Education in prison: Studying through distance learning

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Emma Hughes examines the diverse motivations of inmates undertaking distance learning through a study on 47 students' educational backgrounds and personal histories. An introduction to distance learning in the UK, as well as the methodology and the nature of the study, are presented in chapter 1. The research employed questionnaires in nine English prisons in the Prisoners' Education Trust programme.¹

Chapter 2 (Motivation for Education in Prison) explores students' motivations for undertaking education in prison. Although some of the students had been successful in their educational careers prior to their incarceration (the prison elites described by Stephen Duguid (2000),² a well-known prison education researcher), many had not been successful. Indeed, there is great diversity among inmates, who were exposed to different values pertaining to education.

In addition, the author correctly notes that there is no theoretical consensus on motivation. She gathers students' own perceptions and understandings. Inmates see education as the acquisition of the skills and qualifications required for a specific job. Students also use education in an attempt to counter the negativity and stigma often associated with a prison record (p. 30). The author asks relevant questions such as whether the elite image of the educational milieu could prevent some inmates from studying (p. 31). How did some of those initially not interested in education become involved? Her answer: as a "response to their immediate surroundings and circumstances" (p. 33).

¹ For more information about the Prisoners' Education Trust, visit <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/> [accessed 15 October 2020].

² Duguid, S. (2000). *Can prisons work?: The prisoner as object and subject in modern corrections*. University of Toronto Press.

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Inmates express the desire to undertake a real transformation and show an interest in solving personal problems and even in becoming counsellors. As the author underlines, education can be used as a way to cope with the more negative aspects of the prison sentence (p. 40). The multiple and overlapping factors involved cannot be seen in isolation. For many students, education “is seen as a currency that the Parole Board³ will value” for an eventual release.

In chapter 3 (Disincentives for Education in Prison), the author examines the factors that block education in prison such as the reduction of “wages” (an incentive bonus) paid for pursuing an education. One of the main problems impeding inmate education is substance abuse dependency, which is addressed with the Drug Therapeutic Community (DTC) system, an institutional treatment programme in prison. The author presents some addiction recovery testimonies (p. 47). For some, prison is even the last chance to “beat the alcohol” (p. 50). This is a turning point that often leads to education. This perspective of change is significant, since it overcomes deterministic views in this field of research. The author highlights the importance of fellow prisoners as peer tutors in prison (p. 54) and also emphasises the importance of tutoring in literacy as noted in the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report on prison education in 2005 (Hughes, p. 138).

Prison policies have an impact on prisons and especially on the lives of inmates. Regarding prison policies, the author compiles some views that actually see education “wages” as discouraging inmates from taking courses; as one inmate puts it, “Education is the worst paid job in prison” (p. 56). As Hughes notes, this discrepancy generates an unfair competition with work, which potentially devalues education (p. 59).

Through inmates’ testimonies, Hughes identifies a policy denounced by Warner and Costelloe (2014),⁴ namely the gradual reduction of the education offer in the last decades. The variety of available courses is continuing to shrink. Basic skills classes are prioritised and humanities classes are discontinued. This neoliberal tendency targets skills for economic development in the global era (p. 62). However, even cuts in vocational education have been reported (p. 62).

The author identifies demotivating factors such as the lack of information, permissions and prison officers’ negative attitudes and lack of cooperation. This aspect is important, since governors and education managers can influence and improve the education climate in prison. These actors have the ability to create a culture supportive of learning (p. 77), as Hodkinson (2004) put it (Hughes, p. 126).

Chapter 4 (Experiences of Education: Coping with Prison and Changes in Self-perception) is an overview of how participation in education helps students cope with the negative effects of imprisonment. Education helps them manage their time in prison and build their identity. Hughes presents the testimonies of students who

³ The function of a parole board is to make decisions about a prisoner’s release “on parole” (i.e. subject to specified conditions) after at least a minimum portion of their sentence has been served as stipulated by the sentencing judge.

⁴ Warner, K., & Costelloe, A. (2014). Prison education across Europe: Policy, practice, politics. *London Review of Education*, 12(2), 175–183.

have finally found enjoyment in learning, which is crucial for individuals who have a negative view of school (p. 88). This reminds us of French pedagogue Philippe Meirieu's pleasure of learning (2015).⁵ Education provides inmates with a sense of responsibility while allowing them to envision a positive future after release (p. 108). Education provides self-confidence and opportunities to be creative and "resist institutionalisation" (p. 93). This is an important statement to surpass superficial views based on the philosophies of Michel Foucault, who saw prison education as institutional control (Rangel 2019).⁶

Chapter 5 (Experiences of Education: The Role of "Others", Prison-based Challenges and Building a Culture of Learning) tackles the role of "others" in helping inmates study. People outside prison noted the change in inmates' personality, which in turn made them feel more accepted by outsiders (p. 114). This kind of change is important, and yet it goes unnoticed by conventional researchers and educators, who consider these personality changes as belonging to the psychological realm, outside of the scope of education. The author underlines the importance of the culture of learning and how prison officers can play a significant role in helping inmate students sustain their educational progress (pp. 130–137). This role of prison officers can foster the development of a distance education learning community in the prison (p. 140). This issue deserves further development.

In chapter 6 (Future Course of Action), the author explores recidivist studies and cautiously affirms that reduction in reoffence is attributable to education in prison (p. 145). The author cites the MacKenzie (2006)⁷ meta-analytical study, which shows such a correlation between recidivism and prison education (pp. 147–150). That said, it would have been useful to have specific cases of non-recidivism presented in this chapter.

In sum, Hughes' book constitutes an excellent work on prison learning. The study openly advocates distance learning, which is an important asset since it is badly needed in the difficult prison context and particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. Hughes' research is interesting not only from a criminological point of view, but also from inter- and trans-disciplinary angles. Her study is well-documented and covers a wide range of prison issues. The author tried not only to understand the inmates' slang, but also to gain deep insights and confidences. This refreshingly human approach does not lessen its scientific value.

⁵ Meirieu, P. (2014). *Le plaisir d'apprendre*. Paris: Autrement.

⁶ Rangel, H. (2019). Cooperation and education in prison: A policy against the tide in the Latin American penitentiary crisis. *International Review of Education*, 65(5), 785–809. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9747-5>.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁷ MacKenzie, D. L. (2006). *What works in corrections: Reducing the criminal activities of offenders and delinquents*. New York: Cambridge University Press.