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# Unseen roots and unfolding flowers? Prison learning, equality and the education of socially excluded groups

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The objective of this theoretical article is to critique the notion that adult education, in its current marketised formations, might serve the purpose of rehabilitating learners. To date there has been no detailed interrogation by educationalists of the desirability of rehabilitation as an overarching aim for prison education, or to consider the existing educational philosophies that notions of rehabilitation might cohere with. This article begins to address this gap by engaging with the idea of rehabilitation from a critical adult education perspective. The conceptual framework informing the analysis is critical adult education theory, drawing tangentially on the work of Raymond Williams. The overarching assumption is that education might be understood as the practice of equality, which I employ alongside conceptualisations of empowering adult literacies learning as drawn from writings in the field of New Literacies Studies (NLS). These approaches enable the critique of criminological theory associated with prison learning, alongside the critique of assumptions traceable to NLS. The analysis focuses more specifically on Scotland's prison system, where the criminological theory of 'desistance' currently holds some sway. I observe that whilst perspectives of criminologists and educationists draw upon similar sociological assumptions and underpinnings, different conclusions are inferred about the purpose and practice of adult learning. Here criminologists' conceptualisations tend to neglect power contexts, instead inferring educational practices associated typically with early years education. I also demonstrate the importance of equality in the context of adult education, if educators are to take responsibility for the judgements they make in relation to the education of socially excluded groups.

**Keywords:** adult education; equality; prisoners; rehabilitation

## Introduction

When I worked as a prison educator in Scotland, the idea that learning might rehabilitate people was far removed from my day-to-day teaching activity and received scarce mention from either my colleagues or our managers. In part, my experiences matched Carlen's research in Australian prisons, where enthusiastic prison workers with a non-punitive philosophy were insistent that 'well publicised rehabilitative goals had no chance of realisation' (Carlen, 2008, p. 2). The accredited and non-formal learning on offer had little currency with employers or colleges, and back-up programmes outside of prison were very few. Even if learning programmes were available in the community outside of prison there were multiple obstacles to engagement, including

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homelessness, family violence and drug usage. In this sense my experience also coalesced with critical prison education research contextualised in UK prison settings (Rogers *et al.*, 2014; Czerniawski, 2016).

However, my troubled response to the idea of rehabilitative learning went further. To illustrate, for some months I spent part of the week teaching prisoners and the remainder teaching undergraduates at a local university. During this period there was little sense that I was rehabilitating people in jail on Wednesday and serving alternative educational objectives at university on a Thursday. For me, adult learning might be underpinned by a principle of equality, inconsistent with the idea that some students require rehabilitating, perhaps through a dose of education (Williams, 1993a), necessitating an alternative suite of educational practices.

Since leaving prison I undertook a critical analysis of commercial contracts for the delivery of adult learning to prisoners within the Scottish Prison Service (Galloway, 2019). The results of this research raised further questions, querying the idea that adult learning and criminal justice aims might dovetail together coherently. The central purpose of the analysis I present below is to critique this dovetailing by analysing rehabilitation as it relates to historical and contemporary adult learning theory.

### **Framework for the analysis**

Internationally, there has been no detailed and contemporary theoretical interrogation by educationalists of the desirability of rehabilitation from criminal activity as an overarching aim for adult education. I begin addressing this gap through engaging critically with the idea of rehabilitation from an education perspective. In particular, I focus upon criminologists' conceptualisation of rehabilitation as pathways towards 'desistance' from crime (McNeil, 2012), which currently holds sway with UK organisations advocating for prison learning (e.g. see Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2018).

Here I note that educational understandings of equality may serve the purpose of acknowledging and grappling with significant and complex issues. With this in mind, I commence by introducing the idea of education for equality below.

The idea that equality might be integral to adult education practices has been expressed by British educators and students for at least 100 years (Fieldhouse & Associates, 1996). Such expressions were perhaps a necessary response to students' exposure to education as inequality, in line with their wider experiences of societal injustice. Similarly, the theorisation of equitable educational practices might be characterised as responses to societal inequality, refusals to accept this and the interrogation of that refusal. In this sense, the conceptualisation of education for equality influencing my analysis does not resemble a scoping out of utopian demands with an accompanying blueprint for radical action (see Freire, 1971; Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Cowden & Ridley, 2019).

To illuminate further I draw upon Raymond Williams (e.g. Williams, 2013), internationally renowned for his work as a cultural theorist. In his lesser-known historical analyses of British adult education and associated writings, Williams established the unavoidability of equality as an underlying principle in adult learning practice (Westwood & McIlroy, 1993). This work can be viewed as a precursor to subsequent detailed theorisations of equality in education contexts, including the influential work

of Paulo Freire (e.g. Freire, 1971). As well as demonstrating the necessity of equality in adult learning, the ideas and events described below also serve the purpose of illustrating the historical context in which prison learning developed as a distinct sector of British adult learning.

Historical accounts of nineteenth-century adult education in Britain (e.g. Fieldhouse & Associates, 1996; Cooke, 2006) reveal an influential strand amongst those advocating for universal access to adult learning, motivated by the belief that education might tame or improve working-class people. Williams' historical analysis concurs (Williams, 1961, pp. 162–163), describing elitist groups committed to exposing populations to high culture that might encourage the 'moral rescue' of working people (Williams, 1993b, p. 229). In 1961, Williams observed the same tendencies, except that 'then it was drink, now it is television' (Williams, 1993b, p. 229). However, he also observes a cultural difference, where in contemporary Britain, at that time, archaic practices likened to the colonial practices of missionaries were no longer acceptable (Williams, 1993b, p. 229). Addressing his audience in the first person, Williams warned:

If adult education bases itself, finally, on the missionary principle, it is finished, even though at first it may appear to get an encouraging amount of support for what sounds a good cause. For between you and the people whom you are speaking with is fixed something inherently destructive, so that you will never be able to speak to people as an equal again. The time has passed in British society when you could get away with speaking to people other than as equals. (Williams, 1993b, p. 230)

Reflecting upon adult education practices, Williams acknowledges how the educator's role cannot be to serve up as 'some kind of boiled-down pap', indicating 'some already decided course of action' (Williams, 1993c, pp. 263–264). Rather, educational activity might ensure that students 'aren't given the conclusion of arguments, instead reaching their own' (Williams, 1993c, p. 262). Here, Williams speaks directly to contemporary theorists and practitioners in adult education. This diverse grouping continues to address a similar concern, expressed through the idea that adult learning might encourage social responses to inequality and injustice whilst acknowledging the pivotal issue of who gets to speak and be heard on such matters (e.g. Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Biesta, 2010; Wildemeersch, 2014; Galloway, 2017; Cowden & Ridley, 2019).

This is equality understood as practice, enacted as a manifestation of hope and generosity, in the acknowledgement of inequality and injustice (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; see Guillherme, 2019). It is in this sense, I would argue, that equality is unavoidably significant to the consideration of adult education settings, including prison learning contexts. The assumption is that educators might afford generosity towards all students, with accompanying demands, regardless of their identity. This principle might apply to other student groups, who, like prisoners, are also positioned potentially as non-citizens. For example, students who are illegal immigrants, those with complex intellectual disabilities, the elderly and infirm, or those experiencing severe mental health conditions. There is acknowledgement that particular practical approaches to teaching and learning might be helpful for students with specific shared characteristics. However, the principle of equality implies no requirement or

necessity for an educational theory orientated towards particular groups of students, such as prisoners.

The above principle perhaps complements the Council of Europe's view that prison education is primarily a prisoner's human right (Council of Europe, 1990) rather than an aspect of rehabilitative programmes (see Vorhaus, 2014). Indeed, it has been argued that if prison learning policy rests on rehabilitation as a central objective, it might necessitate the gathering of evidence to prove the positive effects of education on prisoners. The issue here is that this is an instrumental defence of education (Council of Europe, 1990, p. 162), encouraging the narrowing of prison curricula, an argument borne out by the international comparative analysis of prison education policy (Warner, 2007; Costelloe & Warner, 2014; see also Galloway, 2019).

Within my analysis I also consider contemporary theorisations of adult literacies learning, which has been the longstanding focus of prison education. Given Williams' historical analysis of British adult education, it can come as no surprise to find that early literacies education was rooted historically in deficit thinking and orientated towards those judged to be deviant, including prisoners and unmarried mothers (see Hamilton, 1996, pp. 146–147; Scott, 1976). Williams' abovementioned 'missionary principle' is evident in the framing of early literacy learning, which focused primarily on reading and writing skills, supported more widely by what Street (1984) critiqued as a great divide theory. Street acknowledged that historically, a division has been drawn between literate and non-literate societies, where literate cultures have been assumed to be more civilised and more capable of social and economic progress than non-literate counterparts, laying the basis for 'Rifles, railways and writing' as the '3Rs' of British colonial conquest (Fiedrich & Jellema (1998), cited in Archer, 2003, p. 33).

Since the 1970s, empirical research has exposed this type of axiomatic supposition as a damaging literacies myth, supporting the emergence of a new field of research and writing, known as New Literacies Studies (NLS). NLS is associated with developing and defining an alternative social practices conceptualisation of literacies and literacies education, where issues of power might be taken into account (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006). My critique of rehabilitation as an objective for adult education is informed by these developments (e.g. Crowther *et al.*, 2003; Janks, 2010; Grenfell *et al.*, 2012; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015), in addition to an educational conceptualisation of equality (e.g. Williams, 1993b; Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Guilhaume, 2019).

I demonstrate the further significance of equality in adult learning in the concluding sections of this article, where I reflect upon my analysis of prison learning for 'desistance'. But first I provide some further relevant context and background to prison education in Britain.

## **Education in prison: history and background**

Since the 1990s there has been a movement towards establishing rehabilitative objectives for British prisons (Behan, 2014). Before the 1990s, the aim of the Scottish Prison Service was primarily one of 'running safe, humane and orderly prisons' rather than playing a role in reducing reoffending rates (Scottish Prison Service, 2013, p. 54). In 2019, immediately before the election of the current Conservative

government, the home page for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service stated 'We carry out sentences given by the courts, in custody and the community, and rehabilitate people in our care through education and employment' (Her Majesty's Prison Service, 2019). This sentiment is also found in the current framework of the Scottish Prison Service (2016a), where the Chief Executive states responsibility for the care, rehabilitation and reintegration of those citizens committed into custody (Scottish Prison Service, 2016a).

It is worth mentioning that over the same period, internationally, research relating to prison learning has placed strong emphasis on establishing a link between education and the rehabilitation of prisoners, in a context where education in prisons is under-researched (Czerniawski, 2016). A large proportion of existing empirical research relating to prison learning internationally focuses upon the potential for education to encourage rehabilitation or impact recidivism and the possibility of establishing causal linkage (see Ellison *et al.*, 2017). In addition, in Britain, there is evidence of an emerging endeavour to develop a distinct theory of prisoner education with rehabilitative aims entrenched implicitly (e.g. Champion & Noble, 2016; Szifris *et al.*, 2018). These attempts are informed primarily by criminological perspectives, 'desistance theory' in particular, with notable influence from the criminologist Fergus McNeil (e.g. McNeil, 2012).

As already mentioned, the Council of Europe acknowledges prison learning as a right for prisoners, regardless of any perceived rehabilitative potential for education (Council of Europe, 1990, p. 9). Warner (2007, p. 173) goes further, questioning how education can with validity be judged by recidivism rates when factors such as abuse and humiliation, inhumane conditions and further alienation from society may be at work within the prison environment. Prison education researchers, perhaps empowered by the Council of Europe's stance, have worked to establish benefits of learning in prison reaching beyond the rehabilitation agenda. For example, Pike and Adams (2012) describe how distance learning programmes help prisoners to cope with life in prison, whilst Bhatti and Ghazari (2010) recognise the negative impact of prison on inmates and how education opens up a space for hope.

Focusing on Scotland, prison learning practitioners with a non-punitive perspective have worked with external stakeholders, co-producing project based approaches to prison learning (Sams, 2014). For example, New College Lanarkshire and the Scottish Prison Service co-produced Scotland's only prisoners' arts zine, entitled *STIR* (New College Lanarkshire, 2016). Scotland's largest prison, HMP Barlinnie, hosted a varied programme of educational theatrical productions (Citizens' Theatre, 2020). Having previously taught in Scottish Prisons, I am minded that such projects are perhaps better understood as a façade behind which everyday prison learning is housed. In some cases this is indicated by the thematic focus of short-term externally funded prison education projects. For example, 'Cell Block Science' (St Andrews University, 2018) and 'Life Beyond' (Cockell, 2020) were the sole organised science learning providers in Scottish prisons, confirming a lack of core capacity to deliver science education across the entire Scottish prison estate.

It is significant to note here that prisoner education is possibly the most heavily marketised education sector in Britain (Galloway, 2019). The greater majority of prison learning still takes place via a 'bums-on-seats' culture, where 'bite size'

accreditations are offered at a low level of study and with few opportunities for students to progress (Champion, 2013, p. 17; Inside Time, 2018). In both England and Scotland, most accredited prisoner education focuses on literacies and is contracted out commercially for delivery by third-party providers. Here the prison service is the purchaser of learning and skills services, whilst the so-called supplier is either a college of further education or a commercial provider (Rogers *et al.*, 2014; Czerniawski, 2016). Scotland brokers its own learning contracts, having its own education and criminal justice systems. In Wales, whilst prisons remain under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice in London, responsibility for prison education has been devolved to Ministers of the Welsh Assembly (Hanson, 2019). Commercial prison learning contracts are not available to the public or to prisoners and their teachers.

To date, the only analysis of commercial prison learning contracts is situated within the Scottish context, where some chronological contracts are now available through Freedom of Information requests (Galloway, 2019). That analysis confirms how most education taking place in Scottish Prison Service Learning Centres is literacy orientated, where the central measurable is numbers of prisoners attending classes, accounted for in hourly units (Galloway, 2019, p. 76). Analysis of chronological contracts also indicates how the focus upon literacy learning is tied to longstanding concerns within the Scottish Prison Service, relating to prisoners' functional skills, rather than guidance from Scottish education policy or the college sector. Across Britain, despite enduring concerns about prisoners' skills in reading and writing, accurate data relating to prisoners' literacy skills and practices remains incomplete (Creese, 2015; Scottish Prison Service, 2016b).

### **Prison education and rehabilitation**

The idea of education for rehabilitation suggests more than learning geared towards employment, so enabling students to engage with lawful activity once released from prison. The discipline of criminology has drawn from philosophy and sociology to theorise and critique a concept which 'has always been both remarkably elastic and hotly contested' (McNeil, 2012, p. 4). Indeed, rehabilitation has been branded a project of 'coercive soul-transformation' (by Bottoms, 1980, cited in McNeil, 2012, pp. 4–5) and it seems that there are overlapping and conflicting paradigms informing the theorising and practicing of rehabilitation activities for people with convictions (McNeil, 2012; Graham & McNeil, 2017). Behan (2014, p. 21) distinguishes between 'authoritarian' rehabilitation and 'anthropocentric' forms. The latter of these, he argues, have much in common with adult education approaches to teaching and learning, as both seek to respect the independence of the individual, recognising them as agents in a process of change. Indeed, there is a body of criminological literature that might sit with Behan's view, where the development of social bonds and positive identity change are assumed to encourage desistance from crime (McNeil, 2012; Graham & McNeil, 2017). Initial inspection might suggest a dovetailing of 'anthropocentric' rehabilitation with empowering responses to adult literacies learning. This might be informed by research sitting within the abovementioned field of NLS (e.g. Crowther *et al.*, 2003), which I explore further below.

In Britain, criminal justice policy geared towards rehabilitative goals evolved through responses to concerns that services for prisoners and ‘ex-offenders’ tended to focus upon assisting those individuals. The emerging reorientation towards rehabilitation supported the expectation that perpetrators should take responsibility for their law breaking (McNeil, 2006), and here a role for adult education is inferred. The practices associated with rehabilitation have been categorised as a series of three chronological paradigms of risk, desistance and recovery (Graham & McNeil, 2017). As already mentioned, it is the desistance paradigm that currently holds most sway amongst those advocating for prison learning in the UK and I examine it in more detail. However, I commence by summarising the risk paradigm as a way to illustrating the linkage between notions of rehabilitation and possible correspondences with adult learning practices.

### **Risk, rehabilitation and adult learning**

The risk paradigm describes an approach to policy formation where perceived social problems such as law breaking are considered to be the consequences of risk factors, so that plans and legislation might be put into place to prevent or mitigate against these risks. The approach is one of ‘what works’ in reducing the risk of crime, for example, in the area of violent offences this might involve rehabilitative treatment programmes alongside regimes to monitor individuals (Graham & McNeil, 2017). In adult education terms, this understanding of rehabilitation as risk reduction might translate into compulsory learning programmes incorporating fixed knowledge or skills content. The expectation would be that a programme might precipitate specific impacts and effects, for example, as with anger management courses. This type of programme, particularly when developed by prisons, has been critiqued for offering limiting approaches to learning aimed at normalising socially excluded people (Behan, 2014). Prison educators have responded in some cases by circumventing enforcement, for example by rebranding a broad course of study in philosophy as ‘thinking skills’ in order to guarantee its continued inclusion in the prison curriculum (Behan, 2014, p. 27).

It could be interpreted that nineteenth-century literacy education for prisoners sat well within the risk paradigm, as learning to read and write was assumed to elevate the moral character of individuals, along the lines of the ‘missionary principle’ critiqued by Williams (1993b, p. 230). Specifically, a direct link was made between the teaching of reading and writing, often focused on religious texts (Scott, 1976), and the precipitation of predictable functional outcomes impacting students’ behaviour (see Hamilton, 1996).

In England, the current Ministry of Justice makes no claims that literacy learning might impact prisoners’ moral character or rational capabilities. However, wider English policy for adult basic skills education supports functional and instrumental literacy programmes (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015) and the Education and Employment Strategy for prisons in England (Ministry of Justice, 2018) emphasises the monitoring of narrow basic skills acquisition. This is evidenced particularly by the prominence given to demonstrating prisoners’ progressive attainment of pre-defined literacy skills through standardised testing, encouraging

the delivery of a more limited literacy curriculum aligned to measurable outputs. The desistance paradigm, which I analyse below, indicates the necessity for a broader curriculum offering a wider range of experiences for learners, perhaps more in line with adult education approaches (see Behan, 2014, p. 21). Perhaps this explains, in part, why desistance theory has garnered support from organisations advocating on behalf of prisoner education in England and Wales (e.g. Champion & Noble, 2016; Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2018).

There is clearer evidence of this tendency to be found within the domain of Scottish prison learning. Scotland's policy terrain contrasts with the English context in that currently the Scottish Prison Service is informed explicitly by desistance theory (Scottish Prison Service, 2013). In addition, since 2004, Scottish adult literacies policy (Scottish Government, 2011; Education Scotland, 2016) has been directly influenced by the abovementioned field of NLS, asserting against instrumental approaches to literacies learning. Instead, literacies are conceptualised in policy as social practices, necessitating a wide-ranging curriculum aimed at encouraging students' aspirations for their community, family and working lives (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006).

My own analysis of prison learning contracts suggests that the Scottish Prison Service and Scottish colleges have worked hard to successfully embed Scottish adult literacy policy within the current learning strategy and commercial contract for prison learning (Scottish Prison Service, 2016b; see also Galloway, 2019). Interestingly, analysis of chronological contracts evidences that colleges rather than the prison service are responsible for introducing a discourse of rehabilitation, perhaps as a way of justifying the development of a broader, arts-based curriculum (Galloway, 2019, p. 76). This tactic may have been assistive in supporting the emergence of the abovementioned prison arts projects (New College Lanarkshire, 2016; Citizens Theatre, 2020). However, the bringing together of desistance theory and robust adult education policy, may have risked introducing an implicit and unproven assumption that literacies education encourages adult learners to desist from law breaking. This central concern inspired me to critique the notion of education for rehabilitation, from an adult education perspective, the results of which I present below.

It is with the above contexts in mind that I present my analysis of desistance theory as it relates to the contemporary theory and practice of adult learning. As discussed above, the analysis draws from the work of researchers aligned with NLS and the theorising of adult education as the practice of equality. I commence by describing the concept of desistance as discussed by Farrell and Maruna (2004) and Graham and McNeil (2017).

## **Desistance, rehabilitation and education**

Desistance theory is a paradigm primarily focused upon life-course or criminal career research (Farrell & Maruna, 2004, pp. 35–38), offering ways of understanding how 'offenders' come to change their behaviour and so desist from crime. As an alternative response to the abovementioned risk paradigm, this is an understanding of rehabilitation that moves away from mitigating the impact of risk factors, towards an approach aimed at encouraging processes of desistance from law breaking. The understandings



follow from life-course research with ex-prisoners establishing significant influences upon their abstinence from unlawful activity (Maruna, 2000).

Empirical research has informed three interconnected orientations found to encourage processes of desistance (Farrell & Maruna, 2004; Graham & McNeil, 2017). The most significant of these is that people with convictions for law breaking tend to desist from further unlawful activity, over time, without any intervention from the criminal justice system. Secondly, and related to this, the development of social bonds and ties, perhaps following marriage, parenthood or employment, can initiate life-course changes influencing processes of desistance. Finally, narrative theories have emerged stressing the significance of subjective changes taking place in relation to a person's sense of self and identity (Graham & McNeil, 2017). The central conclusion implies that the criminal justice system may have a minor role to play in encouraging ex-prisoners to desist from criminal activity. However, desistance theory has been influential in supporting the idea that progress along pathways towards desistance can be accelerated as part of rehabilitative interventions and regimes. It is here that implications for adult learning might be considered, where educational practices understood to encourage social bonding or positive identity change (e.g. Gee, 1996; Janks, 2010; Grenfell *et al.*, 2012; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015) might be explored as potentially rehabilitative in character.

It seems there is an overarching metaphor for the role of prison and prisoner education in encouraging processes of desistance. This is the metaphor of prison as a hothouse, where prisoners are plants that might be forced along processes of desistance from crime (Farrell & Maruna, 2004, p. 361). The notion of 'forcing the plant' is found within Prisoner Learning Alliance (2018) guidance for prison governors in England, who have increasing responsibility for the commercial contracting of prison learning. The guidance is entitled *Greenhouses, not warehouses: Commissioning education to plant seeds of hope and opportunity*.

The idea of prison education as a form of horticulture or prisoner husbandry is worthy of further attention, if only as a reminder that ideas about education can be put forward without realising that they have been raised previously, perhaps for different purposes (Noddings, 2015, p. 17). The horticultural metaphor sits with early forms of progressive education, concerned with initial childhood development rather than the learning of adults. The metaphor of education as gardening underpins the *kindergarten*, the early years education conceptualised in the first half of the nineteenth century by 'father of the kindergarten' Frederic Froebel. Informed by Rousseau, children are assumed to be intrinsically good rather than wicked and the kindergarten can preserve and nurture this goodness, allowing children to begin to grow and unfold as loving and responsible adults (Noddings, 2015, pp. 16–18).

Perhaps the metaphor of education as horticulture indicates, even reinforces, the prisoner's status as in need of rehabilitation. Rehabilitative nurturing is necessary before the prisoner is capable of taking up the position of a full citizen; a marker of inequality, where prisoners, like pre-school children, are assumed to not yet be fully formed human beings. At this point in my analysis, it seems that the concept of learning for desistance is deeply rooted in the denial of education practiced under a principle of equality. Rather, the practice of learning for desistance might hold more commonalities with missionary work, as critiqued by Williams (1993b). In this sense,

learning for desistance can be interpreted as another form of authoritarian rehabilitation, diverging from adult education principles (see Behan, 2014) and considered primarily punitive in character.

The abovementioned marker of inequality draws my attention to another aspect of Froebel's understanding of child development. Froebel placed emphasis on practical activity and self-expression through creative endeavours and indeed, the scale of attention given to the artistic expression of prisoners, by both academic researchers and prison services, is remarkable. There are a plethora of researched prison arts education projects internationally, inferring the potential for linkages between prisoners' artistic expression and their rehabilitation (e.g. Tett *et al.*, 2012; Sams, 2014). Within the Scottish Prison Service's (2016b) Learning and Skills Strategy, at least two-thirds of the photographic images represent prisoners engaged in the creative arts or examples of their artwork. For me, it is noteworthy that Cheliotis's (2014) comprehensive analysis of the disproportionate attention accorded to the artistic expression of prisoners extends to both prisons and concentration camps.

It is difficult to extend the horticultural metaphor when considering processes towards desistance as defined by criminologists. As stated above, aside from non-intervention, significant contributors to desistance from unlawful activity have been summarised in two strands. Firstly, the encouragement of social bonding and ties, conceptualised through notions of social and cultural capital and secondly, subjective changes taking place in relation to a person's sense of self and identity (Graham & McNeil, 2017). Perhaps the two strands are entwined within the same plant, with the unseen roots more analogous to the less visible social ties, whilst identity unfolds through visibly identifiable budding leaves and flowers.

I now leave the metaphors aside to acknowledge how it is perhaps unsurprising that notions of social capital and identity change emerge as being significant to processes of desistance, given that these concepts have been dominant in social science and education research for some decades (see Gee, 2000; Galloway, 2017). However, below I demonstrate that whilst criminologists and educationalists have drawn upon similar concepts and underpinning philosophies, it cannot be assumed that the resulting understandings of educational practice dovetail coherently. I demonstrate this by exploring processes of desistance from educational perspectives. I take the two strands separately, considering the educational ideas and adult learning practices to which they might relate.

### *Social ties and social capital: unseen roots?*

Adult learning aimed at extending or developing students' social capital tends towards encouraging learners to confront power relations through learning aimed at the development of linguistic and discursive practices (e.g. Grenfell *et al.*, 2012, p. 68; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015, pp. 108–111). The concept of social capital rests upon an understanding that discursive practices within educational institutions privilege students who have gained knowledge and mastery of these practices through their home life and family upbringing. It seems that the familial speech, writing and disposition of middle-class learners tends to resonate with the discursive demands of school or college. This overlapping of school and family discourse allows those

students to accrue cultural and social capital necessary to succeed in ‘linguistic markets’ within the workplace and wider societal institutions. In this way, educational advantage is structurally reproduced and exchanged for economic success and privilege. In turn, working-class students tend to fail within the same cultural, social and economic markets as their primary and learned discourses have less exchange value within the linguistic economy (see Galloway, 2015 for more detail).

The processes by which dominant discourses serve to replicate social hierarchies are assumed to be undetectable to both teachers and students alike, regardless of their best efforts, as this is the mechanism by which these same hierarchies are maintained. The consequences are experienced as a form of symbolic violence (Galloway, 2015), suggesting gloomy prospects for educational alternatives. However, approaches have been put forward that might encourage the development of learners’ social capital, typically drawn out from empirical research employing ethnographic methods (e.g. Street, 2012; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015). In the context of practical literacy learning, education to encourage the gaining of cultural or linguistic capital does not focus upon the techniques or cognitive skills necessary to effective reading and writing. Rather, this is teaching and learning orientated towards students questioning their positioning within power relationships through the development of their discursive practices.

In prison learning settings, this approach might be considered as an empowering literacies learning, achieved by teachers encouraging students to valorise their vernacular ways of speaking, so that they might express their own self-narratives and reclaim these as stories of success (e.g. Grenfell *et al.*, 2012; Tett *et al.*, 2012). Social and cultural capital might be gained through the telling of learners’ stories and the connections made with audiences and peers. In this type of learning context, the role of the educator might include intervening in order to make learners more aware of, and therefore more able to value, their existing literate practices. Empirical research has suggested a purpose for teachers adopting ethnographic methods as a way to gaining insights into their students’ valuable everyday literacy practices, or encouraging students to undertake this type of research themselves (e.g. Janks, 2010; Street, 2012). Here the idea is that students’ literate practices, as revealed, might be drawn upon as productive resources serving to empower them, where their existing practices are valued rather than judged (Street, 2012, pp. 75–77). It follows on that categorisations of literate and illiterate might be refused by teachers and students in prisons, as the whole spectrum of literate practices is afforded value (Street, 2012, p. 77).

### *Identity change: unfolding flowers?*

I acknowledge that the theoretical underpinnings informing understandings of social capital and identity formation are closely related. Indeed, an individual’s development of social capital can be explained and defined precisely in terms of identity formation within power structures (see Galloway, 2015). The above description of social capital accrual through valuing existing literate practices could also be interpreted using the terminology of positive identity change. However, adult learning specifically aimed at this outcome might include additional learning activities. In particular, positive identity change has been associated with the idea of teachers

encouraging students to take control over dominant discourses in order to use these to their advantage. Arguably, James Paul Gee (e.g. Gee, 1996) has had the greatest influence amongst academics and researchers, incorporating this assertion into approaches to literacies learning more broadly (see Galloway, 2015).

As with learning activity aimed at the accrual of social capital, Gee's assumption is that all discourse, be it text, speech or body movement, serves to privilege some individuals and exclude others (Gee, 1996). The discursive practices of students in prison, positions them particularly unfavourably within power hierarchies. Whilst Gee assumes the inevitability of this situation, an empowering response is posited (Gee, 1996). For example, teachers might encourage students to take ownership of authoring their own identities. Teachers might help students to understand that their identities are multiple and that the discursive practices necessary to identity formation are productive resources that they might take control over (Janks, 2010). They might introduce students to tools for critiquing discourse, by teaching skills in critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Janks, 2010). Whilst the assumption remains that discursive disadvantage cannot be overcome completely, learners might build some skills, at least, in the performance of elite literate practices, allowing them to speak and be heard (e.g. Janks, 2010). In turn, this might raise the potential for students to gain positions in organisations, including professional employment, from which they might speak and give voice to themselves and others who are typically unheard.

Gee (1996) uses the term *mushfake* to describe powerful, identity-changing discourse that might be fabricated by learners from their existing linguistic repertoire and used to their advantage. By coincidence, the term is prisoners' vernacular for contraband items made from whatever materials are available legitimately to inmates. It seems that the teacher's role is to encourage their students' success in this type of activity as a discursive project (Gee, 1996, p. 147). This makes the prison educator an ally to students, putting their existing linguistic and symbolic resources to use in the creation of illegal discourse that might serve to challenge power hierarchies within the prison. Prison education for desistance, also conceptualised as positive identity change, seems unlikely to dovetail with this notion of empowering literacy learning. Indeed, I would assert further that Gee's conceptualisation indicates how educators and students in prisons are fundamentally at odds with the regimes in which they are working. Educators are swimming against a persistent stream of alternative discursive practices aimed at subverting, diverting and drowning out their endeavours (see Rogers *et al.*, 2014), aligning with my own experience as a prison educator.

To summarise the above analysis, adult learning understood to build social capital or encourage positive identity formation is education that takes power into account. Indeed, it has been argued that 'literacy [education] that obscures the power relationships inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers' (Crowther *et al.*, 2003, p. 3).

It is noteworthy, therefore, that where desistance theory informs prison learning research there is a tendency for power contexts to be ignored (e.g. see Champion & Noble, 2016; Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2018; Szifris *et al.*, 2018). What's more, there is a dearth of existing prison education research taking power into account, notable exceptions including research studies informed by adult education principles, such as Carrigan and Maunsell (2014) and Pike and Adams (2012). Both studies

draw upon Goffman (1961) to acknowledge the negative impact of prison upon the identities of students, echoing the Council of Europe's recognition of how 'prison is by its very nature abnormal, and destructive of the personality in a number of ways' (Council of Europe, 1990, p. 9).

Whilst adult learning and criminology standpoints are distinguishable by sharply diverging acknowledgements of power, mutual reliance upon theories of identity formation and social capital reveals a significant commonality. Whether the aim of learning is pathways to desistance from law breaking, as defined by criminologists, or individual and social empowerment, as defined by educationalists, the educational endeavour can be understood to encourage emergent student identities. Here a substantial problem can be raised, namely, how judgements are made on whether students' identities in formation are desirable and, importantly, who gets to make and speak that judgement.

Interestingly, desistance theory as employed in education contexts, neglects to expose or address the problem of judging students' identities. Perhaps education for desistance supports the assumption that prison regimes and probation services should judge students' identities, assessing prisoners in relation to pre-decided rehabilitative objectives. If so, this might take responsibility for the aims and outcomes of education away from educators and students, with implications for control over the curriculum. It might also raise a question as to whether the practice of encouraging pathways to desistance can be considered an educational endeavour at all.

Alternatively, neglecting the issue of judging students' identities might evidence a possibly naïve assumption that any learning is inherently helpful in all circumstances. In terms of educational practices, this neglect might translate into situations where teachers valorise all identities equally, regardless of the character of the discourses practiced by individual students or student groups. Here I note that writings informed by desistance theory typically neglect to acknowledge the types of law breaking prisoners have engaged with. Prisoners are referred to as a homogeneous body, e.g. with no demarcation between those convicted of violent sexual crimes and individuals sentenced for non-violent unlawful activity (e.g. Graham & McNeil, 2017).

However, the central point here is that in all educational situations, unwittingly or not, teachers make judgements about students' identities. Arguably, in the context of prisons, where students have little control over decisions and their daily practices are regimented, the attached responsibilities are significant. Here, it seems to me, educational thinking underpinned by an assumption of equality serves the purpose of acknowledging explicitly the issue of how identities are judged, drawing our attention to the responsibilities attached (e.g. Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Wildemeersch, 2014).

Returning to the empowering adult education perspectives presented above, the starting point is to assume that students are not in need of an identity change and education is practiced under that assumption (e.g. see Gee, 1996; Janks, 2010; Street, 2012; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015). However, the expectation remains that new identities will emerge. Here Gee raises the explicit problem of there being no basis upon which to judge the desirability of one discourse in comparison with another (Gee, 1993, pp. 291–292).

Whilst Gee suggests ways of making ethical judgements about the desirability of teachers' and students' discourses, it is educational understandings of equality and

emancipation that have had greater influence in both recognising and grappling with this problem. Here, Freire and critical responses to his work are influential. To reiterate, adult educators may hold to a principle of equality, regardless of students' identities. Significantly, holding to that principle orientates attention towards the important question of who gets to speak and on what basis. This orientation is detected, explicitly, within educational responses to current political, environmental and economic crises drawing upon critical adult education perspectives (see Wilde-meersch, 2014; Cowden & Ridley, 2019). However, this aspect of addressing equality in education is currently a lesser-trodden pathway within the complex landscape of adult education theory and practice. For example, more prominence might be afforded to Gur Ze'ev (1998) (see Guillherme, 2019) who, writing in Israel, warned of the potential for students' discourse to encourage violence, considering alternatives where equality might be enacted though the refusal of identity, rather than positive alignment with pre-existing identities. The analysis presented in this writing has emerged from my own attempts to follow in that vein.

### **Summary and conclusion**

In this writing I commenced by describing a historical strand of influence in adult learning supported by the supposition that education might serve to tame or civilise working-class people, including prisoners. I drew attention to how adult learning practices have previously supported this notion, summarised by Williams as the 'missionary principal' (Williams, 1993b, p. 230). Here I demonstrated how adult learning practices aimed at desistance might re-affirm education as missionary work. More specifically, I identified that the horticultural metaphor encapsulating education for desistance, might act as a marker of inequality, where prisoners are accorded the status of young children, incapable of the responsibilities of citizenship. Significantly, this suggests that education for desistance fails to meet its stated aims of breaking away from authoritarian and punitive regimes encapsulated by the 'risk' paradigm of rehabilitation (Graham & McNeil, 2017).

I then explored the idea of desistance in more detail, focusing on the criminological' understanding that processes of desistance from unlawful activity might encourage the development of social bonds and positive identity change (Graham & McNeil, 2017). I suggested that research and writings, broadly aligned with the field of New Literacy Studies, also infer that adult learning might hold to these aims.

I summarised that adult education practices conceptualised to build social capital and encourage identity formation are understood to account for and challenge power, supporting the empowerment of students. Here the starting point is for educators to valorise the existing identities of students, encouraging learning that might raise possibilities for students to author their own identities and to speak and be heard. In contrast, I observed that current discussion of learning for desistance tends to neglect power contexts, including those found within the prison context itself, with a few notable exceptions.

Finally, I raised a problem associated with both desistance and empowerment aims for adult learning. This is the issue of how judgements are made about the desirability

of students' emerging identities or discursive practices and who gets to make such judgements. Judgements are made about students' identities, in all educational situations, regardless of whether this is acknowledged or not by educators and students. In the case of desistance theory, there seems to be some neglect of this issue. By contrast, I suggested that one of the purposes of educational theory concerned with equality is to encourage educators and students to take responsibility for critiquing and probing the basis for such judgements and who gets to speak on them. As stated in my opening paragraphs, attention given to the idea of education as the practice of equality is perhaps a necessary response to students' exposure to inequitable education. I have attempted to develop such a response whilst demonstrating how holding to a principle of equality might drive an analysis of education for desistance.

My analysis has raised the three abovementioned concerns, perhaps demonstrating the principle of equality at work in stimulating dialogue about important matters relating to education aimed at excluded groups. However, I do not infer a need for developing educational theory and practices specific to the education of prisoners. As already stated, enacting equality in adult education rests on the assumption that such a theory is not desirable.

In the introduction to this writing I described how the theorisation of equitable educational practices might be characterised as a refusal to accept societal inequality and the interrogation of that refusal. In this sense, education for equality does not resemble a plan for a utopian future and instructions for radical action. Rather, it might be understood as an expression of hope in the acknowledgement of inequality and injustice. As already stated, it is in this sense that equality is unavoidably significant to the consideration of adult education settings, including prison contexts, where societal inequality and injustices cannot be ignored. Behan's empirical research (Behan, 2014) reveals students' experiences of education as a manifestation of freedom within the prison. Perhaps this expresses the potential for education to enact hope. From my own experiences as an educator in prison, this is a dangerous hope, manifesting through persistence with the exhausting endeavour of enacting equality through educational practices in jail. For me, this is hope in response to human suffering, to which prison contributes, which has nothing to do with the idea of 'rehabilitation' or rehabilitative aims as expressed by criminologists.

Whilst I cannot point towards specific practices that might encourage hope or equality, I do point at the significance of the idea of equality in education. In particular, that the weakening of an assumption of equality might inadvertently reinvigorate a nineteenth-century orientation towards adult education (Williams, 1961), organised on the basis that learners are not yet fully formed human beings. It seems to me that assuming all students are equals, regardless of their identity, might be a helpful starting point when considering the aims of prison education and how it might be practiced. It is an assumption that precludes the idea that prisoners are in need of a special form of adult learning and associated theory of prison education. Here the concept of rehabilitation has no place, whilst acknowledging that educators and students, be they in colleges, community centres, prisons or universities, make judgements about the desirability of students' discourse. For me, this might describe the work of educators refusing to accept societal inequality and whose interrogation of that refusal acknowledges and grapples with the responsibilities attached. It is in this

sense also, I would argue, that equality is unavoidably significant to the consideration of prison learning settings.

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