

RETHINKING PRISON RE-EDUCATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY: SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SUSTAINABLE JUSTICE FOR AN INTEGRATED RE-EDUCATIONAL MODEL

RIPENSARE LA RIEDUCAZIONE PENITENZIARIA ATTRAVERSO LA PEDAGOGIA TRASFORMATIVA: INTELLIGENZA SOCIALE E GIUSTIZIA SOSTENIBILE PER UN MODELLO RIEDUCATIVO INTEGRATO



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ABSTRACT

From a perspective of transformative pedagogy, prison education recognises the development of social intelligence as a key resource to counteract functional illiteracy. This approach promotes the deconstruction of dysfunctional institutional dynamics and fosters ethical-civil responsibility. The educational action integrates retributive and reparative justice, aiming at identity reconstruction and the enhancement of human capabilities.

In un'ottica di pedagogia trasformativa, l'educazione penitenziaria riconosce nello sviluppo dell'intelligenza sociale una risorsa chiave per contrastare l'analfabetismo funzionale. Tale approccio promuove la decostruzione delle dinamiche istituzionali disfunzionali e favorisce la responsabilità etico-civile. L'azione educativa integra giustizia retributiva e riparativa, puntando alla ricostruzione identitaria e alla valorizzazione delle capacità umane.

KEYWORDS

Prison education, functional illiteracy, social intelligence, transformative pedagogy, lifelong education

Educazione penitenziaria, analfabetismo funzionale, intelligenza sociale, pedagogia trasformativa, educazione permanente

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Introduction

In the context of renewed interest in inclusion, social justice, and human rights, prison education stands out as one of the most complex, yet also most significant, challenges in the current pedagogical landscape. Adopting a transformative pedagogy perspective, the construct of social intelligence (at the crossroads of psychology, neuroscience, and educational sciences) represents a solid epistemological foundation for designing didactic and educational interventions aimed at countering functional illiteracy (a phenomenon particularly widespread within penitentiary institutions) and emotional illiteracy in adulthood.

As Goffman (1968) argued, total institutions tend to rigidify individual identity, hindering the autonomy of the self through practices of control and isolation. In this scenario, education assumes a dual function: deconstructing dysfunctional institutional dynamics and promoting pathways of personal and collective emancipation.

Social intelligence, conceptualized by Goleman (2007) and understood as the capacity to manage human relationships with empathy and effectiveness, when reinterpreted pedagogically, becomes a powerful transformative tool precisely because it is educable. It enables the activation of constructive relational dynamics grounded in responsible reciprocity and personal and community growth.

Integrated into prison educational practices, social intelligence allows overcoming a narrow vision of learning understood only as knowledge transmission, embracing a broader concept of human formation that includes the ethical, affective, and communicative dimensions of the individual.

Pedagogical innovation thus manifests itself in an educational project aimed at raising awareness and fostering responsibility among the subjects involved (Freire, 2004). In this regard, Sturniolo (1996) emphasizes how encouraging a sense of responsibility generates positive effects in managing the concrete problems of collective prison life, fostering more conscious and constructive interactions.

Social intelligence therefore represents a strategic axis for consolidating socio-emotional skills, fundamental in an integrated perspective of lifelong learning, in the multiple contexts of life (lifewide learning), and in the depth of individual identity and values (lifedeeep learning) (Costa, 2016; Del Gobbo, 2018). On an operational level, its strengthening allows the achievement of high-impact

educational objectives, such as reducing intra-prison conflicts, enhancing perceived self-efficacy (self-agency), supporting pathways to employment reintegration, promoting prosocial networks, overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as developing a sense of ethical and civic responsibility. Investing in the promotion of social intelligence as an educational device to counter functional illiteracy means offering the detained person not only tools for social reintegration but also opportunities for recognition and enhancement of their essential human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001).

This approach requires overcoming exclusively compensatory educational models, instead privileging a holistic and transformative perspective (Federighi & Torlone, 2020), which places the person and the processes of critical self-reflection, empowerment, and self-regulation at the center. In this direction, the design and implementation of an “integrated transformative re-educational model” capable of interacting with retributive and restorative justice approaches in a systemic pedagogical vision becomes necessary, aimed at structuring educational pathways oriented towards transformation and the promotion of authentic processes of personal and social maturation.

1. Education and illiteracy in penitentiary contexts: an educational and social challenge

The issue of education¹ within the penitentiary context remains at the center of socio-political and educational debate. Beyond the problem of widespread illiteracy, it raises urgent questions related not only to the theme of study as a human right. Promoting education to counter all forms of illiteracy means not only filling a cultural deficit but also restoring dignity, autonomy, and concrete opportunities for rethinking and building a new life project starting from the state of detention. According to data published by the Ministry of Justice, updated to June 30, 2023, during the 2022/2023 school year, 1,760 school courses were activated within Italian penitentiary institutions, with a total of 19,372 enrollments. Of these, 9,002 concerned prisoners of foreign nationality. The overall promotion rate stands at 47.8%, indicating a decent level of participation but also significant room for improvement in educational outcomes. A more in-

¹ Article 19, Law 354/75.

depth analysis of the data reveals a strong concentration of the foreign prisoner population in the first level of adult education. Specifically, 7,295 people are enrolled in these courses, of whom 4,792 attend literacy and Italian language learning classes. This data indicates a specific educational need connected, on the one hand, to the necessity of acquiring minimum language skills to live in the penitentiary context; on the other hand, to the difficulty of having educational qualifications possibly obtained in their countries of origin recognized. This situation reflects a broader structural issue: functional illiteracy, which, albeit in different forms, affects both the Italian and foreign prisoner populations. Difficulties in language use, comprehension of written texts, and management of complex cognitive tasks significantly hinder re-education and inclusion processes. Data on educational outcomes highlights a gap between the two main levels of prison education². Prisoners enrolled in the first level (corresponding to primary and lower secondary school) show a promotion rate of 37.6%, significantly lower than the 61.3% recorded among those attending second-level courses (upper secondary school). This gap suggests the need to strengthen didactic support in literacy pathways and in the early cycles of education, where the deepest educational vulnerabilities are concentrated. Despite an increase in the overall number of courses and enrollments compared to the 2021/2022 school year, there has been a contraction in the educational offer³. Despite persistent critical issues related to the fragmentation of the offer, linguistic inequalities, and difficulties in achieving educational outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable subjects, education retains a central role in the re-educational process.

² In prison, education is primarily organized on two levels. The first level includes literacy courses and Italian language learning, corresponding to the first years of elementary and lower secondary school. This level is mainly aimed at inmates with a low level of schooling or foreign nationals. The second level concerns upper secondary education, divided into three academic periods corresponding to the first two years of high school, the third and fourth years, and the final year, where it is possible to obtain the high school diploma. These courses are offered on a voluntary basis and in agreement with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education. (in <https://www.adir.unifi.it/rivista/2002/coralli/cap2.htm>) (Author's translation).

³ Ministry of Justice. Data on Education in Penal Institutions – School Year 2022–2023. (https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.page?contentId=SST450251); XX Report Antigone (2024). “*Nodo alla gola*” (<https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/>). (Author's translation).

2. Social intelligence as the foundation of transformative re-education and sustainable justice

These data fit into a framework of deep-rooted educational deprivation, which has often preceded, and in part caused, entry into the penal system. The phenomenon of widespread illiteracy in the penitentiary context is also closely linked to variables such as migratory origin, social exclusion, and economic marginalization. From a transformative pedagogy perspective, it is urgent to consolidate a (re)educational model for prisons. In a complex society, the challenge becomes: "To make the prison system truly sustainable, a radical change is needed that goes beyond simply building new facilities or increasing staff" (Latino, Martinez-Roig, Tafuri, 2025, p. 264). Illiteracy within the prison context represents a significant problem, with profound repercussions both on the re-educational path of prisoners and on their prospects for social reintegration.

It acts as an obstacle to conscious participation. Illiteracy limits prisoners' ability to understand and actively participate in re-education and restorative justice programs, reducing the effectiveness of educational and treatment interventions; it complicates the understanding of legal documents, sentences, and prison regulations, generating insecurity and dependence on others for managing their rights and duties; it hinders communication between prisoners and penitentiary staff, making it difficult to establish constructive and collaborative dialogue; it drastically reduces access to educational, employment, and social reintegration pathways after detention, increasing the risk of recidivism and social exclusion.

All this generates frustration, a sense of inadequacy, social withdrawal, and aggression.

How, then, is it possible to effectively and systematically address the phenomenon of prison illiteracy? The construct of social intelligence seems to represent a pedagogically sound and strategically effective response. The significant relational commitment it entails, as it integrally involves the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the person, legitimizes and supports the adoption of a transformative (re)educational approach for at least four reasons:

1. By stimulating the development of communicative, empathic, and reflective skills (lacking in individuals living in social and emotional

isolation), it enables processes of emotional and metacognitive awareness.

2. In situations of sociocultural deprivation, educational poverty, marginalization, and violence, social intelligence, through the enhancement of life skills, promotes the development of socio-emotional literacy functional to re-education.
3. By strengthening the perception of oneself as a subject capable of acting positively in the world, social intelligence enables the development of self-efficacy and a sense of agency (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1992), fundamental capacities for the development of prosocial and responsible behaviors.
4. By fostering critical and divergent thinking, social intelligence not only allows the re-signification of one's life project but also promotes the activation of reparative processes that align well with a model of sustainable justice.

The construct of social intelligence allows us to move beyond the idea of compensatory education, primarily aimed at recovering basic literacy. The transformative paradigm, which integrates the cognitive, ethical, social, and relational dimensions (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1981; Nussbaum, 2001), marks the path toward the vision of (re)education as a practice of freedom and social justice. In the contemporary penitentiary context, the promotion of social intelligence assumes even greater importance when considered in light of the re-educational purposes enshrined in Article 27 of the Italian Constitution. In totalizing contexts such as prisons, education for social intelligence makes it possible to: counteract the logic of imprisonment as mere containment; open spaces for authentic relational growth, based on awareness of one's own emotions and recognition of those of others.

As highlighted by Goleman (2007), social intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage one's own and others' emotions within interpersonal relationships, promoting cooperation and reciprocity. It operates on a different level from cognitive intelligence, as it is oriented toward relational, empathic, and communicative competence, now considered essential in educational processes aimed at self-transformation. People with strong social intelligence not only know how to read others' emotions but are also able to positively influence them. This ability proves strategic in promoting restorative justice practices, where

awareness of the harm caused and the willingness to repair it constitute the core of the re-educational process.

In this perspective, social intelligence becomes a strategic and transversal pedagogical lever, capable of combining retributive and restorative justice within a transformative and integrated re-educational model, in which (re)education itself is not only an instrument of the penitentiary treatment but a right to the full realization of the person. From this viewpoint, the prison re-education process is consistent with the idea of sustainable justice understood as justice capable of combining reparative, educational, and relational dimensions, aimed not only at damage reduction but also at the regeneration of social bonds and the empowerment of the people involved.

3. Towards an Integrated Transformative Re-educational Model (ITRM)

This theoretical proposal introduces the Integrated Transformative Re-educational Model (ITRM), conceived as an innovative pedagogical device aimed at integrating the transformative learning paradigm with the fundamental principles of sustainable justice. The model seeks to promote a (re)educational action oriented towards empowerment, identity reconstruction, and social cohesion, integrating ethical, relational, and civic dimensions within the re-educational process of the prisoners.

The envisioned ITRM is founded on the idea that the re-educational process must go beyond merely adaptive and resocializing logics, aiming instead at profound change that involves the cognitive, emotional, relational, and ethical spheres of the prisoner (Mezirow, 2003; Freire, 2004). Social intelligence represents the theoretical and operational fulcrum of the model (Goleman, 1995, 2007). Within the penitentiary context, as previously mentioned, this competence assumes a strategic value in countering the phenomena of functional, relational, and emotional illiteracy, contributing to reducing intra-prison conflicts, promoting a sense of agency, and strengthening processes of self-determination.

The model is conceived along three axes:

1. Transformative. Promotes critical-reflective learning, fostering the re-elaboration of personal and social meanings through narrative and dialogical practices.

2. Integrative. Values the interconnection between formal, non-formal, and informal learning, activating educational pathways that traverse disciplinary contents and diverse experiential contexts.
3. Ethical-relational. Integrates the principles of retributive and restorative justice, orienting educational action towards responsibility, reciprocity, and the co-construction of the common good.

The model integrates, from a systemic perspective, elements of retributive and restorative justice, envisaging activities aimed not only at compliance with norms but also at the reconstruction of social bonds, damage repair, and ethical empowerment. It intends to enhance the dynamic and dialogical aspects of re-education.

In this sense, from an initial applied perspective, examples of activities could include: peer education and peer tutoring workshops, where prisoners with greater skills are actively involved as tutors for fellow prisoners, thereby valuing experiential knowledge and building networks of cooperative learning; restorative justice circles, conceived as structured moments of dialogue between inmates, victims (where possible), and community members, aimed at acknowledging harm, fostering accountability, and rebuilding social bonds; Socratic dialogue groups, which could take place through thematic meetings focused on ethical issues, justice, freedom, and responsibility, where open discussion stimulates critical thinking and the deconstruction of stereotypes.

As such, the model constitutes, albeit in an embryonic phase, a concrete response to the multiple forms of illiteracy presents in the penitentiary context (functional, relational, or emotional), restoring to education an essential and transformative role in the regeneration of the individual and the promotion of a justice oriented towards developmental possibilities and the construction of a meaningful future (Bruner, 1997).

Open Conclusions

In the context of contemporary social transformations, the educational system within penitentiary settings is called upon to rethink its models in light of new pedagogical approaches that better address the critical issues identified so far. In this sense, integrating the transformative learning paradigm with the principles of

sustainable justice allows for the promotion of a pedagogical model capable of generating critical awareness, ethical-civic responsibility, and identity reconstruction.

The construct of social intelligence and the transformative perspective on learning represent fundamental tools for a new re-educational paradigm. The theoretical proposal of the Integrated Transformative Re-educational Model (ITRM) arises from the integration of three conceptual cores: transformative pedagogy (Mezirow), sustainable justice (Nussbaum, Sen), and fluidity as the capacity for adaptation, identity renegotiation, and openness to complexity (Bauman). Transformative pedagogy aims at the critical deconstruction of mental schemas and the emergence of new frames of reference; sustainable justice promotes a model of intergenerational equity, respect for human dignity, and social cohesion; fluidity, finally, is understood as a transversal competence to manage change, elaborate new narratives, and generate educational agency.

Fluidity, understood as the person's ability to adapt, renegotiate their meanings, and redefine their identity in relation to contexts, relationships, and experiences (Bauman, 2003; Mezirow, 2003; Freire, 2004), becomes a foundational element for an education that aspires to be transformative, emancipatory, and profoundly human.

Having identified the theoretical-epistemological framework, the most significant pedagogical task moving forward will consist in operationally investigating the real feasibility of ITRM. This approach aims to: counter functional and emotional illiteracy; foster the reconstruction of personal identity; develop relational and civic competences; reduce conflicts within the prison environment; promote processes of restorative justice and empowerment.

Through a systemic, flexible, and person-centered approach focused on the adult prisoner, the model does not merely provide answers to the specific educational challenges of penitentiary contexts but seeks to open up a broader pedagogical perspective capable of promoting justice, inclusion, and social sustainability in the post-detention reintegration process.

A new pedagogical vision that cannot disregard the commitment to training (also transformative and emancipatory) penitentiary staff. Once again, this is a pedagogical challenge that must begin from within and turn outward.

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