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"Education as the practice of freedom?" – prison education and the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a corner of society where the spotlight has not fallen – the black hole of prisons, confining predominantly poor, minoritised and often younger adults. Globally, during the pandemic, people detained in prison have been locked away in solitary, or near solitary, confinement for up to 23-hours a day. In the UK, this meant choosing between fresh air, exercise or a phone call to loved ones each day. There has been little mention of education. Those in custody endured over a year locked in a cell without access to basic education let alone Higher Education (HE). In examining the state's responsibility to provide "education for all", we demonstrate, through our collective participation in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, the value and importance of prison education beyond the current focus on risk, responsibility and recidivism. We evidence the transformative and humanising potential of HE in prison through three key elements – the space and learning environment; the role of voice, recognition and agency; and the power of disruptive and transgressive teaching practice. We shine a light on education in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of COVID-19 expose new and deeper forms of structural disadvantage that shape the educational experiences and journeys of people in custody. We consider how we can expedite "education as the practice of freedom" for those who are incarcerated during and beyond the pandemic. We conclude by reimagining HE in UK prisons, reflecting upon alternative, more positive, approaches to prison education.

Introduction

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme is an extraordinary education programme.[1] For many instructors, like ourselves, it has transformed the way we teach and the way we think about education, its purpose and potential. Inside-Out was borne out of the racialised injustices of the US criminal justice system, founded by Criminologist Lori Pompa and designed with incarcerated men. The accredited[2] programme involves taking equal numbers of university (outside) students into prison to learn alongside and as equals with incarcerated men and women (inside students). Embedded in solidarity and

anti-exclusionary, anti-oppressive practice, Inside-Out offers the same learning opportunity to each student, regardless of previous academic performance. The "learning communities" we build in prisons draw heavily on critical pedagogy, especially the work of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. For Freire education is not simply something that is "done to" students but rather, it is something "done with" students and is an inherently political and moral act. Education is a project of freedom; we must equip our students with the skills and knowledge to re-think, reimagine and challenge dominant systems of knowledge and power. Freire and hooks' ideas about education as liberating, transformative, rooted in dialogue and process serve us well. At the heart of our pedagogical approach are critical thinking and self-reflection and we endeavour to encourage our students to open-up their hearts and minds to new ways of seeing and understanding themselves and their communities, towards self-actualisation (hooks, 1994). As hooks (1994) asserts " . . . once you learn to look at yourself critically, you look at everything around you with new eyes" (p. 117). Thus, through our classroom discussions of criminological issues, our students begin to critically reflect upon systems of power and privilege, especially in relation to gender, race and social class, at an individual and structural level. We teach to "transgress" (hooks, 1994) and in this process the distinction between "instructor" and "learner" is blurred, if not erased; we all learn. Following the first class, Pompa (2013, p. 130) reflected ". . . something quite unexpected was happening: besides learning about crime and justice, the people involved in the class were coming to new understandings of themselves, of others, of society, and of their relationship to society".

We have delivered the programme in the UK since 2014 in three prisons and come to understand its fragility and power to transform students on both sides of the prison wall. Various studies have evaluated and reflected upon the impact of Inside-Out, focusing on core features, for example, self-efficacy among students (see Allred et al., 2013), the impact of the programme's content, structure and readings (Allred, 2009), the reactions of instructors to the courses (Van Gundy et al., 2013), and the role of Think Tanks[3] (Conti et al., 2013). We teach behind prison walls whilst trying to bring down the figurative walls that separate us. The ideas that underpin hooks and Freire's philosophy about teaching and learning; building knowledge collectively, fore-fronting lived experience, experiential learning and deep reflection, are guiding principles for writing this article. We write as a collective of academics and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and men, reflecting, writing and theorising about the value of higher education (HE) in UK prisons. We draw upon seven years of programme data to explore the importance of and challenges for HE in prisons. Our contribution comes from the diversity of our collective and our experiences of HE in prison. We continually wrestle with the tensions and challenges involved in working and writing as a collective, especially as our collaborators are people who are, or have been, incarcerated (Torre et al., 2001).

Together, in this article we examine the state's responsibility to provide "education for all" by interrogating the value of education and its role within the prison estate. We demonstrate the value and importance of prison education beyond the current focus on risk, responsibility and recidivism. We evidence the transformative and humanising potential of HE in prison through three key elements–the space and learning environment; the role of voice, recognition and agency; and the power of disruptive and transgressive teaching practice. The article also explores education in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine the impacts of COVID-19 on prison learners, exposing

new and deeper forms of structural disadvantage that shape the educational experiences and journeys of people in custody. In doing so, we speak to Inside-Out programmes globally and advance wider debates about prison education and inequalities. How can we facilitate "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994) for those who are incarcerated during and beyond the pandemic? We conclude our paper by reimagining HE in UK prisons where we consider alternative approaches to prison education.

Context

"No person shall be denied the right to education" (Article 2, Protocol 1, European Convention on Human Rights).

"All prisoners should have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality" (United Nations [UN], 2009, p. 9).

This is our starting point – that everyone has the right to education, including people in prison. As educators and academics, we have a duty to uphold this right. As Costelloe argues "if one holds the view that education can combat the exclusion of society's most marginalised and disenfranchised citizens, then one must also hold the view that education can 'bring prisoners back into society'". In theory, we are supported by a legal and policy framework that outlines the educational entitlement of people detained in prison. UN policy and the ECHR (above) are supported by extensive EU legislation that ensures incarcerated people are included within this right, representing approximately 640,000 of the EU's population (Hawley et al., 2013, p. 12). In the UK, prison education policy is interpreted and enacted within the neoliberal policy framework and privatisation agenda characteristic of the public sector (Garland, 2010). Consequently, in practice, the entitlement to prison education in England is marred by recidivism discourses, mass incarceration, privatisation, austerity cuts, populist narratives about crime and its causation and resulting punitive penality (Czerniawski, 2016). With the most privatised prison system and highest incarceration rates in Western Europe (Hawley et al., 2013), the English Criminal Justice System is underpinned by privatisation and the contracting out of multiple features, including education, and justified through the politics of risk. In this respect, though vastly different to the US Criminal Justice System, there are notable similarities with the concept of the "prison industrial complex".[4] Emanating from the US and developed by scholars and activists, this term provides a more nuanced understanding of the rapidly expanding prison population and sector by unpicking the political and economic structures that drive the punishment process. Understanding these dimensions enables a more structurally connected exploration of the multiple and overlapping modalities of inequality and oppression that we discuss in this paper.

The purpose of prison, within the UK context at least, is about protecting the public, rather than promoting the welfare of people detained in prison[5] or their personal growth (see Carlen, 2008). People detained in prisons are, of course, part of the wider public, nonetheless such assertions around the purposes of imprisonment are often characterised as if they are mutually exclusive groups. We situate our analysis of HE in prison within a framework that theorises the English prison system as organised around forms of penal power that are underpinned by the goals of public protection and the management of risk

(Crewe, 2009). As Warr (2020, p. 33) argues, "risk and its cognisant practices (measurement and management), have come to permeate, if not dominate, every facet of contemporary penal systems". The prison regime is defined by the omnipresence of risk where key prison personnel, such as uniformed officers and psychologists, constantly make judgements and formal assessments about an individual's perceived level of risk and "dangerousness" (Warr, 2020). Referring to prison-based forensic psychologists, Crewe suggests they have the power to alter a person's future with "the stroke of a pen" (Crewe, 2011). To "get on" and progress through the system requires people in prison to demonstrate compliance with "risk bureaucracy" and engage with particular forms of activity, to satisfy sentence plans, for example, by completing specified, and often of dubious efficacy, offender behaviour programmes[6] (Crewe, 2011). A responsibilisation discourse pervades, with people expected to wholly and individually take responsibility for their actions and be reminded of this daily (King et al., 2021). Often identified by their prison number alone, it is a dehumanising experience. Engagement in HE programmes like Inside-Out does not fit into the actuarial justice model of penal power that defines the modern English prison. Consequently, HE in prisons, including Inside-Out, is regarded as peripheral to the prison regime; it is not focused on changing behaviour or reducing risk.

England and Wales have the highest rate of imprisonment in Western Europe, rising by over 70% in the last 30 years to approximately 78,000 (Prison Reform Trust [PRT], 2021). The profile of the prison population has shifted with increasing numbers of older people, people on longer sentences and those serving "life trashing" indeterminate sentences[7] (Simon, 2001). Women account for just 4% of the prison population; 77% have been found guilty of non-violent offences and most usually receive harsher sentences by a heavily gendered Criminal Justice System (Gelsthorpe, 2004; Women in Prison, 2020). Across the board, official recorded figures catalogue the spectrum of structural disadvantage that people in prison have experienced (PRT, 2021, p. 22). In relation to education, the single biggest indicator to ending up in prison is being made educationally homeless through school exclusion (PRT, 2021). People detained in prison are significantly more likely to have truanted, have low (or no) literacy, to have no qualifications and be unemployed (PRT, 2021, p. 22). The figures for women are consistently higher than for men and are often more severe for BAME men and women (PRT, 2021). Gender, class and racial inequalities operate throughout the school system (Reay, 2005) and intensify within the criminal justice system (Davis, 2003; PRT, 2021). Thousands of (predominantly BAME) young people are caught up in this "school-to-prison pipeline" annually (Graham, 2016). Indeed, there is "greater disproportionality in the number of Black people in prisons here than in the United States" (Lammy, 2017, p. 3).

Prison education is usually at a basic level and only universally available in key subjects, usually literacy and numeracy. Education opportunities are patchy, sporadic, restricted and HE is rarely offered (Coates, 2016; Owers, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Provision is mostly state-sponsored and reframes education as treatment and rehabilitation, reducing the learner to "a patient, a subject, somebody that something is done to, rather than with" (Behan, 2014, p. 27). HE provision in prisons is minimal. The Open University (OU) describe "a glass ceiling beyond Level 2 [basic level] for prison learners, with anything above that seen as, 'at best an optional extra rather than a coherent progression route for students'" (OU evidence in Coates, 2016, p. 38).[8] What little (basic) education is available, is often of questionable quality, delivered by a demoralised, disaffected and insecure workforce

(Rogers et al., 2014) and since 1993 has been privatised and contracted out. Only 1% of the funded curriculum in prison is at a higher post-secondary level (Prisoner's Education Trust [PET], 2014). Within a national educational system renowned for inbuilt structural inequality at all levels, men and women within prison receive an even worse offer (King et al., 2019). Added to this is the barrier of funding–since 2011/12 any person wishing to study at Level 3 or above must fund themselves. Taking out an Advance Learner Loan is risky with the prospect of not being able to complete the course (if released or transferred) and leaving with larger debts than when they entered prison (Coates, 2016). Those with over six years left on their sentence do not qualify for a loan and there are currently no loans available for postgraduate study (Coates, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the uptake of Open University courses has plummeted by 42% since this change with just 1,036 people enrolled (Coates, 2016). Further exacerbated by the increasing use of longer sentences, there is a burgeoning prison population who are excluded from education.

HE in prisons in England and Wales have faced a challenging time. Following upheaval from the introduction of new education contracts in April 2019, prisons were hit with the severest of COVID-19 restrictions, fully locking down from mid-March 2020. Globally, harsh control measures were introduced, including, as in the UK, locking many people away for 23-hours a day (PRT, 2021). In the UK, all face-to-face contact ceased, including family visits, access to the gym and classroom-based teaching (PRT, 2021). They had the difficult choice of fresh air, exercise or a phone call to loved ones each day. There is little mention of education. These restrictions amount to the entire prison population being placed in "prolonged solitary confinement" for over 14 months (PRT, 2021). The evidence of the profound negative impacts of isolation, particularly psychological consequences are unequivocal internationally (Shalev, 2008). Although educational opportunities dramatically reduced and all but disappeared in some prisons, the most disturbing impact has been on their emotional, psychological and physical well-being (Hewson et al., 2020). The Prisons Inspectorate (HMIP, 2021, p. 4) found people in prison to be chronically bored, exhausted from hours locked in their cells, drained, depleted, lacking in purpose and frequently comparing themselves to caged animals. The poor conditions in some prisons and overcrowding have been compounded by the pandemic and responses to it (Scott & Sim, 2020). As in "ordinary" times, prisons and people detained in prison continue to be forgotten.

Methods

This paper draws on a range of data and much of what we cover is grounded in our experiences–as Inside-Out instructors and as women and men who participated in the programme (and became members of the Durham Collective). We have continued to work together, albeit online and through correspondence, throughout the pandemic, though this in itself has been challenging practically. Our critical reflections are drawn from a range of sources and are in keeping with the ethos underpinning Inside-Out pedagogy, which has close ties with feminist and anti-racist approaches to research (see hooks, 1984) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). We draw on a diverse sample, reflective of the three prisons we work with and within, but we speak about and to, both the national and international context for prisons during the pandemic. Delivery of Inside-Out relies on strong relationships with the prisons, particularly the governors

who enable it to happen. We do not seek here to critique these individual prisons. The prisons we work with are committed to a holistically conceived model of prison education, but are constrained by the economic, political and particularly security contexts within which they operate, all of which have been compounded by the pandemic. We draw upon seven years' experience of teaching and supporting men and women in prison as part of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange programme along with men and women with experience of participating in and/or facilitating Inside-Out as teaching assistants (the majority of whom are still incarcerated but several have been released). We offer our arguments and reflections in a spirit of open enquiry, encouraging education scholars to widen their lens to include the education of people in prison.

We have drawn upon correspondence, over 300 reflective essays, 300 student evaluations, twenty student debriefs and creative writing pieces in a purposeful way, to enable us to analyse in-depth several key themes that emerge as distinctive to Inside-Out for our students and collective. The themes explored and the quotes drawn upon here are indicative of the wider data set, collected over the last seven years. Ethical approval was granted from Durham University and consent sought from students.[9] The data, and more importantly some of the experiences, that we draw upon here, are necessarily anonymous. We write as the Durham University Inside-Out Collective, acknowledging our individual and collective contributions and the obvious power dynamics at play in this venture (Torre et al., 2001). However, we forefront the voices of men and women, voices we rarely hear, who have spent time in prison or continue to endure the pains of imprisonment during the global pandemic. In our thematic sections below, we distinguish between contributions from our Durham Collective (DC members) and essay excerpts from inside students. The sections that follow explore three key themes. Firstly, we argue for the value and importance of prison education beyond the current focus on risk, responsibility and recidivism. Next, we consider the transformative and humanising potential of HE through the lens of Inside-Out. We demonstrate how three key elements enable this–the space and learning environment; the role of voice, recognition and agency; and the power of disruptive and transgressive teaching practice. Finally, we reveal the impact of the pandemic on prison learners. Our contribution has relevance for Inside-Out programmes globally, as we seek to learn from each other's experiences across the Inside-Out network. The arguments we make here connect with and advance wider international debates about prison education.

Prison education – beyond risk, responsibility and recidivism

HE within prisons in England and Wales is underfunded and unvalued, a luxury, a privilege and not essential (Czerniawski, 2016). What little education exists, is framed through rehabilitation and desistance. The RAND Corporation's (2013) meta-analysis of the impact of prison education programmes found that these led on average to a 43% reduction in recidivism. Research demonstrates that people in prison who study whilst inside, and who go on to gain HE level qualifications have a much lower recidivism rate than the general prison population (Behan, 2014). A Durham Collective (DC) member reflected that "Starting my degree gave me a focus and structure, in turn I had no interest or time for my old social circles or anti-social behaviours". This is a finding that applies in the UK and elsewhere (Torre & Fine, 2005). Indeed, Prisoner's Education Trust (2014, p. I) argues that

"education has the power to enrich, change and develop people throughout their lives. Offering prisoners access to education improves their self-esteem and enables them to choose a more constructive way of life". The role of education in positively impacting on desistance, improving self-worth and self-esteem, benefitting the prison regime, reducing prison violence, increasing post-release employment outcomes and pro-social thinking have been well documented (e.g. Hall, 2015; Hopkins, 2012; RAND Corporation, 2013). A student echoed this, writing that "HE offers a positive identity to replace that of 'offender' with 'student', thus improving self-belief, self-love and in turn, relationships with others". But this process can be difficult and asks people to reflect deeply on their actions and experiences. A DC member reflected on this in one of her essays:

> Denial in an individual becomes malignant and ultimately eats away and torments the chest and mind . . . I can now reflect on the truth that I have sought and found through [HE] . . . I was too afraid to face the truth of where my actions would finally lead and what I would actually lose . . . [learning and reading] has given me cause to question my own crime more deeply and try to understand its causes . . . this is an uncomfortable but necessary journey for me to take.

People who have completed education courses during their time in jail, are 25% less likely to be reconvicted and 26% more likely to find employment in their first year after release (Coates, 2016). The costs of recidivism are also not lost on penal policy makers, with the European Commission estimating the financial cost of recidivism in England and Wales alone as approximately 71 billion euros (Hawley et al., 2013). Although the reductions in recidivism are compelling, we need to rethink our metrics. Gould (2018, p. 388) highlights the dangers of justifying HE in prison solely based on recidivism, which ignores the "historical context of racial and class bias of the criminal justice system (Castro, 2018), the neoliberal focus on the individual (DeFina & Hannon, 2011; McCorkel, 2013, 2017), an accurate definition of recidivism or the actual measures we use to quantify recidivism rates (Scott, 2018)".

Judging the success of HE in prison in terms of recidivism, crime reduction and value for money is wholly unsuited to the complex development of human change (Behan, 2014, p. 27). James (2009) argues that "education in prison is the last bastion of rehabilitation. It is the only area in a prison where the prisoner is seen as a student, a learner and an individual with specific needs first – and an offender second". Learning in prison should extend beyond the basic and it is the importance of HE opportunities in prison that we advocate for here. A DC member explains how "Inside, education breathes life into you. You can feel free, you can learn to believe in yourself. Inside-Out liberated me to do this". Another DC member emphasised the importance of HE to him because it demonstrated to loved ones on the outside that he was spending his time in prison productively. Farley and Hopkins (2018, p. 150) argue that in both prisons and universities "higher education is and should be also about human development, social relationships, social mobility and social justice" and it is "critically important that we continue to work together to overcome the institutional, structural and systemic barriers that adversely affect incarcerated university students". Indeed, HE in prison is a "significant frontier for educational justice" (Torre & Fine, 2005, p. 589). Lack of education perpetuates inequalities, whether

intentionally or not, adding to the difficulties incarcerated people face inside and when they transition into the community. Within prison, learning can become both an act of freedom and a pathway to freedom.

Space and learning environment

The Coates Review argued that prison "education should be aspirational [and] must offer a learning journey that is truly transformational and enables progression to higher levels" (Coates, 2016, p. 38). The transformative effect of the Inside-Out class is evident from the beginning. Before the end of the first prison class together, we constantly find that people who have never met have made connections with people unlike themselves and their learning on the programme has begun. Even within the confines of prison, "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). That this change happens so suddenly always feels like a bit of a wondrous event, even though it happens for almost all students and is palpable. A student reflected on his first class, "Today I was greeted with a huge 'boom' of excitement and a gigantic flow of positive energy. I was totally speechless, I felt as though I had walked into a University lecture room . . . it felt like everyone in the room was important to one another and in some way we all merged together to become one person".

This first class establishes a learning environment which enables participation through dialogue, reflection, and the establishment of a space of mutual trust and respect, where relationships can develop. The space created is active rather than passive, structured as a learning opportunity, and deliberately unsettling and challenging. We sit in a circle, alternating inside-outside students, making a bold statement about our shared space, community, sense of humanity and equal stake in learning. The classroom is a collaborative space (Gergen, 2009) where all voices are equal, and one is not privileged over another. In a prison setting this is impossible to achieve absolutely and collaborative classrooms are not without power dynamics. However, the pedagogical approach and community building ethos of Inside-Out demonstrates just how it is possible to create a "brave" learning space (Pompa, 2013) within a prison environment that is "often bleak and antithetical to the educational mission" (Gehring & Eggleston, 2006, p. xii).

For inside students, Inside-Out provides them with a feeling of "normality", being treated as an "individual", a "human being" as opposed to a prison number or expletive and forgetting they are in prison. One student reflected: "The opportunity to feel like I was back in an everyday 'normal' situation with different faces talking about different experiences and situations means more than you could know in here". Nelson Mandela described their cell block on Robben Island as "The University" as education allowed him and his peers to learn together and from each other (Mandela, 1994). This resonates for our inside students, with a ripple effect across the prison wings, as the learning space becomes truly liberating (Freire, 1996). One of our first students shared his experiences in this way:

> It was life-changing. It offered me social change through education . . . being in an environment with no stimulation, the stimulation from meeting with students from university reinforced our belief in ourselves, rehabilitation, it was unbelievable.

He went on to reflect,

> after the first lesson we couldn't sleep because our minds had been stimulated outside of the environment. It was just wired with euphoria. No one could sleep, we hadn't been stimulated on this level before. It was such a mind-blowing experience.

Learning within the prism of prison is unique (Pompa, 2013, p. x) in the way the space enables a sense of freedom in learners and teachers. It fosters deeper and more open encounters between students that wouldn't otherwise take place. Inside-Out offers what fellow US instructors, Conti et al. (2013, p. 166) describe as a "contradictory experience ... that promotes normalised interactions and the suspension of institutional identities within the prison itself". In this process, "stigma is negated". Drawing on Goffman's work on stigma (Goffman, 1963) they go on to argue that "when normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another's immediate presence, especially when they there attempt to sustain a joint conversational encounter, there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides" (Conti et al., 2013, p. 13).

Voice, recognition and agency

Wright and Gehring (2008, p. 249) describe prison culture as "alienating, bureaucratic, status oriented, objectifying, disciplinary, and brutal in its corrosive capacity to strip the prisoner's self and world of hope and meaning". Most inside students have had poor, disrupted, unsuccessful, fraught experiences in schools. Within that "caged" space, HE provides a sense of hope and freedom, as one student wrote: "change can come about with the attainment of knowledge ... It is an intrinsic part of a person's navigation through life to continue to hope and dream. Knowledge allows me to keep dreaming". For those with confidence, the transformation brings a sense of recognition of their own skills and worth. It gives people "something to strive for and endeavour to gain a sense of purpose and commitment, instead of the unproductive and useless status inherent within all prisons" (DC member). Often for the first time in their lives, inside students tell us that they have their voices heard, their perspectives valued and their experience validated; they experience success and recognition and gain insight into their previous experiences of education and begin to reframe narratives of what felt like personal failings. A student reflected: "I now have a voice; I can converse with the world again–in fact, I am keen to". The Inside-Out classroom community embodies hooks' (1994, p. 8) call on "our capacity to generate excitement", which "is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognising one another's presence". In his closing ceremony speech a student reflected:

> We confronted our ignorance as we learned about sociology, far more interesting than any of us imagined, we learned about the criminal justice system which gave us new insights about ourselves, and we learned about you. We have confronted our fears of commitment, failure, humiliation, that you might look down on us or make us feel stupid. And we have emerged on the other side feeling better about ourselves, and each other.

Prisoners are "so used to being disbelieved, un-recognised, and un-trusted, listening to their life stories in an active and attentive way is a powerful act . . . it communicates their humanity is being taken seriously" (Crewe, 2013, p. 20). Having a voice is powerfully humanising: "For the first time, in a long time, I felt I had a voice and that my opinions and feelings were valued" (student). Transformation occurs as students realise what they can do with that voice. Prisons can be brutal institutions, which actively limit autonomy, a key element in critical pedagogy. Ironically, Inside-Out enables people in prison to retain and/or regain some agency within the oppressive culture of prison. As Morley (2014, p. 170) notes "even in the most disempowering contexts it is possible for practitioners to envisage power to bring about change". Although this is in reference to social work practitioners in legal contexts, her construction of disempowering contexts as those which "create a sense of powerlessness" and constrain practice in the "pursuit of social justice", coincides powerfully with practicing education in prison. Morley's reference to agency connects with our notion of transformation as being both inward and outward looking, as representing personal growth and potential for action. For inside students the possibility of change and potential action includes pursuing a vision of different outcomes, choices, and solutions which are genuinely rehabilitative. One student poetically summarised:

> The power of transformation is not to be underestimated. The Inside-Out programme represents an academic portal between the realms of lost generations, bound by deep depths of despair, and the limitless oceans of possibility enjoyed by the free mind. Transition of thoughts and ideas between time and space crumble the restraints of captivity and knowledge becomes a unifying source of self-worth.

Disruption and transgression

So much of what we do in the Inside-Out classroom is disruptive. The space in which we teach is an act of disruption. Our classes usually take place in spaces of worship, where we respectfully make it ours for the three-hour class, imbuing it with discussion and sometimes laughter – the latter a human noise that is seldom heard in prison – before returning it to its original state. At the heart of our teaching approach, as outlined earlier, is the practice of dialogue. Seemingly simple, facilitated with care and underpinned by community-building groundwork, it can be powerful and beautifully disruptive. Dialogue enables us to cross boundaries and traverse structural barriers, to meaningfully interact across and with our differences (hooks, 1994, p. 130). Engaging in dialogue, having our ideas and assumptions challenged can be both humanising and necessarily unsettling. In our discussions of criminological issues that matter to us, students often tell us that they find the Inside-Out classroom a space where they can open up, speak up and feel that their ideas and perspectives are validated.

Instructors take responsibility for ensuring that students adhere to prison and programme ground-rules and guidelines for dialogue, which the group itself creates. As instructors, teaching in a manner that "respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). As a DC member reflected "humanity and empathy should not be a luxury in prison, and neither should education". In this setting, we use Gergen's (2009) notion of "disruption"; as the creation of meaning which occurs in

the interactions – the exchange of ideas, experiences and feelings – within the circle. "Meaning" can represent both new knowledge about the topic and new meanings ascribed to previous understanding, values, or assumptions about the world. From a social constructionist perspective, the created meaning is likely to be different for everyone. Meaning arises in a relational space where the possibility of change and collaborative action exists, channelling Henry Giroux in his introduction to Freire's *Politics of Education* (Freire, 1985): "As a referent for change, education represents a form of action that emerges from a joining of the languages of critique and possibility".

Educationally, Inside-Out is also transgressive–its approach disrupts the development of an "ideal citizenry" (Baldwin, 1963). Class discussions deal with topics that seldom arise in the university classroom, regularly focusing on systems of power and privilege and drawing out students' direct experiences of exclusion and discrimination (hooks, 1994). We often tackle complex and sensitive topics head on and because of this our traditional authoritarian teacher role as "knowledge-holder" is also disrupted. Our students are not consumers or receptacles that need to be filled – education for us is not "receive, memorise, repeat", the so called "banking" concept of education (Freire, 1996, p. 53). Our classes forefront lived experience, encouraging an equal stake in the learning process. As a collective, we disrupt and build knowledge together through dialogue – crucial for individuals to be "truly" human (Freire, 1996, p. 69).

The "classroom [becomes] a location of possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 207), enabling students to open their minds, think, explore and critically reflect on themselves and the world around them. Critical reflection, as it is conceived here, is the art and practice of questioning and challenging assumptions and preconceptions, confronting the status quo, and examining our thoughts and feelings in relation to experiences and the world we live in (Brookfield, 2009). Student conversations and reflective essays require them to engage reflexively, to embrace the uncomfortable, uncertain and evolving process of critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987). Transformation occurs over time within and beyond the class. Students consistently reference the "visceral" and "powerful" nature of the experience, which "remains deep inside you", staying with them. A DC member poetically explained this experience:

> For our tutors did not abandon us but stayed relentlessly despite all the unspeakable and unmentionable obstacles; patiently watching the little drops of knowledge and hope carving their way through the hard terrain; drip-drip a man is talking. Drip-drip a man is thinking. Drip-drip a man is asking. Drip-drip signs of change. Drip-drip … drip-drip … drip-drip and they are still here with their unceasing hope and kindness. Whenever I feel overwhelmed by the task and impossibility of a grand change, I remember them and say: drip-drip, educating one person is grand enough. Luckily, I have witnessed it … I remain open for the world outside.

Prison education during COVID-19

COVID-19 has ruptured these unique possibilities of HE in prison and exposed new and deeper forms of structural disadvantage that shape the educational experiences and journeys of people in custody. We have been locked out of prison since March 2020. Although people in prison understood initial lockdown rules in prisons as necessary, over a year later they questioned the legitimacy and fairness of the continuing regimes (HMIP,

2021, p. 3). Our DC members share how people in prison have felt "caged like animals", with no "freedom to protest grievances about jabs or restrictions or the government". Another, now released, explained:

> When people say that lockdown must be like being in prison and how it's affected their life and mental health, I think about what it was like for me locked in for 19 hours a day when there were staff shortages. No phones, no Netflix, a few channels on a small TV in your room that shows you a glimpse of the life you once lived. Officers are staring at you through slits in your door. You see an eye, a nose, a flash of light. You don't have social media connecting each other, bringing you humanity in funny videos or updating statuses to say, "I am here, I am alive."

COVID-19 has illuminated the vast disadvantages experienced by HE learners in prisons; unlike HE learners outside where online learning spaces were quickly deployed in response to the restrictions and focused on connectivity, access to resources, to people, to dialogue, for emotional support and academic guidance. Although not ideal, this has been a very different offer to that in prisons. Inside, lockdown has meant no interaction with people, no association time and no face-to-face contact, not just educationally but at all. Opportunities for dialogue and human engagement have ceased and with them the opportunity for stimulation, disruption and transformation. Our DC members describe feeling "extreme and severe boredom and apathy, infused with bouts of monotony". As one student reflected: "In class I felt that I was putting into practice the ethos of the programme as Pompa described 'we explore together and we challenge one another to always go deeper in our exploration'". The opportunity "to be challenged to explore, reflect and grapple for the truth" has been lost.

With no access to learning spaces, the human potential of "disruptive" HE classrooms has resulted in people going "back to just being a number", "feeling unchallenged" and "dead inside" (DC members). For most, the practice of education as freedom has been quashed. Initially, virtually no education was provided and the endeavours of dedicated individual officers to facilitate in-cell education have been shackled by the archaic systems and processes in place, primarily due to overriding concerns about security and risk. Notwithstanding our recognition that many prison staff have been doing their best during this time, the full learning experience of people in prison has disappeared. Our DC members recognise that the consequences of COVID-19 are "not the fault of staff who were and still are very good in these extreme conditions we are all living through". Most people in prison have now spent almost 18 months in solitary confinement with untold mental and physical health consequences (HMIP, 2021). These impacts have extended to families and relationships (Minson, 2021). Those incarcerated have told of their declining physical and mental health (PRT, 2021), their fears in prison and concerns for family outside.

We have sought to support our prison partners by offering readings, activities and engagement with this year's online outside only Inside-Out programme. Most of the concerns about HE "outside" during the pandemic, such as IT provision, online learning platforms, quality online teaching, face-to-face opportunities, isolation and poor mental health, have manifested in the extreme inside prison. With little to no electronic access, no online access and no engagement from outside facilitators allowed during the pandemic, one DC member explains, "it has highlighted in stark detail the inequalities within the

prison system, both between the male and female estates and in the provision of education across the boundaries". In some cases, under the door, quarantined, in-cell workbooks have been provided for basic level learners and gradually there has been a move to some tutor engagement in prisons where telephony is available (PET, 2020). The pandemic "has resulted in delays in receiving course material, no access to the library and [thus] research, no tutor visits or phone calls, hand-written assignments and many late nights playing catch-up" (DC member). Earlier technological advancements which had been made, such as access to the OU's Virtual Campus for secure settings, have regressed as people remain locked behind their doors.

The transformative opportunities for change, which are vital for community reintegration on release, have also gone. Solitary confinement is not conducive to building self-confidence and self-worth, breaking down barriers and encountering stimulation for self-reflection. For people who encounter Inside-Out as inspiring the beginning of their learning journey, this educational springboard has been pulled from under them. A DC member explained how "the information and the power of the learning groups I was in changed my whole outlook on life and my place in it, it changed my identity" but inside students have lost this opportunity. He went on to reflect how deep this loss will be for those coming up for release: "I felt like education gave me armour and is what I could take with me when the gates closed … but people leaving prison now won't have this armour".

However, unsurprisingly there remains a tension in critiquing the impact of the pandemic on HE in prison. We found that for those fortunate enough to have already been registered on a HE pathway, for example, those completing OU degrees, their courses and distance learning are helping them to "get through" the endless hours of isolation. As one DC member explained "studying has kept me very busy–occupied (mentally), focused, hopeful and positive". Another added that "studying has continued to help me cope throughout my sentence. Everyone needs coping mechanisms and studying is a positive one that helps keep the mind occupied and active". This demonstrates the enduring power of HE to allow the mind to escape and soar even in captivity and its value in enabling people to imagine and dream beyond the walls, even in the most extreme of circumstances.

Conclusion – re-imagining prison education

We end with our opening premise, that everyone has the right to education, including people in prison. In the immediate term digital access must be implemented. As PET (2020) have outlined, digital technology "remains the essential ingredient that would revolutionise prison education. Without this, the digital divide will become a chasm". Even within the confines of the US prison system this has been made possible. For example, our Inside-Out peers at Macomb Correctional Facility, the Macomb Theory Group, have individual tablets which enable digital learning and family connection.

Policy stakeholders need to consider the impact of austerity and punitive penality on people in prison. This is crucial to developing a more holistically conceived model of prison education. A sustainable HE offer, properly fiscally and materially resourced, must be developed, that considers the nuanced lived experiences and structural disadvantage experienced by people before prison and upon release. Flipping the script to a "prison-to-college pipeline" (Dreisinger, 2017) is achievable. Prisons and prison education should be

holistic and restorative. As we have argued above, the humanising and disruptive potential of HE can be grounding principles for a model of prison education. We need only look to the Nordic model of prisons, as a place to heal and reconnect with communities, for inspiration and evidence of how this can be successfully implemented.

Ultimately, however, we must overhaul the structures and systems of multiple disadvantage outside and properly fund our community and public services. Prison reform usually results in growing the prison system, causing tension between investing in a more holistically conceived model of prison education and ultimately reducing the numbers of people subjected to prison. In tackling the tension between abolition and reform, Ben-Moshe suggests non-reformist reforms (2013). This involves enacting changes that will undo the structures that cause harm, shrink the system and redirect resources into actions (services and communities) that will actually address social problems and keep people safe. The principles we advocated for above need embedding within our (education) systems and society throughout people's lives. Preventing the rupturing of school and societal relationships for children and young people would ultimately render prisons and discussions about education in prison defunct. This principle is not a new one. To borrow from Malin's (1895) poem "The Ambulance Down the Valley", if we build a robust fence (of community services and support) on the edge of the cliff, then people won't drop off it and need an ambulance (or prison) at the bottom of the valley. As one DC member advocated:

> This is the responsibility of the formerly imprisoned, the universities and the students who will build the future, vote in governments, discuss policies, report tomorrow's news, and teach our children, as well as those who will prosecute, defend and sit in judgment in a court or at home, reading or watching a news report.

Unusually, we close this paper with a poem by DC member and co-author, Dalton, which speaks to all that we have discussed here and we hope, moves us all to action.

You at the back

The boy in the back of the class
Looks up at the wall but can't tell the time
Lies his way through lessons
Smiles silent in the right places
Traces in his mind the lines across trees outside
Sees seasons change
Sees his sense of ambition be blown out like candles with each birthday
Every day's a workday when you're two steps behind the crowd
Lock your mind away
It was never needed then
Why start now?
Experience expands horizons
No view beyond
Getting smaller by the day
Walking on hot coals but excepting your fate
No change from being raised up
Till the frame clicks shut
A picture of you

Locked up
No room to cough
Forgot
Like boys in the back rows
Who know that's their place
Too afraid to engage
The boy behind the wall
Was always built this way
But inside locked doors
Needing more
Pressed faces against bars
Restricted and contradicted
Afflicted by the past
That lasts longer than the future
One boy sits in a class
Reminding himself of all he's lost
Signs up for everything
Learns about how to unlock
A mind that can't see past barbwire
Now sees social poverty as a problem
Social capital as a way to expand his potential
Motivation to write an essay of life on planets
Tectonic plates and dark matter
Does matter
Twenty X two = realised into society

Time to change the minds
Of those who think
Prison education isn't worth funding

Notes

1. https://www.insideoutcenter.org/.
2. Note that although the programme at Durham University is accredited, this is not the case for all Institutions where Inside-Out programmes are delivered.
3. Think Tanks have evolved organically and are comprised of former inside (and sometimes outside) students who join together to continue to read, think, talk and write and develop their ideas. In 2015–16 we developed men's and women's prison Think Tanks – together we form the Durham University Inside-Out Collective.
4. For a full discussion of the Prison Industrial Complex, see the work of Angela Davis (2003), e.g. Davis, A. (2003) *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.
5. We use the term "people detained in prison" as opposed to "prisoner" throughout this paper and in our work, which is standard practice within Inside-Out. Language matters and for us, this term is more humanising, acknowledging that people detained in prison are more than their offence or status as a "prisoner".
6. Offender behaviour programmes tend to be based on existing medical models of imprisonment which "views the prisoner primarily as something broken in need of fixing or as an object in need of treatment" (Costelloe & Warner, 2008, p. 137) and have been criticised as attempts by the state to "responsibilise," "redeem," or "normalise" the socially excluded (Ryan & Sim, 2007, p. 697).
7. Indeterminate sentences refer to both Life sentences and Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences, the latter of which were abolished in 2012 as deemed unlawful.

8. Over the academic year 2014/15, of the 101,600 adults in prison who participated in prison learning, 81,800 were participating on courses below Level 2; 19,300 on full Level 2; 100 on full Level 3 with no one participating at level 4 or above (OLASS in Coates (2016)).
9. NOMS ethical clearance was not required as this does not constitute an independent empirical study of prison staff or people detained in prison.

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Disclosure statement

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