able to take action, make choices for themselves, feel part of a community with possibilities for confrontation and assumption of an active role; to have a physical space in which they can experience a certain degree of autonomy and self-responsibility. In view of this, an important role within prison contexts can be attributed to libraries if they are reread as learning devices (Bernstein, 1990; Federighi, 2006), capable of affecting the learning processes of restricted people through the definition of implicit and explicit rules, capable of regulating their access to and quality of participation in educational opportunities.

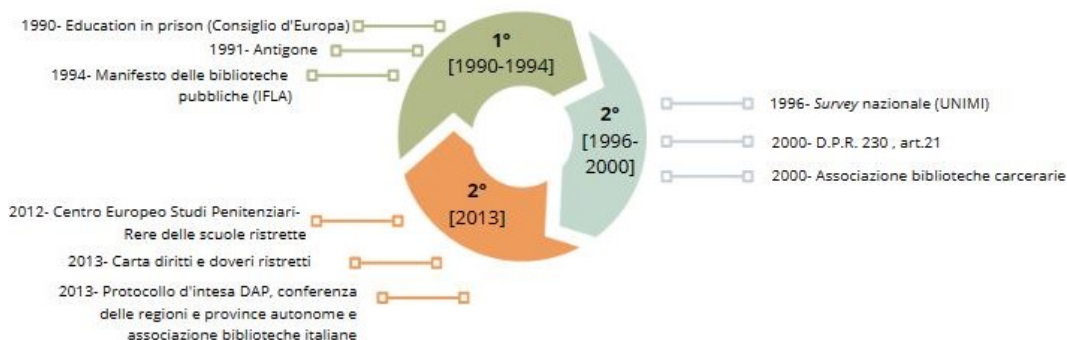


Figure 1. Turning points in the evolution of prison libraries.

Following the formal establishment of prison libraries, thanks to programmatic texts and by international regulations (Council of Europe, 1990; 2006; Lehmann & Locke, 2005; United Nations, 1955) and national regulations (Presidential Decree 230/2000; L. n. 354/1975), it is possible to identify three turning points (Figure 1) that have led them to grow and become more prominent until more recently (2020), with the national project “Innovative Libraries in Prison”. This project is part of the “National Program for Social Innovation of Penal Execution Services: legality, culture, development and social cohesion” (DAP. 27/07/22, 089201), in which the function of the prison library is recognized and supported as an inclusive and transformative learning environment that, through heterogeneous learning opportunities, can solicit the unconscious and unexpressed training needs of the restricted population. This project is ultimately aimed to supporting a social, active and conscious reintegration of the restricted people by offering them the opportunity to acquire knowledge that is concretely expendable from a work perspective but also to develop transversal skills (Stammani, 2022).

Since 1995 (Unesco), libraries have been recognized as having a broader function than the exclusivity of lending and consulting library materials. It is interesting (and necessary), to identify that set of elements and principles that determine the new functions of libraries and that have helped define them a *social library* (Faggiolani & Solimine, 2013; Ferrieri, 2020).

Fundamental to explaining the concept of social library is the shift in library service

management from *government* to *governance*' whereby the library is understood as a "social system made by people for people" (Faggiolani & Solimine, 2013, p. 18). The underlying goal is that the library should be structured and managed in the interest of all those who use it or potentially could use it, thus playing a more receptive role by defining the most suitable objectives and actions to pursue using a bottom-up approach, as a result of opinions and feedback obtained. The underlying objective on which the service aims to work is to break down the boundaries and problems, real or perceived, that the service detects with its users and, instead, foster knowledge flows. With this in mind, the library becomes a physical and metaphysical space of shared knowledge, within which the relationship between people is paramount and the processes of cultural, social and civic development of individuals and the community are supported, offering daily tools to know and understand society (Asvapp & CSS Ebla, 2016; Faggiolani & Galluzzi, 2015; Faggiolani & Solimine, 2013). Libraries, structured in this way, become welfare institutions capable of directly affecting important aspects of people's individual and collective lives (Council of Europe, 2004; Harris & Dudley, 2005; Ridi, 2014).

Taking into consideration the relevant literature and theoretical constructs, the social library within correctional institutions is defined as a learning tool (which has a tangible dimension, the physical space, and a non-tangible one) of (re)connection, (re)signification, (re)orientation and (re)structuring capable of intercepting, receiving, assimilating elements and stimuli from the context, but especially from the publics and of constantly adapting and transforming itself with respect to the purposes to be pursued (Pampaloni, 2023). A tool, therefore, to support both restricted people's new personal planning and the organizational planning of the prison institute.

#### **4. The research**

The reinterpretation of experiential learning theories according to situated and critical-cultural approaches, and to transformative learning theory within the prison context, led to the definition of an operational model on which to set the research actions. This model, taking into account Goal 16.7 of Agenda 2030, was based on democratic and bottom-up approaches to problem solving, through active and extensive participation at all levels present within the prison organization.

The present paper, resulted from doctoral research (Pampaloni, 2023), builds upon the theoretical-scientific framework above and focuses on the process of co-designing the *social library* learning device in two penitentiary institutions from the central area of Italy. Its aim is outlining intervention models capable of affecting and transforming internal processes, through the involvement, on multiple levels, of different organizational actors. In this perspective, it is essential to recognize how the heterogeneous know-how all actors possess can become an added value to address complex issues, reconciling the needs of the system with those of individuals.

The adopted research design, inspired by the Mixed Methods Research paradigm (Creswell, 2012; Trincherò & Robasto, 2019), is divided into two sequential macro phases with parallel sub-phases (desk and field activities), making use of a plurality of methods and tools attributable to a qualitative approach (focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, interviews, co-design) (Figure 2).

In order to reviewing operational practices within penitentiary institutions as well as library services, the methodology of co-design and, in particular, the Goal Oriented Project

Planning methodology (Bussi, 2001) was chosen, recognizing it as particularly useful in dealing with complex situations because it takes advantage of the diversity of perspectives, skills and experiences of the actors involved to develop sustainable solutions that truly respond to the identified problems.

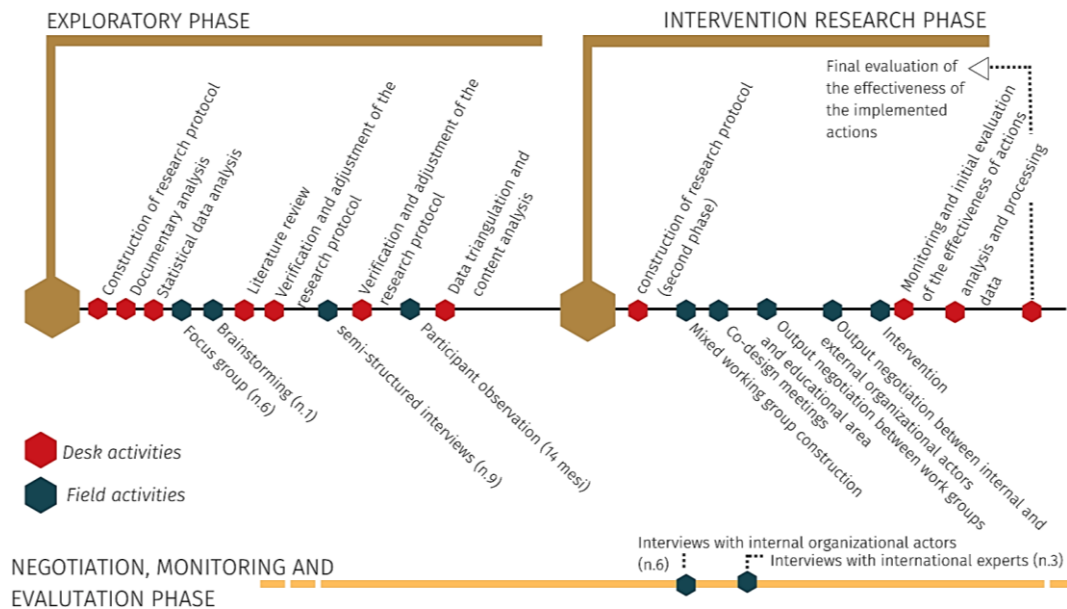


Figure 2. The research design.

## 5. The co-design process: working groups, meeting structure and outputs

The entire co-design process, from identifying stakeholders to participating in the work, to defining and negotiating new actions to be implemented, took over five months (April-September 2021). Importantly, thanks to the content analysis of the empirical material acquired in the first phase of research (observation research), it was possible to define five interpretive keys representing the elements that did not allow libraries to perform a consonant educational function with respect to the intrinsic potential found in the literature. These interpretive keys allowed for a critical reinterpretation of library services and were taken up as categories on which to structure and design improvement actions during the co-design process.

The establishment of the working groups was a delicate phase. Prior to the establishment of the actual working groups, a preliminary outreach process, aimed at actual users of library services, was initiated to outline the current and potential role of the library within the prison environment. Multiple methods were used to identify restricted people interested in being part of the working groups: interviews with regular library users, informal word of mouth among restricted people and a registration form. Three working groups were formed:

- WG1: four male restricted people acting as librarians, three male restricted people and one prison police officer (no. of meetings: seven);
- WG2: five female restricted people and one prison police officer (no. meetings: nine);
- WG3: one male restricted person acting as librarian and 11 male restricted people (no. meetings: ten).

The first three meetings served to define, in a systematic way and through critical analysis, the problems inherent in library services, which the selectors themselves were required to explicate and connect according to cause-effect relationships thus going on to outline a *problem tree*” Once the problem tree was defined, the participants had to make a transposition of the problems into goals, thus creating the *goal tree*. In subsequent meetings, based on the objectives to be pursued, the focus of the working groups was on structuring a logical framework composed of possible actions to be implemented by defining methods, resources to be used (economic and human) and timing of intervention. The last meeting of each working group was devoted to the participatory sharing and negotiation of the outputs produced (logical framework) with the educational area.

Critical issues emerged in all three working groups, specifically with respect to:

- physical space and how to access and use it;
- collection and systematic disappearance of library materials;
- restricted people’s motivation and orientation dimensions (internal and external);
- lack of specific training of librarians;
- lack of active involvement by the treatment area and by the police officers managing the library service.

With respect to these issues, five areas of intervention were identified: management and organization, access and use, training, spaces, and collection. The second meeting was a useful occasion to share and negotiate the logical framework that took place between internal actors (management profiles and educational area) and external actors. Contextually, it was jointly agreed to work on all areas of intervention, focusing, however, on some targeted actions based on:

- strategic interest of the penitentiary institution to respond as much as possible to current regulations on penitentiary education;
- needs that have emerged from the restricted population;
- available resources (human, material, economic);
- feasibility and sustainability in the short to medium term.

Taking these variables into consideration, a minimum of one to a maximum of three actions outlined in the logical framework were implemented for each of the five areas.

## **6. The learning device of the social library in prison**

Following an analysis and interpretation process of empirical data acquired during the field activities of both the exploratory and intervention research phases, the learning device (Federighi, 2006) of the social library was constructed. This process led to the definition of five structural elements of the learning device, determining the type of learning processes to which subjects are exposed:

- accessibility: the organizational conditions that make it possible for the restricted population to physically access library premises, but also to access and to enjoy all the “opportunities and tools that foster the emergence of creative thinking and transformative praxis” (Federighi, 2007, p. 48) that the library and prison institute more generally make available to the restricted population;
- the educational function of professionalism in penitentiary police officers: the need to review the role and functions of prison police is made clear at an international

level (Baker 1979; Council of Europe 1990; 2006). The needed review is no longer and not only of a securitarian nature but is increasingly of an educational nature. Given the close daily contact with the restricted population, prison officers are being called upon to facilitate and support restricted people in their educational journey, taking into account the extreme volatility of prison contexts;

- role and function of the librarian's work in educational perspective: taking into consideration a branch of librarianship called Critical librarianship, defined by Semek (2007) as "an international movement of library and information workers that considers the human condition and human rights above other professional concerns"<sup>1</sup>, librarians are asked to set aside the traditional tasks of the role in favor of a greater focus on the social dimension, the development of new identities of users and the service itself, as well as to implement improvement processes, starting from the analysis of the context in which they act and the needs of the public (real and potential);
- liaison between inside and outside the penitentiary context: an analysis of the literature revealed how one of the cross-cutting worldwide critical issues plaguing penitentiary library services is the poor, if not nonexistent, collaboration with external territorial libraries. There is a need to work on greater collaboration with the local area because a prison institution that is unable to collaborate with the outside usually lacks the ability to have a professional figure to support the restricted people in managing the service, which has repercussions on the service itself;
- physical library space: the way in which the library is designed affects the type of educational activities and social interaction that restricted people can carry out within it, consequently influencing the processes of acquiring knowledge and skills (Beyerns, Kennes, Snacken, & Tournel, 2015; Finlay, 2020; Krolak, 2019). In order for the library space to be configured as a functional learning space, it is necessary and essential, during the design phase of the space, to take into consideration a diverse set of factors (Radcliffe, Wilson, Powell, & Tibbetts, 2009) and guiding principles (Bernheimer, O'Brien, & Barnes, 2017; Lehmann & Locke, 2005; Lithgow, 1995).

## 7. Conclusion

Having used a participatory approach throughout the research process has contributed to the creation of a more inclusive, change-oriented prison environment, capable of reconciling the needs of the system with those of individuals. This has promoted not only the active involvement of restricted people, but also of different internal organizational actors with different roles and functions, and ultimately promoted a structural transformation that reflects a broader participatory vision in decision-making within penitentiary institutions.

Co-design, in particular, has proven to be a powerful tool for addressing complex situations within correctional institutions as it capitalizes on the diversity, collaboration, creativity and developed know-how of stakeholders, thus helping to generate more comprehensive,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bclaifc.wordpress.com/2007/11/13/critical-librarianship-an-interview-with-toni-samek/> (ver. 02.07.2024).



sustainable and adaptable solutions.

Participants, during the co-design process, were asked to play an active role by sharing thoughts, knowledge and expertise. As a result, a safe environment was created in which ideas could flow freely, in which original solutions and opportunities not yet considered in the prison context could be proposed, thus generating greater involvement and empowerment of internal human resources.

In addition to promoting new modes of communication both horizontally and vertically within penitentiary institutions, the research actions promoted self-directed learning processes from a transformative perspective, both personal and of the entire prison organization. During the co-design meetings, restricted people were confronted with problems and working methods that were alien to them and that led them to develop, also with a view to the future, a set of skills that are useful both in the penitentiary context and in the external context: time management; problem identification and solving; managing conflicts and different points of view; building a sense of community; effective communication; social interaction and collaboration among peers and with people with different roles and functions; intrinsic motivation; recognizing one's needs; and goal setting with a view to planning for the future.

At the same time, penitentiary institutions have been able to embrace the proposed initiatives and in bringing them to life, they have necessarily had to revise some of the internal rules and procedures that had been in place up to that point, thus experimenting with different operational practices and introducing new learning opportunities.

The greatest educational-organizational success given by the research actions, however, was to overcome the low expectations of restricted people and internal organizational actors with respect to their abilities to critically analyze the context and, consequently, to design, manage and implement an educational service, taking into consideration numerous and heterogeneous elements from the context itself and beyond.

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