

Learning Behind the Bars: Implications for 'Learning-for-Development'

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Abstract: This study aimed to determine the learning patterns and experiences of incarcerated adults within correctional settings and how their prison learning transforms their lives after they are released. In this qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain the opinions of eight formerly incarcerated people who experienced educational practices during their serving time in prison. The snowball sampling technique was used to reach the target group of the study. Thematic analysis method was used during the data analysis process. The results of the paper, which are limited to the opinions of the participants in the study, showed that the change in the educational level of the prison population had led to a transformation in group dynamics among inmates in Turkey. Although former inmates experienced a permanent transformation in their lives after attending literacy courses, they could not carry on their religious practices after being released due to the struggle to make a living. Inmates who were not interested in educational programmes within prison managed their own learning processes as self-directed learners. Moreover, although inmates are certified through vocational training programmes, they have challenges in finding jobs when they re-enter society. Educational disruptions due to Covid-19 demonstrate that it is urgent to transform the prison education system into a technologically enriched learning environment in Turkey.

Keywords: prison education; literacy courses; religious education; group dynamics; vocational training; COVID-19

Introduction

According to the latest [World Prison Population List](#), published in November 2018, Turkey ranks eighth in the world in terms of the number of incarcerated people (Walmsley, 2018). Although, due to inconsistencies in its data, Turkey was not included in the survey of 2019, the Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics revealed that the population increase rate in Turkish prisons among the 47 European Council countries ranks first with 161.7% (Aebi & Chopin, 2016). For a better understanding of the current target population, Table 1 illustrates and compares the number of inmates in Turkey between 2009 and 2019.



Table 1: Educational Level of Prisoners in a Decade in Turkey (2009- 2019). Source: TurkStat, 2020.

Educational Status	Number of Prisoners in 2009	Number of Prisoners in 2019	% Increase
Illiterate	2,040	2,027	-%1.3
Literate	2,375	10,514	%342.5
Primary School	31,715	41,843	%31.9
Secondary School	17,733	140,077	%689.9
High School	12,675	63,940	%404.4
Higher School	2,992	20,653	%590.2
Unknown	240	2,551	%962.9
Total	69,770	281,605	%303.6

Literature Review

Pedagogic Assumptions

After the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, the number of incarcerated adults who are alleged to have been involved in the coup and/or who are politically dissident continue to increase. Although the current official number of prisoners is not shared, before about forty thousand prisoners were released in March 2020 due to Covid-19, there were officially 281,605 prisoners in Turkish correctional institutions including 11,000 female inmates (TurkStat, 2020). Turkey has 355 correctional institutions, of which 16 are for female inmates (General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses [from now on GDP&DH], 2019). As for the training and educational activities in these correctional settings, prison education programmes in Turkey are categorised as follows (Education Service Division of GDP&DH, 2020):

- literacy courses
- distance learning tests (at secondary, high school and university levels)
- application of national tests inside prison (such as the national university entrance test, higher education test, etc.)
- religious education (in cooperation with the Presidency of Religious Affairs)
- vocational and technical training
- social, cultural and sports activities.

Although a reasonable number of studies have been conducted on each of the activities above, mainly religious education (Altıntaş, 2019; Çınar, 2016; Kızmaz, 2005), cultural activities (Koç, 2016; Koçak & Altun, 2010; Üney & Erim, 2019) and literacy education in prisons (Balaban & Özen, 2015; Köçer & Aydemir, 2016), there is a lack of international research that critically reflects prison education in Turkey from the perspective of adult learning, which is shaped by the views of former prisoners. Therefore, the main motivation of the present paper was to try to bridge this gap. To accomplish the purpose of this study, eight former inmates were interviewed, and they shared their learning experience in prison. The results of the study build on the existing literature, providing additional insights and knowledge on adult learning and prison education. In order to provide some context, a brief historical overview of prison education in Turkey has been added.

A Literature Review of Prison Education in Turkey: From Past to Present (1923-2021)

Since Turkey inherited many state institutions from the Ottoman Empire, correctional education activities date back to centuries ago. During the Ottoman period, the judges (kadi) who enforced the rules of Islamic law reached a verdict of correction through labouring, which was a kind of educational activity, based on two approaches: a) to ensure that offenders could pay their own expenses and debts and contribute to their families' livelihood, and b) to ensure that offenders had an opportunity to get used to their new environment and forget their personal issues (Öztürk, 2014). However, these practices in the Ottoman Empire altered as the country was influenced by changes in punishment practices in Europe. As Foucault stated (1975/2015), the process of consolidation of power, which started with violence and torture inflicted on the body, evolved into a continuous body control through discipline and surveillance. Under the influence of new punishment practices in Europe, the first Criminal Code in the Ottoman Empire was applied across the country in 1858. Rehabilitating prisoners under constant surveillance and correcting them by forcing them to work was fixed by law. In 1911, the 'Prison Improvement Project' was launched and engaging inmates in activities such as art and music as well as educational ones was initiated (Gönen, 2005).

After the foundation of The Republic of Turkey in 1923, a great number of reform movements started in both public institutions and social life. Therefore, based on the Belgian Penal Execution Law of 1902, a regulation was prepared in 1941 (GDP&DH, Chronology of Prisons in Turkey, 2019). Teachers were appointed to the prisons with two basic responsibilities: a) providing literacy courses, and b) ensuring the spiritual development of prisoners. The same law also required the building of new ateliers in prisons and to employ workshop managers with two basic duties: a) teaching crafts to prisoners, and b) ensuring an efficient workforce of prisoners. Apart from literacy education to the prisoners, conferences were planned to ensure their spiritual development and to strengthen their patriotism so that they would not commit a crime again (The Official Gazette, 1941). As the spiritual development of prisoners was not considered enough, preachers were employed in penal institutions after 1974.

Prison education in Turkey took its current form in 2007. From then on, correctional practices have been carried out within the annual curriculum and divided into two semesters. As the most common ones, literacy courses are carried out through protocols with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Books and education programmes are provided by MoNE and when the number of teachers in prisons is insufficient (as of June 2021, the number of teachers working in prisons was 663), it is supported by MoNE. The 1st level literacy course lasts 90 hours in total, whereas the 2nd level finishes after 180 hours. From 2018 to 2020, 10,818 prisoners have benefited from these basic literacy courses (Kamacı, 2021).

Those who have a basic education certificate can continue open secondary school, while those who have graduated from secondary school can continue open high school. There are no courses for distance education inside the prisons and only tests are carried out within the correctional setting. The number of prisoners enrolled open high schools in 2021 totalled 24,106 (Kamacı, 2021).

Anadolu University, which conducts distance education in Turkey, is responsible for the open university activities in prisons as well and 6,567 inmates benefited from this opportunity in 2016. As with open secondary school and high school, the OU holds only the tests inside prison and student inmates study for the exams by themselves (GDP&DH, Annual Activity Report, 2017).

Religious education activities are carried out in prisons using the protocols between the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. It is divided into two branches: Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge – a 74-unit modular course programme – and Quran Teaching in the Arabic Alphabet (Çınar, 2016). In this regard, in 2020, the number of chaplains appointed in prisons was 2,951 (Directorate of Religious Affairs, 2021).

There are 297 workshops within the prisons across the country (The Grand National Assembly Parliamentary Human Rights Commission, 2018). These workshops operate widely in 172 different varieties of sectors, such as furniture, leather, cotton goods (e.g., towels, bathrobes), food, beverage, and vegetable/fruit production. According to the Workshops Activity Report of GDP&DH (2019) 27,387 prisoners were working, with a revenue of 2.5 billion Turkish Liras (around 290 million USD). Depending on their experience, prisoners are paid in total between 14 TL (around 1.3 million USD) to 17.5 TL per day.

Recreational activities in prisons are defined as sports activities, seminars and conferences. These activities are under the responsibility of the prison teacher and the deputy prison director (GDP&DH, Education Circular, 2007). Recreational activities are also practiced in libraries. All correctional institutions in Turkey have libraries, with around one million books in total (The Grand National Assembly Human Rights Commission, 2019). However, no professional librarians work in Turkish prisons (GDP&DH, Number of Staff, 2020).

Research Objectives

This study aimed to determine the learning patterns and experiences of incarcerated adults within the correctional settings and how their prison learning transforms their lives after they are released. With this in mind, detailed research was conducted on each activity (literacy courses, distance learning tests, religious education, vocational trainings, and social, cultural and sports activities) based on the educational practices maintained in prisons in Turkey.

Methods

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design was used in the present study to determine learning patterns and experiences of incarcerated adults within correctional settings and how their prison learning transforms their lives after they are released.

Population and Sample

A sample framework was created to identify the participants who would comprise the study group among the former inmates accessed through snowball sampling. In this regard, the following criteria were considered in selecting the participants of the study:

1. Participants should be representative of those who participated in different training or educational activities during their imprisonment. (Those who did not participate in structured training/educational activities but claimed to have made new learning were also considered to have the criteria to be a participant).
2. The participants should be representative of different education levels.
3. The participants should be willing to share candidly about their learning processes during their stay in prison and their experiences after being released.
4. Participants should be released from prison at least two months before their participation in the study.

In accordance with the sampling criteria determined through purposeful sampling, firstly, acquaintances of former prisoners in the close circle of the researcher were contacted. Then, other incarcerated people were contacted through potential participants reached through the snowball method. In total, 19 former prisoners were reached. The final number was eight, in line with the former prisoners' willingness to participate and the above criteria determined before the research. The determination of the working group residing in various parts of Turkey took place between the beginning of March 2020 and the end of April 2020. Table 2 illustrates some of the demographic characteristics of the sample group of the study.

Table 2: Demographic Features of Interviewed Former Prisoners.

Former Prisoners	Educational Status	Age	Period of Conviction
FP1	High School	38	5 years 3 months
FP2	Higher Education	43	4 years 1 month
FP3	Literate	60	12 years
FP4	Secondary School	53	4 years
FP5	Primary School	50	9 years 6 months
FP6	Higher Education	30	2 years 4 months
FP7	High School	35	8 years
FP8	Primary School	48	15 years 7 months

Tools Used

An interview guide was created before data collection was made using semi-structured interviews. The interviews started with broad open-ended questions then went into more detail as the interviews progressed. The interviews were completed with the final comments of the interviewees.

The first participant was interviewed in person since he lived in the same city as the interviewer. Since the other seven interviewees lived in different cities and intercity transportation was limited due to Covid-19, the interviews were conducted via ZOOM. The first meeting lasted nearly three hours without any interruption. When the data started to repeat and the data collection saturation was reached, the interviews were terminated. Each ZOOM interview also lasted for a total of three hours and occurred at short intervals. Eventually, the interviews concluded with a one-hour group meeting with all the former prisoners to make their final comments. Therefore, a total of 25 hours of interviews were conducted for this paper between May 2020 and July 2020.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

At the first stage of the research, document analysis technique was implemented through collecting data from official reports, statistics, minutes, books, and articles that were about prison education from past to present in Turkey. Moreover, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted as another data collection technique. After all the semi-structured interviews were completed, a focus group interview was organised with all the participants in the research.

As for the data analysis process of the study, thematic analysis method was used. Since the coding framework was developed both from reading the related literature and by transcribing the interview, a deductive-inductive combination approach was applied to thematic analysis. At first, the recorded interviews were listened to and transcribed to construct an initial coding chart. Each interview was addressed as a research unit and classified according to the type of

education/training the interviewees attended in their correctional setting. Before the irrelevant or disconnected themes for each type of education/training were deleted, the potential themes and grouping of the codes under those themes were identified. After re-reading and revising the themes, the results of the interviews were presented and discussed.

Limitation of the Study

The data obtained in the research are limited to the opinions of the participants. Since the former prisoners were reached with the snowball technique and they knew each other from their former accommodations, the sample of the study is limited to only male prisoners.

Ethical Clearance

Participants agreed to participate in the study on condition that they remain anonymous.

Findings: Educational Practices

First Time Ever Learners: Literacy Courses

Lifelong education (learning) has been officially on our agenda for more than a century, since the British Adult Education Committee Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1919 (as cited in Field, 2001). Therefore, it is now a well-known fact that every individual is a lifelong learner from the moment they are born until they die. It is by no means possible to claim that adults who did not enroll in any schools have not learnt anything, since adults participate in hundreds of hours of informal learning (Merriam et al., 2007). One of the former prisoners who was illiterate before his incarceration claimed that they graduated from the School of Life and they know everything but literacy. Therefore, the first time ever learner in the title is the so-called saying of prisoners who feel like a student for the first time in their lives after they attended the literacy courses in correctional institutions.

FP3: At first, I felt like a schoolboy. You know, I attended a parents' meeting at my daughter's school once and sat on a school-chair but it was something completely different. At times when I found the lessons hard to learn, dictation words in particular, I wished I hadn't told the authorities that I was illiterate but now I'm happy to be literate. The only good thing being in prison was that I went in as illiterate, I came out literate!

Interviewer: Do you think the trainings you received in prison helped to improve yourself?

FP3: Absolutely, I can shop without asking the department staff in the market about the expiry date, I can read the sign of coach route and where to go, etc. I can even read information about the coronavirus on the internet. I'm not very fast, but I get the job done! I do not need anybody. I am truly free.

Prisoners commonly have a lower level of education than the general population (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002; Cai et al., 2019; Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011). However, there are also findings that the educational levels of the general population and the prison population are akin to each other (Hetland et al., 2007). Compared to the general population in Turkey, the decreasing number of illiterate prisoners is the only group that is similar to the educational level of the general population (TurkStat, 2020).

There are few studies on whether prisoners are satisfied with the educational practices provided in Turkish prisons (Balaban & Özen, 2015; Şen, 2016). The results of the present study show that the prisoners are relatively satisfied with the processes. However, it seems that since inmates did not experience any other educational settings in their former lives, their first formal-setting learning experience may have been pleasing.

Interviewer: Are you satisfied with the process of literacy courses?

FP3: I had never been a student in a classroom environment before, so I don't know what to say. However, I respected my teacher a lot, because he was teaching me. You know, there is a saying here: 'I will be a slave for forty years to anyone who teaches me a letter.' Well, both the teacher and the courses were ok with me.

Tests behind the Bars: Open Schools and Universities

There are a lot of programmes within the prisons that offer higher education, college education or post-secondary correctional education for incarcerated people. Unfortunately, there are no educational alternatives inside the Turkish correctional institutions except for literacy and religious courses and the only activity implemented inside the prisons is the tests in distance education.

FP7 (Distance higher school student): We were studying for the higher education courses by ourselves and then we sat for the exams, you fail or pass. However lately, we have had a lot of university-graduate inmates and they helped really a lot. I passed English and Maths courses with their help.

FP4: I can say that they were guides not only about the lessons, but also in terms of manners.

The change in the educational demographic structure of the prison population seems to have caused the transformation of group dynamics within the prisons. A self-developed tutoring system has been established among prisoners. Those who are "more educated" became a kind of learning coach for those who are less educated. Thus, rather than creating a hierarchical structure or leadership process, they took on a facilitating role.

Religious Education

It seems that the former prisoners attended to the religious courses in order to meet their temporary needs since they stated that they learnt how to motivate themselves to struggle with conditions of prison settings through the religious courses. However, the changing dynamics of life after being released show that what they learned in religious courses was not permanent.

FP5: Being close to God always relieves me 'cause I'm his servant. I benefited greatly from the lessons of the preachers who visited us twice a week. I can say that it helped a lot in coping with the prison environment.

Interviewer: Do you think the trainings you received in prison helped you to develop patience?

FP5: Yes, in the past prophets also suffered, were thrown into dungeons, etc. Those parables made me feel that I was not alone and that I had to be patient like them.

FP1: When I was inside, I was attending religious practices both to spend time and to feel better. After being released from prison, I have been struggling with the troubles of daily life. The life outside is different.

Self-directed Learners in the Prisons: Libraries and Recreation Activities

Studies show that as the education level of adults increases, their probability of being involved in lifelong learning processes increases (Fuwa, 2001; Kim et al., 2004; Rabusicova & Rabusic, 2006). In other words, the previous education level of adults has an impact on their subsequent learning experiences. As for the present study, the university graduate prisoners seem to be more capable of managing and directing their own learning as lifelong learners compared to other prisoners. University graduate former prisoners stated that they managed and directed their own learning when they could not find courses according to their interests and needs in the education list offered by the prison administration.

FP2: After the adaptation period, I decided to focus on the things I was planning to do while I was

out, but that I was constantly delaying. Vocational courses did not interest me because I had a job to do when I would be released. I started by reading the books that interested me in the library. Although the books in the library seemed to be numerous, they were not rich in content. I asked my family to bring books when they would visit me, and now, compared to the days before my incarceration, I can say that I know more about many subjects.

Interviewer: How did these learnings make a change in your life after you were released?

FP2: In this process, I became more aware of issues such as how I learn and how fast I can learn. I am more confident about my learning.

During the interviews, the former prisoners pointed out the need for education enriched with a technological environment. However, technological updating of prison education is not among the priorities of the authorities due to the general economic situation in the country.

FP6: I was trying to improve my English thinking that it can be useful for me when I get out of prison. I was released after the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the coronavirus, we used to have conferences once a month. Unfortunately, they were ended and we did not have any online conferences or online learning opportunities.

Happy Inside but not Outside: Vocational Trainings

Former prisoners, who got busy with learning a new profession, felt themselves productive. However, they unanimously expressed their struggles in finding a job after their release. It is difficult for any citizen, even one without a criminal record, to find a job, especially after Covid-19. Therefore, they stated that they were disappointed that they could not perform their new skills outside of prison in ordinary life. In fact, from time to time, they even longed for their prison days when they were so frustrated.

FP7: I'm a general high school graduate and didn't get any vocational trainings before my incarceration. I attended upholstery training and I started working inside. However, after release, I am not lucky enough to find a job until now.

FP1: I sometimes miss inside when I think about the money issues. We were no different from each other and we were making little money but we were working. There is no job outside. Everyone is unemployed because of the pandemic. It is even more difficult for me to find a job as a former prisoner. I feel like a burden to my parents.

Discussion and Implications

There seems to be a positive change in former prisoners who received literacy courses in prison. The interviewees, who attended literacy courses in prison, stated that their roles as citizens and urbanites changed. They were able to follow current news and act more comfortably in their daily lives without being dependent on anyone. More importantly, literacy and numeracy learning liberated them in a way. Therefore, literacy courses in prisons helped to increase the number of conscientious and active citizens in Turkey. As stated by Stromquist (2006), this may increase social participation in the long run. Moreover, they seem to have improved their self-esteem compared to their lives before serving in prison. This is a positive indicator for their personal development.

The prison education programs, which are carried out in cooperation with colleges and universities, have both personal and social benefits in terms of reducing crime-prone inmates and recidivism (Baranger et al., 2018; Castro & Gould, 2019). Those who were students of open education received educational assistance from other prisoners with a better education level, and both parties were happy with the process. Therefore, the prisoners continued their learning activities in informal settings apart from the literacy course-hours. Moreover, although they did

not take a high school or university course within prison, preparing for the exams and striving to obtain a high school or university diploma had a positive impact on the personal development of former prisoners.

Dammer (2002) states that the practice of religious activities in correctional institutions and their influence is as old as the prisons themselves. Whether religious education can have positive impact on recidivism or coping with prison conditions has been discussed by a lot of researchers (Ilechukwu & Ugwuozor, 2017; Johnson et al., 1997). Similar studies were conducted by researchers at the national level in Turkey as well (Kızmaz, 2005; Tecim, 2009). To reach a scientific conclusion based on the findings, this subject matter seems to need more data and research. The participants in the present study stated that they tried to fill the emotional gaps they experienced due to prison conditions with religious education, but when they were released, they had no such need. Thus, they concluded that their state of mind changed after they re-entered society and the effects of the religious courses were temporary and not permanent.

As the education level of the interviewees increased, their willingness to manage their own learning also increased. According to the results of the research, the more educated the former prisoners were, the more self-directed learners they turned into. The university graduate former prisoners had the opportunity to explore their learning styles and this process enabled them to be more confident about their own learning.

In Turkey, after prisoners re-enter society they have difficulties becoming employed compared to citizens without criminal records (Engin, 2012; Koçak & Altun, 2010; Saruç, 2018; Savaş & Eryalçın, 2020). For instance, the findings of the most recent study conducted in Turkey by Savaş and Eryalçın (2020) illustrate that the two main reasons for post-prison unemployment are the high unemployment rates in the general population and employers' negative attitudes and bias against former prisoners. Therefore, even though they attend vocational training and get their daily wages inside the prisons, it is not easy for them to become employed after being released. The former prisoners who did not have any profession before their incarceration said that they were glad to be of service after they attended the vocational training programmes and got a profession. However, after being released, it remains difficult for them to find a job.

In her study, Cross (1981) underlines three important barriers for adult learners: institutional, situational, and dispositional. For the present study, the institutional barrier mostly stands out due to reasons such as the lack of interest of the prisoners in the educational content offered by their institution, and the educational disruptions, after Covid-19, due to lack of the necessary technological infrastructure.

According to the results of the research, it was revealed that the education leaders who coordinate the vocational education activities in prisons should make decisions by considering the needs of the business world while planning their educational processes. In this way, former prisoners who are at a disadvantaged stage for employment can become more in demand according to the needs of the market. Moreover, vocational trainers/educators in correctional institutions should be highly aware of changing market needs and carry out intensive, practical training in prison accordingly, so that prisoners can more easily adapt to their new jobs outside of prison settings.

Conclusion

The literacy courses seemed to help former prisoners develop themselves as active and confident citizens and, therefore, had positive effect on their lives. On the other hand, the effect

of religious education in correctional settings was not permanent. Open distance high school or university education contributed to the academic development of former prisoners. University graduate prisoners developed their own learning by discovering how to be self-directed learners. Finally, the prisoners, who occupied themselves with the vocational courses while learning a new profession were happy to get a profession. However, they expressed their disappointment because they had difficulty in finding a job in that profession after being released from prison.

The interruptions in educational activities carried out under traditional conditions in Turkish prisons show that technology-enhanced educational opportunities should be prioritised in correctional institutions. Therefore, different alternatives such as e-learning, blended learning, digital learning, or technology enhanced learning should be considered for those who are incarcerated.

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