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Abstract: Prison education is seen as a way to rehabilitate people, but little is known about what it means to former prisoners in low- and middle-income countries or how long its effects last. Pakistan's prisons carry a colonial punitive legacy and hold about 150% of their capacity. They offer literacy, vocational, and religious education with few resources, and former prisoners' own views of this education have not been studied. This study asked how former prisoners in Lahore and Sargodha, Punjab, understood the meaning, motives, and post-release effects of prison education. Fifteen former prisoners took part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed with reflexive thematic analysis and read through Empowerment Theory, Desistance Theory, and Convict Criminology. Education has helped the participants to heal their moral and psychological wounds, develop an identity that is not associated with crime, and restore dignity, a family role and a place in their community, participants shared. These gains were weakened by limited access, outdated curricula, discriminatory hiring, and stigma. Prison education can change people, but after release the change is easily lost. It will remain a limited value in Pakistan until the access is changed, curriculum is improved, and the recognition of skills and/or employment restrictions.

Introduction

Prison Education as a Pathway to Rehabilitation

Education in the prison has become an integral component of correctional rehabilitation. It goes beyond literacy and job skills and can support personal change, a new identity, and a return to society. Modern correctional thinking holds that prison should do more than punish. It also has the potential to reduce re-offending and promote social inclusion. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated that participation in education programmes reduces recidivism, increases employment rates following release and enhances psychological wellbeing, compared to spending time in detention (Davis et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2000). A large RAND meta-analysis found 43% lower odds of returning to prison and 13% higher employment among participants compared with non-participants (Davis et al., 2013). A more recent meta-analysis of 79 studies found similar results. Being enrolled in a program reduced

recidivism by approximately 15%, increased employment and wages after release, and vocational and college level programs had the largest gains (Stickle & Sprick Schuster, 2023). Labor market returns also exist for credentials obtained in prison, but these are variable and will be contingent on the willingness of employers to recognize these credentials (Ballou, 2024). In many wealthy nations, prison education is thus a standard element of rehabilitation strategy as a human right and as a public safety investment. Education also builds critical thinking, restores a positive self-image, and helps people form identities based on learning and responsible citizenship (Behan, 2014, 2020; Farrall & Calverley, 2005; Maruna, 2001). It can act as a “hook for change” by giving people a safe place to learn, encouraging them to think about the future, and offering qualifications that support desistance (Szifris et al., 2018). It also improves job prospects, strengthens family ties, increases civic engagement, and reduces misconduct in prison by giving people a goal (Behan, 2014; Esperian, 2010; Hawley et al., 2013). Desistance is now known as a process that occurs in a social environment and is not necessarily linear. It is not only the desire to change that keeps a person from moving but if the institutions are not ready to acknowledge and reward that change, people will revert back to a society and a labor market that are not prepared to do so (Doleac, 2023). Recent evidence also shows that education works best when it is combined with other psychosocial and rehabilitative support and that it is a core part of successful reintegration (Beaudry et al., 2021; Negi et al., 2026).

Prison Education in Low- and Middle-Income Contexts

Most research on prison education comes from North America and Europe, where programs are better established and better funded (Behan, 2020; Davis et al., 2013). Much less is known about low- and middle-income countries, where prisons may be overcrowded, short of resources and staff, and lacking support after release (Ngugi, 2021; Sharma, 2020; Ubah & Nwokedi, 2022). Findings from well-funded Western systems, where education is often linked to reentry and employment services, cannot be assumed to apply where prison itself strains basic infrastructure. To understand how prison education operates in these contexts requires evidence from these contexts, not from contexts with very different foundations.

The Pakistani Correctional Context

Pakistan is one such under-researched environment and the barrier outlined above is particularly strong in the Pakistani context. The nature of its prison system is still largely punitive and is based on the colonial era Prisons Act of 1894 (Khan & Saeed, 2021). As of 2024, Pakistan had 128 facilities holding just over 102,000 inmates, about 152% of designed capacity. Some facilities were at 200% to 300% of capacity, and almost three-quarters of prisoners were waiting for trial (National Commission for Human Rights [NCHR] et al., 2025). It was also documented that the cells constructed for three inmates were used to house fifteen people, and that the prison lacked medical personnel, clean water and basic sanitation (HRW, 2023). There are literacy programs, religious education, vocational training, and formal education, however, these are not continually being implemented due to the issues of overcrowding, poor infrastructure, lack of funding, and lack of qualified teachers (Ali, 2019; Farooq & Irfan, 2018; Tariq et al., 2022). Women prisoners face added barriers to learning (Achakzai et al., 2015). Stigma often attaches to former prisoners, discrimination occurs in the labor market, and almost no support is provided for reintegration after release (Zafar 2020). Here, prison education is about skills but it's also about restoring dignity, identity and hope in a system that imposes structural barriers on the road to rehabilitation.

Research Gap and the Present Study

Prison education is widely seen as a key rehabilitative tool, but little research in Pakistan has asked

former prisoners how they understand its meaning and long-term effects. Earlier work has mostly looked at institutional conditions and at how policies or programs are carried out, and there is little interest in prisoners lived experiences after release (Ali, 2019; Farooq & Irfan, 2018). That is important because rehabilitation, as defined by any set of official statistics, is lived, sustained or abandoned by people, in a social context that program evaluations rarely reflect.

This study explores how former prisoners in Punjab, Pakistan, understand the meanings, motives, and post-release effects of prison education. It draws on in-depth interviews with 15 former prisoners from Lahore and Sargodha, uses reflexive thematic analysis, and is informed by Empowerment Theory, Desistance Theory, and Convict Criminology. It concentrates on the voices of former prisoners, includes perspectives from the Global South, synthesises these theories into a resource-poor correctional environment and provides a contribution to rehabilitation policy and prison education reform in Pakistan.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes threefold. It is an empirical account; it's one of the first accounts of prison education in Pakistan from the perspective of former prisoners, not records or policy documents; and it is evidence that continues to be primarily collected in North American, European, and a handful of middle-income contexts (Barua, 2018; Ngugi, 2021; Sharma, 2020). It, theoretically, integrates Empowerment Theory, Desistance Theory and Convict Criminology into one frame. This is an example of the way that the same person's narrative might be evidence of personal empowerment, identity-based desistance, and structural exclusion, which is not often attempted even in higher income contexts. In practice, it identifies areas where there is an incongruity between policy discourse and institutional action in Pakistan and these form the basis of the recommendations later in the paper.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do former prisoners in Punjab understand the meanings and motivations associated with participation in prison education?

RQ2. How do they perceive the influence of prison education on their lives following release?

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the meanings, motives, and post-release effects of prison education requires theories that link personal change to wider structures of exclusion and rehabilitation. Empowerment Theory, Desistance Theory and Convict Criminology are used to inform the analysis of prisoner accounts here. Together they help show prison education as a personal resource, a trigger for behavior change, and a place of resistance to structural marginalization.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory focuses on the concepts of access to resources, self-efficacy and critical awareness as methods of gaining control over one's life (Zimmerman, 2000). Educational empowerment can be constrained in prisons by institutional power and punitive environments, but may still be present (Andrews & Bonta, 2014; Costelloe & Warner, 2014). Education lets prisoners learn to read or gain new skills, and it can also build confidence and self-esteem and help them imagine a different future (Behan, 2014). Empowerment works on several levels: intrapersonal (higher self-esteem), interactional (better social relations), and behavioral (agency in pursuing pro-social goals). This micro-level view helps explain how prison education in a low-resource setting may support identity reconstruction and resilience among learners in Punjab's jails.

Desistance Theory

Desistance Theory examines the gradual disengagement from offending, both on the part of the

individual and the supports they have or lack in their environment (Farrall & Calverley, 2005; Maruna, 2001). Change of identity is at the core. Individuals develop new schemas of “worker,” “parent,” or “student,” and become linked to pro-social positions. Prison education can be a turning point by creating chances for reflection, hope, and reintegration (King, 2013; Schuller, 2009). Education can help ex-prisoners envision themselves as able to contribute instead of “offenders,” especially in countries where stigma and exclusion are prevalent, such as Pakistan. This meso-level frame is applied to examine participants' narratives on behaviour change, employment and a new law-abiding orientation as markers of desistance facilitated through education.

Convict Criminology

Convict Criminology is a critical and macro lens that centres the voice of prisoners and former prisoners in criminological research. It disrupts the dominant narrative that marginalises or negates their lived experience (Newbold et al., 2008; Ross & Richards, 2003). It does not only focus on prisoners' views. It also challenges the notion that correctional education is a state program and envisages it as a lived, interpreted, resisted practice. This matters in Pakistan, where marginalized groups are often neglected and research on prison education has lacked the voices of those being educated (Zafar, 2020). This perspective situates the results within the lived experiences of past prisoners and facilitates scholarship that appreciates narrative as a means to theory and policy in criminology.

Integrative Framework

Together, these frameworks give a multi-level lens for studying prison education. The micro level of Empowerment Theory demonstrates how education fosters self-esteem, confidence, and agency. At the meso level, Desistance Theory shows how education can lead to a new identity and pro-social behavior change. Structural inequality is called into question and prisoners' voices remain central in the understanding of educational practice at the macro level in Convict Criminology. From these viewpoints, the study treats prison education in Punjab as a rehabilitation instrument and additionally as a foundation of empowerment, identity alteration and resistance in a system of incarceration that has historically been about control instead of reintegration.

Methodology

Study Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive design to learn about the experiences of former prisoners who took part in prison education programs while held in Punjab prisons. A qualitative approach fit because it allows an in-depth understanding of how people make meaning from complex social experiences. It also allows researchers to explore what participants think about rehabilitation, identity reconstruction and reintegration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study did not aim to assess specific outcomes. It aimed to understand how participants saw the value of education in prison, how taking part affected their lives inside and outside prison, and what barriers limited its long-term effect.

Study Setting

The study took place in the districts of Lahore and Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan. Participants had served custodial sentences in facilities in these districts and had taken part in at least one formal prison education program. These programs included literacy, secondary academic education, vocational education, and religious education. Interviews were conducted following release, but centered on educational experiences within prison and subsequent impact on reintegration within the community.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a widely accepted way to select information-rich cases that give detailed insight into the topic (Patton, 2015). To be included, participants had to (1)

have served a prison sentence in Lahore or Sargodha, (2) have taken part in at least one formal prison education program, and (3) have been out of prison for at least six months, so they could reflect on life after release.

A total of 15 former prisoners took part. The number was determined based on the concept of information power, where studies with a narrow aim, relatively homogenous sample and rich accounts require fewer participants (Malterud et al., 2016). Interviewing stopped when the data had enough depth, variety, and conceptual richness to answer the study aims. This follows the view that in similar samples, more interviews add little to the analysis (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

The data were gathered by conducting individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews from January to May 2025. Interviews were conducted either in Urdu or Punjabi depending on the preferences of the participant and they lasted for an average of 60 to 90 minutes. The interview guide included questions on the motivation for participation in prison education, experiences in prison education, impact on identity and behavior, work and social reintegration following release and challenges in prison and the community.

Participants chose where to be interviewed, to protect privacy and comfort. Interviews followed written informed consent and were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews were translated into English by bilingual members of the research team from Urdu and Punjabi. They compared the translations repeatedly with the original recordings to keep participants' intended meaning and culturally specific expressions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke (2021). RTA was selected because of its ability to generate rich and interpretive accounts of participants' experiences and its view that themes are created during the researchers' interactions with the data rather than being discovered.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six recursive phases: (1) becoming familiar with the data by reading transcripts repeatedly, (2) generating initial codes, (3) constructing preliminary themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes against the full dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the final analysis. Coding was done by hand and was inductive, meaning patterns of meaning came from participants' stories and were not imposed on them. The research team discussed coding and theme development throughout, to deepen the analysis and keep interpretations close to participants' accounts.

Reflexivity and Positionality

The research team comprised sociologists, criminologists and people with varied perspectives on imprisonment, rehabilitation, social exclusion and reintegration. Reflexivity was a constant element throughout the study because qualitative knowledge is created collectively by the researchers and the participants. Researchers maintained reflexive field notes and analytic memos to consider the influence of their disciplines, professional experiences, and assumptions on data collection and interpretation. Consistent team discussion enabled to test emerging interpretations, challenge individual assumptions, and generate alternative interpretations. This process went on continually. This made the analysis more transparent and kept the findings more within the context of participants' everyday experience rather than the researchers' preconceptions.

Rigor

Trustworthiness was addressed using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and

transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement with the data, follow up questioning during interviews and shared interpretation within the multidisciplinary team supported credibility. The methodological decisions, coding, and theme development were supported by a detailed audit trail, which contributed to the dependability. Reflexive memos and verbatim quotations which connect data to interpretation were used to support confirmability. Transferability is supported by detailed descriptions of the study context, the participants, and the analytic procedures, so readers can judge whether the results apply to similar correctional settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted from the appropriate Departmental Ethical Review Board prior to the start of the study. All the participants were voluntary and all participants gave written informed consent prior to data collection. The aims of the study, the confidentiality procedures, that participants could decline any question, and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty were explained.

To protect anonymity, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were given codes (P-1 to P-15) in all study records and publications. Discussions of incarceration were sensitive, and interviewers were mindful of participants' emotional state, with information on psychological support services made available if anyone became distressed during or after the interview.

Findings

Meanings and Motives of Prison Education

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about prison education as a catalyst for personal, moral and psychological transformation rather than as an obligation. Learning gave them practical legal knowledge, a way to build an identity apart from crime, a way to rebuild self-esteem, and a way to give structure and purpose to otherwise wasted prison time. There was no education as a single event for the participants. They saw it as a change in who they were and in how they saw themselves and society.

Participant 1 shared his reflections on how prison education altered his perspective on the law, ethics and civic duty:

Before I came to prison, I had no real understanding of the law or my rights as a citizen. Studying legal and religious texts together in the classroom gave me an entirely new lens through which to judge right and wrong. It did not seem like punishment, but like a lesson in how to be a responsible citizen in society. (P-1)

Participant 4 accounts for a similar, but different process: reconstruction of self-image. He explained that education helped him replace his identity as a criminal with that of a learner:

I used to be a hot-tempered person, quick to react to anything. But slowly, sitting in that classroom every day, I began to see myself differently, as a student, not a criminal. Whenever conflict arose, I would remind myself that a student does not behave that way, and that thought alone changed how I carried myself. (P-4)

For Participant 7, education was more about restoration of dignity than identity change. He explained how completing a literacy course had helped him gain self-worth after years of feeling devalued in the prison system:

In prison, people look down on you constantly; you are made to feel worthless. But the day I completed my literacy course; I felt genuine pride for the first time in years. For a moment, I was not just a prisoner number. I was someone who had achieved something. (P-7)

Participant 10 spoke about another effect: the way education transformed the experience of time, making it more active than waiting:

The most part of prison is waiting for food, waiting to be released, waiting for time to pass, waiting. The

classroom felt like stepping into a different world altogether, one where I was not simply an inmate marking days, but a person with something to work toward. (P-10)

These accounts demonstrate how prison education operated in various ways, and in concert. It encouraged critical self-reflection, helped build a new self, restored dignity, and gave hope. These processes let participants experience prison also as a time of personal growth.

Post-Release Impacts

Outside prison, participants spoke of education as a fragile but valuable asset that influenced their work opportunities, family dynamics, criminal turnover and reintegration into society. Its practical use was often limited by weak structural support, but participants consistently named their education, and the confidence and legitimacy it gave them, as an asset for reintegration.

Participant 3 said his certificate was a real asset, and his only one, when he re-entered the job market after release:

Upon my release from prison, I was really only able to offer the prospective employer my certificate. Without that paper, and without the confidence the classroom had given me, I would never have found the courage to even ask for a job interview. (P-3)

The benefits described by Participant 6 were indirect, in the form of work he found, and the family role that work restored:

After my release, the first thing I wanted to do was support my family again. It took nearly two months, but when I finally sent money home, my wife cried on the phone. It meant I was her husband again, not just an ex-convict. (P-6)

Participant 11 linked his education directly to staying away from crime and said it helped him turn down his old associates after release:

I told my former friends that I was not going to do the same things anymore. I told them plainly I have studied now, I understand the consequences, and I am not going back to that life. (P-11)

Participant 15 described another use of education, as a way to deal with stigma in the community:

Whenever people in my community asked what I had done during my time in prison, I told them I had studied and earned a certificate. It was like it became a shield, something I could use to protect myself from the disgrace and suspicion people usually give prisoners. (P-15)

Together, these accounts show that prison education helped with behavior change, family reintegration, desistance from crime, and a positive identity that countered the stigma of incarceration.

Barriers and Constraints

Even while recognizing these benefits, participants repeatedly named structural barriers that limited the long-term effect of prison education. Few programs were available, curricula were outdated, employment policies were discriminatory, and social stigma remained strong. All of these undermined the capacity of rehabilitation to transform lives.

Participant 2 noted that there is unequal education within prison:

Not everyone in prison gets the chance to enrol in these programs. Lacks were simply not enough seats, teachers or resources. It was an unfair situation, a privilege rather than a right to be there for rehabilitation. (P-2)

Participant 5 brought up a related but distinctly different issue that was courses in prison were not relevant to life afterwards:

The textbooks we studied from were old and out dated, and the courses mostly taught basic literacy or simple trades like tailoring. It was a distraction and a comfort, but it wasn't enough to ready anyone for the harsh realities of life and work outside. (P-5)

Participant 9 described a direct institutional barrier, which was discrimination when looking for formal work with his qualifications:

After my release, I tried to apply for a government job using my new qualifications, but I was told ex-prisoners are barred from such positions. The system instructs us to transform and improve ourselves, but the same system stops us from making any progress. (P-9)

Participant 13 described a barrier that did not depend on institutional policy, which was community stigma that continued whatever the person had achieved in education:

No matter how many certificates you earn in prison, once people learn you have been to jail, none of that seems to matter. They still look at you and say, “You cannot be trusted” as if the education counted for nothing. (P-13)

These accounts show a lasting tension between the rehabilitative aims of prison education and the structural conditions participants met after release. Education was associated with real change in people but its benefits were constrained by institutional exclusion, labor market discrimination and stigma.

Discussion

This study examined how former prisoners in Punjab make sense of prison education, including what it meant while they were incarcerated and how they see its effect now that they are back in their communities. The findings from Empowerment Theory, Desistance Theory and Convict Criminology indicate that education served as a personal resource, as a means of altering identity and as a space where the boundaries of the system's promise of rehabilitation were made known.

Learning as Moral and Psychological Repair

Classroom learning experiences were not neutral or purely ‘how-to’. In some cases, it was used as moral repair, as they were able to consider themselves and their actions anew, based on a set of legal and religious concepts they had never encountered in a formal setting. This aligns with Zimmerman's (2000) definition of empowerment as critical awareness combined with practice and the Andrews and Bonta (2014) suggestion that cognitive reframing might be as important as behavioral training in rehabilitation. The mix of legal and religious content seen here suggests that empowerment is built through whatever moral vocabulary is available in the local setting (Carrington et al., 2018; Jewkes & Wright, 2022).

Self-worth was another theme. Prison classrooms are “islands of normality”, as described by Costelloe and Warner (2014) and Behan (2014), which temporarily set aside the degradation of the prison environment. The same process is at work with participants' reports on valuing themselves as “someone” instead of “prisoner number”, even though it is a different process. The space the classroom generated, born of a small but powerful act – completion of a literacy course – was not the result of an institutional plan to provide dignity. It came from the learners recovering it themselves (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2020).

Education also influenced the way in which participants spent time in prison. The custodial routine focused on waiting and the classroom provided participants with a sense of purpose and progress in their time. This is consistent with research that shows that education lowers the psychological price of incarceration by providing prisoners with some target to pursue rather than endure (Hawley et al., 2013).

Becoming Someone Else: Identity Work and the Turn from Offending

The strongest evidence that behavior change resulted from a change in self-concept emerged from those participants who purposefully assumed the role of “student,” rather than “criminal.” This mirrors Maruna's (2001) “redemption script” and Farrall and Calverley's (2005) emphasis on the role of role

adoption in securing desistance that is not merely situational but enduring. Participants used this identity as an active trigger for behavior in times of conflict, reminding themselves that “a student does not behave that way.” This is more active than the passive change in circumstances described by King (2013) and Schuller (2009).

After release, this identity work led to concrete outcomes: job attempts, renewed financial support for family, and clear refusal of old associates. A wife's relief on receipt of money demonstrates that in this cultural context desistance is not determined by the cessation of offending behaviors, but rather by the restoration of the provider role (Qureshi, 2021). Certificates did not so much act as qualifications as act as symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986), something that could be presented to employers or neighbors without any reference to their market value. Participants' view of education as a “shield” against community suspicion fits Goffman's (2009) account of stigma and disclosure management and extends it to a setting where the stigmatized condition is a criminal record. Students will need to bring their own drinking water to school. Students will be responsible for providing their own drinking water in school.

Against these personal gains, participants were clear that structural conditions often cancelled them out. There were two critical failures. The first was inside prison. Difficulty in accessing education due to limited teacher supply, seats, and learning materials resulted in a limited right to education, not a guaranteed one. This pattern is well established in the under-resourced correctional systems and is consistent with the overcrowding and strain found nationally in Pakistan (Ali, 2019; Barua, 2018; Farooq & Irfan, 2018; NCHR et al., 2025; Ngugi, 2021; Sharma, 2020; Ubah & Nwokedi, 2022).

The second failure occurred outside prison. Qualifications earned in prison were not honored by the labor market, sometimes openly, as when participants were barred from government jobs because of a criminal record. Structural betrayal, as described in *Convict Criminology* (Earle, 2016; Newbold et al., 2008; Ross & Richards, 2003), refers to a system that can ask convicts to change their behavior, but denies them recognition for it. It fits evidence that desistance is maintained by legitimacy recognition and reward from legitimate institutions, particularly employers (Doleac, 2023); and that desistance is fragile when formal exclusion occurs more broadly (Uggen et al., 2022).

Curricula and the Labor Market: A Persistent Mismatch

A third structural theme was that of content as opposed to availability. Curricula were found to be outmoded, limited to basic literacy and a few old fashioned trades with inadequate preparation for the economy that returned. This is a common issue in comparative prison education literature (Hawley et al., 2013, 2020), and is amplified by the absence of the credential recognition and employer relationships that are important in other settings (Chiu et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2013). In the systems where qualifications may be received, evidence from the higher income systems indicates that returns to prison-earned qualifications are lower than those for comparable qualifications achieved outside prison. This points to a need for closer links between employers and prisons so that qualifications earned while incarcerated pay off (Ballou, 2024). In Punjab, education failed to effectively address personal and relational objectives and was only tangentially related to the labour market it was supposed to train for.

Teaching Empowerment Inside an Institution Built for Control

A tension not explicitly voiced but lying beneath participants' claims is the relationship of prison education to a logic of control (Foucault, 2012). This “different world” classroom can only be created if teachers have the time, space, and attention to do so. Evidence from Europe shows that in coercive systems, dialogic, trust-based teaching could provide real but limited 'spaces of normality' (Armstrong &

Ludlow, 2020; Behan, 2014; Costelloe & Warner, 2014). These spaces are narrower and more fragile in the Punjab data in a system operating at over 1.5 times capacity.

Listening to Those the System Speaks About but Rarely Speaks With

Last but not least, the design of the study itself has a theoretical meaning. Using former prisoners' accounts as the main evidence, and not as illustrations of institutional outcomes, reflects the core value of Convict Criminology, which is that former prisoners can speak for themselves (Newbold et al., 2008; Ross & Richards, 2003). Their stories brought to the fore both individual empowerment and structural exclusion which could not be discerned from theory alone.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings point to a gap between education that is symbolically transformative and education that is structurally effective. There are 5 reforms that would help bridge that gap.

Expand access and increase protection. As participation was explained as being "rationed" and not "guaranteed", seats, materials and qualified teachers should not be regarded as a treat, but a basic right of imprisonment.

Incorporate employability into curricula. The education in literacy and the limited traditional crafts was inadequate for the economy they faced upon their return. Curricula should match regional job market needs and include more digital and vocational content.

Build a bridge between certificate and job. Participants perceived certificates as symbolic and believed that employers do not formally recognize them. The ability to go to work depends on the recognition of credentials. Apprenticeship pathways and incentives for employers to hire people with a custodial record would support the move to work.

Remove formal barriers to reintegration. Not being hired into government work was cited as the obvious disconnect between public statements and action by the state. The findings of this structural betrayal would be remedied by review of these bans and implementation of fair-chance hiring principles.

Address stigma alongside policy. However, policy is not sufficient as suspicion still existed in the community despite the absence of formal barriers. Social and community-level reintegration assistance might be required to provide educational achievement with social as well as institutional legitimacy.

In summary, the priorities indicate that the prison education system in Pakistan does not require re-invention. It has to be linked to labour markets, formal recognition and reintegration services, in order to create a change that remains in the lives of the participants even after their time with the institution that brought them the change.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study has several limitations. The findings could be generalized analytically and not statistically and cannot cover the entire spectrum of correctional conditions in Pakistan because the sample was small, purposive and qualitative. Interviews involved accounts provided following release that could be influenced by circumstances at the time of interview and the period of incarceration. When translating from Urdu and Punjabi to English, though even after checking against recordings, some culturally specific meaning is always lost. The study also concentrated only on former prisoners and excluded teachers, prison staff and policy makers who would over-complicate and temper reports of access and neglect. Not specifically represented were women's experiences of prison education, where the barriers are different.

Future research could address these gaps with longitudinal designs that follow education and employment over several years and do not rely on one retrospective account. Comparative analysis with

other correctional systems in the neighbouring South Asian countries and amongst the provinces of Pakistan would reveal those barriers that are unique to Punjab and those that are regional. The addition of educators and policy makers would enable the structural criticisms expressed here to be considered with institutional accounts of resource restrictions and administrative decisions. Finally, research on the specific innovations (e.g., credential recognition schemes or training that is tied to apprenticeships) would determine whether the policy priorities outlined above result in improved outcomes upon release in this context.

Conclusion

This study gives a rare account, based on the words of former prisoners, of what prison education means and does in Pakistan's under-resourced correctional system. It has no simple success story; it's a mixed result. Education did elicit real, and felt, change in self-knowledge, morals, and family role, but change remained precarious when it returned to a society and labor market that was often unwilling to acknowledge it. The purpose of this article is to discuss how classes can enhance dignity and critical awareness in a coercive institution, as this is what is described as empowerment theory. Desistance Theory shows how a "student" identity can act as a "script" for resisting a return to offending. Convict Criminology requires that these gains be read alongside the structural exclusions that participants said undermined them: rationed access, out dated curricula, employment bans, and lasting stigma. Applying this combined framework in a Global South setting that has been little studied adds empirical material and a methodological example to comparative and Southern criminology. The study recommends, in practice, that the three pillars of access to prison education, curriculum and formal recognition must be dealt with simultaneously in Pakistan. Based on these findings, prison education is not an extra to incarceration, rather it is a right, and it has not fully lived up to its rehabilitative potential. This is because achieving more of it ultimately requires less to happen in the classroom, and more that happens in society beyond the walls of prison.

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