

From HMP to PhD. Transformation, Education and Rehabilitation

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Abstract

This article explores my own transition from prisoner to PhD researcher. Drawing on my own experiences, it emphasises the transformative power of education for former offenders more generally. The first part introduces the failure of the UK prison system to offer a rehabilitative experience for offenders and introduces the concept that the label of criminal can have a detrimental effect which lasts far longer than the prison sentence itself. The second part uses my own experiences to demonstrate the power of education in bringing about transformation, with particular emphasis on the development of social and cultural capital. The final part connects my own experiences with the emerging wider debate on the link between education and rehabilitation.

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Prior to embarking on my PhD, I spent a short time in prison for drug supply offences. Now I am a second year PhD student conducting research on East Kent bottom level drug markets. This article offers a personal reflection on the transition I have undergone from offender to academic researcher, and the key role education has played in that journey. Throughout, it draws on the significance of my attendance at University in undergoing my own transition, providing a positive experience which allowed me to shrug off negative labels (Young, 1971) and evolve from somebody who felt like an imposter in the world of academia into a skilled researcher, confident in my own abilities. This reflection emphasises the fact that I'm no longer ashamed of who I was, but am, rather, proud of who I have become and who I may yet still be.

From Outside to Inside. Transitioning to the 'inmate world'

Prison is a surreal experience – from being sent down under the court, through the van ride to the prison, to being booked in and strip searched before arriving in your first night cell. Every set of bars you get locked behind reaffirms that you are no longer in control. The processes are dehumanising and may be understood in relation to Goffman's (1961) 'inmate world', where by the old self is destroyed and your identity replaced with a new one. By the second day you are spat out into the general prison population and you are just another number in the 'human warehouse' (Hardwick, 2015) that is the prison system in England and Wales.

The prison wing is a daunting environment to step into: you cannot hide as there is nowhere to go. Additionally, you must face all the negative assumptions, largely fed to outsiders by a variety of media images, of prison wings as dangerous and violent spaces. These elements do of course exist within prison wings and there is always a degree of tension, but, there is

also some degree of community amongst prisoners. Rather than making prison wings into rehabilitative spaces, however, these communities reflect and reinforce the street cultures many prisoners come from.

Despite the rehabilitation of prisoners being a core part of the prison service's mission statement (MoJ), very few are actually rehabilitated with almost half (46%) of all adult offenders who are imprisoned being reconvicted within one year of leaving prison (MoJ, 2019). Instead of rehabilitating ex-offenders during their incarceration we label them (Young, 1971), with criminal records when they leave. Whilst criminal records may offer the perception of protection to society, they also label ex-offenders as outsiders (Becker, 1966) and act as barriers to employment, which perhaps amplify the pressures to reoffend (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019). These pressures are sometimes dismissed as ex-offenders having a lack of moral fortitude (Wikström, 2012) for failing to resist the temptations of crime. Rather, they should be understood in relation to being shut out of legitimate employment due to the stigma (Goffman, 1963) attached to criminal records (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019), which extends punishment far beyond the sentence handed down. Therefore, not only does the 'inmate world' destroy one's old identity and remould a new identity (Goffman, 1961), the criminal record attached to prisoners maintains and reinforces this new identity outside of prison in legitimate spaces and inhibits re-entry to society.

From the Inside to the Outside. Criminal Records, Rehabilitation and Re-entry

Many ex-offenders also perform other roles which come with their own pressures and expectations and become harder to meet without a job. In my own experience, for example, my criminal record limited my chances of being employed at a time I was desperate to support my young family. After a year of consistently being either rejected for or not hearing back from jobs, and feeling almost out of options, I enrolled at college and then continued on to university. I completed an access course with full marks, graduated with a first class degree in Sociology and Philosophy, and won a prestigious ESCR 3+1 scholarship for a Masters and PhD.

In the 8 years I have spent back in education I have had opportunities that I didn't think were possible when I first left prison. I have taught classes, spoken at conferences, designed a successful research proposal, and am now in the process of publishing my findings. Unlike criminal records and prison wings, educational courses and campuses have opened the door to meaningful opportunities in a supportive and wholesome environment which have allowed me to upskill and increase my life chances. My qualifications and academic successes have provided me with the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that allows prospective employers to see past my labelling as a criminal.

Whilst I do not plan to return to prison, I do not think this should be attributed to deterrence theory (Beccaria, 1963; Bentham, 1948) which conceptualises the experience of prison as a way of discouraging criminal behaviour. For me personally, it is not the experience of the prison that deters me from reoffending, but rather the meaningful opportunity provided by the educational institutions I have engaged with, combined with the support from my partner

and the purpose I have found in our young family. Whilst the pressures of life never go away, the capital (Bourdieu, 1986) at my disposal to tackle them now provides a clear path to a brighter future with an abundance of possibilities. The prison estate can take no credit for this. Nor can my criminal record which has only made it harder. Neither the prison estate or my criminal record rehabilitated me or encouraged this education path. Therefore, I will not be chalked up as an easy victory for deterrence theory, the prison estate or the CJS.

Education as a Passport for All, Even those who made a Mistake

My experiences of educational pathways as a means of rehabilitation are reflected in an emerging debate about the importance of education in rehabilitating offenders. Coates' (2016) work, titled *Unlocking Potential A review of education in prison*, identifies the benefits of continued educational courses after prison. Farley and Pike (2016) also discuss how engaging prisoners in educational courses reduces recidivism rates countering the link between illiteracy, innumeracy and offending (Natale, 2010). However, it is not just basic courses which prisoners show a desire to engage in with: a fifth of prisoners report wanting to engage in higher education courses (Coates, 2016). In fact, Earle and Mehigan's (2019) book, *Degrees of Freedom*, documents the successes of the open university and provides personal testimonies of a growing number of prisoners who, like me, have been revitalised via educational pursuits rather than the prison system.

Building on this discussion, I propose that instead of sending offenders through cycles of short sentences in prison environments we send them back to 'school', of some sorts, so that they might pursue meaningful opportunities and increase their life chances outside of crime. Currently even the basic literacy rate amongst prisoners is low (MOJ, 2019). 49 percent of people in prison have been permanently excluded from school (Natale, 2010). Although, prisons do offer educational and vocational courses, these are limited in number or at a basic level (Coates, 2016) and struggle to achieve their goals especially with short sentence offenders (Natale, 2010). Not only are ex-offenders shut out of the job market due to their criminal records, but many are also shut out due to their lack of qualifications or opportunity to pursue meaningful upskilling due to a lack of capital gained whilst incarcerated (Bourdieu, 1986).

Educational institutions recruiting directly from court rooms may seem like a radical idea, but the prison population is a pool of untapped potential waiting to be realised. We, as a society, must be more creative than criminal records in our attempts to keep society safe from ex-offenders and be bolder in rehabilitating what we perceive as lost causes and finally embrace education as a 'passport to the future' (Malcom X, 1964), even for those who made a mistake. The turnaround is possible, given the chance, and I hope my transformation from prisoner to PhD researcher serves as testament to that.

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