

Education in prison: a pedagogical challenge

L'educazione in carcere: una sfida pedagogica

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Abstract

This article offers a reflection on the role of education in prison, considering it first of all a human right, as stated by numerous national and international declarations. The different educational opportunities for detainees are explored, underlining the importance of integrating formal education with non-formal and informal education, in order to promote the transformative growth of the person. Reference is also made to some good practices developed in the Italian prison context. Finally, this work considers the critical issues and pedagogical challenges that must be addressed, so that educational experiences can contribute positively to the re-education of the detained person.

Keywords: education; prison contexts; Italy; best practices; pedagogical challenges.

Sintesi

Questo articolo offre una riflessione sul ruolo dell'educazione in ambito carcerario, considerandola prima di tutto un diritto umano, come affermato da numerose dichiarazioni nazionali e internazionali. Si esplorano le diverse opportunità educative per le persone detenute, sottolineando l'importanza di integrare l'educazione formale con quella non formale e informale, al fine di promuovere la crescita trasformativa della persona. Si fa riferimento anche ad alcune buone pratiche sviluppate nel contesto carcerario italiano. Infine, questo lavoro considera le criticità e le sfide pedagogiche che devono essere affrontate, affinché le esperienze formative possano contribuire positivamente alla rieducazione della persona detenuta.

Parole chiave: educazione; contesti carcerari; Italia; buone pratiche; sfide pedagogiche.

1. Education as a fundamental human right, outside and inside prisons

Education is a fundamental human right and, as such, no prisoners should be deprived of it. This is a principle that is declared by international and transnational declarations. The starting point is the United Nations (UN) *Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948: Article 26 states that “everyone has the right to education”, which “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN, 1948). Some years later, this principle of nondiscrimination was recalled by Unesco, who adopted the *Convention against Discrimination in Education* in 1960. Afterwards in 1976, in this same spirit, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (UN, 1966) recognized in Article 13 the “right of everyone to education”. More specifically, regarding education in prisons, the first post-World War II document to deal with the rights of prisoners was the *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (UN, 1955) adopted in 1955. It affirmed that education, including recreational and cultural activities, should be part of the individual treatment needs of the prisoners. A landmark for education in prisons is the recommendations of Council of Europe in *Education in Prison* (1990), drawn up by prison educators, where it is stated that all prisoners shall have access to education (Council of Europe, 1990). In the same year, UN General Assembly resolution 45/111 in its *Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners* affirmed that “all prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality” (UN, 1990). Also, the International Conference on Adult Education (Confintea), organized by Unesco, set the goal of “developing and implementing comprehensive education programmes in prisons, with the participation of inmates, to meet their needs and learning aspirations”, in order to ensure that the right to learn was recognized for all prisoners (Unesco, 1997). An important step was taken in 2015, when the UN General Assembly adopted the *Mandela Rules* (revised *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*) (Unodc, 2016). Specifically, Rule 104 affirms that all detained persons should have access to education, with special attention to people with literacy difficulties and minors.

2. Educational opportunities in prisons and best practices in Italian prisons

“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” (Council of Europe, 1990, pp. 4-5): starting from this recommendation in *Education in Prison*, we can identify the main educational opportunities in prisons.

In general, education is a voluntary activity for adult prisoners, so they can choose to attend classes or to participate in activities of informal curricula. According to *Mandela Rules*, “so far as practicable, the education of prisoners shall be integrated with the educational system of the country so that after their release they may continue their education without difficulty” (Rule 104).

However, we need to consider that not all prisoners’ educational experiences are the same because they also depend on the penal culture, category and security level of a prison.

2.1. Prison schools

Regarding prison schools, in fact, some institutions have school located away from cells

and well equipped, other prisons have school in spaces used as recreation areas or places of workshop. In some prisons, for example in higher security or more punitive institutions, the sites of education are not separate from cells (UIL, 2021).

The location of schooling in prison is able to influence students' learning outcomes and their experience of imprisonment. There is a lot of research that has explored these aspects, and it has been found that prisoners who attend school feel freer, as well as develop values of education, equality and mutuality that mitigate the negative impact of confinement and coercion (Behan, 2018; Crewe, 2009). The school environment can also make prisoners experience more positive relationships with teachers and staff in the educational area that are different from the power relations in the rest of the prison.

Although some of the staff may be internal, teachers can be hired by local or national education authorities and this one is the best approach to follow Mandela Rule (104) that affirms education in prison should be integrated with the country's educational system.

Educational provision is not the same in all prisons. Some are limited only to basic education, i.e., "literacy, numeracy, social and prevocational skills, with elements of what used to be called 'general knowledge'" (Unesco, 1993).

But some prisons offer levels of instruction beyond primary and secondary education, up to higher education. In this regard, Prison University Poles have been established in some of Italy's prisons: it is a system of services and opportunities offered by the university, with the availability of the Prison Administration, in addition to or in substitution for those normally enjoyed by students, proposed in a structural manner and organized on the basis of special agreements, aimed at overcoming the obstacles that objectively stand in the way of an effective exercise of the right to university study by those in penal execution (Stati Generali dell'Esecuzione Penale, 2015-2016). The University enters the prison permanently, with its professors, lectures, examinations and graduation sessions, its officials, its libraries, its tutors, experimenting and adapting the forms of teaching and administration to the purpose.

2.2. Non formal education: an important resource for learning

However, one of the main limitations is that many of the inmates have low levels of education and frown upon classroom-based activities because they have had bad experiences with conventional schooling and low motivation to study. In fact, as reported in the Council of Europe's report on education in prison, a high percentage of prisoners are severely disadvantaged people with multiple experiences of failure, have a low self-image, and consider themselves failures in school, as well as they may believe that education has nothing to offer them (Council of Europe, 1990).

One way to overcome personal, psychological or social barriers to educational participation is to offer not only formal but also non formal and informal programs, that can encourage inmates to learn new skills. In fact, skills can be embedded in broader curricular offers, for example can be included in activities or experiences, so the students can apply what they learned to their own situation.

The cardinal principles of non formal education connect to adult learning theories (Knowles, 1980) and they can be translated in different ways in the prison context: possibility to impact the prisoner's self-concept, his willingness and motivation to learn related to his own fulfillment, growth of self-esteem, desire to improve the quality of life, and his own future (Del Gobbo, 2016).

In the European Commission's report *Prison Education and Training in Europe. Current State-of-play and Challenges* (Hawley et al., 2013), is emphasized as non formal educational programmes improve personal and social skills, develop self-confidence and encourage participation in future learning. In particular, artistic and cultural activities have proven to be significantly effective in supporting the personal and educational development of inmates.

Evidence of this is the Laboratorio Teatrale project in Italy, in the Volterra Prison, which has been going on for 30 years now. The creation of a theater company made up of inmate-actors has developed a bridge between inmates and the local community (Punzo, 2009). In fact, inmates perform in public theaters outside the prison and local residents participate in performances in prison. A decisive step was the recognition of inmates' theatrical activity as a work activity in its own right. In addition, the numerous collaborations with other European and non-European organizations, in order to spread their experience and best practices, have led the "Compagnia della Fortezza" to become an example of a model for the implementation of theater projects in prison¹.

Non formal learning programs can also be promoted by libraries in prisons. These in fact contribute to the education of prisoners by encouraging independent learning, reading, writing, and recreational activities such as book discussion groups or creative writing classes. As Article 64 of the *Mandela Rules* states: "every prison shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it". As Lisa Krolak (2019), Chief Librarian at the Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), points out, "the value of a prison library lies in its ability to help inmates become or continue to be lifelong learners" (p. 13).

A remarkable experience is that of Monza prison, the first prison in Italy to have activated an internet connection service to reserve and access the entire holdings of the territory's 34 libraries, which is 1300000 volumes. The urban library system has taken care of the training of the inmates who will actively manage the library: from issuing cards to inmates, to cataloging, and every week a vehicle passes through the prison to drop off requested volumes and pick up those returned. In this way, being part of the area's library system in all respects, the prison library is used as well to offer meetings and events that are also open to the outside public². This service fully complies with the provisions of the Unesco *Public Library Manifesto*: "the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, language, social status, and any other characteristic. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, poor digital or computer skills, poor literacy abilities or people in hospital or prison" (IFLA-Unesco, 2022).

3. Discrepancies between principles and practice in prison education

It must be kept in mind that although there are numerous declarations and rules that affirm

¹ <http://www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/>

² <https://www.brianzabiblioteche.it/library/casa-circondariale/>

the importance of education in prison, as already mentioned, they are not always translated into action. In fact, the application of these conventions may vary from country to country, from prison to prison, and the way they view prison education influences the educational opportunities that are offered in prisons. There are several reasons why there may be a mismatch between principles and practice in prisons.

It is often due to penal policy in general. Where there is a punitive penal policy, educational provision in prison tends to be more minimalist. Conversely, prisons with a more rehabilitative approach to incarceration place more emphasis on prison education. In some reclusion contexts, prison education is seen only as preparing inmates for employment, while others reject this idea arguing instead that prison education should be based solely on an adult education approach. According to other views, prison education should mirror programs offered to the broader community outside the prison context.

The most dominant perspective internationally is that education is not prioritized as a right, but as a tool to achieve rehabilitation (Bozick et al., 2018). This approach tends to promote vocational and skills training aimed at preparing prisoners for employment upon release, hoping that this will encourage them to leave the criminal life. In this regard, Bozick and colleagues (ibidem) analyzing 57 studies that assessed recidivism found that inmates who participate in educational programs are 28% less likely to reoffend than inmates who do not participate. On the other hand, however, reviewing 21 studies that evaluated employment following participation in prison education programs found that the reduction in recidivism rates does not always translate into gainful employment after release. In fact, those who had participated in prison education were just as likely to obtain employment after release as those who had participated. Other studies confirm that recidivism rate was lower for inmates who had completed more courses in prison education (Giles, 2016).

But there are those who stress that education, intended as formal and informal education for personal development, should not be solely aimed at employment because then this would be referred to as vocational training, which is about learning specific skills for particular types of employment (Pike & Farley, 2018).

3.1. The curtailment of prison education

As mentioned above, in prisons, especially those where men and women are represented only as ‘offenders’, a complete and adequate form of education is not offered. These restrictions on education, which run counter to the guidelines given by the European institutions, can be of various kinds. Costelloe and Warner (2014) present four examples of such reduction or distortion, showing that these different restrictive attitudes may sometimes work together.

Among those identified by the authors (ibidem), there is the so-called ‘criminogenic’ curtailment that occurs when the person in prison is seen and considered only as a criminal or a delinquent, consequently, programs that claim to address offending behavior are preferred. However, this may restrict educational goals, activities, curricula and methods, reducing the possibility of learning that facilitates full personal development. Another consequence is that these types of programs are not offered to all prisoners, but only to certain groups.

Considering people in prison in a very negative way, may lead to another form of curtailment, that of provision to ‘the undeserving’, as the prison system may not find it reasonable to invest in developmental educational activities for people they do not consider capable of development.

The third example presented by Costelloe and Warner (ibidem) is the ‘employability’ curtailment, which is when support in prison is limited primarily to vocational training. However, the idea of helping inmates find work upon release seems only apparent, since the training offered does not match labor market requirements (think of the digital exclusion that takes away an essential requirement for most jobs in the community). In this way, the opportunity for prisoners to overcome deeper problems that go beyond finding employment outside of prison is taken away. The emphasis on training for work is also based on the belief that manual and hard work, particularly, are valid means of punishment.

Another form of reduction in prison education that is mentioned by the authors is the curtailment by measurement. It is related to ‘managerialism,’ where because of bureaucratic attitudes, the focus of educational provision is on cost-effectiveness. However, this approach is hardly compatible with education, particularly adult education, because the outcomes of complex educational processes can be very difficult to measure and often go beyond the scope of economic analysis. Thus, deeper learning (such as growth in self-confidence, increased social and civic awareness, discovery of new interests, etc.) is not recognised and consequently unvalued, because the bureaucracy deems it unmeasurable (ibidem).

4. Conclusion

Penal policies or approaches to education in prison are not the only reasons why what is stated in numerous national and international declarations often fails to be translated into practice. In fact, the obstacles are varied and range from a lack of educational resources, equipment, staff shortages, language barriers, frequent transfer of prisoners, and overcrowding, just to mention a few.

Although action must also be taken on all structural and institutional impediments, in order to truly adopt and encourage a holistic approach to prison education, the priority challenge remains to create a positive pedagogical space. In this way, in the perspective of lifelong learning it will be possible to achieve the empowering and transformational progress that prison education is capable of.

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