

INNOVATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR BASIC SKILLS IN PRISON EDUCATION: YOUNG PRISONERS' MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Correctional institutions can create conditions for empowering socially disadvantaged young individuals through offering them innovative learning opportunities. This is especially true for those young prisoners who end up in prison partly because of conditions that relate to lack of basic skills and competences. This paper examines the introduction of an innovative basic skills program in a blended learning mode in order to make young prisoners more self-assured when facing the challenges of their incarceration but most importantly the challenges of re-entering society upon their release. Specifically it investigates the way young prisoners perceived their competences and their motivation to engage in a basic skills program and explores their expectations for their future. The data for the analysis presented, come from a study that was part of an EU funded project. The findings from the empirical investigation show that young prisoners were highly motivated and had high expectations from the basic skills program both for their lives within prison but also when released.

Keywords: *empowerment, prison education, blended learning, basic skills*

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Τα σωφρονιστικά ιδρύματα είναι σε θέση να δημιουργήσουν προϋποθέσεις για ενδυνάμωση κοινωνικά μειονεκτούντων ατόμων νεαρής ηλικίας μέσω της προσφοράς καινοτόμων εκπαιδευτικών προγραμμάτων. Αυτό ισχύει ιδιαίτερα για νεαρούς κρατούμενους που πολλές φορές καταλήγουν στον εγκλεισμό εν μέρει λόγω συνθηκών που σχετίζονται με την έλλειψη βασικών δεξιοτήτων. Το άρθρο αυτό εξετάζει την εισαγωγή ενός καινοτόμου προγράμματος βασικών δεξιοτήτων με μικτή μέθοδο διδασκαλίας, προκει-

μένου να προετοιμάσει νεαρούς κρατούμενους να αντιμετωπίζουν τόσο προκλήσεις κατά τον εγκλεισμό τους όσο και προκλήσεις που σχετίζονται με την επανένταξή τους στην κοινωνία. Συγκεκριμένα διερευνά τον τρόπο με τον οποίο αξιολογούν τις ικανότητές τους και εξετάζει τα κίνητρά τους για συμμετοχή σε ένα πρόγραμμα βασικών δεξιοτήτων, ενώ παράλληλα αναζητά τις προσδοκίες τους για το μέλλον τους. Τα δεδομένα που παρουσιάζονται προέρχονται από μια μελέτη που αποτελούσε μέρος ενός έργου χρηματοδοτούμενου από την ΕΕ. Τα ευρήματα της εμπειρικής έρευνας καταδεικνύουν ότι οι νεαροί κρατούμενοι έχουν υψηλά κίνητρα και προσδοκίες τόσο για τη ζωή τους εντός της φυλακής όσο και για τη ζωή τους μετά, και αναζητούν ευκαιρίες προσωπικής ανάπτυξης μέσω εκπαιδευτικών προγραμμάτων.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *ενδυνάμωση, εκπαίδευση κρατουμένων, μικτή μάθηση, βασικές δεξιότητες*

■ INTRODUCTION

According to Giddens (2009) “the underlying principle of modern prisons is to ‘improve’ individuals and prepare them to play a fit and proper part in society once released” (p. 976). Can education in prisons serve as a means for rehabilitation rather than incarceration? This paper examines the extent to which the introduction of an innovative educational program can realise this promise. Specifically, this paper suggests that the benefits of basic skills programs in prison education can have positive effects in the lives of young prisoners when these are offered in an engaging manner and when they address specific educational needs that fit their profiles. The profiles of the prisoners who are engaged in a basic skills program are very important to be examined, as these point to interesting issues relating to the design of a program. Equally important is the examination of their expectations for their future in terms of the perceived benefits such programs may produce for them.

Education and training, as a fundamental human right, should be provided in all settings and circumstances especially to groups and individuals who are socially and/ or geographically marginalised. Individuals who are in prison are for short or longer periods socially and physically excluded from everyday social processes and institutions. Even though policy documents with recommendations concerning prisoners’ right to education and training offer clear frameworks for these provisions (Council of Europe, 1990, 2006), the education provided in prisons often fails to meet the demands of trainees for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability once re-entering society. Prisons

need to focus more on education, training, and employment if they are to provide viable support for young prisoners as they move back into society (Rogers, Hurry, Simonot, & Wilson, 2014).

Three decades ago, the Council of Europe recommended that all prisoners should have access to a wide curriculum, with the aim “to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context” (1990, p. 8). Despite this recommendation, throughout Europe, there are different regimes of such provisions (and different philosophies behind them) and they vary considerably across countries. There are countries that offer well-resourced comprehensive programmes of education in prisons while other countries adopt a narrow definition of education offering only minimal educational opportunities to imprisoned individuals. When prison education is viewed in a broad perspective and placed within the framework of adult education, lifelong learning and basic competences acquisition (both key and transversal), it provides the ground for initiatives, research and pilot learning programmes to be introduced. The end result in this case is that prisoners are provided with more educational opportunities and subsequently benefit from them both in the short term (within prison) but also in the long term (when they re-integrate in society).

EDUCATION IN PRISON

Education in prison has the potential to create prospects for empowering educationally disadvantaged individuals, especially those who lack basic skills and competences. When educational opportunities are offered through innovative educational programs (i.e. as Blended learning with extensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)) they create incentives for participating especially for individuals who may have had negative experiences from conventional educational processes. Education then becomes a constructive activity, a truly empowering process that builds skills and strengthens self-assurance allowing individuals to aspire to be active socially and economically in the future.

When individuals end up in prison, they are usually processed through a highly regulated system that leaves them powerless to act, react, and gain control over their everyday lives. It thus becomes a challenging task for correctional systems to deal with some of the circumstances that make individuals prone to deviance. As will be discussed later on, education (or lack of it) for a number of prisoners is often one of many contributing factors associated with incarceration. The challenge thus entails to create the conditions for responding to real needs that

are often connected with the acquisition of very basic skills of literacy, numeracy, use of ICTs and managing personal finances (budgeting).

■ EDUCATION IN PRISON AS A REHABILITATION PROCESS

The need for educational and learning provisions in prisons is always a timely issue for every society because, as research has consistently shown, it contributes to the reduction of recidivism. Wilson, Gallagher and MacKenzie (2000), in a review of studies that examined the relationship between prison experiences and recidivism, found that education in prison, among other activities, was associated with reduced recidivism. One cannot but recall the famous words widely attributed to Victor Hugo who more than a century ago was quoted saying that 'he who opens a school door, closes a prison'.

According to Hawley, Murphy and Souto-Otero (2013) the prison population of Europe (EU) is around 640.000 people and a significant proportion of this population is low-skilled individuals. Further, according to the same researchers, only 3- 5 % of them would be qualified to undertake higher education. Similarly, Clark and Dugdale (2008) have shown that over half of prisoners have no qualifications of any kind, while 43% do not have the reading skills expected of an 11-year-old and 82% do not have the equivalent writing skills. As may be expected, low levels of skills and qualifications have negative effects on prisoners' employment prospects upon release. Subsequently, this becomes an important factor influencing whether or not ex-prisoners would re-offend (Brosens, De Donder, Dury, & Verté, 2015; Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013).

Despite the fact that prison education plays an important positive role in prisoners' rehabilitation process as it may offer them valuable skills necessary for their smooth re-integration into society and for securing employment and possibly further education and training, it is not always a straightforward process. Many challenges are present because of structural and procedural realities found in most prison settings. These may include institutional barriers, such as the shortage of resources and staff (Borden & Richardson, 2008) and restricted educational opportunities in terms of educational content and level. To these, one may add dispositional barriers from prisoners' previous experiences in education, which may limit the extent to which they may benefit from learning opportunities within prisons if offered in conventional forms. It is for this reason that prison education needs to become attractive for people who may have had previous negative experiences from mainstream schooling.

Creating attractive educational programs in prisons is a challenging task. If prison education is to be successful, it should be an appealing pursuit in prison life in general. In other words, it should potentially bring substantial benefits to prisoners, such as higher levels of autonomy and self-respect and a perception of empowerment in the sense that it offers to otherwise powerless individuals the opportunity to gain mastery of competences and skills they did not fully have before. One way to achieve this is by employing ICTs and alternative methods of teaching and learning, different from traditional methodologies.

The acquisition of basic skills should be an essential component when it comes to offering programs for prisoners. Low levels of basic skills in the general adult population is a problem found widely. For example in Europe, 80 million people phase this challenge and, as research shows, a skilled workforce is a productive workforce and is better able to respond to the challenges of the available employment opportunities, health and welfare (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009; Howard & Kings, 2010). In a study published in 2004, Messemer and Valentine (2004) cited a number of research findings which suggested that the majority of prisoners in the US were functionally illiterate. In addition to this, McCulley, Gillespie and Murr (2014) suggested that 43% of prisoners do not have a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate. This profile of prisoners, which is characterised by low levels of educational attainment, lack of vocational skills, lack of educational opportunities and increased rates of unemployment, is a repeated finding in a number of studies (see Curtis, Derzis, Shippen, Musgrove, & Brigman, 2013). All the above are factors strongly associated with increased recidivism, as they constitute impediments to successful re-entry into civilian life.

Another common feature of the educational profile of prisoners is that while they share some basic characteristics they often have quite dissimilar experiences regarding prior education and training. This creates challenges when planning training opportunities for them. The traditional educational approach, which presupposes that all learners embark on their education from a similar starting point does not apply in this case. Prison education programs, such as basic skills programs, should take into account the diverse educational profile of prisoners and should be offered in an engaging and innovative method. The benefits of offering successful programs can be massive, as prisoners who participate in basic skills programs according to Messemer and Valentine (2004) are less likely experience recidivism (see also Porporino & Robinson, 1992).

According to Patzelt, Williams and Shepherd (2014) many prisons have introduced educational programs that prepare prisoners for reintegration into

work and society after release. They demonstrated how a specialised program on entrepreneurial education in a European prison was found to be particularly effective because, in addition to providing an alternative career path, it transformed prisoners' attitudes toward themselves, their current situation and others in their environment. Prisoners developed a particular mind-set that helped them activate opportunity recognition processes that served as means for successful completion of that certain educational program. Basic skills education can produce similar mind-sets. By putting literacy and numeracy at the centre of adult learning, basic skills provision can be enhanced (Howard & Kings, 2010).

THE SUITABILITY OF BLENDED LEARNING FOR PRISON EDUCATION

The dissimilar characteristics in the profile of prisoners, which consist of a variety of prior experiences in education and training makes Blended learning methodologies ideal. Blended learning is an educational approach in which students learn, at least in part, through delivery of content and instruction autonomously via digital and/or online means. This method allows for a substantial student control over time, place, path, or pace which is suitable when learners have diverse abilities and needs. Face-to-face teaching methods are mixed with computer-mediated activities. Blended learning courses facilitate a combination of independent and collaborative learning activities, and this fusion is a major contributor to student satisfaction and success. The use of information and communication technologies in itself can be an important drive for students' positive attitudes towards learning. The introduction of information technology in any class, not only provides better communication between lecturers and trainees, but can also facilitate students' better assessment and understanding of course material and curriculum.

A number of prisoners, such as the ones participating in the present study, often have negative experiences of formal education in their teenage years and simply shutting them in a traditional classroom is unlikely to produce any positive motives for learning. E-learning methodologies can be an exciting incentive very different from prior learning experiences. When prisoners / students are enabled and supported to attend such courses, it can be reasonably expected that this will produce the expectation for meaningful learning outcomes. Additionally, the use of technology in correctional education can address two relevant issues: (1) the numbers and variety of prisoners needing education (Chappell & Shippen, 2013); and (2) understaffing conditions in prison schools (Borden & Richardson,

2008). Pearson (2012) supports that in computer-based training, learners have the convenience of scheduling training sessions when the conditions are convenient for them and sessions may be taken from various points of access and can run depending on an individual's progress.

Many European countries, such as the UK and the Nordic countries have recognised the benefits e-learning can offer to the prison population as a means to overcome the physical barrier of incarceration. E-learning offers prisoners many opportunities in a form which helps them make use of a commodity they have in abundance: time. Moreover, there have been examples of studies looking into the effectiveness and efficiency of e-learning vocational courses in the prison context, which successfully resulted in asserting that “e-learning is [indeed] an engaging and attractive way to deliver education to offenders in [...] custody” (Schuller, 2009).

Blended learning which as discussed earlier makes use of both worlds (face-to-face and e-learning) can maximise this engagement. Blended learning enlarges the scope of the skills developed by prisoners, skills that go beyond traditional prison technical education and training and give opportunities for formal qualifications (such as computer skill certifications, language skill certificates etc.). In a prison setting, the full potential of blended learning is realised, as it is a flexible way to acquire knowledge in highly regulated and controlled systems where instructors and students frequently have limited control of how to structure time and modalities of learning due to safety concerns. Such security concerns for example according to Wade, Bohac and Platt (2013) are connected with Internet access from within prison. Despite these concerns, however, blended learning as an autonomous and, to a certain degree, self-paced process gives prisoners a sense of control of their learning and of their lives, bringing wider advantages to their self- image and confidence; elements that can be important components for developing a sense of empowerment.

All the above issues of education in prisons as an empowerment process and the application of innovative learning methods in this process paved the way for looking in depth into how these issues related to prisoners themselves. In order to empirically examine the above issues, the following research questions were set within the framework of an EU funded project:

- What was the socio-demographic profile of prisoners who volunteered to participate in a basic skills program?
- How did prisoners perceive / evaluate their competences in four basic skills (literacy, numeracy, ICT use and financial skills)?
- How important did prisoners perceive these skills to be for their future lives (upon release from prison)?

- What were the motives (or incentives) of prisoners to engage in a Blended learning program of basic skills?

METHODOLOGY

In order to provide answers to the above-mentioned research questions about the socio-demographic and educational profile of prisoners and the reasons that motivated them to volunteer and participate in a basic skills training program, we explore data that were produced as part of an EU funded Lifelong Learning Program. In this program, four countries Italy, Greece, Romania and Cyprus collaborated in the design and delivery of a basic skills program using a Blended learning methodology. Since prisons in all four countries, had very strict prohibitions relating to internet access because of concerns over security, the material prepared was delivered using offline information technologies. During the program an empirical research was conducted using a mixed methods approach. Three distinct methods of data collection were employed: structured interviews, individual in-depth interviews and group interviews with prisoners. The success of the research effort relied heavily on the collaboration of the research team with the prison's administrative and educational staff. For the purposes of this paper a brief reference will be made to the quantitative findings from the structured interviews while the main focus will be on qualitative data that were produced during personal in-depth interviews and a group interview with young prisoners in the prison setting of one of the participating countries; Cyprus.

Sample

In the wider project which involved the four countries, a purposive sampling strategy was designed aiming to collect information from around 160 prisoners (40 prisoners per country). The individuals to be selected would had to have the following characteristics: Mostly young individuals aged 18-35 eligible to attend prison education and at the time attending various courses in prison schools. In order to be included in the particular program they should have had participated at least in one of the programs already offered in the prison schools of the correction facility. This was thought to be a good indicator of a prior interest for self-development and personal improvement. Moreover, the prisoners to be selected for the project needed to have been native speakers because the material produced was in each country's national language. Participation in the basic-skills program and the research which is presented in this paper was voluntary.

In the end, a total of 151 prisoners from all four countries who fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria participated in the program. The vast majority of them were young males (95,4%). Part of their participation in the project included taking part in a structured interview to collect factual data and their views about themselves and their perceived skills. All selected prisoners gave the structured interview during their presence in the prison schools. Once the structured interviews were completed, a number of them were invited to voluntarily participate in a personal interview and take part in a group discussion in order to elaborate on their views. Selection for the personal interviews and group discussion was made by the interviewers through an in situ assessment of individuals' willingness to engage in an in-depth conversation and their ability to articulate their views in a clear and forthcoming manner. The implications from this mode of selection might be that the recorded views might not be entirely representative of all the prisoners involved in the project but that was an inevitable limitation given the constraints that researchers had both in terms of available time in the prison settings and flexibility to make unrestricted decisions.

Data collection

The structured interview schedule comprised of twenty questions in total. Four questions asked about demographic information including, gender, age, level of education and time and length of incarceration. Prisoners were then asked to give their subjective evaluation of their skills regarding four key competences; literacy, numeracy, use of ICTs and personal budgeting. Specifically they were asked about their perceived abilities prior to their imprisonment and what they expected these competences to be after their release from prison. Additionally, they were asked to indicate how necessary they thought the four key competences would be for their future lives and more importantly how motivated they were to participate in a program that was delivered in a Blended learning modality.

Following the structured interviews, ten prisoners per prison setting were asked to participate in an in-depth interview and group discussion following the selection procedure described above. This was deemed particularly important in order for prisoners to express as best as possible their thoughts about the issues under investigation. Additionally, when the same prisoners were asked to participate in a group interview they were fully briefed about the process and how the discussion would be conducted. They were asked to elaborate on their expectations from participating in a Blended course on basic skills while in prison and after their release. Both the individual interviews and the group conversation were recorded

using shorthand notes. Digital recorders were difficult to use in prison due to security regulations. In fact, the use of any kind of digital equipment in prison such as recorders, cameras etc. needed to be negotiated under a very strict security regime and, in the end, it was deemed not to be a straightforward objective to pursue. The interviews were conducted in the presence of the interviewer and the person who was recording the conversation. No prison guards were present and participants were encouraged to speak freely. They were assured that their views would be treated anonymously and in confidentiality.

■ THE PROFILE OF THE SELECTED PRISONERS

A number of studies have suggested that apart from systemic challenges to introducing educational programs in prison, one should not dismiss the fact that there are challenges connected to the profile of individuals in prison. For example, McCulley, Gillespie and Murr (2014) argue that in the US correctional educators are often faced with students who have failed within regular schools and their descriptions of them is that of apathetic (indifferent - unresponsive) learners, having learning, emotional, or drug problems (and sometimes co-occurring disabilities). Moreover, they are described as persons that usually have a history of violence and low self-concept.

The sample of prisoners who have participated in the present project from all the participating countries had some common characteristics regarding their prior educational, vocational and/or non-formal education. The profile of many of the prisoners was similar to the profile described in many other similar studies. Among the prisoners, there was a high proportion of drug users and people with mental health problems, which significantly affected their educational experience in prison. A typical profile is roughly the following: They have had little or no work experience, they have had little vocational training, most had severe literacy gaps, low self-esteem and lacked participatory skills. Most of them were often people who had failed at school and considered that formal education had nothing to offer them. The most notable feature was the fact that the majority had low educational qualifications regardless of the age range they belonged.

The data collected from the structured interviews were analysed using descriptive statistics and are presented in frequency tables. Regarding their education, it may be seen that the majority of the prisoners had up to Lower Secondary School education (Table 1).

Table 1. Level of prisoners formal education

	No formal education	Primary school or lower	Lower Secondary school	Higher Secondary school	Technical Secondary education	University, College
Total	6,8%	12,2%	49,7%	16,3%	8,2%	6,8%

In order to get an understanding of the perceived level of competence in basic skills, during the structured interview, participants were asked to do a self-assessment of how well they thought they could perform in reading, basic arithmetic, handling their finances and ICT skills. This rating was done in an ordinal scale ranging from very easy to very difficult. It was noteworthy that prisoners replied that they could perform tasks either very easy or fairly easy in all basic skills under investigation. This contradicted the information given to the researchers by the prison school staff when the project was in the design phase. Specifically, based on their previous experience, they advised researchers not to administer a self-completion questionnaire but rather opt for a structured interview because of doubts as to whether prisoners could actually perform the task of responding to questions independently.

Table 2. Basic skills perceived proficiency

	Very easy	Fairly easy	Average	Fairly difficult	Very difficult
Literacy task	47,3%	30,7%	14,7%	6,0%	1,3%
Numeracy task	56,0%	24,7%	15,3%	1,3%	2,7%
ICT tasks	29,7%	24,3%	24,3%	9,5%	12,2%
Budgeting	31,8%	41,7%	13,9%	8,6%	4,0%

A point worth noting, is that in the case of Cyprus the interviewer (an instructor in the prison school) who was conducting the interviews and had a very good first-hand knowledge of most of the interviewees, indicated to the principle investigator (main investigator or investigator in-charge) that the picture presented by the prisoners about themselves was clearly an over-estimation of their real capabilities. When the instructor was asked to provide an explanation about this, she responded that it was highly likely that prisoners gave such responses because they felt uncomfortable or even embarrassed to reveal their actual competency in what might be regarded as simple skills. This was later verified when prisoners took

assessment tests in all four skills and the results essentially revealed a significant deviation between what the prisoners perceived as their level in these skills and what they actually scored in the tests. The mismatch was a very important element for researchers to consider when interpreting the findings of the personal interviews that followed to which we now turn in order to examine the way prisoners talked about their needs and their motives to engage in a basic skills program.

TALKING ABOUT BASIC SKILLS

Many of the issues researched in the structured interviews were further elaborated during personal semi-structured interviews with a selection of prisoners who volunteered from each participating prison and a group interview in the end. The group interview served as a forum for participants to talk freely and built on the views voiced during the personal interviews. Additionally, the group interview acted as a triangulation method that verified the answers previously given and elicited more detailed answers enriching the findings. The respondents in the interviews were mostly young men serving short to medium term sentences.

The data recorded during the interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Howitt, 2010). As indicated previously, participants were asked to talk about the importance of basic skills and about the primary motivating factor for them to improve their skills and competences. In this paper, we present findings from prisoners' responses from the Cyprus prison. Their answers however, did not deviate substantially from the ones produced in the other prison settings of the project. As mentioned in the previous section the interviews were not tape-recorded but instead were recorded using shorthand notes by a research assistant.

Talking about their literacy skills and what they thought about the value of this skill, prisoners talked about issues connected with their everyday life both in prison but also outside prison, when released. They gave emphasis to the necessity of having such skills to a level that would allow them to function better in society both when trying to find employment but also for their family life. Two young prisoners who had young children referred to the fact that good literacy skills would allow them to help their children with their schooling once they were released. Obviously, such an activity was thought of as important for fulfilling possibly overlooked parental obligations on their part because of personal reading deficits. Interviewees also referred to improving their personal circumstances in prison; from reading prison rules to reading books borrowed from the prison school

library. Furthermore, most (eight out of ten) expected that such a skill would allow them to ensure better communication with the public authorities, develop their personality and improve themselves. Young prisoners gave analogous responses when asked to talk about the value of numeracy skills. Even though it was evident during the interviews, that they made strong associations of numeracy skills to mathematics, it was widely acknowledged that people who possessed that skill could perform everyday tasks with more confidence and self-assurance, something that they aspired to accomplish themselves.

When talking about ICT skills it was clear to all the prisoners that they considered ICTs as extremely important for all aspects of contemporary life. There was reference to the ever-changing nature of ICTs, which makes those who are proficient in their use better able to cope with the demands of the modern world. Among the areas that ICTs were considered as being indispensable was when trying to obtain employment after release. When probed to give their views on how ICTs could transform somebody's life, they referred to the fact that it was a medium that allowed individuals to communicate freely, with ease and that it gave access to information on a range of topics. Importantly, it was recognised that personal computers and the internet was a satisfying form of entertainment. During the group interview four respondents focused on the indirect positive effects that ICT proficiency could produce. They expressed the idea that it would allow them to engage in multiple everyday activities of contemporary society where ICT is an integral part. McCulley, Gillespie and Murr (2014) in their study also found that the use of adaptive educational technology improved low literate incarcerated adults' reading competency scores.

Lastly, when prisoners were inquired to talk about budgeting the majority of them (nine out of ten) requested clarification about what this term actually entailed. When the interviewer provided a simple definition a young prisoner who was in prison for petty theft commented humorously that "*had I have that skill before [prison] I would probably not end up here*". It was evident that budgeting was a novel concept to many prisoners and once they found out what it meant they were quick to indicate that it was a very important 'survival' skill. Contrary to what they reported in their self-assessment, almost all admitted their deficiency when it came to dealing even with simple financial issues and stressed their willingness to improve their skills in handling financial matters competently both in prison but most importantly after being released.

MOTIVATION TO ENGAGE IN A PROGRAM PROMOTING BASIC SKILLS

The issue of motivation to engage in a program of basic skills was extremely important because when there are intrinsic motives and positive dispositions to engage in a program of personal development, it can turn out to be a truly empowering exercise with long-term effects. The responses in the personal interviews and the group interview corroborated the answers given in the structured questionnaire. As was mentioned in the previous section, almost all prisoners talked about self-development and its importance in later civilian life and future employment. There were, however, two other important motivating factors. One related to the conditions in prison. Attending school was an activity that was preferable to many other –limited– alternatives available. When, during the group interview a young prisoner described it as an ‘escape’ from the ‘cruel reality’ of imprisonment, the majority of the participants expressed their agreement. Additionally, the novelty of the program and the fact that it was offered in a Blended mode with the use of ICTs was in itself an intriguing prospect for people inducing a willingness to participate. When the program was advertised by the prison school instructors, it was made clear to interested individuals that this approach was an innovative learning program, using e-learning material based on individual progression pace. In many ways, this mode of delivery was promised to be a completely different educational experience from the ones they were engaged earlier in their lives. Instructors later on reported to the researchers that they had noted an increased interest from the school attendees compared to interest expressed for the regular courses on offer in the prison school.

Despite the fact that intrinsic motivation is indeed extremely important for successfully engaging in an educational program, their references to external incentives were equally important. In the group interview almost all participants raised the issue (or agreed) with the need to be given some kind of accreditation for the skills acquired in prison by external agencies (i.e. the Ministry of Education). This accreditation was thought to be a very important qualification for finding a ‘respectable’ job upon release from prison. Another interesting reference that was raised during the group conversations was the potential to receive a reduction of prison sentence when somebody engaged in education while in prison. Evidently, the prisoners who made these references had knowledge of the fact that this was already happening in other countries (Greece was mentioned as an example).

On the whole, prisoners expressed a variety of reasons for their willingness to participate in a program that promoted basic skills. For some, who were school

dropouts, it was a lifelong expectation to go back to school, while others related with issues like getting a job, saving money, having better everyday lifestyle, being able to help others around them. A very interesting comment that when raised during the group interview was quickly endorsed by almost all participants was a reference made to having a creative pursuit in prison that was creating an illusion of 'escape' from the realities of prison life. External motives to engage in prison education is a common finding in other studies too. For example Delaere, Caluwé and Clarebout (2013) point to interesting results about prisoners' motivational orientations to follow an educational program whereby prisoners had a specific goal they wanted to reach (e.g., to heighten their status).

In this study, even though prisoners initially tended to focus on intrinsic motives, upon probing, especially during the group interview, they revealed other down-to-earth motives. Intrinsic motives, although very important, were not always enough. Motives related to privileges within the prison but also with issues that related to the reduction of prison sentence and the accreditation of the skills being offered or even an 'escape' from prison everyday reality were more prevalent. The ranking of motives depended on the profile of the inmate. The researchers deduced from the available information they had during the interviews that prisoners serving longer sentences were mostly tempted by privileges within prison but others, serving medium to short-term sentences, were more inclined to participate because of the prospect of sentence reduction and the prospect of civilian life.

The latter point raises interesting questions about the reasons for participation in such programs and whether in such conditions these programs can realistically fulfil their potential. If participation is influenced primarily by external motives (i.e. attractive mode of delivery or because it provides alternatives to day to day experience of prison life), educational programs may not have lasting positive effects in the lives of otherwise disadvantaged individuals and hinder their smooth reintegration to the community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If prisons are to function as effective rehabilitation institutions rather than places for incarceration they need to promote processes that facilitate successful reintegration to society. As indicated in this paper, previous research has shown that educational programs in prisons have the potential to create positive effects in reducing recidivism and deviance, especially for young individuals. When novel programs are being introduced in prison settings utilising up-to-date curricula (i.e.

basic skills) and pedagogy (i.e. use of Blended courses) these could have positive long-term effects both for the individuals involved and for the wider society. This points to interesting educational policy directions regarding the content and mode of delivery of any new programs of study introduced in prison schools.

Moreover, the introduction of novel programs, needs to be accompanied by in-depth investigation into the profiles of those for which these program are designed for and who volunteer to participate in them. Moreover, their motives and expectations are of crucial importance. This study has shown that when there is a good match between the prisoner profile and the content and mode of delivery, the results can be encouraging in terms of increased participation in prison education. This study has further shown interesting findings in terms of the motives and expectations of the individuals who participated in the program presented here. These expectations were mostly associated with short term gains relating to prison life rather than long term benefits related to rehabilitation and recidivism. Further studies need to follow in order to examine ways with which intrinsic motives may be strengthened in order to promote tangible long-term positive outcomes that will bring genuine individual empowerment and smooth reintegration to society with reduced risks for recidivism.

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