

ALTERNATIVE CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES FOR YOUNG PRISONERS

DEVELOPING (HIDDEN) MATHEMATICAL IDEAS INSIDE PRISON

EXPERIÊNCIAS CURRICULARES ALTERNATIVAS PARA JOVENS RECLUSOS

Desenvolvendo ideias matemáticas (ocultas) dentro da prisão

EXPERIENCIAS CURRICULARES ALTERNATIVAS PARA JÓVENES RECLUSOS

Desarrollando ideas matemáticas (ocultas) dentro de la prisión

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rhetoric of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020) concerning prison education – in particular, the learning needs of people excluded from policy and the recent research that emphasizes the crucial role of education for young prisoners' personal development, and for their rehabilitation reducing the chances of recidivism (e.g., Jonck et al., 2015) in the Greek context, it seems that educational policies do not meet young prisoners' educational needs (Petsas, 2017). We report on a project that directly addressed the inappropriate curricula and texts, and teachers' lack of preparation for

this population's needs. The project ACTinPRISON (actinprison.sed.uth.gr)¹ pursued empowerment of young prisoners by creating common spaces between “insiders” --young prisoners-- and “outsiders” –the academic team and students/prospective teachers. Our “common spaces” framework mitigated the dominant, disciplinary, prison discourse with the perspective and techniques of Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM) for developing mathematics and language literacy. This challenged symbolic boundaries separating the two groups by using co-creation of mathematics to foster equal participation and interaction. The initial needs analysis phase of the project introduced young prisoners to the idea and practice of research as a matter of participatory practice and incorporated important mathematics concepts and skills within jointly constructed community-building activities. Likewise, moments of open-ended discussion were effective as emergent language and mathematical literacy events. The second project phase applied that experience to the preparation of university students for entering the prison, followed by the university students and young prisoners working together in the common spaces inside prison. Again, mathematical activities evolved as extensions of the information regarding their funds of knowledge. Work sometimes integrated this knowledge into theatrical play, at other times the group exploited mathematics contexts as here-and-now moments of group development. These experiences afforded the expression of situated mathematical concepts through informal mathematical language as the young prisoners were exposed to the idea of a mathematics register. We report on our persistent pursuit of a transition to scientific language use in this educational context despite the complexity of this challenge. (Resource limitations combined with super-diverse sociolinguistic repertoires and literacy backgrounds of the participants were treated as opportunities rather than obstacles). The ACTinPRISON project extends previous action creating common spaces with young prisoners and prospective teachers (<http://cospirom.sed.uth.gr>) that identified the need for new participatory practices to challenge typical research protocols. This new work responds through joint mathematically-rich activity to post-colonial critiques of research with marginalized populations. Such critiques often describe research as a “dirty word” (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), because it perpetuates forms of hierarchy and injustice. We counteracted this concern by inviting young prisoners to be co-researchers of their experiences. The examples we present here result from bottom-up extra-curricular experiences involving mathematical ideas. We discuss how such an atypical “school framework” challenges together numerous expectations of both traditional mathematics education and commonsense discourse of prison life. Based on this project experience, we propose in our conclusion the potential for co-constructed needs analysis research to set the stage for informed curriculum development when working with disenfranchised learners who research their own needs. We also discuss the challenges of making this kind of work sustainable and institutionalized.

Key words: prison education. mathematics education. curricula. young prisoners. participatory research.

RESUMO

Apesar da retórica do Quadro Estratégico para a Cooperação Europeia em Educação e Formação (ET2020) à educação prisional – em particular, as necessidades de aprendizagem das pessoas excluídas da política e a pesquisa recente que enfatiza o papel crucial da educação para o desenvolvimento pessoal dos jovens reclusos, e por sua reabilitação reduzir



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as chances de reincidência (por exemplo, Jonck et al., 2015) no contexto grego, parece que as políticas educacionais não atendem às necessidades educacionais dos jovens presos (Petsas, 2017). Relatamos um projeto que abordou diretamente os currículos e textos inadequados e o despreparo dos professores para as necessidades dessa população. O projeto ACTinPRISON (actinprison.sed.uth.gr) procurou o empoderamento de jovens reclusos através da criação de espaços comuns entre os “insiders” --jovens reclusos-- e os “outsiders” --a equipa académica e os alunos/possíveis professores. Nossa estrutura de “espaços comuns” mitigou o discurso dominante, disciplinar e prisional com a perspectiva e as técnicas da Metodologia Comunicativa Crítica (CCM) para o desenvolvimento da alfabetização matemática e linguística. Isso desafiou as fronteiras simbólicas que separavam os dois grupos, usando a cocriação da matemática para promover participação e interação iguais. A fase inicial de análise das necessidades do projeto apresentou aos jovens presos a ideia e a prática da pesquisa como uma prática participativa e incorporou importantes conceitos e habilidades matemáticas em atividades de construção comunitária construídas em conjunto. Da mesma forma, momentos de discussão aberta foram eficazes como eventos emergentes de linguagem e alfabetização matemática. prisão. Novamente, as atividades matemáticas evoluíram como extensões da informação sobre seus fundos de conhecimento. O trabalho às vezes integrou esse conhecimento no jogo teatral, outras vezes o grupo explorou contextos matemáticos como momentos aqui e agora de desenvolvimento do grupo. Essas experiências permitiram a expressão de conceitos matemáticos situados por meio da linguagem matemática informal, à medida que os jovens prisioneiros eram expostos à ideia de um registro matemático. Relatamos nossa busca persistente por uma transição para o uso da linguagem científica neste contexto educacional, apesar da complexidade desse desafio. (Limitações de recursos combinadas com repertórios sociolinguísticos superdiversos e histórico de alfabetização dos participantes foram tratados como oportunidades e não como obstáculos). O projeto ACTinPRISON estende ações anteriores criando espaços comuns com jovens presos e futuros professores (cospirom.sed.uth.gr) que identificaram a necessidade de novas práticas participativas para desafiar protocolos de pesquisa típicos. Este novo trabalho responde por meio de atividades matematicamente ricas conjuntas a críticas pós-coloniais de pesquisa com populações marginalizadas. Tais críticas costumam descrever a pesquisa como uma “palavra suja” (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), porque perpetua formas de hierarquia e injustiça. Contrariamos essa preocupação convidando jovens presos a serem co-pesquisadores de suas experiências. Os exemplos que apresentamos aqui resultam de experiências extracurriculares ascendentes envolvendo ideias matemáticas. Discutimos como uma “estrutura escolar” tão atípica desafia inúmeras expectativas tanto da educação matemática tradicional quanto do discurso de senso comum da vida na prisão. Com base nessa experiência de projeto, propomos em nossa conclusão o potencial para a pesquisa de análise de necessidades coconstruída para preparar o terreno para o desenvolvimento curricular informado ao trabalhar com alunos desprivilegiados que pesquisam suas próprias necessidades. Também discutimos os desafios de tornar esse tipo de trabalho sustentável e institucionalizado.

Palavras-chave: educação prisional. educação matemática. currículos. jovens reclusos. investigação participante.

RESUMEN

A pesar de la retórica del Marco Estratégico para la Cooperación Europea en Educación y Formación (ET2020) a la educación penitenciaria – en particular, las necesidades de aprendizaje de las personas excluidas de la política y la investigación reciente que enfatiza el papel crucial de la educación para el desarrollo personal de los jóvenes presos, y debido a que su rehabilitación reduce las posibilidades de reincidencia (por ejemplo, Jonck et al., 2015) en el contexto griego, parece que las políticas educativas no satisfacen las necesidades educativas de los jóvenes presos (Petsas, 2017). Informamos sobre un proyecto que abordó

directamente los currículos y textos inadecuados y la falta de preparación de los maestros para las necesidades de esta población. El proyecto ACTinPRISON (<https://actinprison.sed.uth.gr>) buscó empoderar a los jóvenes reclusos a través de la creación de espacios comunes entre "insiders" --jóvenes reclusos-- y "outsiders" -el equipo académico y los estudiantes /posibles profesores. Nuestro marco de "espacios comunes" mitigó el discurso dominante, disciplinario y carcelario con la perspectiva y las técnicas de la Metodología Crítica Comunicativa (MCC) para el desarrollo de la alfabetización matemática y lingüística. Desafió los límites simbólicos que separaban a los dos grupos, usando la co-creación matemática para promover la participación e interacción equitativas. La fase inicial de análisis de necesidades del proyecto presentó a los jóvenes reclusos la idea y la práctica de la investigación como una práctica participativa e incorporó importantes conceptos y habilidades matemáticas en actividades de construcción comunitaria construidas en conjunto. Asimismo, los momentos de discusión abierta fueron efectivos como eventos emergentes de lenguaje y alfabetización matemática. prisi3n. Nuevamente, las actividades matemáticas evolucionaron como extensiones de informaci3n sobre su fondo de conocimiento. El trabajo integraba a veces este conocimiento en el juego teatral, en otras ocasiones el grupo exploraba contextos matemáticos como momentos aqu3 y ahora del desarrollo del grupo. Estas experiencias permitieron la expresi3n de conceptos matemáticos situados a trav3s del lenguaje matemático informal, ya que los jóvenes presos fueron expuestos a la idea de un registro matemático. Reportamos nuestra b3squeda persistente por una transici3n al uso del lenguaje cient3fico en este contexto educativo, a pesar de la complejidad de este desaf3o. (Las limitaciones de recursos combinadas con repertorios sociolingüísticos súper diversos y antecedentes de alfabetizaci3n de los participantes se trataron como oportunidades en lugar de obstáculos). El proyecto ACTinPRISON amplía acciones anteriores mediante la creaci3n de espacios comunes con jóvenes reclusos y futuros docentes (<http://cospirom.sed.uth.gr>) que han identificado la necesidad de nuevas prácticas participativas para desafiar los protocolos típicos de investigaci3n. Este nuevo trabajo responde a trav3s de actividades conjuntas matemáticamente ricas a las críticas poscoloniales a la investigaci3n con poblaciones marginadas. Tales críticos a menudo describen la investigaci3n como una "palabra sucia" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), porque perpetúa formas de jerarquía e injusticia. Contrarrestamos esta preocupaci3n invitando a los jóvenes presos a ser co-investigadores de sus experiencias. Los ejemplos que presentamos aqu3 provienen de experiencias extracurriculares ascendentes que involucran ideas matemáticas. Discutimos cómo una "estructura escolar" tan atípica desafía numerosas expectativas tanto de la educaci3n matemática tradicional como del discurso de sentido común de la vida en prisi3n. Basándonos en esta experiencia de diseño, proponemos en nuestra conclusi3n el potencial de la investigaci3n de análisis de necesidades construida conjuntamente para preparar el escenario para el desarrollo curricular informado cuando se trabaja con estudiantes desfavorecidos que investigan sus propias necesidades. También discutimos los desaf3os de hacer que este tipo de trabajo sea sostenible e institucionalizado.

Palabras clave: educaci3n penitenciaria. educaci3n matemática. currículos. jóvenes reclusos. investigaci3n participativa.

What it means to be a prisoner

Prisons are no longer places of torture, yet imprisonment expresses a political technology of the body (Foucault, 2012). Like other categories of people, 'prisoners' are produced by constellations of knowledge, institutions, expertise and practices (Hacking, 2007) to be subjects of governmentality. Limited control over bodies enclosed and restrained away from society characterizes prison life. Boundaries symbolic of degradation, violence (Saleh-Hanna, 2008) and dehumanization perpetuate myth and fear. Michel Foucault (1978) characterizes prison as an institution that constructs both itself and its 'inhabitants' as outside of society. Similarly, Goffman (1961) describes prison as a totalitarian

institution—a place defined by boundaries, both physical and symbolic, distinguishing insiders from outsiders, cutting off residents from society for a long time. A strong policy emphasis on education as the way to bring prisoners ‘back’ into society (Mertanen & Brunila, 2018) buttresses these boundaries, through discourses and practices of control structured by a rhetoric of care. The ‘prisoner’, a generalized, imaginary entity (simulacrum), is designated ‘offender’, associated with ‘danger’ and treated bureaucratically—an entity ‘to be dealt with’. So: a) Prisoners are defined through deficits; rehabilitation is based on correcting these deficits and normalizing them, b) Prison education (PE) policy interprets education as an intervention primarily concerned with correcting problem behaviours.

What education means for *young* prisoners: Which education and mathematics education matter?

We consider the above posture a feature of coloniality and adopt the contrasting perspective that education can provide skills and knowledge aimed at personal growth, future development, and successful reintegration. We also take seriously the socialization of many young prisoners into a culture of failure, exhibiting low self-concept and lacking self-confidence (Hirschfield, 2014) stemming from their status as refugees and immigrants. They commonly display school denial, poor academic preparation (Pytash & Li, 2014), low academic self-esteem and a lack of motivation—promulgated by the absence of evident meaning-making and connections between academic work and their everyday lives (Liebling, 2011); they have high rates of school dropout (Ochoa, 2016), contributing to the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Heitzeg, 2016). These people will perhaps return to their unchanged, home communities, affording the same (lack of) opportunities; whether their lives are then characterized as ‘delinquent’ could potentially be influenced by the type of education they experience during incarceration (<http://reentrypolicy.org>). So, despite a common view of prison in which the state locks up offenders and ‘throws away the key’, the reality is that most prisoners will eventually be released. The challenge for PE in general and for mathematics education within prison education in particular, is to create opportunities for empowerment and for a better life after release.

Research literature justifies participation in educational programs during a detention period by reference to numerous positive outcomes, such as decreasing recidivism, transforming lives, retaining a sense of agency within the controlled and coercive prison environment, and creating a regime of dynamic security (Behan, 2014). A worthwhile version of PE shifts from a crime-centered orientation to the creation of environments that foster the emotional security necessary for active students, that is, citizens of the present and future, who critically perceive their world (Warr, 2016). This vision, accomplished through pedagogical approaches grounded in metacognition, thinking skills, emotional intelligence and narrative change through empowerment and community collaborations (Pike & Hopkins, 2019; Inside-Out Center, liberalarts.temple.edu/research/labs-centers-and-institutes/inside-out-center), would be transformative. Nevertheless, PE confront numerous challenges.

Current educational practices do not meet the specific needs of this population. Greek prisons reflect the general European experience of an increase in the proportion of foreign nationals serving prison sentences with little to no change in their PE policies (Petsas, 2017; Brosens et al., 2020). Despite arguments that curriculum revision should move beyond basic literacy and numeracy and incorporate strands such as personal development, social skills, the arts and new technologies (e.g. Hawley et al., 2013), the conventional prison curriculum ignores the age of learners, their cultural backgrounds and prior negative school experiences. Inadequate teacher preparation for working with non-mainstream communities belies the correlation between quality training and student achievement (Jenkins, 2016; Wright, 2020). Effective, appropriate methods of combining different student groups and promoting literacies through interdisciplinary methods in prison contexts would include arts-based practices and ICT, demonstrated to successfully challenge negative identities, and stimulate self-reflection leading to sustainable transformations and decreased levels of anger (Davey et. al, 2015). In other words, there is unrealized potential to enhance prisoners’ lives while keeping them connected to the outside world, preserving autonomy and mastery; achieving purpose through educational attainment would provide an

alternative perspective on an otherwise life of misery—controlled, stagnant, and self-absorbed (Wright, 2020).

Since academic success is closely tied to math achievement, the development of mathematical literacy is a critical challenge for PE (Terry, 2010). Yet international studies consistently demonstrate prisoners' disproportionately poor level of basic skills (Creese, 2016). Compounding the challenge, PE tends to give more attention to general literacy than to mathematics (Byrne 2015). Career pathways to prison teaching have been postulated as responsible. Striving for a pleasant and nurturing experience as a platform to restart learning, some caring prison educators wrongly believe that this is more easily accomplished within creative arts than in the sterile and austere subject they have defined for themselves as mathematics. Naïve educators sometimes believe that literacy is distinct from and does not include mathematics, or that mathematics is too difficult for their students. Most appreciate the value of reading and writing, while a common misconception is that mathematics can be relegated to calculators. The learners themselves may collude with this misunderstanding, admitting more readily to having problems with mathematics than with reading, writing or speaking, and therefore contentedly avoiding direct study of mathematics.

Of course, mathematics can be both a gateway subject for entry to basic education and a path to lifelong learning. Contrary to the common misconceptions, we have confirmed in the ACTinPRISON project that people tend to have more mathematics skills than they realise, making progress easy and rapid. Small class sizes in prison make it possible to personalize learning and to identify together the as-yet-invisible skills. Mathematics at every level has similar strands (e.g. Number, Data, Algebra, Shape and Measure, Problem Solving), and deep understanding at the basic level gives a strong foundation for further learning. Adults and older adolescents often have acquired understanding and skills in many of these strands through life experience, without seeing it as mathematics. Instructional strategies centered on storytelling from life experiences outside of school can reveal such surprisingly sophisticated mathematical understanding, facilitate its recognition as 'mathematics', and build upon this knowledge to develop new skills and concepts. Due to the often-shared expectation that a learner's as-yet-invisible mathematics skills are best developed when working with real-world mathematics, this can provide a platform for exploring real-world applications of mathematics. Yet older learners think with complex reasoning and cognitive skills honed through many life challenges, and often enjoy and excel at more abstract and less obviously concrete mathematics. Costelloe and Langelid (2011) stress the need to explore their experience with mathematics as a child or adult together with what brought them back to education in prison now (family, friends or some other motivation/ reasons). This can reduce the impact of negative memories commonly carried into the present, including past tedium and boredom with school mathematics. Yet this negativity is not universal; a teacher in prison should expect the unexpected, and never assume that there is nothing left to learn about teaching this population. Although negativity and frustration in PE can be challenging, it is often the preamble to startling self-discovery for both teacher and student. Remembering the successes helps --the times when a student gets it, when he (usually prisoners are men) turns and teaches another, when he can talk about what he has learnt and how he learnt it.

The research setting: Space, time, participants

Space and duration. The prison, located in a rural area of central Greece, designates within the larger prison campus a building separated from the rest of the prison as its 'school'. An HFRI (Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation) grant supports our (an academic team together with prospective teachers) working together with young prisoners. The duration of the entire project is 30 months. Our interaction with young prisoners in both phases is about 2-3 hours each week.

Participants. The 15 prisoners in our project, 18-23 years old, the majority recent refugees or immigrants, and Roma (the majority Greek Roma), are serving sentences for a variety of offences related to illegal status within Greece traceable to the need to survive in a marginal existence on the fringes of society. Their facility to communicate and learn in Greek varies; all speak multiple languages; some are attending school for the first time in prison, while others bring extensive school backgrounds. Together with 12 prospective teachers we are creating curricular experiences with both populations.

The procedure. Before the two populations (university prospective teachers and prison students) were brought together, they each participated in a preparation phase. Focus group interviews identified training needs and guided development of training materials. The university prospective teachers were introduced to the background on the prison system, to PE, curriculum theory and design, (mathematics, language, ICT) literacies, and Drama in Education through 8 workshops.

The beginning needs analysis with the young prisoners used drama in education techniques to learn more about their life experiences and to invite them into participating as co-researchers of the mathematics in their everyday lives and beyond. Personal statements articulated during these drama activities indicated a majority of the young prisoners had limited prior school education experience, in contrast with their expansive and challenging life experiences. As D. said, for him, "*The best school is on the streets*". We learned that previous school mathematics, as well as current lessons during incarceration, was unrelated to their lives and interests. The curricula followed and the books used assumed very different life experiences and were designed for primary school children rather than young adults. How challenging is it for them to add 5 red and 3 blue pencils? Such 'problems' are alienating. They described teachers as complaining about their lack of participation; but the students are disconnected from the (school) mathematics.

Actions in prison/ Research while refusing research?

Among several perceptions and constructions of prisoners, we adopted one grounded in social justice that understands them as in need of help and support. This perception dictated to us participatory approaches such CCM. Being aware of the potential for research to take on characteristics warranting its reception as a "dirty" word, we understood that work with a marginalized population often perpetuates practices of coloniality. We designed the project to avoid typical field-based research methods, with serious and ongoing self-critique that kept our attention on potential pitfalls of coloniality practices, and worked to void positioning young prisoners as subjects of our gaze. Ideally, collaboration should do something other than create stories about 'others' to feed the stratification of knowledge within academia and public discourse. The drama techniques at the beginning helped to establish a collaboration with the prisoners as authorities on their own experience, authors of their own stories, and decision-makers about what knowledge needs to be discovered--the skills that need to be mastered, and the reports that need to be written.

This paper is not an analysis of 'rich' pragmatological data, but a consciously selected sample of 'snapshots' characterizing our approach and demonstrating opportunities for starting the negotiation of mathematical ideas. Taken together, the snapshots create a collage of overlapping and interlacing contributions to a social movement (Tuck & Yang, 2014), rather than 'a story to pass on'. We don't restrict our interest on mathematics, but we expand to interactions with the young prisoners, sharing important questions that give opportunities for interaction and empowerment. How a young prisoner has

been constructed, by whom and why, are central to this work; these considerations matter more than any particular demographic details. Their stories that emerged pointed to conditions placing someone on one or another side of the abyssal line (de Sousa Santos, 2007)-- the line where one side is ruled by regulation and emancipation, and the other side by appropriation and violence. Mathematics in our work with the young prisoners is a collection of strategies for confronting the ways that this abyssal line has been producing the knowledges and values of the prisoners as irrelevant or non-existent. The mathematics that we created in collaboration with these young men is a response to those ways in which the abyssal line has consistently and persistently framed their lived systems of knowing and learning, along with their different ways of thinking-feeling and feeling-acting, as inferior and inept. We adopt arts-based practices as a matter of “epistemological respect and reciprocity rather than epistemological assimilation or colonization” (Tuck & Yang, 2014), to reclaim ‘research’ from a history of exploitation and abuse of marginalized communities as ‘subjects of research’. Our work positions ourselves as secondary to the young prisoners, the researchers of their own lives; as consultants in mathematics education and curriculum development, we become resources to be exploited.

Snapshots from our interaction—the emergence of mathematical ideas

Even during the needs analysis phases, we tried to explore any opportunity for developing mathematical literacy in a natural way, respecting all the peculiarities of their life in prison while taking into consideration both their mood depending on the problems they were facing (family, courts, etc.) and their interests and desires. We began by asking the young prisoners if they would be interested in pursuing the project, making clear that this would be a special part of their school day, while the majority of their time would continue to be spent with the more traditional, compulsory, National Curriculum. Once we reached mutual understanding, we introduced the idea of the learners as researchers through a general introduction to research as a specialized pursuit of certain types of questions. We asked, “What do you think research is?” Responses included: *Police are looking for (offenders) at houses; Police are looking for drugs; We are looking for shoes (to buy); We are looking on the internet.* We asked the students/prisoners to choose a question to pursue, as the beginning of a critical communicative methodology (Gómez et al., 2011). This first experience led the young men to ask among their group, How many are married (9 yes, 7 no); How did we get here (by the police); and so on. About 25 questions emerged. As co-researchers we facilitated a discussion of the content of these questions, their categorization and classifications, with the following results: family, school, work/professional, general, and personal. The context made sense to the students, who were actively engaged, agreeing or disagreeing. A discussion ensued through a Venn diagram on the floor of the school space (See Fig. 1, Questions), initiated by one of the researcher facilitators. The students themselves joined in, readily placing questions on small papers into what they deemed appropriate circles. This took the form of a negotiation, generating not only a correctly constructed Venn diagram, but also the opportunity to discuss the content of the questions, elaborating upon the relationships among the questions, their possible common categories, and the nature of the questions themselves. Unfortunately, cameras are in general forbidden inside the prison; but on this day a prison officer that happened to be with us took the picture, Fig.1.

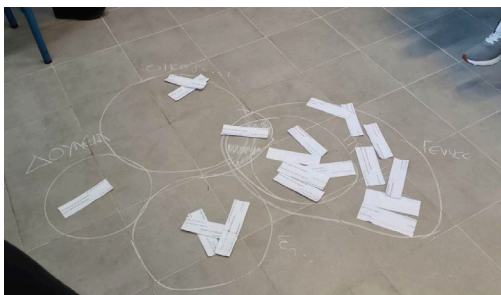


Fig. 1: Questions

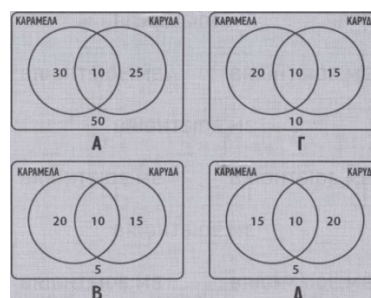


Fig. 2: Select the right Venn diagram

We asked students to think of other examples of sets, and to find sets, intersections and unions, as well as subsets. (Note that the word ‘set’ was not understood, but the concept was readily employed after we used the word ‘group’.) They suggested examples like ‘the members of my family’ and ‘the children’ as subset, or the set of ‘all prisoners’ with ‘young prisoners attending school’ as a subset. Continuing the apprenticeship of co-researchers, we shared samples of charts and graphs from other researchers, the majority quantitative data concerning smoking (i.e., the evolution of smoking in various countries over the past twenty years, a comparative study of women and men smoking, etc.). In groups of three, with those who could better understand the graphs explaining to the others, they discussed health habits. After discussion we had the opportunity to create our own graphs depicting similar brief research topics. Using mental calculations, mostly the Roma students who had extensive experience with monetary transactions, could not only depict frequencies on the graphs, but also relative frequencies, inventing their own strategies. We closed this activity posing this problem and sharing the graph (Fig. 2), asking of the students to select the correct one.

A third snapshot developed in response to their complaint of not understanding division facts, referring to the standard algorithm. (The typical school emphasis is practice in applying the standard algorithm). To challenge their misconception, we presented the following: “You have 172 kg of beans to put in boxes of 20 kg. How many boxes do you need?”. The majority replied 8 boxes, but we need 9 to put all in boxes. A Roma with extensive work experience said: 8 boxes, explaining that he would put extra beans in the 8 boxes. Discussions of this kind helped the students develop confidence based on the acceptance of their solutions, and on the value placed on their outside-of-school experiences. This changed the nature of mathematics from tasks to be endured into opportunities to talk about life and to imagine possibilities.

Recently, an activity afforded the opportunity to listen to their narrations of the different sense of time inside and outside prison. This took place during the collaborative preparation of a theatrical play in the common space by the young prisoners and university students, and led to the creation of interesting strategies for transforming time.

Reflection and Discussion

Our action in the framework of this project is a matter of social justice. We support people who experience discrimination and marginalization, and even more so when we work with young prisoners who experience more than one form of marginalization. It is challenging to create cracks in the ‘abyssal line’ that separates people as a result of where they were born. Although ACTinPRISON addresses literacy issues (mathematics and language) of young prisoners, we respect the situation in which our work takes place, the result of geopolitical, economic and post-colonial forces that criminalize these people well before they arrive in our educational program.

Following six months of bridging the ‘inside’ with ‘outside’, the academic team and young prisoners together constituted the project research team within a common space of participants and contributors mitigating disciplinary discourse practices. Weekly workshops of 2-3 hours focused on the development of curricular experiences. Each week, the academic team worried in anticipation: How many young prisoners will appear, in what mood? They were often preoccupied with waiting for the court, or with anxiety about an issue with a family member. During Ramadan, participation was low since they stayed up all night and could not be in class the next day. While we hoped for active participation, we needed to keep in mind that this time away from the guarded prison areas was a time of relative freedom, which meant that they could not concentrate as well as we might have wished. Our meetings, held in their formal school space, challenged the school’s everyday practice through physical rearrangement to accommodate our very different pedagogy. The young prisoners described our meetings as, “*We see different ways of thinking. We have a beautiful bond and cooperation. We are all one team*” or “*...We have realized that we can do many things we didn’t know we could.*” In a way our collaborations functioned as a window to the world outside of prison.

Considering the special situations of PE (e.g. Inappropriate curricula), our efforts had two main pillars: (1) An alternative conception about curriculum grounded in dynamic processes across local and cultural borders; challenging knowledge as a skill set and replaced standardized tests and the ‘global marketplace’ with interrogation of the ‘life journey’ (Pinar, 2006), (2) A methodological approach, creating an environment of mitigating disciplinary practices within a collaborative community. Reflecting on our work, on the powerful experiential learning for both populations of the others, we started to worry about the future of these young prisoners. The continuation of this kind of interaction, the expectations set up by the co-construction of knowledge, create potential problems. It is easy to imagine consequences for these young adults: Have we opened a door only to violently slam it shut? Does life now seem worse? It is imperative to go ahead. Just now we succeed to convince University principals for the necessity of a structure that could address this situation and the structure “Bridges between UTH and SUDF” is almost prepared.

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