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Articles

From coping to hoping: Reclaiming meaningful learning relationships in Second Chance Schools operating in Greek prisons

Dal coping alla speranza: verso relazioni di apprendimento nelle Scuole della Seconda Opportunità nelle carceri greche

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of education within Greek prisons – spaces marked by overcrowding, poor living conditions, and scarce opportunities for meaningful engagement. Despite its vital role in reintegration, education remains underutilized: around 10% of incarcerated adults participate in established educational structures, and only a few structures operate beyond the compulsory level. Drawing on a three-year ethnographic study across six Second Chance Schools inside adult prisons – including 25 biographical narratives of students, 12 interviews with educators, and extensive fieldnotes – this research highlights the centrality of educator-student relationships, frequently valued by both incarcerated learners and non-incarcerated educators over traditional learning outcomes. We argue that the transformative potential of these relationships stems from both the deprivation inherent in incarceration and the broader life trajectories of the learners. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on critical prison pedagogies and the emotional dimensions of imprisonment.

Keywords: education in prison; prison ethnography; critical education; emotions; learning relationships.

Sintesi

Questo articolo esplora il ruolo dell'istruzione negli istituti penitenziari in Grecia, luoghi caratterizzati da sovraffollamento, condizioni di vita precarie e scarse opportunità di coinvolgimento. Nonostante il ruolo che riveste nel reinserimento, l'istruzione rimane sottoutilizzata: circa il 10% dei detenuti partecipa a servizi educativi e solo pochi di questi operano al di là delle attività obbligatorie. Basandosi su uno studio etnografico triennale condotto in sei Second Chance School dentro le carceri per adulti, la ricerca mette in luce la centralità delle relazioni tra educatori e studenti, spesso apprezzate sia dagli studenti detenuti che dagli educatori non detenuti rispetto ai risultati di apprendimento tradizionali. La ricerca comprende 25 narrazioni biografiche di studenti, 12 interviste con educatori e numerose note sul campo. Sosteniamo che il potenziale trasformativo di queste relazioni derivi sia dalle privazioni intrinseche alla condizione detentiva sia dalle più ampie traiettorie di vita degli studenti. I risultati contribuiscono al dibattito in corso sulla pedagogia critica nelle carceri e sulla dimensione emotiva dell'esperienza detentiva.

Parole chiave: istruzione in carcere; etnografia carceraria; istruzione critica; emozioni; relazioni di apprendimento.

1. Introduction

In 2011 the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) issued the sixth – in its 22-year history – public statement concerning the deplorable conditions in Greek prisons and detention centres. The Committee spoke about a steady deterioration in the living standards and treatment of prisoners – from 2000 on – in terms of physical conditions, overcrowding, provision of healthcare, staffing levels, inter-prisoner violence and lack of purposeful activities that might promote reintegration, adding that "a regulated prison system, as aspired to in law, has given way to the practice of warehousing prisoners" (CPT, 2011, p. 4). Eleven years later, during the first year of our study, the same issues were raised by CPT after a visit that confirmed nothing had improved, and no forward planning existed (CPT, 2022, p. 7). Scholars have repeatedly confirmed the above talking about prisoners' "desperation in the face of official indifference" (Cheliotis, 2012, p. 13) connected to extreme measures of protest, such as hunger strikes, all the more often due to breaches of the right to education (Sakka, 2022). In July 2025, responding to another CPT visit, the Ministry of Citizen Protection published an action plan that provides, among other things, for the construction of eight new prisons in order to accommodate the expected increase in the prison population by at least 36% within five years, without specifying in detail how it intends to address the above mentioned structural problems, especially with regard to the use of idle time and the promotion of reintegration (Kiskira-Bartsoka, 2025).

In order to understand the importance of the above, one must consider the extremely long duration of the sentences served in Greece, by European standards[1], and the fact that members of marginalised groups are traditionally over-represented in Greek prisons. For example, foreign nationals who represent around 55% of the total prison population since 2010, according to official data published by the respective Ministries, face serious communication difficulties that have been associated with social isolation and missing out on basic provisions (Dünkel et al., 2019), including education (Sakka, 2022).

Public discourse around prison education in Greece tends to be shaped by selectively positive narratives – stories of personal redemption and transformation – disseminated through school self-publications, the press, and television documentaries. Rarely is there any serious engagement with the less visible, structural issues that define its everyday reality – such as the discretionary power of prison authorities in student selection and retention, often shaped by disciplinary decisions, institutional security concerns and staffing shortages (Petsas, 2019; Sakka, 2022; Tzenou, 2017) or the challenges encountered by imprisoned students who have to navigate life between two worlds (Efstratoglou, 2025).

In this paper, we attempt to address this gap by presenting findings from a three-year ethnographic study in six Second Chance Schools operating in Greek prisons for adults. Theoretically, we draw on critical criminology, prison sociology, and psychology to discuss the often-overlooked emotional toll of imprisonment. We then explore the promises and challenges of applying critical pedagogy in prisons, linking these to the philosophy of

[1] According to the Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics report (Aebi et al., 2022) in January 2021, while Greece's crime rates were lower to the European median, 85% of sentenced prisoners were serving long-term prison sentences of over five years, compared to a European median of 37%. 38.5% of these were sentenced to serve from 20 years to life. The respective European median is 3.7%.

second chance education and the specific context of our study. Empirically, we revisit initial findings based on biographical narratives, highlighting students' prioritization of relationships with educators above all else (Efstratoglou & Koulaouzides, 2024). Drawing from 25 narratives, informal student conversations, 12 interviews with educators and principals, and extensive field notes, we argue that understanding the importance of educational relationships in the specific context requires grasping the deprivations inflicted by the criminal justice system and their deep roots in incarcerated students' broader biographies (Ievins, 2024; Western, 2018).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Prison as a site of (painful) learning

One of the most firmly established ideas about prison is that it functions as a big school in its own right (Foucault, 1991) that leaves a very strong imprint on the lives of incarcerated people and their communities of origin. Moreover, as Wacquant (2002) suggested in his classic article on the importance of prison ethnography, prison is not an institution external to social space in which it selectively intrudes but is rather "woven deep into the fabric and life course of the lower classes across generations" (p. 388), an argument that the first stage of our research based on students' biographical narratives amply supported (Efstratoglou & Koulaouzides, 2024).

Scholars have described in detail prison's multiple ways of conveying messages, via the abandonment of the buildings (O'Donnell, 2014), overcrowding, understaffing, lack of care and meaningful activities, fear of punishment for reporting rights violations (Koros, 2020) and the lack of adequate support for reintegration. Considering the role of the penal systems in reproducing inequality, researchers suggest that what is learnt informally in prison does not so much refer to what people *did*, what they are serving time for, but rather to who they *are* and how low their place is in the social hierarchy (Carlen, 2012; Wacquant, 2009). In Fassin's (2017) words imprisonment works as "a recall to the social rather than to the moral order" (p. 293), something that has also been implied in some of the rare empirical studies conducted in Greek prisons (Drossou, 2016; Spirea, 2021).

Going even further, some scholars argue that what is actually at stake is the humanity of those incarcerated (Price, 2015) and the related feeling of hopelessness and ethical loneliness (Schliehe et al., 2022). The harm caused by detention, regardless of the quality of the institutional environment (Ugelvik & Dullum, 2012), affects a person to the core, altering their sense of space, time and identity (Crewe et al., 2020; O'Donnell, 2014), as well as their capacity to build or sustain stable social connections (Liebling & Maruna, 2005). Such connections are considered crucial for post-release adjustment, according to studies that cover several different jurisdictions with differing degrees of provided state support (Dünkel et al., 2019).

One might wonder whether there is any room at all for positive change in prison. Several researchers have, indeed, documented counter narratives of re-invention (Scott, 2011), conscious transformation (O'Donnell, 2014) and "radical hope" amidst the suffering, concurrently arguing that these rarely endure post-release (Crewe & Ievins, 2019; Schinkel, 2014). One thing scholars propose is that such narratives should be interpreted "in the broader context of diminished social welfare and intensified socioeconomic disadvantage that force poor people to turn to a punitive institution as a 'resource' for the social goods

distributed through valorised channels to their more privileged peers" (Comfort, 2012, p. 308). Another is that, even though they may effectively counteract the pains experienced by long-term imprisonment, transformed versions of selves are too disconnected from people's real lives to last in the community (Ievins, 2024), thus amplifying pain and hampering desistance (Crewe & Ievins, 2019). Concluding a study of unusual breadth, in terms of range of prisons and number of participants, on how young people adapt to life sentences, Crewe and colleagues (2020) proposed that "adaptations that are functional within prison are deeply dysfunctional on release, particularly in the realms of social and family life. One of the many tragic aspects of imprisonment is that, while it often produces a desire among prisoners to lead a different kind of life, it so often disables the possibility of doing so through the ties that it breaks and the traits that it generates" (p. 330).

This world of broken ties and broken dignity is the world where the Second Chance Schools we studied are situated. Having described prison as a site of learning, we can now explore how the prison context significantly limits the promises and praxis of anti-oppressive pedagogies before turning to our empirical data.

2.2. The promises and challenges of critical pedagogies inside prison

Advocates of critical pedagogy argue that education contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. Based on this reasoning, the over-incarceration of members of the weaker classes, who tend to leave school prematurely, can also be seen as a big failure of the education system. The related (traumatic) early experiences make returning to education in adulthood, especially challenging. The importance of relationships based on respect, empathy, trust, and caring (Boler, 1999; hooks, 2003; Noddings, 1986) as well as the need to develop teaching methods that address (educational) trauma (Daniels, 2022; Gray, 2019) has long been emphasised, especially in the context of alternative educational structures focused on engaging marginalised learners, such as Second Chance Schools (Meo & Tarabini, 2020; te Riele et al., 2017) and prison schools (Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993) serves as a most relevant reference in this context. Freire links life revolving around the struggle for daily survival, life under domination, with dehumanisation. He explains that it is the consciousness of historicity, the tendency of humans to move forward in order to overcome the situations that constrain them, that effectively distinguishes them from animals. Immobility and fatalism present, as he argues, fatal threats. It is this ontological vocation that critical education attempts to foster.

In the struggle for transcendence, one is never alone. Others are essential at every stage of the dialogical process through which one seeks to broaden their perspective, become critically aware of the predispositions shaped by particular social worlds, and transform these in praxis. It has been suggested that our most basic assumptions are formed before we even begin to understand ourselves, in the context of emotionally charged relationships with significant others.

Furthermore, feminist scholars argue for the central role of emotion in education and knowledge (re)production (Boler, 1999; hooks, 2003; Noddings, 1986). Emotional awareness is a precondition for change, Boler (1999) argues, explaining that practices of cruelty and injustice "are often rooted in unspoken 'emotional' investments in unexamined ideological beliefs" (p. xiv). Yet, there is scant evidence of how emotional support works, on the ground.

All in all, the central tenets of critical pedagogy (developing a consciousness of human historicity and of the malleability of social reality; developing an ability to critically reflect upon fundamental assumptions; and sustaining social relationships based on faith, trust and caring) are subverted inside prison. More specifically:

1. time in prison stagnates. Research participants consistently report experiencing feelings of limbo, stuckness (Crewe et al., 2020) and self-suspension (O'Donnell, 2014). Crewe et al. report on how early-stage prisoners described managing time only through reference to "a daily timetable, or short-term milestones, such as canteen day or the daily programming of television shows, such as soap operas. Rather than planning ahead", they argued, prisoners "lived a myopic existence, in an endless and repetitive present, perceiving even the short-term future to be irrelevant to their existence" (Crewe et al., 2020, p. 294). This is in sharp contrast to Freire's (1985) suggestion that people need to exert control over the alienating daily routines that make them live submerged in time, with no dynamic appreciation of history;
2. incarceration promotes silencing as a means of surviving the threats posed by the institutional environment and of securing early release (Koros, 2020). The words most often used by research participants are illustrative. To be in prison means above all else to "learn how to manage", to "cope", to "keep one's head down", to "keep one's mouth shut", no matter what one witnesses, in line with the prisoners' code (Aloskofis, 2010; Efstratoglou & Koulaouzides, 2024). Such behaviours reflect an entrenched fatalistic belief that prison as immediate context, let alone reality at large, are beyond control;
3. prisons are social environments fraught with distrust. Several studies that examine the repercussions of long-term imprisonment, both during incarceration (Crewe et al., 2020) and post-release (Liem, 2016; Western, 2018) suggest that the adaptive mechanisms that alleviate some of the pains of imprisonment have secondary, negative effects on the ability to develop feelings of belonging and trust.

2.3. Second Chance Schools in Greek prisons

Second Chance Schools (SCS) were introduced by the European Commission's 1995 White Paper *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*, as a pilot project intended to combat social and educational exclusion (EC, 2001). SCS offer accelerated compulsory education to young adults who have dropped out of ordinary compulsory education.

In Greece, the first SCS was established in 2000, and by 2022-2023 their number had increased to 101. Although Greek SCS adhere to the European model's flexible and learner-centred philosophy, they also exhibit distinct national characteristics – such as much higher average student age, a significant proportion of migrant learners, and a focus on basic education instead of vocational training (KANEP-GSEE , 2024). Yet, across all contexts, SCS' defining common feature remains the emphasis on supportive, respectful, and empowering teacher-learner relationships (Ecorys, 2013).

In 2004, the first Second Chance School (SCS) operating within a Greek adult prison was established in Larissa. For nearly two decades – until 2021, when the first primary school was founded in Korydallos Prison, the largest remand establishment in the country – the SCS remained the only educational space available to adult learners. Within the limits of an under-resourced prison system, they sought not only to provide knowledge and basic

skills, but also to offer counselling and psychological support – forms of care that remain chronically scarce (The Greek Ombudsman, 2024).

Most Greek studies we reviewed highlight how the two contexts (the school and the prison) interact. Some present schools as positively contributing to the disciplinary work of the prison (Asimaki et al., 2019) and others as dynamic fields of discourse development that are clearly opposed to the discourses cultivated in prison (Chasiotis, 2010; Sakka, 2022), without always questioning the overarching correctional philosophy (Tzenou, 2017). The role of educators is considered extremely challenging as they struggle to provide, as we discussed earlier, what has proven to be most important for inclusive education in general (trust, recognition, care) and encourage critical reflection, within an organisation that systematically cultivates their opposites (see also Castro & Brawn, 2017; Thomas, 1995; Wright, 2004). This fact leads some scholars to suggest that pedagogical practice cannot be adequately critical unless it also attempts to become abolitionist (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Love, 2019; Rodríguez, 2010).

3. Research questions and context

Our study set out to explore how imprisonment influences adult learning, and whether there is any place for anti-oppressive pedagogies inside prison. While some researchers have attempted to investigate how participation in education is experienced by interviewing incarcerated students, rarely are such experiences examined in the broader context of their biographies (Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014) and even more rarely are they cross-referenced with their long-term engagement in school life. Our research seeks precisely to bridge this gap by situating learners' educational experiences within the continuum of their life histories and their sustained participation in prison schooling.

The six schools where the research was conducted differ considerably from one another, even though they share the common philosophy of the Second Chance Schools. These differences stem, among other factors, from the type of prison in which they operate – such as whether it is a high-security facility – and from the nature of the relationship between between the school and prison administrations. The first school we worked in is located within the largest Greek remand establishment, which housed more than 1,750 people at the time of the research. Three others are situated in urban prisons, each with a population of around 550, while two are in semi-urban areas, with fewer than 400 inmates. One of these operates within the country's only women's prison that hosts a school.

Ministry data, provided upon our request, show that, despite the expansion of educational structures over the last decade, access to education in prisons across the country remains low – below 11%, despite the fact that most incarcerated individuals have not completed compulsory education, revealing a clear mismatch between need and opportunity (Efstratoglou, 2025).

In late 2023, in the six prisons we studied, only 22% of inmates had completed education beyond high school, while 23% had dropped out of or never attended elementary school. Just 4.3% held tertiary degrees, compared to 36% in the general population aged 25-54. In 2022-2023, only seven prison primary schools and 13 Second Chance Schools operated nationwide, graduating 94 and 188 students respectively – out of a prison population exceeding 9,700. The first (vocational) high school was established in 2025. High school completion still depends on self-study, with minimal volunteer support, while tertiary distance education remains largely inaccessible – only nine graduates were recorded

between 2020 and 2023.

4. Methodology

Research in Greek prisons is scarce and is conducted under very difficult conditions. As a result, published studies are very limited in number, duration and geographical coverage (Panagos, 2018b). The Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) stopped publishing data on prisoners in 2015 and there is not a proper electronic system in place for recording incarcerated individuals' demographic data, their education and training needs, or their progress post-release by the competent Ministry of Citizen Protection, upon which sound research designs could be established (Hellenic Court of Audit, 2021).

According to our review of the Hellenic National Archive of Doctoral Dissertations, only sixteen doctoral studies have been conducted in Greek prisons over the past twenty years. Most were carried out in the two adult prisons located in Greece's largest cities (Athens and Thessaloniki), and only five focused on education or informal learning. Overall, the process of obtaining research approval is extremely laborious – unless the researcher is already employed within the system in another role (e.g. as a sociologist, a psychiatrist, or an educator) (Panagos, 2018b). These researchers are, in practice, the only ones permitted to conduct observation – beyond interviews – without strict supervision by prison authorities.

Our research spanned three years (2021-2024) and involved approximately 650 hours of fieldwork in six of the thirteen Second Chance Schools operating in Greek adult prisons. In three of these schools, our presence was long-term (ranging from one to two school years), as the main researcher was also working as an educator. This dual role granted her daily, unsupervised access and enabled her to observe school life and classroom dynamics as an active participant, beyond the classes she taught.

During the first semester of the study she performed a series of semi-structured interviews focused on participants' educational biographies, asking about the schools they had attended as children and the one where she now met them. However, they themselves identified other "schools" as more significant – child labor, migration, life in child protection institutions, the army, and even prison, which they often described as a "university". This reminder that learning spans one's entire life led her to adopt the method of biographical narrative. Over the course of the next two and a half years, she collected 40 biographical accounts from students, conducted 14 interviews with educators and six with school principals, and held hundreds of informal conversations with members of school communities and former students, post-release. A research diary and extensive field notes were systematically kept, documenting how her position in the field evolved over time, and how ongoing analysis shaped the collection and interpretation of data – hallmarks of a flexible, iterative, and reflexive ethnographic process. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on a selected portion of this material[2], following an inductive thematic analysis approach to identify what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as *latent themes* – those that reveal underlying assumptions, ideas, and ideologies, rather than the explicit content of

[2] The selected material includes 25 biographical narratives, 12 interviews (6 with experienced educator and 6 with School Principals), and extensive field notes.

specific data segments.

It should be noted that securing access to the specific research field does not only depend on obtaining formal permissions to "get in". In our case we had to obtain permissions from the competent department of the Ministry of Education, the Prison Councils, the School administrations and boards, the Hellenic Open University's Research Ethics Committee and informed consent by research participants. "Getting on" also depends on the rapport that the researcher manages to build within the (school) community so that it is possible to move without close supervision, depending on what the prison staff, the school staff, and even students themselves consider safe. Overall, the rapport established with participants, along with the length and diversity of our sample, enabled a deeper understanding of the prison population's heterogeneity – such as differences related to sentence stage, educational background, prison type, and gender. This, in turn, helped us avoid simplistic generalisations and better grasp why certain discourses, such as the discourse of risk, remain so pervasive within this field.

We will focus on the second point, presenting two latent themes identified during the course of the analysis that relate to our research questions. Verbatim quotes are presented with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and we also generally indicate the participant's age group and their experience in prison, where relevant.

5. Findings

The first theme *Learning to deteriorate in prison* reflects two of the most painful qualities of the experience of imprisonment: Hopelessness regarding one's future prospects, especially regarding their social progress, and Fatalism (the idea that the world is beyond control). These have been found to be closely related to several facets of life in prison. We will focus on three of them: The pervasive discourse of risk/danger that affects prisoners' sense of self and their progression through the system; The erosion of relationships with significant others; The inability to share feelings related to the above that multiplies their negative effects.

The second theme, *From coping to hoping*, explores how the world of the Second Chance School stands apart from both the wider prison environment and mainstream education, particularly through the kinds of social relationships it fosters – relationships grounded in care, trust, and mutual belief.

5.1. Learning to deteriorate in prison

The pains associated with deprivation of liberty are legitimised, in the context of public discourse, mainly on the basis of the rehabilitative or re-educative role of imprisonment. Our experience in the field has shown that there is insufficient provision linked to such an objective. The majority of students described inefficient application procedures (up to two years of waiting for a visit to a psychologist) and very rare opportunities to establish stable support relationships with social workers or health care personnel, covering needs beyond in-kind provision (e.g. medication). Opportunities to participate in educational and recreational activities are scarce and the work offered is notional and allocated without any assessment of a prisoner's needs. This is confirmed by the few independent bodies in charge of monitoring the system that are formally granted access (e.g. CPT, 2022; The Greek Ombudsman, 2019).

People who decide on how incarcerated people progress through the system (e.g. examining applications for prison labour, prison leave and conditional release) mainly refer to the files containing information on their criminal record, the length of sentence, the outcome of previous applications, disciplinary sanctions etc., rather than their current needs, plans or efforts, substantiated, for example, through school performance (Koros, 2020). Incarcerated people themselves might also check a newcomer's record to identify potential threats as the following classroom dialogue shows, making clear how pervasive the feeling of distrust is in the wider context of students' biographies. The dialogue, which was recorded in the field journal, took place in the context of an introductory discussion on the research objectives:

> Researcher: Social research intends to...
>
> Student 1: All you need is a snitch.
>
> Researcher: I don't mean that kind of research...
>
> Student 2: Well, all our lives, they've been checking us out. Since the day we were born. Someone next to you with stripes, stars here (points to the shoulder), is checking you out.
>
> Student 3: We also investigate one another.
>
> (silence)
>
> Student 4: There are records scattered everywhere…

One of the greatest anxieties of people who are imprisoned relates to life going on, without them, outside the prison. Many shared with us the feeling of abandonment, which is often associated with visitation deprivation or a sense of betrayal by significant others that accompanies involvement with the law. It is also associated with stigmatisation, even within the prisoners' society, which constructs its own outliers (Panagos, 2018a).

This sense of abandonment and stigmatisation gives rise to feelings that are difficult to express. It generates, for example, anger towards the people who hand out the sentences, not showing the impartiality appropriate to their role ("The judge lifted her finger and pointed at me; she spoke with hatred. I saw her in my sleep during the early years. Now I just hope God pays her back" [Jenny, 50s]) and people charged with disciplining them in prison, expressing indifference ("When you walk in here that's what you see in their eyes: 'Another piece of rubbish went in the bin'" [Paul, 30s]). It also generates shame for being a burden to their family. Many speak of parents who are sick with grief, partners who are estranged, younger siblings who shut themselves away or drop out of school. Especially with regard to younger children or siblings, the anxiety about the kind of influence they exert is evident. One of the greatest pains of detention is related to the inability of incarcerated individuals to mourn for what is lost:

"I was inside when my mother died. They wouldn't let me attend the funeral. Every year on this day, I cover myself up and just lie there, not saying a word" [Peter, 40s]

"All my life I've used those hands to build; to provide for my family. I've been working since I was 12. I have no idea what to do with my hands in here. I'm a burden to my own children. I'm useless. I'm nothing" [John, 40s]

Relationships are seriously challenged by incarceration. Not only do ruptures occur, but also real or imaginary reconnections, as incarcerated individuals renegotiate experiences of abuse, often perpetrated by primary caregivers (Efstratoglou & Koulaouzides, 2024). When referring to these relationships narrators express gratitude for not only surviving the trauma,

but for becoming who they are, thanks to the perpetrator. This usually concerns the father, an older brother acting on his behalf, or a teacher. The following extract from the research journal is indicative:

> Two students are sitting in the courtyard as it begins to rain. They are older than most of the students in the school, and usually withdrawn. I greet them with a smile as I pass by. The student I had never heard speaking in class (nor would I hear him again, as he left the school that same day) calls out to me and says:
>
> - They call me a snitch. I'm going to crash them. This (points to school) is a joke compared to this (points to prison). A kindergarten. I never went to school. I learned to read and write here, from you all. I used to leave my bag at school and go to work. That's how tall I was (points to the height of an imaginary kid, who comes up to our waist). I used to work in construction. Along with my father. He used to lift me up to get there; (shows a little above his height). You can't imagine the beatings. He was very strict. They called him a gorilla. He was. Once, I stole a cardinal from a cage. I brought it home with me and it was singing. He heard it. He used to catch birds himself. He says, 'Where did you find it? I want to find one too.' I told him... We went over, we waited for a while... Then I said, 'I am sorry. I lied.' He was mumbling as we took me to put it back where I had found it. I said 'I am sorry'. And he did this to me. (He shows me a scar on his hand that's very deep). He did it like this. (He shows me how he bit him).
>
> - And what did you learn from that?
>
> - I didn't steal again. He was very strict. But I'm proud.

As time goes by, and people who are incarcerated become increasingly disconnected from pre-prison social worlds their efforts to build relationships in which their struggle is recognised, share common values and draw material and moral support is increasingly directed towards the prison society. Apart from relationships of intimacy, wider communities are formed on the basis of shared origin or a common tradition (e.g. thieves in law) who share values that are not easily translated and have great symbolic power. Yet, the harsh discipline they rely upon leaves important needs uncovered, such as needs for tenderness or sharing of weakness. These are often met by mentally escaping from the institution. Late in the evening, when the prison is quiet, or at dawn before it wakes up, people find the opportunity to have imaginary conversations with loved ones (mostly parents and grandparents who have died or children who are estranged):

"My biggest motivation has always been my father. And whenever I find myself in the wrong, late at night, I apologise to him". [Paul, 30s, first time]

"I have another vice, you know. Every night, when I go to bed, I take stock of the day. What I said yes to, what I said no to. A good deed I did. For my late grandmother used to say. 'No robe can soothe your sin. Can you do one good deed each day?' I believe I do". [Steve, early 40s, in and out since his 20s]

"I understand Hamlet. I've been in his position many times… Having to imagine someone who is not there to help me get on a path". [Peter, 40s, in and out since he was a kid]

People with very long sentences occasionally lose the ability to make realistic plans, like Steve, who has just turned 40 and has been in and out of prison since his 20s, mostly for property crimes:

"3,000 days in prison and still counting. All the emotions a human being can imagine on the outside, a prisoner experiences every day. I 'll talk about myself. Malandrino prison is in a trough, in Lidoriki. The tallest tree is a parsley tree. Skinny cows. Only planes pass by.

You don't hear a thing. You only hear the swallows coming in the spring. I have read lots of books. Not stuff like the ones you 'd pick[3]. Dostoyevsky, that sort of thing, highbrow culture... Rather a lot of anthropology. How the joints work... How the brain works... Nature documentaries. Psychoanalysis. Over the years, you put on airs. You go nuts. Sometimes you feel young... old... ugly... beautiful. Truth is, I'm getting old. I feel like I've completed my cycle… What they call life. Hopefully, I'm gonna be released. If I don't get transferred. What will I do then... I'll see. I will definitely go to a mountain. Without a tv set. Without a thing".

This also applies to very young incarcerated individuals facing life sentences, as testified by mothers who spoke to us:

"Do you know what my son tells me? 'When I get out, I want a little room with a door that closes. And I want you to go from time to time to the supermarket to fill it with food'".

"My boy says 'I want the two of us to get in a car together. I want us to go to an island and stay there- looking at the sea, all day long'".

5.2. From coping to hoping

The first impressions students share about the school refer to its warm atmosphere and the fact that no strict precautions are in place regarding human contact. Many use the metaphor of "a candle lighting a very dark place", or "a breath of fresh air inside a room that's full of mould", to express what the school represents in prison. In what follows we also draw from interviews with experienced school educators and school principals to describe what teaching in prison means to them, how they manage to disavow what they describe as 'alienating' pedagogical practices of mainstream education and build relationships with incarcerated students based on caring and trust, within an institutional space devoid of both.

Educators with many years of experience in formal education explain that in the prison school they enjoy things they have been deprived of. For example, the feeling of time abundance that allows people to listen carefully to each other, instead of being caught up in a frantic race to cover what is prescribed by the formal curriculum. "They consider me as one of their own", a school principal told us. "I don't solve problems. I just listen, with genuine interest. My door is always open. I never say, 'go away'".

An educator stated: "When I was in school, school was a nightmare. It is important for students to see that we can learn and have fun at the same time. It's also very important that someone cares. For many students, teachers are the only people they get to see besides their lawyer in years, you know. It is important that they see people with whom they can talk about something other than prison. About volcanoes, about the moon, about math".

Most experienced educators believe that it is crucial for prison educators to at least be able to imagine the conditions of their students' daily lives that they rarely talk about. To get a sense of what it means to attend school when you have been kept awake all night by fear, or when you are hungry. Others speak highly of both emotional and physical contact. "School is a hug", two educators say, almost simultaneously, attaching both a metaphorical and a literal meaning to the phrase. "We express ourselves as humans, not robots. I can't imagine not being able to hug". "He is like a father to me", says a former student who

[3] By "you" he means "the educated", in general.

unexpectedly meets his teacher in the new prison where he has been transferred. “He gave me his shoulder to cry on when I lost my mother. People don’t cry here, you know”.

When asked about his teaching method a science educator admitted:

“I am trying to influence them emotionally, more than intellectually. I don’t care if they remember Newton’s first or second law. What I care about is, using the laws of physics and haggling over ideas, theories, and different perceptions of the world, to present them with possibilities. To show that a man has many sides. He may think like this, like that... He is allowed to change, to make mistakes, to get up, to fall down. The science does it- theories are constantly reconsidered. Religion does it. The law does it. We do it. I do it. So, I try to show that life is not one-sided. That’s where I get more emotional. I deconstruct myself. I don’t mind saying things that might come back to haunt me. I try to capture them... not from the head. But from the heart”.

Of course, not all teachers have the same attitudes, nor the same commitment. And there are students who maintain their pessimism until the end. “What’s the point of coming here, if I have to return to the bars every noon?”, asks a student who dropped out of school shortly after his mother’s death. “I’d rather do something with my hands, than learn all this theoretical stuff. Will they be of use when I am released?”, says another.

The priority given by some students to the practicality of knowledge is perfectly understandable in the context of their biographies that are characterised by a constant struggle for survival, both before, in and beyond prison (Efstratoglou & Koulaouzides, 2024). At the same time, most of the students with whom we spoke, evaluated their experience in the school, predominantly in moral terms. As an opportunity that allows them to remain human, in an inhuman space, and even hope that they might get a real chance in life, upon release.

A young girl’s testimony, recorded in the research journal, stands out. Tanya grew up in Afghanistan. As a child, she was not allowed, by Taliban law, to even pass outside of a school. She was taken to prison directly from the refugee camp. Her daughter went to school as an infant, in the prison in Thebes. “Tell our Afghans in Larissa prison”, she says to me when the school bell rings, “not to give up.” She doesn’t complain about anything. She wears coloured buns, writes everything in a pink notebook (perhaps the first that she gets to fill in her life) and smiles broadly.

6. Conclusion

Our study set out to explore how imprisonment influences adult learning, what returning to school while in prison means to those who participate, and whether there is any place for anti-oppressive pedagogies inside prison. Interestingly, participation in education was not judged by the students in terms of improving prospects of re-integration. Nor was it judged by the educators in terms of whether students critically reflected upon fundamental assumptions or were somehow transformed. In line with previous studies on alternative school settings (Meo & Tarabini, 2020; te Riele et al., 2017), priorities of a different kind emerged that focused, instead, on the quality of the educational relationship. We proposed that in order for us to understand its weight we need to examine it in the wider context of students’ biographies and their experience of incarceration.

Students with whom we kept contact years after their release attributed the strength of this relationship to educators’ persistent efforts to see beyond the world in which they had

grown up. In terms of classroom discourse, this would mean, as Freire (1993) suggests, discovering the actual weight of what were to them, initially, rather abstract concepts (like inequality, injustice, systemic violence), through developing a better understanding of students' lived realities. It is the educators' gradual transformation, on the basis of such recognition, that provides students with a rare example. Educators seem to do what Freire describes as "crossing over to the other side of the street" from which their students may also, if they so wish, begin their own journey (Shor & Freire, 1987). Nobody assumed, though, let alone insisted, that they *ought* do so.

This is a really delicate art that takes years and quite some courage to master. Educators struggle to listen beyond institutional silence; read beyond the surface of their students' behaviour. They struggle to care, within institutionally prescribed prohibitions on relationships with those imprisoned, thus resisting wide-spread prison norms that depersonalize, deprive of hope and devalue (Wright, 2004). The importance of care is often highlighted within research concerning Second Chance Schools. Educators reject the bureaucratization of mainstream schooling, insisting on seeing their students not as 'numbers', but as people with distinct social and educational trajectories that have affected both their sense of selves and their view of the world. In the educators' view, Meo and Tarabini (2020) note, "SCS should be 'safety nets' not only in physical and material terms, but also, and above all, in emotional terms, as spaces where young people feel respected and represented and where they feel they belong" (p. 7). For many, teaching is understood as a political act (te Riele et al., 2017).

Most educators whose classes we observed, seemed uncertain of their work's influence in terms of knowledge acquisition, yet quite proud of the warm emotional climate they help to establish in a space devoid of warmth. This support extends beyond emotions, contributing also to students' social empowerment. "Our students, many of whom have grandchildren, are given the chance for the first time in their life to voice their opinion on a public matter. To read, to write, to cast a vote. And we are talking about rehabilitation…", says the principal of the Second Chance School in the women prison of Thebes.

Carlen (2012) suggests that when aspirational criminal justice concepts are treated as achievable without addressing deeper social changes, they evolve into penal imaginaries that hinder critical examination. Rehabilitation, for example, is identified as one such penal imaginary, largely irrelevant to many individuals currently incarcerated, who lack a prior stable foundation to which they can be rehabilitated. The moral significance of the educational relationship lies in acknowledging this inherently unsolvable paradox and affirming that its resolution matters.

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