

Chapter 61

Prison Education in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Prison education in Europe differs across countries and jurisdictions. While there are some common features that link the countries of Europe together, this chapter examines the similarities and differences across a range of jurisdictions linked more by geography than ideology in prison education programs. It begins by locating imprisonment in its wider social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Due to the characteristics of the particular learner group and unique environment, this chapter contends that a more informal, non-traditional approach to education is necessary to realize the potential for education in prison. It examines how the space for pedagogy can be achieved in coercive environments by positioning prison education within an adult education approach and concludes with some recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Penal action against vulnerable groups does not generate integration or social stability, let alone produce law-abiding citizens. Mass incarceration of the poor causes yet more marginalization, exclusion and community disorganization, ... destabilizing and tearing apart the very fabric that it purports to mend. (Ruggerio, 2016, p. 385)

Prisoners are people who have been failed. Many have had a long history of failure at home, at school, at work, and at establishing human relationships. It is unrealistic to expect that prison can achieve what better-placed institutions in society have failed to do. Neither are prisons like laundries where what is wrong, personally and socially can be washed away. (Whitaker, 1985, p. 91)

Prison education in Europe differs across countries and jurisdictions. The ideology underpinning it is not homogenous, nor is its practice uniform. While there are some common characteristics that link the countries of Europe together, this chapter will examine both the similarities and differences across a range of jurisdictions linked more by geography than ideology in prison education programs. As with

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all pedagogy, education in prison is not a neutral technology that can be removed from the context in which it operates. It must be considered in the wider social, political, economic and cultural context. Prison education has the added dynamic of taking place behind walls, cut off from the public gaze, and influenced by unique institutional culture/s.

Due to the wide range of jurisdictions, and recognising that “comparisons across cultures and societies are inevitably reductions” (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012, p. 5), this chapter takes a thematic approach to sketch out the contours of education in prison across a broad and diverse continent. It uses examples from various jurisdictions to explore these themes, but acknowledges that with limited space, this is by no means exhaustive. When examining the philosophy underpinning prison education, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of political economy and penal policy, including the emotional tone of debates around punishment and prisoners, which impacts on the ideological framework and practice of education in prison. The provision of education in prison reveals something of the nature of penal policy in individual jurisdictions and indicates whether it is built around a punitive or rehabilitative/reformative approach to punishment.

BACKGROUND

This chapter analyzes international and European declarations and conventions that inform the provision of prison education in Europe, while recognizing that the objectives set out in these policies do not always materialise in practice. Despite the differences, there are a number of similar issues to contend with for educators and learners in prison across the various jurisdictions. These include an appreciation of the social class and marginalization of the learner group and their level of education; debates around the definition of prison education; accessing education; resources for special groups of prisoners, in particular foreign prisoners and prisoners on protection/segregation, and the professional and organizational supports available to prison educators. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the potential for pedagogy in prison. Due to the characteristics of the particular learner group and unique features of imprisonment, this chapter contends that a more informal, non-traditional approach to education is necessary to create spaces for freedom and creativity in coercive environments. This conclusion challenges the prevailing penal ideology in many European jurisdictions.

PENAL POLICY IN EUROPE

Although it is influenced by national educational policy, the underlying ethos of education in prison – whether explicitly or implicitly – primarily emanates from penal policy in individual jurisdictions. To understand the ideology underpinning prison education in such a diverse continent, we must begin by considering local characteristics and penal culture of particular jurisdictions which impact on the practice of education. Penal policy across Europe ranges from neo-liberal jurisdictions such as England and Wales with a ‘Law and Order’ ideology and exclusionary attitude toward prisoners, to countries such as Germany, Italy and France with mixed modes of punishment and the dominant penal ideology being rehabilitation/resocialization, to comparatively more liberal countries such as Norway and Sweden with a rights-based framework for prisoners and a more inclusionary approach to punishment (Cavadino & Dignan, 2006, p. 15). Perhaps the most acute demonstration of the difference in penal policy and modes of

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