Teaching basic skills to marginalized groups: blended learning in prison settings

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a study on the education provisions in the prison systems of Italy, Romania, Greece and Cyprus. Specifically, it attempts to identify commonalities and differences in the regimes and structures of the education systems across these four diverse systems. After, presenting the rationale for introducing an innovative program utilizing blended learning to teach basic skills to inmates, namely numeracy, literacy, budgeting and ICT skills, the paper presents findings from an empirical investigation in prison institutions in the abovementioned four European countries. Three distinct methods of data collection were employed: Structured interviews with inmates, in-depth interviews and focus groups with inmates, teaching staff and administrative staff. The data, both qualitative and quantitative were analyzed in order to draw useful insights, recommendations and guidelines for drafting a basics skills curriculum.

Keywords basic skills, blended learning, prison systems

Introduction

Education and training can and should be provided in numerous settings and circumstances, prisons being one of them. Even though international and European conventions (UN, 1957, 1977; EU, 2000) and recommendations have been approved and recognized so as to protect and promote prisoners' right to education and training, prison education is still one of the most pressing issue globally and more specifically in Europe since, on the one hand, the importance of quality education in prisons is not always fully recognized, while on the other hand, the education provided very often fails to meet the demands for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability.

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In an effort to address these very important issues partners from four European countries, namely, Italy, Romania, Greece and Cyprus sought and secured funding from the European Union in order to study the education provisions in the prison systems of their respective countries. The project titled "Prison Education Basic skills Blended Learning (PEBBLE)" attempts to identify commonalities and differences in the regimes and structures of the education systems across four diverse prison education systems by making use of blended learning in order to teach basic skills to inmates, namely numeracy, literacy, budgeting and ICT skills. The present paper reports the findings from an empirical investigation focusing on all those parameters that would ensure the successful fulfillment of the goals of this project such as inmates perceived competences in the four basic skills and willingness to engage in an innovative program that made use of blended learning and the existing infrastructure of the educational provisions in the prison systems of the four countries (i.e. existing curricula, content, modes of attendance and organization of Prison schools). Data were collected using structured interviews and qualitative personal interviews and focus groups with inmates and additional focus groups with teaching staff and administrative staff.

Theoretical framework

Prisons create a very distinct educational environment with multiple challenges in comparison to the mainstream education and training. Imprisonment in overcrowded institutions and the diversity of prison populations are mainly the reasons which constitute prison education a challenging issue across Europe. Today, the need for educational and learning provisions in prisons is more urgent than ever. Around 640.000 people form the European prison population and a significant proportion of it is low-skilled individuals. It is estimated that only 3- 5 % of them would be qualified to undertake higher education (Hawley at all, 2013). Moreover, research has shown that over half of prisoners have no qualifications of any kind, while 43% do not have the reading skills expected of an 11-year-old and 82% do not have the corresponding writing skills (Clark & Dugale, 2008). Low levels of skills and qualifications have negative effects on prisoners' employment opportunities upon release, which has been found to be one of the most important factors influencing whether or not ex-prisoners would re-offend. Even though prison education plays an important part of the rehabilitation process and can help inmates gain valuable skills which can be useful for future employment and further education and training opportunities, participation in education programmes among prisoners remains below 25% in most European countries. Institutional barriers, such as the shortage of resources and staff and the restricted educational opportunities in terms of content and level, as well as dispositional barriers such as prisoners' previous failure in education limit the extent to which prisoners can access learning within prisons. These are facts which apply to almost all European prisons and are no different in the prisons of Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Romania, which are the four countries participating in the PEBBLE project.

Based on these facts, finding ways to improve the attractiveness, quality and efficiency of prison education is imperative. Even though there can be no single approach to the arrangements for prison education which can be applied in all countries, it has been pointed out in numerous studies that the provision of education and training in

prisons should be contextualised at the local and national levels and tailored to the individual. Innovative teaching and learning methods, which focus on the individual learner and build on existing knowledge and experience, attract more prisoners into learning. This includes the use of ICT and of alternative methods of teaching and learning, such as blended learning, so that prison learners may be more engaged and their learning opportunities enhanced.

But what is the situation in the four countries that participate in the project? In terms of curricula and contents the existing infrastructure in the prison systems is a reflection of the diverse regimes that may be found in the four systems and are influenced by the conditions within which they are offered. In Greece for example these are linked with the national provisions of Second Chance Schools. Italy, and more specifically the prison of Pescara, is a notable case in the sense that it has managed to link the education offered in prison with an existing system of distance learning (the web learning system named TRIO, managed by the Region of Tuscany) which provides users with free educational products and services. Romania has developed specialized provisions based on the philosophy of rehabilitation that runs through the system. Lastly, in Cyprus the curricula and contents are set by the needs of the inmates and there is a lot of flexibility due to the fact that there is no accreditation and comparability with already existing programs. In most cases the delivery of the programs offered follow the traditional face to face mode.

The PEBBLE project

The aim of the research carried out in the framework of the PEBBLE project was to design and implement an innovative program in adult basic education to be delivered in prison setting. It was based on the Instructional System Design Model (Ford & Kraiger, 1995) and relevant literature on individual Training Needs Analysis (thereafter TNA, also referred to as learning needs analysis or training needs assessment) (Goldstein & Ford, 2002; Kaufman and English, 1979; Moore & Dutton, 1978). It implies that programs and treatment interventions should be focused on

(1) individual needs,

(2) circumstances of each prisoner,

(3) prison context and setting and the way inmate is inserted therein (including both the general prison context and the context of the prison where the programme is to be implemented).

The importance of conducting individual assessments of inmates-learners' needs and actual skills is highlighted in several reports (Taylor & O'Driscoll, 1998; Scheiner et al., 1988; Rossett, 1987). Individual learner assessments prior to the delivery of training or education help to ensure that it meets the individual's needs and enables the prisoner to enhance his/her chances of reaching his/her own learning goals. An additional aim of this approach is supporting prisoners in gaining employment on release (vast literature investigates the relationship between education and recidivism, i.e. Kaiser, 2010; Steurer, S. J. et al., 2001; Duguid, S. et al., 1996).

In our research we adopt TNA process-oriented and impact-driven approaches (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Robinson & Robinson, 1989) that allow us to cover both individual and context related dimensions that need to be considered for

the training design, planning, delivering and evaluating (Sweeney, 1999). Individual needs-analysis is the most crucial phase of the learning process as it establishes links between training, results and impact. TNA includes the establishment of individual learning objectives, and influences the way learning is designed, developed, delivered, and evaluated. The *individual dimension* related to the TNA process examines individual features and lives of inmates-learners such as his/her biography, individual aptitudes, emotional structures, behaviors, educational background and learning goals. When investigating TNA in a prison setting, prison experiences of each inmate concerned, such as time that can be dedicated to learning, tasks covered within prison, treatment interventions joined and penitentiary individual biography, should be taken into account.

People involved in the training needs analysis process include a number of actors such as: the Governor, senior management, teachers from the school system, trainers from external agencies, prison educators (that can vary from country to country, and prison officers. They can guarantee that adult basic education programs – in the fields dealt with in the research - are strictly connected to inmates' goals and objectives for improving their lives and their lives in prison.

The learning process could be based on the following steps:

1. Activities are built upon inmates' expectations of their individual and social life-improvement as for specific and significant aspects (i.e. being able to read and understand their conviction)
2. A learning project consisting of a combination of learning actions leading to the expected changes will be agreed in an Individual Learning Plan (ILP)
3. The learning project will include different kinds of actions: self-directed learning and group actions and mentoring
4. Every inmate will get support – based on available human resources and materials – to reach his/her own learning objectives
5. Each inmate is directly involved in the learning actions' implementation and has the responsibility for reaching the learning objectives
6. Learning impact evaluation will be based on evidences of the learning goals achieved

In order for the above to be implemented an empirical investigation was needed to look into the factors that would ensure the successful fulfillment of the goals of the project such as inmates perceived competences in the four basic skills and willingness to engage in an innovative program that makes use of blended learning and perceptions about the existing infrastructure of the educational provisions in the prison systems of the four participating countries.

Methodology

With the aim of gathering information that could be used as a guide for successfully implementing the PEBBLE project, a survey was conducted in agreement with all the partners that took part in the project. Specifically,

three distinct methods of data collection were employed: structured interviews with inmates, in-depth interviews and focus groups with inmates, teaching staff and administrative staff. The success of such an endeavor relied heavily on the collaboration of the respective participating prison's administrative and educational staff.

The research questions that all four partners had to seek answers to, were the following:

- What is the socio-demographic profile of inmates interested to participate in a basic skills program?

- How do inmates perceive/ evaluate their competences in the four skills:

    o Communication in mother language

    o Numeracy

    o Digital competence – ICT skills

    o Financial skills

- How necessary do inmates perceive these skills for their future lives?

- How do inmates/educators/ administrators evaluate the educational facilities in the correction institution?

- How useful do inmates/educators/ administrators find the objectives put forward by PEEBLE?

Data collection: Personal closed and open-ended interviews and focus groups

The structured interview consisted of around twenty questions in total. Four of them asked about demographic data including, gender, age, level of education and time and length of incarceration. There were questions asking the inmates to give a subjective evaluation of their skills regarding the four key competences of the PEBBLE project. In particular, the questions focused on their perceived abilities prior, during and what they expected them to be after their release from prison. Moreover, they were asked to indicate how necessary they thought the four key competences would be for their future lives. Lastly, the inmates were asked to specify how useful they thought the objectives of the PEBBLE project were and how motivated they would be to participate in such a program. All questions were closed ones and the response scales were ordinal. Following the structured interviews 10 inmates per prison setting were then asked to give more in-depth answers on similar questions to the ones in the structured questionnaire. This was deemed particularly important in order to get inmates to articulate as best as possible their thoughts about the issues under investigation. The last mode of data collection included three focus-groups with inmates, educators and prison administrators in order to extract useful information from all parties involved in prison education and thus accommodate as best as possible the drafting of the curricula and the sample content to be delivered in a way that would correspond to the real needs of the target population.

Sampling criteria

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in order to collect information from around 160 (40 inmates per country). The individuals selected should have had the following characteristics:

- ages 18-35
- both sexes (although it is expected that the sample will be over-represented by males)
- voluntary recruitment (indicating an interest on a basic skills program)
- fluent in the country's main language (regardless of ethnicity)
- inmates eligible to attend prison education and that have participated at least in one of the programs already offered in the correction facility

Once the structured interview was completed a selected number on inmates were asked to elaborate their views in open-ended questions. Selection was to be made by an in situ assessment of whether individuals were willing to engage in a more in-depth elaboration of their views. Lastly, 3 focus groups were scheduled and took place in each country with inmates, educators and administrators (4-6 participants selected for each group).

In total 151 inmates from all four countries took part in the first phase of the survey. Of them, only 7 were female and they all came from the Central Prison of Cyprus. Their educational level by country is presented below. The majority of the inmates from Italy, Greece and Romania had Lower Secondary School education and below. In Greece 22,5% had no formal education whereas in Cyprus nearly 60% of the inmates had some kind of secondary education and a significant percentage had postsecondary level education as well. Upon further probing into this latter percentage it emerged that this group of inmates had convictions on economic related offences (tax evasion, debts, etc.).

Table 6: Country and Level of formal Education

	No formal education	Primary school or lower	Lower Secondary school	Higher Secondary school	Technical secondary education	University, College
Italy	3,4%	3,4%	65,5%	20,7%	3,4%	3,4%
Romania	0,0%	10,0%	67,5%	22,5%	0,0%	0,0%
Greece	22,5%	15,0%	50,0%	12,5%	0,0%	0,0%
Cyprus	0,0%	18,4%	18,4%	10,5%	28,9%	23,7%
Total	6,8%	12,2%	49,7%	16,3%	8,2%	6,8%

Findings

Structured questionnaires

Below we present the way the inmates responded to the questions of the structured questionnaire by country regarding their personal subjective evaluation of the level they though they possessed the four basic skills.

Table 7: How easy do you find it …

	…reading a text?				
	Very easy	**Fairly easy**	**Average**	**Fairly difficult**	**Very difficult**
Italy	45,2%	51,6%	3,2%	0,0%	0,0%
Romania	65,0%	25,0%	5,0%	2,5%	2,5%
Greece	37,5%	27,5%	32,5%	0,0%	2,5%
Cyprus	71,1%	13,2%	10,5%	5,3%	0,0%

	…to perform additions with numbers up to 100?				
	Very easy	**Fairly easy**	**Average**	**Fairly difficult**	**Very difficult**
Italy	71,9%	21,9%	6,2%	0,0%	0,0%
Romania	55,0%	25,0%	12,5%	0,0%	7,5%
Greece	35,0%	30,0%	30,0%	2,5%	2,5%
Cyprus	65,8%	21,1%	10,5%	2,6%	0,0%

	…to work with a PC				
	Very well	**Fairly well**	**Average**	**Not very well**	**Not well at all**
Italy	20,0%	26,7%	30,0%	20,0%	3,3%
Romania	52,5%	27,5%	17,5%	2,5%	0,0%
Greece	15,0%	20,0%	25,0%	7,5%	32,5%

Cyprus	28,9%	23,7%	26,3%	10,5%	10,5%

…to manage your personal budget?				
	Very well	**Fairly well**	**Average**	**Not very well**	**Not well at all**
Italy	39,4%	42,4%	12,1%	3,0%	3,0%
Romania	20,0%	57,5%	10,0%	12,5%	0,0%
Greece	27,5%	37,5%	15,0%	12,5%	7,5%
Cyprus	42,1%	28,9%	18,4%	5,3%	5,3%

The majority of the inmates that were surveyed in this study indicated that they had a good or fairly good level in the four basic skills that the PEBBLE project deals with. However, of the 4 skills ICT and budgeting appear to be less well possessed personal skills. Specifically, there was an increased proportion of inmates that indicated that these skills compared with literacy and numeracy was average or below average. It is worth noting, however, that it may be assumed that the interviewees/ inmates were over-estimating their real competences and the reason that they gave such responses was the fact that they may have felt uncomfortable telling the truth about themselves. The latter point was further strengthened by the responses they gave to the question about the necessity of such skills for their lives and their willingness to develop them further as the next set of data present.

Table 8: How necessary are the four basic skills?

Literacy necessary				
	Very necessary	**Fairly necessary**	**Average**	**Not very necessary**	**Not necessary at all**
Italy	75,8%	18,2%	3,0%	3,0%	0,0%
Romania	32,5%	0,0%	65,0%	2,5%	0,0%
Greece	75,0%	20,0%	2,5%	2,5%	0,0%
Cyprus	73,7%	21,1%	5,3%	0,0%	0,0%
Numeracy necessary				

Italy	78,8%	21,2%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Romania	30,0%	2,5%	67,5%	0,0%	0,0%
Greece	72,5%	22,5%	0,0%	5,0%	0,0%
Cyprus	57,9%	23,7%	13,2%	0,0%	5,3%
ICT necessary					
Italy	69,7%	27,3%	0,0%	3,0%	0,0%
Romania	42,5%	15,0%	42,5%	0,0%	0,0%
Greece	82,5%	12,5%	5,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Cyprus	68,4%	18,4%	7,9%	0,0%	5,3%
Budgeting necessary					
Italy	60,6%	36,4%	3,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Romania	27,5%	27,5%	45,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Greece	72,5%	20,0%	7,5%	0,0%	0,0%
Cyprus	81,6%	10,5%	5,3%	2,6%	0,0%

The four basic skills were considered by the vast majority of the inmates that participated in the survey to be either very or fairly necessary. Moreover and more importantly when they were asked about how interested and motivated they would be to engage in a program that uses new technologies to promote these skills more than 9 out of 10 provided positive responses.

Table 9: How interested would you be to engage in a program that uses new technologies to promote these skills?

	Very interested	Fairly interested	Average	Not very interested	Not interested at all
Italy	97,0%	3,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%

Romania	80,0%	15,0%	0,0%	5,0%	0,0%
Greece	70,0%	25,0%	2,5%	2,5%	0,0%
Cyprus	78,9%	13,2%	2,6%	2,6%	2,6%

Personal interviews

Many of the issues that were explored in the questionnaires were further elaborated with personal open ended interviews with a selection of 10 inmates from each participating prison. Below we present some common issues that emerged from their answers.

The first important issue that emerged was the fact that many gave answers that connected with their everyday life and also to the necessity of having such skills to a level that would allow them to function better in society upon release from prison. For example, there were references to literacy skills being necessary to read prison rules and to improving their reading of books borrowed from the school library. Furthermore, good reading skills would allow them to have better communication with the public authorities, develop their personality and improve themselves. There were references that such a skill would allow those with children to help them once they got out. Similarly, inmates gave analogous responses to the numeracy skills questions. Even though it appeared that during the interviews there was an association of numeracy skills to mathematics it was widely acknowledged that people who possessed that skill were in a better position to perform their everyday tasks with more confidence and self-assurance. Regarding ICT skills it was clear to the inmates that ICTs were to be found in all aspects of contemporary life and because of its ever changing nature these skills were necessary to make it in the modern world. Among the issues cited for the necessity of ICT skills were the use of ICTs to secure employment after their release from prison, to communicate free and easy, to have free access to information on a range of topics and importantly the fact that computers and the Internet were a pleasant form of entertainment. Personal budgeting appeared to be a newfound concept to many inmates and once they found out what it meant they were quick to indicate that it was a very important skill that would make them deal with financial issues more competently both within the prison but most importantly once they were released.

A key element of the personal open interviews related to their motivation to engage in a program that uses new technologies to promote basic skills. This was a key issue in the study because positive motives to engage in such a program would ensure its success. The responses in the interviews corroborated the answers that were given in the structured questionnaire that such a program was a motivating factor in itself for someone to participate.

Focus groups

By far the most interesting piece of information from the three modes of data collection was generated from the focus groups. This rich form of information was pivotal for the success of the PEBBLE project.

Motivation

Regarding the issue of motivation and incentives of inmates to participate in a project for the acquisition of basic skills, inmates initially tended to focus on intrinsic motives. Intrinsic motives, however, though very important were not always enough. There was a need to introduce motives connected to privileges within the prison but also with issues that connected to the reduction of the prison sentence and the accreditation of the skills that were being taught. These motives depended on the profile of the inmate. Inmates serving long sentences would be tempted by privileges within the prison but others serving medium to short sentences would be tempted by reduction of the sentence. This was not something that was in place nor was there any immediate prospect for it to be introduced in the short term. As with inmates, teachers and prison officials also talked about accreditation and smooth re-entrance to civilian life which would connect to a continuity of the knowledge they acquired once they were released. The regime of sentence reduction as an external motive was not uniform in all the countries.

Usefulness of the scope and the target of the PEBBLE project

All respondents in the focus groups were uniform when asked about the usefulness of the scope of the PEBBLE project. Inmates focused on issues that connected with skills that would prepare them for their after prison life. Special reference was made to the ICT skills, which was thought of as essential in every aspect of contemporary life. Educators and administration staff also agreed on the usefulness and the necessity of the PEBBLE project. Teachers pointed out the necessity of the program to be implemented complementarily with the other classes organized and delivered in the school system so that the "human connection" between the trainers and the trainees was not lost. On the other hand, the administrative staff thought that this project would help inmates develop important skills and competences, such as their creativity, and would promote their knowledge on different issues. Generally, all actors participating in the focus groups appeared very positive and were fully supportive of such initiatives.

Organizational issues and teaching materials regarding prison education

On a number of instances there were references of shortages on issues of facilities and teaching materials. In Italy for example there were references about the efforts being made to compensate for these shortages by utilizing other available means. In the case of Cyprus two issues were noticeable. One was the fact that education in prisons was under the Ministry of Justice and the second was the fact that there was no accreditation in place such as in Greece where prison schools were under the national Second Chance School scheme. In Greece, however, there were other impediments in place such as many and strict controls involved in the operation of the Second Chance

School, making educational processes bureaucratic and inflexible, even in the case of activities which were cleared for implementation. In Romania too even though educators considered the educational activities well organized, they also believed that the activities were not focused enough in developing practical skills or professional competencies of the inmates. Furthermore, administrators considered education in prisons still organized in traditional ways.

Existing educational programs inside the prison and available educational materials

On the whole from all the focus groups it emerged that there were expressions of content about the programs on offer in all cases. The programs were frequently based on inmates' preferences and availability of instructors. The need for prison programs to be accredited by recognized bodies was paramount in every system. The heterogeneity of inmates' profiles attending prison programs, however, presented all systems with many challenges. Despite visible shortcomings which were unique in the different systems, the schools appeared to be well-equipped to meet the requirements of delivering a basic skills program based on a blended methodology. Access to the Internet, however, was a contentious issue due to security and other prison regulations.

Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented in this paper does not aspire to generalize its results to all prison settings and their educational contexts, but rather to address specific questions and challenges when introducing a novice program. On the one hand, the research aimed at assessing the perceived skills of a specific prison population and to capture and record their perception and motivation for basic skills learning. On the other hand, it hoped to investigate the appropriateness of developing and implementing a basic skills curriculum for offenders. The results of the research conducted set out very good premises for the development of a basic skills program. The development of the basic skills curriculum should be in line with the education needs of inmates and should be successfully integrated into already existing programmes and can create lasting positive effects that will ultimately upgrade the educational provisions within the prison system. Based on the results and findings of the research presented, the following recommendations and guidelines appear to be of particular importance when drafting a curriculum for basic skills (Vryonides, 2014):

- The motivation of inmates to improve their basic skills should be taken into consideration. This motivation is related to several needs concerning the re-integration into society and family life, entering the labour market and finding a way for personal fulfilling. Thus, particular attention is to be paid at the contents of the curriculum, which should correspond to the development of skills in different life contexts and dimensions.

- There is a huge heterogeneity among the prison population and the educational profiles differ significantly. Therefore, a basic skills curriculum should provide individualized learning pathways that ultimately meet the needs and realities of each inmate learner.

- A blended learning approach should have a balanced integration between the face to face teaching and self-directed learning. To a certain extent, the absence of human interaction (teacher and learner) raises some concerns among inmates.

- A basic skills curriculum should involve a formal recognition of the skills gained or developed by inmates. The development of such a curriculum should be made in line with the existing accreditation criteria. A formal accreditation for basic skills would bring a lot of added value and relevance for inmates, especially in countries where a rewarding system (i.e. reducing sentences for participation in educational programmes) is in place.

- A basic-skills curriculum should have a practice-oriented approach, focusing on developing skills, rather than sharing theories. Activities and educational programmes already existing in prisons are not focused enough in developing practical skills or professional competences for inmates.

- A basic skills curriculum should relate in a visible way with the interests of the inmates, it should start from the idea of empowering the inmates, increasing self-esteem and raising awareness of the importance and value of learning. Moreover, it should motivate and re-engage inmates with education and training.

- Particular attention should be paid to the training of teachers, educators, prison-officers, who will facilitate the implementation of a basic skills program. Basic skills provision is not a common educational practice, thus even if the education personnel master the methodologies and pedagogies for teaching adults, they may lack the subject specific knowledge and understanding – the didactics of teaching literacy, numeracy, financial literacy and digital skills.

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