

"VR" As A Reflective Device In Prison Contexts

Carmen Lucia Moccia¹ and Fausta Sabatano ¹

¹ Università degli Studi di Salerno; cmoccia@unisa.it; fsabatano@unisa.it

* Correspondence: cmoccia@unisa.it

Abstract: Despite the recognition of prison education as a human right in various international documents, Europe does not express a unified vision regarding the implementation of this right. The complexity of education in prison lies in the diversity of factors that influence its realization, including the political and social priority accorded and the pedagogical approaches adopted. The reflection on education and re-education in prison contexts raises ethical, epistemological, and moral questions, highlighting the need for an educational approach that goes beyond mere categories and focuses on the individual experience and perception of the inmate of their own story and condition. In this sense, technology, particularly virtual reality (VR), emerges as a promising reflective tool, capable of offering new opportunities for prison education through immersive experiences that promote reflection and change. In this regard, this contribution presents the STEPs project as a possible example of the combination of narration and technology to create innovative educational environments within prisons

Keywords: Deviance, Special Educational Need, Phenomenological approach, VR

Introduction

Education in prisons is different in various countries and areas, but no matter where you look, teachers and others who work in prisons deal with a lot of the same problems. These challenges are united by the complexity of designing and implementing inclusive educational and training interventions within coercive environments. Adherence to principles promoted at national and continental levels seems to suggest a peaceful recognition of prison education as a human right in different countries (Concil of Europe, 1987, 2006, rev. 2020; European Commission, 2011), yet Europe lacks a unified and common vision regarding the implementation of this right ("Costello & Warner, 2014; GHK, 2013; Behan, 2018). As is well known, Section 28 of the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006, REV. 2020) recognizes the right of every prisoner to access comprehensive and personalized educational programs. The realization of this right is deeply affected by numerous factors that can essentially be traced back to the political and social priority that different countries accord to prison education, as well as to the different pedagogical approaches to realizing the principle of 'education for all' in penitentiary institutions.



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In this sense, the contribution aims to outline the role of VR as a reflective tool starting from an inquiry on the meaning of educating and re-educating in carceral contexts.

1. To Educate or Re-educate?

Article 27 of the Italian Constitution, stating that "punishments cannot consist of treatments contrary to the sense of humanity and must aim at the re-education of the convicted person," enshrines the re-educative purpose of punishment. However, there is a margin of interpretation, which the norm does not exhaust, regarding what is meant by "re-education." In general, the use of the term re-education would refer to two specific contexts: the medical sector and the psycho-pedagogical sector. In the medical context, it refers to functional re-education, such as the recovery of the mobility of a limb or the functionality of an organ following an injury or illness, assimilating re-education to rehabilitation processes whose goal is to restore lost physical abilities. In the psycho-pedagogical field, re-education is used particularly in contexts characterized by deviance and criminality, materializing in an intervention aimed at stimulating the subject's change in response to an educational deficiency (Farné, 2020). In this second case, the term re-education has often been the subject of reflection and deepening, since its use, clearly, is not free from epistemological, moral, and ethical implications that, if not dissipated, can lead to misunderstandings and distortions. Specifically, the use of the prefix "re-" would underscore the implications inherent in a process carried out a second time, or that is renewed or corrected, highlighting the implications of a certain power dynamic based therefore on coercion and repetition (C. Nanni, 1997):

“poiché una volta sola non è bastata a sopprimere la trasgressione delle norme e a inculcare la persuasione all'obbedienza politica e alla sottomissione psicologica. Rieducare è dunque ricondurre, o ridurre a una condizione che non rechi disturbo alle regole”

In this case, the disturbance (a term of medical ancestry) does not specifically pertain to the "disturbed" person as much as to the society that is 'disturbed' by dissonant presences and behaviors and therefore to be monitored and punished (Iori 2015). From this perspective, the medical and psycho-pedagogical fields seem to converge when penitentiary re-education is seen as a tool for "cure" understood as the repair of subjects (Ferri, 1930; 1929; 1881; Lombroso, 1876; Grispigni, 1952) focusing on the etiological investigation of their "criminal disease," generating reductionist and predictive drifts susceptible to encouraging classificatory and prejudicial approaches. A view that in some measure seems to reside in the somewhat obsolete lexicon of the Italian penitentiary legislation, when several years after the promulgation of the Constitutional Charter it is affirmed that the (re-educational) treatment is based on scientific observation aimed at tracing the 'deficiencies' of the subject that led him to delinquency. (cf. art. 13 o.p.) However, the representation of the detainee author of the crime as a subject dysfunctional, poorly integrated into the social and cultural fabric, and culturally unprepared has proven inadequate in the face of types of criminal subjects such as the so-called white-collar criminals (Balloni, Sette, Bisi, 2019). It seems to emerge in the lexicon, in some respects obsolete, of the penitentiary legislative framework, the subjugation of the re-educational practice to the pen-

itentiary diagnosis which would make re-education a linear process, a tool for the resocialization of the "sick," who, through the identification of the deviant cause and the possible removal of the same, could be readmitted to society. In these terms, the obligatoriness of work for the prisoner - whose modification has recently been completed (d.lgs. 2018) - seemed to suggest, in accordance with this view, a re-education inspired by now outdated paternalistic principles whereby the educator, like the doctor, would act for the good of the patient-prisoner, regardless of his/her assent/consent. In this sense, it is not intended to minimize the importance of the formative value of work that is amply demonstrated in the literature. (Schnepel, 2018; Sedgley et al., 2008, CNEL 2023). However, it is important to underline how any aspect of the educational intervention, if misaligned from a process of personal growth and the development of a critical competence of the world by the prisoner, makes it inadequate from an inclusive point of view.

The pedagogical perspective suggests shifting the focus of the educational discourse no longer on diagnostic categories - making re-education an appendix of resocialization - but on the experience and perception of the subject, which are fundamental to understand his behavior and to develop effective educational actions. (Bertolini, 1988; Bertolini, 1993; Van Manen, 2002)

It becomes necessary, in this sense, for the educator to make use of a capacity for observation, description, and interpretation pedagogically and phenomenologically characterized to confront the interpretative schemes of the subjects and the paths of change that often proceed on non-linear trajectories (Sibilio, 2015). The boundary between education and reeducation, in this sense, appears blurred. Every education that is pedagogically founded, in fact, focuses both on the physical and mental development of the individual, and on enhancing his/her intentional capacities, promoting the favorable conditions for an authentic change. Moreover, education and reeducation are both by definition future-oriented (Bertolini, 1988) so what we are, what we know, what we consider up to a given moment will have to confront the outcomes of an educational intervention that finds its *raison d'être* in change and in the subject's capacity to transpose what has been learned up to that moment to promote a modification of his/her relationship with reality. Education and reeducation thus anchored to the future look at the subject's past experience exclusively with the purpose of allowing him/her an attribution of meaning that "frees" him/her from the confusion that often accompanies criminal action. From an educational point of view, in fact, all "stories" require an educational effort that leads the subject to moments of disorientation. However, what outlines a peculiarity of the re-educational intervention is undoubtedly the direction "As paradoxical as it may seem, the re-educational intervention does not proceed from the past to the future, but from the future to the past" (Bertolini, Caronia p. 92, 1993). Such considerations lead to recognizing, from a pedagogical point of view, the importance of resorting to interdisciplinary and transprofessional approaches through which to recognize and manage the complexity of processes in contexts characterized by special educational needs. In this sense, in order to deal with the educability of people who are often marginalized, excluded, segregated by society (d'Alonzo, 2019) it becomes fundamental to give them back the words to speak for themselves to give voice and body to human experience, valuing its uniqueness and unrepeatability (Adler, 1930).

This involves focusing not so much on the logical formal coherence between causes and event, but on the meaning and value associated by the subject with such causes (Hillman, 2021), on the psycho-pedagogical understanding of the choices that have led to living the condition of being incarcerated, in order to promote the acquisition of new perspectives and new awareness towards the future. The educational action is called, therefore, to trace new paths for the achievement of such objectives by designing “percorsi di sviluppo commisurati a ogni situazione soggettiva, impegnando in modificazioni coevolutive il contesto” (Pavone, 2014, p. 15).

2. VR as a Reflective Device: The Experience of the Step's Project

Within prison structures, time seems to halt, and the advancement of new technologies proceeds with extreme slowness. Although the onset of the pandemic gave a first impulse—consider, for example, the use of video calls—the daily reality of inmates remains significantly detached from the fast pace of the outside world. This disconnection is particularly evident in the relationship with technology. Outside prison institutions, technological innovations rapidly succeed one another, continually transforming the way society lives, works, and interacts, but this rapid evolution remains almost entirely inaccessible to inmates, relegating them to a sort of temporal bubble where technological progress is only marginally perceived. In this sense, phenomena of digital divide are fueled, both in terms of accessibility and literacy. In this context, the recent applications of artificial intelligence seem to orient the use of AI technologies' potentials primarily in the field of security and control techniques (Puolakka & Van De Steene, 2021): AI-integrated camera systems that scrutinize visitors to identify prohibited objects, drugs, and weapons, analyzing movements and behaviors through 'suspiciousness' parameters predefined in algorithms; (Mcgoohan 2016). The use of techniques such as voice recognition and semantic analysis to create archives of words and models aimed at identifying criminal activities (Cassens-Weiss, 2019). In this sense, a partial and uniform implementation of AI-based technologies seems to emerge, with risks in its use referring to the implications arising from decisions and measures based on algorithms susceptible to errors or infused with systemic biases. (Benasayag 2021; Zavrisk, 2019). The discrepancy between the adoption of advanced technologies for surveillance and control and the limited accessibility to technological progress for purely rehabilitative purposes highlights a field of opportunity not yet fully explored: Only recently have initiatives begun to take the first steps that exploit the immersive potentials of virtual reality (Unicri, 2023) in the context of rehabilitative projects. Among these is the Supporting Ties in the Education of Prisoners Steps project.

The STEPs project, under the EU's Erasmus+ program, is an international partnership coordinated by EEPEK in Larissa, Greece, involving institutional agencies, adult educational centers, and non-formal educational organizations in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Cyprus. Started in November 2018, it aims to promote effective actions for re-education, social inclusion, and the prevention of recidivism. The project includes research on innovative educational practices and methodological development through interactive virtual environments, using stories and texts elaborated by inmates during educational activities carried out by teachers and educators. The project has not yet offered the publication of reports and balances of activities,

so it will not be possible to reflect on the objectives achieved in the first three years of the project. However, it is believed that it can represent an opportunity to reflect on the potential outcomes of projects that combine technological elements and narration, through virtual reality. Specifically, it seems a useful occasion to reflect on how the intertwining of narration and technology can make VR a reflective and guiding device (Batini, 2010) aimed at supporting a fundamental need for meaning, significance, and coherence in the individual's life path. STEPS is a project that combines narration and immersive technologies through the collection of biographical and autobiographical materials, through laboratory activities. These stories are the raw material for the creation of VR rooms. Each story is entrusted to a script-writing group for adaptation, and subsequently to the design team for the realization of an interactive story creating 3D spaces and materials provided by the script. Once the virtual room is completed, participants begin to familiarize themselves with the virtual environments. During exploration, users encounter various elements related to their personal story and the reasons for their detention. In this sense, the session is enriched or stripped of these elements, selected and uploaded by the session organizer, taking into account the data collected during monitoring. The VR unit records the behaviors and choices of participants, favoring the possibility of a further personalized intervention based on the collected data, processing behaviors and choices of participants, during the immersive experience. Tracking information is uploaded directly to the platform's statistical sub-unit, making the data available for subsequent processing. Through the combination of the narrative element and virtual reality, individuals can fully immerse themselves in an alternative environment, where they can live experiences otherwise hardly accessible except in the dimension of a static, immovable, and unchangeable past. The push towards the future, characteristic of rehabilitative activity, is favored by the sense of presence—the feeling of "really being there" through reliving/living the stories—facilitating a deep level of identification, which facilitates processes of self-reflection. In this perspective, VR is configured as a "disturber" element (Varela, Maturana, 1987) capable of triggering the search for new points of balance, restructurings of the self. This restructuring has to do with the possibility of realizing transformative learning within which the subject's interpretive schemes become the object of a deliberate cognitive process aimed at understanding why we act in that way. (Mezirow, 2000). This requires recourse to a reflective practice that allows the individual to expand the range of alternatives he himself considers to broaden the perspectives of emancipation (Freire, 2002).

In this sense, immersive experiences, such as those offered by virtual reality, refer to a method of learning and reflection deeply rooted in the individual's experience. In these virtual spaces, the individual immerses completely, living the stories directly and personally. As the boundary between the self and the story thins, an intimate bond is created between the individual and the narrative. These are safe and controlled spaces that encourage the exploration of new perspectives, behaviors, and decisions, without the fear of real consequences. Active participation in immersive narratives encourages individuals to reflect not only on their own choices but also on their impact on the surrounding world. (Aiello, 2016) In this sense, narration as a reflective device becomes part of a broader narrative orientation (Batini, Salva-

rani, 1999; Batini, Zaccaria, 2000; 2002) in which narration is configured as a methodology (Batini, del sarto 2005; Batini Giusti 2008) aimed at valuing stories and personal experiences as primary means to give meaning to human experience, starting from the consideration that “telling and listening to stories” are fundamental processes in learning and understanding the world. If such aspects acquire primary importance in the contemporary landscape, where the closure to the “axiological experience” often degenerates into the substitution of “missing thoughts” with slogans and catchphrases (De Monticelli, 2020), they become even more central, if possible, in contexts where too often the story of “deviants” is the subject of the narrative of figures other than the subject. (psychologists, educators, lawyers, etc.). It is also essential to highlight how these narratives emerge in a context, that of prison, where the daily reality for numerous detainees is defined by limited and crowded spaces, staff shortages, reduced contacts with the outside world, and where the monotony of experiences makes it difficult to differentiate one day from another. The risk is that a standardized intervention, which does not take into account the subject's point of view, may lead to an instrumental adherence to the rehabilitative path (Migliori, 2008). More specifically, it refers to the possibility of encountering a flattening of the subject's identity in favor of that “false self” (Sartarelli, 2004) instrumental in alleviating the anguish and discomfort that incarceration and stay in the institute entail, through behavior aimed exclusively at obtaining penitentiary benefits. In this sense, narration becomes a tool for the search for identity, (Cambi 2002, p.86), but also a means to imagine and design the future, promoting orientational competencies for the life project. (Mura 2018, Giaconi, 2015).

“Ciascuno, [...], se adeguatamente supportato, se gli si consente, cioè, di sviluppare competenze atte alla redazione della “sceneggiatura” del proprio futuro è in grado di governare e gestire la propria esistenza, di essere autore e interprete del “romanzo” della propria vita, ciascuno deve assumere l'obiettivo di determinare attivamente ciò che gli accade e gli accadrà”(Batini 2012).

Such narratives become the object of reflection within a shared path, allowing to broaden the range of reflective activity to everyday life and that “practical knowledge” that characterizes it (Mura 2015).

3. Conclusions

An educational journey is always an action marked by ideology, linked to an anthropology, a worldview: teachers, parents, educators carry out their action, which is generally defined as educational, but this same action can have different colors, intentions, outcomes, because it is interpreted differently. Educating requires, initially, questioning the meaning of what is understood by education. Throughout history, under the name of re-education, actions have been carried out that annihilate human dignity, segregate, punish, exterminate: the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet gulags, the Chinese laogais. To call extermination practices, detention camps, or other realities that aim not at the growth and development of the person but at their annihilation re-education, signifies the intent to “educate again,” anew and more harshly, since once was not enough to suppress the transgression of norms and to instill persuasion to political obedience and psychological submission. At the foundation of re-education, historically, lies on one hand a power paradigm that humiliates the ed-

educational instance in favor of processes of expropriation of subjectivity (Iori V., Augelli, Bruzzone 2012), inhibition of individual autonomy, and capacity for choice; on the other hand, a positivist paradigm, which until the beginning of the 20th century constituted the framework within which deviant behaviors were interpreted in the name of a supposed scientific objectivity and deterministic theories. This perspective has generated reductionist drifts and fueled classifying approaches and prejudices (Cavana 2009), often leading to designing educational actions intended as all-inclusive packages of anti-discomfort or anti-deviance activities, spending a lot of time doing, realizing activities of which the meaning is easily lost. If the crime, not the person or the reasons why it is committed, is in the foreground, the dimension of reflection, original interpretation, and construction of meaning by the subject regarding their condition are clearly unrecognized and humiliated. Instead, it is precisely from this interpretive, reflective dimension that singular and always different educational paths start, centered on approaches, relational modalities, always new objectives and conceived in response to the changing and maturing of the subject. It is not possible to consider the crime itself and punish it; rather, it is necessary to consider that the need to re-educate subjects who have violated social behavioral norms is linked to the occurrence of an "educational damage" suffered by them before incarceration; we refer to "adverse educational actions," at the base of the fracture with civil society, and accentuated during the detention period (Torlone, 2014). From an educational perspective, the focus should be placed on those adverse conditions that have generated educational damage such that it deviates the behavior of the individual. The unloved are those who have suffered damages that have left scars, more or less deep, but who must return to exist, managing to imagine a different life. This is the purpose of a re-educational work that, as an antidote to fatalism and existential determinism, must be able to trigger a dialectical overcoming of oneself that leads to evolution and change (Di Profio, 2017). To succeed in doing this, it is necessary to meet the life story of the individual and, in particular, their interpretation of this story, not just that which the educator, pedagogist, or psychologist can provide. It means looking at things not with a claim to objectivity, but considering how they appear in the eyes of those who live them.

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