Experiences of Learners Who Are Incarcerated With Accessing Educational Opportunities in Ontario, Canada

Ardavan Eizadirad
Wilfrid Laurier University

Tina-Nadia Gopal Chambers
University of Guelph-Humber

Access to education is a human right that should be upheld for everyone including individuals who are incarcerated as outlined in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 25 interviews were conducted between April to June 2021 with various key stakeholders: 5 staff involved with the delivery of educational programs in jails, 10 learners who are or were formerly incarcerated, and 10 representatives from post-secondary institutions or jails. The objective was to identify barriers limiting access to education, while incarcerated and post-release, and how such barriers can be mitigated. Responses were examined using Critical Race Theory as a paradigm and thematic analysis as a methodology. Findings indicate that access to education for individuals who are incarcerated remains limited, not prioritized, and overall an underdeveloped sector in Canada. More funding and resources need to be allocated to prioritize education and expand the capacity of incarceration facilities to offer more programming in ways that are accessible and socio-culturally relevant.

Keywords: prison education, access to education, incarceration, remand, systemic inequities

INTRODUCTION

> *"Jail in my opinion does not reform people unless they're given the right tools inside. Jail only makes criminals worse criminals when you restrict them access to good things such as education."*
>
> Incarcerated Student

Access to education is a human right that should be upheld for everyone including individuals who are incarcerated as outlined in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2022). In phase one of this research project, a literature review was conducted to examine what current educational opportunities exist in terms of programs and pathways and how they are delivered for individuals who are incarcerated in Ontario, Canada. The findings and recommendations were published in a report in February 2021 titled Access to Post-Secondary Schooling and The Credit Transfer Experience of the *Remand Population in Ontario* (Eizadirad, 2021). The report outlines three major findings from the literature review:

1) There is a lack of information available to the public about the types of programs offered in incarceration facilities including criteria for enrollment, who it is used by, and its outcomes. Access to information is a systemic barrier that disadvantages families of those impacted by incarceration as well as individuals incarcerated post-release.
2) Limited access to education needs to be more of a priority supported with funding and resources to promote rehabilitation and effective reintegration back into the community. The type of educational programs offered are limited, lack capacity within institutions to meet demand, and are low in quality due to restrictions imposed on how they can be delivered.
3) There is a need to modernize policies, practices, and processes involved at various levels within correctional facilities to create more opportunities for access to quality education. The majority of the educational programs offered are high school diplomas, due to need, with limited access to learning spaces, technology, and computers to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

Guiding Research Questions

In phase two of this research project, a series of interviews were conducted with various key stakeholders to further explore the findings from the literature review. It was important to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of individuals who accessed education while incarcerated or post-release. The objective was to better understand the challenges and systemic barriers they experienced while striving to access educational opportunities. The key guiding questions for the project were:

- What are the experiences of individuals who receive educational opportunities while incarcerated?
- What are the experiences of individuals incarcerated as they pursue post-secondary education while incarcerated and after being released from jail?
- Are courses or training provided to individuals while incarcerated, specifically credits earned, formally recognized by colleges or universities post-release?

The research team worked in partnership with Amadeusz to identify participants to be interviewed. Amadeusz (https://amadeusz.ca/home) is a charity in Ontario that provides opportunities, resources, and supports to young people held in remand to complete high school and pursue post-secondary schooling (Amadeusz, 2022). The findings identified are based on perspectives and lived experiences of learners who are incarcerated as well as other stakeholders interviewed involved with the delivery of educational programs within incarceration facilities. The objective was to identify systemic barriers to accessing educational opportunities and outline a series of recommendations leading to improvements for more equitable access.

Recruitment and Research Participants

Ethics approval was granted by Humber College's Research Ethics Board. 25 key informants were recruited and interviewed via purposeful sampling through Amadeusz's contacts and networks. Participants were divided into three groups:

- Past and present Amadeusz education program staff (n=5).
- Program participants (n=10) who met one of the four criteria outlined below:
  a) Completed high school with Amadeusz while incarcerated, started post-secondary courses while incarcerated, and continued their post-secondary studies after being released.
  b) Completed high school with Amadeusz while incarcerated, got released, and then started post-secondary studies.
  c) Already had their high school diploma upon incarceration. Began post-secondary courses with Amadeusz while incarcerated and continued their post-secondary studies after being released.
  d) Already had their high school diploma and enrolled in a post-secondary program before incarceration. Continued their post-secondary studies with Amadeusz while incarcerated.

- Representatives from post-secondary institutions (n=8) and jails (n=2) interested or involved with the delivery of educational programs in incarceration facilities.

Interviews were done between April to June 2021. Participants were provided with informed consent outlining the project objectives and the steps involved. For those currently incarcerated, interviews were conducted over the phone and the number of questions asked were reduced to accommodate the limited time available ranging from 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews with Amadeusz program participants who were no longer incarcerated as well as Amadeusz staff, administrators, and post-secondary representatives were conducted over the phone or via Zoom in alignment with safety guidelines and protocols associated with COVID-19. The remote interviews took approximately 60 to 90 minutes to be administered. All interviews were audio-recorded and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to further ensure anonymity as part of sharing quotes. Interview responses were transcribed to facilitate coding and thematic analysis of the data. Participants had the option to drop out of the study at any point without any penalties by informing the lead researcher. Participants were provided with a $50 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation for their time participating in the study.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Interview responses were examined using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical paradigm and thematic analysis as a methodology for data analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Green et al. 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Xu & Zammit, 2020). CRT, which recently has been banned in some places in the United States, provides a framework to examine how racism operates through policies and processes embedded within the social fabric of institutions proclaimed as "neutral" and "colorblind". CRT provides an alternative perspective to neoliberal discourses that glorify meritocracy, individualism, and competition (Au, 2016; Carter & Welner, 2013; Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018; Lopez, 2003). As Au (2016) explains,

> The ideology of meritocracy asserts that, regardless of social position, economic class, gender, race, or culture (or any other form of socially or institutionally defined difference), everyone has an equal chance at becoming "successful" based purely on individual merit and hard work. (p. 46)

Furthermore, Lopez (2003) expands on how institutional policies and practices can serve as gatekeeping mechanisms that privilege some identities and social groups at the expense of oppressing others. As Lopez (2003) states, "Unfortunately, for the vast majority of people of color… and other marginalized groups—who are constantly reminded daily that they are second-class citizens in this country—the concept of rights is elusive" (p. 75).

As it relates to this article, we examine what it means to have a right to education and whether it is upheld for those incarcerated. We focus on access to education being proclaimed as a human right but is this the case when it comes to individuals who are incarcerated, given that there is an overrepresentation of racialized and minoritized identities within incarceration facilities? CRT provides a framework to critically examine who is privileged and advantaged and who is excluded and oppressed and in what ways. This involves going beyond the individual realm to community and institutional factors that influence the lack of access to education for learners who are incarcerated. The narratives expressed by the participants interviewed, particularly learners who are incarcerated, help to identify systemic inequities that serve as barriers to accessing education during incarceration and post-release.

Findings were identified through thematic analysis. Clarke and Braun (2017) operationalize thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 297). Codes were identified after transcription of all interviews and through ongoing dialogue and discussions between the researchers. Codes were interconnected to capture reoccurring themes expressed by the various stakeholders interviewed. This aligns with how Xu and Zammit (2020) envision thematic analysis where it "involves finding repeated meanings across a data set, which is crucial to the interpretation of phenomena" where the theme "captures some crucial information about the data about the research questions" (p. 2).

Amadeusz and the Need for More Educational Opportunities for Learners Who Are Incarcerated

Amadeusz is a charity that supports young people who are incarcerated to create positive change in their lives through access to education, community support, mentorship, and exceptional care (Amadeusz, 2022; Eizadirad & Gopal-Chambers, 2021). Amadeusz values and prioritizes creating greater access to educational opportunities, courses, and programs for learners while incarcerated and post-release. Studies and statistics have shown that there is low education achievement among the incarcerated population. As Woods et al. (2018) emphasize,

> [I]t is estimated that 75% of individuals do not have a high school education upon entry to a federal correctional facility. More specifically, the Correctional Service of Canada found that 82% of individuals test below a Grade 10 level and 37% of males have a Grade 9 education or less. (p. 61)

Therefore, there is a need to create greater access to educational opportunities and transfer pathways for individuals incarcerated, particularly since education has been identified as a major protective factor in mitigating recidivism (Davis et al., 2013; John Howard Society of Ontario, 2016; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Richer et al., 2015). A cost-saving analysis of one million dollars invested in incarceration compared to prison education has shown that one million invested in incarceration prevents approximately 350 crimes whereas the same amount invested in prison education prevents approximately 600 crimes (Bazos & Hausman, 2004).

In Canada, as of 2005, the overall population of adults in remand has consistently outnumbered sentenced offenders with limited access to educational opportunities. 2005 was the first time that Canada's provincial and territorial jails held more people who were legally innocent in remand compared to sentenced offenders (Correctional Services Program, 2017; Malakieh, 2019). Amadeusz facilitates educational programs for young people aged 18 to 35 who are incarcerated at the Toronto South Detention Centre, the Toronto East Detention Centre, and the Vanier Centre for Women. Amadeusz is actively seeking funding to expand its programming into other facilities to further make education more accessible to individuals incarcerated. They have a long waiting list of participants who have expressed interest to enroll in their programs and services yet the demand cannot always be met. The goal of Amadeusz educational programs is to provide young people who are in detention with the opportunity, resources and supports to complete their high school diploma or General Education Diploma (GED) and to further pursue post-secondary education while incarcerated and post-release. Accessing Amadeusz educational programs is a five-step process:

1) *Referral:* Program participants are identified through a self-referral process by putting in a request to speak with Amadeusz staff. Individuals can also be referred by others working within the institution including correctional officers, volunteer coordinators, social workers, psychiatrists, community partners, and members of the Amadeusz staff team.

2) *Intake/Assessment:* A program facilitator meets with the referred individual to determine program eligibility. If eligible for any of the available educational programs, an intake and educational assessment are conducted. Once enrolled in the program, the participant is supported to create an educational plan which includes their goals. If ineligible, the program facilitator refers the individual to other available services.

3) *Programming:* Based on the educational assessment and program eligibility, the participant is placed in one or more of the following streams:
   a) High school correspondence credits towards obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD)
   b) GED preparation and examination
   c) Post-secondary courses
   d) Career exploration
   e) Post-release referrals

4) *Evaluation:* Ongoing feedback from participants, program facilitators, and volunteer coordinators is collected to assess the progress of the student in the program.
5) *Discharge:* When a participant is released or transferred from one institution to another, program facilitators do their best to ensure continued support for the participant in their educational goals and finishing their program. Files are closed when appropriate.

Since 2009, Amadeusz's high school completion stream has graduated 52 people with their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) and 173 people with their GED. In the post-secondary stream, 251 post-secondary courses have been completed with 6 people having obtained a postsecondary certificate.

Demographics of the Research Participants and the Interview Questions

Five past and current Amadeusz staff and administrators were interviewed about their experiences planning, implementing, and supporting learners incarcerated with their educational goals and aspirations. Those interviewed were involved with the high school and post-secondary program streams. Ten participants who accessed Amadeusz educational programs or courses in the high school or post-secondary stream were also interviewed. Table 1 outlines the age, gender, and ethnicity of the program participants interviewed.

TABLE 1
AGE, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

Participant	Age	Gender (self-identified)	Ethnicity (self-identified)
1	31	Trans Female	Mixed Identity
2	34	Male	Black and African
3	34	Male	Chinese
4	28	Male	Latino and Hispanic
5	29	Male	Jamaican
6	28	Male	White
7	32	Male	Mixed Identity: Scottish, Irish, Welsh. Dutch, Spanish, and Filipino
8	28	Male	Jamaican and Canadian
9	41	Male	Japanese
10	26	Male	White

The average age of individuals interviewed was 31. Nine of the participants self-identified as male with one participant being a trans female. Eight of the respondents self-identified as racialized with two being white. Lastly, eight representatives from post-secondary institutions and two representatives from jails were interviewed about their interest and involvement in educational programs within incarceration facilities.

Emerging Themes and Findings

In this section, four major findings are shared based on the emerging codes and themes from the interview transcriptions (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Green et al. 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Xu & Zammit, 2020). The discussion of the themes is supported by quotes from the research participants.

Finding #1: There needs to be an ideological shift about the purpose of incarceration facilities from being spaces that punish people by warehousing them to spaces that facilitate and promote rehabilitation. By extension, there is a need to disrupt deficit thinking about learners who are incarcerated and negative stereotypes about their potential and competencies.

According to the Correctional Service of Canada's Evaluation of CSC's Education Programs and Services (2015) report "approximately three-quarters of federally sentenced offenders present a need for educational programming" (p. vi). A common theme expressed by individuals who accessed education while incarcerated was how incarceration facilities prioritized security and discipline at the expense of promoting learning and rehabilitation As one interviewee explained,

> *I can have goals so that my time in custody is not just about killing time. We should invest in people's mental health and education much more. Stop investing billions of dollars in jail and start spending on education and in genuine health, mental health care, in genuine tools that will help people get out of that hole because just putting them there for three months or longer does nothing.*

Many interviewees echoed how institutions treat them as threats instead of humans who have a right to education. Individuals incarcerated expressed that they wanted to better their lives by spending their time constructively but the lack of accessibility to meaningful educational programs did not help. They also mentioned that the hypermasculine jail culture where they must constantly be on the lookout for their safety due to sporadic incidents of violence makes it very hard to focus and pursue educational goals and aspirations consistently.

A study by the *Canadian Civil Liberties Association* (2021), titled Education for Ontario Youth in Detention: A Qualitative Report, conducted 50 interviews with youth, staff, teachers at detention facilities, and justice system professionals to explore the extent "education is available to youth in detention, and the barriers they may face" (p. 5). Although the focus of the report was on youth offenders whereas we interviewed adults incarcerated, both identified that "facilities were treating youth [and in our case adults] as security threats to be managed, rather than students deserving of rehabilitation through educational opportunities" (p. 5) The report further connects this to anti-Black racism "where the majority of the youth are Black" (p. 5). The lack of access to educational programs is highly problematic given that majority of people incarcerated do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (Correctional Service of Canada, 2015), and education is one of the most effective protective factors in facilitating reintegration and mitigating recidivism post-release.

Other interviewees spoke about how information about the availability of educational programs is not readily shared. As one interviewee put it, "We have so many inmates in these buildings and it's silly that they don't understand what's available to them. It's like they keep this information hidden from people who can benefit from it". The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) report attributes some of the barriers to accessing educational programs for learners who are incarcerated to "gaps in oversight and accountability which contribute to allowing the educational deficits identified to persist unabated" (p. 5). As another interviewee expressed, "Sometimes learners are post-secondary ready, they just don't know until they've had an opportunity to find out".

Many learners who were incarcerated expressed that the way incarceration facilities operate creates more barriers to accessing education and other relevant services such as mental health support. The subculture of always being seen as a threat from a deficit lens justifies limited access to rights associated with the rhetoric of managing risk and violence among inmates (Portelli & Sharma, 2014). This contributes to individuals who are incarcerated not bettering themselves, and in many cases getting worse over time due to a lack of accessibility to socio-culturally relevant support services to meet their needs (Davis et al., 2013; Eizadirad, 2016; George et al., 2014; John Howard Society of Ontario, 2016). As one interviewee explained:

> *Jail in my opinion does not reform people unless they're given the right tools inside. Jail only makes criminals worse criminals when you restrict them access to good things such as education. And it's not even like that's what they want It's because that's what they need to do to survive. When you're just surrounded by it, it just becomes you, and so the longer you stay in jail, the longer you're surrounded by those people, and the worse off you come*

out. Especially when you come out after say more than a few months. You don't feel like you belong in normal society so you gravitate towards the type of people you were inside with, right? So I think, you know, having certain access while you're in jail and then having access to supports afterward is a big thing.

Without access to support services and other social determinants such as housing and a steady income, the risks of gravitating towards recidivism increase.

Other learners who were incarcerated as well as other stakeholders interviewed strongly expressed that even though the literature and statistics clearly outline that education is the best protective factor towards mitigating recidivism, there is a misalignment between theory and how jails operate in facilitating access to education. Getting into an educational program often takes long, in many cases with long waitlists, and there are constant disruptions to the program impacted by factors such as lockdowns, taking away of privileges, or use of solitary confinement (Correctional Service of Canada has ended solitary confinement as of November 2019 and now uses the term Structured Intervention Units) as a result of poor behavior or involvement with violent incidents. One of the institutional representatives explained that there needs to be more flexibility and options to overcome the restrictions in jails associated with how educational programs are offered so it becomes more accessible:

> *If institutions wanted to make print-based materials for incarcerated individuals, then they would. We need to like, humanize this a little bit more. These are human beings who are intelligent and have all of these skills and can go to amazing places and they just don't have access because so many people have continually told them no, no, no.*

This echoes the report from the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2019) which found that "little emphasis is placed on delivering programming to remanded inmates, who comprise the majority of the inmate population" (p. 17). Overall, there needs to be an ideological shift about the purpose of incarceration facilities from being spaces that punish people by warehousing them to spaces that facilitate and promote rehabilitation, during incarceration and post-release, through greater access to education. Part of this involves disrupting deficit thinking about individuals who are incarcerated where they are constantly treated as a threat.

Finding #2: Education needs to be treated as a right rather than a privilege. Education has to be prioritized to make it more accessible and the type of programs offered diversified to meet the needs of various individuals incarcerated.

Many participants shared how the infrastructure, design, layout, and operation of incarceration facilities serve as a barrier to accessing education on the inside. As one interviewee stated, "There is a lot of talk about the value of education, and it is said to be supported, but it is just talk and no action". Another interviewee felt that there was more support provided post-release, but the time spent while incarcerated was much more isolating and less productive due to the limited educational opportunities available. He stated, "Everything is offered to you after your release or before your release or things like that. There are very little things for you to do while you're there on the inside." There is a misalignment between theory and practice where constantly education is proclaimed as an effective protective factor in reducing recidivism yet not prioritized. Organizations such as Amadeusz offer educational programs to learners who are incarcerated need more funding to help increase their capacity to offer their programs to more participants across more facilities.

Chan et al. (2017) outline how it "costs Correctional Service Canada an average of $111,202 annually to incarcerate one man (and twice as much to incarcerate one woman), with only $2950 of that money spent on education per prisoner" (para. 16). This applies to individuals who are doing their time in a federal incarceration facility. A more recent report by the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2019) titled *Annual Report 2019: Reports on Correctional Services and Court Operations* states that,

> [T]he Ministry does not have fully effective systems and procedures in place to ensure that institutional programs and services are delivered economically, efficiently, and by legislative and policy requirements. Specifically, we found that correctional institutions are not equipped to deal with challenges resulting from the greater proportion of the remand population and inmates with possible mental health issues. This adversely affects the availability and content of programming and treatment that would otherwise help inmates reintegrate positively into the community and reduce recidivism. (p. 20)

These statistics and trends confirm that access to education as a human right is not upheld consistently within incarceration facilities in Canada (People for Education, 2022). A more systemic approach is needed to ensure education is prioritized and the conditions to access education are improved. This would benefit all stakeholders as investing in educational programs and services will lead to greater returns in terms of reducing recidivism which in the long run leads to tax dollar savings.

Many other learners who were incarcerated expressed the emotional, mental, and spiritual benefits they gained from accessing an educational program where they interacted with someone who cared about their future:

> *Just even to have somebody that was kind of helping you towards doing something good for yourself inside was a huge help for me. When you don't have somebody to try and keep you grounded when you're in jail, you are forced into this mentality for survival. And then, you know, the only way to do it is to assimilate with everybody.*

> *I am just trying to say if I have you guys, I have somebody to talk to. I have somebody going to give me some career options, give me some creative options, and I wouldn't be incarcerated.*

Others expressed that it was a new start to learn from their mistakes and better themselves. As one interviewee stated, "What became important to me was more than just getting my previous education validated but to also get a new start". Yet, the collective responses from individuals who accessed educational programs while incarcerated indicate that the type of programs and courses offered are limited. There is a lack of capacity within institutions to meet educational demands as programs offered often lack quality due to restrictions imposed on how they can be delivered, predominantly being paper-based correspondence. As well, there is a lack of partnerships with post-secondary institutions to offer education in prison. Various Amadeusz staff interviewed explained how there are often long waitlists to access their programming due to capacity associated with funding. Many learners who are incarcerated expressed frustrations about the length of time it takes to be assessed to gain access to educational programs.

Another interviewee further explained how creating greater access to education will lead to reduced incarceration rates: "If we were investing in inmates to get access to education and the help they would need, then we would not need jails". Representatives from post-secondary institutions expressed similar sentiments about how there are many barriers in place which limit accessing educational opportunities within incarceration facilities ranging from lack of funding and partnerships to the limited time dedicated to education and frequency of the sessions. As one of the jail representatives explained,

> *It's more so accessibility to the inmates and space to have that accessibility. At the end of the day, we're an institution. So while systemically there is a lot of progress and there is a lot of research being done that supports how important having access to services like school and social work is, ultimately if the jail's locked down that day, the jail's locked down that day.*

Overall, access to education is not treated as a priority. Instead, education is treated as optional and a privilege for individuals who demonstrate good behavior. There are often disruptions to delivering educational programs as expressed by Amadeusz staff on days where punitive measures such as lockdowns or solitary confinement are used to manage the day to day risks within prisons and jails (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2019; Sapers et al., 2017, 2018). As one interviewee explained,

> *It would help people if there is more of a structure because when they're in there, it's not structured when like the teacher can't come in certain days or we're locked down or something. When we're locked down, we get a shower and phone program, so you either get to take a shower or phone. You have a certain amount of time, you know? It's a right as inmates so how come education is not our right?*

These practices limit access to education for individuals who are incarcerated. They are reactive in their approach and often have harmful short and long-term impacts. More importantly, these practices do not align with the long-term goal of rehabilitation and effective reintegration of those incarcerated back into the community.

Finding #3: The physical space of jails needs to be altered to create greater access to educational spaces, technology, and resources to facilitate optimal teaching and learning conditions. Particularly, there is a need to modernize and create greater access to computers and digital platforms to facilitate more educational experiences.

There is a need to modernize policies, practices, and processes at incarceration facilities to create more opportunities for accessing quality education. One of the common concerns raised by learners who are incarcerated were the lack of space allocated for educational programs. As one interviewee stated, "They should set aside an area in jail for education. There should be like a schooling area where people could go and feel safe.". Another person echoed similar sentiments by stating, "More or less the correction facility itself is the barrier." Many individuals who are incarcerated expressed how the lack of space dedicated to schooling and learning creates a culture of always feeling at risk and having to worry about one's safety which contributes to difficulties in focusing. The following statements from various learners who accessed education while incarcerated reflect such sentiments:

> *It's very difficult to focus on things even though you might have the time in here.*

> *How do you lay out your books to study when there's no space to lay out your books to study when you have like, a cellmate in a tiny space? How do you try to organize your thoughts and your papers when you don't know how to take notes, when you've never been taught how to study, when you don't know how to prepare for an exam, when there's no quiet time ever, when you always have to be worried about not being too absorbed in your stuff because you always have to be worried about what's happening around you and if there's you know, maybe there's tension on the range.*

> *The space, unfortunately, seems to require that people, no matter what else is going on, stay attuned to what's happening there which means that like, you can't ever really 100% focus on something, which makes it hard to study.*

Beyond access to space, lack of access to computers and technology was a common barrier mentioned throughout the interviews. As one of the post-secondary representatives stated, "We're in a very technologically advanced society now, and I feel like the approach to education is very outdated. Like they should be able to have computers that the inmates can access to complete work related to their courses". Lack of access to technology was also identified by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) report

concerning experiences of youth offenders. Youth offenders expressed similar sentiments about how greater access to computer resources, institutional libraries, and optimization of delivery will lead to more positive experiences. As one of our interviewees stated,

> *Most distance learning now requires computer access, so that is a massive barrier that continues to really limit access. I think even a lot of people without really recognizing it think that it is really a wonderful thing that, um, that distance education is available online and it creates more access, but a lot of people don't think about what happens then when people just are not able to use a computer and don't have internet access, and can't print things easily, and can't have hardcover textbooks, and can't bind course material together.*

Others interviewed expressed how it is great that many institutions are now offering more courses remotely via distance education in response to COVID-19, but a major barrier remains access to computers and technology on the inside associated with deficit thinking and the fear of learners abusing their access. Paper-based correspondence learning does not align with best practices in education pedagogically where the learner often works in isolation without access to consistent guidance or support. This does not create many opportunities for collaborative work which has shown to be effective as a learning pedagogy. Overall, there need to be more spaces designed for schooling within incarceration facilities with greater investments in creating access to computers, technology, resources, support services, and digital platforms so learners who are incarcerated receive quality education where they can conduct research and engage in effective pedagogical practices.

Finding #4: There is a need to implement socio-culturally relevant and responsive curriculum content, pedagogies, and accommodations to better support learners who are incarcerated with considerations for lack of access to resources and technology.

There is a correlation between race and racialization and the magnitude of systemic inequities experienced by racialized identities including Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC), and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Canadian society (Colour of Poverty, 2019; Eizadirad, 2019; Toronto Foundation, 2021; Williams et al., 2013). Findings from the Lewis (1992) and McMurtry and Curling (2008) reports provide historical context for Ontario which contextualize how systemic inequities rooted in the intersection of racism and poverty lead to disparities in outcomes such as the over-representation of racialized identities in correctional facilities particularly Black and Indigenous people (Chan et al., 2017; Colour of Poverty, 2019). This is a problematic trend that continues today due to systemic barriers.

Chan et al. (2017) emphasize that "the overrepresentation of racialized communities in Canada's prisons reflects the country's racial profiling and over-policing of Black and Indigenous people" (para. 10). Racialized identities experience more systemic barriers contributing to the perpetuation of the school to prison pipeline (Carter & Welner, 2013; Eizadirad, 2019). Lack of representation, mentorship, and culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies leads to many racialized identities being pushed out of schools because schools and their content, policies, and pedagogies are not reflective of racialized identities and their histories and lived experiences (Au, 2016; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006). As one of the Amdeusz staff explained,

> *Education is often an outcome, right? It's an outcome of like all of the other things that a young person is dealing with, so whether that's systemic discrimination from being a racialized person, reintegration, coming from a low-income background, you know, a history of community violence, like there's so many social determinants of health that need to be addressed before somebody can really think about being successful from an education perspective.*

Hence, there is a need to implement socio-culturally relevant and responsive curriculum content, pedagogies, and accommodations to support learners who are incarcerated (Eizadirad et al., 2022). As the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) report outlines "Courses are often written from a colonial lens that does not acknowledge other histories or present-day lived experiences" (p. 25) and "the transition to an entirely self-directed learning model was particularly challenging for youth in detention, especially those with significant learning challenges and acute needs" (p. 7). This was also echoed by incarcerated learners we interviewed who expressed,

> *Even though yes there was some access, it was still a pretty independent and isolating sort of experience.*

> *For me it wasn't really like deep learning all the time because it still required that somebody was able to learn basically straight out of a textbook with very little support.*

An Amadeusz educational facilitator further explained,

> *I don't know what real learning looks like but giving somebody a textbook and confusing assignments and saying 'do these assignments, we'll get you marks back whenever we get them back to you, and then you'll do an exam' does not align with best practices. To me, that is a real disservice to somebody who is at a precarious place along their education journey.*

Furthermore, the education offered within incarceration facilities does not take into account accommodations or modifications learners may need for circumstances related to limitations in accessing resources or technology. Should being incarcerated be recognized as a need for accommodation? This is something that needs to be considered by post-secondary institutions given the limitations incarcerated learners experience in completing their work and submitting it on time through paper-based correspondence. As one Amadeusz staff involved with delivering educational programs stated,

> *We advocated at a college to see if the incarcerated learner would qualify as a student with a disability just because by definition at the college in particular it stated that anyone facing barriers and challenges to their learning may qualify for accommodations. We were trying to kind of use that and to say well, look at all of the challenges and barriers that they're facing, right? Like why they can't qualify for, you know, accommodations and further support? Even if it's like a course extension.*

In Ontario to qualify for accommodations, one needs legal documentation of a learning disability or an Individual Education Plan initiated and approved by the school board. Incarceration is not a condition and hence is not approved under accommodations. Concerning accessing further support services post-release, numerous participants outlined how there were no specific transfer pathways for people coming out of incarceration. They expressed that they would fall under and receive the same resources and supports as a mature or transition year student.

A report by Erzen et al. (2019) titled *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison* suggests that, "It is essential that higher education in prison programs maintain a holistic approach that includes mentorship, tutoring, advising and the provision of the myriad "soft" skills that students need to succeed academically" (p. 34). Part of this would require discussions about what constitutes academic accommodations beyond exceptionalities to encompass the environment in which one resides, and the barriers that prevent meaningful participation in effective learning such as lack of access to computers and technology within incarceration facilities. While many post-secondary institutions have equity and inclusive education policies and strategies, these strategies do not specifically account for the needs of learners who are incarcerated.

Creating curriculum content that is socio-culturally relevant and responsive to the lived experiences of learners who are incarcerated would also lead to higher-quality educational experiences and more engagement from the incarcerated learners. As one incarcerated learner stated,

> *I wish educational programs offered by Amadeusz were not optional, and it was actually possible for everybody in jail to do, you know? Because the rate of the kind of people coming back to jail would be a lot lower in my opinion. It's a whole revolving door system because there's not enough help for people in jail.*

This aligns with findings from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) which states, "There were also concerns expressed that programming was arbitrary and was not developed in partnership with youth to ensure it accounted for their lived experiences" (p. 8). Overall, more funding and resources need to be allocated for education and the various levels of government need to provide incentives for universities to create post-secondary educational programs and transfer pathways for individuals incarcerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the literature review in phase one of the research project and interviews with various stakeholders in phase two, the following recommendations are made to improve access to education for learners who are incarcerated:

1. Amadeusz should host forums and conduct further research to show the positive impact of access to education on learners who are incarcerated. Findings should be publicized and shared with various stakeholders to outline the social return in terms of taxpayer savings and more effective reintegration and reduction in recidivism. This will contribute to disrupting deficit thinking about individuals who are incarcerated and further create awareness about education as a human right, even for individuals who are incarcerated as outlined in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. As part of prioritizing education as a human right, incarceration institutions should have a dedicated space or unit for schooling purposes. When on lockdown, people who are incarcerated should continue to maintain access to educational programs.

3. There should be greater access to computers, technology, digital platforms, and resources to facilitate distance learning and modernize conditions for teaching and learning. These can include dedicating greater spaces to teaching and learning such as a library and providing more educational materials. This also includes better access to computers, educational tools, and assistive technology in a manner that is safe for conducting research, reading texts, and completing course assignments.

4. There should be greater staff and instructor training to deliver educational programs in a manner that is socio-culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining to the identities and lived experiences of learners who are incarcerated. Trauma-informed, anti-oppression, and decolonial practices (Battiste, 2013; Hanna, 2019) are recommended as part of pedagogies to be implemented for course content and delivery.

5. Post-secondary institutions should be mandated to have several programs and courses available in paper-based correspondence with academic accommodations for individuals who are incarcerated. Incarceration should be approved as a valid reason to receive accommodations that can be implemented as part of post-secondary institutions' equity and inclusion policies.

6. There should be federal and provincial bursaries created for learners who are incarcerated. Amadeusz has begun to offer scholarships to learners who are incarcerated or post-release. Post-secondary institutions should have specific bursaries for individuals who are incarcerated instead of grouping them under existing categories such as mature or low-income students.

7. A coalition should be created involving partnerships with various post-secondary institutions to advocate for greater access to educational opportunities for learners who are incarcerated.

The coalition would design, create, and implement a pilot program involving transfer pathways, courses, and support services to meet the needs of learners who are incarcerated with consideration for their circumstances. Part of this program would involve Amadeusz providing their existing case management service post-release to ensure continuity of access to education and other relevant support services (e.g. securing housing and employment) to facilitate reintegration back into the community.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

In phase one of this research project, a literature review was conducted to examine what educational opportunities are available to individuals who are incarcerated in Ontario, Canada with a focus on availability, accessibility, and post-release pathways. In phase two, interviews were conducted with various stakeholders to further learn about the lived experiences of those impacted by incarceration and those who are interested or involved in delivering educational programs to individuals who are incarcerated. The objective was to better understand processes, challenges, and systemic barriers related to accessing education while incarcerated and post-release, particularly how to make improvements to ensure the human right of access to education is upheld by incarceration facilities, post-secondary institutions, and various levels of government. As a collective, findings from both phases of the research project indicate that access to post-secondary education for individuals who are incarcerated remains limited and an under-developed sector in Canada. More funding and resources need to be allocated to prioritize education and expand current programming as there is a demand for it. A holistic approach involving synergetic partnerships with non-profits, community agencies, and post-secondary institutions is required to revamp the system and prioritize education as a human right. This is important given that education is a significant protective factor in reducing recidivism. Overall, this report outlines why the limited educational opportunities offered in incarceration facilities in Canada are inequitable and unjust, and how systemic barriers further limit access to quality educational opportunities. A series of recommendations were outlined as the next steps to mitigate such systemic barriers and to create greater access to education for individuals who are incarcerated, both during incarceration as well as post-release. Investing in such recommendations would contribute to higher rates of rehabilitation and a reduction in recidivism.

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