

# Learning and Teaching Behind Bars

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Education in prison<sup>1</sup> has a long history. From the early days of the institution in the late 1700s, it has evolved from moral education and spiritual guidance to diverse approaches and practices today. As the modern prison spread, so did the numbers it housed. Currently, there are more than 11 million people in penal institutions worldwide (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). While mass incarceration raises profound ethical questions, in the educational context, the unique environment of the prison creates a range of challenges. This research digest begins with considering how the objectives of the early iteration of the prison allowed for a conception of education to meet these aims. It examines how educators have tried to carve out the space for pedagogy as the prison expanded, policy developed, and the context in which education operated changed. It provides an overview of some recent developments in education behind bars, and concludes that a holistic approach to education is essential in order to meet the needs of the learner group.

## The Evolution of Education in Prison

Early forms of incarceration held prisoners in congregate settings. These were considered schools for vice where young and first-time prisoners could be trained in unlawful activity by more seasoned criminals. To avoid this, it was argued that prisoners should be housed separately in cells. The solution was the penitentiary, a place of repentance and solitude. In the early days of the penitentiary, education of prisoners was a moral undertaking. Educators were mainly inspired by religious faith and motivated by charitable and philanthropic endeavours. They believed that participating in criminal activity was not only breaking the law but was also committing a

sin. Therefore, moral education was necessary to divert prisoners from their criminal activity. For some, prison as an instrument of punishment was the ultimate educational technique. Opened in 1829, the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was designed with individual cells, as “[t]otal solitude before God was supposed to effect a conversion of the criminal’s moral sensibilities” (Schmid, 2003, p. 554).

The earliest provision of education in prison in North America was through the Sabbath Schools. Chaplains attended on Sundays to read the Bible through the cell door. Being the only reading material allowed, the Bible served “as a spelling book and grammar, in addition to its religious purpose” (Gehring & Rennie, 2008, p. 176). Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845), a middle-class and well-connected English Quaker began organizing educational activities at London’s Newgate Prison in 1817. These included scripture readings to prisoners, and such were their popularity, tickets were issued to visitors to observe (Cooper, 1981). James Patrick Organ (1825–1869), teacher and Inspector of Discharged Convicts in Ireland pioneered a humanistic approach to education. He believed that his teaching would help prisoners in the “development of their minds, and to give them matter for thought,” and “to arrive at the mind, by exciting the curiosity; to arrive at the heart, by showing the men that we all feel a desire in common to receive those who have erred from the path of rectitude.” In keeping with many of the policymakers and educationalists in the Western World at the time, Organ thought that religion was an “all-powerful agent” and “should form the basis of reformation” (Organ, as cited in McNally, 2019, pp. 49–50).

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, prison is used as a generic term for prisons, jails, and correctional institutions.

## Policy and Pedagogy

As the prison began to be used more widely, its failings became apparent. Reform movements emerged, which encouraged and nurtured the provision of education (Muth, 2008). By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, practically every jurisdiction in the world had integrated some form of education into its prisons. Policy statements and new approaches followed. International and regional declarations and conventions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries dealt specifically with education for prisoners, or pledged to provide universal education for all. The 2016 iteration of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (originally adopted in 1955 and now referred to as the Nelson Mandela Rules) state that:

Provision shall be made for the further education of all prisoners capable of profiting thereby, including religious instruction in the countries where this is possible. The education of illiterate prisoners and of young prisoners shall be compulsory and special attention shall be paid to it by the prison administration.

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.

Recreational and cultural activities shall be provided in all prisons for the benefit of the mental and physical health of prisoners. (Rules 104-5)

Various regional declarations such as the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948), the African Union's Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2013) pledge to provide education for all. The transnational organization to address education in prison most comprehensively is the 46-member Council of Europe. Going further than the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules, their policy document *Education in Prison* (1990) promotes a holistic approach to education:

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.

Education for prisoners should be like the education provided for similar age-groups in the outside world, and the range of learning opportunities for prisoners should be as wide as possible. (Council of Europe, 1990, p.4)

These policies aim for a wide and comprehensive program of education. However, recent research has identified a divergence between the commitments professed

in international and regional declarations and policy conventions, and the ways in which these obligations have (or have not) translated into the provision of education in prison (Behan, 2021). With a few notable exceptions, the recommendations and minimum standards have not been fully embraced by state, provincial, or national policy makers, which in turn can impact negatively on local practice. This can be due to a lack of resources, challenges in overcoming the rules and regulations governing penal institutions, absence of political commitment, and debates about what constitutes education.

## Place, People and Politics

As with all forms of pedagogy, education in prison is not a neutral activity that is independent of the context in which it operates. The type of education offered is influenced by historical, social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Teaching and learning behind bars encounters many of the issues associated with education outside. However, being located in a coercive environment exacerbates the challenges learners and educators face in engaging in pedagogy. First and foremost is the nature of prison itself, with rules, regulations and its disciplinary function, which can work to complicate, and at times hinder, the provision of education in prison.

As with all educational practice, educators in prison take into consideration the characteristics of their student population. Many have specific needs due to their educational history, life course and personal issues. It is widely recognized that throughout the world certain demographics are over-represented in prisons. A disproportionate number of people from working class areas, ethnic minorities, indigenous populations and marginalized communities are arrested for wrong doing, prosecuted, tried and subsequently imprisoned (Behan, 2018). Further, many of those who end up within the criminal justice system have significantly lower levels of traditional educational attainment in the form of accredited examinations. Many prisoners left school early, or had their learning disrupted, and continue to have difficulties engaging in a literate (both written and digital) world.

There are a number of issues that need consideration in order to meet the needs of students in prison. A comprehensive analysis is not possible due to the

limitations of space, so what follows are some of the more recent developments.

The levels of literacy (both written and numerical) among prisoners have been a cause for concern for a long time in the United States and internationally, with diverse strategies devised to meet the needs of students (Harlow, 2003; Muth, 2007). While these should not be neglected, digital literacy is perhaps one of the most challenging issues facing educators and learners today. Restricted access to the internet is the norm in most prisons around the world and has become a significant impediment to learning and teaching behind bars. Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) concluded that prisoners constitute “one of the most impoverished groups in the digital age” (p.771). Digital skills are not only vital in education, but they are also an essential part of participation in modern society. Prisoners are at the sharp end of the digital divide, with students having little or no internet access, limited computer hardware, and restricted access to academic library materials (Dent, 2022). Farley and Hopkins (2017) have studied incarcerated students’ attempts to complete post-secondary distance courses without internet access. They highlight what they see as the contrast between offering prisoners educational opportunities while denying them the materials, resources and access that they need in order to participate fully. This dichotomy, Farley and Hopkins (2017) argue, “encourages rehabilitation through education, while effectively cutting prisoners off from the wider digital world” (p. 391). While prisons by their nature restrict freedom of movement, prisoners who want to fully embrace educational opportunities are curtailed by lack of independent access to online resources that are an essential part of the modern learning process.

Along with the acute need to develop strategies to provide adult basic education to many people who end up in prison, at the other end of the learning continuum there has been a burgeoning of interest in the provision of university education. In the United States with the availability, suspension and reintroduction of Pell Grants for students in prison (Turner, 2023), many universities took the initiative while they were not available and established Inside-Out programs. Initiated in 1997, these programs bring college students and incarcerated learners together for semester-long modules. Inside-Out now has more than 1,500 trained instructors in the United States and worldwide, with prison and higher education

institution collaboration already creating opportunities for more than 65,000 inside and outside learners (Inside-Out Center, 2025). The optimism that college education inspires should not be underestimated. It was summed up by a student in the Emerson Prison Initiative—a partnership between Emerson College in Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Corrections:

A prison sentence can feel like walking down a tunnel. Life is constricted, and for many, the light at the end appears to be out of reach. At the very least, a college education provides light within that tunnel, a sense of direction. For me, college has made the tunnel into a hallway, lined with the doors of opportunities that college presents. (Alexander X. as cited in Gellman, 2022, p.185)

In 2015 similar programs were introduced in the United Kingdom and elsewhere under the banner of the Learning Together initiative. They bring learners in prison and probation settings together with students in higher education institutions. The objective of studying together is to learn with, and from each other, through dialogue and the sharing of experience (Ludlow et al., 2019). These collaborative programs have an added element. They challenge perceptions among different categories of students and promote engagement and dialogue between inside and outside learners.

Another challenge facing the provision of education in prison is on the political front. Some politicians and policymakers oppose the provision of holistic education to prisoners for monetary and political reasons. Others on ideological grounds. In some jurisdictions education provision can focus on training and skills-based subjects in the hope of preparing prisoners for employment after they are released. This perspective, in essence, views education in prison, not as a right, but as a means to an end. Training is reframed as education. However, this approach leads to a narrower skills-focussed curriculum, with the success or otherwise determined by measures such as the rate of job placement, and level of recidivism among students. It neglects or downplays the structural impediments to achieving these objectives and fails to appreciate the impact of imprisonment on a student’s life chances, regardless of the level of education achieved in prison. Gehring and Rennie (2008) argue that “correctional educators and others should be discouraged from using recidivism as a measure of program success” and remind practitioners that “[i]nstead of focussing on recidivism measures, correctional educators should define

student-orientated effectiveness measures. If we do not do this, someone else will continue to write the rules” (pp.170-171). If educators do not write the rules, others might redefine education to suit political and economic agendas and subsequently undermine the provision of a holistic program of education in prison.

## Conclusion

With so many people imprisoned worldwide, the impact of incarceration ripples far beyond prison walls. While the rates of imprisonment vary widely between countries and across jurisdictions, the education of prisoners needs to be analysed in wider contexts than what goes on in the classroom. This includes examining who is imprisoned, the conditions of confinement for students, and how penal policies impact on the provision of education. Essentially,

we need to consider the role of punishment and the use of prison in modern society. Further, we need to examine the type of education that is offered to students in prison.

Education is about liberation, which in essence is contrary to the objectives of confinement. In punitive, coercive regimes that dominate in the modern prison, educators remain conscious of the damage that prison does to people. Education in prison can lessen some of that damage, and as outlined by the student from the Emerson Prison Initiative there are positive examples of learners who have successfully overcome obstacles to eke out the space for pedagogy. Teaching and learning in prison will always be a challenge. However, as with teaching outside, educators focus on the positives, endeavour to build communities of learning, and strive to enable inclusion in the hope of a better future for their students.

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