International research on prison education and dyslexia among prisoners

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The Klasbak seminar
Brussels the 14th of November 2013
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Journal of Prison Education and Reentry (JPER)

Center for the Study of Correctional Education (CSCE), California State University, San Bernardino

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security

Prison Education Network (PEN)
The aims of our research projects

• To focus on an often neglected aspect of adult learning

• To examine prisoners’ educational background, educational competence, educational desires and motives, learning difficulties (reading, spelling and mathematics), educational self-efficacy, educational activities in prison, past employment and future employment plans

• To examine factors influencing participation in education in prison and desires to start an education in prison

• To support a knowledge-based practice in prison education
Knowledge-based practice in prison education

- Empirically supported knowledge
- Experience based knowledge (teachers)
- Prisoners’ experiences and needs

Good knowledge-based practice
Prisoners right to learn: International recommendations and legal aspects

- **UNESCO** (1985): The right to learn, the right to read and write

- The Council of Europe’s Recommendations on Education in Prison No. R (89/12)

Prisoners right to learn: Norwegian policy documents

- White paper no. 27
  (2004-2005)

- The National Curriculum

- The Education Act

- The Penal Implementation Act
• Six prison regions
• Education in all 51 institutions (during 2007)
• The import – model
• A prison population of 3704
• Mean sentence length: 141 days
• Average age: 34.7 years
• Educational level: 1/10 non completed education, 1/3 completed upper secondary and 1/6 have single subjects or a degree on college or university level
• Gender distribution 94 % men and 6% women
• 2/3 of the prisoners are Norwegians and 1/3 are foreigners and come from 120 different countries

(Ministry of Justice 2011; Norwegian Correctional Services 2010; Eikeland, Manger and Asbjørnsen 2010)
Bergen prison
258 prisoners, high and low security and open départements
Prison education in Norway

• In 1969 the Ministry of Education took over responsibility for prison education

• «The import model» place responsibility for all functions not related to prison care outside the prison

• The Ministry of Justice and Public Security have responsibility for school premises

• Persons under 18 years of age are not supposed to be incarcerated
What is reading and spelling skills?
Prisoners reading and spelling skills: International studies

Studies from English speaking countries and the Nordic countries report prevalence rates of reading and spelling difficulties to be between 50-70 percent (f. ex. Moody m.fl.1998; Svensson m.fl. 2003).

Over half of the prisoners in an International Adult Literacy Study (IALS) in Ireland obtained scores on Level 1 or on a level Morgan and Kett defined as Pre-level (Morgan & Kett 2003).

The high prevalence of reading and spelling difficulties among incarcerated is found to be independent of type of sample, sample size, prison education, and also languages.
Dyslexia rates among prisoners

- In one study by Moody, et al. (2000) 47.8 percent of the prisoners showed signs of dyslexia based on a word attack measure.
- A study of young offenders in Kuwait report over 20 percent showing evidence of dyslexia (Elbeheri, et al., 2009)
- Studies from Sweden report the rates of dyslexia to be as in the general population, 7-11 %. (f.ex. Samuelsson et al. 2003)
So what does affect these different prevalence rates?

- Not making a distinction between dyslexia and more general reading and spelling difficulties
- Selection of tests used
- Who you include in the test groups
- The use of control groups
Results from Norwegian prison studies
A representative sample of prisoners in Norwegian prisons (Phd sample), autumn 2007

- 19 prisons (7 prisons)
- Questionnaire, N=600
- Reading and spelling tests, N=92
- Gender: 93% men and 7% women
- Inclusion criteria: over 18 years and Norwegian language skills that made it meaningful to participate
• What have we measured?

• Self-reporting of reading and writing difficulties (N=600)

• Self-reporting of efficacy beliefs in reading and writing (N=600)

• Screening of prisoners’ reading and spelling skills using standardized tests (N=92)
The reading and spelling tests

Reading and spelling tests for students in higher education (Strømsø, Hagtvet, Lyster & Rygvold 1997) (Handal 1964)*.

• Word chains
• Nonsense words
• **Reading speed***
• Reading comprehension*
• **Spelling**
• Proof reading
• Non-verbal skills, MAT SF (Naglieri 1985)
## Demographic variables

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Various educational needs among prisoners

Although there is an overrepresentation of students with disabilities in the correctional system, one must also acknowledge that there are students who have good skills, and their educational needs must also be met (Eggleston, 2008).
Self-reporting of reading and writing difficulties (N=600)

- Reading difficulties:
  - 34.1 percent report reading difficulties to a certain degree
- Writing difficulties:
  - 46.4 percent report writing difficulties to a certain degree
Self-reporting of reading difficulties and writing difficulties (N=600)
Self-reporting a diagnose of dyslexia (N=600)
Do you experience difficulties with reading, writing and mathematics? (Eikeland et al. 2013)
Do you experience difficulties with r/w/m and participate in education in prison? (Eikeland et al. 2013)
What predicts prisoners’ participation in education?

- Self-reporting dyslexia?
- Level of skills?
- Education level?
- Age?
- Sentence length?
- Efficacy beliefs?
What predicts prisoners’ participation in education? (cont.)

• Younger prisoners were more likely to participate compared to older prisoners

• It was more likely that prisoners with longer sentences participated compared to prisoners with shorter sentences

• Self-reports of dyslexia predicted participation in education: those who self-reported such difficulties were twice as likely to participate in education compared to the prisoners who did not report such difficulties

• Efficacy beliefs in writing predicted participation
The SWOT-Model

- **Strengths (S)**: Identify your internal strengths.
- **Opportunities (O)**: Look for external opportunities.
- **Weaknesses (W)**: Recognize your internal weaknesses.
- **Threats (T)**: Monitor external threats.

This model helps in analyzing and planning strategies.
The Norwegian context

Strengths
- Documentation of the prisoners’ needs
- High consciousness

Opportunities
A national screening system?
- Better adaptive education

Weaknesses
Need for competence?

Threats
Resistance for change?

Resources
"The importance of thinking of clients in prison as they are: people with faults like the rest of us, but also with richness of personality and undeveloped potential (in other words, as 'whole persons' rather than just as 'offenders')"

(Kevin Warner, 2010, in his address to 8th Conference for European Directors and Co-ordinators of Prison Education, Lucerne, Switzerland, 9th-12th September).
Selected references