

Training educators working for penitentiary institutions

Formare gli educatori per il carcere

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abstract

Penitentiary institutions are considered places of discomfort on the fringes of society despite the fact that they are required to re-educate and re-socialize prisoners according to national and supranational regulations. Training in prison – besides being a constitutional right and duty – is a challenge that involves the opportunity to reflect on and review prisoners' life plans and, at the same time, to go beyond the uniquely repressive model of penitentiary institutions. The achievement of these objectives requires professional figures such as educators and pedagogical operators with specific skills and capable of planning effective training actions upon agreement with the penitentiary équipe.

Keywords: *educators, prison, training*

Il carcere, considerato da sempre luogo ai margini della società e contenitore di disagio, è chiamato a rispondere al compito di ri-educare e ri-socializzare le persone reclusi, così come stabilisce la normativa nazionale e sovranazionale. La sfida della formazione in carcere – oltre ad un dovere e un diritto costituzionale – implica l'opportunità di riflessione e revisione del progetto di vita dei soggetti reclusi ma, contemporaneamente, di superare il modello unicamente repressivo dei luoghi di pena. Per raggiungere tali obiettivi sono necessarie le figure professionali di tipo educativo e pedagogico con competenze specifiche in grado di progettare interventi formativi efficaci e in accordo con l'équipe penitenziaria.

Parole chiave: educatori, carcere, formazione

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1. Educating in a “special” setting

Prisons are increasingly populated by individuals with complex life conditions such as drug addiction, mental discomfort, cultural and social deprivation, intercultural problems. Considering the complexity of the prisoners and the resulting educational emergencies, prison is and should be the place for psycho-social rehabilitation, for a new life experience and a personal chance of self review besides being the place of expiation. The professional figure in charge of following this training process is the penitentiary educator, currently denominated ‘legal-pedagogical professional’ in cooperation with other internal professional figures (psychologists, teachers, caseworkers, doctors) and external figures (volunteers, priests and educators from the third sector) with the aim of operating in the direction of re-education and re-integration in the social environment of the convict.

I have been dealing with penitentiary education for many years and since the first experiences I have reflected on the possibility to consider prison as a context of learning and training in a condition of deprivation of freedom. Thanks to a research work and to in-field actions I have come to the conclusion that this is possible (Benelli, 2008; 2012). The penitentiary institution, whether juvenile or open, district prison or jail, can and should become an inclusive place with the opportunity of active citizenship, a training context oriented to a developmental change. The basic concept of my work as a researcher and trainer in prison is that everybody has the right to education, “none excluded” (Valerio, Striano, Oliverio, 2013). During their reclusion the individuals called to take on the responsibility of their crimes have the chance – sometimes for the first time in their life – to reflect about themselves and to change ideas, priorities, values, and to improve and learn. For many prisoners their crime or “mistake” can become an educational opportunity (Torlone, 2016). In detention the imprisoned individual has the chance to review and ‘correct’ his deviant behaviour thanks to the educational paths offered by the penitentiary institu-

tion according to the Pedagogical Plan of the institution in which he is imprisoned (Contini, 2009).

We know that the penitentiary institutions are closed contexts subject to strict applicable regulations (Prison Rules, 1975), but there are spaces and interstices accessible to the educators where they can create opportunities of change, training, learning in the direction of active citizenship and empowerment and in order to hinder infantilization and passivization, that are still typical in nowadays penitentiary institutions (Benelli, Del Gobbo, 2012; Benelli, Del Gobbo, 2016).

The reform of the prison system came to light in the Seventies and it radically changed, although perhaps incompletely, the forms of educational treatment by focusing on the problems of humanization of the penitentiary treatment and of the social rehabilitation of the convicts as a purpose of the prison term. The new law introduced the social principles of re-socialization and re-education of the convicts through structured and precise action plans. In particular the article 27 of the Italian Constitution, sets forth that «Detention punishments cannot consist of inhuman treatments and must tend toward the re-education of the convict». As a matter of fact the first article of the Penitentiary Set of Rules sets forth that «the penitentiary treatment must be human and must guarantee the dignity of the human person».¹

Indeed the added value of the text of the set of rules is the aim to underline that the treatment must be individualized by taking into consideration the specific condition of the person. Therefore it requires a preliminary study of the individual's condition through observation, that is specifically separated by the proper treatment as provided by the law. As a matter of fact observation is an extremely important step in the educational relationship because, according to the Article 13 of the Penitentiary Set of Rules, it aims at identifying the personal and social conditions that have led the individual to commit a crime, at identifying his psycho-physical deficiencies and the other causes of social maladjustment. The observation is aimed at preparing an individual reeducational program including instruments such as education, work, religion, cultural, recreational and sport activities, contacts with the world outside, relationship with the family.

Very recently a new implementing regulation has been issued with the

1 Text updated to Law Decree July 1, 2013, no. 78 (in G.U. 02/07/2013, n.153) - Law of July 26th 1975/ 354-Rules on the Penitentiary Order and on the implementation of the deprivation and limiting measures of liberty.

Decree Law n. 230 on June 30th 2000, specifically inspired to the “Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners” implemented by the UN in 1955 and to the “European Penitentiary Regulations” of the European Council of 1987. The content of the regulations concerns the necessary humanization of the life conditions inside the prison. In the last few years there has been an increasing number of new emergencies inside prisons: particularly self-harm actions, violence and suicide (Gonin 1994; Concato, Rigione, 2005; Zuffa, Ronconi, 2014). Some texts precisely describe the different forms of self-harm or attempted suicide by some convicts, mainly at the beginning of their imprisonment. Therefore the challenge of educational actions inside the prison lies in the planning and promotion of educational settings and places, by sneaking into the tangle of the global institutions, in the interstices of the places where education was absent, by carrying out specialized actions addressed to the detained population and to the operators working there, with the additional purpose to prevent self-harm acts and antisocial behaviours.

2. The role of the educator in prison

The educator in prison is a professional figure working in a penitentiary environment, with the task of coping with new emergencies through specific training actions. The Penitentiary Reform ascribes to the educator the main task to plan and follow rieducational paths and the eventual social reinsertion of the detained individuals. Starting from the needs of the beneficiaries the educator is able to transform his pedagogical knowledge into an educational action through activities that he is asked to plan, coordinate and carry out through the actions described in the Pedagogical Plan of the institute. An important task of the educator is also to prevent and overcome discomforts and structural and organizational deficiencies typical of a penitentiary. Treatments and rieducational activities tend to promote self-fulfilment of the individuals with the aim to let them become aware of the chance they have to cope with their own personal fragilities and to value their potentials by preventing a self-harming and deviant behaviour.

The penitentiary educators’s task, now called law-pedagogical professionals, includes the involvement of the territorial entities, of the civil society, of the non-profit world and of the volunteering. Their role is to coordinate and network the resources involved in the resocialization of the convicts by building and encouraging synergies with the territory. Considering the difficult condition of the educator inside the prison and the ne-

ed to integrate the Pedagogical Plan of the institute with cultural, recreational and sport activities, there is the need of external educational professional figures specialized in the penitentiary field. The external educators, in cooperation with the director and the educators of the prison, are necessary resources for the realization of plans, courses and educational actions that facilitate the realization of the planned treatment goals. The educator in prison, among the various skills, plays a decisive role within the “Observation and Treatment Group”: a strategic place where is elaborated the pedagogical project of each person in prison.

2.1 Formal education in prison

In prison the school represents a place where it is possible to learn a sense of community and to begin an educational path thanks to the activities typical of the school education and didactics. The school in prison is a place in which the punishing society and the caring society come together: the first requires the ability to adapt to the detention regime, the second requires to activate participation and self-care. Thanks to the education and the training in prison during the term of imprisonment it is possible to monitor the convicts in compliance with the art. 27 of the Constitution, which considers them “responsible individuals”, engaged in their educational path. Sometimes the school in prison enables to become aware of the need of rehabilitation, redemption, compensation and reconciliation. The school needed in prison is as a place of personal growth and life in community, in which it is not what one learns that matters but who one is and who one can become. The school is an opportunity of development and emancipation and represents – especially in prison – the first moment of existential orientation, of planning a life by building a new way to be and to deal with others. Besides the school is the place of human promotion and it is here that the individual begins to discover his own identity: a chance to learn different ways to cope with reality; a chance to encourage the respect of the rules and the ability to reach minimum goals in compliance with specific regulations and procedures, to stimulate and experiment other problem-solving strategies, both personal, relational and social, to learn from and confront themselves with other points of view. Today the school in prison is considered not only a privilege for many but necessary for everybody: it allows to get an education, to learn Italian, to improve conversation skills among each other, with one’s own children and other people also about general topics. The school is as a preparation for the future life out of the prison, an instrument to increase one’s knowledge

and to get off circular thoughts. The educational courses grant certificates of attendance and are useful for the “outside”. It is already a known fact – although not enough analyzed – that there is an important connection between deviance and negative school experience, as demonstrated also by the low level of education of convicts.

With these premises the question is what is the role of the educator working in prison and how to cooperate with the penitentiary school. Good educational practices are those that connect the formal and the non-formal setting through a cooperational vision of exchange and implementation of the corresponding educational and didactic contents. If the two educational fields cooperate and coordinate through jointly planned activities within the Pedagogical Plan of the institute, the educational return will be more effective for the participants and for the penitentiary institution itself. We refer to the associations engaged in the study support activities born around the prison university units, to the newly graduated educators who have had the chance to take part to the cultural volunteering in the role of university tutors and to cooperate to the planning of cultural and educational actions (Migliori 2007).

2.2 Non-formal education in prison.

In prison, besides the formal education provided for by the Penitentiary regulations, there is the need to encourage – as already underlined – non-formal educational paths by internal and external staff.

Cultural, professional, recreational and sport classes are necessary to support the improvement of knowledge, skills, values and habits of the convicts. This is even more necessary in contexts where the educational chances are few; where they are missing, the risk is to perpetuate and increase the level of discomfort and implosion which can lead to a self-harming and deviant behaviour.

If it is true that the prison is seen as a cold place deprived of any affective feature, then the chance to promote innovative educational plans with the support of an external network formed by territorial and local subjects is a necessary and essential action for the development of the world inside the prison and of its human and complex inhabitants. The start of permanent and engaging training experiences and workshops is an important and purposeful incentive, above all if the connection between “inside and outside the walls” evolves in a coherent way. In order to grow, to survive and not to turn into the infantilization of the total institutions or into the de-socialization typical of imprisonment (Goffman, 2001), the prison

must become a place where it is possible to try to find themselves and re-build themselves despite the lack of freedom. Unfortunately it is not easy to deconstruct the natural de-socialization inside the prisons and to transform it into positive interpersonal relationship aimed at finding one's own awareness and of one's own needs. On the contrary, as maintained by Salierno, «Prison embitters, hardens and feeds interethnic hatred. [...]» (2001, p. 14). The educator of the penitentiary institute is the professional figure taking care of the setting by planning and reorganizing the management practices of the institute with a systemic approach in order to develop the human resources of civil society and their ability to listen and to deal with communication treatment, and in meantime to engage and use all the potential human resources already available in the institutes themselves: from the penitentiary police to the volunteering.

3. Good practices

In the various experiences gathered through the years as a researcher and trainer in penitentiary contexts, I have had the chance to study and plan educational activities aimed at the improvement of the conditions of the penitentiary population through some 'good practices'. They are educational actions that allow the convicts and the institute itself to improve their conditions and opportunities of change for the participants. After the assessment of the effectiveness of these educational actions, they become a permanent part of the Pedagogical Plan of the institute. The following are among the more common projects in detention places in the Italian territory that represent the "good practices" in terms of effectiveness and involvement:

3.1 Classes of autobiographical writing

There is an increasing diffusion of creative and autobiographical writing paths in the penitentiary institutions oriented towards a treatment with an educational-therapeutical purpose. In prison the convicts write a lot (letters, diaries, memories) and develop the desire to fix thoughts, emotions, events and needs through intimate writing and other ways. Writing represents an opportunity that can lead the writer to take time for himself, to reflect on his own existence, a sort of "escape", at least with the mind. The convict writes with the sometimes unconscious hope to be read. The anguish to be forgotten and not to leave a trace in this world appears fre-

quently in the autobiographical writing of the convicts: in other words it is an attempt to exorcize the fear of death and the oblivion of the memory (Benelli, 2012). Through the writing the individual proves his presence to the world and to himself by writing down his own perceptions, emotions, gestures and describing the space-time framework in which he finds himself. According to this concept each individual participating in an educational path can feel recognized, valued and facilitated in tracing, recognizing and developing his own knowledge and skills. Self-writing mainly represents the return to the center of subjectivity, whatever the social, economical and political category of the writer can be. There are many penitentiary institutions that include autobiographical writing workshops in their annual pedagogical plans, whose purposes can be all gathered in the writing: opportunity and space of reflection; a means to strengthen identity and self-esteem; space for the self care, a chance to redesign themselves “beyond the bars” and after the detention; educational/developmental moments; reflection and meditation in conditions of existential fragility; opportunity of improving writing, reading and communication skills.

The accomplishment of these goals can be facilitated with the support of specialized educators within specific paths coordinated together with teachers, volunteers and penitentiary educators.

3.2 Acting classes

Within the Pedagogical plans of the penitentiary institutions there is an increasing presence of acting classes and activities: one of the richest and engaging experiences for the involvement of convicts of the penitentiary institutions, aimed at diminishing the dehumanization typical of this reality. Since many years acting workshops have been representing an essential contribution in the prisons of the national territory (De Vito, Gamelli, Kubati, Paoloni, Purgatorio, Ricco, Tedeschi, 2015; Pozzi, Minoia, 2009). Being the prison a place of social and political tensions, the theatre has the following educational purposes: entertainment; therapeutical work; research. The contribution of theatre inside the prison, with the cooperation of educators and experts in educational processes, aims necessarily to a more articulated reconstruction of the relationships among people, of social groups and of the communities, by stimulating the physical-emotional dimension naturally present in the individuals. The educational return of acting classes in prison lies undoubtedly in the sharing of emotions expressed through the characters to be performed and in the creations of a

group mood which is ideal to stimulate the expression of emotions; this is exactly the most delicate aspect of the educational intervention. Acting means trying to show themselves to the others by interpreting someone else, or learning to show oneself in the way one is, without censorship. This is why in prison, more than in other places, this path must be accompanied by expert figures and with a solid pedagogical or psychological background. Among the main educational returns of theatre in prison we find: creation of a different life scene; activation from immobility; invention of a new space; filling silences with words; lighting up the darkness (Pozzi, Minoia, 2009, pp. 66-67). Among the most important and known projects at a national and international level we shall mention the acting classes in the Volterra prison, also because of the approach used by the Institution itself in the coordination of the acting, educational and other classes offered and present in the Pedagogical Plan of the institution (Buscarino, Giacchè, Martone, 2002).

3.3 In conclusion

In consideration of the new social emergencies the Bachelor's degrees and Master's degrees for the training of educators and pedagogists should be oriented also to the education in penitentiary environments as a professional opportunity for future educators that can cooperate with the various penitentiary realities and with various intervention possibilities: from the riorganization of the library to the support of parenthood up to the planning of reading, writing, acting classes and so on.

The purpose is to contribute to the transformation of the penitentiary institution into an "Educational town": where the right to learning and to the principles of empowerment provided by the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006) are guaranteed. In this way the prison can become an environment of learning and a context with the purpose to offer the opportunity to use the detention term as a chance to review and change one's own existence despite its complexities and contradictions.

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