

Education in Prison Workshop 2026

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Workshop Schedule

09.30 Welcome

09.40 Right to Education and the New Council of Europe Standards
Anne Costelloe

10.20 Education in Irish Prisons' Departure from Council of Europe Standards and Previous Irish Policy
Kevin Warner

11.00 Break

11.15 Learnings From Inside Out Education
Katharina Swirak and Pieter De Witte,
moderated by Robert Cullen

11.55 Prison Education, Relationships, and the Family
Helen Nichols

12.35 Capture Reflections and Policy Implications

13.05 Closing Observations - **Orla O'Connor**

13.10 Lunch and Networking

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Session One

Council of Europe 2026 Recommendation on Prison Education



Why update the 1989 Recommendation?

Take into account changing prison populations and regime management, e.g. increasing numbers of foreign prisoners, ageing prison populations, longer and deeper levels of imprisonment, increasing numbers on restricted regimes, etc.

Take into account contemporary research and understandings around key factors that impact the ability to learn and engage in education (e.g., neurodiversity, addiction, mental health issues, etc.)

Take account of advances in educational research and practice relevant to the prison context (e.g., interactive technologies, inclusive practices, continuity of provision, etc.)

Underpinning principles remain unchanged

Education has the power to transform prisoners' lives; promote responsible citizenship, reduce recidivism, pave the way for therapeutic or other interventions, make prisons safer.

All prisoners should have access to education

Education is just as valid as work or other regime activities

Education provision must be based in the principles and practices of adult education

New Recommendation focuses on:

- **Creating the climate for learning – Education provides sanctuary**
- **Specific cohorts of prisoners that need extra support, i.e., neurodiverse, low literacy levels, long-term prisoners, minority groups, and those who don't speak the local language**
- **Digital teaching and learning**
- **Quality assurance of provision and practice**

Structure of updated Recommendation

Basic Principles (Rules 1 - 8)

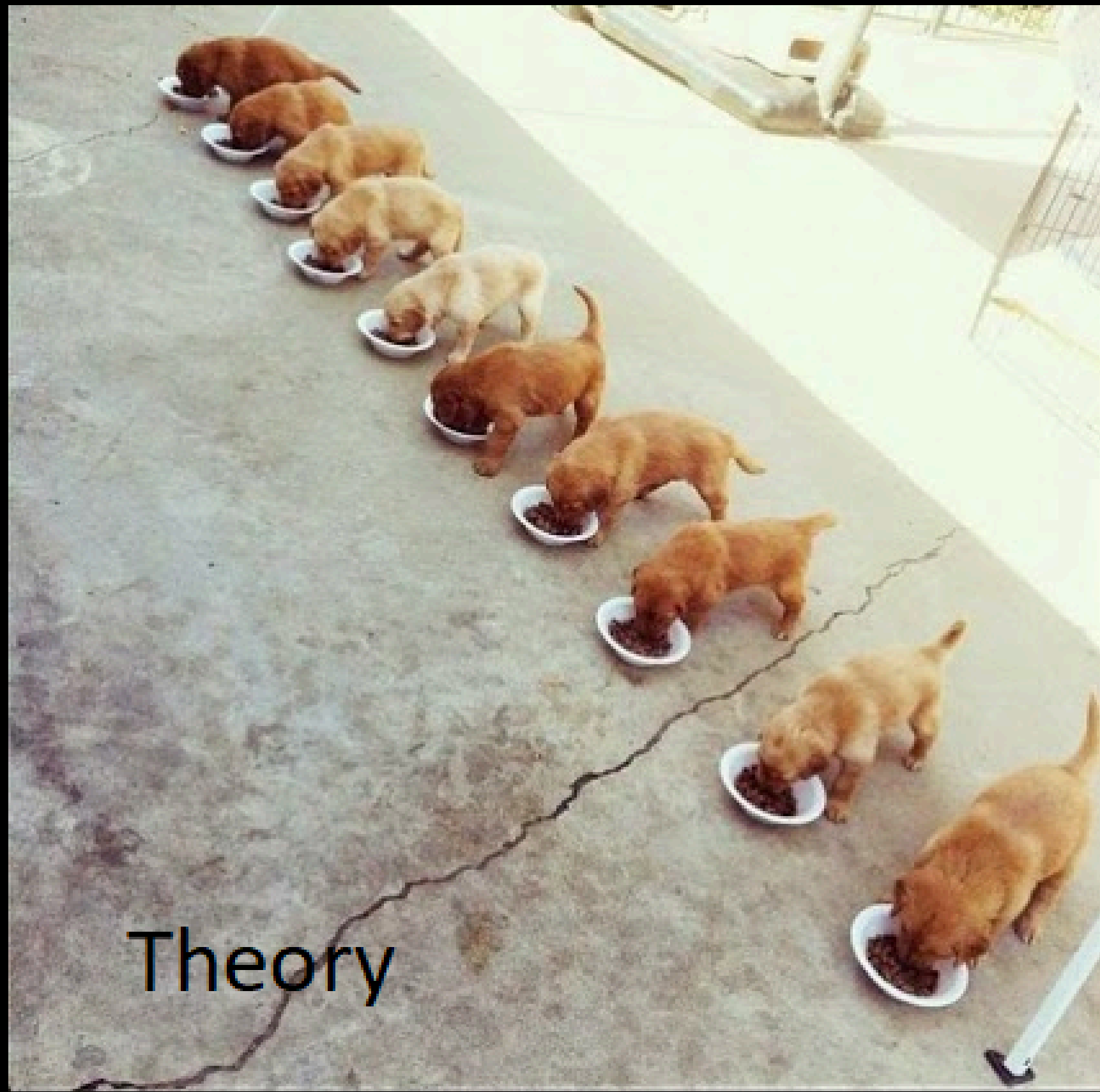
Access to Education (Rules 9 - 10)

Responsibility for Education (Rules 11 - 13)

Provision of Education (Rules 14 – 22)

Educational Support for specific groups (Rule 23 – a, b, & c.)

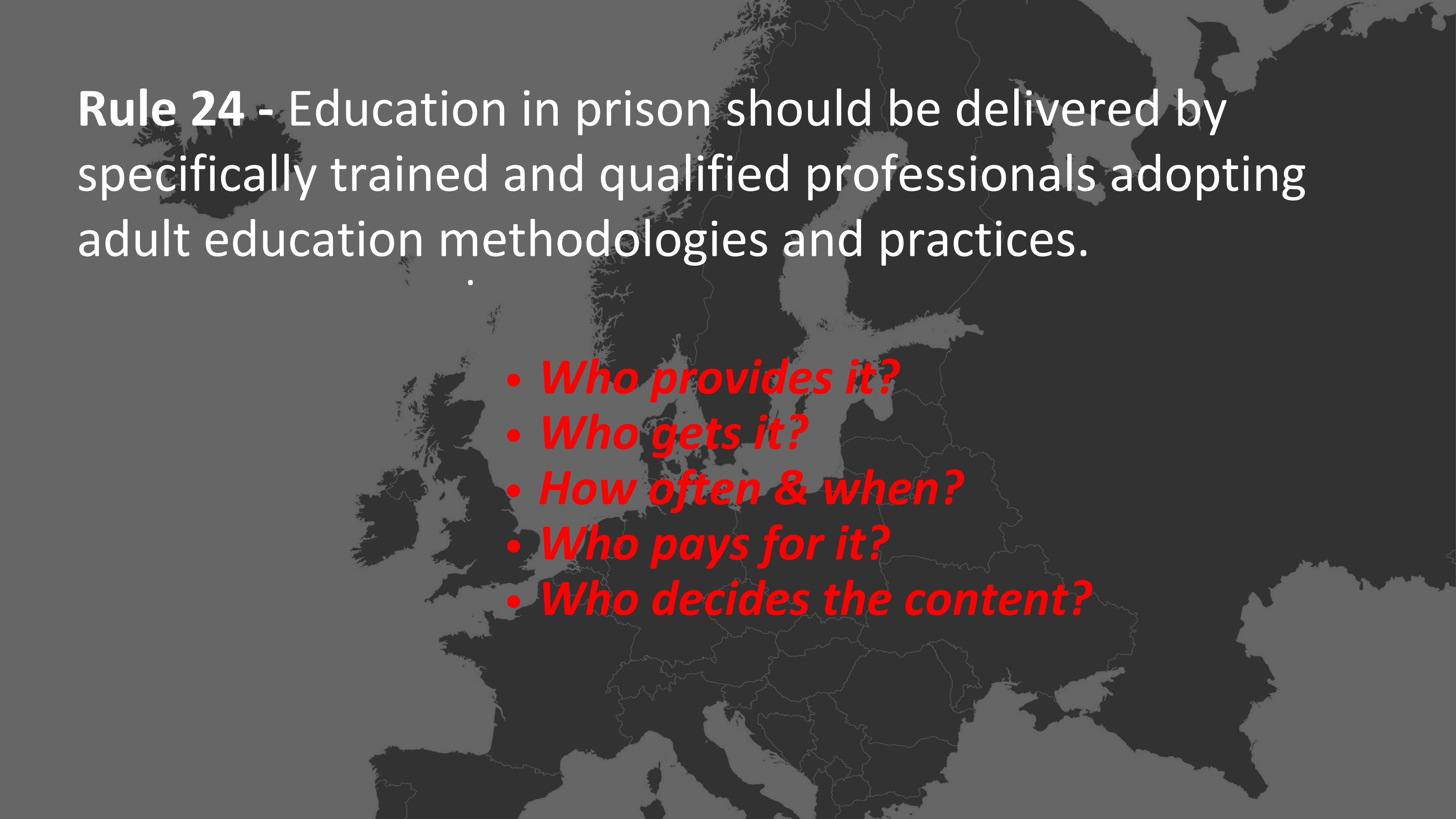
Cooperation and Collaboration (Rules 24 - 30)



Theory



Practice



Rule 24 - Education in prison should be delivered by specifically trained and qualified professionals adopting adult education methodologies and practices.

- *Who provides it?*
- *Who gets it?*
- *How often & when?*
- *Who pays for it?*
- *Who decides the content?*



**THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING
OF PRISON EDUCATORS
WORKING IN THE UK**

March 2026

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/m02dfr/eh/mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-prison-educators-report.pdf>

Rule 10: Access to education should be provided to all prisoners regardless of length of sentence, remand status, security regime, or individual categorisation.

“Security issues or restricted regimes should not serve as de facto obstacles to the practical realisation of the right to access education”

“Additionally, it is essential that operational constraints, such as inter-prison transfers (see also Rule 6), staff redeployment or shortages, or limited out-of-cell time, do not adversely affect a prisoner’s right to access education and training”.

Rule 13: Every effort should be made to encourage prisoners to participate actively in a range of educational opportunities.

Cultural

Curricular

Financial

“It is essential that prison management and staff understand the benefits to be had from prisoners’ engagement with education”

“...foster a prison-wide culture and attitude that regards education as the norm, and which supports and promotes it as a legitimate and worthwhile activity on par with work and other activities”

Rule 25: Prisoners should have regular access to a well-stocked library at least once a week, which should include digitally stocked reading, audio, and video materials. Access should be provided to community-based libraries where possible.

- **Review of Prison Library Services in Ireland - The School of Education, Ulster University.**

Rule 11: Public authorities are responsible for developing, implementing and resourcing policies and practices that aim to ensure quality education in prison.

- **Who is going to implement the Recommendation?**
- **What happens when provision is assessed as not meeting standards?**

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Session Two

Education in Prison workshop

Departure from Council of Europe Standards and Previous
Irish Policy

Museum of Literature Ireland, 22 April 2026

Kevin Warner
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Council of Europe: prison minimising, socially inclusive

From European Prison Rules, 2020

- “no one shall be deprived of liberty save as a measure of last resort”
- “Restrictions placed on persons deprived of their liberty shall be the minimum necessary and proportionate”
- “Life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community”
- “offer meaningful occupational activities and treatment programmes to inmates, thus preparing them for their reintegration into society”
- “Co-operation with outside social services and... the involvement of civil society in prison life”

Education: a right or a 'rehabilitation service'?

- **Norway:** Education passes on values and imparts knowledge and tools that allow everyone to make full use of their abilities and realise their talents...
... the humane treatment of prison inmates and the protection of their civil rights... has been crucial for successfully returning inmates to society...
The object for education in the correctional [Kriminalomsorgen='care of criminals'] services is the same for all other education. It is meant to help to cultivate, assist in coping with society and becoming self-reliant and impart knowledge, enabling the individual to make the most of his talents and contribute to wealth creation in Norwegian society.
- **England:** Stopping criminals re-offending is an important aim of any criminal justice system. We will always seek to punish offenders. Those who commit the most serious crimes, and pose the greatest risk to the public, must expect their punishment to be severe. But we... must also address the underlying causes of crime... To that end, the Government aims to help offenders become more productive members of society.

Penal policy: 'Pastoral penalty' to 'new punitiveness'

- IMPRISONMENT
problematic, 'detrimental effects', criminogenic, 'last resort'
Overimprisonment: 'Prison works', justice = more to prison for longer,
- PEOPLE IN PRISON
'Valued members of society', deprivation: need help, care + social inclusion
'dangerous people', 'a threat to the public', violent, demonised/othered
- INSTITUTIONS
Aims: normalisation, mitigation, reintegration, prisons small, 'dynamic security'
Warehousing, one-size-fits-all security, severe confinement, dysfunctional
- EDUCATION
A right for all to wide comprehensive developmental opportunities
Neo-liberal thinking: purpose: 'address offending behaviour', "to get offenders into work", reduce recidivism; for the few not the many

The care/custody balance

- “caring services in prisons... - work, education, welfare and **psychology** - retains much of the quality of being a **useful appendage to the prison system** and being **peripheral** to what is seen as the real business of running prisons - containment and security” (Whitaker Report, 1985, p.100)
- “The [independent prison] **board** should include non-executive members **with experience and competence in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, education, care and social integration**. The aim of the board should be to build up an efficient system combining a **caring as well as a custodial role**” (p.20).
- McAuley report (1997): rebalance custody and care in the direction of care, “**strengthening of health care and of the psychological, training and educational elements**” (p.34)

The erosion of the right to education (1)

- 1. **Expanding prisons but not teacher numbers** (220 w.t.e, the same as 2008, but the prison population has risen by 60% since); should now be 370.
- 2. **The erosion of learning space:** new cell blocks with no or few new facilities; closure of prisons with very good education; classrooms removed; reduced use of sports halls, libraries, outlier classrooms, etc.
- 3. **The cutting of summer and evening provision and special events** (plays, choirs, etc.)
- 4. **The huge reduction in access to learning**, arising from structural issues (higher lock-up times, segregation, severe confinement); and **the class-cancellation iceberg** arising largely from sclerotic prison staff arrangements

The erosion of the right to education (2)

- 5. The deepening marginalisation of education in the prison system (abandonment of the EPR equality principle, incentivised regime scheme, etc)
- 6. A contracting definition of the 'Prison Education Service' and IPS/Dept. of Justice corporate memory loss (+ sometimes, restrictive thinking in the education field: a narrow focus on training, certs, employment)
- 7. The erosion of the right to education in penal policy (for the few not all; seen as a privilege/used for discipline; weakened third-level opportunities and transition opportunities post-release)
- 8. A lack of yeast in the bread: erosion of curriculum development and in-service support for educators; **the undermining of morale**

Myths and mindsets restricting education's potential

- 1. all who go to prison are a “threat to the public”, “dangerous people”
- 2. prison rehabilitates and protects the public, more prison = more justice
- 3. more restrictions within prisons give more security
- 4. building more prison ‘spaces’ will solve overcrowding (and large prisons are more ‘efficient’)
- 5. rising prison numbers just keeps pace with growth in the general population
- 6. prisoners need to be pressured to engage with services
- 7. certificates, qualifications and jobs are the best measure of education's success
(Instead, “make the important measurable rather than the measurable important”!)

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Break



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Session Three

Learnings From Inside Out Education



Panel with
Katharina Swirak,
Pieter De Witte, and
Robert Cullen

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Session Four

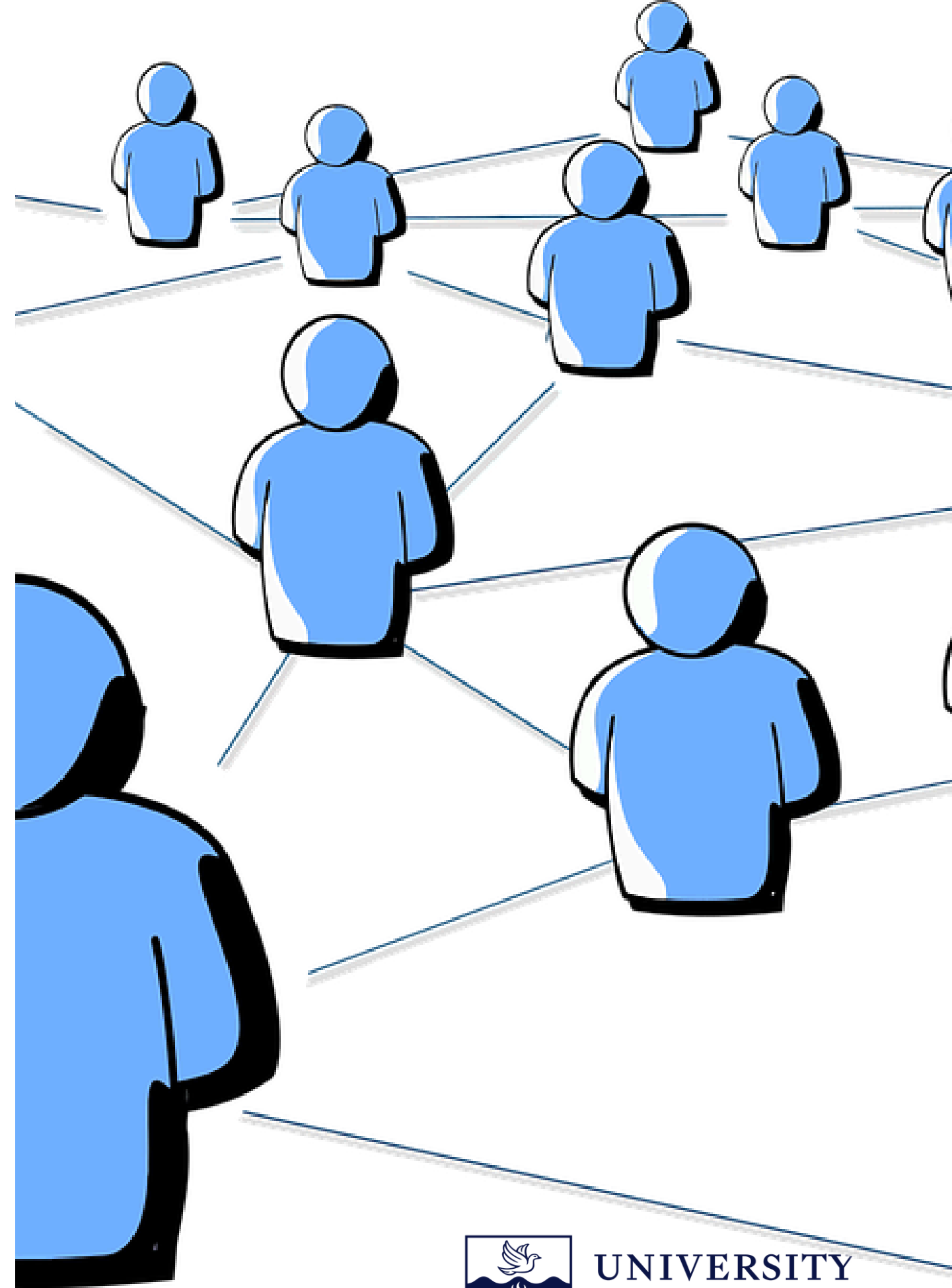
Prison Education, Relationships and the Family

Dr Helen Nichols
Reader in Criminology
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Overview

- My Relationship to Education in Prison
- Sharing Learnings from the Inside
 - Relationships inside prison
 - Relationships outside prison
- The Good, The Bad, The Evidence
- Concluding Comments



My Relationship to Education in Prison

Researcher

PhD exploring adult male prisoners' experiences of education

Educator

Delivered a penology programme in High Security prison and advised universities in England and Wales on developing education partnerships.
Ongoing writing collaborations with a former student.

Interest Group Lead

Co-Lead of Prison Education Group (PEG) – interest group of the British Society of Criminology Prison Research Network

Relationships with Staff

Respect & Trust

The Friend

*“Some of [the men] are **almost like friends because I've known them for so long**. You become blasé to the things they've done but not towards security. I don't really want to know what they've done. There was one guy who was completely insane, and he used to do strange things and I just thought he was walking about with this pen like a knife. He'd also eat his cornflakes out of his sink in his cell. The men who come into the workshop know if they start kicking off, the privilege of being in the workshop will be taken away and **I have that respect from them.**”*

(Phil, Teacher)

The Grandmother

*“I'm the grandmother. I can put them in their place. **I have sons and I treat them like that. I take some under my wing a bit.** If they nick stuff they know they're out. If they've been in the [segregation unit] and they ask for a bit more food, I'll say “go on then” - but it's important that they don't see kindness for weakness. **They all say that they think a lot of me and look after me.** They tell me about their grievances, often about things moving slowly. I sympathise when it's about something to do with a family member. They do see me different from officers because of the authority. I'm never aware that I'm teaching men who are doing really awful things - I tell them I don't want to know what they've done. **We see their human side in education.** If you've got any compassion in your heart you've got to have a kind word sometimes. I'm like a mother figure. **When you're a mum like me, you know that all you want for your children is the best and I tell the lads in here that I want the best for them. I do sort them out.**”*

(Lauren, Teacher)

The Foe

*“A guy had made a model steam engine, and it was sent to another prison instead of Koestler. When he got it back, pieces were missing, and it was damaged. He sued the prison. **Quite often things do get broken and it's deliberate.** Sometimes it's because of the jealousy.”*

(Sophie, Teacher)

Seeing Behind the Mask

*“If someone is wearing black and white, their role is discipline. If I'm in as a civilian, I am an enabler for something. **The relationship we have with prisoners is different and we often see a different person to those seen on the wings** and we're often told that by officers. Officers say, “you don't see the real person, you don't see what we see”. We're not there to act as the disciplinarian. I know if I was to wear black and white that the initial interaction would be different - there'd be far less trust.”*

(Tim, Teacher)

Relationships with Family

Redemption & Connection

George

*“While in Custody I decided that I Would educate myself, So that on my release I Can lead a more Constructive life and **Show my family that With all the pain and hurt that I brought to the Whole family I am Capable of making a life and future for myself.**”*

(Letter to PET)

Robert

*“My own pig-headedness of wanting to do it on my own led to me being a load carrier and I have been stuck in this profession because I can’t take the time out to learn my chosen subject. I needed to support my 2 boys aswell, so to leave work to study was never an option, **I want to make this terrible situation I have got myself in into some sort of positive**, so I hope you can see I have the motivation to make this work, if not for myself then for my 2 beautifull boys, although **I really do want this for me, my family & friends** can only benefit from me becoming a more rounded person by teaching myself more.”*

(Letter to PET)

Richard

- His crime and prison sentence had caused shock amongst the local residents in the village he lived in with his parents
- Elderly members of the village community often took flowers to his mother as if she were grieving a bereavement
- When discussing education in prison, Richard said *“I decided I had to do it”*
- He had spent a lot of time during his sentence thinking about his family and this encouraged him to do something positive
- On completion of educational courses, he enjoyed *“showing off” his certificates to his mother and would give her some to take home when she visited*
- This created a way for Richard to *stay connected to his family and keep his presence in their home through certificates of achievement*

(Interview, category C prison)

Alistair

*“My paintings have given me hope and pleasure in a very very grim environment. So much of prison life/sentences is punitive and about punishment that it is very hard to try and stay motivated. By doing painting **I have brought beauty into a place where there is none . . .** I have been able to hand out paintings when my wife and son has (sic) visited me and in some small way I have been able to **give my love to them thru the paintings.**”*

(Letter to PET)

Gregory

*“I believe education is “a gift”, for which I am extremely gratefull (sic). My youngest son is studying for a Marketing degree at...University and during a recent phone call he reminded me that **we should both graduate at the same time** if I get my head down and study hard?! So you see education not only offers opportunities for the future but it also **brings families together.**”*

(Letter to PET)

Darren

- Education in prison had had little impact on Darren personally, but it had made him more aware of the importance of education more broadly
- He experienced an **increase in the value he placed on his 10-year-old daughter's education**
- While in prison, he had become very supportive of her learning to the extent that he would reward her educational achievements ***“with books rather than sweets”*** to encourage her to continue in her efforts at school

(Interview, category C prison)

The Good, The Bad, The Evidence

The Good: Reading Projects for Family Connection

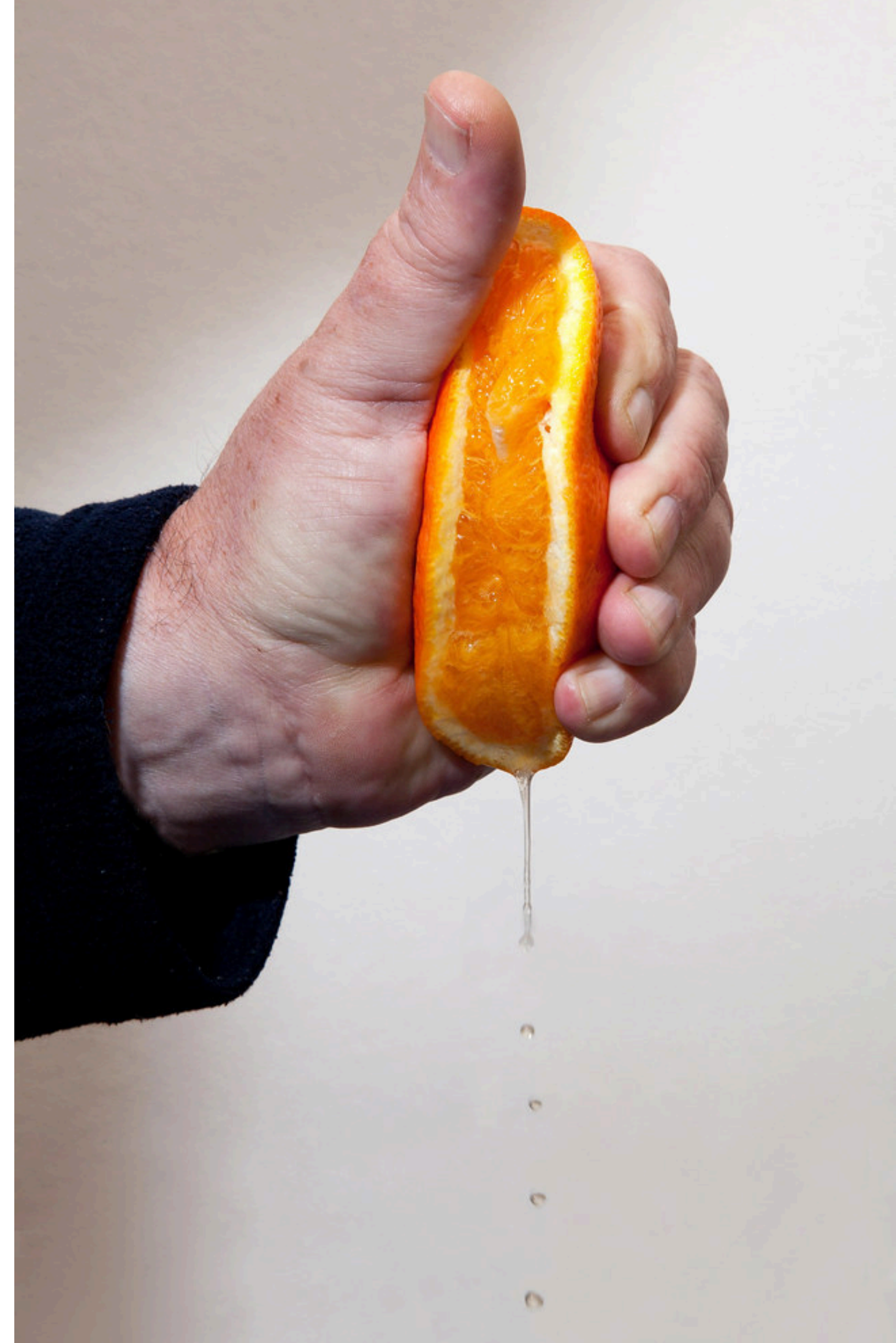
- Family literacy reading programmes increase perceived closeness and emotional connection
- Hearing a parent's voice reading a story helps children feel loved, remembered, and emotionally secure, reducing feelings of abandonment and anxiety
- Parents report feeling able to continue their identity as a mother or father despite imprisonment, which strengthens attachment and trust



Roberson, K. L., Campbell, T., & Hinkle, D. (2024) Invisible Strings Improve Feelings of Connectedness between Incarcerated Fathers and their Children: A Mixed-Methods Quasi-Experimental Study. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 75(2), 130–147.

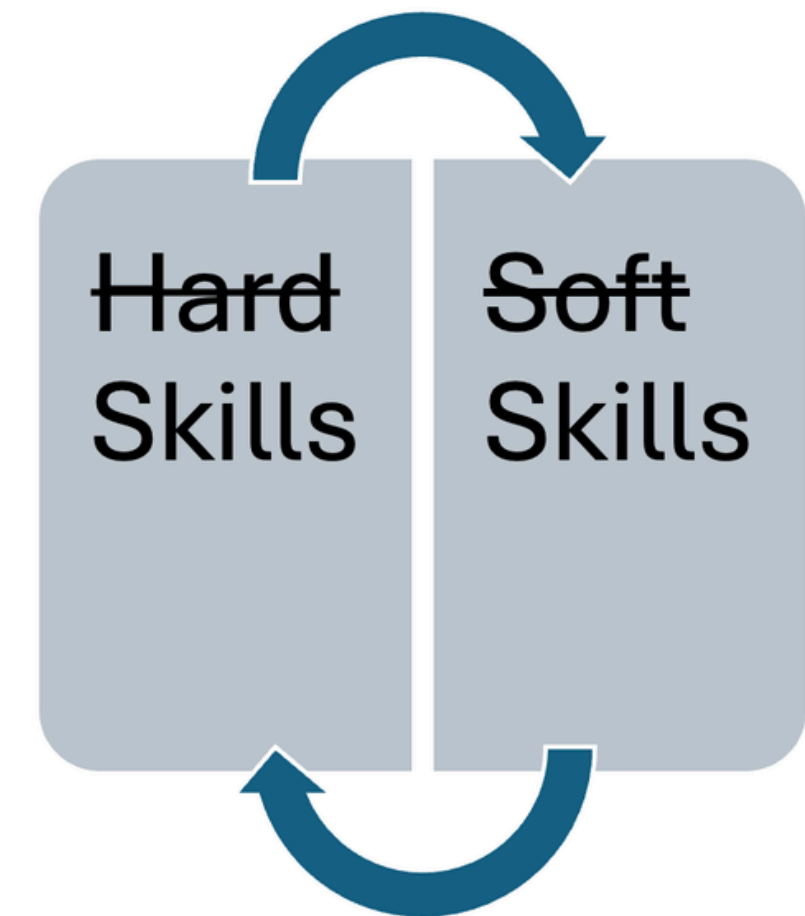
The Bad: The Education Squeeze

- Overcrowding
- Short sentences
- Resources
- Staffing
- Inconsistency
- Access
- Engagement



The Evidence: Imagining what if?

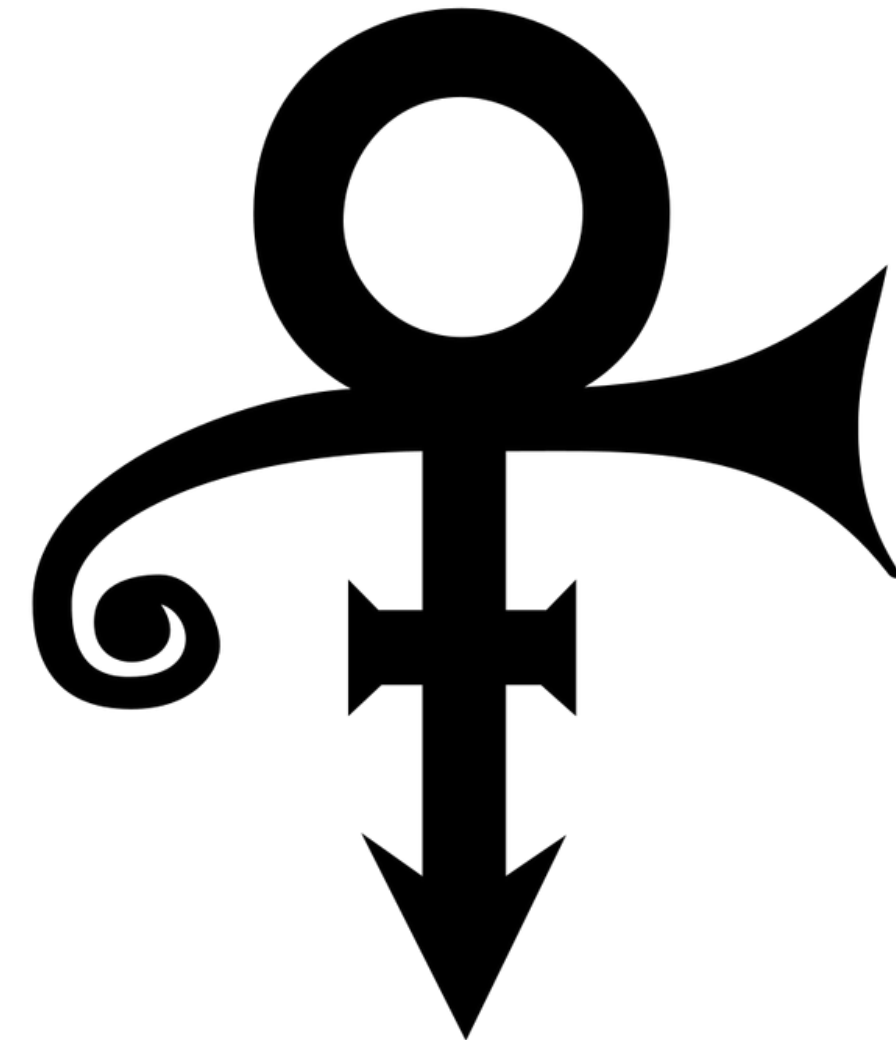
- **We know** the value of education in prison including and beyond employability
- **We know** education's 'place' in the policy agenda
- **What if. . .**
 - We removed the competitive nature of "hard" and "soft" skills in prison education?
 - We changed the "soft" language to give it equitable power?



The ~~artist~~ skill formerly known as ~~Prince~~ “soft”?

Potential to bring this conversation directly into the prison education context as it exists in other fields (business, management, psychology etc.) :

- The word “soft” trivialises essential capabilities (Parlamis & Monnot, 2019)
- Soft skills as a damaging label (Kellam et al., 2020)
- Long term dissatisfaction with the term “soft skills” (Kubátová et al., 2025)



Concluding Comments

Concluding Comments

01

Participation in education can both maintain and improve personal and social relationships within and beyond the prison

02

Education in prison is (of course) valuable for enhancing employability skills, but this is only part of the picture

03

The broader value of education needs to be equally recognised as a legitimate, meaningful purpose of education provision

04

To platform these outcomes, do we need to consider a reframing of “soft” skills, beginning with language, to strengthen policy and practice engagement with the whole prison education picture?

| Thank you

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Session Five

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Closing Observations

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