

Exploring Prison Education in Promoting Social Equity and Justice for Prison Students

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Received: Aug 25, 2026

Accepted: Sep 22, 2026

Published: Sep 22, 2026

Abstract

Prison education has emerged as a critical intervention for promoting social equity and justice within correctional systems globally. This article examines the multifaceted role of education in fostering transformative learning, restorative justice, and successful reintegration for incarcerated individuals. Drawing on recent literature and theoretical frameworks including Bernstein's pedagogic rights, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and restorative justice principles, this study analyses how educational interventions address systemic inequalities and support marginalized populations. The analysis reveals that effective prison education programs integrate holistic approaches encompassing critical consciousness development, economic empowerment, psychosocial support, and community engagement. Key themes explored include the C.A.R.E. model (Collaborate, Amend, Reintegrate, Empower), Islamic educational approaches to resilience building, educational leadership for social justice and critiques of neoliberal education policies that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline. Findings indicate that prison education significantly reduces recidivism when implemented through culturally responsive, collective care frameworks that prioritize human dignity over punitive control. The article concludes by advocating for sustained investment in comprehensive educational programs that recognize incarcerated learners as co-creators of knowledge and agents of social transformation, thereby advancing both individual rehabilitation and broader societal justice.

Keywords: prison education, social equity, transformative learning, restorative justice, pedagogic rights, educational justice

1. Introduction

The global landscape of correctional education has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, shifting from punitive paradigms toward rehabilitative and restorative approaches that recognize education as a fundamental human right. With over 2.3 million incarcerated individuals in the United States alone and disproportionate representation of marginalized communities particularly Black, Latino, and Indigenous populations within carceral systems, the imperative for educational interventions that promote social equity, and justice has never been more urgent (In et al., 2024). Prison education represents not merely a

mechanism for reducing recidivism but a critical site for addressing systemic inequalities, fostering transformative learning, and enabling formerly incarcerated individuals to reclaim their agency and contribute meaningfully to society.

Recent scholarship has illuminated the profound impact of higher education in prison (HEP) on justice-impacted individuals, demonstrating improvements in quality of life during incarceration and substantial reductions in post-release recidivism (Hogan et al., 2024). The reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students in the United States marks a pivotal policy shift, expanding access to postsecondary education for populations historically excluded from such opportunities. However, the effective credential on education extends beyond mere access to credentials; it encompasses the cultivation of critical consciousness, the development of entrepreneurial capabilities, and the reconstruction of social identities damaged by stigma and structural oppression.

This article examines prison education through multiple theoretical lenses including transformative learning theory, restorative justice principles, Bernstein's concept of pedagogic rights, and critical pedagogy to understand how educational interventions can promote social equity and justice for incarcerated learners. Drawing on recent literature published between 2023 and 2026, as well as comprehensive analyses of educational programs in diverse contexts ranging from South African correctional facilities to Indonesian deradicalization initiatives, this study explores the intersections of education, justice and social transformation within carceral settings.

The analysis is organized around several key themes: the theoretical foundations of transformative learning and pedagogic rights in prison contexts; the role of restorative justice and the C.A.R.E. model in re-entry programs; Islamic educational approaches to building resilience among former terrorism convicts; entrepreneurship education as a pathway to economic inclusion; educational leadership for social justice; and critiques of neoliberal policies that perpetuate educational inequities and the school-to-prison pipeline. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how prison education can serve as a catalyst for individual transformation and systemic change, ultimately advancing social equity and justice for marginalized populations.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it seeks to critically examine the theoretical frameworks that underpin effective prison education programs, with particular attention to transformative learning theory, restorative justice principles, and Bernstein's pedagogic rights. Second, it aims to synthesize recent empirical evidence (2023-2026) regarding the implementation and outcomes of diverse educational interventions in correctional settings across multiple national contexts. Third, it endeavors to identify best practices and policy recommendations for developing culturally responsive, holistic educational programs that address the multidimensional needs of incarcerated learners while promoting social equity and justice.

Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do transformative learning and critical pedagogy contribute to the development of critical consciousness and agency among incarcerated learners?
2. What role do restorative justice principles and the C.A.R.E. model play in facilitating successful re-entry and reducing recidivism?
3. How can Bernstein's concept of pedagogic rights inform the design of educational programs that promote epistemic justice and inclusion for marginalized populations?
4. What lessons can be drawn from Islamic educational approaches to resilience building and deradicalization for broader prison education initiatives?
5. How do neoliberal education policies contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, and what alternative frameworks can promote educational justice?
6. What are the essential components of effective re-entry programs that integrate education, economic empowerment, psychosocial support, and community engagement?

By addressing these questions, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly and policy debates regarding the role of education in criminal justice reform, offering insights that can inform the development of more equitable, effective and humane correctional education systems.

3. Data Collection: Literature Review Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to identify, analyse, and synthesize recent scholarship on prison education, social equity and justice. The review was conducted using an interpretive paradigm that recognizes knowledge as socially constructed and contextually situated, emphasizing the importance of understanding diverse perspectives and lived experiences of incarcerated learners.

3.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases including SciSpace, SciSpace Full Text, and Google Scholar. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to capture relevant literature: ("prison education" OR "correctional education" OR "higher education in prison" OR "incarcerated learners") AND ("social equity" OR "social justice" OR "transformative learning" OR "restorative justice" OR "re-entry programs" OR "pedagogic rights"). The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, theses, and book chapters published between 2023 and 2026 to ensure the inclusion of the most current scholarship.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) focused on educational interventions in correctional settings or re-entry programs; (2) addressed themes of social equity, justice, transformative learning, or restorative justice; (3) were published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian; (4) provided

empirical data, theoretical analysis, or policy recommendations; and (5) were published between 2023 and 2026. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on juvenile justice systems without relevance to adult correctional education, or if they lacked sufficient methodological rigor or theoretical grounding.

3.3 Data Sources

The literature review yielded 75 unique papers from scholarly databases, which were reranked by relevance to the research questions. The top 30 papers formed the primary evidence base for this analysis. Additionally, nine comprehensive documents were analysed, including: (1) a study on prison education and re-entry programs; (2) a systematic review of pedagogic rights and educational justice; (3) research on Islamic educational approaches to resilience among former terrorism convicts; (4) a critical analysis of neoliberal education policies; (5) a conceptual framework for collective care in criminal justice reform; (6) an examination of transformative learning and social justice in educational practice; (7) research on integrating restorative justice principles through the C.A.R.E. model; (8) a hybrid systematic review of educational leadership and social justice; and (9) a study on entrepreneurship education in South African correctional facilities.

3.4 Analysis Approach

The analysis employed thematic synthesis, a method that involves coding data from included studies, developing descriptive themes, and generating analytical themes that address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding focused on identifying key concepts, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and policy recommendations across the literature. Descriptive themes were then developed to organize the coded data into coherent categories. Finally, analytical themes were generated through interpretive analysis that examined relationships between themes, identified patterns and contradictions, and synthesized insights relevant to understanding how prison education promotes social equity and justice.

The interpretive paradigm guiding this analysis recognizes that knowledge about prison education is shaped by power relations, cultural contexts, and the positionality of researchers and practitioners. Therefore, particular attention was paid to studies that centered the voices and experiences of incarcerated learners, formerly incarcerated individuals, and marginalized communities. This approach aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on recognizing learners as co-creators of knowledge and challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate deficit perspectives of incarcerated populations.

4. Analysis: Interpretive Paradigm and Theoretical Foundations

4.1 Transformative Learning Theory in Correctional Education

Transformative learning theory, as articulated by Mezirow (1991), provides a powerful framework for understanding how education in correctional settings can facilitate profound shifts in perspective, identity, and agency among incarcerated learners. At its core, transformative learning involves a process of critical reflection triggered by "disorienting

dilemmas" that challenge individuals' taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves, their circumstances, and their place in society. For incarcerated individuals, the experience of imprisonment itself often constitutes such a disorienting dilemma, creating opportunities for deep reflection on past behaviours, values, and life trajectories.

Research on college-in-prison programs demonstrates that education serves as a catalyst for personal transformation, with participants reporting that "education changes a person" through the development of critical thinking skills, expanded worldviews, and enhanced self-efficacy (Conway, 2023). Transformative learning in correctional education systems plays a significant role in fostering economic inclusion through entrepreneurship, beginning with critical reflection that prompts individuals to reassess their circumstances, reform their behaviours, and prepare for re-entry into society. The application of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory further emphasizes that learning is most effective when individuals actively engage in experiences, reflect on them, conceptualize their insights, and apply them in new situations, making learning a dynamic, cyclical process particularly relevant to work-integrated learning contexts in correctional facilities.

The transformative potential of prison education extends beyond individual cognitive and behavioural change to encompass the reconstruction of social identities. Incarcerated individuals often carry "spoiled identities" shaped by stigma, labeling, and structural exclusion. Educational programs that incorporate critical pedagogy and culturally responsive curricula enable learners to challenge deficit narratives, reclaim their humanity, and envision alternative futures. This process of identity reconstruction is particularly evident in programs that integrate humanities-based education, which facilitates deep engagement with questions of meaning, morality, and social responsibility (Frascella, 2024).

4.2 Pedagogic Rights and Epistemic Justice

Bernstein's concept of pedagogic rights provides a crucial framework for understanding educational justice in prison contexts. Pedagogic rights encompass three dimensions: enhancement (the right to critical understanding and new possibilities), inclusion (the right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally, and personally), and participation (the right to participate in the construction and maintenance of social order). In correctional settings, where power relations are starkly asymmetrical and marginalized populations are overrepresented, the realization of pedagogic rights is essential for promoting social equity and justice.

Critical pedagogy, as articulated by Freire (1970), emphasizes that justice in education requires the inclusion of marginalized voices, recognition of learners as co-creators of knowledge, and dialogue as the key to pedagogy. In contexts where caste, gender, linguistic, and racial hierarchies remain deeply embedded, Freirean principles advocate for incorporating local languages and epistemologies into curricula and empowering marginalized groups to integrate their lived experiences into the learning process. This approach challenges instrumentalist and technocratic views that dominate educational discourse, which focus narrowly on enrolment, infrastructure, and performance indicators while rarely interrogating how knowledge is constructed, legitimized and contested.

Achieving educational justice demands epistemic inclusion—recognizing that whose knowledge is valued matters as much as access to education. Without addressing the epistemic dimensions of justice, educational reforms risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to overcome. Marginalized students may access schooling but continue to experience cultural alienation when their lived realities are not included in the curriculum, and gendered or racialized expectations limit their empowerment despite formal equality of access. In prison education contexts, epistemic justice requires curricula that validate incarcerated learners' experiences, challenge dominant narratives about crime and punishment, and create space for critical examination of the social, economic, and political conditions that contribute to mass incarceration.

4.3 Restorative Justice Principles and the C.A.R.E. Model

Restorative justice has profoundly transformed re-entry programs by shifting the paradigm from punitive measures to approaches focused on healing, accountability, and community support (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2026). Unlike traditional criminal justice approaches that emphasize retribution and incapacitation, restorative justice prioritizes repairing harm, addressing the needs of victims and communities, and facilitating the reintegration of offenders through processes that foster accountability, empathy, and reconciliation.

The C.A.R.E. model (Collaborate, Amend, Reintegrate, Empower) operationalizes restorative justice principles within re-entry programs, offering a holistic, healing-centered approach that traditional methods often overlook. The model emphasizes a community-focused, participatory approach to reintegration, prioritizing collaboration among all stakeholders—including returning citizens, families, community members, service providers, and criminal justice agencies—and shared responsibility for creating conditions that support successful re-entry. Each component of the C.A.R.E. model aligns with core restorative justice principles:

Collaborate: This dimension emphasizes engaging a network of stakeholders to address the broader social, psychological, and systemic factors influencing reintegration. Collaboration is crucial for creating comprehensive support systems that address multiple dimensions of need, from housing and employment to mental health and family reunification. Community partnerships with local businesses, faith-based organizations, and community groups are essential for providing mentorship, employment opportunities, and social support.

Amend: This component requires institutions to move beyond punitive aspects, reforming post-conviction policies that perpetuate isolation and exclusion. Restorative justice advocates for balancing accountability with rehabilitation and reintegration, fostering personal growth and rebuilding trust. Programs that incorporate restorative justice components often facilitate dialogue between victims and offenders, providing a foundation for ongoing accountability and support while enabling offenders to make amends for harm caused.

Reintegrate: This dimension involves incorporating impacted communities in the intervention process, leveraging restorative justice practices like community circles to facilitate discussions on crime's impact and develop plans for reparation and support. Community integration efforts reduce stigma and isolation for returning citizens, while accountability-centered practices help individuals acknowledge past actions, facilitating trust and acceptance. Community members

serve as mentors or provide job opportunities, creating pathways for meaningful social participation.

Empower: This component focuses on providing skills and support for returning citizens, including mental health services, substance abuse treatment, educational programs, job training, and housing assistance. Empowerment addresses underlying issues contributing to criminal behaviour and promotes successful reintegration by fostering self-sufficiency, confidence, and agency. Restorative justice prioritizes healing and addresses mental health concerns, helping individuals attain balance and control, thereby reducing the probability of reoffending.

Empirical evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of restorative justice approaches in reducing recidivism. National data reveals that approximately 67.8% of individuals released from prison in 2008 were rearrested within three years; by 2019, the reincarceration rate showed improvement at 27%, representing a 23% decline over 15 years, correlating with initiatives like the Second Chance Act that emphasize restorative justice and comprehensive re-entry support (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2026).

4.4 Islamic Educational Approaches to Resilience and Deradicalization

Islamic educational approaches to supporting formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly those convicted of terrorism-related offenses, offer valuable insights for broader prison education initiatives. The Yayasan Lingkar Perdamaian (YLP) program in Indonesia exemplifies a holistic and dialogical Islamic educational approach that has proven effective in strengthening psychosocial resilience, reconstructing religious and social identities, and facilitating disengagement from violent extremist ideologies.

YLP's Social Reconstruction Curriculum integrates four pillars: religious moderation education, economic empowerment, peace advocacy, and family-community reintegration. This curriculum aligns with social reconstruction curriculum theory, which views education as a transformative force for building a just and humane social order. The program creates an inclusive alternative community functioning as a safe space for disengagement from violent ideologies through empathetic and participatory dialogue. This approach is grounded in social-ecological resilience theory, which views resilience not merely as an individual trait but as the outcome of interactions between internal strengths and external support within a specific sociocultural context.

A key component of YLP's approach is the Jalan Terang Forum, which brings together former perpetrators, victims of terrorism, religious leaders, security personnel, and civil society. Encounters with victims' testimonies often become critical moments of awareness, prompting deep reflection and regret that mark turning points in participants' ideological and personal transformation. This process exemplifies Mezirow's transformative learning theory, involving disorienting dilemmas that challenge deeply held beliefs and enable critical reflection and worldview reconstruction.

YLP's program addresses multiple dimensions of reintegration challenges. Social stigma represents a significant barrier, as the label "ex-terrorist" often persists long after sentence completion, becoming structural stigma embedded in societal narratives of security, morality, and collective trauma. Former convicts carry "spoiled identities" where past actions overshadow rehabilitation efforts, resulting in exclusion, suspicion, and limited access to work, education, and community life. YLP responds through holistic, spiritually informed psychosocial support combining counseling, spiritual mentoring, and community-based dialogue. The approach integrates Sufi-based practices such as *muhāsabah* (self-reflection), *ṣabr* (patience), and *rahmah* (compassion), which support emotional regulation, moral grounding, and renewed purpose, especially where conventional therapy may be inaccessible or stigmatized.

Economic reintegration is facilitated through an integrated model combining vocational training, entrepreneurship coaching, and community-based employment linkages. Through partnerships with local businesses, religious institutions, and civil society, YLP helps reduce distrust and enables former convicts to re-enter the workforce. Family reintegration is also prioritized, recognizing that terrorism-related incarceration imposes emotional, psychological, and economic burdens on families, frequently resulting in fractured relationships and long-term disruption of family dynamics. Families often become "secondary victims" of imprisonment and its associated stigma, necessitating comprehensive family support services.

The YLP model demonstrates that deradicalization grounded in Islamic education constitutes a long-term, humanistic, and contextual process of social reconstruction, offering an alternative curriculum model to strengthen deradicalization programs and post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives. The principles underlying this approach is holistic support, cultural responsiveness, community engagement and spiritual grounding have broad applicability to prison education programs serving diverse populations.

5. Findings: Multidimensional Approaches to Prison Education and Social Equity

5.1 Transformative Learning and Critical Consciousness Development

The literature reveals that effective prison education programs prioritize the development of critical consciousness alongside academic and vocational skills. Critical consciousness—the ability to recognize and analyse systems of oppression and take action to transform unjust conditions is essential for enabling incarcerated learners to understand the structural factors that contribute to mass incarceration and to envision themselves as agents of social change.

Programs that centre critical consciousness development, such as the Day One program for Black boys, demonstrate the importance of culturally affirming curricula that validate students' racial identities and lived experiences while engaging them in conversations about interlocking systems of oppression related to race, class, and gender. This approach challenges deficit narratives that frame marginalized youth as lacking motivation or intellectual capabilities, instead recognizing their promise and potential. The possibilities framework applied in such programs identifies seven dimensions that foster possibilities for marginalized youth: caring,

dreaming, belonging, enjoying, agency, protecting, and affirming. These dimensions are equally relevant to prison education contexts, where incarcerated learners often face criminalization, low expectations, and tracking into remedial programs that limit their opportunities.

Research on college-in-prison programs utilizing critical andragogy demonstrates that education facilitates student development through processes that encourage critical reflection on social structures, power relations, and personal agency. Participants in such programs report expanded worldviews, enhanced critical thinking skills, and increased confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to society. The transformative potential of humanities-based education is particularly noteworthy, as engagement with literature, philosophy, history, and the arts enables incarcerated learners to grapple with fundamental questions of meaning, morality, and social responsibility.

The integration of transformative learning theory with critical pedagogy creates educational experiences that are both personally meaningful and socially transformative. By creating space for incarcerated learners to examine their life experiences through critical lenses, question dominant narratives about crime and punishment, and develop alternative understandings of themselves and their potential, prison education programs can facilitate profound shifts in identity, agency, and social consciousness.

5.2 Economic Inclusion Through Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education has emerged as a significant mechanism for fostering economic inclusion, particularly for marginalized communities facing structural barriers to employment. In correctional settings, entrepreneurship training offers formerly incarcerated individuals pathways to economic self-sufficiency that circumvent discrimination in traditional labor markets. Research from South African correctional facilities demonstrates that entrepreneurship education can enhance personal growth and self-efficacy among incarcerated individuals, fostering motivation and a sense of achievement essential for successful reintegration.

The DUT-Ngodini Bunduz Entrepreneurship Advancement Project exemplifies a comprehensive approach to entrepreneurship education in correctional contexts. The program aims to equip formerly incarcerated individuals with business acumen skills to support financially and socially sustainable businesses, while also rehumanizing learning by focusing on Ubuntu-centered dimensions of collaboration, community building, and connectedness. This approach recognizes that entrepreneurship education must address not only technical business skills but also the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of economic participation.

However, the literature also identifies significant challenges in implementing entrepreneurship education in correctional facilities. Many prison entrepreneurship programs are not optimally designed to enhance entrepreneurial intentions among inmates, suggesting the need for more structured educational approaches that integrate experiential learning, mentorship, and ongoing post-release support. Correctional facilities face operational challenges including restricted access, security protocols, and lack of classroom-based learning infrastructure. Content

creators must consider the unique backgrounds and psychological impacts of incarcerated individuals' past experiences when developing learning materials.

Despite these challenges, entrepreneurship education holds particular promise in contexts of high unemployment. In South Africa, where over 60% of youth under age 25 are unable to secure employment and graduate unemployment accounts for 9.8% of the total unemployed population, training incarcerated individuals in entrepreneurship is transformative. The provision of free education and post-workshop support for employment or business start-up can significantly improve reintegration outcomes, particularly when combined with access to capital, mentorship networks, and supportive policy environments.

5.3 Re-entry Programs and Collective Care Frameworks

Current re-entry programs in the United States are often limited, fragmented, and primarily focused on human capital development aimed at reducing recidivism, rather than holistic rehabilitation. Meta-analyses reveal that national re-entry programs reduced recidivism by only about 6%, and employment programs alone did not reduce recidivism effectively. These poor outcomes suggest that something fundamental is missing in understanding what will help returning citizens achieve stabilization and success.

Research on the lived experiences of returning citizens identifies additional needs beyond basic employment and skills training, including supportive relationships, opportunities for personal transformation, spiritual or religious connections, aspirational goals, a proactive mindset, and engagement in helping others. The empowerment tradition emphasizes that returning citizens must be privileged as experts of their own lived experience and determine their own journey, rather than having interventions imposed by institutional experts using risk assessment tools.

The Re-entry of Collective Care framework offers a conceptual alternative that highlights essential factors for successful re-entry: proactive provision of psychological, relational, economic, and ecological needs as prioritized by returning citizens themselves. This model emphasizes natural contexts that support healing and reintegration, benefiting individuals, families, and communities. It draws on international models such as Norway's principle of normality, which ensures that prison life mirrors the outside world to ease re-entry, and the import model, which integrates community services directly into prisons to ensure continuous support before and after release.

Australia's Throughcare model provides another exemplar of comprehensive re-entry support, offering continuous assistance from incarceration to reintegration with emphasis on culturally sensitive approaches, particularly for Indigenous populations, long-term family and community involvement, and integration of services across the re-entry timeline. Community-based models such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) rely on community volunteers to support high-risk individuals, focusing on both individual reintegration and community safety, and have achieved significant reductions in recidivism.

The literature consistently emphasizes that effective re-entry programs must address systemic barriers including permanent criminal records, racialized policing, and discriminatory policies that render successful re-entry extraordinarily difficult. Parole officers often serve a

surveillance function, enforcing strict compliance rather than offering meaningful support. Addressing these structural inadequacies requires fundamental transformation of the criminal justice system from punitive traditions to approaches that prioritize rehabilitation, transparency, fairness, and accountability.

5.4 Culturally Responsive and Context-Specific Approaches

The literature demonstrates that effective prison education programs are culturally responsive and context-specific, recognizing that incarcerated populations are diverse and that educational interventions must be tailored to specific cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. Research from Latin American countries highlights the importance of implementing educational programs grounded in human rights frameworks and socio-educational approaches oriented toward social reintegration through both formal programs (literacy, basic and secondary education) and informal programs (workshops and courses).

In Brazil, studies reveal that 68% of the incarcerated population has not completed elementary education, and educational programs, especially sentence reduction through reading programs (*remição de pena pela leitura*), have significantly reduced criminal recidivism (SILVA et al., 2025). These findings underscore the importance of educational access as a human right within prison systems and the need for continued public policies, culturally situated curricula, and structural investments to ensure that education ceases to be a privilege and becomes affirmed as a human right. The Brazilian context demonstrates that prison education serves as a "link of liberation" (*elo de libertação*), offering possibilities and perspectives for the incarcerated population that extend beyond mere skill acquisition to encompass fundamental human dignity and social reintegration (SILVA et al., 2025).

Research from Argentina examines the development of higher education in contexts of confinement within public universities, problematizing the experience of promoting the right to university education for persons deprived of liberty. This work emphasizes the importance of understanding educational initiatives within the historical context of national policies on education in settings of deprivation of liberty, transcending exploratory instances to account for decisions regarding educational inclusion, strategies, and actions deployed around such policies.

The literature also highlights the importance of addressing gender and diversity issues in prison education. Structural and institutional barriers, gender-specific challenges, and the need for specialized training for educators working in correctional contexts are identified as significant obstacles to achieving educational equity. Adopting integrated and collaborative approaches involving multiple social actors—including governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the prison system itself—supported by solid and well-structured public policies, is essential for overcoming these challenges and maximizing opportunities for social reintegration.

5.5 Addressing the School-to-Prison Pipeline Through Educational Justice

Critical scholarship on neoliberal education policies illuminates how market-driven reforms contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly for poor minority youth. Public

education is under assault by advocates of neoliberalism whose reform efforts focus narrowly on high-stakes testing, traditional texts, and memorization drills. At the heart of this approach is an aggressive attempt to disinvest in public schools, replace them with charter schools, and remove state and federal governments from public education, allowing education to be organized and administered by market-driven forces (Giroux, 2026).

Many public schools, especially those serving poor minority youth, have become militarized and provide a direct route into the prison-industrial complex. Many states invest more in building prisons than educating students, especially those who are poor, disabled, and immersed in poverty. In states such as Louisiana and California, there are more Black men in prison than in higher education. This disproportionate incarceration reflects systemic inequalities rooted in educational exclusion, criminalization, and structural racism.

Defending public education as a vital public sphere and a public good, rather than merely a private commodity, is necessary to develop and nourish the proper balance between democratic public spheres and commercial power. Political pedagogy offers the promise of nurturing students to think critically about their understanding of classroom knowledge and its relationship to social responsibility. It is responsive to the challenge of educating students to engage the world critically in order to struggle for those political and economic conditions that make democratic participation possible.

Central to this vision is the importance for educators to encourage students to connect knowledge and criticism as a precondition to becoming agents of social change buttressed by a profound desire to overcome injustice and a spirited commitment to social action. Academics, teachers, students, parents, community activists, and other socially concerned groups must provide the first line of defenses in protecting public education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation.

The connections between educational injustice in K-12 settings and mass incarceration are clear. Black boys are vastly underrepresented in honours and Advanced Placement courses and disproportionately overrepresented in categories associated with academic failure and school discipline. In 2021, only 67% of Black boys graduated from high school across five of the nation's most diverse states. Among all high school graduates who enrolled in college, Black boys represented 42% in 2011; by 2023, the rate had fallen to 37%. These disparities reflect systemic barriers including criminalization, low expectations from teachers, and tracking into remedial courses that limit college opportunities.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline requires comprehensive educational reforms that challenge deficit narratives, implement culturally responsive curricula, provide adequate resources to schools serving marginalized communities, eliminate punitive discipline policies, and create pathways to higher education for all students regardless of race, class, or background. Prison education programs must be understood within this broader context of educational injustice, recognizing that many incarcerated individuals were failed by educational systems long before they entered the criminal justice system.

6. Discussion: Toward Holistic, Justice-Oriented Prison Education

6.1 Integrating Multiple Dimensions of Support

The findings of this review demonstrate that effective prison education programs integrate multiple dimensions of support, addressing not only academic and vocational needs but also psychological, social, spiritual, and economic dimensions. Holistic approaches recognize that successful reintegration requires comprehensive support systems that address the complex, interconnected challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals.

The C.A.R.E. model exemplifies this holistic approach, emphasizing collaboration among diverse stakeholders, institutional reform to balance accountability with rehabilitation, community integration through restorative practices, and empowerment through comprehensive services including mental health support, substance abuse treatment, educational programs, job training, and housing assistance. Similarly, the Islamic educational approach implemented by YLP demonstrates the importance of integrating spiritual and cultural dimensions of support, recognizing that resilience and transformation are facilitated through practices that are meaningful within individuals' cultural contexts.

The literature consistently emphasizes that employment training alone is insufficient for successful reintegration. Returning citizens require supportive relationships, opportunities for personal transformation, spiritual connections, aspirational goals, and engagement in helping others. Educational programs that facilitate these multidimensional forms of growth and connection are more likely to support long-term success and reduce recidivism than narrowly focused interventions.

6.2 Centering Lived Experience and Epistemic Justice

A critical theme emerging from the literature is the importance of centering the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in the design and implementation of educational programs. The empowerment tradition emphasizes that returning citizens must be privileged as experts of their own lived experience and determine their own journey. This principle aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on recognizing learners as co-creators of knowledge and challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate deficit perspectives.

Epistemic justice—ensuring that marginalized voices and knowledge systems are valued and included—is essential for promoting educational equity in prison contexts. Without addressing the epistemic dimensions of justice, educational reforms risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to overcome. Curricula must validate incarcerated learners' experiences, incorporate diverse epistemologies including local and Indigenous knowledge systems, and create space for critical examination of the social, economic, and political conditions that contribute to mass incarceration.

Asset-based approaches that centre the promise and potential of incarcerated learners, rather than framing them through deficit lenses, are crucial for fostering agency, self-efficacy, and transformative learning. Programs that create culturally affirming environments where learners feel seen, heard, and valued can counteract the stigma and dehumanization inherent in carceral

systems, facilitating identity reconstruction and the development of positive, prosocial identities.

6.3 Addressing Structural Barriers and Systemic Reform

While individual-level educational interventions are important, the literature emphasizes that achieving social equity and justice for incarcerated learners requires addressing structural barriers and pursuing systemic reform. Permanent criminal records, racialized policing, discriminatory employment policies, inadequate housing, and limited access to mental health care create formidable obstacles to successful reintegration. Educational programs alone cannot overcome these structural barriers; they must be accompanied by policy reforms that remove obstacles to employment, housing, and social participation for formerly incarcerated individuals.

The literature calls for fundamental transformation of the criminal justice system from punitive traditions to approaches that prioritize rehabilitation, transparency, fairness, and accountability. This transformation requires shifting from surveillance and control to healing and restoration, from risk management to capacity building, and from institutional expertise to community-based support. International models from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Australia demonstrate that rehabilitation-oriented approaches that emphasize humane treatment, community integration, and continuous support can achieve significantly lower recidivism rates than punitive approaches.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline requires comprehensive educational reforms that challenge neoliberal policies, invest adequately in schools serving marginalized communities, eliminate punitive discipline practices, and create pathways to higher education for all students. Defending public education as a vital public sphere and a public good is essential for preventing the criminalization of poverty and ensuring that education serves as a pathway to opportunity rather than a mechanism of exclusion.

6.4 The Role of Community and Family

The literature consistently emphasizes the central role of community and family in successful reintegration. Families often become "secondary victims" of incarceration, experiencing emotional, psychological, and economic burdens that result in fractured relationships and long-term disruption of family dynamics. Comprehensive re-entry programs must include family support services, family counseling, and structured family reintegration processes.

Community engagement is equally essential. Community-based models such as Circles of Support and Accountability demonstrate the power of community volunteers in supporting reintegration and enhancing community safety. Partnerships with local businesses, faith-based organizations, and community groups provide mentorship, employment opportunities, and social support that facilitate successful re-entry. Restorative justice practices such as community circles create spaces for dialogue about the impact of crime and the development of plans for reparation and support.

The concept of collective care emphasizes that reintegration is not solely the responsibility of returning citizens or criminal justice agencies but requires active collaboration among trusted community members, families, employers, housing providers, and service providers. Creating natural contexts that support healing and reintegration benefits not only individuals but also families and communities, contributing to broader social cohesion and well-being.

6.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, several policy recommendations emerge for promoting social equity and justice through prison education:

1. **Expand Access to Higher Education:** The reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students represents a crucial policy advance that should be maintained and expanded. Postsecondary education in prison has demonstrated significant impacts on reducing recidivism and improving quality of life during and after incarceration.
2. **Implement Holistic, Culturally Responsive Programs:** Educational programs should integrate multiple dimensions of support including academic instruction, vocational training, entrepreneurship education, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, family support, and spiritual/cultural programming. Programs should be culturally responsive and context-specific, recognizing the diversity of incarcerated populations.
3. **Adopt Restorative Justice Frameworks:** Re-entry programs should incorporate restorative justice principles and models such as C.A.R.E., emphasizing collaboration, institutional reform, community integration, and empowerment. Restorative practices should facilitate dialogue, accountability, and healing for all affected parties.
4. **Center Lived Experience and Epistemic Justice:** Program design and implementation should privilege the voices and experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Curricula should incorporate diverse epistemologies, validate learners' experiences, and create space for critical examination of structural inequalities.
5. **Address Structural Barriers:** Policy reforms should remove obstacles to employment, housing, and social participation for formerly incarcerated individuals, including eliminating discriminatory policies, expunging or sealing records for eligible individuals, and ensuring access to social services.
6. **Invest in Community-Based Support:** Funding should support community-based organizations, mentorship programs, and partnerships with local businesses and faith-based organizations that provide ongoing support for reintegration.
7. **Reform K-12 Education to Prevent the School-to-Prison Pipeline:** Comprehensive educational reforms should challenge neoliberal policies, invest adequately in schools serving marginalized communities, eliminate punitive discipline practices, implement culturally responsive curricula, and create pathways to higher education for all students.

8. **Support Educator Training and Development:** Educators working in correctional settings require specialized training in critical pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, cultural responsiveness, and restorative justice principles. Professional development opportunities should be provided to enhance educator capacity.
9. **Conduct Ongoing Research and Evaluation:** Continued research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of diverse educational interventions, identify best practices, and understand the long-term outcomes of prison education programs. Research should employ participatory methodologies that centre the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.
10. **Advocate for Systemic Criminal Justice Reform:** Ultimately, achieving social equity and justice requires fundamental transformation of the criminal justice system from punitive to rehabilitative approaches, reducing reliance on incarceration, and investing in community-based alternatives that address the root causes of crime including poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity.

7. Conclusion

Prison education represents a critical intervention for promoting social equity and justice within correctional systems and society more broadly. This article has examined the multifaceted role of education in fostering transformative learning, restorative justice, and successful reintegration for incarcerated individuals, drawing on recent literature and diverse theoretical frameworks including transformative learning theory, restorative justice principles, Bernstein's pedagogic rights, and critical pedagogy.

The analysis reveals that effective prison education programs are holistic, culturally responsive, and justice-oriented, integrating multiple dimensions of support including academic instruction, vocational training, entrepreneurship education, mental health services, family support, and community engagement. Such programs prioritize the development of critical consciousness alongside technical skills, enabling incarcerated learners to understand structural inequalities, challenge deficit narratives, and envision themselves as agents of social transformation.

The C.A.R.E. model and Islamic educational approaches exemplify comprehensive frameworks that address the complex, interconnected challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals. These approaches emphasize collaboration among diverse stakeholders, institutional reform to balance accountability with rehabilitation, community integration through restorative practices, and empowerment through comprehensive services. They recognize that successful reintegration requires not only individual-level interventions but also structural reforms that remove barriers to employment, housing, and social participation.

The literature consistently emphasizes the importance of centering the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, recognizing them as experts of their own journeys and co-creators of knowledge. Epistemic justice—ensuring that marginalized voices

and knowledge systems are valued and included—is essential for promoting educational equity in prison contexts. Asset-based approaches that recognize the promise and potential of incarcerated learners, rather than framing them through deficit lenses, facilitate agency, self-efficacy, and transformative learning.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline requires comprehensive educational reforms that challenge neoliberal policies, invest adequately in schools serving marginalized communities, eliminate punitive discipline practices, and create pathways to higher education for all students. Prison education must be understood within this broader context of educational injustice, recognizing that many incarcerated individuals were failed by educational systems long before they entered the criminal justice system.

Ultimately, achieving social equity and justice for incarcerated learners requires not only expanding access to quality educational programs but also pursuing fundamental transformation of the criminal justice system from punitive to rehabilitative approaches. International models from Norway, Australia, and other countries demonstrate that rehabilitation-oriented approaches emphasizing humane treatment, community integration, and continuous support can achieve significantly lower recidivism rates than punitive approaches.

The findings of this review underscore that prison education is not merely a mechanism for reducing recidivism but a critical site for addressing systemic inequalities, fostering transformative learning, and enabling formerly incarcerated individuals to reclaim their agency and contribute meaningfully to society. By investing in comprehensive, culturally responsive, justice-oriented educational programs that recognize incarcerated learners as co-creators of knowledge and agents of social transformation, societies can advance both individual rehabilitation and broader social justice, creating more equitable, humane, and democratic communities for all.

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