



VCU

Journal of Prison Education Research

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 6

4-26-2024

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Recommended Citation

Efstratoglou, A. K., & Koulaouzides, G. A. (2024). Understanding the Challenges of Perspective Transformation in Prison: Biographical Narratives of Foreign National Students of a Second Chance School in Greece. *Journal of Prison Education Research*, 8(1). Retrieved from <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/joper/vol8/iss1/6>

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Understanding the Challenges of Perspective Transformation in Prison: Biographical Narratives of Foreign National Students of a Second Chance School in Greece

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Abstract: *Education has borne the burden of prisoners' reform since the early days of modern prison. Several studies attest to its transformative potential, taking a short-term perspective. Rarely the experience of being a student, while incarcerated, is examined in the context of the wider biography. This paper uses perspective transformation theory as a point of departure to study how imprisonment influences adult learning. Building on biographical narratives of ten foreign national students of a Second Chance School at the largest Greek remand establishment, and participant observation of relevant class discussions, we argue that imprisonment impedes perspective transformation, strengthening structural inequalities and distorted views of incarcerated students' position in the social world, that extend far beyond the prison's walls. We further discuss the perceived importance of the educational relationship, and the ethical implications that educators who work in prisons should consider, as part of their work.*

Keywords: *Adult prison education; informal learning; perspective transformation; biographical method; foreign national prisoners*

Introduction

While it remains uncertain who first voiced the phrase attributed to Victor Hugo “He who opens the door of a school, closes the door of a prison”, we should admit that its message has a wide appeal. Prison education has borne the burden of reform since the early days of modern prison (Foucault, 1991; Duguid, 2000; Gehring & Eggleston, 2007), masking the way that the expanding carceral system reproduces and legitimizes social inequalities (Fassin, 2017) as well as the broader criminogenic effects of imprisonment (Higgins, 2021). In recent years, in the context of policies characterized as a “punitive turn” (Pratt et al, 2005), general education programmes have been downsized in favour of programmes aimed at behavior correction, skills and moral development (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Hollin & Palmer, 2006). The latter are proposed to bring about change through conformity (Behan, 2014; Crewe, 2009), sidelining the contextual factors that produce deviance (Higgins, 2021).

At the same time, several researchers attest to the transformative potential of general prison education programmes (UNESCO, 2021), by evaluating their short-term outcomes through autoethnography (Key & May, 2019) or interviewing educators (Fairbairn, 2021) and incarcerated students (Behan, 2014; Davidson, 1995; Tett, 2017; Wilson & Reuss, 2000), only rarely examining how these outcomes are translated in the



post-release real world (Pike, 2015). On the other hand, published (auto)biographies and studies that examine transformation in the context of the narrated life histories of people who are imprisoned reveal that there is actually a continuity within their biographies regarding school failure (Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014; Crewe et al, 2020), familiarity with institutional life (Bunker, 2000; Shaw, 1966), violence, stigmatization and lack of social support, before, within and beyond prison (Masters, 1997; Sandoval et al, 2016; Western, 2018). This continuity in biography is often overlooked by both researchers and policy makers.

The study presented in this paper is the first part of a three-year research project that aims to examine the ways in which imprisonment influences adult learning, taking the Greek prison education system as an example. It builds upon studies that examine transformation through a long-term perspective, as a biographical experience that is inextricably linked to social contexts (Alheit, 2022), paying special attention to the ways prison limits incarcerated students' ability to reread their circumstances (Wright, 2014), let alone embody the kind of dispositions that critical pedagogies desire (Castro & Brawn, 2017).

The exploratory nature of our research orientation, the peculiarities of prison schools as a site of research, as well as the parallel role of one of us as a prison educator, led us to employ an ethnographical approach. During the first semester of our study, we focused on two methods of data collection: participant observation and biographical narratives of students of the Second Chance School of Korydallos Men's Prison, the largest remand establishment in Greece, where most people awaiting trial are detained. Many of them are entering prison for the first time in their lives.

The following sections outline the basic tenets of perspective transformation theory, that stands as our theoretical point of departure. We also describe the particularities of the Greek justice system, the precarious position of foreign nationals within it, and the circumstances under which education is provided in prisons for adults. Then, we present our methodological approach, the research site, and the main characteristics of our informants. Finally, we present our findings, the significance, and limitations of our ongoing research, as well as aspects of it that deserve further investigation.

Perspective Transformation in Context

Mezirow (1978) proposed that “the learning most uniquely adult pertains to becoming aware that one is caught in one's own history and is reliving it” (p. 101). According to his theory:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

Perspectives involve sets of assumptions that may prove dysfunctional in adult life due to epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological distortions. For example, assuming that a phenomenon produced by social interaction (like the delivery of justice) is beyond human control; and dealing with either the concrete or the abstract when the other is necessary for understanding, are among the most common epistemic distortions (Freire, 1993; Geuss, 1981). Sociolinguistic premise distortions, on the other hand, are “the mechanisms by which society and language arbitrarily shape and limit our perception and understanding”, like, for instance, cultural codes; social norms, roles, and practices (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 130-131). Meaning perspectives are, according to Mezirow:

... for the most part, uncritically acquired in childhood through the process of socialization, often in the context of an emotionally charged relationship with parents, teachers, or other mentors. The more intense the emotional context of learning and the more it is reinforced, the more deeply embedded and intractable to change are the habits of expectation that constitute our meaning perspectives. Experience strengthens, extends, and refines our structures of meaning by reinforcing our expectations about how things are supposed to be (1990, pp. 3-4).

While empirical research on transformative learning is flourishing, it remains disproportionately focused on formal educational contexts (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Less often researchers examine how local, informal sociocultural contexts might impede transformation (Merriam et al., 2007), especially when it comes to forced transitions to hostile contexts that disrupt inherited frames of reference, leading to identity deconstruction (Morrice, 2012), prolonged liminality (Jewkes, 2005), and even social death, as is supposedly the case with institutionalization (Goffman, 1961), forced-migration (Hartonen et al., 2021) and long-term imprisonment (Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Price, 2015).

To mention one example relevant to our research, dialectical discourse is considered a *sine qua non* for the development of critical reflection, upon which perspective transformation rests. Drawing from the “ideal speech situation” coined by Habermas (1971), Mezirow (1991) proposes that such discourse is distinguished, among other things, by the availability of complete and accurate information, freedom from coercion, openness to alternative points of view and equal opportunities to participate in the various roles of discourse. Scholars who have attempted to practice critical pedagogies inside prisons propose that such preconditions run counter to the very essence of the carceral space, as well as the lived experiences of those who inhabit it (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Thomas, 1995).

The carceral space is, indeed, one out of many marginal spaces (Morrice, 2012; Musgrove, 1977) where theories relating to the process of transformation in adult life are put to test, not only in practical or experiential terms but also in ethical terms that educators, as cultural outsiders, need to consider (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023). For example, the risk of being rejected from a present or an imagined community, that Brookfield (1994) termed as “cultural suicide”, is only one of several risks connected to critical reflection, that is reflected in incarcerated students’ narratives. In order to assess the imprint left by the process of critical reflection, the possibility and appropriateness of a significant change in perspective in the specific context (Hoggan et al., 2017), we consider that it is important to examine the formative experiences of adult learners, as well as the challenges they currently face, i.e. their overall biography.

Research Context

The Greek Criminal Justice System and the Precarious Position of Foreign Nationals

After its latest visit to Greece, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (hereafter CPT) reaffirmed “a continued lack of strategic direction and investment by successive governments to address the chronic crisis within prisons” (2022, p. 45). The country has been repeatedly condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for dire detention conditions and for prison overcrowding, which even increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that crime rates in Greece remain lower than the European median (CPT, 2022), the country has one of the highest percentages in Europe of long and very long prison sentences for a large range of offenses.¹

Minority populations are over-represented in Greek prisons and there is evidence that a clear class and ethnic bias exists (Vidali et al., 2019), reflecting a general trend in the Western justice systems (Armstrong and Maruna, 2016). Greece has one of the highest percentages of foreign national prisoners (hereafter FNPs)² in Europe, estimated around 60% of the total prison population during the period studied, compared to a European median of 15.3%, a percentage that does not correspond to foreign nationals’ contribution to the overall criminality.³

It has been proposed that, although FNPs share the same rights as Greek citizens, they are often discriminated in practice, a fact that leads to them experiencing specific pains of imprisonment connected, among others, to deportability, lack of certitude, legitimacy, and hope (Warr, 2015). Indeed, studies suggest that in Greece foreign nationals are heavily over-represented in pre-trial detention and are rarely considered for home detention curfew or prison leave (Koros, 2020; Morfonios, 2022; Sakka, 2022). According to a recent study that focuses on criminalization of migrants, people who are arrested for smuggling in the country’s borders, currently forming the second largest group by crime in Greek prisons, suffer gross human rights violations in all stages of the criminal process, “including arbitrary arrests, violence and coercion, little to no access to interpretation or legal support as well as problems in accessing the asylum procedure during detention” (Winkler & Mayr, 2023, p. 7). Less is known about the obstacles that FNPs face regarding participation in education. It

has been proposed that insufficient understanding of the national language, the perceived irrelevance of programmes (Brosens, et al., 2020) and the involvement of prison officials in the selection of students based on security risk assessments (Sakka, 2022), often lead to their exclusion.

The Greek penal system is notable, more generally, for the very limited availability of education and training programmes (Misirli, 2021), and the lack of adequate provision for maintaining social ties or supporting reintegration (Dimopoulos, 2021; Hellenic Court of Audit, 2021). Lawyers and criminologists who study the evolution of the Greek Penal Code, including the two more recent reforms (Koulouris, 2022; Papadakis, 2023), attest to contradictory policies, decisions that remain captive to media agendas and political cost, ignoring basic constitutional requirements. They speak about contingent, rather than strategic solutions, such as indirect sentence reduction measures, that affect the very legitimacy of the penal system (Tzannetaki, 2016). The application of measures that are officially declared to promote successful reentry into society, such as prison leaves and conditional release, is not grounded on proof of prisoners' positive change, but on the sole requirement that they do not have a valid disciplinary penalty (Koros, 2020). Thus, time in prison is spent needlessly and excruciatingly, while people are driven to inactivity so as not to trigger the additional punishments the system has in store for them beyond the sentence (Fassin, 2017; Koros, 2020).

Prison Education in Greece

In 2017, around sixty percent (60%) of people detained in Greece had not completed compulsory education, while seventeen percent (17%) declared themselves illiterate (Dimitrouli & Rigoutsou, 2017). Consistent with the official Eurostat (2021) data, the corresponding percentage of the Greek population in the 25-54 age category, which is where most detainees belong, with a low educational attainment (i.e. ISCED 2011 levels 0–2), was 15.4%. If we consider international surveys that show that, regardless of the formal educational level they have completed, an extremely high percentage of people in prison are functionally illiterate, and the over-representation of foreign nationals with little understanding of the language, we may argue that the need for reconnection with education is much higher than the one assumed from the relevant statistical figures.

However, according to current data, only one in ten people detained in prisons for adults, whether sentenced or in remand, has an opportunity to enroll in an educational programme⁴ in many cases several years after the beginning of their sentence. Primary schools exist in only seven out of thirty-two prisons for adults, covering a tiny part of the (most pressing) recorded needs.⁵ Most schools operating in Greek prisons for adults are Second Chance Schools (hereafter, SCS), which correspond to the general lower secondary level of education, that is compulsory in Greece, but have a flexible programme that can be tailored to the students' needs, in contrast to their formal equivalent "gymnasium". There are only thirteen SCS and two vocational training institutes in prisons for adults. No general or vocational high schools ("lyceums") exist, that would encourage SCS graduates to continue their studies and acquire professional specialization diplomas. Occasionally people in prison manage to finish high school after taking exams as individually taught students, with the help of volunteers or by studying completely on their own. Those who attempt to participate in tertiary education from a distance are facing enormous obstacles, ending up in protests or even hunger strikes (Misirli, 2021; Sakka, 2022) or prematurely dropping out.

Research Methodology

During the initial stage of our study, we focused on the Second Chance School of the male department of Korydallos Prison, the largest remand establishment in the country, where approximately 18% of the total prison population is detained, for two reasons. The first reason is that the field researcher of this study had privileged access to the site due to her parallel role as an adult educator in the school for five consecutive years. Taking into consideration the inherent difficulties in establishing rapport in the specific research environment, the absence of relevant studies and data on students' demographics that would allow us to understand the context and make informed choices regarding sampling, we decided to focus on a site that we were familiar with. For analogous reasons, we decided not to include women during the initial stage of the study. Women traditionally represent around 5% of the total prison population in Greece, slightly less than the European and the global average, and are equally under-represented in the relevant research projects. Furthermore, there were no educational programmes running in the female department of Korydallos Prison.

Our research lasted six months, with the first three months dedicated to participatory observation

of the prison school's life. Extensive journal-keeping allowed us to record dysfunctional assumptions that were often reflected in class conversations, as well as thoughts on their epistemic and sociolinguistic sources that were worthy of further examination. The latter three months were dedicated to collecting biographical narratives. We selected this method because we were interested in finding out how students' formative experiences influenced the way they learn and how they interpret the importance of those experiences from their current position. In other words, we were not so much interested in uncovering the "true history" of their lives, rather than the way they actively reconstruct their life story at this current time (Bruner, 1987). We followed Rosenthal's (2013) proposal to use a starting question-prompt that is open but specific enough in terms of research focus, inviting our participants to share their life story, at first without interruptions, paying special attention to events that influenced the way they see themselves and the world. We used prompts such as the following:

We are exploring the ways in which the experience of imprisonment, including your participation in the prison school, influences the way you learn. We are very interested in hearing your life story from the start. You may share anything that you feel is important and has influenced the ways you see yourself and the world around you. You may begin by referring to where you were born, your childhood, the first school you attended as a kid... Anything you consider important about your life and your educational and learning experiences.

During this initial phase we listened carefully, noting critical events that were not discussed in enough detail, parts of the narration that seemed less plausible and omissions (connected to specific thematic areas or biographical phases) that we considered worthy of closer examination (Correia & Caetano, 2023). Relevant questions were only asked during the second phase of the interview. First, we asked questions related to the narration produced (internal narrative questions) and then external narrative questions, related to subjects that were not mentioned by the narrator, but were central to our research endeavor. Like, for instance, schooling experiences and relationships with people who have acted as mentors in informal contexts of different sorts, including the prison school. According to Rosenthal, "keeping the narrative-external questions for the last phase of the interview is important so that the interviewer does not impose his/her own relevance system upon the narrator" (2013, p. 52).

The participants were selected based on a purposive sampling procedure designed to create a diverse group in terms of (a) ethnic origin, (b) degrees of experience of the prison context, and (c) levels of commitment to the school. During the research period there were about 55 students active in the school, 39 of whom were FNPs, a percentage that clearly reflects their over-representation within the general prison population. In fact, for the last 14 years the percentage of FNPs in Greek prisons has stayed consistently close to 60%, with Albanians being by far the largest non-national group of sentenced prisoners, representing around one third of the total population.⁶ In closed prisons, where people with longer sentences are incarcerated, the percentage of FNPs in the school population is much higher, reaching even 85% of those registered.

Following a thorough process of discussing the aims of the study with the school community, and after presenting the ethical protections afforded to each prospective participant and obtaining informed consent, we collected complete biographical narratives from 14 students, 12 of whom were foreign nationals. We focus on just 10 of those 12 foreign national students (all aged between 35-45 years old) because they represent a characteristic pattern in the population, due to the students' age, experience of forced migration, their educational and working-class background.

Eight of our participants grew up in countries of the former Eastern Bloc (mainly Albania), and two in countries of the Middle East in the early 80s, as members of working-class families. They all dropped out of school, acquired their first job between the age of twelve and fourteen, and were forced to migrate to Greece, either directly or after several efforts to settle elsewhere. Before their incarceration they were mostly employed as manual workers in several different posts, under precarious terms, due to their non-citizen legal status. Seven of them had no previous experience of incarceration and three of them had at least two previous convictions.

Following an accepted alternative practice, the researcher recorded the narratives herself, in writing, in front of the narrators, instead of using digital recording, in order to better protect their anonymity and allow them to edit the text, if they so wished (Israel & Hay, 2021). The narratives were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merrill & West, 2009; Riessman, 2007), first at the level of the individual case, by ordering relevant episodes chronologically, and then by focusing more closely, and naming (coding) critical events and underlined assumptions reflected in each. Particular cases were selected in order to establish general patterns - range and variation - and underlying assumptions were compared to develop typologies, so that rich individual life histories would connect to broader social discourses, like for instance, ideas on the relevance of formal education for members of the working class or ideas on what being a man really means.

Following the approach described by Merrill (Merrill & West, 2009), we first immersed ourselves in the data, carefully reading each particular case and underlining key sentences of paragraphs. We then started coding, relating our data to the conceptual framework of perspective transformation. We paid special attention to the kinds of relationships and contexts to which our narrators attributed their most important learning experiences, i.e. experiences that they felt defined who they are. We also focused on critical events connected to transformations they experienced in the past, that is events that they believe changed who they have been. Their references to the prison school, as we explain later, were less central to their overall narration than references to prison as school. After completing each round of coding, each life story was summarized and compared to observations of the student's participation in class discussions, as recorded in the field notes and the research journal. Codes were combined into themes and themes were reviewed and refined to become responsive to our research questions. The analysis that follows focuses on three of the most salient themes ("Internalizing fatalism", "Adopting hegemonic masculinity's norms" and "Searching for meaning/hope"). The first two reflect the kind of cognitive and sociolinguistic premise distortions outlined in the theoretical part of the article. The third one runs through the narratives, often without being explicitly discussed. Due to the limitation of space, we will not discuss the themes exhaustively. To clarify the inter-relationships between structural and agentic factors at play and ways in which themes relate to one another, indicative codes are presented in reference to the respective themes at the beginning of the analysis.

Research Findings

In this section we summarize aspects of our participants' narratives that highlight continuities between the lessons learned from their lives before prison and from the prison itself, ordered by life phase or major transition. All quotes are presented with pseudonyms to conserve anonymity.

In the following section we discuss implications these lessons may have on the process of perspective transformation, as well as the educators' perceived role in the process.

Notes on the Coding Process

The worlds in which our participants were raised were in constant crisis. Codes indicative of the situation they had to face while growing up include, at the level of the country: "poverty", "undemocratic/punitive regime", "weak rule of law", "uncontained rioting", "anarchy"; and at the family level: "poverty", "misery", "absence", "abuse", "silence". Formal institutions, including the school our participants attended as kids, proved unable to order what they describe as "total chaos" or at least attend to their fundamental questions about history as experienced. This made them feel, from a very early age, that the world around them and their own lives were beyond control, subjected to blind fate or the will of powerful others like "the regime", "the system", and State authorities of all sorts - hence our first theme ("Internalizing fatalism"). The relevant codes "alienation from significant others" and "alienation from school" co-occur with "premature entry to work". The latter code is salient across most narratives, often related to codes such as the following: "provide for the family", "build an identity", "conform with the family tradition", "develop self-worth", "escape". Finally, the experience of forced migration is linked to codes such as "living on the run", "getting used to be illegal", "life in limbo".

The second main theme ("Adopting hegemonic masculinity norms")⁷ reflects stances and assumptions that are rooted in early adolescence, when several of our participants started to reflect on their formative

(traumatic) experiences as a result of their ongoing “search for meaning/hope” (see next theme) and as a means to satisfy an increasing “urge to fit in/belong”, in order to find not only practical, but also moral support. Members of their immediate family were either too caught up in the struggle of survival to get actively involved with their upbringing or abused them, as part of an uncritically adopted way of parenting that gave priority on “harsh discipline” and “respect rooted on fear”. Indicative codes that are related to the second theme include “manning up”, “learning to punch back”, “justifying violence”, “adopting the street code”, “adopting the prisoner code” and, again, “learning to not question authorities” and “learning to stay silent”. All the above codes are relevant to our participants’ lives in prison and are also sorted under the broader, theoretically relevant theme “internalizing the logic of domination” (Freire, 1993).

At a deeper level, our participants’ narratives reflect a constant “struggle for survival” and an urgent, though rarely openly acknowledged, “search for meaning/hope”, that stands as our last theme. The theme reflects, among others, references to the following: (a) reflective questions regarding the purpose of events that disrupted the course of their lives (e.g. political riots that led 16-year olds to bare weapons); (b) relationships with strangers who supported participants through transitioning periods (e.g. people who helped them learn the language or acquire on the job training during their first years of migration, concurrently accepting them as family members); (c) relationships with teachers of the prison school, close relatives and mentors of all sorts, who recognized their struggles and saw potential and “good in them” when no one else did.

Internalizing Fatalism

Childhood Years. Most of our participants experienced the collapse of regimes while they were still children. They saw their homes fall apart, their parents become unemployed, and their teachers selling their books on the street to survive. They describe the situation they experienced before emigrating to Greece as chaotic. As children, they did not understand what was happening or why, nor could they do anything to take control of their lives. Some make no references to their childhood at all. They start directly from the period of entering work or the period of migration.

Fifth grade, twelve years old. I was getting up in the morning. My grandfather was taking out ice. We worked on refreshments in the summer and blankets, mattresses in the winter. I'd take the ice out, fill the freezer, go to the bazaars, and when I was done, I'd take a bag of ice to school. Like a kid. We weren't that rich. I was more into work than studying or reading. So did my parents. They were all workers.

-Joe

Early Schooling Experiences. All of the participants left school early, either because they needed to work to support their family or because they could not integrate into the Greek school. Even those who had relatives in the family who had advanced degrees saw a lifetime’s hard work wasted after the collapse of the regime and a society abruptly change its orientation.

When the (Soviet) Union collapsed, my people came to Greece. I was fifteen and I had a house, a car. I had everything. I gained freedom from one day to the next. Very dangerous. One day everything is forbidden, then they say, “It’s all yours!” That’s when I got into trouble with the law. There were no laws, nothing back there. Everybody did what they liked. The country was full of guns. We lived in poverty, misery. And suddenly the world went wild. The Wall came down and people were poisoned by freedom. It’s like going hungry for days and then, suddenly, you eat bread, and you are poisoned.

-Jason

The lesson they learned from the adventures of their elders was that education does not improve (material) living conditions, nor does it lead to social recognition. The teachers they remember were extremely strict, not to say that they were not respected. One participant recalls that a teacher caused the death of his

his mother's big brother by banging his head on the blackboard. His mother was given the name Fatmirë, which in Albanian means "the fortunate one". Another one reports:

The first school was under Hoxha. Very strict. Communism was ending and the system was changing. Imagine, when the teacher would give you homework, if you didn't bring it in the morning, she would grab you by the hair and bring you spinners. Or if she asked you a question and you got it wrong, you got a beating. The teacher had more authority than the parent.

-Mike

Migration. Most of our participants emigrated very early on, selling their belongings to make a fresh start, and lived for several years in the agony of being undocumented. They were used to living on the run, even though they were working legally and making good money. Some of them, through work, built up bonds of trust with their employers and stayed for years in the same working environment, sometimes likened to a "family". Others, on the contrary, liken the working condition they experienced to prison, such as Eric who spent a year after arriving in Greece locked in an iron yard, where he worked and slept with dozens of other people who didn't have "papers".

No matter how things went, being undocumented made them live in constant agony. A walk downtown, an unexpected check, could result in a violent deportation. One of those rides brought Michael, then seventeen years old, very close to death, as the van carrying him along with 25 other young migrants caught fire and the policemen in charge, forbid them to exit for more than three hours, until the next one to carry them arrived.

Adopting hegemonic masculinity's norms

Dropping out of School. The dense narratives we collected are filled with violent incidents. And there is an intersection in many of them that leads to what Michael called "role reversal". We will convey just one narrative relating to the school environment, of the kind we often find in similar empirical studies (Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014; Liebling et al., 2015).

That thing... In front of the class, in front of all the kids, asking me questions that I was answering in a broken voice.... I didn't understand the language. And if I sort of understood and I threw a word and someone laughed because they couldn't help it, they will get a beating at recess. Within a month I was getting a bad rap all over the school. I was feared by high school kids who had beards. It was because we were familiar with a different mentality. We came into a different system. And I wouldn't bear lowering my status.

One day the principal found out and called me and my friend in, and because my friend talked back, he hit him. We pounced on him and beat him up. He said my mother should come. They didn't kick me out because I said we'd burn his car. I didn't finally tell my mother, but we did. We burned it down.

-George

Informal Survival Lessons from the "Street". Most of our participants grew up in harsh, patriarchal societies of the kind that bell hooks (2004) vividly (and painfully) described. They seem not to question the value of discipline - even when it is imposed by brute force. Multiple incidents of violence run through the narrative in all kinds of social contexts (e.g., violent children's games, accidents, beatings and/or shootings at home, feuds that forced the family to flee, suicides of family members to which they were eyewitnesses). One participant recalled one such distressing incident, without being provoked, immediately after the end of his narrative:

There's something important I didn't tell you. A gap. (silence) So you can understand my story... When I was thirteen, I saw my grandfather hanged. My cousin and I found him. We took him

down... The cops came looking. We were throwing stones at them to make them go away. They were trying to record how it happened. And he was hanging...

-Stuart

The perpetrators of violence are mainly older men in the family who have (or undertake) the role of a “protector”, gangs of peers, teachers, and all kinds of authority figures, such as residence permit inspectors, customs officials, employers, police officers, etc. When violence is perpetrated by a significant other, it is usually justified by reference to objective difficulties, culture or even religion (Kochurani, 2019), while gradually the participants recognize its necessity (and currency). Even for those who decide not to use violence, it is very important in the context of their worlds to show that they can do so. This applies to their lives in general, and to prison in particular which, at this point, reflects and validates a very familiar reality (Crewe, 2009; Western, 2018).

One night my older brother happened to see me trying a cigarette. He waves me over “come home”. I started shaking. When I arrived, I sat in the courtyard and cried. My mother sees me, and I say, “he’s going to hit me”. She says, “it will do you good”. He calls me upstairs. It was night. There is no railing upstairs. I go. He says, “Why are you smoking?” I said, “It was my first time. Sorry. It won’t happen again.” “There’s no excuse,” he says. And he throws me down. I landed half on the concrete and half on the grass. I thought I was dead. I woke up in the hospital. From then until now, thank God, I don’t smoke. Maybe he was good... He was a teacher. If it wasn’t for that, I would have smoked by now. And for us, smoking is very bad. It’s a sin. “Instead of buying a packet to kill yourself,” God says, “take food and hand it out to those who have not.”

-David

In some narratives, the very experience of incarceration is presented by the informants as an opportunity to come to terms with a deeply troubling past and even treat relationships with (abusive) significant others as resources from which valuable lessons can be distracted and new identities can be forged.

My father did time in prison as a child. Out of grief for my sister, he drank and made trouble. And I was leaving the house. In an area where no matter where you went there was nothing happy. Everybody was growing back then. With the suffering. With poverty. You didn’t see any joy. And I failed school, due to absences. I didn’t go to classes. I knew I’d grown up in a family where everyone was a driver, and I knew I didn’t need school.

What did they think?

They were swearing. He shot my mother. I started hating him as a kid. I couldn’t understand why. I only understood when I was imprisoned.

All those years he was so cruel... No love.

But that’s what made me strong. If I’m proud today, it’s because of him. Because I don’t know, if he was different, what I’d be like today.

-Jim

Life in Prison. References to prison life are very cautiously made and are usually kept off the record. The following notes are based not only on students’ narratives, but also on participant observation of relevant class discussions and informal talks with former inmates. All in all, experiences of incarceration seem to confirm and exacerbate what reality has already taught our students regarding structural inequality, including in the criminal justice system (Scott-Hayward & Fradella, 2019), as well as the importance of not questioning authority in order to survive. In that sense, references on the experience of imprisonment reflect the first two themes presented above. As long as fatalism is concerned, several participants highlighted the effects of economic disadvantage that prison perpetuates:

Money makes the (prison) world spin. If you don't have money while in prison you can't eat enough to not starve, you can't get medicine or a good lawyer to push your case, buy a mitigation, have more than a couple of square meters of personal space, communicate with your folks, earn vindication and respect. "Hunger!" one prisoner told me with eyes wide open. "You cannot imagine how many kinds and how much hunger there is in here."

-Excerpt 1 from the research journal

Differences in economic power are not only believed to determine how one will spend incarceration time, e.g., how often and under what terms they will see their family, but also how favorably their case and application for parole will be judged. It has been suggested that no matter how much one struggles to spend time in prison productively the only thing that matters to those who decide the future of those imprisoned (e.g., members of parole boards), is that they do not disrupt prison order (Koros, 2023). This practically means succumbing to both formal power (exerted by legal authorities, i.e., custodial officers) and informal power (exerted through prisoner hierarchies):

The best thing to do in prison, according to common wisdom, is to keep quiet, mind your own business, and bow your head to pass the time. It seems that surviving prison requires avoiding critical thinking, let alone openly questioning formal and informal hierarchies, at any cost.

-Excerpt 2 from the research journal

One of the participants who avoided speaking about the "dark side of prison" (his words) when interviewed, gave us the following note on our last day in the field, which reflects the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity norms:

This is where the man resets. Miserable conditions, cold water, dirty food, horror. Ugly behavior. From morning till night in agony, both for your life in here and those left behind. In the same room men from different countries, differences in mentality and character. Survival of the fittest, the one without fear. Bloodshed for a Coca Cola can. Unimportant objects you wouldn't even notice outside, become valuable inside. To see people dying next to you, you don't talk. Three basic things: survival in here, anxiety for loved ones outside, shame for becoming a burden to your family. And all day long you have to think about what you're going to say in court and how it's going to turn out.

Searching for meaning/hope

The Prison School through Students' Eyes. Several of our informants made no reference to the prison school in their initial impromptu narrative. However, they gave unequivocal answers about it, when asked. Among other things we invited our participants to explain (a) what prison school means to them; (b) which of the skills acquired and lessons learnt in the prison school they appreciate most; (c) in what ways the prison school differs from schools they have attended in the past; and (d) what are the challenges of being a student, while in prison.

For some of them several years of imprisonment had passed before they were given access to the school. No schools corresponding to the upper secondary level exist in Greek prisons for adults, so all of them knew they were destined to return to their cells upon graduation, no matter how hard they tried. Therefore, they were cognizant of the fact that the education provided by the prison school was only a small part of the wider learning experience of imprisonment, and that the two contexts often contradict each other (Castro & Brawn, 2017). Apart from language skills, which are highly valued in prison, as they allow people to exercise fundamental rights, our informants rarely made systematic references to other types of skills acquired through their participation in the school. Some students even expressed reservations on whether graduating would help them continue their studies or find a job upon release, echoing the thoughts that alienated them from the schools they attended as kids, and studies that argue that the impact of a prison sentence outweighs a prisoner's

in-prison educational achievements (Bozick et al., 2018, cited in UNESCO, 2021). Yet, no one implied that participating in the prison school was unimportant.

On the contrary, in our informants' words, despite "being a drop in the ocean of dead time", school allowed them "to breath". School allowed them to feel human, respected, connected, "in touch with the world". It allowed them to appreciate things they have missed, values worth fighting for. The word most often used in their narratives when referring to the school was "humaneness". Then "light". It was the only common stimulus that made all of our participants smile. Some of them even slightly bow.

Clean air. Clean air. Amidst this mold. It is like mold. A vengeful... (makes an expression of disgust). What happens outside the school is nothing but correctional. As soon as you pass through the gate, you breathe.

-Elton

Whenever we asked a participant to justify feelings of the sort, the discourse flowed directly. Participants were naming specific teachers, explaining how they made them feel that their efforts were recognized. They talked about the care and politeness with which they are addressed, the patience educators show when someone persistently refuses to reflect on their views, the insight that makes them perceive anxieties that are not openly expressed in classroom, and the resourcefulness they show in order to allay them. Many likened teachers to members of their family or close friends. As much as we attempted to elicit comments on specific practices, participants' responses prioritized the overall attitude of teachers and the fact that they are actively standing by them at a time when their trust in several of their significant others has been deeply shaken, thus echoing the importance of what Mälkki and Green (2014) call "a certain sensitivity of the accompanist - a sensitivity not to do but just be [with the students]" (p. 17) as they undergo an emotionally demanding, potentially transitioning, phase. Here is how a student responded when asked which of the skills acquired and lessons learnt in the prison school he appreciates most:

The first thing I have felt and seen in here is humanity. How teachers talk to us. With respect... Like outside. Of course we're learning. Whoever wants to learn, learns. But much more than we need lessons... we need to hear Mrs. Sophie, Mr. George saying good morning to us... You have someone to speak to. The way you would with your family. They will listen to you; they will see you. (the word "see" is emphasized) It has nothing to do with what happens in the wings. Prison makes you a different person. You have to be more careful and tough. You mustn't show your feelings. Never. The other guy watching you, will know..

-Joe

Ideas connected to the fatalistic assumptions presented above were often expressed during the beginning of the schooling period. Ideas such as the futility of educational attainment in the face of persistent social inequalities, further reinforced by the stigma attached to imprisonment, or students' perceived inadequacies regarding background knowledge and skills that made them cautious to participate in class discussions. Many students were reluctant for months to even speak, let alone criticize norms related to hegemonic masculinity ideals or the prisoner code that reflected these, even if they were at odds with their own experiences. The educators worked persistently, and empathetically, to build the trust necessary for critical reflection to occur, even though they knew that such instances would not always be shared in the classroom. Moreover, several of the students who doubted that studying might improve their future circumstances in concrete, material terms, appeared to fully appreciate the room for wonder that the school had opened up. One of them confessed:

Let me tell you what education means for me. I am glad I have understood this, even at this late point in my life: the fact that I asked our teacher who was guiding us through the (virtual) museum the other day, "Do leaves turn into stones?" I am content I made this step. I carry a lot

of baggage. Way too much. But I also have a great deal to experience. I accept being punished. Nonetheless, I expect this world to give me something positive.

Discussion

On Prisons within Prisons. The Experience of Incarceration as a Re-affirmation of Reality

Kegan (2000) and Taylor (2009) have convincingly argued that we need to consider the learning history of our (incarcerated) students, their prior transformations, as well as the challenges they are facing in present tense, before we encourage them to question “the loyalties and devotions that have made up the very foundation of their lives” (Kegan, 2000, p. 67). Based on the continuities observed between our informants’ experiences inside and outside of prison, we argue that incarcerated students’ ability to critically reflect on their predispositions is severely constrained. For example, the pressure for them to conform (at least publicly) to standards of hegemonic masculinity (Maycock & Hunt, 2018; Sloan, 2016; Sykes, 1958), to “make amends” with (significant) others who (on that same ground) have abused them, or the need to stay within strict behavioral boundaries in order to survive (Behan, 2014; Crew, 2009).

It is worth wondering how our informants learned to be in society (Jarvis, 2012). The state authorities they remember punished freedom of speech, often with imprisonment. Small offenses, like stealing grapes, could lead a child to be publicly tried by their fellow citizens (Rosa, 2017). One of our informants admitted that years later he would play the reverse role, judging his compatriots in informal prison trials. In their homes they were not allowed to question the rules imposed by their elders. hooks (2000, p. 64) argues that “in a culture of domination everyone is socialized to see violence as an acceptable means of social control”. The school system, that we are representing in their eyes, allowed no room for critical reflection (Mezirow et al., 1990). They learned to read and to write, among other things they were forced to learn, by fear of punishment, but we learn much more than what we are taught, as Illeris (2007) proposed. In the case of our informants, the school they attended as kids reinforced assumptions about their destiny as members of a disadvantaged class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Willis, 1977), thus solidifying a kind of “pre-reflective conformism” that represents “the most absolute form of conservatism” (Charlesworth, 2003, p. 106-107). The same stands for our informants’ assumptions on power and violence as a means of establishing respect in the family, in the streets, at school, at work, practically everywhere (Western, 2018). Starting from the first life history of a young delinquent boy that was ever published, Clifford Shaw’s *The Jack-Roller* (1966), and coming to current life histories of prisoners all over the world (e.g., Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014; Liebling et al., 2015; Masters, 1997) - including those we collected - we observe that narratives remain rampant with relevant comparisons between prison and school experience.

Nevertheless, the continuities observed, during the course of our research, are rarely openly expressed, so that private experiences can be connected to collective ones and new perspectives can be validated and reinforced through discourse (Mezirow, 1991). Staying silent and repressing negative emotion, at any cost, two of the most valued skills inside prison, seem to have deep roots in the experiences of our informants, reflecting what Freire (1993) has termed as “cultures of silence”. Some of the teachers, whose lessons we had the opportunity to observe, did their best to understand the multiple meanings of silences inside the prison school, and further invited their students to reflect on their relations to broader forms of silencing within communities of discourse, like unwanted, complied-in and self-imposed silencing (Thiesmeyer, 2003). In a sense, they adopted Shor & Freire’s proposal that educators should try to situate the learning process in the actual conditions of the learning group, as “education is only one piece of larger lives in an even larger society” (1987, p. 25). Even though their questions were sometimes left unanswered or met with discontent, their choice to openly recognize students’ experiences and struggles, and to share how they made them feel, was of the utmost importance in a place where no one talks publicly about feelings and no one affords to care about others’ pain, on top of one’s own (Aloskofis, 2010). Given the challenges imposed by the institutional environment, that were reflected in the narratives, students’ alienation from the schools they had attended as kids, and the psychic turmoil that challenging assumptions might generate (Mälkki & Green, 2014), it makes perfect sense that students prioritized the emotional and moral aspects of their relationship with adult educators (Duguid, 2000), over what they gained in terms of knowledge and skills from their participation in the prison school.

Conclusion

In the context of the research project presented here, we had set out to study the kind of formative experiences that shaped incarcerated students' core assumptions about their selves and the world, and the ways in which the experience of studying while in prison influenced these. Based on our informants' biographical narratives and the wider research data, we may now argue that imprisonment not only impedes perspective transformation but may also strengthen structural inequalities and distorted views of incarcerated students' position in the social world, that extend far beyond its borders. This is something both researchers studying transformative learning through biography, and educators that attempt to practice situated critical pedagogy should consider (Castro & Brawn, 2017).

Freire (1993) proposed that liberatory education can only take root in a mutual process of developing critical awareness of the social conditions that reproduce oppression, which involves the educators as much as it involves the students. Many research avenues are opening ahead of us if we dare question our own role inside the prison system. If prison has failed, what exactly does "correctional education" stand for? What will happen if our students attempt to re-read their circumstances as critical pedagogies desire, such as challenge prison authorities? (Behan, 2014; Castro & Brawn, 2017; Davidson, 1995). How can we practice anti-oppressive pedagogies without facing these questions, without acknowledging the positionalities of our students, their lived experiences of social history, of class, of gender, of the carceral world, as well as their intersections (Formenti & West, 2018; Jewkes, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018)? How can we teach and learn from them (Freire, 1993) without trying to see through their eyes, without at least trying to imagine what it means to be imprisoned (Wright, 2014), what it means to live "in a prison within a prison", due to internalized gender norms (Evans & Wallace, 2008), social class norms (Charlesworth, 2003), or any other kind of socially produced norms for that matter? Brookfield proposes that the way we think is shaped by our social location, the cultural stream in which we swim, without even realizing its existence, and by dominant ideology: "the set of beliefs and practices, reflected in the structures and systems of a society, that are accepted as natural, common sense and working for the good of all" (2012, p. 143). Indeed, there is a pervasive assumption that prisons must feel like places of hardship and deprivation, despite all the research evidence on the harm they inflict. Even in our own (educational) fora, prison is too often taken for granted - a necessary evil that we hope our students forget while in the school wing. From time to time, they admit they do. But critical reflection is not about forgetting. It is about remembering. We, as teacher-students, also need to reflect on our assumptions, not only of the correctional system, but also of education, of our schools that continue to promote a "culture of silence", by focusing on reading the words, but hiding the worlds within which their students are struggling (Shor & Freire, 1987). Our ongoing research is a step forward in that direction.

Regarding the study's limitations, we did not comment on the local context or the relational dimensions that have influenced the production of the narratives (Riessman, 2007), although several relevant observations have been recorded in the research journal. There is no doubt that the specific time and space where each conversation took place have influenced the stories upon which our interpretation is based. For example, the stage of each informant's sentence, the reading of silences that lead to specific prompts, even the (female) gaze of the researcher that provided an extremely rare opportunity for the interviewees to perform their identities outside the public prison space where everything is closely scrutinized in relation to hegemonic masculinity's standards (Maycock & Hunt, 2018; Sloan, 2016). On the other hand, our long-term involvement in the field gave us the chance to compare what was being said during the interviews with what was happening in classes, in the corridors, the schoolyard and other "backstage" places (Goffman, 1961), thus allowing us a better insight into the complex dynamics at play and of things that for several reasons could not be verbally expressed or verified, due to secrecy (Drake, 2015).

The fact that limited references were made to the prison school in the context of our informants' initial narratives, is probably connected to the circumstances under which education is provided in Greek prisons for adults and the specific (post-COVID) period that the research took place. As discussed, although recognized by law, access to education is in practice extremely limited in Greece, especially for those who lack basic skills of communication, given the absence of primary schools in most prisons for adults. Indeed, several of our participants had passed years in confinement before gaining access to the Second Chance School, and none

had any idea, at the time of the interview, of the amount of time they would need to spend with no access to organized educational structures, after graduation. What's more, the participants who were attending the second year of the School during the time researched, had lost several months of study due to COVID-19 lockdown.

Given the difficulties related to incarceration and the fact that most students had dropped out of school at a very young age, Second Chance Schools seem like oases in deserts of unmet educational needs. We propose that this fact alone partly explains the priorities our informants expressed, putting relationships with educators above any achievements in terms of acquiring specific knowledge/skills. Given the importance of recognition in the context of adult learning, this is a significant finding. Nevertheless, during the next phase of our ongoing research, we intend to include students with longer experience of the prison school in our sample in order to examine the effects of sustained school participation.

All in all, our informants expressed on several occasions their gratitude for the chance they were given to critically reflect on their lives (Rossiter, 1999), outside official discourses that inscribe them as guilty and in need of correction. Many might convincingly argue, for example, that not every inmate conforms to the hegemonic masculine ideal. Yet, prisoners all over the world are overwhelmingly male, young, unemployed, and drawn from the lower working classes. For decades now, several scholars who study the experience of imprisonment, argue that codes of overtly masculine behavior that characterize working-class cultures are implicated in its perpetuation (Jewkes, 2005, p. 44). The narratives we collected uncovered several ways in which formative experiences of deprivation and abuse shaped core assumptions, the very sense of our participants' identities and views of the world. They also indicated that the possibility and appropriateness of perspective transformation cannot be judged out of context. We need to take the actual life circumstances of our participants, including their uncertainty regarding the most fundamental aspects of their sentence (Warr, 2015), under serious consideration before evaluating what taking a leap of faith might actually entail. This is only one of several reasons why far more research is needed on the ethics of practicing transformative learning inside spaces of institutionalized oppression.

Finally, our research reaffirms the fact that being able to experiment with ourselves, tell new stories about who we are, who we have been and might become, is crucial for our development, as long as we feel understood, as long as we have not lost all hope (Freire, 1993). One of the last participants we interviewed, a man in his fifties, with several years in prison, stood silent for a while, after finishing his narrative, then wondered: "Would a judge ever listen so carefully to my story?"

Acknowledgements

The research upon which this work is based is supported financially by the Research Fund of the Hellenic Open University.

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the reviewers and the editor of the Journal for their invaluable contributions to the refinement of this paper.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Endnotes

1. According to the European Annual Penal Statistics report (SPACE I, 2021) as of January 2021, 85% of sentenced prisoners were serving long-term prison sentences of over five years in Greece compared to a European median of 37%. 38.5% of these were sentenced to serve from 20 years to life. The respective European median is 3.7%.
2. For the purposes of the paper, we adopt the definition used by the UNODC in the Handbook on Prisoners with special needs (2009, p. 79), referring to foreign national prisoners as those individuals ‘who do not carry the passport of the country in which they are imprisoned. This term covers prisoners who have lived for extended periods in the country of imprisonment, but who have not been naturalized, as well as those who have recently arrived.’
3. According to the more recent relevant statistics published by the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT), the average percentage of non-national offenders in the total population of offenders between 2015-2022 was 24.5%.
4. In Greece there are three Special Youth Detention Centers with primary school, secondary school, and some high school classes, providing young prisoners with adequate opportunities to study. The estimated fraction refers to the remaining 30 Adult Detention Centers (including the 3 therapeutic establishments) where the vast majority of (male) prisoners are incarcerated. In the beginning of 2024, for example, 9.253 men out of a total of 10.270 people were detained in them. Women are held in a separate department of Korydallos prison and in an all-female prison in Elaiona, Thiva. Only the second has a Second Chance School and a primary school.
5. Indicatively, the total number of primary school graduates for the school year 2019-2020 amounted to 52 persons in a population that surpassed 11.400 prisoners. No data exist regarding the total number of prisoners who had not completed primary education and/or did not speak the language, per detention facility, for the period in question, that would allow us to assess the degree to which actual needs are being met. (Hellenic Court of Audit, 2021).
6. During the period studied, Albanian nationals represented more than half of the school population, for reasons not only connected to their over-representation in the general prison population but also to their better language skills, their better integration in prison, and the fewer obstacles they usually face to acquire the official documents that are necessary for applying.
7. Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), who developed the concept “hegemonic masculinity”, acknowledge that such a form of identity is not necessarily desirable, easy to perform or faithfully reflecting the lived reality of prisoners’ lives, but works more as a normative standard to which men may aspire and against which they can assess their identities. Hegemonic masculinity is considered a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. We consider the latter especially relevant to the hierarchies of the prison context. According to Messerschmidt (2018, p. 12): “The emphasis on hegemony and thus legitimation underscores the achievement of hegemonic masculinity through cultural influence and discursive persuasion, encouraging consent and compliance—rather than direct control and commands—to unequal gender relations”.

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