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appliquée pour l'éducation en prison



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SPECIAL BULLETIN

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With the *Montreal International Conference on Education in prison*, the UNESCO Chair in Applied Research for Prison Education and its partners wanted to explore research and education practices in prisons to highlight the various innovative initiatives coming from citizen, communities and institutions in the fields of formal, non-formal and informal education. The conference was designed to share ideas and knowledge from different jurisdictions and practice settings. The primary objective was to build bridges: between research and practice; between the different disciplines concerned with the issue of education in prison; between linguistic communities; and between different regions of the world.

The Chair's mission has always been to build connections between the various stakeholders in the prison education community; to bridge the gaps between the different silos of practice and research, between criminology and educational sciences, between intervention and advocacy. Convinced of the essential role of human relations in the various learning processes and, above all, of the importance of co-presence in this work, the founders of the Chair have long cultivated the dream of welcoming the driving forces of the field in Montreal for an international and interdisciplinary meeting on and for education in prison. While the organization of a similar event was already well underway at the beginning of 2020, we were stopped by the COVID-19 pandemic. We pivoted to a **series of webinars** on research and innovative practices in prison education, which nevertheless helped to build the foundations of a strong international exchange network. Building on this positive experience, the Chair's team put the international conference project back on track in March 2023.

Early on, we decided with the organizing committee to opt for an in-person event. The aim was to allow informal exchanges and the building of stronger relationships between the people participating in the *Conference*. This decision came with its share of challenges, particularly for people from the Global South and for people with criminal records. Since most people in these situations have had to cancel their presence, we will have to re-examine the formula for the next *Conference*. However, we remain convinced of the importance and contribution of a co-presence event.

We also chose to hold a bilingual event with simultaneous interpretation to allow as many people as possible to express themselves comfortably in the language of their choice. We are satisfied with this decision. However, it must be acknowledged that English was the *lingua franca* of the *Conference* and we warmly thank our colleagues from Latin America and Spain and other parts of the world who agreed to share their work and their reflections in a language other than their own.

In the following pages, you will find a summary of some of the highlights of the *Conference*, but also a reflection on the questions raised by the speakers and their impact on the future of the field.

Enjoy!

Recent developments in research on education in prison show the importance of studying the effects of non-formal education practices and informal learning opportunities that are associated with social reintegration and the process of identity transformation of incarcerated people. The emergence of new issues related to the overrepresentation of marginalized and vulnerable populations increases the need to take time to reflect on what concerns, enriches and transforms education practices in prison.

The people invited to present at the plenary conferences shared their experience and expertise and set the stage for rich discussions around the issues that affect both research teams and teams working in the field.

In the opening lecture, **Cormac Behan**, Professor at the School of Law and Criminology at Maynooth University (Ireland), highlighted the importance of appropriate programs that do not simply replicate ordinary educational programs. In particular, he stressed that education in prison must be part of the daily life of incarcerated learners and take into account both the difficulty of their previous school career and life in prison. This approach makes it possible to adapt learning to the specific realities of learners with difficult life trajectories (multiple traumas, school dropout, perception of themselves as «unworthy» of learning). Education in prison will not erase some of the difficulties inherent in these life trajectories, but it could allow learners to better cope with them.

Cormac Behan's presentation also recalled that education, far from being simply a tool for the transmission of knowledge, represents a powerful vector of transformation in complex social, political and cultural contexts. It has the potential to generate real change, especially when it is perceived as a fundamental right, linked to citizenship. Participation in education in prison, which should not be reduced to a privilege that can be taken away at any time, is a key lever for inclusion and transformation. Cormac then underlined the importance of enhancing educational spaces in situations of confinement. Ultimately, education in prison appears to be an essential key to building a more inclusive, equitable and just society.

In her talk, **Mneesha Gellman**, Associate Professor of Political Science at the *Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies* at Emerson College (USA) also presented prison education as a powerful tool for transformation, highlighting its role in disrupting a repressive prison system. Gellman also distinguished two important concepts: prison education, which is often considered secondary, and education in prison, which presents itself as a comprehensive process of social transformation, aimed at restoring the dignity of incarcerated individuals. She highlighted the importance of restoring this dignity through education, an act of resistance against the dehumanizing prison system. Finally, she insisted on the importance of a decolonial approach to education in prison, taking into account racial and social inequalities that particularly affect racialized incarcerated people, in order to review educational programs to make them inclusive and adapted to these realities.

Marisa Belausteguigoitia, full professor at the Faculty of Human Sciences of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), spoke about the Iztapalapa women's prison and the work of the university collective *Espiral Mujeres* (*Spiral Women*).

The Conference in perspective

↓ Photograph from the presentation *University and Prison's Narratives of Desire and aspiration: Recalibration, Recitation and Recount* by Marisa Belausteguigoitia, on October 16, 2024, during her plenary lecture at the Conference



One of the collective's flagship projects is the creation of four large frescoes, representing stories of resistance and transformation. The participants, by climbing scaffolding to paint, symbolically reverse their condition: from invisible figures, they become creators of their own story. These works also make it possible to reconstruct their relationship to time and justice, by inscribing their presence permanently on the walls of the institution that imprisons them.



← Photograph from the presentation *University and Prison's Narratives of Desire and aspiration: Recalibration, Recitation and Recount* by Marisa Belausteguigoitia, on October 16, 2024, during her plenary lecture at the Conference

The artistic practices put in place by this properly feminist, decolonial and transformative approach are not limited to aesthetics; they become a legal and social means of action. Some work has contributed to reducing sentences or obtaining early releases, particularly for Indigenous women whose rights were violated during trial.



Photographie tirée de la présentation *University and Prison's Narratives of Desire and aspiration : Recalibration, Recitation and Recount* par Marisa Belausteguigoitia, le 16 octobre 2024, lors de sa conférence plénière aux Rencontres

The *Espiral Mujeres* collective also provides legal education. Working with lawyers and activists, they set up a legal clinic, helping inmates better understand and uphold their rights. This holistic approach links artistic expression and legal advocacy, giving incarcerated women the tools to take back control of their own narratives and, in some cases, alter the course of their judicial destiny.

Non-formal educational activities in cooking, self-care and management bridge the gap between incarceration and the outdoor life bordering Iztapalapa, starting from the inclusive community units of Utopía, making their gradual reintegration into the community concrete. *Espiral Mujeres* is part of a restorative justice perspective, seeking to transform the prison experience into a process of social reinvention. Marisa Belausteguigoitia concludes that art education in prison goes beyond the pedagogical dimension alone: it becomes an act of resistance, a means of reconstructing an identity outside the stigmata of detention and, for some, an opportunity to rewrite their own future by themselves.



Photography of Barba del reclusorio. Utópia Libertad. 7/07/2023, YC, from the presentation *University and Prison's Narratives of Desire and aspiration: Recalibration, Recitation and Recount* by Marisa Belausteguigoitia, on October 16, 2024, during her plenary lecture at the Conference

GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Émilie Cousineau, Université Laval student researcher in the master's degree in educational technology

I attended the Conference as a student researcher and had the chance to see a powerful presentation by **Geraldine Cleere**, who teaches law and criminology at the South East Technological University (Ireland). Her talk on the evolution of perspectives on education in prison made a great impression on me. Rather than measuring the success of education solely through its effects on recidivism rates, Cleere proposes a more holistic approach, highlighting the personal transformation of inmates through the development of self-confidence, social capital and prosocial ties. This vision is in line with my research interests, which are related to the sustainable uses of digital technology in education, particularly in constrained contexts such as prisons. Thoughtful digital integration could play a key role in fostering prisoners' autonomy, providing opportunities for self-directed learning, and developing transferable skills. However, such a transformation requires interprofessional collaboration between educators, correctional officers, social workers, and teachers. Cleere's idea of redefining the roles of prison staff to better support education is particularly interesting from this perspective. Training adapted to the pedagogical uses of digital technology could allow correctional officers to become learning facilitators, working together with other professionals to create a more engaging educational environment that is better adapted to the needs of inmates. Thus, by integrating these dimensions into my research, I would like to explore how a systemic and interprofessional approach to digital technology can promote a more humanizing and efficient prison education, going beyond purely security or disciplinary logics.

Finally, **Corinne Rostaing**, professor of sociology at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 and researcher at the Max Weber Center (France), explained that prison, far from being a place of rehabilitation, is a space where human dignity is systematically undermined, plunging inmates into situations of infantilization and daily violence. In this context, education appears to be a lever for transformation, allowing incarcerated people to rediscover their identity and regain a form of dignity, by offering a space for reflection, communication and personal development.

This conference was also an opportunity for the public to remember that even if many people in prison enroll in educational programs primarily to occupy themselves or pass the time, the classroom is often the only place where they can have positive contact with a person from the outside and initiate, with dignity, the identity (re)construction necessary for reintegration. Her words were echoed almost immediately (with a different accent) in **Lyne Bisson** and **Fréderrick Armstrong**'s presentation on the way incarcerated people in Quebec look at the meaning and effects of education in prison.

The fact that the organizing committee was open to hear about interventions by external communities and the innovative and transformative cultural practices within prison, this often «degrading» institution (Rostaing 2021), contributed to the richness of the presentations. The people who presented their work showed, among other things, that self-exploration through the arts, writing, learning in daily life can contribute to a successful reintegration, by improving learners' self-esteem.

The issue of gender inequality in prison was also discussed at length. These inequalities have been highlighted, particularly in access to programmes. The possibility of introducing a form of gender "mixture" in certain activities was seen as a way to develop the supply of programmes and improve access for incarcerated women. This approach could offer a different kind of space, contributing to a change in gender perceptions within the prison. Thus, Corinne Rostaing's presentation paved the way for a reflection on the reinvention of prison, exploring avenues for transformation based on education, human dignity and equal opportunities. These discussions about education in prison have taken prison out of strict punishment, towards places of learning and individual and social transformation.

The panel presentations of **Kenya Herrera Bórquez**, **Nadia Gutierrez**, **Anayanci Fregoso**, **Marycarmen Arroyo** and **Pablo Hoyos González** illustrated the psychological impact of art as a transformative tool for incarcerated women, whether from the creation of intramural educational spaces facilitating the development of legal capacities of women in prison in Iztapalapa, or by developing artistic practices that allow them to express themselves outside the prison settings in Mexicali.

Other presentations from Latin America highlighted the challenges and potential for new initiatives that are currently being deployed. **Karina Biondi** spoke about the determination and resilience that must be shown by those who want to develop a post-secondary education program in prisons in Brazil. **João Barbosa** presented the Incarceration Nations Network, an international solidarity project for post-secondary education that brings together learners, teachers, administrators and researchers. This network is a good example of the concern of communities outside the walls for education in prison to humanize prison conditions and increase the place of social reintegration in the prison continuum in America, Europe and Africa. Finally, **Sergio Grossi** presented several alternative models of prison stemming from the paradigm of «generative justice» in France, Spain, Argentina and Brazil, highlighting the potential for rehabilitation and empowerment of inmates through the self-organization of educational activities and respect for the human condition.

In a North American context, the development of university initiatives such as *Walls to Bridges* promotes convivial exchange between students and learners in prison, making it possible to co-develop educational and deliberation skills. The development of community restorative justice initiatives by the *Art Entr'Elles* collective, combining writing, scriptwriting and introduction to video technologies in the Unconditional project, illustrates the full potential of education and emancipation for incarcerated women, by helping them to reinvent themselves and rebuild their self-esteem for release.



Work produced as part of the Ywrite Pilot Program-creative writing project, from the presentation *Beauty in Negative Spaces: Aesthetic Principles of Prison Education* by Adelle Sefton-Rowston, October 16, 2024

Adelle Sefton-Rowston spoke about the introduction of an intervention device that integrates aesthetic principles into educational activities in a prison for Aboriginal women. These incarcerated people, who come from marginalised communities, are often distrustful of teachers due to past trauma and bad experiences with authority, which represents a major barrier to education in prison. Sefton-Rowston proposes to reinvent the prison space, no longer as a single punitive place, but as a space for learning and personal development. By integrating aesthetic principles, such as the appreciation of «so-called negative spaces» (silences and voids), we can reconsider the educational function of the institution. Thus, without being «limited» to a single reintegration function, education instead allows for a twofold movement: deconstructing racial and social injustices and rebuilding trust between incarcerated people and teachers, fostering a process of transformation that repairs past harms while building positive relationships. At the same time, beauty is becoming a powerful tool for rewriting the narratives of marginalized individuals, turning suffering and oppression into opportunities for personal growth. This process, which combines aesthetics, education and emancipation, allows incarcerated people to reclaim their history and envision a different future.

The integration of educational frameworks adapted to the specific cultural contexts of incarcerated people, including those of indigenous peoples, allows for a better understanding of their histories and identities. This cultural sensitivity thus enriches the educational process, valuing the unique experiences of incarcerated people.

Why Art?

Art is survival
Art is resistance
Art is medicine
Art is a tool
Art is resurgence



↑ Excerpt from Lancy Van Styvendale and Karrie Auger's presentation for Light Fires: Indigenous Art as Resurgence and Resistance, October 16, 2024

Lisa Prins at the workshop *Bringing Kindness to Prison: The Learning Club*, photo taken by Marc-André Lacelle.



The resurgence of authentic Indigenous artistic practices (Light my Fire) has highlighted the active resistance of Indigenous incarcerated people to the traces of colonization still present in the Canadian prison system from a non-formal education project developed in co-construction with a community of learners from their own choices according to their needs.

« Prisons are an abomination. They are a blasphemy in the face of God. I cannot believe that God ever intended for any of her children to be locked up in iron cages behind stone walls. Prisons in Canada are simply a white racist institution. » - Elder Arthur Solomon (Ojibwe), *Songs for the People*, 91.

In the context of the Learning Cities Space (panel organised by UIL), the focus was on the transformation of the prison environment into a «learning city». This means structuring the prison environment so that education is at the heart of rehabilitation, with trainers and educators playing a central role in this transformation. This concept goes beyond simply offering educational programmes in prison and seeks to create a culture of constant learning that is integrated into the daily lives of inmates, which would help prepare them for successful reintegration. The panel also highlighted the need for strategic partnerships to develop educational programmes in prisons, including to combat illiteracy and facilitate the reintegration of prisoners into society. This method of literacy by peers, in Morocco, where inmates themselves become trainers for their classmates, made an impression on the public. This approach creates a virtuous circle where learning is collaborative and mutually beneficial, building prisoners' self-esteem while providing them with a hands-on teaching experience. This changes the dynamics of prison education by making it more inclusive and participatory, and empowers inmates to become agents of change in their own prison community.

Penny Kane, Anna Muller and **Paul Draus** from the University of Michigan have illustrated the liberating potential of such moments of building and deconstructing learning for all. The team engaged the audience through a variety of activities, such as a sharing session on everyone's fears and hopes and the presentation of videos made by participants in the University of Michigan programs. The highlight was an individual vision board session, which quickly turned into a collective work when it was proposed to use the *Rencontres* poster as a support for the various individual boards. These activities have helped to establish equitable interpersonal relationships and have facilitated exchanges and the sharing of important experiences on collective learning.



↑ Visionboards made by the participants, during the Art, Agency, and Decarceration panel by Paul Draus, Anna Muller, Penny Kane (University of Michigan), photo taken by Frédérick Armstrong, October 18, 2024.

This workshop, like others during the *Conference*, also made it possible to observe that people who have been incarcerated themselves become particularly effective trainers in demonstrating the power of learning in prison and its effects in reintegration.

The day-to-day development of empowerment skills was also discussed in relation to the participants' poster proposals. **Audrée Frappier** and the teaching team of the Trois-Rivières provincial detention facility proposed «**Cuisine beyond the walls**» to unify several disciplines of learning and social integration by federating interests around cooking in the community, thus combining collaboration, pleasure and personal well-being.

Richard Mayrand shared the fruits of his non-formal education initiative through the screening of the movie *Truman Show* at the *Portage Therapy House* for Youth.



↑ **Richard Mayrand and Lena Sarrut, during the presentation of his poster, "Truman à Portage", October 17, 2024. Credit: Maryse Boyce.**

Marisa Belausteguigoitia lors de l'atelier Walls to Bridges : Creativity, Art and Resilience, photo prise par Marc-André Lacelle, 18 octobre 2024.



The initiative allowed a closed intervention environment to initiate a reflection on the social expectations and social conformism related to addiction on a daily basis. The dynamic group of speakers of *Walls to Bridges* shared their methods of openness and dialogue between prisoners, teachers and university students based on performances, games, plastic expressions and personal reflections.

The involvement of universities in prison offers pedagogical resources and spaces for critical reflection that initiate and enrich the educational experiences of incarcerated people for their identity reconstruction.

The *Conference* allowed for exchanges that would not have taken place otherwise, and these undoubtedly made it possible to bring out questions that will eventually lead to new collaborations or new research projects. In particular, the Chair's team has become aware, along with Canadian colleagues, of the lack of reciprocal knowledge of the specificities of the educational regimes available in the various Canadian correctional services. We are therefore convinced of the importance of providing the communities of practice and research with an up-to-date picture of the state of education in Canada's provincial and federal prisons. We also hope that other people in attendance have made meaningful encounters that will advance their project – by the way, don't hesitate to talk to us if that's the case!

We have also made several contacts that give us the hope of reproducing this *Conference*, in other forms or under other skies. Finally, we are convinced that the *Rencontres* have strengthened everyone's conviction of the limits of the punitive correctional logic and of the capacity of education in all its forms to (re)give dignity to people who learn in prison, but also of its key role in the social reintegration function that should be at the heart of all correctional services.

Unfortunately, we were not able to talk about all the individual contributions to the *Conference*, but rest assured that everyone who participated contributed to the event's success. At the end of the *Conference*, a consensus was built on the fact that it is imperative to integrate educational approaches that take into account the systemic inequalities encountered by women and Indigenous people before and during their prison career. Another of the key questions raised during the *Conference* was whether education could change the prison itself. Several exchanges took place highlighting the positive power of education, provided that educational practices are humanistic and question the punitive structure of prison. Education in prisons should not be limited to being an activity to «pass the time», but should become a real tool for personal transformation. It could play a central role in the rehabilitation of incarcerated people, promoting self-esteem and creating a space where individuals can express and rebuild their humanity.

Special thanks

The Chair's team would like to warmly thank all the people who made this event possible. First, we would like to thank the volunteers who volunteered their time to facilitate the logistical aspects of the conference:

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