

A photograph of numerous black graduation caps with blue tassels falling through the air against a clear blue sky. In the lower right corner, the hands and arms of graduates in blue gowns are visible, some reaching up towards the caps. One hand is holding a rolled-up white diploma.

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2018 No 240

Autonomy and exclusion among Danish prisoners in education

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Completing an education while in prison requires a high degree of willpower and autonomy. Concurrently, such autonomy may be under pressure from a variety of exclusion processes that are in operation within as well as without the prison. This article focuses on the tension that emerges between autonomy and exclusion when a prison inmate embarks on an education. The central problem will be exemplified by excerpts from interviews with a number of Danish prison inmates, who are taking or have completed an education while serving time.

The background for focusing on this aspect of the educational life of prison inmates comes from a research project, which I carried out during the period of 2012-2015. Here, I conducted interviews with ten prison inmates and former inmates, visited a number of Danish prisons, spoke to prison personnel etc. in order to explore the question of how it is possible to complete an education while serving a prison sentence. In my research, especially the interviews yielded insights into how the possibilities for carrying out an education during a prison sentence are affected by the surrounding environment's responses to the educational wishes of the prisoner. The fact that inmates are excluded from the opportunities that exist in society in general is an obvious consequence of being in prison. But—as will also become apparent during the course of this article—exclusion mechanisms within the prison are similarly crucial to how and whether inmates who embark on an education manage to complete it.

Theoretically, Axel Honneth's¹ dialectically conceived understanding of identity played a central part in the study, because the assumption was that the ability to complete an education would also be dependent on the individual's ability to maintain an identity as a student. This theoretical approach meant that I questioned each interviewee particularly about his or her personal experience of and interpretation of concrete conditions and situations, but also about the reactions that these conditions produced from their

surroundings (as the interviewee recalled these reactions). Within Honneth's identity theory, other people's reactions are, indeed, crucial to an individual's self-perception (a point he takes from the socialpsychologist G.H. Mead). Further, this theoretical approach meant that my research of the educational conditions within the Danish prisons was designed to focus on the interaction between inmates, between inmates and prison employees as well as between the prison context and the surrounding society. The involvement of exclusion as a theme is engendered not least by this kind of dialectic thinking. If you are to regard yourself as 'a student', this requires some degree of support from the surroundings and exclusion processes normally undermine such support.

The ability to define oneself in terms of and by means of education is, moreover, a topic within education research. Concerning prison inmates, so-called 'transformative learning', wherein education 'entails changes within the identity of the learner',² is of interest, because changes within the identity of the inmate may impact on whether or not he or she will continue a life of crime. A range of conclusions from the thesis *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release*³ by Anne Pike will therefore act as a supplement to the analyses presented here. Within the Danish context, there is, unfortunately, no published research on transformative learning within the prison system.

In the following, the methodological approaches of the empirical study will be presented first. Next, a clarification of the concepts of exclusion and autonomy will follow. Subsequently the two concepts will play a central role in an analysis of the education strategies and possibilities of my interviewees.

Methodological conditions of the study

In this article, excerpts from ten interviews are employed as examples in order to highlight the tension

1. Honneth A (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (translated by Joel Anderson). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

2. Illeris, K (2013). *Transformativ læring og identitet*. Gylling: Samfundslitteratur. (p. 67).

3. Pike, A (2014) *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release*. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University.

between autonomy and exclusion that arises when Danish prison inmates take up education.⁴ My visits to some of the Danish prisons, including conversations with prison staff, have first and foremost contributed to the contextualization of the interviews themselves. The restrictions that are placed on prison inmates are, for example, sometimes experienced as unfair by the inmates, whereas the intention from the point of view of the authorities is to prioritize security above individual concerns.

Even so, the analyses presented below focus primarily on the interviewees' experiences of the challenges they have encountered while undergoing education. The ten interviewees involved in my research took different levels of education, ranging from school-leaving exams to university level. In between, A-levels, vocational training and tertiary education linked to vocational training were represented. At the time of the interviews, five interviewees were inmates and five were former inmates. Eight interviewees were men and two were women.⁵ In order to avoid a reflection of local practise, I conducted interviews with inmates at three different prisons located in three different parts of the country. All of the interviewees had, moreover, been transferred from one prison to another and thus had experience from typically two or three different prisons (Denmark currently has 13 prisons distributed across the country). Also in terms of age I sought to attain a spread: The youngest interviewee was at the time of the interview in the mid-twenties and the oldest in the mid-fifties, while the majority were between 30 and 40 years of age. The length of their respective sentences ranged from just short of five years to more than twelve years.

The interviews were all recorded on a dictaphone. Immediately after each interview, I made extensive notes of what was said and, subsequently, I transcribed selected parts of each interview. My choice of which parts to transcribe were made on the basis of themes brought up during the interviews that stood out as significant. All of the interview citations below are

direct transcriptions (albeit obviously translated from Danish). On average, the interviews took 1 hour and 50 minutes each.

As a matter of record, my research was conducted with permission from Datatilsynet, which is the Danish information protection authority.

Exclusion and autonomy

When human beings are prevented from partaking in groups or communities which they would like to be part of, we are dealing with what is normally defined as exclusion.⁶ Being sentenced to prison is therefore to be regarded as a form of exclusion. One of the definitions what exclusion is that since the 90s has been cited most frequently likewise focuses on the unrealized desire for participation:

An individual is socially excluded if (a) he or she is geographically resident in a society but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society and (c) he or she would like to so participate.⁷

A person's self-determination is obviously restricted when his or her desire to participate cannot be realized.

As is clear from this definition, self-determination is an important aspect in relation to exclusion. A person's self-determination is obviously restricted when his or her desire to participate cannot be realized. One trait that inmates may develop in connection with reduced self-determination is apathy.⁸ Apathy can result in an undermining of the ability to make active choices. At the same time, being able to choose another course in life is a crucial factor in order to avoid reverting to a life of crime.

In the present article, autonomy is strongly connected to the ability to make reflected choices that also express a personal, internalized conviction. Historically, this understanding of the concept goes back to Immanuel Kant:

In the 1700s, Kant formulated a range of significant characteristics that describe individual

4. This obviously does not mean that the same challenges apply to every prison inmate, but my interviews may contribute to the identification issues that are relevant to consider in connection with the question of how we can help prison inmates to complete an education.
5. Currently, 7.4 per cent of Danish inmates are female (Danish Prison and Probation Service (2016) *Statistik 2016*. Report for the Danish Ministry of Justice).
6. Larsen JE (2009) Forståelser af begrebet social udsathed. In: Brandt P et al. (eds), *Udsat for forståelse—en antologi om socialt udsatte*. Copenhagen: The Danish Ministry for Social Affairs. (p. 20).
7. Burchardt T, Le Grand J and Piachaud D (1999) Social Exclusion in Britain 1991-1995. *Social Policy & Administration* 33(3): 227-244. (p. 229).
8. Zurn P and Dilts A (2016) . New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (p. 98).

autonomy. Here, autonomy is described as a precondition for making any qualified decision about anything—that is, autonomy is highlighted as an ability. Additionally, the act of choosing can, according to Kant, only be considered a genuine choice when it does not stem from inclinations.⁹ ‘Kantian autonomy presupposes that we are rational agents whose transcendental freedom takes us out of the domain of natural causation’.¹⁰ What may seem like a choice, then, may very well be a question of giving in to one’s inclinations—or, in other words: A choice, which purely concerns inclinations, does not necessarily have anything to do with actual self-determination. Kant uses the concept of self-determination synonymously with the concept of self-control, and self-control requires a well-considered rationale where the individual has thought through his or her choice in such a way as to be able to justify it rationally to others. With this in mind, for example criminal actions must be regarded as predominantly non-autonomous.

According to the psychological theorists Ryan and Deci,¹¹ who are behind some of the newest developments within self-determination theory (SDT), this aspect of justification remains central to the understanding of autonomy.¹² However they do not believe that it presupposes being outwith the domain of natural causations: ‘people’s autonomy lies not in being independent causes but in exercising their capacity to reflectively endorse or reject prompted actions’.¹³ In practice, no person’s self-determination can be completely unrestricted, because human beings always enter into relations and contexts that either influence or circumscribe the choices they make. Because of this, the balance between exclusion and autonomy always constitutes a tension, which must nonetheless be contained within the individual involved.

In Anne Pike’s PhD-thesis on transformative learning among English prison inmates, motivation similarly constitutes a theme in relation to autonomy. Because autonomy is based on a considered, internalized choice, the autonomous choice can be linked to a particular type of motivation, which is not simply about achieving an external goal.¹⁴ As we shall see, different reasons for wanting education may thus

be regarded as more or less autonomous depending on the underlying motivation.

The last explication of the concept of autonomy, which will be relevant in the present article, points in the direction of various degrees of autonomy. Beauchamp and Childress analyze ‘autonomous actions in terms of normal choosers who act 1) intentionally 2) with understanding, and 3) without controlling influences that determine their action’.¹⁵ They emphasize that this is not a question of absolute criteria, but of grades—for example, you can have a greater or lesser understanding of a given case and you can be more or less influenced by external factors. This means that they point to a link between autonomy and exclusion exactly because exclusion must be regarded as a strong ‘controlling influence’.

In what follows, I will start by clarifying the formal requirements for pursuing education within a Danish prison. Subsequently, I will consider different types of reasons why inmates want education.

Reasons for wanting education

As an inmate of a Danish prison, you are obliged to work 37 hours a week (this is the official standard for weekly working hours in Denmark). These hours of work may take the form of work, education and/or various forms of therapy. The inmate’s wishes are taken into consideration in each individual case when determining the distribution of the working hours. Individual circumstances, legal frames (including security) and the capacities of the prison all play a part in this decision. This means it cannot be taken for granted that the inmate’s wishes can be accommodated. If, for example, an inmate has an addiction, this can mean that education is postponed regardless of the wishes of the person in question. Likewise, the capacities of the prison school may mean that the desire for an education cannot be met.¹⁶

Seven of my interviewees never had any doubt that they wanted to obtain an education while in prison. To them it has, in other words, been a deliberate choice from the very start of their imprisonment. One of them explained it thus: ‘*I had been saying for a long time that, if I were arrested, then I’d start on an*

9. Kant I (2002) *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*; edited and translated by Allen W. Wood; with essays by Schneewind JB et al. New York: Yale University Press. (p. 32).

10. Schneewind JB (1998) *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. (p. 515).

11. Ryan R and Deci E (2006) Self-Regulation and the Problem of Human Autonomy: Does Psychology Need Choice, Self-Determination, and Will? *Journal of Personality* 74:6: 1557-1586.

12. Ryan and Deci also declares themselves to be inspired by post-Kantian thinking.

13. Ryan R and Deci E (2006) Self-Regulation and the Problem of Human Autonomy: Does Psychology Need Choice, Self-Determination, and Will? *Journal of Personality* 74:6: 1557-1586. (p. 1574).

14. Generally, we can distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: ‘intrinsic motivation is related to the internal desire to engage in an activity for its own sake whereas extrinsic motivation is related to external and contextual factors’ (Pike, A (2014) *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release*. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University. (p. 39).

15. Beauchamp TL and Childress JF (2009) *Principles of biomedical ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 59).

16. Riis AH (2016) Indsat under uddannelse – mulighed og kamp. *Nordic Journal of Law and Justice* 39(1): 73-87.

education—just to spend the time on something sensible’ (former inmate 2013). Several other interviewees expressed in similar ways how taking an education while serving time is all about spending one’s time prudently. This concurs with a survey conducted in 2006 wherein all Danish prison inmates, who were in education, were asked to give their reasons for choosing this (the response rate in the survey was 69.5 per cent).¹⁷ Here, rationality and usefulness constituted the most important factor among a range of reasons for embarking on an education (73.1 per cent regarded this as very important).

In Anne Pike’s investigation of English prison inmates in education, she notes that the very concept of ‘usefulness’ is unclear and may refer to a great many explanations ranging from ‘externally-motivated, prison-focused, reasons to the more internalised personal development and a desire for knowledge for its own sake’.¹⁸ Exactly this distinction between what is externally motivated and what is personal and internalized is a theme discussed by Koudal in terms of the threshold between official and unofficial explanations for why education is a good thing.¹⁹ As we will see, this may also involve a boundary between externally expected reasons and personal reasons where the personal reasons remain unofficial or hidden. My interviewees expressed how prison culture promoted specific types of reasons, which were not always concurrent with the personally internalized and *autonomous* reasons.

Another type of reason points in a very different direction. The wish for education cannot be considered independently of the fact that every prison inmate is, as mentioned, obliged to spend 37 hours a week on work, education and/or therapeutic treatment. A preference for one option may therefore stem from a wish to avoid something else. One of the inmates I interviewed expressed it thus: ‘*When I came here [he refers to the prison school], it was mainly because (...), you know, I didn’t want to work (...) I felt that that didn’t make any sense*’ (inmate 2014). The interviewee goes on to describe the work he was expected to carry out in the

prison as monotonous and boring—in this case, the work entailed packing work.

The latter type of reason has an ambiguous status. On the one hand, this may be the expected type of reason *among the prison inmates*. On the other hand, this type of reason may contribute to a suspicious attitude towards what motivates prison inmates to choose education. It may be regarded as a way of cheating in the sense that the reason for choosing education is founded in a wish to avoid something—at least when seen from the point of view of the system.

One form of prejudice, which follows from the Kantian concept of autonomy, concerns what *ought* to motivate people in the choices they make. Seen through Kantian eyes, the carrying out of criminal acts reveals that a criminal is allowing him or her self to be governed by inclinations (including impulses and instincts), and, for this very reason, one may argue that the criminal abandons his or her autonomy. However, the question is whether the person who has committed a crime also subsequently acts in disregard of the reasoned reflection that characterizes this understanding of autonomy. One of the themes that continuously turned up during the ten interviews with inmates and former inmates

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concerned becoming categorized as a person who is always suspected of attempting to get away with as much as possible in as easy a manner as possible. Nine out of ten interviewees experienced becoming subjected to this perception by others and explained that this also entailed a suspicious attitude towards their motivation for wanting education.

Anne Pike shows in her thesis that the thresholds between different types of motivation are not necessarily sharp.²⁰ Finding direct motivation in for example the professional substance of an education—something, which is not founded in external factors, such as wanting to avoid boring work—may thus not necessarily be present from the start. Research on autonomy and education often focuses on how to promote autonomy or the capacity for autonomy through the education system or through teaching,

17. Koudal P (2007) Indsatte i danske fængsler. Uddannelse og uddannelsesønsker. Report for the Danish Prison and Probation Service. (p.7).

18. Pike, A (2014) Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University. (p. 135).

19. Koudal P (2010) Uddannelse i fængslerne. Hvad siger de indsatte? En interviewundersøgelse. Report for the Danish Prison and Probation Service. (p. 35).

20. Pike, A (2014) Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University. (p. 269).

because education is often seen as a means to develop a person's ability to make reflective choices.²¹ Because of this, it is not necessarily conducive to expect certain forms of motivation before entering an education if the aim is that the inmate should alter his or her behaviour in the long run.

Education, aim and purpose

One of the former inmates (interviewed 2013) had taken an A-level education during his sentence. The application procedure in itself was slow and it took a number of years for him to be able to start his studies in earnest and, subsequently, they took the form of self-study—that is, he was allowed to study in his room while most of the other inmates were at work or took part in treatment programmes. The exams were also conducted in the prison. In his response to my questions about how other persons at the prison reacted to his education, he focused especially on the prison guards. From them he experienced a variety of reactions, ranging from a certain amount of indifference to positive as well as negative attention: *'To begin with, I was (...) just one of all sorts of others who were also in education'*. When he begins to attain extraordinarily good results in his exams, the attitude changes: *'At first they don't believe it (...), then they begin to pay a bit of attention to it (...) and begin to ask about it'*. The former inmate recalls this questioning as an ambiguous affair. On the one hand, it was an expression of some sort of interest, *'and in that sense you can say that they [the prison guards] also were a support'*, he says. On the other hand, there were different ways of asking: *'there were also (...) some slightly negative characters [among the prison guards]'*. These 'negative characters' would, for example, ask: *'What's it you want with that education? Where is it you want to work?'* The hidden premise of such questions is the notion that education only makes sense if it is a realization of the wish to get a job. Because it is widely known that it is more difficult to get a job if one has served a prison sentence, the implication is that, as a prison inmate, there is no purpose to taking an education.

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However, reasons to do explicitly with, for instance, professional interest are not valid in the prison context if we are to believe an inmate (2015), who explained that there is an ambiguity in relation to what *really* motivates an inmate to pursue an education and what he or she presents outwardly as motivating factors. He focuses especially on his fellow inmates' expectations to his reasons. Also in this case, a variety of negatively slanted questions is mentioned: *'Who the Hell is going to give you a job? (...) What the heck are you doing!?'* Gradually, he put together a response consisting of: *'I'm doing this to pass the time'*. This became his response primarily because he, according to his own words, *'couldn't be bothered discussing it'*. In other words, he did not want to state the real reason, because he expected that this would lead to a discussion wherein he would have to justify his actual standpoint. He explains to me that his aim was not to get just any education, but that he had a *specific* wish to pursue a specific education (university level) in which he had a long-standing professional interest.

Having to explain away one's real motivation in order to legitimize taking an education is confirmed by a third example from the interviews where a former inmate (2014) explains that, if you have ambitions in the direction of a higher level of education than what the prison can offer,²² you may be met with comments such as: *'Do you really think that you can do that! What the Hell are you talking about?'*. The same person gives examples of different types of explanations, revealing that it is neither interest in the education itself, nor the hope of acquiring a job that makes the studies attractive to him, but the fact that other benefits can be obtained: *'Because then I can [mentions various examples], you know, you find some sort of excuse (...)'*. Taking an education in order to avoid work thus becomes an accepted explanation *among the inmates*, while it is *not* an accepted explanation among the *prison employees*. Nevertheless, the suspicion that inmates primarily harbour the agenda of avoiding work may appear to the employees to be confirmed because they obviously also become aware of the way in which inmates argue when it comes to education. During the same part of the interview, the interviewee emphasizes an important aspect of this complex navigation between

21. Liu W, Wang J and Ryan R (eds) (2016) Building Autonomous Learners. Perspectives from Research and Practice using Self-Determination Theory. Singapore: Springer. (p. 1).

22. The prison school normally offers 9th and 10th year of the common Danish school education. Some prisons offer A-level classes and components of various vocational educations.

explaining and explaining away. The interviewee does not believe that the opinions expressed by the other inmates are genuine. *'I think a lot of them would like to do it [i.e. take an education] (...) but there is a culture that says, well, then we'll cheat the system'*. The former inmate also recalls having been a representative of that culture: *'I thought that way when I was at the school [he refers to the prison's own school], great, you know, I'm gonna cheat them, I don't give a damn'*.²³ Later on in life, the very same person, incidentally, became a dedicated university student.

As a prison inmate in education, one may thus feel compelled to express oneself within a discourse, which implicitly encourages explanations that emphasize selfishly calculated motivation. That, at least, is the case among the inmates. But also questions focusing on job-attainment reveal important aspects of the discourse: Because we know that people who have a prison sentence behind them experience greater difficulties when it comes to getting a job, those who explain their desire for education by means of job-attainment are caught out by a logic, which in principle renders education less meaningful for them. When an explanation emphasizing, for instance, a professional interest is not valid either, the motivation for wanting education must remain hidden. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that prison inmates are *obliged* to live together. Outside of prison, people can to a large extent choose to partake in those environments that support their interests—in prison, you are forced to make your way in the environment that is given to you.

All in all, the educational discourse within the prison does not exactly support autonomous explanations for wanting education, when the accepted explanations are, so to speak, assigned to you by the surroundings.²⁴ Even though my interviewees seemed to be fully aware of the fact that they adjusted their explanations to accord with points of view that differed from their actual reasons for going into educate, one

can easily imagine how inmates with fewer personal resources might develop an identity that matches the 'prison inmate discourse'. As mentioned, the theoretical point of departure of my research was inspired by Axel Honneth's dialectical thinking. Seen from this perspective, the way in which human beings interact with different environments is to some extent always decisive for their self-perception. The question is whether you react with surrender or resistance.

Moreover, larger empirical studies support the Honnethian thesis about the important role played by social context when it comes to the formation of identity. One study conducted among different groups of South African youths, for instance, showed that their ideas about the future and thus also about their own 'possible identities' were strongly influenced by their assessment of the possibilities that were open to the social grouping to which they regarded themselves as belonging.^{25,26}

The real surprise with regard to my interviewees was the fact that they entered into education *in spite* of the dynamics described here. They never gave in to the 'identity pressure' of the social context framed by the prison. But, as we shall see in the following, they also used a strategy of withdrawing from other inmates. Seven out of the ten interviewees gave examples of how they gradually began to shield themselves against the prison discourse by isolating themselves or by avoiding the company of other inmates.²⁷ As one inmate (2014) puts it: *'I'm not here to make friends. In the five years I've been in prison, I have met enough criminals (...) that's a different talk and I'm sick of that talk (...) I'm so fed up listening to them...'*

Autonomy and exclusion

The fact that we, as human beings, are set into relations to other individuals and that we are part of specific environments and societies does inevitably

23. Jones & Berglas have referred to this phenomenon as 'self-handicapping', which basically means that, in order to protect oneself against defeat, situations that might lead to defeat are avoided (Berglas S and Jones EE (1978). Drug Choice as Self-Handicapping Strategy in Response to Success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36: 405-417). In the context of the Danish education system, this phenomenon has been documented by, *inter alia*, Gillam, who describes school pupils' negative attitude to school and learning as 'reversed social capital' (Gillam L (2008) *Balladens fornuft. Ungdomsforskning 1(2): 25-35*).
24. Goodman's studies of Californian prison inmates show, by the way, that in the prison context it may not be possible to avoid certain identity-related designations if the prison system is coordinated by means of a categorization of 'types'. In a situation where the prison discourse is saturated with such categorizations, it is not easy to place oneself in a category that stands out as irregular within that discourse (Goodman P (2008) *It's Just Black, White, or Hispanic: An Observational Study of Racializing Moves in California's Segregated Prison Reception Centers. Law & Society Review* 42(4): 735-770).
25. Masinga N and Dumont K (2018) The motivational implications of adolescents' school-oriented possible identities in a social change context. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 48: 284-290.
26. Recidivism statisticians are, among other things, able to tell inmates that they – as a group – are at a significant risk of lapsing back into crime after completing a prison sentence. If you look at the Danish relapse rate for convicted criminals, who receive a new sentence within two years of their release from prison, recidivism is at about 30% (Danish Prison and Probation Service (2016) *Statistik 2016. Report for the Danish Ministry of Justice*).
27. Out of the ten inmates whom I interviewed, eight shared the experience of perceiving many of their fellow inmates as people with whom they had very little in common. It was mentioned, for example, that conversations in the common rooms often centred on crime. In Koudal's Danish survey, it is also noted that *'often, what the inmates have to talk to one another about are things, which they already have in common: Crime and grumbings about the system. Additionally also sex and women'* (Koudal P (2010) *0 Report for the Danish Prison and Probation Service, p. 35*).

influence us. However, being autonomous means that, although this is the case, we do not always allow the context to determine our choices—at least, our explanations for choosing as we do must come ‘from ourselves’ in such a way that they do not exclusively reflect an adjustment to the premises dictated by our surroundings. Explanations must be thought through by means of personally internalized convictions. Here, Beauchamp and Childress’ notion of graded autonomy becomes relevant—because you can ask to what extent it is possible for individuals to remain independent of ‘controlling influences that determine their action’.²⁸ Within the prison walls, the above-mentioned discourse is an example of just such a ‘controlling influence’. If you do not adhere to the discourse, this has ramifications in the form of, for example, whom you can and cannot talk to—and that may cause you to adjust. Another possibility is, as mentioned, to avoid the discourse by limiting contact to those inmates who represent that discourse. ‘Self-exclusion’ is therefore not necessarily a freely made choice. Here, this sort of exclusion is, rather, a consequence of a very different choice, namely choosing to become a student.

My research generally shows that, for the interviewees, it has been a real struggle to obtain an education. Many of them had to insist on their wish over a sustained period of time before it became possible for them to start school or embark on an education. Aspects such as a lack of help and guidance as well as prolonged application procedures and sometimes rejected applications have been highlighted as frustrating barriers that prevent inmates from starting an education.²⁹ It is one thing to have a desire for something, but it is a completely different thing to hang onto that desire when you encounter resistance. It requires a deliberate choice, which in turn requires that you identify with your choice. But defining yourself as ‘someone in education’ can be difficult in an environment where you are first and foremost defined as ‘an inmate’. In conjunction with my visits to various Danish prisons, I asked a number of employees at the prison schools whether they regarded the inmates in education as ‘students’. The answer was no, and in one

case the person I asked referred to the safety-risk it might pose if you forget that the inmates are exactly inmates.³⁰

Seven out of the ten interviewees spoke of a student life that was in several ways lonely and of choosing to limit contact to other inmates in favour of focusing on the studies. Those who undertook self-study did, as mentioned, isolate themselves with their studies, either in a specially designed study-cell or in their room, although they actually had the opportunity to use the schoolrooms. None of them tried to hide the fact that it was hard work to maintain the self-discipline it requires to work alone, and several of them noted the cost of this isolated life in terms of their interaction with other people. One former inmate (2012) said thus: ‘I’ve become very sensitive when it comes to other people (...) something has happened in my way of dealing with other people’. The same former inmate noted the importance of having had two mentors to help complete the studies: ‘If I hadn’t had those two people (...) then it would have been very, very difficult for me’.

Mentoring and student identity

Having a mentor or some other person, who has an insight into one’s course of education, is emphasized by the interviewees as extremely important.³¹ This may be a professional from the outside or it may be a person who has a close relation to the inmate in question. In a few cases, the spouse is highlighted as a significant support and motivator during the education.³² But often, relations to family members are associated with separation and deprivation in such a way that inmates are not able to obtain support there. Instead, a number of interviewees speak of building up close relations to a mentor. This becomes clear when, for instance, they refer not just to ‘a mentor’, but to ‘a personal mentor’, and a number of them also remark that they have continued to stay in touch with their mentor after having completed their education. Denmark has a variety of mentor-systems, for example the Danish branch of the International Committee of the Red

28. Beauchamp TL and Childress JF (2009) *Principles of biomedical ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 59).

29. Riis AH (2016) Indsat under uddannelse – mulighed og kamp. *Nordic Journal of Law and Justice* 39(1): 73-87.

30. In everyday language, there is unfortunately often a direct link between the term ‘inmate’ and the term ‘criminal’. One of the former inmates, who participated in my interviews (2014), told me how a prison guard described him as a ‘criminal’. But this particular inmate had, in fact, decided to never again commit crime and thus felt extremely disparaged.

31. Even one of the former inmates, who did not in other ways keep in touch with relatives, mentioned the importance of notifying relatives of exams that were passed. This shows how crucial it is to be regarded as ‘someone in education’. This, moreover, touches ‘upon the implicit tension between being an ‘inmate’ and being ‘in education’. The tendency to pay greater attention to a person’s status as convicted or previously convicted is considerable. Winning another designation for oneself also matters greatly to one’s self-perception (Vold GB, Bernard TJ. and Snipes JB (2002) *Theoretical Criminology*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 210; Reuss A and Wilson D (2012) *The Way Forward*. In: Wilson D and Reuss A (eds), *Prison(er) Education. Stories of Change and Transformation*. Sheffield: Waterside Press, pp. 172-181, p. 177/178).

32. The article *A Life-Course View of the Development of Crime* discusses and documents different family-related reasons for persistence with and desistance from crime. An interesting point in the study by Sampsons and Laub is that marriage represents a ‘potential causal force in desistance’ (Sampson R and Laub J (2005) *A Life-Course View of the Development of Crime*. *ANNALS, AAPSS*, 602, November: 12-45, p. 36).

Cross has an arrangement whereby people (often students) can help an inmate with his or her education. Also prison inmates can become mentors, but none of my interviewees had mentors among their co-inmates. Some have helped other inmates with their studies, but this has happened on their own initiatives and without the framework of obligation that comes with official mentor relationships. Pike's research shows that organized mentor relationships between inmates can have an important, identity-confirming function for both the person who is the recipient and the person who is the mentor: 'It provided valuable mentoring for the less able learners but also the mentors themselves gained hugely from their responsible role, providing them with self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, pride and a sense of belonging'.³³

Receiving support to complete an education is obviously important and, in the case of my interviewees, this support often comes from individuals outwith the prison. Nonetheless, one inmate (2014) returns repeatedly during the interview to a named member of the prison staff (not a prison guard), who represents a significant support to this inmate's educational project. Because of this, I ask about the difference between support that comes from within the prison and support that comes from the outside. I receive the following response:

What [support] I get from here is hugely important. They are much more a part of what you do—they are more involved in it (...) The family really can't quite appreciate what it's like to be in prison—though of course they can tell from looking at me that it's no fun, but really, they don't know what it actually entails.

By 'support from here' the inmate refers to the named individual mentioned above and to another member of the prison staff who was appointed as mentor to this inmate.

Pike's research shows that organized mentor relationships between inmates can have an important, identity-confirming function for both the person who is the recipient and the person who is the mentor.

The struggle to maintain an identity as a student in an environment where a completely different set of categorizations colour the daily routines of interacting with and referring to one another emphasizes the importance of being able to strengthen one's self-image through individuals, who represent values and opinions that relate positively to the notion of taking an education. In theory, an identity that is not supported by others is difficult to maintain, because human beings need affirmation from others regarding the things we do.³⁴ In this connection, one of the former inmates (2012) pointed to the decisive importance of 'this thing about having, maybe for the first time in some people's lives, someone who sees the potential'. In that context, autonomy defined as the ability to determine for oneself is, in other words, not an ability that is detached from the interplay between individual and surroundings. Both the negative influence in the form of impacts against which one wishes to shield oneself by means of self-exclusion and the positive interest that helps one to insist on one's choices are examples of this. Thus, autonomy may be supported as well as undermined by reactions from the surroundings.

One of the options given to Danish prison inmates, when they have served the main part of their sentence, is to apply for an education-pass. If their application is met, this means that they will be allowed to leave the prison in order to take part in education outside of the prison. In this way, they get the opportunity to become part of an actual educational environment. In the next section, we will look at what this may mean to them.

Student life outside of prison

Having an education-pass means, more specifically, that you are allowed to take part in the scheduled classes of a state-recognized education. Since many educations operate very much in interplay with study-groups established by the students themselves as well as with other sorts of 'social binding material', this means that prison inmates with an

33. Pike, A (2014) *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release*. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University. (p. 180).

34. Honneth A (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (translated by Joel Anderson). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

education-pass can only take a limited part in the educational environment itself, because they are restricted to the explicitly teaching-related components of the education. This causes at least two problems: Firstly, a considerable part of the development of a person's identity as a student happens in the social interaction with other students;³⁵ secondly, it may arouse wonder among the other students if someone does not take part in the more extensive study-related and social life. The latter is especially relevant in cases where inmates do not want to tell their fellow students that, actually, they are prison inmates. To all of my interviewees, the ways in which the surroundings have reacted to their criminal past has constituted a substantial theme. To some, it is simply an impossible thought to be open about their past. To others, it has been a question of waiting a certain amount of time before telling other students about their past. It was important to them that they were given the opportunity to initially introduce themselves as the people they are without being categorized as 'that guy from the prison' (inmate 2014). Among those who initially chose to remain completely silent about their background, a few have experienced being unmasked because others knew about their background, and one person felt pressured to tell the truth at an earlier point than intended.

One last example from one of the inmates illustrates this issue rather well. This inmate (2014) had no intentions of telling the other students about his background: 'They ask where you live, right (...) alright, well, I live with my family. Which is what I also did' [the inmate is referring to weekend-passes from prison]. He continues: 'Sometimes you feel like just getting up in front of everyone and saying: 'You know what? Let me tell you something'. Because you feel kind of, that because you're not [pause]—you're evading the truth then you feel like you're running around telling lies—and that doesn't feel good, you know'.

The paradox in this situation is that the very designation 'inmate' in a way becomes the focus while, at the same time, it becomes the one designation that cannot be used. Thus, having an education-pass becomes something that makes it very clear to the inmate that he or she is exactly that: an inmate. Inside of the prison, you differ from the others by being a student. Outside of the prison, you differ by being an

'inmate'. In other words, this means that the exclusion that may occur in relation to taking an education in the prison has a tendency to follow the inmate outside of the prison, albeit in a different constellation.

Exclusion, autonomy and education— concluding remarks

The ten inmates and former inmates, who were interviewed as part of my research and whose statements have been used to draw examples from, had all completed at least one exam while serving their sentence and several had completed a full education. This means that the interviewees belonged to a group we might refer to as 'resourceful inmates'. I have not in

this article gone into details about where, on a personal level, such resources come from, except that I have shown how the surroundings may support or fail to support the education wishes of inmates.³⁶ Mostly, the interviewees themselves describe it as pure willpower, but clearly, this willpower or autonomy needs to be somehow encouraged and aided. When directly asked how it was possible to go through with the exams, one inmate (2014)

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answers without any hesitation: 'That was sheer will; that was drawing on my previous experience'.

It requires willpower and strength to complete an education in an environment that does not support one's educational project. When different exclusion mechanisms simultaneously complicate this project, the challenge is anything but lessened. The notion of exclusion is often employed in relation to socially deprived groups. But in this case, it is actually a—seen from *inside* of the prison—strong group, which is excluded. The exclusion happens *inter alia* by means of the discourse within the prison. A countering move by a resourceful inmate may take the form of self-exclusion but, as mentioned, such self-exclusion is not necessarily a freely made choice. It is, rather, a solution such inmates may feel forced to resort to in order to complete an education. One should imagine, then, that obtaining a pass for education outside of the

35. Ulriksen L. (2009) The implied student. *Studies in Higher Education* 34(5): 517-532.

36. Pike's thesis treats much more thoroughly the phenomenon of 'resilience', which she associates with 'inner strength' (Pike, A (2014) *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after release*. Ph.D. thesis. UK: Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University, p. 187).

prison, and with that the opportunity of becoming included in new educationally oriented networks, might alleviate the situation. But in actual fact, this continues to make it clear to such inmates that they differ from everyone else: The fear of being stamped as a prison inmate influenced all of the interviewees, who had obtained an education-pass, in terms of how they interacted and communicated with their fellow students. In this way, the exclusion from society that prison inmates are subjected to regardless does not operate only within the prison walls—it continues to cling to inmates when they move outside of the prison.

If it is possible to grade autonomy, then an extraordinarily strong degree of autonomy is required of those inmates who wish to obtain an education, because maintaining this choice is challenged by what Beauchamp and Childress call 'controlling influences'. Paying attention to the fact that those inmates, who insist on taking an education, do not constitute the majority of prison inmates reveals an important question

that needs to be asked regarding the rest of the inmates: How can you motivate them to take an education when the prison discourse undermines such motivation? In addition to this, opposing the discourse entails an autonomous choice, and it is exactly the ability to make your own choices that suffers when you are imprisoned, because your latitude is restricted and many decisions are made for you. Given the fact that maintaining autonomy is, moreover, an important requirement for being able to partake in society once the prison sentence has been served, we need to pay more attention to the link between autonomy and exclusion.

Although the possibility of taking certain kinds of educations exists within the Danish prisons, Denmark currently has only two prisons with genuine educational departments where inmates in education are living together.³⁷ According to the Prison Service's own records a total of 42 inmates currently live in such departments. The total number of prisoners in Denmark averages some 3400 individuals.³⁸

37. 'The educational department at Nyborg Fængsel houses 16 inmates, who live together. This department was established some years ago as a trial, while a similar department was established at Søbysøgård, housing 26 individuals, in order to improve the opportunities of prison inmates to remain in and complete an education while serving a sentence' (The Danish Prison and Probation Service's website on February 2nd, 2018. Available at: <http://www.kriminalforsorgen.dk/Nyheder-19.aspx?M=NewsV2&PID=18&NewsID=1830>)

38. In 2016, the number of newly convicted persons entering prisons and county gaols amounted to 11.175 persons. Due to many short sentences, however, the prisons and county gaols housed only on average 3.421 persons per day (Danish Prison and Probation Service (2016) *Statistik 2016*. Report for the Danish Ministry of Justice, p. 15).