**RESEARCH PAPER**

# A Realist Model of Prison Education, Growth, and Desistance: A New Theory

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**Abstract:** *This paper articulates the first 'general theory' of prison education, offering a new insight into the relevance of desistance theory and understanding of prison sociology to the lives of men engaged in education whilst in prison. Using a realist review method (Pawson, 2002b; Wong, 2013a) we develop a rough, initial general theory of prison education articulated in the form of three context-mechanism-outcome configurations (CMO). We then 'test' these CMOs by assessing the current evidence base through a systematic review of literature. This paper articulates three inter-related CMOs that we ground in prison sociology and desistance literature: 'hook', 'safe space' and 'qualifications'. 'Hook' refers to engaging in prison education as a 'hook for change' and its impact on personal identity. 'Safe space' refers to the space an educational class can provide and its relevance to social identity. 'Qualifications' refers to the relevance of skills and qualifications gains. The literature review takes a targeted view of relevant fields to identify the most relevant evidence base for (or against) the three CMOs under scrutiny. We identify a stronger evidence base to support the 'safe space' and 'hook' CMOs than for the 'qualifications' CMO. However, the research is limited by a narrow focus on literature. We outline the next steps for future researchers to build on this work.*

Despite its ubiquity, prison education remains under-theorised. This paper addresses this by articulating, for the first time, a general theory of prison education. Using systematic methods of theory-development and a realist model of assessing extant literature, we strengthen the depth of theory in prison education research by drawing on understandings of the prison context and indentity change for those who have been convicted of an offence. Although this work is rooted in the policy situation in England and Wales, our work speaks to an international audience. By providing a clear account of how we have developed our theories, we articulate the role of education in the lives of prisoners and outline the way in which education contributes to personal development and self-improvement. This paper provides a clear roadmap for future researchers, highlighting gaps in research and outlining a theory that can underpin future work in this area.

**Education in prison**

Every prison in England and Wales, and most prisons in Western countries, have a dedicated prison education department. Each department offers a range of courses and qualifications. In recent years, focus has been on basic skills with literacy, numeracy and applied skills for the job market taking precedence. Yet more recently, in England and Wales, there has been a renewed focus on the role of education with attention paid to the importance of more holistic education and the role of unaccredited programmes (see, for example, Coates 2015).

A recent review of research suggested that participating in educational activities reduces recidivism and increases the likelihood of finding work (although these studies are subject to selection bias, see Ellison et al, 2017). Beyond these stark measures, education can act as a refuge with the education department representing a different 'emotional climate' to that which prevails in the wider prison community (Reuss, 1997, Crewe

*et al*., 2013). Furthermore, research indicates educational activities relieve the boredom of prison (Hughes, 2009), helping prisoners cope with the pains and deprivations of prison life (Maruna, 2010) and providing a space for pro-social modelling, mutual support (Casey *et al*., 2013) and positive socialisation (Waller, 2000).

However, the field remains under-theorised and under-researched. Prison researchers offer suggestions and indications as to the impact of prison education but often fall short of developing and articulating a full and comprehensive theory of prison education and its relevance to the lives of prisoners. What purpose does prison education serve? How does socialisation, pro-social activity, and mutual support relate to the overarching prison environment and aims of imprisonment? Should prison education be linked to rehabilitation or should the focus be on the more holistic aims of personal development and growth?

This paper aims to address these questions and start a conversation around the role of prison education in the lives of prisoners. Following the work of Pawson (2002b), we employed a realist review framework to develop three theories that aim to address the 'how' and 'why' of prison education. Through this framework, we articulate, at a theoretical level, what prison education can do for the individual, consider what current research tells us, and provide a starting point for future researchers. We build on two previous pieces of work in particular: a Rapid Evidence Assessment of prison education undertaken by the same research team (see Ellison *et al*., 2017) and Prison Education Trust's Theory of Change (Champion and Noble, 2016).

We take a particular methodological and theoretical perspective in considering prison education theory. Theoretically, we draw on desistance and prison sociology. Methodologically, we follow a realist perspective. This has led to a contextualised discussion of *education* in prison for the *person* in prison. However, this perspective does not incorporate educational theory sufficiently and we recognise the importance of future studies incorporating this perspective. We ultimately demonstrate that there are gaps in both theory and the underpinning research base that researchers ought to address.

In this paper, we define education in broad terms. As such, we describe education as engagement in a structured period of learning with an intention of gaining new knowledge, new skills, or a specific qualification. As such, we consider everything from basic functional skills, to reading groups, to gym classes, to Open University qualifications, to vocational skills-based courses. Here, we are not concerned with specifics, but instead concerned with general engagement in educational programming. Importantly, educational courses do not focus specifically on offending-related behaviour but instead on acquisition of skills and knowledge, on broadening the mind, and on developing new interests.

We also took the view that education ought to focus on the broader aims of personal development. The term 'personal development' can take a variety of meanings. In the context of this research, we perceive personal development as being part of the process of growth an individual undertakes during their life course (Szifris, 2018). In the context of a prison, Liebling (assisted by Arnold, 2004) defines an environment that encourages personal development as,

> "The extent to which provision is made for prisoners to spend their time in a purposeful and constructive way, opportunities are available for self-development, and prisoners are enabled to develop their potential, gain a sense of direction, and prepare for release."

> (p. 318).

The notion of personal development incorporates the current policy assumption that prison education ought to relate to increasing employability, in that becoming more employable and developing skills is part of developing as a person. However, it goes beyond this by recognising that education also involves a broader sense of developing as a person. This emphasis on the role of education in personal development sits within the desistance paradigm. This review therefore pursues a theory that aims to understand the role of education within the desistance process. As such, we place education alongside a host of other opportunities both within prison and beyond the prison gates that aim to assist people who have committed an offence in their endeavour to forge a new (offending-free) lifestyle.

The next section sets out and discusses the realist review methodology in more detail. We then discuss the three rough initial theories we developed. Following this, we describe how we used the realist review to test and refine these rough theories, concluding with a brief discussion of the implications of this exercise,

both for prison education and future research.

## Methodology

This research follows the realist review methodology first developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) and further developed by Wong *et al.* (2013b). The basic principle of the realist review method involves starting with a 'rough initial theory', then conducting a systematic but targeted review of literature to 'test' this rough theory, and, finally, re-articulate the 'rough initial theory' in light of the current evidence base. The rough theory (or theories) developed should be articulated in the form of Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations (CMOs). As such, this section describes a) how we developed the CMOs under consideration and b) the process of systematically reviewing literature. We begin by providing an overview of the realist review philosophy, then outline the basic steps taken. We then go on to describe how we operationalise each of the basic steps articulating the choices made in focusing the review, the role of stakeholder engagement, and the process of developing the three CMOs. We then move on to the processes of searching and sifting literature including the methods of assessing for relevance and rigour. Finally, we outline the limitations to the approach and the focus we have taken.

### *The realist review philosophy*

Pawson and Tilley (1997) root their methodology in the scientific realist perspective, a perspective that is critical of the 'traditional' systematic review methodology. In particular, Pawson argues traditional methods can group together dissimilar interventions, which oversimplifies programme outcomes and conceals the importance of programme contexts. As an alternative, Pawson (2002b) offers a realist review method which utilises a 'generative' approach to causation whereby it is not 'programmes' that work but, instead, the underlying reasons or resources that they offer. The realist review method recognises that programme outcomes depends on characteristics of the individual involved and the circumstances in which the programme is delivered.

This logic also suggests a different approach to evidence reviews. Wong *et al.* (2013: 2) describe how a realist review begins with programme theory or "eliciting from the literature the main ideas that went into the making of a class of interventions". Another related point of distinction from traditional meta-analysis and Systematic Reviews is the emphasis on theory building through the review process:

> "Realist synthesis assumes that the transmission of lessons occurs through a process of theory building rather than assembling empirical generalizations." (Pawson 2002b: 347).

As such, it provides a useful framework for developing a prison education theory that incorporates current knowledge and research in the field.

The 'realist review' process, developed by Pawson (2002b), takes a realist approach to understanding how programmes work, namely that "causal outcomes follow from mechanisms acting in contexts" (Pawson and Tilley 1997, p. 58). Put more simply, providers deliver programmes in specific contexts and that mechanisms at work are, in turn, dependent on that context. As such, Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations are central to Pawson and Tilley's explanation of 'scientific realism' evaluation (1997) and Pawson's further developments of a realist review methodology (Pawson, 2002b, Wong *et al.*, 2013).

Throughout this paper, we employ the terms 'context', 'mechanism' and 'outcome' in reference to CMO configurations that we have developed. Under the realist framework, the 'context' of a programme relates to the conditions in which a social programme is undertaken. This can relate to a range of features including cultural, social or geographical features; place or space of implementation; or the make-up of the participants (Wong *et al.*, 2013b). A 'mechanism' explains what it is about a programme that makes it work (Pawson and Tilley 1997). Identifying and articulating the relevant mechanism can prove complex and can be dependent on the outcome of interest whilst being shaped by the context. In some respects, the term 'outcome' is self-explanatory. However, in the context of prison education, we must consider what outcome we are hoping to achieve through educational provision (in the context of prison). The desired outcome can differ depending on the perspective of the stakeholder. For example, for the prison, a desired outcome might relate to

behaviour within the prison. For the Government or commissioners of prison education, the desired outcome might be reduced recidivism or increased employment. However, in this paper, we consider the perspective of the individual prisoner and shape our understanding of 'desired outcomes' in the perspective of personal development and growth.

*The basic steps*

A realist review starts with 'rough initial theory' that is used to guide a realist synthesis (Wong *et al.*, 2013, p.11). This might be a programme theory, but could be a rough theory of the question (ibid.). A 'refined theory' is the product of a realist review, likely to be presented in the form of a Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration discussed above (Wong *et al.*, 2013).

This realist review described in this paper broadly follows the stages set out by Wong *et al.* (2013a):

- Focusing the review

- Developing and refining a realist programme theory

- Developing a search strategy

- Selection and appraisal of documents

- Analysis applying realist principles

- Reporting.

In the following sections, we outline each of these stages in turn. However, as discussed above, these stages are not linear. A realist review relies on an iterative process where 'rough initial theory' is tested and refined through systematic consultation with literature. A systematic search and quality appraisal of literature then allows for refinement of the initial theory in light of available evidence.

*Focusing the review*

The first stage involves focusing the review to ensure process remains a) manageable and b) meaningful. We recognise that educational experience varies between individuals and a theory of prison education might look different for different sections of the population. Therefore, we employed two criteria for focussing the review: stakeholder opinion and prisoner demographics. Here, we outline how we engaged the stakeholder and the justifications for focussing on specific demographics. Throughout the remainder of the methodology section, we provide details of the points at which we engaged with stakeholders to assist in guiding and shaping our theory.

Stakeholder engagement involved a range of activities. This included informal telephone interviews with a range of individuals in the sector, sense checking our theories through brief presentations and email correspondence and asking for guidance around targeting literature. In particular, we consulted with the commissioners of this research, Novus (part of The Manchester College Group), several times throughout. As a deliverer of prison education across England and Wales, Novus provided particular insights into the practicalities of delivery, the policy-landscape and current framework of education provision. Through a range of conversations, presentations and workshops, we encouraged Novus staff to articulate how education looks today, their vision for prison education in the future, and the goals and outcomes that their provision attempts to address. We also consulted with a range of other academics and interested groups including Nina Champion, Head of Policy, The Prison Education Trust; Morwenna Bennallick, PhD Researcher, The Prison Education Trust; Helen Nichols, Senior Lecturer, Leeds Beckett University; Stephen King, The Reed NCFE Partnership, Employment Mindsets; Charlotte Weinberg, Safeground; and Jessica Plant, Arts Alliance. Engaging with both academics and educational practitioners ensured that we could articulate theories grounded in academic thought while remaining relevant and meaningful to practitioners in the field. Through these conversations, we developed a broad framework of prison education which produced a complex map of factors relating to prison education.

Moving now to prisoner demographics, we focused our theory development on the role of education for adult, male medium-term prisoners who have sufficient time in prison to gain meaningful skills or quali-

fications, but for whom there is a prospect of release.[1] We focused predominantly on the role of education in the context of an adult, male prison[2] and, although not exclusively, on papers that could offer insight into the prison context in England and Wales. The focus on adult males reflects the distinction educational theorists make between adult education and education for young people (see, for example, Knowles 1975) whilst prison sociology highlights the different prison experiences of men and women (see Crewe *et al.,* 2017). Adult males make up the majority of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2016) and we therefore focus on this population for a first step towards a theory of prison education.

*Developing the CMOs for testing*

Having defined the focus of the review, the next step involved developing the 'rough initial theories' and articulating them in the form of CMOs. To do this, we drew on guidelines from Jagosh *et al.* (2011) and began by identifying outcomes of interest that might result from engaging in prison education: increased skills and qualifications, changed self-perception, and change in interaction with immediate environments. Then, following Wong *et al.* (2013b), we developed a range of CMOs, working backwards and 'outwards' to construct a rough initial theory. Here, we provide details of how we developed the three CMOs of interest in this paper.

As discussed, we began by considering the outcomes of interest. Following this, we turned to considering the mechanisms (i.e. thinking about how education might lead to these outcomes). We considered questions such as 'What does education do?' 'How does it 'work'?' and 'What outcomes can an education provider realistically expect to achieve?' In answering these questions, we developed a range of potential CMO configurations. The following table provides two examples of initial CMOs.

These initial CMOs were detailed and specific rather than general. We therefore organised the initial CMOs into three themes using NVivo software and a database. These were:

A. 'Hooks' or Personal factors (subjective processes involved in forging and forming a new identity). The 'hook' CMO considers the processes that occur when engaging in education – formal or informal, in private personal study, or as part of a class or course – and takes a more individualised perspective on education.

B. 'Qualifications' or Skills and Knowledge (transferable skills, employability skills, qualifications, and critical thinking abilities). The 'qualifications' CMO describes how prison education can contribute to 'employability' by helping prisoners gain qualifications and skills.

C. 'Safe space' or Environment and/or behaviour (external outcomes of engaging in education relating to interaction with the environment, coping skills, the role of education as an escape within prisons, and prison culture). The 'safe space' CMO configuration takes a more social perspective and considers the role of an educational environment (a classroom, an education department, a gym or a less formal learning space) and the role of engaging in education *with others*.

We then articulated:

• the assumptions made in developing these CMOs (e.g. the aim of prison education is to make some contribution to a reduction in reoffending)

• their links to desistance theory (e.g. link to Giordano's 'conditional-on-cognitive-transformation' theory of desistance)

• their relevance to broader research (e.g. papers might refer to self-esteem, motivation or life goals).

• Finally, we articulated each of the three themes as more general CMOs under the headings of 'hook', 'qualifications' and 'safe space'. We discussed these in turn below.

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[1] The concept of a 'medium-term' prisoner will vary from country to country. In the UK, it is generally considered to be people serving 1-4 years (Ministry of Justice, 2016).

[2] The term 'adult', in the context of this study and in line with the prison system in England, refers to those over the age of 21.

*Searching and sifting for papers*

Having developed a rough initial theory in the form of three CMOs, the next stage of a realist review involved systematically searching for and sifting through research studies that would assist us in understanding the accuracy of our rough CMOs. We used the following steps:

1. Initial keyword and database search, citation mapping and hand searching of specific journals.

2. Reviewing returns by title, then abstract, then full article for relevance.

3. Reviewing full articles for rigour.

4. Analysis of context and refinement of theory.

5. Second round of citation mapping and further searching of specific journals.

6. Repeat steps 2-4.

7. Final articulation of theory and reflection on where the gaps in evidence lie.

**Table 1: Examples of early CMOs**

| Theme | Context | Mechanism | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| 'Hook' | Prisoners require structural opportunities that can act as a 'hook for change' if they are to desist. | Education is, in and of itself, a 'hook' for change as it develops new interests, provides activity etc. | Prisoners diverted away from anti-social behaviours/activities. |
| 'Qualifications' | Prisoners do not perceive opportunities as being available to them and therefore fail to take advantage of structural opportunities. | Educational progress and achievements such as qualifications gain means the individual has an increased belief that they can move forward, develop and access opportunity. | Prisoners take up structural opportunities more often which, in turn, increases rates of employment. |
| 'Safe Space' | Crime is correlated with low self-control and poor empathy. | As a communal activity education promotes understanding of other people and cultures. Some subject matters actively encourage prisoners to discuss motivations and circumstances of other people. | Prisoners develop a better understanding of other people reducing their likelihood to commit crimes. |

We conducted our 'search and sift' stage in two key phases. We began by focusing exclusively on prison education but then broadened our search to other areas. In broadening the search, we included papers from different types of educational programmes, courses in different contexts and from desistance literature that did not necessarily refer specifically to prison education.

The first stage involved a search for papers with a focus on prison education literature using the fol-

lowing inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- Reports empirical findings AND

- Discusses a specific educational course delivered in a prison AND

- Participants of the course are predominantly male adults ANDDiscusses outcomes *beyond* educational achievement (employment, recidivism and interim outcomes such as improved behaviour, anger management, empathy etc.).

- AND was published between 1995-2016

Further criteria:

- Relates to research conducted in England and Wales OR

- Written by (or has the involvement) of a key figure within criminology/adult education OR

- Involves a particularly robust study with significant contributions to theory.[3]

We searched an existing database of relevant papers (developed in Ellison *et al.*, 2017), updated to include papers published in 2015-16. We also consulted a range of experts and stakeholders, drew on our own expertise and undertook forwards and backwards citation mapping based on the following key texts:

- Duguid and Pawson (1998) 'Education, change, and transformation: A prison experience'

- Ubah and Robinson (2003) 'A grounded look at the debate over prison education: Optimistic theory versus pessimistic worldview'

- Behan (2014) 'Learning to escape: Prison education, rehabilitation and the potential for transformation'

After the first round of sifting and searching, we further widened the scope of literature included in the review. In particular, we take account of, and include, research from different jurisdictions and from literature that goes beyond prison education. This was, in part, due to the paucity of literature available that focuses on prison education in England and Wales and reflects the realist review methodology. In doing so, we actively reflected on the relevance of findings from different countries to the situation in England and Wales. As such, the analysis process included a period of reflexivity that drew on the reviewers' expertise and knowledge of the prison system in England and Wales (Murchison, 2010).

The original database, developed as part of the Rapid Evidence Assessment (Ellison *et al.*, 2017), included 284 papers. We reviewed each of these papers on title and abstract initially with 20 (out of 284) papers in the database reviewed by two reviewers. Further papers were reviewed from the citation mapping exercise discussed above, again with a two reviewers reviewing four papers (representing around 10% of all papers reviewed). We checked for inter-rater reliability and discussed any differences of inclusion thereby refining our processes.

The second stage of searching involved strengthening the evidence base to refine the rough theory. Following Pawson's framework, we broadened the criteria to move beyond prison education towards more general programmes that related to the CMOs. This involved running targeted and specific searches and extending the citation mapping. The reviewers focused on two keys areas of literature – adult education and desistance. Due to time constraints and limited resources, we took a very narrow search in these fields. For adult education, we chose one key journal, Adult Education Quarterly, and completed a manual search of abstracts for the period 1995-2016. For desistance literature, using research expertise, we completed a forward citation mapping exercise for one paper within desistance literature – Giordano *et al.* (2002).

After sifting based on title and abstract, 43 papers 'passed' the relevance test. We then located the full articles for a further test for relevance. Of the 43 papers, 10 were coded as 'include', 25 as 'exclude', with the remaining 8 papers as 'potentially relevant at a later stage'. Reasons for exclusion at this stage included 'unable to locate full article' (5/25); 'not based in the UK AND not sufficiently relevant' (3/25), 'not an empirical

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[3] This 'further criteria' was included as our initial criteria focused specifically on research conducted in England and Wales. This returned almost no results. To maintain our focus, we add two further options. The term 'key figure' relates to significant figures in the desistance field whilst the 'robust study with significant contributions' refered to studies with a sufficiently detailed methodology and rigorous research design that would allow for a reflection on the transferability of findings to the relevant jurisdiction.

study' (9/25), 'no methodology' (1/25); 'focused on young people' (4/25), and 'content not relevant' (2/25). Reviewers assessed the 10 articles that 'passed' the relevance stage for rigour before moving on to the second phase of searching and sifting for articles (see the following section).

From the citation mapping of the Giordano *et al.* paper, 31 papers were transferred onto the data capture tool and downloaded for a full review. From Adult Education Quarterly, 21 papers were identified and transferred. Upon review of the full papers, 8 were retained, a total of 18 in all. These 18, in addition to the three papers used for citation mapping meant 21 papers were subject to review for methodological rigour.

*Assessing for rigour*

Existing guidance stresses the importance of assessing papers for 'rigour' but provides no detailed guidance on process. Developing a uniform and systematic method of appraising the quality of such a range of research proved complex and, in the end, we had to apply a level of 'professional judgment'. This is consistent with the more 'open textured', mixed-method approach of a realist review. As (Wong *et al.* 2013b: 8) note:

> "Realist synthesis is not a technical process - that is, following a set protocol will not guarantee that a review will be robust. Rather, it requires a series of judgements about the relevance and robustness of particular data for the purposes of answering a specific question."

As Wong *et al.* (2013b) note:

> "It is unlikely that authors will be able to provide an in-depth description of each decision involved, but the broad processes used to determine relevance and assess rigor … should be described." (Wong *et al.,* 2013b: 9)

To assess the quality of quantitative research we adapted the Cambridge Quality Checklist developed specifically for studies looking at risk and protective factors (Murray, Farrington and Eisner, 2009). This involved 7 questions relating to sample size, appropriateness of statistical measures, appropriate measures of outcomes and study design. Using the guidelines set out in the Cambridge Quality Checklist, each paper was scored (as a '1' if it passed and '0' if it did not) for each question that was relevant to the study design (some questions only referred to causation studies and others only to correlation studies). Quantitative papers were included if they had adequate sample sizes and scored well on the relevant areas.

In the case of empirical research with an emphasis on qualitative research (which are likely to be particularly relevant when considering mechanisms) the issue is more complex. We developed questions based on Cochrane guidance (Hannes, 2011) and Blaxter's (1996) criteria for evaluating qualitative research. Hannes' (2011) work provided a clear framework for assessing qualitative research for rigour but does not provide clear questions for use by a review. We therefore applied Blaxter's (1996) criteria for evaluating qualitative research to develop a series of questions around these terms.

1. Credibility (5 questions) - Extent to which an author has reported on how they assessed whether their findings were 'credible'.

2. Transferability (1 question) - Sufficient information for a reader to be able to assess whether the findings can be transferred to another setting.

3. Dependability (9 questions) - Logical and traceable process including some form of 'audit trail' of how they went about collecting data, triangulating findings, and engaging in reflexive practice.

4. Confirmability (2 questions) - Steps have been taken to minimise research bias in the process (excludes purposefully subjective research that utilises the researchers' own experiences as part of the data).

For each question, papers were scored as,
   - 0= Not at all/unclear
   - 1= partially/some information
   - 2=completely/sufficient information to replicate.
   - Nil = not relevant to type of study

All papers were required to score at least a '1' for the first two questions (Are the research methods appropriate for the research questions? Is the connection between the research and an existing body of research/theory clear?). Qualitative papers needed to score 'well' on at least three out of the four areas (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) or on at least two out of the three areas for ethnographic research where confirmability did not apply.

For mixed-methods research, we appraised the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research separately and then utilised additional questions from O'Cathain *et al.* (2008) to assess methods of integration. One final question relating to ethical procedures was also included for all papers. Drawing on these sources, we subjected each paper to a series of questions on methodological rigour. Two key questions were applied to all papers:

- Are the research methods appropriate for the research questions?

- Is the connection between the research and an existing body of research/theory clear?

In total, we reviewed 21 papers in full for rigour. At least two reviewers reviewed 5 of these papers. Of these, 11 were deemed suitably rigorous for inclusion in the study. These 11 papers form the basis of the findings section below.

*Refining the theory*

We thematically analysed the findings sections of each of the included papers. We used the codes 'hook', 'qualifications' or 'safe space' to articulate how different aspects of the papers related to each of our CMOs. Realist principles were applied and each relevant section analysed for impact on the CMOs. Each paper was initially analysed individually and summarised (see descriptive findings section below). The discussion section then rearticulates the CMOs in light of these findings.

*Limitations*

A key limitation involves the issue of capacity and time. Only three reviewers have been involved in this process with one reviewer leading on the sifting and searching for literature. Ideally, a larger team of researchers would be involved in this process to ensure a wide scope and comprehensive review of sources. Whilst we are confident we have provided an overview of our systematic methods of searching and sifting, and that the literature we have consulted has been relevant, this review does not constitute a full and comprehensive review of all possible relevant literature. We would welcome extensions to the process we have begun here and for further reviews to take place to extend and develop the evidence base from distinct research perspectives.

Further limitations to the theory relate to the scope. We root our theory and findings in the context of prison education in adult, male prisons in England and Wales. Careful reflection will be required before the findings can be transferred to other jurisdictions and other groups. In particular, we have considered education for 'medium-term' prisoners. In considering the scope of the theory, we recognise that an educational course for those serving very long sentences may relate more to their lives inside than it might to outcomes upon release. Further, for those on very short sentences, the likelihood of completing a meaningful educational course seems remote.

Furthermore, we have developed the theory from a desistance and prison sociological perspective. The outcomes of interest relate to these fields (e.g. the prison environment, employability, reduced recidivism, improved behaviour). To extend the theory, other theoretical perspectives need to be incorporated, most notably, educational and pedagogical theory.

## Conceptual Framework: Developing Rough Initial Theory

The question for this review is what role education can and does play in identity formation for male adults imprisoned in England and Wales. We draw primarily on desistance narratives of identity and on prison sociological accounts (which, in turn, draw on Goffman's, 1959, perspective of the self). In particular, by recognising that successful desistance occurs at the crossroads of individual effort and the provision of opportunity, we can begin to see where prison education can sit. Within prison, education can provide structure and activity that can lead to further opportunities related to employment, hobbies, and social circles. In this

section, we provide a brief overview of relevant literature. This section sets out our perspective in developing three CMOs and contributing towards a theory of prison education.

*Desistance*

In the broadest sense, the desistance process involves a gradual shift in lifestyle away from one that involves offending, towards one that does not (Bushway, Thornberry, and Krohn, 2003). Early theories of desistance focused on external factors such as gaining employment or finding a stable relationship, with criminologists, most notably Samspon and Laub (1993), postulating that such events can act as 'turning points' in a person's life. However, some scholars have argued early desistance theories neglect the agency of the individuals concerned (see Vaughan, 2007), with more recent theories articulating desistance as a process rather than an event.

Pathways to desistance take a variety of forms (Shapland, Bottoms and Farrall, 2016). Following the work of Maruna (2001) and Giordano *et al.* (2002), desistance theories have begun to consider the active role the individual takes in reshaping their identity and developing crime-free lifestyles. Desistance is also discussed in terms of primary, secondary and, more recently, tertiary desistance (McNeill and Schinkel, 2016). These three 'levels' of desistance reflect an understanding of how desisting from crime can present in different ways and involves a complex interaction of behaviour change, altered self-understanding, and (re-)integration into society. Further to this, theories have begun to recognise the role of both individual and structural circumstances as contributing factors. In other words, the desistance process involves cognitive shifts (Giordano, 2016), developing a meaningful and credible concept of a future self (Healy, 2014), and the individual's agency and personal desire to change. However, it also relies upon structural opportunities or 'hooks for change' (Giordano *et al.*, 2002) that the desisting individual can exploit.

Very little research articulates the desistance process within prisons. We therefore also turn to prison sociological literature to consider prisoner identities and the role of education in the context of a prison environment.

*Prison sociological literature – social identities and interactions in forming the self*

In describing and exploring the prison environment and its impact on the individual, prison sociological literature draws upon ideas of 'presentations of the self' as a mode of survival (Jewkes and Bennett, 2008). The prison environment is such that individuals must learn to navigate the complex social relations within it (Liebling assisted by Arnold, 2004). Evidence from prison research suggests that upon entering prison, individuals make a conscious effort to present a particular 'front' to the rest of the prison population (see Jones and Schmid, 2000). For some, prison results in the finding of an inner strength and engaging in a search for meaning (O'Donnell, 2014), whilst others describe prison life as 'stagnant', 'boring', 'frustrating' and 'unstable' (Liebling, Arnold and Straub, 2011: 27). Identity presentation and orchestration are tactics employed to survive the prison experience. Prisoners feel the need to present the image of a 'tough man' and to build up a 'rep' among the prison community (de Viggiani, 2012). Tested on a regular basis, manliness and machismo are part of the 'act' (Toch, 1977), which involves not appearing weak and standing your ground (Crewe, 2009).

The environment of an education department differs to that of the wider prison community (Ellison *et al.*, 2017). Crewe *et al.* (2013) discuss 'emotion zones' in prison and argue that different aspects of prison provide different contexts for prisoners to interact with each other and staff in distinct ways. They specifically highlight education, visitation and the chaplaincy as places in which prisoners can drop masculine fronts and engage in a level of camaraderie with one another.

*Education, identity and personal development in prisons*

Individuals in prison engage in education for a variety of reasons and pursue a range of courses, some involving qualifications with others emphasising pro-social activity and social interaction. In the context of a prison, it is possible to consider education as a potential 'break' from overarching prison culture, a space in which the individual can interact with others as a learner as opposed to a prisoner. The process of engaging in an educational course could be relevant to a person's self-understanding – education broadens people's horizons and helps their understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Szifris, 2016). Finally, skills and qualifications gain can be relevant to identity formation by serving as a mechanism for recognising and

externally validating fledgling identities or 'imaginations of the self' (Healy, 2014).

These three aspects of educational engagement – *education as a 'hook' for change, education as a means to achieve qualifications and the educational environment as a 'safe place'* – serve as the foundation for our initial theory of prison education (see Table 2). In developing this theory, we consider whether education acts as a '*hook*' for change, a '*safe space*' for positive socialisation, or as a means of gaining '*qualifications*' and skills.

## Results

### Refining and testing theory

In the following subsections, we articulate three CMOs. Each is followed by a brief narrative justifying and explaining the context of these theories together with an overview of the evidence we have been able to locate as part of this review. We then provide a discussion and a restatement of these CMOs in light of the evidence.

*CMO 'Hook': Education as a 'hook for change'*

The first CMO considers whether prison education can act as a 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.*, 2002):

> *A: Educational activity exposes prisoners to new and different ways of thinking, and to alternative lifestyle choices. Such exposure acts as a 'hook' into new ways of being and encourages new identities. This relates to the process of engaging in educational activity.*

Although the process of crafting a replacement self is complex, non-linear, and related to a variety of other external factors, we seek here to focus on the role of prison education in this process. As a CMO configuration, we state this as follows:

> *In the context of a person in the prison environment who has made a conscious decision to move away from a criminal lifestyle, prison education can provide the structural opportunity required to develop a new identity. This leads to prisoners developing a new sense of self and developing a lifestyle that is incompatible with criminal activity.*

This CMO configuration focuses on the role education can playing in 'hooking' learners into new activity and ways of being. Here, prison education 'works' through engagement with it. The act of learning and developing in the prison environment is the mechanism through which prisoners can move away from a criminal lifestyle. This is in contrast to a focus on *qualifications* and skills gain (the focus of the second CMO below).

The papers reviewed offered contrasting insights into the role of education in the 'hooks for change' model of desistance. There was some support for the role of education in improving self-efficacy (Allred *et al.*, 2013) and self-esteem (Andrews and Andrews, 2003), but there was insufficient discussion around what this process actually entails. Duguid and Pawson's (1998) paper indicated that longer exposure to education increases the likelihood of seeing certain roles as possible (for example, exposure to an academic setting made the possibility of taking on the role of 'mature student' upon release more likely). Patzelt *et al.*'s (2014) article supported the idea that the process of engaging in education provided opportunities to develop meaningful future selves. Further to this, there was some evidence to suggest education challenges learners' worldviews (Henley *et al.*, 2012) and can provide the 'scaffolding' for self-improvement (Diseth *et al.*, 2008). Finally, LeBel *et al.*'s (2008) paper clearly demonstrates that the individual can act as agent in their own change with self-belief being particularly relevant to this process.

We found some mixed evidence around how education might achieve this change in identity. Some articles (Henley, 2012) seemed to indicate education can provide the *catalyst* for change (as opposed to providing an opportunity to change when someone has already made a commitment) whilst others (Diseth *et al.*, 2008) highlighted the barriers to learning many prisoners face. In light of the findings, we rearticulate this CMO as follows:

> *A: In prison education, learners can be exposed to different ways of thinking and alternative lifestyle choices. This can serve to develop meaningful concepts of a possible future self with education acting as a 'hook' into new ways of being and encourages new identities. This relates to the process of engaging in educational activity.*

**Table 2: The Papers**

| Description | Conclusion | Relevance to CMOs | Limitations | Rigour |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inside-Out programme where college students learn alongside prison students within prison environment. | Lower levels of self-efficacy reported by prisoners compared with college students initially. After course, statistically significant increase in self-efficacy among prisoners only. | Increased self-efficacy suggests structured education aids personal development. Some support for *safe space* CMO with education an opportunity for different types of encounter. However, they suggest the learning process is relevant (*hook*). | There is insufficient evidence around what the learning process actually entails. | Scored 4/5 on rigour tool. |
| A range of arts programmes took place in five Scottish prisons in 2010. | Sessions were beneficial for arts practitioners to reflect on growth and development, whilst providing understanding of the role of the arts in desistence. | Indicates skills gain increases confidence in ability and being seen by others as something other than a prisoner. Highlights difficulties of this with some educational opportunities accentuating differences between prisoners. | The mechanisms of this type of education may have limited transferability to other areas. | Scored 6/10 for credibility and 11/18 for dependability on rigour tool. |
| Sporting activities for young people who have committed offences, providing an arena for achievement and development of self-concept and self-esteem. | Teachers' praise of students and belief in them achieving goals can lead to improved self-esteem and increased effort from learners. However, praise can lead to dependency if constructed inappropriately, leading to decreased self-esteem. | Education can promote positive self-image by providing the opportunity to present a positive self. A positive education environment needs to be carefully fostered, as it does not always result in positive reflection on the self. Furthermore, not all types of education will promote positive or desirable identities. | Relates to young people. Some findings not relevant to adult population, particularly relating to self-esteem and body image. | Scored 5/10 for credibility and 14/18 for dependability on rigour tool. |

Table 2 (continued)

| Description | Conclusion | Relevance to CMOs | Limitations | Rigour |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anti-gang initiative delivering transitional housing, readiness for employment, substance misuse support, mental health support. | Research demonstrates achieving something tangible is directly relevant to participants' attitudes towards education. Support, belief and respect from others leads to a more positive sense of self. | Supports *qualifications* CMO as having external validation of gaining a job seems to be of relevance to those interviewed. However, there is evidence engaging in a programme to assist with employment improves self-belief and confidence. | USA based and focused on high-risk prisoners. | Scored 6/10 for credibility and 17/18 for dependability on rigour tool. |
| Development of an instrument to measure the experience of prison education. | Participants quite satisfied with education quality with associated workload/demands not excessive. Participants reported high levels of self-efficacy, intrinsic value, cognitive strategy use (4.19), and self-regulation. | The context of a prison environment works against the motivations and purposes of education in general. However, there is evidence the process of engaging in education in general is relevant and this provides some tentative support for the idea of education as a scaffolding tool for those seeking self-improvement (*hook*). | Unclear whether education develops self-efficacy and self-regulation skills, or those with these skills engage in education. | Scored 5/5 on rigour tool for sampling method and size, response rate, statistical measure. |
| University-level liberal arts programme delivered in prison. | Prison education programme suggested to bring about personal change in participants. However, effectiveness differs widely, dependent upon criminal history, family background and prior educational and social achievements. | Post-secondary education reported to enhance personal development. Some participants used this to increase employability as path to crime-free lifestyle. Education over longer period provided opportunities to build identity around newfound interests/achievements, with 'mature student' identity realistic. | Based in Canada and focused on college level qualifications. Cohort released from prison 1975-1995 so dated study. | Scored 5/5 on rigour tool for sampling method and size, response rate, statistical measure. |

Table 2 (*continued*)

| Description | Conclusion | Relevance to CMOs | Limitations | Rigour |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Three residential learning programmes focused on professional development, environment/social responsibility, and leadership development. | Residential learning allows participants to develop a sense of cohesion and community, consequently developing interpersonal and communication skills, and enhanced understanding and insight. | Residential learning provides opportunity to engage in focused learning in safe environment, leading to personal development, enhanced skills and increased employability (*hook*). Education allowed learners to be themselves, with environment encouraging thinking about self/others (*safe space*). | Limited application from voluntary residential learning to the context of prison-based learning. | Scored 6/10 for credibility and 14/18 for dependability on the rigour tool. |
| Good Vibrations music project for people in prison and on probation. | Project shown to enhance communication skills with fellow learners, improve confidence and coping skills in prison/community, aiding anger management skills and self-expression. | Musical activities a vehicle for enhancing social skills, leading to positive identity change (*hook*). Involvement means seen as more than prisoner (*safe space*). Learners treated as musicians, working towards something and contributing to shared endeavour. | Small-scale qualitative study without long-term follow up. | Scored 8/10 for credibility and 14/18 for dependability on the rigour tool. |
| The Oxford University 'Dynamics of Recidivism' study involved multiple interviews with men who have committed repeat offences in the United Kingdom. | Hope and regret negatively correlated to reconviction and re-imprisonment whilst stigma positively correlated. Self-efficacy a necessary component in desistance process. Increased hope leads to higher likelihood to take up opportunities. | Support for the dependent-on-cognitive-transformation theory of desistance. Self-belief (in the form of self-efficacy and hope) a relevant factor. Prisoners need to believe that they are able to change and forge a new lifestyle if they are to do it. | Does not address educational programmes. Small sample size (126) so the findings must be received with caution. | Scored 4/5 on rigour tool for sampling method, response rate, statistical measure. |

Table 2 *(continued)*

| Description | Conclusion | Relevance to CMOs | Limitations | Rigour |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prison entrepreneurship educational programme. The programme ran for 20 weeks. | Programme completers had more self-belief and personal agency. They internalised responsibility, recognising ability to take control of future, seeing prison as 'opportunity'. Course developed ideas and reified hope for future. Qualification validation viewed as demonstrating potential to employers. | This paper offers some confirmation of *dependent-on-cognitive-transformation* theory of desistence (*hook*). A mechanism of education is to provide opportunity to develop meaningful and credible future selves. Also, education acts as a positive environment and a means to external validation of the self. | Retrospective study – not possible to state whether successful completion due to different attitudes of persisters or course | Scored 9/10 for credibility and 16/18 for dependability on the rigour tool. |
| New Start aims to support re-socialisation of young people who have committed offences through structured sessions centring on boxing training and weightlifting. | Re-developing narratives on masculinity created distinction between past criminal and new future selves. Some split loyalty to old ties (brotherhood) but re-directing identities towards pro-social constructs key in desistance process. Authors warn some masculine identities not 'desirable'. | The programme provided participants the opportunity to take on positive prosocial roles, allowing time to act these out in the real world. Findings support idea engaging in education can support desistance. Moreover, providing roles for participants to take on (e.g. as mentors) cemented fledgling identities, allowing prisoners to see themselves as having something positive to contribute. | Relates to juveniles and based in Denmark. Findings not directly transferable to adult males in the UK. | Scored 5/10 for credibility and 15/18 for dependability on the rigour tool. |

*CMO 'Qualifications': Education as a means for gaining skills and qualifications*

> *Education provides qualifications and skills that serve to externally validate newly formed identities within an individual. Such external validation serves to improve a person's belief that they are able to successfully pursue a new identity. This relates to the outcomes of engaging in educational activity.*

Here, we consider education as a means of gaining access to the job market. In doing so, we recognise that education, in and of itself, does not help prisoners get a job. Instead, education provides prisoners with skills and qualifications the job sector require, with successfully gaining employment also involving external factors such as a good job market and access to opportunity. This theory also assumes that financial concerns are a key motivator for criminal activity and is most relevant to those prisoners who have few employable skills, insufficient qualifications, or no profession upon entering prison.

We postulate that gaining qualifications can develop confidence and self-belief through experience of task/goal achievement and gaining transferable skills. Gaining qualifications also serves to validate the individual as a capable person, able to learn and therefore be employed in the future. Furthermore, qualifications act as a marker for achievement and development, providing a clear statement to take to an employer. Finally, gaining a qualification broadens opportunity for legitimate sources of income, as various areas of employment require specific qualifications.

Evidence suggests finding secure employment can act as a key 'turning point' in the life of a person engaged in criminal activity (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Rather than the experience of education providing a space to test out new identities in a process of 'becoming', this theory postulates that outcomes of skills gain and qualifications serve to formally validate a new and distinct role for the person in prison. The key mechanism is as follows:

> *In the context of a person in prison, gaining skills and qualifications through education serves to validate the prisoner's identity as an employable member of the workforce and a person who is capable of achievement. As such, prisoners form a new identity.*

This mechanism refers to an individual's social identity and ability to access new and different roles within society. This theory postulates that it is the fact of gaining a qualification that serves as the key mechanism in accessing these roles.

However, we found insufficient evidence from this review to refine this CMO with none of the papers focussing on effect of skills and qualifications gain. Anderson's (2015) paper indicated that gaining skills could lead to increased self-confidence whilst Bender *et al.*'s (2016) paper demonstrates having tangible benefits to engaging in an education course (such as successfully gaining employment as a direct result of engagement) did improve the educational experience of the learners. There is a small amount of evidence to suggest learners rewarded with either skills that they can define clearly, or qualifications or outcomes that they perceive as being positive, improved their engagement with the course. However, the evidence does not provide insights into the way in which gaining a qualification or skill is relevant to the individual's identity.

*CMO 'Safe space': Education as a safe space within a prison environment*

> *Education provides a space within a prison that constitutes a distinct emotional climate from the rest of the prison. This distinct environment provides a safe space for prisoners to put forward a different, more pro-social, version of the self than is possible in the normal prison climate. This serves to promote an identity that is focused on growth and development as opposed to preoccupied with survival. This relates to the environment in which educational activity takes place.*

The final CMO configuration refers to the environment of a prison and the role an education department plays in ameliorating the damaging effect prison culture can have on a person's sense of self. Prisoners associate with other prisoners on the wings, often in a climate of fear and intimidation (see, for example, Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1996). As a result, prisoners have a limited number of 'roles' they can take on in prison with pro-social interaction undermined by the underlying prison culture (Szifris, 2018). It can be difficult to 'cope'

in the prison environment meaning prisoners are pre-occupied with personal safety and navigating complex social interactions (Jewkes, 2005). This can limit opportunities for self-reflection and development. Education can provide a 'safe space' where prisoners can drop the 'mask' and associate with peers along different lines (Szifris, 2017). Within education, prisoners can engage in pro-social interaction, take on the role of 'learner', and have the opportunity to express themselves and communicate with others. Education provides space to have new social interactions and form ties with people based on a shared endeavour.

This relates somewhat to education as a 'hook for change' in that it refers to the role of education in testing out and developing new identities. However, the mechanism of interest here is distinct as we conceptualise educational space as a place to take on or act out a different version of the self. This theory relates directly to prison sociological literature which describes prison as a 'closed community' characterised by boredom, isolation, complex power-relations and a consistent threat to personal safety (Clemmer, 1958; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1994; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, Arnold and Straub, 2011). Evidence suggests that upon entering prison men make a conscious effort to present a particular 'front' to the rest of the prison population (Jones and Schmid, 2000) and the environment means that such a front often involves a hyper-masculine, macho identity based around the need for survival (Szifris, 2018). In contrast prison education departments have been described as having a different 'emotional climate' (Crewe *et al.,* 2013) that acts as a 'refuge' (Ruess, 1997) within prison. As such, they provide an educational space for prisoners to put forward a different 'front'. The key mechanism is as follows:

> *In the context of wider prison culture encouraging anti-social, hyper-masculine survival identities, prison education departments provide a distinct emotional climate that allows prisoners space to test out new (pro-social) identities. This encourages the development of a new self.*

Evidence from the included papers suggests education can provide a space for learners to play out different roles (Søgaard *et al.*, 2016). In the context of a prison environment, this can involve an important opportunity for individuals to be seen by others as something other than 'prisoners' (Anderson 2015; Henley *et al.*, 2012). Education provides opportunity to present a positive self (Andrews and Andrews 2003) and engage in a different type of encounter (Allred *et al.*, 2013). This can improve social skills (Henley *et al.*, 2012) with some tentative indication this can externally validate the self (Patzelt *et al.*, 2014).

However, interestingly, these papers also indicated the environment of an education course does not always promote a positive or desirable self-image. For example, in Patzelt *et al.*'s (2014) study of boxing, although staff helped participants articulate their masculinity in a more pro-social fashion, the environment served to exclude women and promote negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Further to this, Anderson's (2015) study of sport with young people found that education could accentuate differences between learners and undermine self-confidence. However, as neither of these papers relate to programmes specifically for adult men in prison, caution must be exercised in applying these findings to our context.

In summary, the papers provide some evidence that the environment of an education department has an impact on the learner. Positive learning environments must be carefully cultivated as they can also promote identities that may not be compatible with developing a positive, pro-social identity. In light of the findings, we rearticulate this CMO as follows:

> *C: Education can, under the right circumstances, and with careful facilitation by appropriate staff, cultivate an environment for the development of positive pro-social identities. When achieved, this promotes an identity that is focused on growth and development as opposed to preoccupied with survival.*

### Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has articulated a new theory of prsion education. By articulating this in the form of 'context-mechanism-outcome' configurations, we have provided a means of thinking about the mechanisms underpinning prison education. We root the CMOs in the prison context of England and Wales and focus on adult males serving medium-term sentences. However, the findings of this paper are relevant to an international audience as we have taken a general view of prison education. The CMOs consider education as a possible

'*hook*' for change and a means for identity change; as a way of gaining skills and '*qualifications*' that could serve to validate an merging identity; and as a '*safe space*' for prisoners to spend time in a positive, pro-social environment and develop a different social identity. The papers included in this review offer some evidence for all three CMO configurations. We identified a stronger evidence base to support the 'safe place' and 'hook' CMOs than for the 'qualifications' CMO. However, with only 11 papers identified as suitable for inclusion in this review, there is a clear lack of robust research into the impact and mechanisms of prison education. We rejected many papers for a lack of methodological rigour. There is also a lack of robust theory applied to prison education.

We have articulated education in terms of the desistance process. In the course of this review, we have located some evidence that tentatively suggests education can act as a catalyst for change, but further research is required to understand how education might act more as 'scaffolding' for those ready to change. Further-more, although evidence indicates that education can constitute a distinct space in the context of a prison, how positive this space is depends on the tutor and the atmosphere they cultivate; a different space does not automatically imply a positive, pro-social space for *all* prisoners. Very little research addresses the importance of gaining skills and qualifications in the desistance process. We highlight a clear need for further research to establish the link between these mechanisms and successful desistance.

This review has implications for policy. It demonstrates that designing education programmes in pris-ons to support desistance and personal development is complex and currently under-theorised. The evidence here suggests education has the most potential when learners are allowed to engage in it as a distinct experi-ence from the wider institutional climate. Future research on education in prison could incorporate theories of desistance. Both theoretical and empirical work is required to articulate the role of education in desistance.

Although the review has revealed a limited evidence base, the process has provided an opportunity to articulate, in clear terms, a way in which education might contribute to the desistance process. As outlined in the introduction, prison education remains under-theorised and under-researched. This review has served to highlight the paucity of robust and relevant research whilst providing a clear framework for future researchers. However, this review has also taken a narrow view of literature and we would encourage other researchers, in-cluding those from different disciplines, to continue the work that we have begun and add to the evidence-base from different perspectives.

Finally, in this review we have taken a somewhat 'instrumentalised' approach to education to consider how it relates to 'desired' outcomes from imprisonment such as reduced offending and increased employabil-ity. However, we would caution that we do not intend to imply prison educational courses ought only to aim for these outcomes but rather, in line with Coates (2016), that these outcomes should be seen as fitting within more holistic aims of a broad educational curriculum. In doing this, we have articulated the CMOs with refer-ence to broader aims of personal development and desistance.

## Next Steps

We have emphasised throughout that this review offers a starting point for developing a theory of pris-on education. We have also emphasised the perspective that we have taken in developing our theories which is, fundamentally, a criminological perspective. We would encourage those from other perspectives to repeat the process that we have begun here but from a different literature base. In particular, the theory that we have developed here is weak on *educational* theory and we would encourage educationalists to take an interest in prison education theory. This is a problem more broadly as academics who take an interest in prison learning often come from a criminological background. Education in prison is rarely on the agenda at educational con-ferences and rarely featured in educational journals. Without the assistance of educational theorists, any theory of prison education will remain narrow and incomplete. We hope therefore to have provided a starting point for the educationalist by outlining a theory of prison education from the criminologist perspective.

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