

Learning to Get Out of the Wing: The Motivations of Learners Incarcerated in Québec Provincial Prisons

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Abstract: *41 men and women incarcerated in provincial prisons of Québec were asked why they enrolled in educational activities. Relying on self-determination theory to describe and categorize their motivations, I found that most respondents had extrinsic motivations to participate in educational activities and that only three respondents could be described as intrinsically motivated. Respondents joined programmes to escape boredom, to receive financial compensation or to receive some other benefits; not for the pleasure of learning. These results are different from other research reporting that a majority of incarcerated learners were intrinsically motivated. After addressing this contrast, I conclude it is more likely that most incarcerated learners are initially motivated by extrinsic factors. However, our data also shows that motivation can change and deepen during participation. In this context, education practitioners should not try to avoid attracting learners with financial incentives or other extrinsic motivators. Learning to get out of the wing is as good a reason as any.*

Keywords: *Education in prison, formal and non-formal education, learning motivations, Self-determination theory, Québec (Canada)*

Introduction

This article is part of a broader qualitative study, during which my co-researcher and I conducted semi-structured interviews with 41 incarcerated people (28 men and 13 women) in provincial prisons in Québec, to examine their perspective on the meanings and effects of education in prison. Our goal was to rely on learners' insight and perceptions to assess the effects of education in prison and identify concrete ways to improve accessibility, retention and services in general. One of the main themes of our interviews was learning motivations. We focused on this theme based on the hypothesis that understanding what motivates incarcerated individuals to participate in educational activities can enable us to identify strategies to increase participation and strengthen retention.

In this article, I provide a qualitative portrait of the learning motivations of our respondents, using a version of Deci and Ryan self-determination theory which draws a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Manger et al., 2020; Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). In this view, someone is intrinsically motivated to learn when they learn for the sake of learning itself and extrinsically motivated when they learn for another reason. Most of our respondents said they joined programmes to escape boredom, to



receive money, or to pass the time. In other words, even if some expressed a genuine desire to learn or recognized the value of education, almost all respondents described extrinsic learning motivations.

These results are strikingly different from those of Halimi and her colleagues, who reported that a majority (63%) of incarcerated learners in remand centres in Belgium, had an intrinsic motivation to learn (Halimi et al., 2017, p. 15). While these contrasting results can be attributed to methodological and definitional issues (addressed later), it is also important to challenge the idea that most incarcerated learners are intrinsically motivated for practical and normative reasons. While our data suggests incarcerated learners can eventually develop autonomous or intrinsic motivations, we should not assume education is attractive enough by itself, if we want to increase participation and retention. Instead, we should focus on other things that motivate people to “get out of the wing,” without judgment. Indeed, if we assume that incarcerated people are, or ought to be, intrinsically motivated, we risk treating those who are not as if they are there for the “wrong reasons.”

After describing the context of the study, discussing why education in prison matters and why we have good reasons to increase participation and improve retention, I will explain how learning motivations can be categorized and review studies on the motivations of incarcerated learners. Next, I present and discuss our data and conclude with a discussion on the practical and normative implications of these findings.

Subject and Context

The subject of the study was education as it is deployed in correctional settings. We used a broad definition of education which includes both formal education, which leads to official certification, and non-formal education, which is structured around clear objectives without leading to official certification. We did not include correctional programmes targeting specific criminogenic or therapeutic needs (addiction, anger management, etc.) in our analysis as those are compulsory and seldom seen as “education” by practitioners and learners.

Canada has two correctional jurisdictions: federal penitentiaries administer sentences of two years and longer and provincial/territorial prisons which manage sentences shorter than two years as well as pre-trial detentions. This project was limited to provincial prisons in one Canadian province: Québec.

All prisons in Québec offer the subjects required to complete a high school diploma (French, English, Mathematics) and a range of non-formal activities or vocational training (e.g., arts and craft, health and security training for construction labourers). Accessibility varies based on incarcerated people’s security rating, whether they received their sentence or not, whether they are under protection or not, etc. Some prisons provide access to everyone; others do not and these decisions are usually based on considerations of security. At the time of the study not a single prison in Québec offered post-secondary education and many services were cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Numerous studies now support the idea that education, in its many forms, is valuable and important, both for instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. Educational programs were shown to reduce recidivism for participants while being cost-efficient, meaning that the costs of programs is largely compensated by the reduced costs linked to reincarceration (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2014; Stickle & Schuster, 2023). Participation was also shown to improve general social capital and reduce prison-based social capital among learners, both effects contributing to the broader process of desistance (Cleere, 2020). It was also shown to reduce the pains of imprisonment (Harmes et al., 2019), provide incarcerated people with a safe space where they can learn new things about themselves and the world around them, where they can (re)build a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Nichols, 2021); where they can learn to build new relationships and where they can gain experiences, skills and aptitudes that will be useful during their reentry process (Szifris et al., 2018). In other words, education in prison provides ‘hooks for change’ (see Giordano et al., 2002) which often support processes of identity transformation in learners and, eventually, life transformation (Hughes, 2016; Pike & Hopkins, 2019), concrete benefits and values that go ‘beyond’ statistical effects on recidivism (Conway, 2023).

Considering these benefits, correctional administrations should (and they often do) recognize the value of educational programs in prison contexts. They should also see these services as part of the core function of carceral systems designed to promote social reinsertion. Indeed, one of the main partners¹ in the broader social innovation project this article stems from, Québec’s ministry of Public Safety, recognizes the importance of education in prison and asked us to identify ways to increase participation and improve retention. Therefore,

in interviewing incarcerated men and women who participated in formal or non-formal education programs in prison and question them on the meaning and effects of education, our objective was to give our community and institutional partners a unique perspective that would promote innovation in prison education, help improve services and increase participation in educational programs.

Categorizing the Motivations of Learners

Learning motivations are usually studied in two phases: before someone joins a programme (what gets them in), and during participation (what keeps them in) (Bourgeois, 2019, p. 239). Like most of the literature on adult education, I focus on the first question because the non-compulsory nature of adult education means that participation is the result of a decision and, in principle, institutions have some control over the factors that influence it. Moreover, people in provincial prisons are incarcerated for a relatively short period, so it is important to identify ways to enroll them quickly.

An influential way of categorizing learning motivations stems from Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (SDT), which postulates that motivations exist on a continuum that goes from intrinsic to extrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Someone is *intrinsically* motivated when they engage in learning for the sake of learning. They are *extrinsically* motivated when they learn to avoid or gain something else.

Note that the spatial metaphor in this dichotomy refers to the activity itself and not the person. A motivation is intrinsic when its source lies *within* learning and extrinsic when its source lies *outside*. This clarification is important because people often assume that intrinsic motivations are linked to the person and his/her interests. For example, it seems that someone who learns to improve their well-being is intrinsically motivated, when in fact their motivation is not related to learning itself. This is counter-intuitive because this motivation seems much more "internal" than, say, financial incentives. In other words, there are extrinsic motivations that seem "more intrinsic" than others.

To account for this complexity, other formulations of SDT describe motivations on a spectrum going from autonomous to controlled, where intrinsic motivations are fully autonomous and where extrinsic motivations are more or less autonomous/controlled (Manger et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). In this approach, learning to improve one's well-being would be considered more autonomous than learning for financial gains. Manger et al.(2020)'s version of this revised SDT, the 'five-factor model', posits three types of extrinsic motivations: (1) "external regulations" comprise fear of punishment and hope of reward; (2) "introjected regulations" relate to shame and pride, situations in which people adopt the views of others to evaluate their actions; (3) "identified regulations" are autonomous and describe people acting for reasons they identify with. For example, "students [who] work [...] because they perceive the behaviour to be useful" have identified regulations (Manger et al., 2020, p. 553). Completing this five-factor model are intrinsic motivations and amotivation.

Another influential model in the literature on incarcerated learners' motivation focuses on learners' end-goal (Houle, 1961). Someone is "learning oriented" when they join a programme purely for "the desire to know" (Houle, 1961, p. 25), they are "goal-oriented" when they hope to reach another goal (e.g., a diploma, a job) and they are "activity-oriented" when they join for the social interactions.

There are many other ways to think about the learning motivations of adults (see Bourgeois, 2019 for other examples), but I focussed on these particular examples because, as we will see in the next section, they have been used to describe the motivations of incarcerated learners.

Why Do Incarcerated Adults Join Educational Programmes?

Relying on Houle (1961)'s typology, Parsons and Langenbach (1993) found that incarcerated learners had essentially the same motivations as the general population. However, they noticed that often followed an "avoidance orientation" absent from Houle's typology. In short, many incarcerated people want to join programmes to escape violence in living units, boredom, constant scrutiny from guards, etc. (Parsons & Langenbach, 1993, p. 40).

More recently, Manger and his team investigated incarcerated Norwegian nationals' motivations for learning as part of a wider study (Manger et al., 2019, 2020). Relying on self-determination theory (SDT), they concluded, using confirmatory factor analysis, that the five-factor model, described earlier, fit the data

significantly better than a three-factor model which collapsed external regulations, introjected regulations and identified regulations into a single category of extrinsic motivations. I do not have the space to examine this conclusion in detail, but suffice to say that the five-factor model fits better with the view that there are meaningful differences between types of extrinsic motivations (Manger et al., 2020). The authors do not comment on the distribution of each motivation in their sample, but their results are in line with Parsons and Langenbach (1993): incarcerated learners self-report motivations of all kinds and none of the categories is clearly dominant (Manger et al., 2020, p. 562).

Halimi and her team surveyed 486 men in a Belgian remand prison on several topics, including their learning motivations (Halimi et al., 2017). Relying on self-administered questionnaires and a categorization similar to Houle's, they report a wide range of motives and note that the majority of their respondents (63.2%) were intrinsically motivated because they enrolled "to improve [their] knowledge and skill" (Halimi et al., 2017, p. 14).

In a qualitative study conducted with 47 men incarcerated in two Irish prisons, Cleere arrives at different results (Cleere, 2020). While some of her respondents say they enrolled to improve their knowledge, most of them wanted to escape boredom and the prison atmosphere (Cleere, 2020, pp. 58–74). Cleere, like many before her, describes her respondents as being "pushed" towards education by negative aspects of prison life rather than "pulled" by education's attractive features (Costelloe, 2003; Diseth et al., 2008; Forster, 1976; Gambetta, 1987; Manger et al., 2010; Parsons & Langenbach, 1993; Roth & Manger, 2014). In another qualitative study, Addae reports after interviewing 30 young inmates in a Ghanaian correctional facility that participants have various motivations that align with Houle (1961), including both learning orientations and goal orientations (Addae, 2020). Finally, Nichols (2021) reports that men join educational programmes because they seek spaces where they do not have to perform the "hegemonic" form of masculinity prevalent in prison, because they appreciate this "mental escape" that reduces the pains of imprisonment or because they want better social interactions (Nichols, 2021, p. 128).

Clearly, previous studies have shown that incarcerated learners report many motivations, but they do not draw conclusions on the relative weight of each motivational category. At least one study claims that most incarcerated learners are intrinsically motivated, yet some qualitative studies suggest extrinsic motivations are more significant and others report both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations without quantifying them. Therefore, there appears to be no consensus on the reasons incarcerated learners choose to participate in educational activities and practitioners are left without a clear answer on what gets people inside their classrooms.

Why Should We Care About the Learning Motivations of Incarcerated Learners?

It was shown earlier that education in prison is valuable for instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. In this context, increasing participation and retention is important by default. In principle, if we know why people join educational programmes when they are in prison, we can increase participation by acting on the factors that influence this decision.

However, when we explore the literature on learning motivations, it is clear that all learning motivations are not valued equally. Indeed, much of the literature on learning motivations suggests that intrinsic motivations are associated with better performance and well-being than extrinsic motivations, and adding extrinsic motivators into a process often reduces intrinsic motivation (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Deci, 1971; Deci et al., 1999; Gillet et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). It is, of course, more complicated than that, but the point is that intrinsic motivation is often perceived more favourably than extrinsic motivation because it is associated with increased autonomy and a more positive relationship with learning in general.

In this context, some might think that programmes in prison should foster intrinsic motivation, emphasize the intrinsic value of education and maximize positive results. These people might have been reassured to know that the majority of Halimi's respondents wanted to improve their knowledge. However, the literature also shows that many incarcerated learners are pushed to join programmes by the pains of imprisonment. There is, it seems, a tension and I will address it after presenting the methods and results of our study.

Methods

As I said earlier, this article stems from a broader project on learners' perspectives on the meanings and effects of education in prison. We conducted semi-structured interviews with incarcerated men and women who participated in formal or non-formal educational activities. To participate in the research, individuals had to be incarcerated in a Québec provincial prison and have participated, or be currently participating, in educational activities for at least two weeks. We initially sought people who participated for at least one month, but we lowered this requirement to facilitate recruitment in the COVID-19 pandemic context of 2020–2022.

We visited five provincial prisons (see table 1). Access was facilitated by counsellors in charge of coordinating educational activities in each prison. They helped recruitment by presenting the project during class time, collecting the names of potential participants and providing us with the information required to confirm eligibility.

Table 1

List of Facilities Visited

Facility	Size	Gender	Approximative daily population ^a	Capacity	Security level
Facility 1	Small	Male	175	235	Medium/minimum
Facility 2	Medium	Male	350	400	Medium/minimum
Facility 3	Large ^b	Female	175 ^b	365	Maximum/Medium/Minimum
Facility 4	Large	Male/Female	500	600	Maximum/Medium/Minimum
Facility 5	Large	Male	975	1400	Maximum/Medium/Minimum

^aAt the time of the visit.

^bThis constitutes an odd case. The facility is very large – one of the largest we visited in terms of space and number of detention units– but most of it is not used. This explains why its population is smaller than some of the medium facility we visited.

Our sample is non-probabilistic and recruitment was opportunistic. We sought a wide range of voices, not just those following an exemplary path. We informed our collaborators about the importance of putting together a heterogeneous group including people who faced more challenges. Each of the two researchers conducted about half the interviews independently but also ran one together. Interviews were recorded between November 2021 and April 2023 and took place in closed rooms, alone with each participant. Each participant received \$20 in their “canteen” account as compensation. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by research assistants and a professional transcriber. Transcripts are in French, except for one that is in English.

We followed the principle of data saturation according to which “the quality of the sample has less to do with its size and representativeness than with the fact that it produces new information” (Baribeau & Royer, 2012, p. 35). We reached saturation with men, but not women. During the analysis, we realized the women we met had disparate profiles and experiences. We decided to meet five additional women in another facility to identify a wider range of experience. This proved helpful, but we did not quite reach saturation, something on which I will revisit in the limitations section.

Transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo. Coding was an iterative process, “involving frequent backtracking to solidify links and guide future analytical decisions,” by both researchers (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 261). We started coding with a list of themes connected to our questionnaire and research objectives and refined the list when we saw certain themes emerging in verbatim. We also modified our questions and interview methods when we realized certain questions were not clear or were prone to misinterpretation. For example, we changed our questionnaire after we realized that our question, “Do you have meaningful exchanges with other students during class?” designed to qualify their relationship with other students, could easily be interpreted as “Are you exchanging contraband with other students?”. We kept the question, but we

changed the word “exchanges” for “discussions”.

Thematic categories were not mutually exclusive and there were often overlaps between some (e.g., factors of perseverance and things they like about school). We carried out a transversal thematic content analysis in which the content of each code/theme was summarized, synthesized and compared across the whole sample (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021). We drew connections between these summaries and concepts found in the literature, particular concerns of our community partners, and our research objectives. This contextualization gave intelligible meaning to the content collected under the model of theorizing analysis proposed in Gaudet & Robert (2018).

Interviews, transcription and coding were carried out simultaneously and continuously by both researchers, with a double coding for ten respondents to ensure inter-coder reliability. We did not wait to have all the transcripts before coding. This enabled us to discuss and refine coding as we went. It also allowed us to identify certain themes insufficiently developed in each new transcript and improve for next interviews. After reading and coding each verbatim, a summary portrait for each participant was written.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. Initially scheduled for winter 2021, interviews were postponed for several months. Some activities resumed in September 2021 and we started collecting data in November 2021. After several interviews, educational activities were suspended again in mid-December 2021, before resuming sparsely at the end of February 2022. We completed all interviews by April 2023.

Ethical Considerations

The project posed ethical issues because incarcerated people are a vulnerable population. As Gaudet and Robert (2018) point out “interviews (...) can be perceived as a way of judging [respondents] or imposing a power relationship.” (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 127). We emphasized during recruitment and interviews that there was no obligation to participate, that participation would have no effect on their sentence, that everything was confidential and voluntary, and that their opinion, positive or negative, was valuable. Inspired by Arsenault, we emphasize “confidentiality [and our] independence [...] from the prison system” (Arsenault et al., 2014, p. 27). The names used in the following are pseudonyms chosen to reflect each participant’s age, gender and cultural background. To differentiate ourselves from prison authorities, we referred to respondents as ‘learners’ and not as prisoners, and none of our questions referred to their offence. Finally, we informed them that their input could be used to improve educational services in prison.

Findings

We interviewed 41 incarcerated individuals, 28 men and 13 women, between November 2021 and April 2023. Respondent characteristics are included in table 2. Their ages ranged from 21 to 61, averaging 37. Eight respondents identified as visible minorities, and one was indigenous. Twenty respondents had no diploma, 9 had a high school diploma, 8 had vocational certification and 4 had post-secondary diplomas. The sample included 10 people awaiting trial. All but one of the sentenced individuals had sentences of more than 6 months, with half of them sentenced to more than 12 months. 84% of the sample had completed more than one sixth of their sentence, while 45% had already served more than one third.³ More than 20 people were serving a repeat sentence and 10 people served at least one federal sentence. Table 3 describes the programmes available on each site visited.

Table 2*Characteristics of Respondents*

Characteristics	Women	Men	<i>n</i>	%
Age groups				
18–25	1	4	5	12%
25–34	4	9	13	32%
35–44	6	9	15	37%
45–54	0	3	3	07%
55–64	2	3	5	12%
Last degree obtained				
None	6	14	20	49%
Vocational certificate(s)	4	4	8	20%
High school diploma	1	8	9	22%
CÉGEP (post-secondary)	1	2	3	7%
University (any)	1	0	1	2%
Occupation				
None	3	7	10	18%
Unskilled trade	6	11	17	41%
Trade	2	9	11	27%
Entrepreneur	0	3	3	7%
Professional	2	1	3	7%
Length of sentence				
Pre-trial detention	3	7	10	24%
Less than 3 months	0	1	1	2%
3 to 6 months	0	0	0	0%

Table 2 continued.

Characteristics	Women	Men	n	%
6 to 9 months	4	3	7	17%
9 to 12 months	2	1	3	7%
12 to 15 months	1	2	3	7%
15 to 18 months	0	0	0	0%
18 to 21 months	0	6	6	15%
21 to 24 months	3	5	8	20%
More than 24 months	0	3	3	7%
% of sentence completed (n = 31 ^a)				
Less than 1/6	2	3	5	16%
Between 1/6 and 1/3	2	10	12	39%
Between 1/3 and 2/3	4	7	11	35%
More than 2/3	2	1	3	10%
Programmes followed (n = 78)				
Secondary level	8	18	26	33%
Social integration	10	12	22	28%
Employability	5	8	13	17%
Socio-professional integration	0	1	1	1%
Arts and music	2	9	11	14%
Parenting skills	1	0	1	1%
Activities with a non- profit	3	0	3	4%
Distance education	0	1	1	1%

^a Only sentenced individuals are counted here.

Table 3*Programmes in which respondents participated*

Detention facilities	Formal education	Non-formal education
Facility 1—Men 3 interviews	• Secondary/pre-secondary	• Social integration (SI) • Employability support
Facility 2—Men 7 interviews	• Secondary/pre-secondary • High school courses with distance support	• Social integration (SI) • Employability support • Art
Facility 3—Women 8 interviews	• Secondary/pre-secondary	• Parenting support for women • Employability support • Social integration (SI) • Art therapy
Facility 4—Men and women 13 interviews	• Secondary/pre-secondary	• Employability support • Social integration (SI)
Facility 5—Men 10 interviews	• Secondary/pre-secondary	• Employability support • Social integration (SI) • Socio-professional integration • Pottery • Music

In the next section, the findings are presented using Manger et al.(2020)’s categorization described earlier. Since all respondents provided at least one reason to join, there is no section dedicated to “amotivation.” Instead, I close with a description of the complex and evolving nature of motivation, using quotes from our respondents. Note that someone can have both external and identified or introjected regulations. For certain categories, I use quantitative terms like “most” or “the majority of” to show how often a motive was mentioned, but this is not the only measure of significance. I also analyzed the relative weight of each motivation in each transcript. For example, if someone said they enrolled to “get out of the wing,” but emphatically talked about the importance of education in their life, I considered they had more identified regulations than external ones. I translated from French, striving to remain faithful to the original tone and language register. Lines reproduced in bold were spoken by interviewers.

External regulations: Reward and Punishment

A) Mitigate boredom and “get out of the wing”

Most respondents explicitly told us they joined activities to occupy their time, to take their mind off things, or to “get out of the wing.” Some, like François, added they might as well spend their time doing

something positive:

Instead of staying in the sector and run around like a hamster, I'd rather try to work on my knowledge (François, Facility 4)

Note how François is talking about improving his knowledge, but he is not motivated by the pleasure of learning. Some respondents who said they enrolled to get out of the sector also mentioned the importance of education, but, like François, this was not a motivator. This perceived value seemed more like an afterthought: something they could see while discussing the topic of education, but not the reason they joined activities.

B) Financial Incentives

In Québec's prisons, students receive a nominal stipend when they participate in programmes. This amount varies, but it is usually around \$4 a day, rounded up to \$25 when students attend the whole week. This stipend was often mentioned as the main motivator. Carl, who already holds a secondary degree, told us:

You already have your high school diploma. What made you want to go to school?

Well, I wanted to get out of the row [i.e., the detention sector], then the money, 25 bucks (Carl, Facility 4).

Speaking of money, it is important to note that this stipend is significantly less than the wages offered for work opportunities. Many of our respondents told us they would prefer working, but they could not because positions were already filled or because they did not have adequate security rating. The fact that participation in educational programmes could improve this rating was a motivation in some cases. Simon, who had already spent four months of a two-year sentence, said he joined social integration courses to lower his security rating and eventually access better jobs:

OK. So right now you're doing the social integration course?

Yeah.

Do you do any other...

No, I can't. My security rating is medium and if I want to be able to go to work or go to other courses in the prison, I have to, first of all, do [the courses].

It has to be ... ah OK, you have to do it before doing other things?

Well, not everyone, there are some who have a minimum rating, which means they can go and work in the prison, but for me, it's medium ... which means that... I have to lower my rating (...) It was really to lower my rating because I want to be able to go and work in the kitchen or the laundry (Simon, Facility 2).

Simon also told us formal education was not worth it because he already had a good job outside and because he did not like school.

Introjected regulations: External Pressure, Shame or Pride

Some respondents said they joined programmes to improve their self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Marc, a 21-year-old high school graduate, was serving his seventh sentence. He said he participated in social integration courses to learn more about himself, to pass the time and to be more credible with Youth Protection services. His two children are a deep source of motivation, and he would be less motivated without them. He wanted to become a "normal citizen" and adds:

Seeing as I don't feel [pause]... I wanted to learn a little more about self-esteem, then relationships, parenting skills. Like learning more things. I know some things, but if it can give me more solutions for things like grief. Just like I lost my mom, I lost my dad. So, I feel more... To know myself a little more, how to decide (...) (Marc, Facility 1).

Others join programmes to get a diploma. This is often motivated by the prospect of better employment, but many said that “since I’m wasting time in prison, I might as well get out with a diploma,” implying that the diploma was not necessarily part of their personal projects; only a bonus to take pride in. We also saw people like Sébastien who were motivated by the pride their loved ones will feel if they graduated. He told us that he always felt good at school, but he fell behind because of substance issues. He felt like a “black sheep” and thought getting his high school degree would make his father proud:

But it’s for me personally, 50 years old, finishing high school, [mouths sound], I finished that, and maybe going to College!

Yeah. Would you be proud to finish high school?

Yes, yes! Yeah, I guess so. And especially college! [emotional pause] Sorry...

It’s OK. It’s fine. Take your time.

[Silence]. Yeah, maybe for my dad too.

OK.

Maybe he’d be happy... (Sébastien, Facility 5).

In other cases, people participate to increase their chances of getting parole. As Sonia explains, social integration courses are seen as essential for obtaining parole. She even waved her right to her “sixth⁴” to finish one of her programmes, because she thought that might increase her chances of being released after:

It’s to show that I’ve made an effort, that I didn’t twiddle my thumbs ... in the wing. It’s good for the CQLC.⁵ That’s where I’ll go to get released. [...]

OK.

That’s what they are looking at, a lot, it’s the course, it’s precisely... I gave up my third [first parole opportunity] to be able to finish the course, finish the first module at least and I’m going back to... I’ll have my [hearing] date tomorrow, by the 13th... [...] Yes so ... for Parcours [a programme of fered by carceral authority], I know ... that they look at that a lot and when I went before the judge, he said: is it because you really want to finish Parcours? I said yes.

And that looks good?

A lot (Sonia, Facility 3).

In all these cases, the desire to learn is not the initial motivators, but unlike the first category, the value of education is not merely an afterthought. However, it is not clear if respondents identified with this value and considering that social norms are strongly in favour of education, it seems that these regulations were mostly introjected.

Identified regulations: Education as Part of One’s Values or Project

People are sometimes motivated by another life goal. Paul had a 2-year sentence and spent most of his time trying to improve his detention conditions. Joining programmes was one of his strategies to do so. He also mentioned that he did not have to work in prison because he had money outside. In this context, Paul did not “need” to go to school, but he saw it as a good way to achieve a goal he identified with:

I repair trucks, but not 100%, so I said “I have a goal,” I want to go and do a DVS⁶ in heavy mechanics, and out there I don’t really have time to study. And I started working early, because I didn’t finish high school. And to do the DVS, well, here it took me I have to do prerequisites in French, mathematics that it takes me to do a GDT,⁷ then do my DVS outside. (...) While we’re at it, while I’m here, I’m making the most of the positive things here (Paul, Facility 5).

In other cases, getting a diploma was seen as setting a good example. Kevin, for example, who finished his high school degree in prison, told us that he did it because he wanted to prevent his child from dropping

out. His goal was to be a good father, help his children with their homework and become a source of motivation for them:

Ah! I think it brings me back to “hey hang in there, I got it, you’re going to get your diploma too!”

OK.

And I’ll be able to help him at school, with his grades, if there’s something my child doesn’t understand, I’ll be able to show him.

OK. You are, what’s it doing to you?

That’s a plus. I’ll be able to prevent my child from failing, whereas if I didn’t have a diploma I might not have any tricks to motivate the child to get it! Because if my child ends up dropping out of school like me, that’s what I’m going to get out of there, no, no, you’re going to get your diploma. Look your father is here, if you don’t know, you show him, OK. It’s going to be a source of motivation. Afterwards, if you want to go to school or stay there, at least I would have succeeded in opening doors for you to succeed in life (Kevin, Facility 2).

These respondents were not engaging in education for the sheer joy of learning, but they identified with the value of education: They wanted to be better parents; they wanted to follow their dreams.

Intrinsic Motivations

Only three respondents expressed intrinsic learning motivations. In the next quotes, Jessy and Carl, who both had a long history of imprisonment, talk about the pleasure of learning:

I don’t want to stay in a wing behind bars, at the mercy of guards who search us, who take us away at any time, that’s it, I want to have some control over my destiny. Instead of saying, “Oh, I may be in prison, but I went to school, I learned something.” To come out with what I’ve learned. (Silence.) That’s what drives me to, above all, to enroll in programmes like that. It’s ... really to learn ... to earn (Jessy, Facility 5).

You know, it’s true that not everyone wants to be like me, you know. I’ve reached the point where I’m doing crossword puzzles in my cell at 6 a.m.

That’s really what school taught you?

Yeah! Now, I have a thirst for learning, and you know ... me... I don’t know why for some time now, I’ve been really open-minded. I don’t know what happened there.....

What do you think happened?

I have no idea. (...), But school allowed me to develop a logical side (...).

School has given you knowledge and the ability to think. Is that what you’re telling me?

Well, yes, then at some point, you develop a desire for learning and knowledge. Well, for me, at least, that’s it (Carl, Facility 4).

Anne, 61 years-old, was serving her first sentence. After comparing the wages of prison work and the stipends offered to programme participants, she explains why she chose to go to school:

For me, frankly ... listen ... money is important in my life, that’s not what I’m saying, but I’m definitely going to favour learning, new knowledge, and also an environment that stimulates me a lot... Because... I don’t... That’s it... I have no interest in the jobs offered here. And I have a lot of interest in education.

The environment that stimulates you, why do you find it stimulating?

Well, I’m a very curious person. I like to learn very, very much. That’s my driving force. It’s what makes me feel alive... I want to live, definitely. [...]. I’m bored. I’m bored, boredom brings the depres-

sive side, so I prefer to turn to activities that stimulate me like [history and other things] (Anne, Facility 3).

For Jessy and Carl, intrinsic motivation came after they joined. It may not have been what got them in the programme, but it is what keeps them coming. For Anne, things are slightly different. Even if she is putting a lot of emphasis on her need to escape boredom, her discourse also shows an intrinsic desire to learn.

Complex and Evolving Motivations

Learners' motivations are rarely one-dimensional. As we saw in Carl's last quote, learning motivations are influenced by various factors and fluctuate over time. In the next quote, Marco, who joined a programme to pass the time, describes a complex set of extrinsic motivations that evolve to become more autonomous and internalized:

Well... I figure it'll also help with my sixth⁸... and a diploma is never bad for ... the future, basically. I know that with what I've got, what I want to do in life, I don't need a diploma, but you never know what can happen in life. Maybe one day you'll lose your company and then you'll have to start working for someone again. So, a diploma is always important. It's essential. I tell myself that as long as I'm here, as long as I'm wasting my time, staying in the unit doing nothing, I'm going to go to school, I'm going to do something (Marco, Facility 5).

Marco initially thinks joining an educational programme will improve his chances of getting parole, but he is also aware that credentials have a broader value. He concludes by putting emphasis on the importance of using his time to do something for himself. While the motivations of passing the time or financial incentives often act as the proximal cause for participation, learners' motivations evolve or change when they realize that learning can be fun and rewarding, when they experience success or learn faster than they imagined. This is quite clear in the next quotes from Carl and Serge:

Well, it's because at the beginning we go in with the 25 bucks, then you know at the end of the day, well we come up with results, results that are going to be there all the time. You know, it's the efforts we've made that make us proud (Carl, Facility 4).

But I'm finding it better and better... I'm starting to like it, but it's hard at first because I don't understand it... I have to understand, but all of a sudden, I'll have ... understood how to calculate with a calculator, how to do the multiplications to be able to do taxes and all that stuff. The percentages, then using a calculator and saying, well, I'll be able to move forward with that later, I mean ... it's encouraging (Serge, Facility 5).

Analysis and Discussion

My co-researcher and I sought to find what motivates incarcerated learners because are convinced by available research cited earlier that these individuals, and society in general, would benefit from increased participation in education in prison. We also believe properly characterizing their motivations is one way to increase both participation and retention. We quickly saw that most respondents joined programmes to escape boredom and make money "while at it." Only three of our respondents explicitly referred to the sheer pleasure of learning. These respondents were older than the sample's average, which fits with Manger et al.'s who noticed that older learners tend to have more autonomous and intrinsic motivations (Manger et al., 2020, p. 567).

If we stopped here, we could conclude that incarcerated learners are, by and large, moved by extrinsic motivations. However, our data also shows that many of our respondents seemed to ascribe value to education in general before joining. We saw this when people told us they joined in programmes to use their time for something "positive." Even if it is impossible to determine accurately whether these individuals internalized the value of education or if they simply conformed to social norms, their motivation was at least somewhat autonomous and not purely controlled. In other words, most of our respondents' motivation to learn was not unilaterally extrinsic and existed on the continuum that goes from external regulations to identified regulations. This is why Manger et al.(2020)'s five-factor model of motivation is more appropriate than a simple intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy.

Nevertheless, even if our respondents' motivations are complex and evolving, it remains clear that most join programmes to get away from something negative—in most cases boredom—rather than to get towards something positive. Our respondents, like Cleere's, were “pushed” towards education by difficult elements of prison life rather than “pulled” by education's inherent appeal (Cleere, 2020, p. 216; Manger et al., 2010). Unlike Halimi and her team (2017), we did not find that the majority of our respondents were intrinsically motivated learners.

This difference has more to do with methodological issues than with fundamental differences between the two groups of respondents. Let us first recall Deci and Ryan's definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: a person's motivation is intrinsic if they engage in an activity simply for the pleasure of participating in the activity; it is extrinsic if they engage for something external, e.g., to get a reward. Even though we saw that certain extrinsic motivations are more autonomous than others, Halimi et al. conclude that most prisoners are intrinsically motivated, because they said they joined “to improve their skills and knowledge” (Halimi et al., 2017, p. 22). While this does suggest a desire to learn, Halimi and her colleagues conflate Houle's notion of “learning-oriented learners” with Deci and Ryan's “intrinsically motivated learners” (Halimi et al., 2017, p. 6; Houle, 1961). Wanting to improve one's skills and knowledge is not an intrinsic motivation because it is not directed at learning itself.

Setting aside this terminological dispute, there are more serious methodological issues at play. As Halimi et al. acknowledge, their questionnaire did not allow respondents to qualify their motive; they simply checked those that applied to them (Halimi et al., 2017, pp. 22–23). Since motivations are complex, analysis should be based on a more nuanced qualitative analysis or on the results of a validated questionnaire like the Academic Motivation Scale (Ratelle et al., 2007). In short, we cannot conclude that a person is intrinsically motivated simply because they say they want to improve their knowledge or skills. Further analysis is required. My own analysis shows that even if several of the respondents told us that they joined programmes to improve their knowledge, the rest of their discourse clearly highlighted that extrinsic factors played a more significant role. In short, our study shows that incarcerated learners are, by and large, extrinsically motivated.

Having said that, it is important to stress that many of our respondents told us they came to see other valuable things about education. In many cases, these things, such as the relationships they built with teachers or their rise in self-esteem, were what ultimately kept them coming. In other words, motivations evolve and some of our respondents developed more autonomous motivations even if they initially joined for controlled reasons and even if they never came to the point where they participated for the sheer pleasure of learning.

Limitations

Because of our sampling methods these findings cannot be generalized to other incarcerated individuals in Québec or other jurisdictions, but this was not the goal. We also noticed that it is hard to isolate education programmes from other programmes (e.g., substance abuse and anger management programmes). Participants often conflated “the programmes” and did not differentiate formal, non-formal education, and other types of intervention. We often had to reframe questions to put the focus on educational programmes and we could not avoid all confusion. It would have been interesting to talk about the motivations for each programme separately, but our data did not allow such granularity.

Another limitation is linked to the types of educational programmes our respondents had access to. Much of the literature on education in prison, including research of learning motivations, focuses on post-secondary education and, as we said, no such programme is available in Québec's provincial prisons. Motivations of incarcerated individuals who enroll in basic adult education or non-formal education programmes may be different from those of people who enroll in post-secondary education, but we have no way of knowing it this would have been the case with our respondents. The length of sentences in provincial prisons may also affect our results. Even if a significant proportion of our respondents spent more time than the average incarceration time in Québec's provincial prisons (about 60 days), the length of sentences means that learners do not spend a lot of time in educational programs. The motivations of someone who knows they cannot possibly finish their programme because their sentence is just too short may differ in interesting ways from those who have more time, but we do not have the data necessary to make this comparison.

The COVID pandemic also imposes a significant analytical bias. Education programmes stopped altogether for several months, with shorter interruptions as outbreaks occurred in each facility. The results must therefore be understood in light of this context: the number of activities was reduced, as was accessibility. Moreover, prisons were much less crowded than usual. It is not clear if incarcerated people were more or less motivated to get out of the wing in non-pandemic context, but if we had met more people following non-formal programmes and vocational training, maybe their motivations would have been different.

As we said earlier, we interviewed more women than originally planned because we did not reach saturation. Unfortunately, even with five more participants, we are not convinced we reached the same level of saturation as men. Having said that, we did not see any noticeable difference between the learning motivations of men and women, so this limitation does not necessarily affect our conclusions here.

Finally, we did not speak with non-participants. While it is important to know why incarcerated people choose to join educational programmes, it is also important to know why they choose not to join programmes. We can glean some information from the fact that many people told us work opportunities were more attractive, but that is quite limited since we already know financial incentives work as motivators. If we conducted a similar study today, we would include non-participants in the sample.

Practical Implications and Conclusion

As Cleere points out, many educators prefer intrinsic motivation, over extrinsic ones, because they are associated with better performance and more meaningful learning (Cleere, 2020, p. 59). I would add that the perceived importance of intrinsic motivation is linked to the idea, shared by many educators, that education is intrinsically valuable. It is, after all, part of the reason education is a fundamental right. In this context, some may find it regrettable to discover that incarcerated learners are not intrinsically motivated and enroll for basic instrumental reasons. This sentiment was actually echoed by many people we interviewed who worried about people joining programmes for the “wrong reasons,” e.g., money or just to pass time. These people might have been reassured to see Halimi et al. (2017)’s results and, faced with my conclusions, they might conclude that we should cultivate the pleasure of learning and diminish the intensity of extrinsic motivators for would-be participants.

The picture emerging from our interviews leads me to question this strategy. Our broader project, like many other studies on education in prison, shows that learners benefit from the positive effects of education regardless of their motivational profile. It also shows that education is more meaningful for students who have concrete objectives. However, those objectives do not have to be ambitious to lead to positive outcomes. Whether it is to pass the time, work towards a degree or for the pleasure of learning, education in prison provides a safe space where people can learn about themselves and the world around them; where they can (re) build a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy; where they can learn to build new relationships, and where they can gain experiences and skills useful to their reentry process (Szifris et al., 2018). But to get these effects, individuals must be in the classroom and because they spend so little time in prison, they must join quickly. Therefore, the priority is to find ways to increase participation and maximize retention.

To increase participation, educational needs of individuals should be assessed early and quickly. Educational activities should be presented as a pleasant way to pass time and a proven way to improve their life in and after prison. Participants should receive a stipend high enough to compete with other opportunities on offer. Programme coordinators should follow the principles of “active offer” and ensure that activities are proactively promoted and that information about them is easily available. To foster retention, activities should be structured in ways that allow for “quick wins” and concrete, measurable success. For example, students should be rewarded when they complete an activity book, and they should be able to pass exams without delay. Certificates and rewards, for example, allowing learners to borrow an extra book from the library or organizing special activities, should be given when learners pass important milestones.

These strategies are already well known by educators abiding by the principles of andragogy recently defended by Conway, Bennallick, Finlay, Little, Nichols and others (Bennallick et al., 2025; Conway, 2022), and I do not pretend to provide revolutionary solutions to this challenge. My point is simply that attraction and retention strategies that involve financial incentives or other forms of extrinsic motivators should not be avoided on the pretext that they diminish intrinsic motivation or that those are not the “right reasons” to learn.

Even if some might believe that all learners should ideally seek education for the sheer pleasure of learning, my analysis suggests that fostering this ideal is not the best way to spread and maximize the benefits of education in prison.

Incarcerated learners should not be judged for wanting to escape the pains of imprisonment and make a little money, while at it. Instead, they should be welcomed as learners, as students, regardless of their motivation. Moreover, as I have shown, motivations can change in nature and intensify during participation. Indeed, while most of our respondents enrolled for extrinsic reasons, some also developed an interest in education for its own sake. In other words, even if they are not intrinsically motivated, initially, incarcerated learners can develop a more autonomous rapport with learning. In any case, the first step is to get out of the wing.

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Endnotes

- 1 List of partners : Quebec’s ministry of Public Safety, the Société de criminologie du Québec, Exéko, Continuité-famille auprès des détenues (CFAD), the Institut de coopération pour l’éducation des adultes (ICÉA) and the Centre de formation général des adultes de la Rivière-du-Nord.
- 2 My translation.
- 3 Incarcerated individuals are eligible for “pre-parole” and parole at the “sixth” and “third” of their sentence, respectively. The difference between the two is that incarcerated individuals must ask for “pre-parole” in writing while a parole hearing is automatic at the third of a sentence. Pre-parole is more demanding and is part of a social reinsertion project.
- 4 Preparole release.
- 5 *Commission québécoise des libérations conditionnelles*: parole board in Québec.
- 6 Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS); the original is DEP, *diplôme d’études professionnelles*
- 7 General Development Test (GDT). Not to be confused with the GED, which is often treated as a substitute for a Secondary School Diploma (SSD). Passing the GDT “entitles the adult student to access certain vocational education programmes at the secondary level or to access certain construction trades (CCQ)” (*General Development Test [GDT], n.d.*).
- 8 Marco is referring to pre-parole described earlier.