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Frédéric Armstrong

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Thankfully, the COVID-19 pandemic has somewhat receded and it seems that prison education programs have resumed more or less normally in September. The fatigue and backlogs of the past three years may not have fully subsided yet and we hope that your workplaces are beginning to see better days.

While this tumultuous period has disrupted prison learning environments, it has also allowed for the development of digitally enabled remote education projects in many places around the world. These pioneering initiatives should be given special attention by managers to make prison education more diverse and inclusive. Meanwhile, the Chair continues to work to bring you the latest developments in prison education initiatives and research. Our “Meaning and Impact” research project is entering its final phase, as co-investigators Frédéric Armstrong and Lyne Bisson are currently working on the analysis of data collected from incarcerated learners in Quebec prisons

Lifelong learning is a fundamental objective for the sustainable development of societies around the world and our encounters with the people who make it happen are an illustration of this. We are committed not only to disseminating and supporting research on education within the field of prison and post-prison institutions, but we also want to contribute to raising public awareness of the importance of education in prison by emphasizing the human side of this reality. We hope that the interviews with French prison education researcher [Fanny Salane](#) and Quebec learner [José Skilling](#), an entrepreneur-poet, will inspire you.

We must unfortunately close by mentioning, with great regret, the departure of our incumbent, Geneviève Perreault, who is now the director of the Terrebonne campus of the Cégep Régional de Lanaudière. We will miss her expertise, her enthusiasm and her rigour, and we wish her the best of luck in her new position! We will share more details on what comes next in our winter newsletter, which is scheduled for February 2023.

Until then, follow us on Twitter [@unesco_prison](#) for a weekly update on research and innovative practices in prison education.

Enjoy!



Call for Papers – Société de criminologie du Québec Congress

The next Société de Criminologie du Québec Congress will be held from October 4 to 6, 2023 at the Victorin Hotel in Victoriaville under the theme of new justice practices in the context of a virtual shift. Researchers, students, practitioners, managers, decision-makers, etc. are invited to submit a proposal for a paper that fits into one of the sub-themes presented on the Society's website.

More details at <https://www.societecrimino.qc.ca/fr/appel-a-communication>

A First Step for the European STEP Project

The STEP (Supporting Distance Training and Education in Prison) project, led by Sofia Antonelli, in collaboration with Francesca Biondi, Carla Cangeri, Maria Serena Costantini and Maria Vittoria Tatangelo, has recently wrapped up an important part of its first phase by producing a report on the state of technology-enhanced learning (e-learning) in prisons in France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. This report should be published shortly and we will summarize it in the next newsletter.

Until then, you can read about the STEP project and its objectives here:

<https://www.progettolinc.it/2022/04/20/progetto-step/#>, STEP | Facebook

See also: <http://changeschances.com/step-article-by-sofia-antonelli/>

A Pilot Project for Civic and Vocational Education in Prisons in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The *Youth for Peace DRC* network, whose mission is to “promote the participation of Congolese youth in peace and development efforts and processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo” (DRC), celebrated the International Day of Peace on September 21 at the Bukavu Central Prison in the province of South Kivu by organizing an informal civic education activity as part of its Civic Education Program in prisons. Some of the network's member organizations were represented, including *Foyer de Paix Grands Lacs*, Action pour la Promotion de la Paix et le Développement Intégral (APPDI), *Génération Épanouie*, the Club des Amis de la Paix et du Développement (CAPD) and *Free Média RDC*.

This pilot project of civic education in prisons mobilizes civil society youth organizations to become agents of change and peace for the eastern part of the DRC. According to *Human Right Watch*, the political and security situation remains critical in this region under siege, particularly in North Kivu and Ituri, in order to counter armed foreign and national terrorist groups that engage in looting, massacres, sexual violence against women and forced recruitment of children.

Bukavu Central Prison is plagued by population problems (more than 1,800 inmates, five times its capacity) and ineffective legal processes (64% of the prison population is on remand awaiting trial and education and social reintegration programs are all but absent). Ninety percent of the prison population is under the age of 35 and includes women and children, in addition to former child soldiers. The DRC's prisons are major sites of suffering and sexual violence, as evidenced by the September 2020 riots at Kasapa prison. Lack of food and medicine are also part of their daily lives.



Photo Credit: Divin Cirimwami

This pilot project of civic education in prisons will initially target 400 inmates of the Bukavu Central Prison to interact with them in a supportive manner and aims to promote positive change among them. In the absence of national programs for the supervision of detainees in the DRC, Youth For Peace DRC, thanks to the contribution of its member organizations and the support of potential partners, will develop three specific areas: civic education, sexual and reproductive health education, and social and professional reintegration (artistic expression and initiation into various trades such as painting, culinary arts, hairdressing, knitting, etc.). The project seeks to bring out the talents of the inmates and to contribute to the reduction of recidivism rates once their sentence is completed and to rehabilitate them in a post-war context in order to increase their contribution to the development of the country.

PORTRAIT OF A RESEARCHER:

FANNY SALANE



Photo Credit: Fanny Salane

Fanny Salane is a lecturer in education and training sciences at the University of Paris Nanterre, France. She is deputy director of the Centre de Recherches Éducation et Formation (Cref). She has just published *L'éducation en prison. Revue de littérature francophone (UNESCO, 2021)*. She became interested in the field of education after studying pure mathematics. After doctoral studies on the experience of first generation university students, she devoted herself to studying the experience of students incarcerated in prisons in France. She is now working on the professional paths of teachers in prison. She shares with us her background, her reflections on education in prison and on the practice of research in prison

The following remarks were collected on September 26, 2022, during a videoconference between Frédérick Armstrong, Marc-André Lacelle and Fanny Salane. They have been edited and abridged for clarity.



Marc-André Lacelle (MAL)

What led you to the issue of prison education?

Fanny Salane (FS)

I did not enter this field through the "prison" issue. What interested me, at the beginning, was the question of the construction of the student identity for people who were not "heirs", to use Bourdieu's term. Today, we would speak of class defectors. In my previous work, I had been interested in the children of farmers who were the first in their families to come to college. In researching this,



I found that the issue of prison education was really under-researched and that the issue of higher education was not at all. What interested me first was how you construct yourself as a student in an environment that is out of the ordinary.

MAL

The impact of formal education in prison is fairly well known, but could you share your findings on the effects of non-formal and informal education in prison?

FS

I think that the impact of the different types of education must be considered in conjunction. The inmates I met were very involved in their studies, so we were in formal education. But, on the other hand, there were many who participated in theatre clubs or who were active in the prison's newspaper. Others were hired as librarians in the prison and could accompany other inmates. In this context, these people play the role of public writers; they help other prisoners to write their letters, to perhaps understand court decisions.

So, we can clearly see that we cannot separate the different forms of education and that these forms of education, they feed each other, they interact.

In formal education, there is not necessarily room for everyone. Not everyone who wants to can enroll and, moreover, the profile of the detainees means that most of the time they have a rather complicated relationship with the school institution, because of their school experience and their previous trajectory, so not everyone wants to go back to school, for many reasons, for questions of self-esteem, the fear of experiencing new humiliations, because they don't necessarily see the point. The reflection around non-formal and informal education mechanisms or projects is extremely important.

Frédéric Armstrong (FA)

You say that people who are incarcerated often have a negative history with formal education, do you find that people who ended up in school in prison find those experiences highly negative?

FS

In my survey, I met adults who were in higher education, so they had an extremely positive relationship with school. This does not mean that they had not had painful experiences in their schooling 30 or 40 years earlier. But when I met them, they were really in a process of reparation, of vindication, as much social as academic.

And since I met them and they were in a course, it means that they had managed to hang on and therefore they had also managed to overcome, either the fact of coming by default, or the fact of coming to get out of their cell.

The only motivation that would be, for example, to get reprieves because when you graduate or enroll in a course, you can get reprieves, that's not enough, because there are too many barriers for that to be the only reason.

The relationship to school for minors is much more complex. In particular, because there is an obligation to attend school, which also applies in detention for those under 16 years of age, or a very strong incentive, which can reactivate negative relationships in juvenile detainees to the world of school, to the school institution and its representatives, i.e. the teachers.

As for the adults, it is clear that it is almost an "ideal" population. The term is probably a bit strong, but in any case, they are present, they do the work that is asked of them. For the teachers, it's often actually a very positive and relaxed relationship.

FA

I think it's plausible for the public to believe that formal education in prison, if done well, is going to contribute to reintegration, because it allows you to get a bachelor's degree, because it allows you to get a job, etc. It's maybe a little harder for the public to understand that you can't completely separate formal education from other types of education... What do you think?

FS

I agree. I think that the issue of formal education is perhaps better understood, especially since in France, diplomas are important. This has been shown by researchers, notably in the book [La société des diplômés](#): in France, a person's social and professional future is still strongly correlated with their degree.

As statistics show, achieving a certain level of education promotes social and professional integration. Presented with such arguments, one has a better chance of legitimizing such educational actions in prison within the general population.

I remain very cautious on these questions, because proving the impact of measures on social and professional integration is complex. Methodologically, it is extremely complicated and, ethically, it raises a lot of questions, because there are risks of instrumentalizing it: "it doesn't work, we abolish it; it works, we duplicate it".

This question of access to education is fundamental. It is essential in all environments, including prisons, where it is very much affected by questions of inequality. That is to say that I have not forgotten that prison impoverishes on the whole, that prison disaffiliates, that prison isolates. I also know that people who succeed in making their studies "profitable" are also people who will be accompanied when they get out, who will not find themselves alone, who will potentially be able to find a job or a promise of employment, who will not get out cold, without support. For people who find themselves on the street with no money and no family, the fact that they studied during their incarceration will not be of much help to them in the immediate future.

I always try to be systemic in my thinking: "it's in a system that generally takes in and retains poor people and often sends them out much poorer."

FA

A precarization of the precariat.

FS

That's it! I think it's not the only place, but in France there is still a strong desire to punish individuals, and this manifests itself by restricting access to certain rights, for example access to education, to recreation, to activities considered in the rhetoric of the "four-star" prison, as a way of privileging the prison population and giving them access to opportunities that are not available to people on the outside. [In some people's minds,] the inmate should not be treated any better than the worst treated person on the outside.

There may still be the belief, among some stakeholders, that detainees should have limited access to equipment or activities that would be deemed "of comfort" and that there could not be any form of education in recreational activities, in interactive activities, in meetings with other stakeholders, and that it would necessarily be mere entertainment or a means to buy social peace.

MAL

To what extent can a manager facilitate the creation of programs or the support of informal or formal prison education programs? To what extent does their position play a role in developing and supporting the sustainability of these programs?

FS

This plays an extremely important role. When I did my survey, I saw that, depending on the institution, there were very different things being done, even between institutions with the same level of security, even between institutions that were close in terms of the number of detainees. We can see very clearly that the implementation of education and teaching practices will be very different, will be facilitated in some establishments. The entry and exit of equipment, the entry and exit of personnel to administer examinations will be authorized. The extraction of detainees to take an exam or to do an internship. I have seen people doing their internship, part of their thesis within the framework of the penitentiary establishment: missions were arranged for a detainee, who could then go and do interviews or work with other detainees, in other cells.

There are some establishments where management can be very open to studies, to educational practices, to teaching and training. It depends on the management staff who set the tone for the supervisory staff. The management staff can be particularly vigilant about any excesses that might occur, or conversely, they can bring along supervisory staff who are in complete agreement, but who previously did not necessarily find the place or the opportunity to encourage educational practices in prison.

What is complicated for detainees is that they have often been through several institutions and it is difficult for them to understand the difference between institutions. For instance, the fact that in one institution they are allowed to bring in this type of pen and in the other it is forbidden, in this one they are allowed to bring in this type of book, while in the other it is forbidden. The detainees see this as arbitrary: there is no consistency, it's up to the goodwill of this or that person and therefore, potentially, it's unfair, according to them.

It also depends on the geographical location of the institutions in relation to the centre. One can be in Alsace, far from urban centres and places of higher education, and not have the same relationships, the same facilities to be able to carry out educational activities and support the education of a detainee. This is true for management staff, but it is also true for teaching staff. If you are in an institution in the Paris region, you will have several universities nearby. I'm not saying that it's easy, but in any case it allows you to have closer relationships, it allows you to do things yourself and maybe go and get the courses or the exam papers and bring them back, for example.

I also think it depends a lot on the size, the location, the type of facility, the proximity to urban centres. The ability to bring in professionals, volunteers, it's more complicated if you have to travel two hours by public transportation, if you need a car...

MAL

From a global perspective, there are countries where it is more difficult to develop and promote such education programs to policy-makers. Have you observed any emerging ideas in France that would allow the transfer of knowledge to other jurisdictions in terms of customs, legal rules or applied scientific principles?

FS

The first answer I could give is that the prison world does not have enough staff, there are not enough supervisory staff, there are not enough probation staff, and there are not enough teachers in prisons.

Even if we are faced with rather supportive staff, we really have to take into account the fact that these staff members are very often overwhelmed, that they are very often all alone to take care of the comings and goings, to bring the detainees to class, to the infirmary, on walks, etc. So I think that we need to have an ambitious policy of hiring and training staff at all levels: at the social level, at the educational level, at the health level...

In France, there are a lot of initiatives that are being done that we are not necessarily aware of. What I see from my window as a researcher and as a person involved in places of reflection on these issues is that there is often a lack of sustainability of the actions and experiments that are set up.

One way to address this is to put in place mechanisms that allow actions to be maintained and continued when a person responsible for a project or system leaves an organization. The fact that senior staff are required to move every four years contributes to this instability. When proactive prison directors leave, the staff on the ground are left with little or no support, and sometimes everything has to start all over again.

Therefore, processes should be put in place that prevent the need to start over and that also allow for the sustainability of experiments.

I also think that the question of staff training is extremely important, that is to say that the training which is done in particular at the national school of prison administration must make the staff aware of the issues of education and training – whether formal, informal or non-formal. All these projects that are set up in the establishments or initiated by the staff on site, must be valued and presented to the public.

FA

Can you comment on the reasons why individual facility managers support education specifically? Have you spoken with prison directors to find out their rationale?

FS

I think there are people who are aware of these issues because of their background, their previous paths, either professional or family, and who have become interested in these issues through their own life experiences, either because they have children, or because in the course of their lives they have been made aware of popular education issues or forms of formal, informal or non-formal education.

FA

Many stakeholders justify prison education normatively, as a right to education, and others seem more practical, “because it works”.

FS

I think that there is indeed a very pragmatic vision in prisons. I have heard a lot that it eases tensions and keeps people busy. While they are in class, at the theatre, at the newspaper, at the needlepoint class, they don't do anything else and they don't get up to any mischief.

There is also this other vision according to which most of the detainees, especially those who are in [pre-trial detention in] the prison, spend their time in their cell waiting, in a kind of management of the vacuum.

I think it's also primarily a way to live with your grief, in fact, to manage it in the present time. What do I do in the time I have left to do here, what do I do? I can live it in a “struggle” mode, where I am fighting against the other inmates, against the guards, against the system, etc. Or, and this is not incompatible, I find other ways to escape, to build something. In this time that is imposed on me, I can try to suffer as little as possible. I think that for the management staff, education offers possibilities, so that the detainee can use this time in a useful way.

MAL

Education in prison as a right is important, but it contributes to many things in a prison that can lessen the hardships of the sentence and can be useful for rehabilitation, either by creating positive experiences or by forming pro-social bonds, which lead people to see something other than the hardships they have experienced.

FS

I agree wholeheartedly: these two arguments can coexist in the same people, but they do not use them for the same interlocutors. In the literature, for example, it is the right to education that dominates. Since it is a right, it must be applied and implemented. On the other hand, in relation to public opinion, or in relation to certain supervisory staff, it is not necessarily something that is very audible or very acceptable, the right to education for people who have reached a certain age, who have committed offences... therefore, mentioning the fact of constructing one's sentence in an intelligent way, carries more weight with certain interlocutors.

MAL

In your book, *Être étudiant en prison: l'évasion par le haut* (Being a student in prison: escape from the top), you conducted interviews about the student condition in prison. Could you describe what you found in these interviews?

FS

The "inmate student" is marked by issues of inequality in prison. In my book, I was able to highlight three profiles. A profile of direct continuity with their previous studies and the extension of a student identity that is easy to have recognized by the institution and the people around them. A second profile more at odds with their identity, because they do not all come from privileged social backgrounds, they did not all have a good and positive academic trajectory before incarceration and some have difficulty asserting themselves as students, particularly because of the reception reserved for their activities according to the social network in which they circulate or according to the resources available in an institution. And finally, a third profile, very similar to the general prison population, with a very short educational and professional history, or none at all. Their pursuit of higher education is the result of a thorough process of rehabilitation. Some have used the term "conversion" to characterize this process. For this profile, education is a break in their learning life, it has had an extremely strong impact on their lives. This is what emerges from the interviews in terms of a connection to others, to the human community and a kind of self-transformation.

Being in prison, one feels or is belittled and education allows them to retain or maintain an identity that is being undermined or to construct a new identity that will combat the imposed, reductive, violent and stigmatizing identity. For this reason alone, prison education has this positive impact. For people who have extremely long sentences, who have been sentenced to life imprisonment with a 22-year guarantee, I don't know if it will have helped their social reintegration... It was probably one of the elements that allowed them to survive. I hope that it helped them to project themselves inside and outside, but afterwards, I hope that they had the social, family and emotional environment that allowed them to maintain this identity after their release, which they were in the process of developing, of building positively. When I met them, several of them spoke very positively about their studies, being in great pain, very isolated, having broken the ties with their families... Education was a way to hold on to something...

MAL

Could you elaborate on this idea of conversion through education? You raised an important connection to the community of men, of being part of a larger community, when they see themselves as non-citizens.

FS

What interests me is the building of identity, the student identity. In my research, I have collected some testimonies on building a new identity, without saying that it is only education that has made this new identity, but it does play a part.



Photo Credit: Marc-André Lacelle

Some incarcerated students have discovered themselves through their studies. They discover themselves in a discipline they had absolutely never heard of before: linguistics, philosophy. Some didn't even know it existed.

It also means discovering a different self in the end. They discover the fact that they can interact with others in a different way from what they were used to, which could be violent, combative, with rather vulgar forms of vocabulary, for example, and therefore a way of relating to others that is completely different and which, of course, has different effects.

When we look at the definition of identity conversion by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, it is really that, it is to become a different person and, in their words, it was really to become someone else. Sometimes to the point of no longer being completely recognized by those close to you, that is to say, to experience truly profound transformations. And this is why I also use the term "conversion".

FA

Our research chair has a bias towards prison education and specifically seeks to produce and promote research that contributes to the development of best practices, rationales and tools for practitioners who must defend the relevance of their programs.

Through this work, we must adopt a stance on a series of ethical issues related to our institutional position, to the different partners necessary for the development of and access to the field, and to the interaction between academic and other more institutional and community environments. This leads us to question the framework of our work, on the limits drawn between scientific goals and the expectations of the community.

Have you encountered such tensions as a researcher in the field of prison education?

FS

When I was doing my dissertation, there was almost no writing in French on prison education issues, and I was just a doctoral student. So I didn't bother anyone. I did go through the whole authorization process, I met different people, but they were in the research department of the Ministry of Justice, so they were quite open to these issues.

I think that educational issues were not at all perceived as potentially taboo or sensitive. It's not the issue of sexuality or religion, for example. It could be perceived as a somewhat cold subject that passes without much difficulty and gets the necessary approvals.

However, what I realize is that I can be asked to be involved, for example, in voluntary associations that intervene in prisons, or in interviews such as with the International Observatory of Prisons, which recently produced a dossier on teaching in prison.

I am then considered as an activist, whereas from my point of view, I am not. I think that this raises the question of the researcher's position in the humanities and social sciences. When do we do activism, when do we do science? When do we do research? One of the easy criticisms is to say "it's activism" to diminish the results of a research. I think that I have to try to keep myself on the crest of a wave, to try to ensure that my work is scientifically and methodologically sound, to consolidate and defend it as scientific work and, at the same time, to make a critical statement about the state of education in prisons today, supported by the various research projects that I carry out.

A critical view where, in the end, when we talk to individual institutions, they tend to agree with the findings. This is not necessarily something that will be said publicly, but most of the people who are either in the ministries or in the institutions have a fairly accurate view of the situation and of the fact that there are things that work and things that do not work at all.

For my part, I try to defend the fact that I base myself on the interviews I do with the people concerned, to restore and analyze their words and cross them with other words, other writings...

At the same time, I am careful about the arenas in which I express myself and the way I express myself, because I want to continue in this environment. I am aware of this reluctance to be accused of being an activist. I also want to continue to be taken seriously scientifically, and that is why I always try to base my answers on my scientific knowledge and on my own research, and not to give my opinion on subjects that I do not master.

But this tension does exist.

Practically speaking, if you want to do research in France, you can also go through inter-acquaintance links, and you have people who are very open to research and who can open up fields to you quite easily. In some places, it is rather closed. Some places are very open... That's the complexity of this environment, but there is always a way to access the research field because in my work, I meet people who are interested in my research, with whom I discuss, I participate in mechanisms and they are also people who actually open up fields to me.

But, ultimately, I'm in a pretty remote position being at the university, with very little impact on prison institutions. I have never been in a position where I had to take an official stance on issues that were a bit divisive, that would have had consequences, either on one side or the other, because I would have taken a position that was not suitable for the partners or perhaps not suitable for the Ministry of Justice.

MAL

In 20 years of research, have you seen a shift in public opinion about prison education? Have you observed any trends or new issues emerging in the field of prison education?

FS

Things have evolved a bit. There are more researchers in France at the institutional level who are interested in this issue. When I did my research on students, there was really no data that had been produced, and when the statistics from the Ministry of Justice's Prison Administration Department came out, there was little specific data.

There is a growing interest in these issues from policy-makers or researchers. For some years now, the national education officer has been a very committed person, trying to defend the relevance of looking at the issue of education in prison – formal, informal, non-formal. That person just left. So, there is a new person who has been appointed and fortunately, his deputy has stayed on. I hope



that this new person in charge is going to remain in a really proactive process like his predecessor was... This issue of continuity that is really important for prison education.

As far as research issues are concerned, the fact that UNESCO has commissioned a review of the Anglophone and Francophone literature on these issues is nothing new, but we can see that there are more seminars, discussions, dissemination and experimentation.

As far as the basic trends are concerned, the question of the processes of indoctrination or radicalization and the link with education is a lively debate in France and elsewhere in Europe. Research that deals with directions, project orientations and that studies the intervention of associations or the relationship to knowledge are emerging interests that are taking more space.

Finally, there are some issues where I think there is little progress and which are really important. For example, the issue of the Internet or the issue of access to the connection. This is a concern that I've been hearing about almost since the beginning of my thesis. I have been told about the experiments that have been done, they have taken the example of such and such a country, they have tried this in such and such an establishment or in several establishments, but the progress is extremely slow.

And I think that the ideological or political impediments are extremely strong, even if within the institution, the prison administration, there are a lot of people who are supportive and who have been in processes, in experiments and who think that it is possible in terms of security. This question, which seems to me to be more and more pressing at the moment, has not really found any national or institutional answers.

FA

Are these ideological and political impediments more about security or more about "punishment"? I ask because one can advocate for safety without wanting to punish incarcerated people.

FS

The discussions I have had with people who are interested in experimenting with digital technology in detention, mention that there would be no, or few, security barriers. We could imagine platforms that allow secure connections that are not directly linked to the Internet, but that allow us to put content with links.

I don't know if the people who make the decisions have the same expertise as the people who set up the experiments. In any case, the argument put forward by managers is that these are safety issues. It's the fact that it's the gateway to a link with the outside world, quick, easy, with all the inconveniences that this can entail. This concern, this tension, is also likely to be a sign of cold feet.

But, since the pandemic, we realize that on the outside, things are going extremely fast and in an extremely accelerated way and that the gap is widening enormously. And, if we come back to the question of schooling, education, whatever the level in prison and on the outside, has nothing to do with it.

This means that people in institutions do not have access to an extremely important part of the field of education and training, and I think that this is the big challenge of educational issues in prison. I'm not saying that the Internet is going to save us, and that it's THE solution, but in any case, I think that the prison institution is really behind on these issues.



Photo Credit: José Skilling

Real estate manager and poet José Skilling shares his experience of education in prison. The following remarks were collected on September 21, 2022, during a videoconference between Frédérick Armstrong, Marc-André Lacelle and José Skilling. They have been edited and abridged for clarity.



Marc-André Lacelle (MAL)

Could you describe your life path for us?

José Skilling (JS)

I come from a small area in Témiscouata, about 300 inhabitants.

I grew up there until I was 17 years old, before I left home. I was raised in a fairly poor family. My mother had mental health issues; she made numerous suicide attempts. Sometimes it was as many as two or three times a year. We're also talking about lengthy hospital stays. So I didn't really have a mother.

My father supported us as a lumberjack. He also worked in the construction industry, as a seasonal worker, in order to get his unemployment. And then, when autumn or winter came, we started to work in the woods with him at a very young age.

At school, we were called the little martyrs. It was hard to get involved in our studies. I still managed to get my secondary 5, with great difficulty. In elementary school, I was at the top of my class, but things quickly went downhill because of my mother's illness and the violence that came from my father.

Frédérick Armstrong (FA)

It's rare for incarcerated people to have a secondary 5.



JS

Exactly, some of them can't even write. It's difficult for them to follow suit and go to school in the prison environment. It's not easy; the other inmates look at you; you have to open up to those who are going to be in the classroom because we are all in the same room.

And not everyone will have the opportunity to go. The number of places is quite limited.

MAL

How are students selected?

JS

In several ways. First, people in protective custody cannot attend classes like those in the general population. Others are going to be encouraged to go to work rather than school. Guys are not automatically encouraged to go to school; I think the opposite should happen.

Instead, we should be encouraging, finding ways for it to be better compensated, to give a little more comfort to the guys who go to school instead of putting a value on working in the laundry room or elsewhere.

FA

Who do you think is not doing enough to promote schooling?

JS

People who work for the school will encourage guys to enroll, but not everyone in the prison does. I'll give you an example. When I first came to the penitentiary, I wanted to register for school. You have to submit a requisition and take it to a box. But you have to ask the guard for this little piece of paper, and they won't necessarily give it to you. I, for example, was told to take my time, to wait 2-3 months before registering. So the first thing I had to learn was how to get around that, so as not to lose 2-3 months. I finally got around it by giving the form to someone else who agreed to take it to the school at the box that's further away, not in our area.

FA

And during the 23 months in the provincial system, did you feel like investing your time, as you say, a little better?

JS

Yes, I went to school, but since I had my secondary 5, I had to find a way to bend the rules. I always had an artistic side, not valued and not exploited, but I had still started writing poetry and stuff.

I convinced them to enroll me in school, but only in French, to learn how to learn again. This allowed me to talk with the teacher from time to time, to go and meet him and have concepts explained to me. Because the teacher had some experience in the field of literature.

It wasn't immediately accessible for me... it took maybe one or two months of fighting to get there. And then at some point I was transferred to a more secure area and lost access to the school.

FA

Can you explain what you mean by "fighting"?

JS

To go to school, you have to put a requisition in a box, but the box is not in the area. So you have to give the requisition to an officer.

I had to insist and find an officer who was willing to go and deliver my paper. Not necessarily because



the others were all anti-detainee, but simply because you end up realizing that there are some who are more proactive in seeking solutions or listening to us when we have something meaningful to say.

I'll give you another example of fighting. When I started school, I bought pencils and paper and started writing in my cell. I could write for a long time... and because I wrote a lot, I often needed the pencil sharpener. And I had to ask the officer to bring it to me. But they don't always have the time or the inclination to bring it to you; sometimes it can go overnight. There was even one time when an agent said to me, "Just keep it until the end of my shift." Okay, that's fine, but then another officer saw the pencil sharpener in my cell and took it away and said I wouldn't be allowed to use it anymore... Now I'm freaking out, I don't think I'll be able to write, just like that, all of a sudden... Finally, it was okay, but you know, it's always like that. It's like our access to education or our tools can always be suspended for any reason.

MAL

Let's go back to the triggers: you find yourself in it, and then you're passionate about the issue of writing and reading, and you decide to really get into it. So you take steps on your own to attend classes, even if you're not technically enrolled in the program.

JS

Exactly.

MAL

And when you are transferred to federal custody for your sentence, what happens?

JS

I had no idea what I was getting into. The penitentiary is a little bit harder, it's a tougher situation. You don't want to steal other people's places. You have to take the time to get there. I was also told that I couldn't go to school because I already had my secondary 5. I wanted to at least meet the school administration. I got there, there were three people in front of me, including the school principal. And then, they ask me if I want to work, but I wanted to go to school.

I came out of the office, and they chatted for a few minutes. They finally told me: we're going to send you to school in French. You're going to start coming to class, and eventually we'd like you to be able to help the others to support the teacher.

So I joined the French class to help the others.

But that's special in a prison, because I'm still an inmate, and I can't put myself in an awkward position with the others, so I really had to let the others approach me.

The teacher introduced me to the others, she said that I had a good knowledge of French and that students could ask me questions or come to me to correct things.

All this allowed me to be in class, in French, and to hone my writing, my poetry.

And I learned a lot of things on a psychosocial level. Sometimes, I would arrive in my cell and there, I had other inmates from different spheres, different levels and different backgrounds who would come to meet me, either to have an assignment corrected, or to ask questions in French, or to have me help them write a letter for the release commission.

Others asked me to help them write to their kids or their girlfriend, someone wanted to write to the lawyer because he was getting a divorce. A lot of really sensitive stuff. They had to be able to trust me.

FA

I guess before you went to prison, helping someone with their letters wasn't something you did on a daily basis?



JS

It wasn't. I was withdrawn, with the pressure of my environment. I had a lot to deal with emotionally. So, no, I had no team spirit, no help to give. If anything, I needed help.

FA

What impact did being a peer support person in a prison setting have on your life?

JS

I think I originally had that kind of personality. I'm still good at helping people today. There are limits, of course, we become good, maybe I have a little more empathy than before.

In my prison journey, in fact, my value system changed. Education has contributed to that. There are other things, other values, that come into play, and then you reclassify them to put them back in order.

And the other activities, the other programs on violence or addiction also helped me to better understand certain behaviours, certain things. Throughout my time at the provincial level, it helped me a lot. When I was at the federal level, when I received people in my cell, I understood their problems or their charges or their personality thanks to these small trainings.

I didn't have any problems myself, but at least I learned to understand others better. Then, it's not helping others because I feel like a saviour, it's helping humbly and discreetly, and I've made my own small journey through that.

I started doing my little things. I did my poetry exams. Then, the director of the school comes to see me after maybe 3-4 months, to ask me to help organize a contest in connection with the *Cabaret de la seconde chance*, organized by the *Association des services de réhabilitation sociale du Québec* (a community action organization dedicated to the social reintegration of offenders).

At first I thought she just wanted some of my poems, no stress about that, but then she asked me to help select the winners for the writing contest for inmates.

The goal was to collect 50 inmate scripts and have them published. Each selected essay received a \$50 grant.

I said yes right away! They even provided me with a computer! For the first time, an inmate in French had a laptop in the classroom to work on, transcribe texts and put them together.

By the end of this collection, it turned out to be something really good! It went around the world, it was talked about a lot.

I did a short interview with the people who organized the *Cabaret de la seconde chance* and the school director. We raised \$10,000 to continue funding this kind of project – and to promote education in penitentiaries – through a donation from the *Association des services de réhabilitation sociale du Québec*.

So, yes, it went a long way. There were a lot of students who participated, unlike other years, it had a positive effect.

MAL

During this time, did you take any other courses?

JS

No, I didn't take any other classes, because the stuff the director asked me to do took up most of my time.



MAL

Can you tell us more about what you had to do?

JS

OK, there is a whole process. You don't work with the Internet, images, ideas, you have to transcribe everything from the poems that are handwritten. And the selection committee is something else. Another anecdote: in the class, we have teachers who came from several penitentiaries to select among all the texts that we had received from the prisoners.

And then there, we had to be paired up two by two, but not all professors are comfortable with inmates, and then I was paired up with a lady, a professor and then you see, it was very cold at the beginning... We were in our corner to choose a handful of texts, then I had to give my opinion.

After 45 minutes, an hour, it started to get cooler [laughs]. And then, in the end, it created quite a stir. But it was accepted and understood by all the other teachers; I took the time to explain things and introduce myself, etc.

MAL

With your profile, no one suggested post-secondary education, such as CEGEP, for example?

JS

I asked to go further because I was blocked, for my poetry, but I couldn't go any higher. But, deep down, I don't know... if it's true that it wasn't accessible where I was. At least, that's what I was told: that it was not accessible.

MAL

After prison, did you continue to attend classes?

JS

I continued to participate in the Cabaret de la seconde chance, but I did not continue to go to school. I did a 10-month closed transition, but in those 10 months – in Montréal. After that, I had to leave because my girlfriend's mother was dying.

Afterwards, I opened my own real estate management business after taking real estate courses with the Club immobilier in Québec City, to understand real estate and how to become a better manager. And now I invest in real estate, but I did not continue my education in literature, because I already have a good base.

But I have continued to write, I am going to publish ten volumes of poetry, I have written more than 2000 poems, I also have novels in the pipeline.

FA

I have a question about the role of peer support in prison education. There are already peer help or peer support programs in prison schools in several countries: what do you think? Do you think this should be institutionalized or should it be done more like you described, in an unofficial way?

JS

I think you have to put yourself in the place of the inmates. It all depends on the level of security it's set up in. In minimum security, I think it could work officially, but in a medium-high context, it's not the same criminality, it's not the same world.

In an environment like that, I don't know how the correctional system could implement peer support without inmates being suspicious.



Photo Credit: Marc-André Lacelle

FA

The concern is that peer helpers will be perceived as too close to the prison administration?

JS

Yes, that's right. Even I thought it was weird that I was friends with the principal. I had to be careful, I couldn't look like I had two faces, two personalities; it doesn't work. You really have to stay neutral.

For sure, when working with inmates, they will not want the peer helper to talk to other inmates or, worse, to the prison administration.

It can hurt people, it really takes special people to be a peer helper in that context. It's not a role that's for everyone.

MAL

How can education services in prisons be improved?

JS

There is a lot of room for improvement. I think we should give more space, more visibility to people who get out and succeed in their social reintegration. We should listen to them more to see what has worked for them. You know, as I was saying earlier, before setting up a peer support program, you absolutely have to talk to the inmates and to those who have gotten out.

There should also be many more funds so that people don't have to dip into their mess hall accounts to buy notebooks or pencils.

And we need to find additional sources of motivation that will get guys out of their bunks and into school. These people have often dropped out of school, so we need to get them back in school, but not with the methods we already know.

Because the person starts by going to school, to get that learning, to get the knowledge. And then after that, if they were still there, they might come to ask themselves what they really want, and that's often learned in school. But, you know, because guys often come from poor backgrounds, they didn't have the chance to do that in school.

So we should really give a lot of space to schooling, and less to work, for example by giving a better salary to the guys who go to school. In addition, this money will help them to get out, to find a place to live and to get out of an environment that is often unhealthy.



FA

What have you gained from going to school in prison?

JS

Put it this way. I have a criminal record. Do you think my criminal record was a problem for me? On my release?

No, never, in any respect.

Why? The confidence that I managed to acquire, the reconstruction that I did, the psychological follow-ups that I did inside, the studies, my work as a peer helper that showed me that I am capable of helping people. All of this makes me discover the person I really am, because you know, I was scorned for the first 17 years of my life and then for another 17 years, well, it was less intense, but I managed to free myself from all that.

That whole time, in school, had a big impact on me. It brought me to the Cabaret de la seconde chance to read in front of 400 people, with artists, television artists. All that thanks to prison education.

That's what it did for me.

I am in the process of self-realization. My confidence, my self-esteem and all my basic needs are fulfilled, and now I am realizing myself.

In my journey, going to prison saved my life. It made me rediscover the person I am. And I think I've become a better writer.



Photo Credit: Streets_of_food – Unsplash

Poème de José Skilling

PSYCHOTRIA ELATA

Bangkok
Je veux danser avec toi
Dans tes ruelles animées
Je veux rire avec elle

Rattanakosin
Je veux voir tes richesses
Dans tes temples sacrés
Et me coucher auprès d'elle

Je veux rire
Je veux rêver
Je veux la revoir
Je veux la toucher encore

Assise au cœur de Sanam Luang
Je crois entrevoir ta longue chevelure
Déployée telles les grandes voiles
Qui voguent sur l'eau du Chao Praya

L'odeur du Rafflesia Kerru
Mélangé à mes espoirs naïfs
Me hante de douleurs sans fin
Je me perds dans un halo d'illusion

Pourtant je veux rire
Pourtant je veux encore rêver
Pourtant je veux toujours te revoir
Pourtant je veux redécouvrir ta peau

Quelques fois si seul
Quelques fois trop seul
Dans mon hiver québécois
Pshychotria Elata tu me manques

A poem by José Skilling

PSYCHOTRIA ELATA

Bangkok
I want to dance with you
In your lively alleys
I want to laugh with her

Rattanakosin
I want to see your treasures
In your sacred temples
And lie beside her

I want to laugh
I want to dream
I want to see her again
I want to touch her again

Sitting in the heart of Sanam Luang
I think I can see a glimpse of your long hair
Unfurled like the great sails
That glide on the surface of the Chao Praya

The smell of the Rafflesia Kerru
Mixed with my naive hopes
Haunts me with never ending pain
I am lost in a halo of illusion

Still I want to laugh
Still I want to dream
Still I want to see you again
Still I want to rediscover your skin

Sometimes so alone
Sometimes too alone
In my Quebec winter
Pshychotria Elata I miss you

SCIENCES DE L'ÉDUCATION

Conway, P. F. (2022). *Andragogy in Prison: Higher Education in Prison and the Tenets of Adult Education. Adult Education Quarterly, OnlineFirst*, n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136221100481>

The return of Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals in the United States heralds a massive growth in the student population in American prisons. In this context, Patrick Conway describes and defends the andragogical approach to education, which he considers particularly appropriate for the prison context. Designed specifically for adult education, Conway argues that the andragogical approach can counteract some of the most deleterious effects of incarceration, including the loss of autonomy and agency for incarcerated individuals. The main principles of andragogy are based on the idea that adults learn differently than children and for different reasons. This means tailoring adult education to the realities, motivations, needs, and interests of adults, including recognizing the importance of their life experiences and their ability to shape their learning. Conway suggests that by building on these principles, prison education practitioners will be able to contribute more to the academic success and well-being of their incarcerated students. With the andragogical approach, learners are not subjected to their education. They are full and autonomous participants.

Dennis, M., & Halbert, J. D. (2022). *Effective Online Course Delivery in Correctional Settings: A Pilot. Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 22(8), 89.* <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v22i8.5324>

In a brief article reporting on the results of a pilot project on prison-based online education, Michelle Dennis and James Albert highlight the importance of providing education services that are adapted to the constraints of prison life. Among the key factors for successful implementation of e-learning in a prison setting, Dennis and Albert note that university or college administrations need to work with custodial facilities to plan schedules that fit the needs and limitations of incarcerated individuals, as they cannot use laptops in their living areas and must still attend synchronous court sessions. Although the sample size was very small – only 10 people were able to participate in the project – the researchers note that the experiment was conclusive: all students successfully completed the course and the collaboration with the prison administration went well. They hope to expand the program and offer microprograms of 3-4 courses in the medium term to maximize the contribution to employability and reintegration of incarcerated students.

Fantuzzo, J. P. (2022). *Recognizing human dignity behind bars: A moral justification for college-in-prison programs. Theory and Research in Education, 20(1), 26-43.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/14778785221102035>

As more and more colleges offer programs in U.S. prisons, philosopher John Fantuzzo joins those attempting to defend the relevance and legitimacy of college programs in prison by going beyond an analysis of their impact on recidivism rates. Without denying the importance of this indicator, Fantuzzo argues that prison institutions have a moral obligation to recognize the dignity of incarcerated persons, an obligation that can be met, among other things, by allowing them to participate in college programs, an activity that allows for the exercise of the faculties that confer special dignity on human beings – the ability to reason, to deliberate, to be self-reliant, and so on. The author postulates that human beings have a fundamental dignity that is not based on the value of their actions. This dignity confers on all human beings, even those who have committed crimes, certain fundamental and inalienable rights related to their capacity to be autonomous. Fantuzzo then argues that the prison institution unfortunately does not always recognize the dignity



of the incarcerated, but that it can nevertheless fulfill its moral obligation by setting up educational programs that allow the incarcerated to exercise their capacities. He concludes that these programs have the limited but important capacity to transform the U.S. prison institution and reduce the injustices experienced there.

CRIMINOLOGY

Kaiser, K. A., Piquero, A., Keena, L., & Howley, C. (2022). Assessing the Institutional Barriers and Individual Motivational Factors to Participation in Prison-Based Programs. *Crime & Delinquency*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011287221114804>

Kimberly Kaiser and her colleagues contribute to recent research examining motivations and barriers to participation in rehabilitation and education programs in prison settings (Brosens, 2019; Brosens et al., 2015; Manger et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2014). Analysis of surveys completed by 212 men incarcerated in a private prison in the southern United States indicates that two barriers to program participation have a statistically significant effect on program participation: lack of program space and infrequency of certain programs. On the other hand, Kaiser et al. note that people who have a strongly positive perception of the legitimacy of prison, who are interested in programs, and who have high self-esteem are more likely to participate in programs. The research team then concludes that prison institutions must act on at least two fronts to encourage program participation. First, at the individual level, they must help foster a positive perception of the prison and its programs. Second, at the institutional level, they must minimize administrative or structural constraints on access to programs.

SOCIAL SCIENCES

Leone, P. E. & Gagnon, J. C. (2022). The imperative of high-quality education in juvenile corrections: An introduction to the special section. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 389. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000639>

Peter E. Leone and Joseph Calvin Gagnon present a special issue of the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry that focuses on education services in juvenile correctional facilities in the United States. This issue consists of four articles co-authored by a dozen individuals and follows the publication of a set of guiding principles for education in juvenile correctional settings called the *Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Setting*, published in 2014 by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. These four articles survey the scientific literature that addresses these issues and together demonstrate the importance of funding research on educating youth in prison settings, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, and ensuring that youth can return to school after their term of incarceration.



See also:

Gagnon, J. C., Benedick, A. R., & Mason-Williams, L. (2022). Mental health interventions for youth who are incarcerated: A systematic review of literature. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 391–404. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000587>

Gagnon, J. C., Mason-Williams, L., Griller Clark, H., LaBelle, B., Mathur, S. R., & Leone, P. E. (2022). Providing high-quality education in juvenile corrections: Next steps. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 429–441. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000612>

Gagnon, J. C., Ruiz, E., Mathur, S. R., & Mason-Williams, L. (2022). Interventions addressing incarcerated youth behaviour: A review of literature. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 405–417. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000621>

Hunter, A., Griller Clark, H., Mason-Williams, L., & Gagnon, J. C. (2022). Curriculum, instruction, and promoting college and career readiness for incarcerated youth: A literature review. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 418–428. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000623>



MONOGRAPHS

Volpe, P. P. (2021). *L'enseignement universitaire en milieu carcéral: Expériences comparées entre la France et l'Italie*. Champ social. <https://doi.org/10.3917/chaso.pacin.2021.01>

Published in the "Questions de société" collection, this collective work directed by political science researcher Patrizia Pacini Volpe paints a comparative portrait of university education in French and Italian prisons. Consisting of two main sections, the first offering a theoretical framework and the second providing an empirical portrait of certain realities in Italian and French prisons, the book reveals marked differences between these countries, which are so similar in other respects. While many Italian universities have been working with prisons for more than thirty years, French universities hardly ever go beyond the walls to offer training to incarcerated people. The book therefore highlights the importance of continuing to promote access to education in prisons at all levels, as well as the challenges that lie ahead for those who advocate for this right.

Available online:

<https://www.cairn.info/l-enseignement-universitaire-en-milieu-carceral--9791034606399.htm>

Parchuc, J. P., Bustelo, C., Ichaso, I., Charaf, S., García, Y., Rubin, M. J., Molina, M. L., Moris, J. P., Gareffi, F., Camarda, A., Sbdar, J., and Adur, L. (2020). *Escribir en la cárcel. Prácticas y experiencias de lectura y escritura en contextos de encierro*. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Editorial de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires.

<http://publicaciones.filo.uba.ar/sites/publicaciones.filo.uba.ar/files/Escribir%20en%20la%20carcel.pdf>

Prison Writing. Practices and Experiences of Reading and Writing in Prison.

The volume studies different aspects of prison writing. Its chapters analyze reading and writing practices, pedagogical and cultural interventions, and poems and stories written in prison. Specifically, it considers the work and research carried out for more than fifteen years by the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature in UBAXXII Program of higher education in prison and the Prison Extension Program of the University of Buenos Aires. It also contains interviews with writers who began their work while they were incarcerated and teachers with wide experience on the subject.



Chaire **UNESCO** de recherche
appliquée pour l'éducation en prison



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