

RECREATIONAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT: EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Absztrakt

SZABADIDŐS ÉS KÖZÖSSÉGI TEVÉKENYSÉGEK A BÜNTETÉS-VÉGREHAJTÁSI KÖRNYEZETBEN: PEDAGÓGIAI GYAKORLATOK ÉS PERSPEKTÍVÁK

A tanulmány a börtönkörnyezetben szervezett rekreációs és extracurricularis tevékenységek oktatási és kapcsolati dimenzióit vizsgálja. A kvalitatív kutatás négy pedagógussal készített félig strukturált interjúkra épül. Az eredmények szerint az ilyen

tevékenységek támogatják az együttműködést, az önbizalom fejlődését és a közösségi részvételt a fogvatartottak körében. A kutatás rámutat arra is, hogy a közös tevékenységek hozzájárulhatnak a társas kapcsolatok és az oktatási részvétel erősödéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: börtönpedagógia, extracurricularis tevékenységek, reintegráció, kvalitatív kutatás

Diszciplinák: neveléstudomány, pszichológia, jogtudomány

Abstract

The study explores the educational and relational dimensions of recreational and extracurricular activities organized in prison settings. The qualitative research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with four educators involved in such activities. The findings suggest that these activities may support cooperation, self-confidence, and social participation among incarcerated individuals. The study also highlights the role of collective activities in strengthening interpersonal relationships and educational participation.

Keywords: prison education, extracurricular activities, reintegration, qualitative research

Disciplines: pedagogy, psychology, legal studies

The evolution of modern prison policies has gradually brought a shift in perspective regarding the role of detention, moving from a predominantly punitive logic toward approaches that also include dimensions related to education, social reintegration, and respect for human dignity. In this context, educational, artistic, and extracurricular activities carried out in prison settings have increasingly become part of the programs designed for incarcerated individuals.

The literature frequently discusses the role of these activities in relation to educational participation, the development of

social relationships, and the support of reintegration processes. In particular, group-based activities are associated with the emergence of forms of cooperation and involvement that differ from the everyday interactions specific to prison environments. Recent studies pay increasing attention to the relational and socio-emotional dimensions of artistic and extracurricular activities, emphasizing that experiences built around active participation and cooperation may influence the ways participants relate to their own resources, to other members of the group, and to the experience of educational

involvement itself (see: Bandura, 1997; Burnard et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Within prison settings, these processes acquire a particular significance. Participation in a short theatrical performance, a musical moment, or any group activity involves forms of exposure and co-operation that may become difficult within an institutional context marked by strict regulations, highly regulated social interactions, and often fragmented educational experiences. For some incarcerated individuals, simply taking part in an artistic or educational activity may require overcoming hesitation, insecurity, or lack of confidence in their own abilities. At the same time, extracurricular activities may also influence the ways participants relate to other members of the group, to educators, and to collaborators involved in the activities.

Starting from these considerations, the present study explores how educators involved in extracurricular activities organized in prison settings describe the experience of coordinating such activities, the involvement of incarcerated individuals, the dynamics of relationships developed within the group, and the role of collaborations with institutions or individuals from outside the prison environment. The article follows an exploratory qualitative approach focused on experiences and perceptions associated with participation in educational and artistic activities carried out within a restrictive institutional context.

Institutional Framework of Educational Activities in Prison Settings

The Evolution of Perspectives on Detention and Social Reintegration

The way society has understood the function of detention has changed significantly over time. While earlier forms of punishment were predominantly oriented toward corporal sanctions, exclusion, or public intimidation, modern prison systems have gradually incorporated concerns related to the protection of fundamental rights and the social reintegration of incarcerated individuals. In this context, detention is no longer understood exclusively through its punitive dimension, but also in relation to the possibility of developing educational, social, and psychological interventions during the execution of the sentence.

This shift in perspective is also reflected in international documents concerning the treatment of incarcerated individuals. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) emphasize the importance of respecting human dignity and facilitating social reintegration following the completion of a sentence. Within these guidelines, educational, cultural, recreational, and sports activities are considered relevant components of prison interventions, alongside measures aimed at preparing incarcerated individuals for their return to the community.

In Romania, the general framework regarding the execution of custodial sentences is regulated by Law No. 254/2013 on the execution of sentences and custodial measures ordered by judicial organs during criminal proceedings. The legislative act stipulates that sentences must be executed with respect for human dignity and aims to create the conditions necessary for the social reintegration of incarcerated individuals. Within this framework, educational, psychological, social, cultural, and recreational activities become part of the institutional efforts directed toward supporting participation in formative programs and the development of behaviors compatible with social reintegration.

Beyond its legislative dimension, the development of educational and extra-curricular activities in prison settings also reflects a gradual change in the way the participation of incarcerated individuals in educational and social experiences is understood. In many situations, such activities create contexts that exceed the strictly administrative logic of detention and facilitate experiences of cooperation, personal expression, and social interaction within a highly restrictive institutional environment.

*Legislative and Institutional Landmarks
Regarding Educational Activities in Detention*

According to Article 3(1) of Law No. 254/2013 on the execution of sentences and custodial measures ordered by judicial organs during criminal proceedings, the

purpose of the execution of sentences and custodial educational measures is the prevention of further criminal offenses. At the same time, criminal policy aims to develop an appropriate attitude toward the rule of law, social coexistence, and work, with the objective of supporting the social reintegration of incarcerated individuals. In the case of minors who have committed criminal acts, Romanian legislation provides for the application of educational measures rather than custodial penalties specific to adult offenders.

As a principle governing the execution of sentences, custodial measures must be carried out under conditions that ensure respect for human dignity, excluding torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or any other form of mistreatment. During detention, incarcerated individuals retain the possibility of exercising their civil and political rights without discrimination based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, political opinion, social origin, or other similar criteria, while respecting the limitations inherent to deprivation of liberty and the measures necessary to maintain institutional security.

These principles are also reflected in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners – the Nelson Mandela Rules – adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 17 December 2015. The Rules promote humane detention conditions and emphasize the importance of access to education, vocational training,

work, and other forms of social, moral, spiritual, or recreational support. In the same context, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) recommend supporting family relationships, encouraging community involvement in programs designed for convicted individuals, and developing educational measures that facilitate social reintegration.

Within the Romanian prison system, specialized structures dedicated to education and psychosocial assistance are responsible for developing individualized educational and therapeutic intervention plans for each incarcerated individual. These include educational programs, cultural and recreational activities, and interventions adapted to the needs identified in each case. Particular attention is given to young detainees, who benefit from special educational, psychological, and social programs carried out with the involvement of specialized staff, volunteers, non-governmental organizations, and, in certain situations, representatives of civil society. At the same time, based on protocols concluded with the Ministry of Education and Research, incarcerated individuals may participate in schooling or vocational training programs, depending on their health condition, detention regime, and applicable security measures.

Institutional Landmarks

Regarding the Oradea Penitentiary

The present study focuses on the specific case of the Oradea Penitentiary. The

institution was established in 1865, initially as a single building that was later expanded through the addition of new structures designed for custodial purposes and through the construction of a cellular pavilion with a ground floor and three upper levels. In 1882, the “Association for the Support of Prisoners from Bihor County and Oradea” was founded with the declared purpose of supporting the social reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. Later, in 1932, Mihail Ceuca, who was serving as prison director at the time, founded *Penitenciarul – Journal of Penitentiary Science*. During the communist period, the institution was re-organized as an economic and collective unit specific to the political context of that time. Beginning with 2004, it was re-established and classified as a maximum-security penitentiary.

At present, the Oradea Penitentiary has a legal capacity of 439 places. However, public data from 2024 and 2025 indicate a high level of overcrowding, influenced by factors related to the maximum-security regime, pre-trial detention cases, and the need to manage situations that cannot be anticipated from the perspective of judicial dynamics. Within this context, the institution’s activity involves not only custodial responsibilities, but also the organization of educational and psychosocial interventions aimed at supporting social reintegration.

According to Law No. 254/2013, the penitentiary includes specialized structures dedicated to education and psychosocial

assistance, responsible for developing individualized educational and therapeutic intervention plans for each incarcerated individual. These interventions include educational, cultural, and recreational activities, as well as assistance programs adapted to the needs identified in each case. Particular attention is given to young detainees, who benefit from specific educational, psychological, and social programs carried out with the involvement of specialized staff, volunteers, non-governmental organizations, and, in certain situations, representatives of civil society.

Within the Oradea Penitentiary, educational and extracurricular activities are periodically organized, including collaborations with institutions and activities carried out outside the detention environment. Publicly available data for 2025 mention the participation of incarcerated individuals in cultural and religious visits, sports activities, competitions, and volunteer actions conducted within the community. At the same time, the institution develops work-related activities both inside and outside the penitentiary, an aspect considered relevant also from the perspective of preparation for social reintegration following the completion of the sentence.

At the same time, the specific nature of prison environments also involves difficulties related to the management of the institutional climate and interpersonal relationships among incarcerated individuals. Public reports concerning the

activity of the penitentiary indicate the existence of operational incidents, medical emergencies, and other situations specific to custodial settings, including cases of self-harm or escape attempts. From this perspective, educational and extracurricular activities become relevant not only through their formative dimension, but also through their potential to create contexts of participation, cooperation, and involvement that differ from the everyday routine of detention.

Extracurricular Activities in Prison Settings: Educational and Relational Perspectives

Educational and Psychosocial Functions of Recreational Activities

In the literature on prison education, recreational activities are frequently associated with time management and the reduction of tensions specific to custodial environments. In some cases, they are also discussed in relation to the social reintegration of incarcerated individuals. However, such perspectives capture only part of the significance that these activities may acquire within a space marked by institutional restriction and often fragmented educational biographies. In practice, activities carried out in detention frequently exceed their strictly recreational dimension. The relationship with the group, the rhythm of the activity, and the experience of building something together

directly influence the ways participants relate to involvement and to educational participation.

Recent research pays increasing attention to the socio-emotional dimension of artistic and extracurricular activities developed in vulnerable environments. Studies dedicated to arts education show that creative group experiences may support the development of self-confidence and sustained engagement in educational activities, particularly when participants begin to perceive themselves as part of a stable collective framework (Brewster, 2014; Burnard et al., 2023; Vidrih et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature on socio-emotional development emphasizes that constant involvement in collective activities favors the emergence of more stable forms of self-regulation and social cooperation (Hattie, 2009; Mező & Mező, 2019). Similar results are reflected in recent research dedicated to extracurricular activities carried out in vulnerable educational contexts. A study based on a participatory qualitative Photovoice methodology highlights that involvement in group extracurricular activities contributes to the development of communication skills, cooperation, and self-efficacy, while also supporting participants' sense of belonging and social inclusion (Berce et al., 2026). The authors emphasize that collective experiences and the relational dimension of extracurricular activities may become important factors in supporting educational participation within contexts marked by social vulnerability.

Within prison settings, these processes acquire a particular intensity. Participation in a short theatrical performance or simply reciting a poem in front of others involves forms of exposure and personal engagement within a space where defensive mechanisms often remain very strong. For some incarcerated individuals, such experiences may become difficult precisely because they involve personal expression and the assumption of visibility within the group. For this reason, recreational activities carried out in detention do not function exclusively as complementary forms of formal education. They also create contexts in which participants encounter experiences of cooperation and forms of social validation that are less common within the everyday dynamics of prison life.

The literature pays considerable attention to the educational and behavioral benefits associated with these activities. Less frequently discussed, however, is the emotional dimension of participation. In the case of artistic activities, involvement requires the management of a form of vulnerability that appears less often in other educational contexts. Exposure in front of the group and the difficulty of maintaining a role until the end become part of the participatory experience and directly influence the ways participants relate to their own possibilities of involvement.

At the same time, participation does not always follow a linear trajectory. In many situations, resistance toward involvement

emerges. In other cases, participation is motivated primarily by certain associated benefits or becomes difficult to sustain over longer periods of time. Precisely this tension makes the formative value of recreational activities impossible to reduce to simple attendance within an educational program. More relevant becomes the process through which some individuals gradually assume participation and begin to modify the ways they relate to their own resources.

Viewed from this perspective, recreational activities developed in detention settings function as mediating spaces between the institutional dimension of education and the concrete experience of human participation. More important than the formal structure of the activity itself are the relational processes it generates and the experiences of cooperation it makes possible within a deeply restrictive environment.

Artistic and Extracurricular Activities as Forms of Educational Participation

Within prison environments, extracurricular activities create educational contexts that differ from those associated with formal instruction. Participation in an artistic project or in a group activity involves more than the completion of an isolated task. Participants must adapt their working rhythm to the dynamics of the group and maintain their involvement throughout the activity. In some situations, this also implies assuming responsibilities toward other members of the group,

particularly when the activity depends on the contribution of each participant. It is precisely this relational dimension that differentiates extracurricular activities from other forms of participation characteristic of prison environments.

The literature on cooperative learning highlights the importance of activities organized around common objectives and the role of positive interdependence in supporting social cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Within prison settings, such experiences acquire a particular significance. Preparing an artistic moment or organizing a collective activity introduces forms of collaboration that require consistency and constant interaction with other participants. In many situations, participation begins to depend on the functioning of the group rather than exclusively on individual decision-making. Similarly, research dedicated to extracurricular activities developed in vulnerable contexts shows that collective experiences organized around educational and artistic projects support the development of communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skills, while also contributing to the consolidation of participants' engagement in group activities (Berce et al., 2026).

Another important aspect concerns the experience of educational achievement. For some incarcerated individuals, their relationship with education is marked by school dropout or repeated experiences of failure. Within this context, extracurricular activities may create situations in which

participants complete an activity, sustain a role until the end, or receive appreciation for their involvement. Even if such achievements may appear limited in scope, they influence the ways participants perceive their own resources and their willingness to engage in other educational activities. From the perspective of self-efficacy theory, accessible experiences of success contribute to strengthening individuals' perceptions regarding their own capacity for action and may support the maintenance of educational involvement over longer periods of time (Bandura, 1997).

Artistic activities also introduce an expressive dimension that appears less frequently in other educational contexts within detention. In the case of a short theatrical performance or a musical moment presented in front of the group, participants must manage their emotions and tolerate public exposure. The literature on arts education shows that creative experiences developed in group settings favor active involvement and strengthen the sense of belonging to a community (Burnard et al., 2023; Vidrih et al., 2024). At the same time, such activities create contexts in which participants may experience forms of expression and social validation that are less accessible in other areas of everyday prison life.

The relationship between participants and the educators involved in extra-curricular activities also presents particular characteristics. During an artistic activity or a collective project, the teacher no

longer appears exclusively as an evaluator or representative of institutional authority. Interaction becomes more flexible and closer to the logic of a jointly constructed activity. From the perspective of contemporary motivational theories, educational experiences that support feelings of competence and relatedness favor the maintenance of participation and the development of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Viewed as a whole, artistic and extra-curricular activities developed in detention settings create contexts in which educational participation acquires a concrete and directly experiential dimension. Their importance does not derive exclusively from the final product of the activity itself. Equally relevant are the relational processes they generate and the experiences of cooperation and personal engagement they make possible within a deeply restrictive environment.

Collaboration with Educational Institutions and Openness toward the Community

The possibility of organizing extra-curricular activities in partnership with educational and cultural institutions is supported by the institutional framework regulating educational activities carried out within prison environments. In practice, such collaborations frequently emerge around concrete projects – artistic workshops, cultural activities, school celebrations, or educational programs organized together with teachers, students, artists, or

representatives of cultural institutions. Beyond their organizational dimension, these contexts introduce different forms of interaction and create the possibility of educational relationships that do not entirely overlap with the institutional logic specific to prison environments.

The presence of external collaborators modifies, even temporarily, the dynamics of activities carried out in detention. Different working rhythms and different ways of relating to the activity begin to emerge. For some incarcerated individuals, contact with teachers or representatives of educational institutions may also function as a reconnection with experiences associated with educational environments outside prison, particularly in the case of individuals whose educational trajectories were fragmented or interrupted. In such situations, extracurricular activities begin to create forms of continuity between the experience of detention and the outside social environment.

The literature dedicated to education in vulnerable contexts emphasizes the importance of relationships developed around collective activities and their role in supporting educational participation (Wenger, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Similarly, research on arts education highlights that projects developed in collaboration with cultural or educational institutions may support the development of a sense of belonging and the emergence of more active forms of social involvement (Burnard et al., 2023; Vidrih et al., 2024). Within prison settings, these aspects

acquire a particular significance, as activities carried out in partnership introduce relational and educational experiences that are less common in the everyday life of detention.

Collaborations developed around extracurricular projects also contribute to increasing the public visibility of activities carried out in prison environments. Press articles, public presentations, or projects organized in partnership bring into the public sphere images that differ from the predominantly punitive representations commonly associated with detention. Without changing the institutional reality of prison environments, such initiatives create contexts in which incarcerated individuals may also be perceived through their participation in educational, artistic, or community activities.

At the same time, the relationship between educational institutions and prison environments is not free of difficulties. Differences in institutional organization, limitations imposed by security regulations, or the temporary nature of certain projects sometimes affect the continuity of partnership-based activities. Nevertheless, collaborations developed around extracurricular projects remain important through the types of educational and relational experiences they make possible. In many situations, they create contexts in which participation becomes closer, even temporarily, to the social and educational experiences characteristic of life outside detention.

Methodology

The present research follows an exploratory qualitative approach and examines the ways in which recreational and extracurricular activities carried out in prison settings are perceived by individuals directly involved in organizing and coordinating such activities. The choice of a qualitative approach is determined by the interest in the educational, relational, and experiential dimensions associated with participation in these activities. This option is also supported by recent research dedicated to extracurricular activities developed in vulnerable contexts, where particular attention is given to participants' experiences and to the relational dimension of educational activities (Berce et al., 2026).

The study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with four respondents involved in educational and extracurricular activities carried out in prison settings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, the main criterion being their direct experience in organizing or coordinating such activities. The interviews addressed themes such as the types of activities carried out, participants' involvement, difficulties encountered in organizing activities, the relationship between recreational activities and educational components, as well as collaboration with educational or cultural institutions.

In order to contextualize the institutional framework, public materials and institutional documents related to educational

activities carried out in prison settings and to the activity of the Oradea Penitentiary were also consulted. These materials were used exclusively for contextual and descriptive purposes and did not constitute a separate direction of analysis within the research.

The data were analyzed thematically, with the aim of identifying recurring categories and interpretative directions relevant to the research topic. Participants' responses were examined in their entirety, and recurrent ideas were grouped around themes such as educational participation, experiences of cooperation, the relational dimension of extracurricular activities, experiences of achievement, and the role of collaborations with educational and cultural institutions.

The research respects the principles of confidentiality and data anonymization. The findings are interpreted with caution, considering the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study. The objective of the research is not to evaluate the penitentiary institution itself, but rather to explore educational experiences and practices developed within a particular institutional context.

Results

The findings of the research are organized around several complementary thematic directions derived from the interviews conducted with educators involved in extracurricular activities carried out in prison settings.

*Educators' Experiences
in Organizing Extracurricular Activities*

Participants' responses indicate that extracurricular activities developed in prison settings require constant adaptation to the institutional particularities of custodial environments and to the characteristics of the individuals involved. The interviews include references to school celebrations, short theatrical performances, poetry recitations, musical moments, literacy activities, and civic debates organized both individually and in groups. Educators frequently mention the amount of time required for preparing activities and the difficulty of maintaining participants' involvement throughout rehearsals and group-based activities.

Two of the interviews explicitly highlight the difficulties associated with involving participants in activities that require public exposure. One respondent describes situations in which some individuals initially refuse to recite without written support or avoid assuming a role in a theatrical performance. Another respondent emphasizes that progress develops slowly and requires "a great deal of patience and encouragement," particularly in the case of individuals who show insecurity regarding their own abilities.

Respondents also observe important differences among participants involved in activities. In some situations, individuals communicate more openly and collaborate more easily during group activities, while others remain reluctant or avoid sustained participation. Participants in the study note

that activities require constant adaptation and that rigid forms of organization become difficult to apply in practice. Several interviews suggest that relationships gradually developed with participants influence the continuity of involvement in group activities.

*Perceptions Regarding
the Involvement of Incarcerated Individuals*

Participants' responses suggest that involvement in extracurricular activities is strongly influenced by previous educational experiences and by the ways individuals relate to their own abilities. The interviews include references to school dropout, communication difficulties, and lack of self-confidence, aspects that influence willingness to participate. One respondent notes that many participants initially begin with the belief that they are "not capable" or that they "will not succeed," which causes the first stages of the activities to be marked by hesitation and insecurity.

Participation is frequently described as a gradual process built through repeated involvement and successive experiences of achievement. Two of the interviews emphasize that participants become more active after successfully completing an activity or after receiving appreciation for their participation. One respondent states that, after participating in several group activities, individuals "begin to gain more confidence" and become more willing to engage in other educational or artistic

projects. At the same time, the responses indicate that participants do not evolve at the same pace.

The importance of collective activities appears in all four interviews. Respondents affirm that preparing theatrical performances, artistic moments, or activities dedicated to different events favors collaboration and increased interaction among participants. In one interview, extracurricular activities are described as moments in which participants begin to perceive themselves “as part of a collective working toward the same objectives.” Other responses refer to mutual support among participants and to the fact that group activities favor interpersonal closeness and reduce reluctance toward involvement.

Two of the interviews also highlight a more pragmatic dimension of participation. Respondents mention situations in which certain individuals enroll in activities primarily because of the benefits associated with participation, without a genuine interest in the educational dimension of the activities themselves. Even under such circumstances, interview participants observe that sustained involvement may gradually modify some individuals’ attitudes toward educational activities and toward the experience of group participation.

The Relational Dimension of Extracurricular Activities

All four interviews include the idea that extracurricular activities modify, at least

temporarily, the usual forms of interaction characteristic of prison environments. Respondents describe situations in which participants communicate more openly, collaborate more easily, and show a greater willingness to become involved during artistic or educational group activities. Several responses include the observation that the atmosphere created during rehearsals or activity preparation differs from the everyday interactions specific to custodial settings.

Three respondents insist that relationships developed around extracurricular activities influence the ways participants relate both to the activity itself and to other members of the group. Interview participants refer to mutual support and encouragement, as well as, in some situations, the emergence of a sense of belonging within the group. One respondent states that participants begin “to support one another” during the preparation of artistic activities, while another observes that involvement in a collective project contributes to the development of trust among participants.

Two interviews also mention changes in the relationship between participants and the educators involved in the activities. Respondents observe that extracurricular activities encourage more open communication and temporarily reduce the distance associated with usual institutional roles. Within this context, activities are described as situations in which participants become more willing to engage in dialogue and more prepared to express

their opinions or emotions, particularly during activities that involve constant cooperation and interaction within the group.

*Institutional Collaborations
and Openness toward the Community*

Participants frequently refer to collaborations developed with teachers, volunteers, representatives of cultural institutions, and other individuals involved in organizing educational and artistic activities within prison settings. The interviews mention activities organized on the occasion of celebrations, cultural projects, and artistic events carried out together with guests from outside the institution. Respondents appreciate that such collaborations contribute to the diversification of activities and create contexts different from those associated exclusively with educational programs organized inside the penitentiary.

Several interviews indicate that the presence of external collaborators influences the ways participants relate to activities. Respondents observe that activities organized together with individuals or institutions from outside the prison environment generate greater interest and favor participants' involvement in group activities. Two interviews explicitly highlight that such activities are perceived by participants as experiences that bring them closer to the world outside prison.

Three respondents affirm that partnership-based activities facilitate participation in collective projects and contribute to

increasing interest in educational and artistic activities. Educators refer to cultural events and group activities, particularly in situations where participants interact with guests or external collaborators.

Two interviews also mention activities later presented in penitentiary press materials or in other public documents. Respondents observe that these forms of public presentation contribute to highlighting the educational dimension of activities carried out in detention and provide a different image of the work developed within extracurricular programs.

Conclusions

The findings of the research indicate that recreational and extracurricular activities carried out in prison settings frequently exceed the occupational or recreational dimension commonly associated with such interventions. From the respondents' perspective, these activities create educational and relational contexts in which participation involves cooperation, gradual personal engagement, and involvement within a collective framework different from the everyday dynamics of prison life. In particular, artistic and group-based activities favor experiences of interaction and mutual support that influence the ways participants relate both to others and to their own possibilities of involvement.

The data support observations from the literature regarding the role of collective activities in the development of edu-

cational participation and the relational dimension of learning (Bandura, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2020). At the same time, the findings suggest that, within prison environments, these processes acquire a particular significance precisely because of the restrictive institutional context and the educational or relational vulnerabilities frequently associated with detention experiences. Participation in a theatrical performance, an artistic activity, or a group project involves not only the completion of an educational task, but also the assumption of forms of exposure and cooperation that may become difficult within a space dominated by defensive mechanisms and highly regulated interactions.

An important aspect emerging from the interviews concerns the gradual and often fragile nature of participants' involvement. Respondents frequently describe situations in which participation is initially marked by hesitation, insecurity, or lack of confidence in personal abilities, while progress develops slowly through repeated experiences of cooperation and achievement. From this perspective, the value of extracurricular activities cannot be reduced exclusively to the final product of the activity or to formal participation in an educational program. More important appear to be the relational processes and the experiences of involvement that such activities make possible within a deeply restrictive institutional context.

The research also presents several limitations that should be considered in interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study do not allow for conclusions that can be generalized to the penitentiary system as a whole. Second, the specificity of the institutional framework and the sensitivity of the topic inevitably influence access to data and the possibility of conducting broader or more in-depth investigations. In addition, the nature of the researched context involves methodological limitations related to the replication of similar studies and to direct access to the experiences of incarcerated individuals. Public representations associated with prison environments may also influence the ways such activities are perceived and interpreted within the public sphere.

Despite these limitations, the study opens several relevant directions for future research. One possible direction concerns the investigation of the experiences of incarcerated individuals directly involved in educational and artistic activities, as well as the analysis of the relationship between extracurricular participation and sustained involvement in other forms of education carried out in detention. It would also be relevant to develop comparative studies between different penitentiary institutions or between different types of extracurricular activities. At the same time, the topic of collaboration between educational institutions, cultural organizations, and prison environments remains insuf-

ficiently explored and may offer important perspectives regarding the role of educational and community relationships in supporting participation and social re-integration.

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