

Reimagining Access: Institutional Narratives and Practices Shaping Educational Equity for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Learners in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Educational access for jailed and formerly incarcerated students in the United States is primarily framed by a "recidivist paradigm" that supports programming based on its utility in reducing recidivism and producing economic savings. This literature review, which synthesizes twenty-six scholarly works, contends that this restricted paradigm is insufficient and frequently harmful to establishing true educational equity. According to the analysis, a "correctional education paradox" (Kakupa & Mulenga, 2021, Introduction, para. 2) often becomes coercive rather than empowering because institutional practices routinely restrict pedagogical quality and student autonomy, driven by a security-first logic and a preference for limited vocational training. Furthermore, institutional impediments, including discriminatory admissions processes, the digital divide, and a lack of comprehensive post-release care, contribute to injustice outside of jail. The results show that reimagining access necessitates a major departure from instrumentalist narratives in favor of frameworks like Empowerment Theory and Critical Pedagogy that are focused on human dignity, agency, and critical consciousness. This means incorporating lived experience into the design of programs, putting in place clear anti-racist policies to eliminate systemic racism, and using evaluation metrics that include humanistic outcomes other than recidivism. To promote a more transformative and equitable educational practice for this marginalized student population, the review's conclusion identifies important gaps in the literature regarding longitudinal studies on academic programs, causal mechanisms of transformation, and the empirical evaluation of equity frameworks. It also suggests a targeted agenda for future research.

KEYWORDS: correctional education, educational equity, higher education in prison, recidivism, institutional narratives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of higher education into US jails presents a significant conflict, as the liberating promise of learning clashes with the oppressive architecture of the carceral state. This endeavor takes place against a backdrop of significant structural exclusion, with formerly imprisoned individuals eight times less likely

to complete college than the general public and unemployment rates as high as 60% for those without a high school diploma (Couloute, 2018). For decades, the most compelling justification for investing in prison-based programs has been instrumental and pragmatic: correctional education reduces recidivism while providing a considerable return on public investment (Davis et al., 2013; Stickle & Schuster, 2023). The evidence-based approach that focuses on reducing repeat offenses, which Castro et al. (2015) referred to as the 'recidivist paradigm') has proven highly successful. This evidence provided the justification needed for major policy achievements, such as reinstating federal financial aid (Pell Grants) for incarcerated students to attend college programs in prison. Still, this dominant narrative often hides a more complicated reality. Inside prisons, educational initiatives unfold within an institution whose core imperatives of security, control, and punishment can systematically weaken the conditions needed for transformative learning (Payton, 2021; Pearce, 2023).

This literature review suggests that to truly reimagine access for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated learners, one must critically move beyond the recidivism-reduction paradigm and examine the institutional narratives and practices that fundamentally shape the nature of educational fairness. The work of Kakupa and Mulenga (2021) provides a powerful illustration: they show that even when students see education as a critical second chance, its potency is undermined by oppressive institutional practices that deny autonomy. This finding is central to the critical viewpoint that access is not a binary condition of program availability but rather a qualitative experience shaped by power, agency, and institutional constraints. The underlying issue, therefore, is not only a lack of educational opportunity but also the types of access that are permitted within systems that are not structured for empowerment, as well as the devastating life outcomes that emerge from this systemic failure (Couloute, 2018). To make sense of this landscape, this review looks at how the conversation has grown over time. It brings together the major studies that shaped the field's early thinking, including Davis et al. (2013), Castro et al. (2015), and Tolbert (2002). It also pays close attention to newer work that challenges those ideas, expands them, and pushes the field in new directions. The study begins with identifying the various theoretical frameworks that determine the field's aim. It then analyzes the historical policy trajectory that led to the current situation before critically assessing the institutional narratives of control and utility that govern program design. The review then examines the evidence for the effectiveness of the program, classroom pedagogical and technological realities, and major hurdles to post-release educational attainment. Finally, it brings the major structural problems into one picture and points out where the research still falls short. It also lays out a forward-looking path for building an approach to correctional education that centers on human dignity and liberation, not institutional control.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The field of correctional education is a theoretical battleground, where competing understandings of its fundamental purpose influence policy, pedagogy, and practice. The dominating framework, and the most understandable to policymakers and the masses, is the recidivist paradigm, which is strongly based on Human Capital Theory (Davis et al., 2013; Stickle & Sprick Schuster, 2023). This framework views education primarily as workforce preparation. The investment pays off by equipping people with skills for legal employment, which reduces their incentive to commit crimes and increases their economic contribution to society. Davis et al. (2013) and Stickle and Schuster (2023) conducted seminal meta-analyses to put this theory into practice, providing solid quantitative evidence that correctional education reduces recidivism and provides a substantial return on investment for taxpayers. This instrumentalist

focus continues to drive contemporary policy, as seen in work by Stickle et al. (2024), who use this same economic evidence to argue for structural reforms like centralized administration and automatic enrollment. These changes are explicitly framed as a financially sound investment intended to maximize returns for public safety and state budgets. This approach has been useful in pushing for program financing because it integrates the importance of education with public safety and fiscal responsibility (Davis et al., 2013; Stickle & Sprick Schuster, 2023). However, its shortcoming is its instrumentalist approach; it views education as a tool for risk management and cost-benefit analysis, reducing the scope of what constitutes a successful educational outcome (Castro et al., 2015; Vandala, 2019). Critical Pedagogy, a concept promoted by authors such as Castro et al. (2015), stands in stark contrast to this instrumental viewpoint. Drawing on Paulo Freire's work, this viewpoint sees education as a liberatory practice, a practice of freedom aimed at humanization, and the development of critical awareness. From this perspective, the recidivist paradigm not only limits but also actively destroys the potential for transformative education, constituting its 'greatest constraint' (Castro et al., 2015). It criticizes a system that seeks to produce compliant students instead of autonomous, analytical thinkers. This theoretical perspective is frequently latent in qualitative research that highlights the contradiction between the carceral environment and the educational process.

For example, Pearce (2023) frames education as an act of intellectual and personal liberation by contrasting the carceral system's institutional attempts at dehumanization with the students' demonstrated intellectual brilliance and resourcefulness. Although Pearce does not specifically name critical pedagogy, her story of teaching mathematics in a women's prison is steeped in its principles.

Theories that concentrate on the psychological and agentic aspects of learning bridge the macro-level focus of these paradigms. An essential lens for examining the educational process itself is Empowerment Theory, which shifts the focus from economic outcomes to the internal development of a learner's autonomy, control, and self-determination (Kakupa & Mulenga, 2021; Nisser et al., 2024). This approach is specifically used by Kakupa and Mulenga (2021) to criticize the coercive and disempowering aspects of Zambian correctional education, contending that genuine rehabilitation necessitates the development of agency and a self-determining voice. When education is imposed rather than chosen, it reinforces incarceration's power dynamics and fails to foster the psychological empowerment required for long-term reform. To complement this, Social Cognitive Theory, specifically the idea of self-efficacy, provides a measurable mechanism for empowerment. Nisser et al. (2024) base their study of a virtual web design curriculum on Bandura's theory (Social Cognitive Theory), creating the program to deliver mastery experiences and establishing using pre- and post-test scales that it resulted in a statistically significant increase in participants' self-efficacy. This lends empirical support to the argument that educational choices have a direct impact on the psychological resources learners require for success.

Finally, Critical Policy Analysis and Stigma Theory provide essential lenses for examining the systemic barriers that extend beyond the prison classroom. Lubben et al. (2022) employ Stigma Theory to analyze the "box" on college applications, explaining how the forced disclosure of a criminal record activates a stigmatized identity, creating psychological and procedural application attrition and ensuring equal access to educational opportunity is diminished. This analysis is advanced and radicalized by the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the work of Wachendorfer et al. (2024). Their framework moves beyond access to demand anti-oppressive and antiracist policies that explicitly confront the structural racism embedded within both the carceral and educational systems. CRT encourages the field to accept that racial

and gender inequities in enrollment and discipline are not accidental but rather the result of institutional practices that must be actively eradicated.

These theoretical frameworks work together to give a multi-layered toolkit for understanding the intricate interplay of economic value, human emancipation, psychological agency, and structural oppression that characterizes the struggle for educational equity in carceral settings.

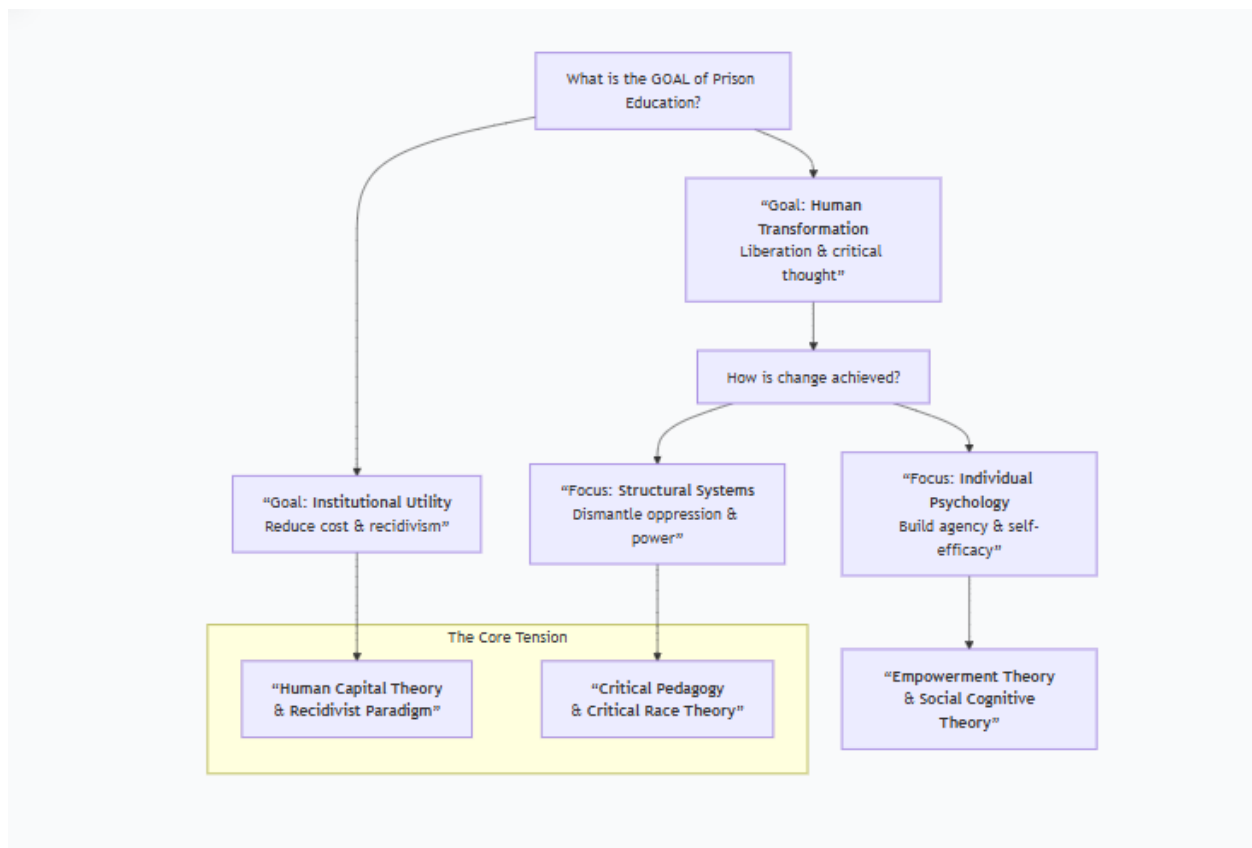


Figure 1: Theoretical Frameworks of Carceral Education

Interpretation of Figure 1: Theoretical Frameworks of Carceral Education

This flowchart depicts the key theoretical frameworks that define the purpose and practice of education in carceral settings. The structure exposes a fundamental division in the field, starting with the central question of education's ultimate objective. The left path represents the mainstream institutional narrative, which argues that education is a tool for institutional utility, specifically reducing recidivism and giving a cost-effective return on public investment. This rationale underpins Human Capital Theory and the Recidivist Paradigm, both of which emphasize the development of employable skills. The right path represents critical and humanistic perspectives that see human change and emancipation as the major goals of education. The path then diverges depending on the mechanism of change. One branch focuses on individual psychology, employing Empowerment Theory and Social Cognitive Theory to foster agency and self-efficacy. The other branch focuses on structural systems, using Critical Pedagogy and Critical Race Theory to study and deconstruct oppressive power structures, including the correctional facility. The dashed box represents the core contradiction in the literature: the clash between dominant, system-serving narratives (left) and transformational, system-challenging frameworks (right). This diagram illustrates

why discussions regarding prison education frequently center on ideas of justice, rehabilitation, and education itself rather than just its efficacy.

2.1 Defining some Terms

To enhance clarity in the analysis that follows, this review operationalizes some fundamental concepts that are central to the discussion.

Educational Equity: In this context, educational equity is defined as a commitment to creating learning environments that actively humanize and empower incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. It moves beyond the simple provision of classes to fundamentally challenge the controlling nature of the carceral system. This means fostering dignity, critical consciousness, and agency through pedagogical practices and institutional structures that prioritize voice, choice, and transformation. In the end, true justice is attained when education acts as a liberating practice that promotes self-determination and combats disempowerment (Castro et al., 2015; Vandala, 2019).
The Recidivist Paradigm: According to Castro et al. (2015), the recidivist paradigm is the dominant framework that justifies correctional education primarily or solely based on its effectiveness in lowering re-arrest and re-incarceration rates while also producing financial savings for the public. This paradigm prioritizes extrinsic carceral outcomes over internal educational goals.

Access: In the context of "reimagining access," this review conceptualizes access not as a binary condition of enrollment, but as a qualitative educational experience shaped by power dynamics, institutional constraints, and a learner's autonomy and ability to engage in transformative learning. "Reimagining access" thus refers to the purposeful and critical process of moving away from a system that offers education on the restrictive terms of the carceral institution, a model that often manifests as coercive, disempowering, and focused on institutional control (Kakupa & Mulenga, 2021; Pearce, 2023). Instead, it demands a fundamental shift toward designing educational experiences on the terms of human liberation, where pedagogical practices and institutional structures are intentionally realigned to foster critical consciousness, agency, and self-determination (Castro et al., 2015; Vandala, 2019).

Transformative Learning: Drawing on critical and humanistic frameworks, transformative learning is defined as an educational process that moves beyond the basic acquisition of skills or certificates to radically alter a learner's viewpoint, worldview, and sense of self. It is characterized by the fostering of critical thinking, a significant increase in personal agency, and a profound reassessment of one's connection to society (Vandala, 2019).

3. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

The landscape of prison education in the United States has been influenced by a dynamic history of legislative shifts, alternating between rehabilitative idealism and punitive austerity. Understanding this history is critical for contextualizing the current situation, which is marked by both the unprecedented opportunity for Pell Grant reinstatement and the ongoing institutional hurdles that threaten to limit its impact. Tolbert (2002) described the early 21st-century baseline as an extreme fragmentation and resource constraint. State correctional education programs were under-resourced and highly fragmented, with a patchwork of inconsistent funding sources and a primary concentration on Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) instruction. This environment not only limited the range of educational offerings but also mirrored an institutional philosophy that often prioritized basic literacy over transformative higher education, which critical scholars would later characterize as a form of constrained ambition for incarcerated learners (Castro et al., 2015).

This landscape began to shift as rigorous quantitative research provided a compelling evidence-based alternative to purely retributive approaches. The pivotal meta-analysis from the RAND Corporation (Research and Development) (Davis et al., 2013) gave policymakers definitive proof that correctional education caused a 43% reduction in recidivism, fundamentally altering the cost-benefit calculus of rehabilitation. This number became the foundation of lobbying, transforming the moral and pedagogical case for prison education into the practical language of public safety and fiscal prudence.

Later studies, such as Stickle and Schuster's (2023), corroborated the large, positive economic returns of such investments, strengthening the economic case. This economic narrative's persuasive power lives on, informing contemporary state-level policy blueprints that prescribe structural reforms such as centralized administration and automatic enrollment explicitly designed to maximize the return on public investment (Stickle et al., 2024). This evidence-based advocacy was instrumental in the establishment of the Second Chance Pell experimental sites initiative, which culminated in the full restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated people in 2023, effectively reversing the 1994 ban that had decimated prison college programs for nearly 30 years.

However, restoring government financing is not a panacea, and the historical issues outlined at the turn of the century remain profoundly relevant. The Vera Institute's snapshot of the first year of Pell restoration (Taber et al., 2024) critically explores the difficult transition from policy to practice, revealing a system still hampered by the same challenges Tolbert (2002) described decades ago. Their report finds that the promise of wider access is impeded by significant, pervasive institutional barriers, including regulatory difficulties and a lack of dedicated state funding. This directly verifies and reinforces Tolbert's initial observations of inconsistent funding sources and systemic fragmentation.

The implementation gap established by Taber et al. (2024) demonstrates that the historical patterns described by Tolbert (2002) cannot be easily addressed through policy fiat alone. The historical trajectory thus demonstrates a cyclical pattern: progressive policy advances are consistently met with the inertial resistance of carceral systems, highlighting the fact that long-term educational equity necessitates more than just changing laws but also transforming the institutional cultures and priorities that have perpetuated these barriers for decades.

4. INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES AND LOGICS OF CONTROL

The operation of educational programs in carceral settings is dominated by a series of powerful, often competing, institutional narratives that determine their purpose, design, and everyday operation. These narratives highlight a fundamental conflict between education's rehabilitative potential and the overarching logics of control and security inherent in the prison environment.

The most politically robust narrative is that of the good investment. This paradigm, which is substantially reinforced by the economic assessments of Davis et al. (2013) and Stickle and Schuster (2023) and is perpetuated in contemporary policy toolkits (Stickle et al., 2024), portrays prison education as a cost-saving measure for taxpayers rather than a right or social good. By assessing the economic returns exclusively through the prism of crime avoidance, this narrative gains bipartisan support while reducing the value of education to its utility in risk management and public expenditure reduction. It is a compelling but reductive frame that accords with Castro et al.'s (2015) critique of the recidivist paradigm, which links educational worth to carceral results.

This economic logic is frequently expressed in a second, more operational narrative: the creation of the labor-ready body (Castro et al., 2015). The ubiquitous emphasis on vocational skills is illustrated by Castro

et al.'s (2015) discovery that more than 75% of educational possibilities in prison are non-academic, indicating a system structured to generate employable rather than educated individuals. Methodologically rigorous research, on the other hand, calls into doubt the model's supposed success. After adjusting for selection bias, McNeeley (2023) discovered no statistically significant differences in results for those who earned a vocational certificate, implying that the institutional belief in vocational training as a single answer may be incorrect. This suggests that the labor-ready body myth frequently promotes institutional convenience rather than learners' complicated, long-term demands.

The most pervasive and influential narrative is the unchanging priority of security over rehabilitation. This logic of control actively limits and distorts educational activity at all levels. Pearce's (2023) autoethnographic account of teaching mathematics provides vivid, ground-level examples of how administrative hurdles such as multiple security screenings, the confiscation of materials deemed contraband (such as highlighters), and the remote location of facilities systematically degrade the learning environment and undermine student dignity. Payton (2021) discovered that non-supportive administrative policies, such as recurrent class cancellations for security operations and a general lack of communication, were significant impediments to successful teaching. This security-first logic creates a regime of pedagogical constraints, as Gashi (2021) defines it, in which teachers must continuously adapt their approaches to an environment geared for control rather than intellectual development. These narratives (economic, vocational, and security-focused) combine to produce a system of coercive and disempowering educational access, in which the institutional requirements of the carceral system itself take precedence over the structure and purpose of education (Kakupa & Mulenga, 2021).

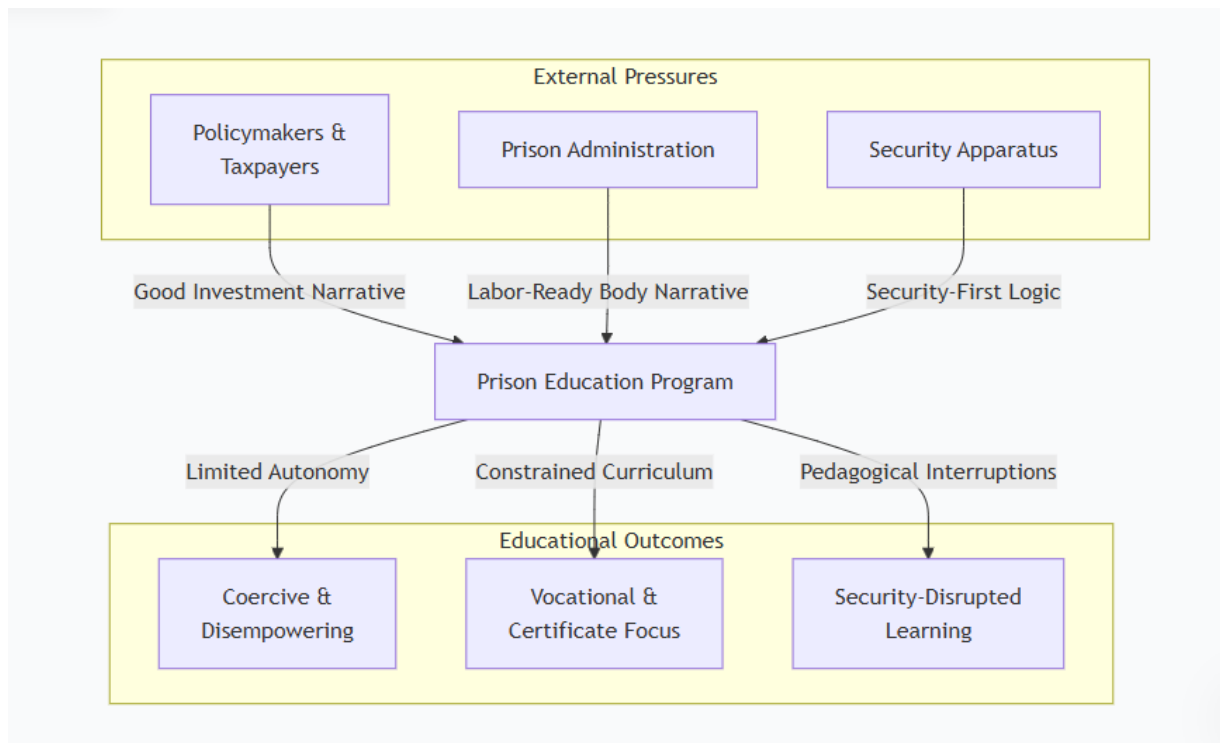


Figure 2: Institutional Narratives and Logics of Control

Interpretation: Figure 2 demonstrates how three opposing institutional narratives merge to constrain prison education initiatives.

1. The "Good Investment" Narrative from policymakers demands cost-benefit justifications and recidivism reduction
2. The "Labor-Ready Body" Narrative from prison administration prioritizes vocational training and employability
3. The "Security-First Logic" from correctional staff imposes operational constraints that disrupt education

5. PROGRAM DESIGN AND EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

The empirical evidence on the success of correctional education presents a multifaceted picture, affirming its overall usefulness but challenging basic assumptions about how and why it functions. The most influential support comes from large-scale meta-analyses that include data from multiple studies. The foundational RAND study (Davis et al., 2013) produced convincing evidence, stating that participants in correctional education had a 43% lower chance of recidivating and were 13% more likely to find work after being released. This work, which presented schooling as a highly cost-effective institutional practice, and gave a conclusive, data-driven counterargument to exclusively punitive carceral regimes. Building on this basis, Stickle and Schuster (2023) carried out an updated meta-analysis of 152 estimations, demonstrating that all types of jail education raise employment and income while lowering recidivism. Importantly, by identifying the largest effects in vocational and college education programs, their work provided a comparative analysis that, in theory, ought to direct the distribution of institutional resources. This evolving evidence base directly informs modern policy proposals that seek to structure prison education systems to maximize these documented benefits through administrative efficiency and increased participation (Stickle et al., 2024).

However, this seemingly straightforward positive consensus is complicated by methodologically rigorous research that addresses the prevalent issue of selection bias. McNeeley (2023) conducted a quasi-experimental study that employed Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to create statistically comparable treatment and comparison groups. After using PSM to control observable selection factors, the study found 'no statistically significant differences' in recidivism or post-release employment between those who received a vocational certificate and those who did not. This significant finding suggests that the positive outcomes commonly attributed to vocational programs in previous studies may be an artifact of selection bias, implying that the personal motivation and characteristics of those who choose to enroll are the true drivers of success, rather than the credential itself. This calls into question a key institutional narrative and necessitates a rethinking of what constitutes good program design, reaching beyond certification to address deeper issues of participation and relevance. In response to these complicated findings, an expanding body of literature advocates for more sophisticated and integrated program models. For instance, both McNeeley (2023) and Shaw (2021) propose integrating the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model into instructional design. Shaw's (2021) research is pivotal here; she found that educational engagement can paradoxically lead to an increase in in-prison misconduct, theorizing that the agency and frustration education fosters can, without proper support, manifest as behavior the system punishes. This counterintuitive result directly supports her call for the RNR framework to provide the necessary support structure.

Her conclusion is that education should be combined with therapies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to address criminogenic needs and assist students in managing the psychological problems of change. This reflects a substantial shift in thinking: effective education cannot be a stand-alone solution

but must be part of a comprehensive rehabilitative framework that considers the entire person, their talents, risks, learning styles, and psychological well-being.

6. PEDAGOGY, TECHNOLOGY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Within the confines of the carceral setting, the quality of the educational experience is heavily influenced by pedagogical choices, access to technology, and the extent to which students' and educators' lived experiences are prioritized.

There is a fundamental tension between coercion and empowerment. Kakupa and Mulenga (2021) identified this as the correctional education paradox, in which incarcerated learners find education meaningful and relevant for providing hope and skills while also experiencing it as a highly coercive process in which they are not consulted on the programs they enroll into. This imposed curriculum takes away autonomy and mimics the power dynamics of incarceration, directly opposing the goals of rehabilitation. In stark contrast, programs especially designed to foster empowerment show significant promise. Nisser et al. (2024) found that a web design program that prioritized student choice and intellectual ownership of a final product resulted in a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy. This offers empirical evidence that pedagogical models prioritizing agency and mastery experiences can effectively cultivate the psychological resources necessary for successful learning and reentry.

Technology represents both a significant impediment and a potential bridge to equity, embodying the larger conflict between institutional control and current educational requirements. The digital divide is a major, devastating equity issue. Chambers (2025) investigates the issues of online correctional education, concluding that security-driven technology constraints, such as a complete lack of internet access and severely constrained software, reduce so-called online learning to a mere digital exchange. This results in a digital façade that lacks the engagement, cooperation, and research capabilities that characterize great online education. While Nisser et al. (2024) demonstrated that a high-tech, synchronous virtual curriculum is possible, they also stated that it is severely constrained by institutional security protocols.

This highlights the continuous conflict where the carceral desire to monitor and regulate information systematically limits the ability of technology to deliver meaningful, marketable skills. The views of individuals delivering and receiving education are crucial for comprehending these dynamics. According to Payton (2021) and Gashi (2021), teachers often feel alone, unsupported, and professionally unprepared for the difficulties of the cell classroom. They work in an atmosphere where their instructional goals are frequently subordinated to security mandates, resulting in dissatisfaction and stress.

The most transformative practice emerging in the literature is the centering of lived experience as a source of expertise. Nguyen et al. (2025) describe the process of forming a Community Advisory Board (CAB) made of formerly jailed people. This CAB provided critical, practical insights on correctional culture and pedagogical constraints that were previously unknown to faculty and administrators, resulting in recommendations for trauma-informed education and improved transitional support. This paradigm of shared expertise, as demonstrated by Castro et al. (2015), in which incarcerated students served as co-authors, is critical to reinventing access. It asserts that true equality cannot be designed from the outside in; rather, it must be co-constructed in collaboration with those whose lives are most directly impacted by these institutional practices.

7. REENTRY, CAMPUS ACCESS, AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES

The educational journey of system-involved individuals does not end at the jail gate; rather, it meets a new and challenging set of institutional impediments within the field of higher education itself. This struggle for access aims to overcome a profound legacy of systemic exclusion, as quantified by Couloute (2018), who discovered that formerly incarcerated people are 8 times less likely to complete college than the general public and that a quarter of them have no educational credential at all. The most visible of these impediments is "the box," or the criminal background question on college applications. Lubben et al. (2022) claim that this approach is a systemic deterrent that leads to application attrition, describing it as a fundamental gatekeeping mechanism that hinders equitable access even before a student submits an application. This analysis is supported by Donaldson and Viera (2021), who categorize the barriers faced by formerly incarcerated (FI) students into three types: logistical challenges (like housing and financial aid instability), institutional policies (like background checks and campus security protocols), and interpersonal or psychological hurdles (like stigma and incarceration trauma). This multidimensional model reveals that the path to educational equity is impeded by an entire ecology of exclusion, rather than a single policy. Once admitted, FI students must traverse a campus climate that is frequently unable to address their specific demands, which are exacerbated by the educational gaps documented by Couloute (2018).

Focusing on the community college context, Caskey and Price-Williams (2024) identified several significant challenges for these students. This included difficulty using technology due to the digital divide caused by incarceration, complex issues establishing in-state residency for tuition, and a critical need for quiet study spaces and equipment. These findings show how normal institutional procedures and assumptions regarding student readiness can create significant, frequently unnoticed equity barriers for a population that is already at a severe educational disadvantage.

In response to these issues, the literature emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, targeted support systems to guarantee that access leads to perseverance and graduation. Donaldson and Viera (2021) compile evidence to show that targeted, FI-specific support programs are the most effective institutional response. These programs, which often involve dedicated advisors, peer mentorship, and basic needs, help address the social and logistical challenges that impede academic performance. This appeal for institutional responsibility is reflected in policy briefs like Wallace et al.'s (2020), which advocate tangible changes such as eliminating college application barriers and expanding on-campus support programs. The evidence suggests that without these intentional support structures, the promise of post-release education remains unfulfilled for many, emphasizing the importance of active institutional accommodation in overcoming the deep-seated exclusion that characterizes the lives of the formerly incarcerated.

8. Population-Specific Gaps and Methodological Critique

A critical analysis of the literature reveals significant gaps, both in terms of the populations served and the methodological approaches that dominate the field. A stark population-level gap is highlighted by Murolo and Campagna (2025), whose research focuses on older incarcerated learners. They found that standard vocational and GED programs are largely irrelevant to this demographic, who are motivated by needs for life skills, physical activity, and social connection related to aging, rather than post-release employment. This exposes the profound inequity of a one-size-fits-all institutional model and challenges the economic-first narrative that underpins much correctional education policy. It forces a redefinition of success for this

population to include psychological well-being and social reintegration, metrics that are often absent from standard program evaluations.

A major methodological critique pervasive in the more critical literature concerns the field's over-reliance on recidivism as the primary outcome measure. Castro and Lerman (2025) argue that this recidivist paradigm effectively renders incarcerated students invisible to the broader higher education community. It makes meaningful evaluation of the full humanistic impact of education, such as the development of critical consciousness, self-worth, or civic engagement, nearly impossible. This argument is powerfully supported by Vandala (2019), who, from a global perspective, contends that the true transformative effect of education is the internal, non-measurable change in identity and agency, which is the foundational mechanism that enables subsequent behavioral change like desistance from crime. By focusing solely on the external behavior (recidivism), the field neglects the very engine of change it seeks to understand and foster.

This problem of measurement is compounded by a systemic issue of "data apartheid" (Castro & Lerman, 2025). The carceral environment, by its nature, treats student data as sensitive security information, severely restricting access for independent researchers and program evaluators. This lack of transparent, comprehensive, and longitudinal data hinders rigorous evaluation, quality improvement, and accountability. It creates a cycle where programs cannot be effectively assessed or refined based on robust evidence, and where the nuanced, process-oriented findings of qualitative research remain marginalized in policy discussions that prioritize hard metrics. This methodological landscape ultimately perpetuates a system where the deepest goals of education are the least measured, and where accountability for educational quality is subsumed by the security apparatus of the state.

9. CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Synthesizing the literature reveals a set of deep-seated, interconnected structural challenges that fundamentally obstruct the realization of educational equity. Funding instability is a recurring problem. While the complete restoration of Pell Grants is a huge policy move, the Vera Institute's analysis (Taber et al., 2024) shows that a lack of dedicated state funding and bureaucratic hurdles are severely impeding its implementation. This difficulty is not exclusive to the United States. Lally and Conway's (2025) comparative analysis demonstrates that funding mechanisms are a primary determinant of access globally, revealing that the financialization of education and reliance on patchwork models create inequitable variations in access across national contexts, from the United States to Australia. Perhaps the most pressing and ethically urgent task is addressing institutional racism in carceral education systems. Wachendorfer et al. (2024) make a compelling case that simply expanding access is insufficient. They advocate for a purposeful shift beyond access to develop a Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) framework that actively dismantles barriers such as disproportionate disciplinary removals and failure of programs to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy.

The implementation gap between policy and practice is a significant barrier. This disparity is exacerbated by institutional practices that prioritize convenience, a problem that extends beyond national borders. Lally and Conway (2025) criticize the widespread reliance on remote or distance learning, claiming that while such methods increase accessibility, they frequently compromise pedagogical quality and fail to provide the supportive environment required for transformative change. This global insight supports domestic findings that the promise of Pell Grant restoration is hampered by inconsistent quality control (Taber et al., 2024), demonstrating that even with supportive policy, transformative change is limited without a

fundamental shift in delivery methods and institutional priorities. The issues of funding, equity, and execution are interconnected, resulting in institutional inertia that can only be overcome via concerted, multi-level activism and a firm commitment to prioritizing educational goals over carceral aims.

10. CRITICAL GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This comprehensive review of the literature finds numerous important gaps that prevent a complete understanding of educational fairness for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Addressing these gaps is critical for developing scholarships and practice. First, there is a critical need for longitudinal outcome studies of intensive academic programs. While meta-analyses support postsecondary education's overall success (Davis et al., 2013; Stickle & Schuster, 2023), there is a dearth of nuanced data on the long-term consequences of liberal arts, humanities, and STEM programs in comparison to vocational tracks. Over a decade or more, research is needed to track how participation in high-rigor academic programs influences not only recidivism and employment but also broader outcomes such as civic engagement, psychological well-being, critical thinking skills, and career trajectory (Pearce, 2023; Nisser et al., 2024).

Second, the field necessitates additional research on causal mechanisms related to transformation. Quantitative studies demonstrate correlations between education and favorable outcomes, while qualitative studies articulate transformative experiences; however, mixed-method research is necessary to connect the two. Subsequent research ought to explicitly examine how pedagogical methodologies, curriculum architecture, and student-instructor dynamics directly cultivate the emergence of agency, critical consciousness, and prosocial identity transformations precisely the mechanisms that theorists such as Vandala (2019) contend are the cornerstone of desistance. This necessitates research methodologies that transcend the "black box" of program evaluation (Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

Third, there is an immediate necessity for empirical assessment of equity frameworks. The robust theoretical and policy-driven advocacy for Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) by Wachendorfer et al. (2024) necessitates subsequent rigorous empirical investigation. Research ought to examine the implementation process of REI frameworks and assess their efficacy in diminishing disparities in program enrollment, retention, and completion among students of color. This will give us important proof of what works to break down systemic barriers in carceral education.

Fourth, the restoration of Pell Grants and "ban the box" initiatives provide a natural laboratory for long-term policy implementation study. Research must examine the implementation of these policies across states and institutions, examining the bureaucratic, cultural, and financial elements that either help or impede their effectiveness in achieving quality, equity, and scalability (Taber et al., 2024; Lubben et al., 2022). This policy-focused study is critical to ensuring that major reforms result in actual gains in students' lives.

Finally, research must focus on bridging the evidence-equity divide. Future research should expand on the basic evidence of 'what works' established by significant studies (Duwe, 2018; Davis et al., 2013) and the structural implementation models they inspire (Stickle et al., 2024) to study 'for whom it works best, and under what conditions.' This necessitates combining quantitative data on recidivism and employment with qualitative, equity-focused research to ensure that program expansion does not exacerbate existing inequities in access and success.

CONCLUSION

This review contends that fully reinventing educational access for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people necessitates a fundamental departure from the prevalent recidivist paradigm. This narrow focus on minimizing recidivism and costs, combined with the carceral system's security-first mentality, results in a coercive and disempowering type of schooling that stifles revolutionary potential. True equity necessitates eliminating barriers that extend from the jail classroom to the college campus, including stigmatizing admissions policies and a lack of assistance. Achieving this is more than a technological problem; it is a moral and political obligation that requires a strong commitment to pedagogical empowerment, anti-racist change, and a focus on lived experience. Stakeholders can work together to develop an educational ecosystem that recognizes education as a basic component of justice and human dignity by addressing critical research gaps, such as long-term implications of academic programs and the adoption of equity frameworks.

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