

Some questions for

Some international challenges for education in prison

By Marc De Maeyer

EDUCATION is a right for all. In consequence, performance evaluation, indicators, surveys, results and best practices are not useful in justifying the obligations of a State to organise education for all, as members states signed to do in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, sixty years ago. Governments are responsible for all kinds of education and the challenge concerning education in prison is how to respect this right in a place which is by its nature anti-educative.

Prison is a place where prisoners *unlearn* many things; how to organise a budget, meals, their time, space, intimacy, relations with people of the other sex. Yet at the same time public opinion asks educators in prison to do more, better and quicker than formal educators outside, with less human and financial resources.

Three main challenges for educators

1. "Reduction of recidivism"

For many people, education must contribute to the reduction of recidivism.

Here is the danger! How do we calculate the rate of non-recidivism? In which time-frame; one month, six months, three years? What is recidivism; committing the same crime, or another more violent or less dangerous? Who will evaluate it? And even supposing we can calculate the rate of non-recidivism, on what should we base our conclusions? If education cannot reduce recidivism sufficiently, say by 30, 50, or 90 per cent, should we abandon education?

If recidivism is not reduced by education, should we seek find something else, such as a military model or humiliation program?

The majority of inmates are in prison because traditional actors of education failed; the family, the school, the group of friends and others. Before calculating the link between recidivism and education in prison, we need to understand that the conditions of recidivism took root inside the prison due to a lack of education. Many conditions of recidivism are provided by the prison

itself, as an institution.

Junior delinquents learn how to become professional delinquents, just by sharing experiences and daily life with colleagues.

Why are we asking education in prison to do more than education outside prison?

2. Education and vocational training

When I visit a (usually overcrowded) prison, I also visit three to five classes and workshops. Such space is rare in prison and we know that organising vocational workshops for 1,000 inmates is impossible due to security reasons and lack of space.

Vocational training is, of course, important but it is not the first step.

We need first to clarify the objectives of lifelong learning. Education is connected with personal and social development, participation in the community, citizenship, cultural experiences, personal history, links with families and health issues. In prison there is confusion between a vision of education which is linked to social, personal and economic development and one dedicated exclusively to short term economic interests.

More and more education programs in prison are justified in terms of employability issues and less and less in terms of citizenship.

A short term and strictly economic vision of business orientated education focuses only on employability and ignores the social and cultural role of education.

What is the difference between an illiterate delinquent and a trained delinquent?

3. Education and privatisation

The economic sector transforms all kind of products into a market good, and education is less and less an exception. This is also true for education in prison, for e-learning, for the funding of research



educators in prison

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some institutions organise cheap labour in prison without training?

The standardised model of education, from the private sector, denies the concept of educational demand driven by students. Technologies sometimes used in education in prison are in their great majority repetitive; it is just a modern way of repeating and reproducing knowledge. There is no creativity, no place for questions, just formatted responses for future “reformatted” people. Not citizens — just clients.

The question is; why are private enterprises more interested in delivering jobs inside prisons and less interested for providing jobs after release or before imprisonment? The answer is simply because they can fix the conditions of work; salary, flexibility, delay and no risk of a strike! In these conditions, education becomes just a way of marking time.

The State must remain solely responsible for the daily life in prisons; for formal education, security, justice, prevention, prison, health, post-release programs and support for families. Civil society should be a partner.

Transforming prisons into learning centres

Formal education and vocational training is not possible in the conditions prevailing in the great majority of prisons in the world. Yet transforming prisons into learning places, formal and informal, is now possible. Here are four suggestions:

Permanent education for staff

Generally, penitentiary employees have low levels

of education. They will not promote education for inmates if they cannot also access permanent education for themselves. Through the professionalisation of their jobs they can become aware of

their social and educational responsibilities. They are not educators but they can develop educational attitudes.

Rethinking the role of libraries

Before their imprisonment, the majority of inmates never went to libraries. Most do not have books at home; for them, book means school and school means education and failure. Libraries must be transformed into places for discovering the joys of reading, both alone and with families during visits organised in these cultural spaces. Libraries can be good places for exchanging what the incarcerated parent and his or her children have learnt.

Libraries can be transformed into places where information on health, HIV, human rights, leisure, local and international events are presented. Prudent access to the internet should also be possible.

Watching television together

We know that the favourite programs of the inmates transmit specific concepts; success, the social roles of men and women, violence, becoming rich, being a “hero”, dreams of celebrity. What coherence does this have with our values as educators? Analysing television programs should be included in education for citizenship programs.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning perspectives mean that education in prison will be the continuation of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences and not a new education for a new person for a new behaviour.

Lifelong learning perspectives mean that informal learning, both good and bad, circulating in prison could be integrated in discussions during courses. Lifelong learning perspectives which place the inmate in the centre of the educational process are in contradiction with the privatisation of prison and the privatisation of education in prison.

It is very important for the educator’s community to choose the conditions of their involvement in prison... and to organise themselves in this way! ❖

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centres and for universities.

Do we agree, as educators working with poor and excluded people, that everything can be transformed into a market good, including our jobs? Is it without influence on our work that