
**FREE THE IMPRISONED KNOWLEDGE! - INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL
PATHS IN PRISONS**

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is based on a concrete experience in the context of a project for the right to study in prison at the University of Milan (Italy), from which we intend to examine the function and potential of education in prison in the dual role of a universal right and a tool for social (re)inclusion. In particular, we will reflect on how *commons education* can work within a particular context such as prison through experiences of defining shared educational paths between external trainers and inmates starting from the latter's needs and skills. Starting from the consideration of the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the prison population, we will outline a possible educational approach aimed at contrasting processes of exclusion. Specifically, we will

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focus on the forms of 'peer-to-peer learning' - with specific reference to direct experience of shared learning between university students with the role of tutor and prisoner students - and the shared construction of knowledge, which will be interpreted as a means of contrasting both the hierarchical dynamics of traditional knowledge and the power relations that permeate the prison context. These educational methods will also be interpreted as forms of inclusion in the social discourse on inequalities and possible means of combating them, in the conviction of the co-responsibility of different social actor - prison and university above all - in the development of policies for active social inclusion through learning pathways promoting freedom and equality.

Keywords: education in prison, social re-inclusion, commons education, 'peer to peer learning', shared learning, freedom, equality

Supporting study in prison: between norm and effectiveness

In recent years, study support in prisons has proliferated in several countries in Europe. This is thanks to a growing attention to the protection of prisoners' rights urged, in particular, by the institutions and judicial bodies of the Council of Europe. The result has offered many hints about the potential for commons education. This paradigm seems to respond well to the instances of democratisation of knowledge and experimentation with unconventional teaching methodologies that often accompany training practices in prison.

In order to examine which characteristics of commons education find expression in training experiences in prison, we will start from a concrete experience: that experimented within the Prison Project of the University of Milan, from which we will attempt to define a theoretical framework in which to place the themes that will be discussed. The reflections that follow, moreover, while relating to the right to study in general, have university study as their specific reference.

The University's Prison Project was born in 2015 and is aimed at supporting the right to study in prison through a series of concrete actions whose purpose is to make this right universally accessible, according to certain fundamental principles. First of all, gratuitousness. Incarcerated students¹, who do not benefit from most of the university's services, do not pay university fees. In addition, they can benefit, like all other students, from library loan services, without having to bear the cost of purchasing textbooks.

Secondly, prisoners embarking on a university course are exempted from taking entrance tests, which would put them in competition with students with very different educational backgrounds. Another pillar of the project is the involvement in the activities promoted by the university in prison also of prisoners who are not enrolled in university courses and therefore have lower qualifications.

Lastly, a distinctive feature is the active participation of external students who form classes and study together with prison inmates. In fact, the spirit of the Project is not only to support a right (the right to study), but also to encourage the breaking of the isolation characteristic of the prison institution by building a constant dialogue between the university community - and, more generally, the outside community - and prison.

The Prison Project of the University of Milan is the largest in Italy in terms of students (both inmates and free) involved: there are currently 140 inmates enrolled in degree courses (more than 10 % of the national total) and an equal number of active student-tutors (we will come back to this role later). In addition, each year there are more than 150 students who enter the prison to participate in courses held within the prison walls and several dozen professors who come in to examine students and/or conduct courses or lectures. In recent years, incarcerated students enrolled at the University of Milan have taken a total of about 200 exams per year². There are seven prison institutes where the Prison Project activities are carried out, scattered throughout Lombardy, the region where the University is based.

Before delving into the reflection on the peculiarities of the experience of studying in prison, it is necessary to make a premise concerning the legal framework of our country in relation to this issue: in Italy, studying is a constitutionally recognised³ right and prison study is included in the prison regulations as a right of the prisoner and as a tool that contributes to the purpose (stated in the Constitution) of re-education/rehabilitation of the penalty⁴. What emerges, therefore, is the dual statute of study in prison, declined as an inalienable right but also as an instrument that contributes to the purpose of the sentence - a 'noble' purpose such as the rehabilitative one, but one that nonetheless places study in a relationship of instrumental subjugation. This dual nature of the educational processes in prison must necessarily be taken into account in the training initiatives proposed there, in an attempt not to be subjugated to prison dynamics.

Key principles

In order to describe the Project proposed by the University of Milan, we will define in particular a number of key principles intended as interpretative keys to the various initiatives put in place, in order to define their overall aims and the spirit that animates them: *equity*, *contamination*, *institutionalization*, *co-construction*.

Equity

Bringing university study courses into prisons does not mean merely re-proposing the traditional didactic offer, for several reasons. First of all, because of the 'characteristics' of the incarcerated students to whom the project is addressed. Most of the inmates share common characteristics

regarding their socio-cultural and economic background. Moreover, the largest proportion of inmates enter prison with a lower secondary school diploma or even a primary school diploma. Many of those embarking on a university career, therefore, have obtained a high school diploma in prison, often as adults and with all the related difficulties, such as interruptions due to transfers from one prison to another, failure to activate courses due to a shortage of teachers, etc.

Then there are those who graduated before entering prison, but long ago, often decades ago. The right to study, in fact, is one of those rights to which certain individuals often have access only because of their imprisonment, which highlights a paradox that recalls deeper social issues of which prison is only the last resort. In general, what emerges when analysing the incarcerated students involved in the Project in recent years is that most of them are united by their geographical origin: they come mainly from Southern Italy⁵, from regions and/or contexts characterised by strong educational poverty and a lack of social infrastructure (often from contexts with a high density of organised crime), they have an average age of around fifty years and they mostly have long prison sentences, which - paradoxically again - makes it easier for them to study at university, thus greatly curbing the possibility of dropping out⁶.

These starting conditions express the forms of vulnerability and marginality that already exist outside the prison context, which in turn - from an educational point of view - are also reproduced inside prisons. Late schooling (if not literacy), the discontinuity of previous educational paths, the loss of familiarity with study, are all factors that must be taken into account and that require offering the incarcerated student an educational proposal that cannot necessarily be the same as that offered to the traditional university student, but rather a fair one: then equal in terms of opportunities and rights but different in terms of teaching and learning tools and methods.

Educational experimentation within prisons - given the space, time and restrictions of prison - consequently needs an approach that is capable of challenging these starting conditions and avoiding reproducing logics of inequality and exclusion already present in the daily condition of detained persons. With a view to equity, it is also essential to individualise training courses, so as to pay attention to the difficulties, gaps, needs and aptitudes of the individual student and consequently be able to identify the most effective forms of support.

Contamination

The second concept is that of contamination, understood as the attempt to create a strong synergy between university, prison and society. Indeed, it must be considered that the relationship between two public institutions such as the university and the prison is something new and unprecedented since it breaks the traditional isolation of the prison universe - characterised by the principles of segregation and separation from the rest of society. The dynamic of contamination affects several areas:

a. *The relational dimension.* Dozens of tutors, students and professors enter prisons - the place of isolation par excellence - every day; similarly, the university is increasingly populated and frequented by incarcerated students who come out to attend lectures and take exams. This reciprocal contamination was and is the harbinger of the construction of a relational space, of an expression of sociality, of exchange, albeit in a complex process that has nevertheless suffered from the rigidity of an environment such as the prison, which tends to experience as a danger the entry of 'external' gazes and voices within its walls.

b. *The lexical dimension.* In the prison context, the words used to define persons, roles, objects, are strongly connoted. Very often they tend to emphasise the dynamics inherent in the prison context - infantilising, hierarchical, prevaricating - and to trace individual identity back to a generic identity: that of the prisoner. Contaminating the language of prison is therefore a deeply impactful, almost subversive, action. People in prison go from being 'inmates' to 'students' or 'classmates'. Contaminating the prison vocabulary means contesting its logic and preventing it from encompassing all those who frequent it, even those outside the prison, such as volunteers, inmates' families or even external students.

c. *The physical dimension.* Ultimately, contamination also concerns physical spaces. Spaces dedicated to the university have sprung up within prisons, such as study rooms in the different sections and reading spaces. In one of the prisons where the Project is particularly rooted, a project to build an entire university pavilion was recently started. Similarly, those incarcerated students who have access to exit permits or forms of external execution of the sentence, use the university's spaces like any other student: they attend lectures, libraries, take part in study groups. For them, forms of support in familiarising themselves with the university environment - which is often, at an early stage, completely new and disorienting - are also envisaged, should they so request.

Within this framework, it is therefore possible to define an idea of *education as a shared space*. On the other hand, care must be taken to avoid the risk of 'negative contamination', for example by preventing the outside community from adhering to prison logic. It is equally crucial - especially in this context - to try to overcome some of the typical features of 'neo-liberal' education: the logic of voting, excellence and competition. An attempt is made, for example, to enhance the course preparation process by means of moments of discussion and in-depth study, and to reduce the importance of the examination itself. An attempt is also made to encourage a dimension of cooperation on various levels, both between different categories of subjects (e.g., between external students and incarcerated students) and between members of the same category.

The contamination between the university and prison worlds has also helped to build a capital of information and awareness that has given rise to new activities, such as training courses for new tutors and dissemination projects aimed at raising community awareness of the issue of punishment and detention. All these activities often directly involve the incarcerated students - who experience the prison condition first-hand - in the role of trainers.

Institutionalisation

A particularly important concept is that of institutionalisation. By this term we mean the attribution of an institutional character - and not merely voluntary or individual - to the activities promoted. The difficulties encountered, particularly in the first phase of the Project, resulted in an awareness of the need to pay more and more attention to the institutionalisation of practices and agreements, so as not to subordinate the initiatives and activities carried out in prison to the discretion of individual figures in decision-making positions, and at the same time to allow them to continue without interruptions due to personal or political reasons. Hence, institutionalisation in the sense of formalising mutual cooperation commitments between public institutions (prison and university), guaranteeing the continuity of initiatives.

Co-construction

The last key concept is that of co-construction. The Prison Project has always aimed at the co-construction of experience and knowledge, contrary to an extractive dynamic in research activities or indoctrination in daily teaching, favouring a *peer-to-peer learning dimension* rather than a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. For example, frontal forms of

teaching were excluded, favouring instead courses and lectures that were as multidisciplinary as possible and with strong participatory dynamics.

Practices

To give concreteness to the principles set out so far, the main types of activities characterising the Prison Project will be described in more detail: courses in prison with mixed classes and tutoring activity.

Some university courses each academic year are held in prisons instead of university classrooms and are intended for what are called mixed classes, i.e., made up of half of external students and half of prisoners - both enrolled at university and not (and therefore holding lower degrees). In this way, external and internal students find themselves sharing a space in which they are, each other, equally students. As mentioned, the lessons are dialogue-driven and aimed at soliciting everyone's participation (starting with the circle arrangement of participants in the classroom, to emphasise this feature).

The courses always present an interdisciplinary approach and give preference to general topics (topics such as personal identity, justice, gender issues, truth and lies, and the conception of time have been proposed over the years) with a view to stimulating debate as much as possible. This type of approach makes it possible to involve external and internal students on an equal footing, as well as allowing a dialogue between those who have a solid and structured previous cultural background and those who have a bumpy educational path behind them. The aim of this learning methodology is precisely to:

- a. Promote the cultural capital of each participant, with the idea that knowledge is not just a collection of notions but also a collection exchange of experiences, points of view and cultures.
- b. Stimulate the overcoming of the elitist conception of knowledge, understood as the prerogative of 'those who have studied', opposed to a project of building shared knowledge.
- c. Challenge a certain traditional conception of teaching as a unidirectional dynamic characterised by a subordinate relationship between students and teachers.

The other mainstay activity of the Prison Project is tutoring. From the beginning of their studies, each incarcerated student is assigned an external student who attends the same degree course and takes on the role of tutor (external students apply voluntarily and free of charge). The tutor is the main

interlocutor of the incarcerated students, acting as a bridge between prison and university and enabling the incarcerated student to access the information, materials and knowledge needed to embark on a university career.

Therefore, from the study plan, to finding study materials, organising exams and, above all, shared study. Tutors and inmates meet weekly or bi-weekly in dedicated spaces within the prisons and prepare together for the exam they are both going to take. In addition to being a study space, this relationship allows both to access forms of sociality and discussion that reproduce external university dynamics. The generational exchange and knowledge of different contexts, even very distant from one's own daily life, often revealed conditions of vulnerability and social exclusion that were almost like a structural element in the lives of many incarcerated students.

The continuous construction of this dialogue space allowed for the emergence of dense relationships that in many cases - as witnessed by the words of the incarcerated students themselves - turned out to be decisive for their own (re)socialisation paths, as well as being equally crucial for the experiences of the external students. Various practices in the area of tutoring have been tried out, for example - related to the co-construction of knowledge - taking joint exams between tutor and incarcerated students or even writing the degree thesis together.

Towards a rethinking of the relationship between prison and society through educational practices

As has been emphasised many times, when we talk about the right to study in prison, we are not dealing with a straightforward and easy-to-implement issue, but rather we often come up against a marked gap between the norm and effectiveness. In spite of the legal dictate, the right to study in prison is only rarely practically enforceable; in fact, where no concrete actions are promoted by institutions outside the prison (such as schools, universities, for example), it is very complex to carry out a course of study, first and foremost for practical reasons, such as the difficulty in finding books, the impossibility of using internet, the very strong limitation of contacts with the outside world, which makes opportunities for confrontation almost impossible.

In fact, as is well known, a crucial problem concerning the guarantee of rights is the gap between their guarantee at a formal level and their actual translation; this distance is increased - when speaking of the right to study in

prison - by the fact that the objective limitations of the prison condition are compounded by the reluctance of the prison institution to any form of 'contamination' by outside society. Only through the encounter between 'inside' and 'outside', however, is it possible to restore fullness to a right that cannot be limited to the individual relationship with books alone, but which has as its corollary the opportunities for dialogue, exchange, sociality, which can only be experienced in a relational dynamic.

Ambrogio, incarcerated student enrolled in Philosophy, describes the presence of members of the university community in prison in this way: 'you are, perhaps without knowing it, architects. You build 'bridges' that allow us to cross the abyss of detention, loss of dignity, of having become and considered a serial number. Study, culture, are the indispensable tools to achieve the goal of understanding. Every exam taken is a cot that empties'.

The activities promoted by the Prison Project have made it possible, at least in part, to bridge the gap between written law and its translation and to inaugurate an unprecedented path of guaranteeing the right to study through inclusive educational practices and methodologies. It is stimulating to think that through them we can also contribute to a global rethinking of punishment and prison, starting with the definition of a new relationship between prison and external society, and that this can be done through a public institution such as the university, which can act as a 'bridge'.

Again, knowledge-sharing experiences in the prison context often result in practices of empowerment and awareness. From this point of view, it is possible to hypothesise that, in a context that is by definition deprived of freedom, educational experiences can translate themselves, to paraphrase Paulo Freire, into true practices of freedom, in which each person involved can express his or her subjectivity and find an expressive space capable of contributing to the construction of knowledge that is truly a shared heritage and a form of contrast to processes of exclusion.

Such a perspective may certainly appear ambitious, but not utopian if one listens to those who live the experiences described 'from within'. Borrowing the words of Giuseppe: 'you ask yourself: how is it possible for a prisoner to say that he feels free? In fact, I'm not saying that I'm free, but that I feel free, since culture gives me the opportunity to interact with cultured people. So, what is the difference between being and feeling? To give you an idea: try to

imagine being among the waves of the sea and the only possibility of salvation is to grab a life preserver that someone has thrown.

Living in these places is like swimming in a sea of ignorance, so culture becomes our lifesaver thrown by you'. The aim is for educational practices similar to the one experimented by the University of Milan to spread and become institutionalized in more and more Italian and European prisons, inaugurating new synergies and exchanges of good practices that will make this activity increasingly effective and visible.

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¹ It is necessary here to introduce some terminological clarifications. We will use the term 'incarcerated students' to refer to those prisoners who are enrolled in one of our university

courses. Those we will call 'external students' are, on the other hand, traditionally enrolled university students who choose to participate in our prison activities.

² Data updated to June 2023.

³ 'Education shall be open to everyone [...] Capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources, shall have the right to attain the highest levels of education. [...]' (Article 34 of Italian Constitution).

⁴ Cultural and vocational education is provided for in prisons through the organisation of scholastic and vocational courses, in accordance with the trends currently in force and employing methods suited to the prisoners' condition. [...] Attendance and completion of university and higher technical studies are facilitated, also through agreements with university institutions [...] (Article 19 of Italian prison system). 'Prisoners and internees who are enrolled in university courses of study or who meet the requirements for enrolment in such courses are facilitated to complete their studies. To this end, appropriate arrangements are established with the academic authorities to enable students to benefit from all possible assistance and to take their exams. [...] Prisoners and inmates who are university students are assigned, where possible, to rooms and wards suitable for the performance of their studies, and common rooms are also made available for them. Students may be authorised to keep books, publications and all teaching aids necessary for their study in their room and other study rooms' (Article 44 'Regolamento recante norme sull'ordinamento penitenziario e sulle misure privative e limitative della libertà').

⁵ Most of our incarcerated students are Italian. Approximately 1 in 3 inmates in Italy are foreigners, but it is more difficult for foreigners to undertake university studies because of the greater difficulties in entering the Italian school and university system (often due to a lack of documentation etc.) and above all for linguistic reasons.

⁶ In most cases, confined students abandon their studies upon release from prison, usually because the return to free life makes primary needs such as work and family life management prevail.