

## **Guest Editorial Preface**

# **Special Issue on Identity, Bias and Diversity Behind Bars: Overcoming Barriers to Education for Incarcerated Students**

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This special issue of *IJBIDE* critically investigates and raises awareness of the identity, bias and diversity issues faced by incarcerated students; these are students completing any form of formal or informal education in a prison context. The guest editors have collected a series of insightful articles about the immense difficulties faced by incarcerated students in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia as well as the many innovative ways in which these difficulties are being overcome.

This special issue promotes a vision and dialogue about the perception, bias and identity of diverse individuals who are attempting to improve their lives through education while being incarcerated. Education refers to all types of learning in prisons from basic reading and writing to higher education up to the postgraduate level, formal and informal, classroom-based or distance learning. Diversity refers to ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, language and socio-economic background. Bias relates to attitudes, actions and social disadvantage, during and before imprisonment as well as systemic bias within the criminal justice systems across Australia and Europe, such as the dramatically disproportionate rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people in Australian prisons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and the high rate of foreign nationals in European prisons (Pakes & Holt, 2017).

Globally, many prisoners are from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and are likely to have experienced social and economic disadvantage. As a result, in comparison with the general population they experience a relatively high chance of unemployment on release, face on-going physical and mental health and social problems and have limited work experience (Giles et al., 2004). However contemporary studies demonstrate that the rates of recidivism (re-offense) are significantly lower for prisoners undertaking an educational program while incarcerated, compared to the general prison population (Richards et al., 2008; Aceves et al., 2011).

The role of education in prisons serves two purposes: increasing opportunities for employment after release, but also most importantly, improving self-esteem and self-confidence to assist in avoiding the negative lifestyle temptations that contributed to the initial incarceration of offenders. As a result, a greater emphasis has been placed on education opportunities for prisoners. The decision to participate in education depends on a number of factors including the length of sentence, the constraints of sentence management plans, the capacity of prison staff to provide learning support, the demands of in-prison employment and the availability of programs and courses (Giles et al., 2004). Overcrowding and restricted access to computers further limits prisoners' access to education (Farley, 2017). Prisoners are hampered in their choices by the extent to which courses require students to access online activities. The provision of education services to prisoners is becoming increasingly problematic given the increasing reliance on digital and mobile delivery of materials and assessment. It is against these limitations and the biases that are subtly and sometimes not-so-subtly shaping them that the articles in this edition examine prison education.

## IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The first article in this special issue, *Beyond Incarcerated Identities: Identity, Bias and Barriers to Higher Education in Australian Prisons*, while acknowledging the personal circumstances that may lead to an individual's imprisonment, investigates the societal mechanisms which lead to the incarceration of some of Australia's most marginalised populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It explores how prisoners struggle with this 'criminalization of the other' while trying to forge new prosocial identities as students. These challenges are exacerbated by the prioritisation of security and economic efficiency over the human rights of prisoners, which sees incarcerated students unable to access the internet or modern computers to complete their study or communicate with their lecturers.

Lorna Barrow and her colleagues from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, further explore the technological divide between prisoners engaged in education and their counterparts who are not in custody. In *Incarcerated Students, the Technological Divide and the Challenges in Tertiary Education Delivery*, the authors report on the results of a survey conducted both with incarcerated students and those officers who facilitate prisoner participation in education within prisons. While both prisoners and prisoner education officers were very positive about their engagement with education, they bemoaned the lack of prisoner access to the internet and the modern technologies that most Australian students take for granted. This article startlingly illustrates how a cohort who are already widely discriminated against and who have often had traumatic experiences with formal education, are further marginalised by their inability to access modern ICTs, even in the pursuit of improving themselves and their futures.

At first glance, mathematics seems an unlikely catalyst for personal transformation, yet this is exactly what is reported by Catherine Byrne and her colleagues Michael Carr and Brian Bowe in their article. In *Identity, Hard Sums and Butterflies*, they describe how Irish prisoners who engage with education, and in this instance, mathematics education, leave behind those old communities of associates and families who were no longer working for them, and embrace new ways of being. What makes this article so impactful is that the transformation from 'cocoon to butterfly' is told in the prisoners' own voices. They describe the emergence of a student identity and a desire to 'give back' to society. Too often the success of educational programs is described in terms of reductions in recidivism rates (see Andersen & Skardhamar, 2015), but in this article, we see the very real personal transformation that lies behind those facts and figures.

The prisoners and ex-prisoners who were the subject of Pike and Hopkins' article, *Transformative Learning: Positive Identity through Prison-based Higher Education in England and Wales*, were changed by their participation in higher education while incarcerated. They were students, not prisoners. They had raised hopes and realistic aspirations for continuing their education upon release from custody and finding employment which would not only allow them to become good citizens but allow them to pay back to society. This transformation is understood in terms of Jack Mezirow's transformative learning whereby learners become critically aware of their beliefs in themselves and their place in society. Their stories are told in their own voices, lending a poignancy and depth that would have otherwise been difficult to describe.

Higher education in prisons is also the focus of King, Measham, and O'Brien's article, *Building Bridges Across Diversity*. The article describes the impacts of the Inside-Out prison education programme that brings together 'Inside' (prison) students and 'Outside' (university) students to study together as peers and as equals behind the prison walls. Originally developed by Temple University criminologist Lori Pompa, and applied in three prisons in the UK by Durham University educators, the programme benefits both the 'Inside' learners and the 'Outside' learners. Assumptions and prejudices are challenged and social barriers are broken down, leading to an identity shift in both cohorts and the disintegration of bias in each.

Thomas Hopkins and Alex Kendall of Birmingham City University, in *Inside Out Literacies: Literacy Learning with a Peer-led Prison Reading Scheme*, show how approaching literacy learning by putting the learner's identity at the centre of the process, can act as a powerful agent for change. Instead of seeing education as something being 'done to them,' learners engage with a sure knowledge of what they want to achieve and how they want to apply their learning. Again, telling the story in the learners' own voices, this article challenges traditional notions of formal education. This article draws from data produced in the qualitative phase of a year-long study across the English prison estate of Shannon Trust's prison-based reading programme.

Most are familiar with the challenges associated with education in prisons in Australasia, Western Europe and the USA, yet remain unaware of the conditions in prisons in the former Eastern Block countries. *The Role of Education and NGOs in the Reintegration of Inmates in Hungary* by Márta Miklósi and Erika Juhász of the University of Debrecen, Hungary, shows that many of the same challenges encountered in more familiar prison settings are pertinent in this context. This article describes how prison authorities, NGOs and the prisoners themselves are overcoming great social disadvantage to educate prisoners with a view to successfully rehabilitating them into the community post-release. It further describes how even though great strides have been made, it is still difficult for ex-offenders to overcome the systemic prejudice of Hungarian society to allow for true reintegration and social inclusion.

Just as in the previous article, Skues, Pfeifer, Oliva and Wise in their article, *Responding to the Needs of Prisoners with Learning Difficulties in Australia*, recognise that a disproportionate number of prisoners struggle under the burden of learning difficulties which may have contributed to their incarceration in the first place. The authors examine the evidence for the prevalence of learning difficulties in the Australian prison population and put forward some strategies for mitigating the challenges faced by these individuals. Intriguingly, they posit that the accommodations made for prisoners with learning difficulties have the potential to benefit all incarcerated students.

It seems fitting that this special edition concludes by reminding us that we may not know who our prisoners are or with what levels of education they are entering prison. Olga Cara and Brian Creese in their paper, *Prisoners' Basic Skills and Subsequent Education Involvement: An Analysis of Individualised Learner Records Data in England*, show us that not only are we unsure of what levels of educational experience people enter prison, there is no attempt to determine how many do not have English as a first language. This seems ludicrous in the face of increasing globalisation and mass migration. Most disturbingly, very often prisoners are enrolled in programmes that are far below their qualification levels and fail to challenge or educate them. This suggests a prison system that is failing prisoners and society.

## CONCLUSION

By providing these contributions for this special issue on *Educating the Incarcerated – Bias and Identity* which investigate the challenges faced by incarcerated students attempting to improve their lives through education, we hope to enable the *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversity in Education* to take a leading role in this space. Through the publication of this selection of seminal articles we hope to promote a vision and encourage further dialogue for a keystone review of the state of prisoner education in Australia and Europe.

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