From the Cell to the Classroom: Educational Transformation and Professional Recognition in Pathways into Teaching

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Formerly incarcerated individuals; teacher identity; professional recognition; stigma; transformative learning; adult education, peer support.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of individuals who have transitioned from incarceration into teaching roles in Ireland. Although education is widely recognised as supporting rehabilitation and reintegration, considerably less attention has been paid to what happens when people with lived experience of imprisonment seek entry into regulated professions such as teaching. Drawing on in-depth interviews with six formerly incarcerated individuals who were working in, or navigating pathways into, teaching, the study explores how educational transformation intersects with professional recognition within institutional and regulatory systems.

Using reflexive thematic analysis, three interconnected themes were identified: the persistence of prisoner identity beyond prison, disclosure anxiety and conditional trust within professional contexts, and education as a transformative process that did not automatically secure professional legitimacy. Across these themes, peer support emerged as a crucial but often overlooked source of practical guidance, encouragement, and recognition, helping participants navigate institutional processes and sustain confidence during periods of uncertainty.

The findings suggest that, while education enabled participants to reconstruct their identities, develop professional aspirations, and imagine different futures, entry into teaching remained shaped by stigma, disclosure, and institutional gatekeeping. Professional accreditation and vetting processes frequently left recognition provisional, requiring participants to negotiate acceptance within systems that continued to evaluate them through the lens of past conviction. As a result, educational transformation and institutional recognition emerged as related, but distinct, processes.

The article argues that understanding transitions from incarceration into regulated professions requires greater attention to the relationship between personal transformation and institutional recognition. It extends existing scholarship by showing that educational achievement alone does not secure professional belonging; recognition remains contingent on how transformed identities are interpreted within professional and regulatory contexts.

1. Introduction

For individuals leaving prison, moving into professional employment can present challenges that extend well beyond access to education. Regulated professions such as teaching require applicants to navigate formal systems of accreditation, vetting, and professional judgement, where questions of trust, suitability, and past convictions may continue to shape opportunities long after release. These tensions raise broader questions about how personal change is understood and recognised within professions that carry significant public responsibility.

Existing research on adult education and reintegration has highlighted the role that learning can play in supporting identity reconstruction, agency, and resistance to stigmatised identities shaped by imprisonment (Mezirow, 1991; Maruna, 2001). However, less attention has been paid to how these transformations are recognised within regulated professions such as teaching. In particular, little research has examined the experiences of individuals seeking to move beyond participation in education and into positions of professional authority, where processes of accreditation, vetting, and institutional judgement continue to shape access and professional recognition.

Teaching is a profession governed by regulatory frameworks designed to safeguard students and maintain public trust. These frameworks involve processes of accreditation, vetting, and institutional approval that shape who is permitted to enter the profession. While such systems play an important role in maintaining professional standards, they may also create uncertainty for individuals whose past involvement with the criminal justice system becomes part of the assessment process. As a result, educational achievement and personal development did not necessarily translate into recognition as legitimate members of the profession.

This study explores how individuals with experience of imprisonment navigate issues of identity, disclosure, and professional recognition as they transition into teaching roles in Ireland. The analysis examines how stigma persists beyond prison, how legitimacy is negotiated through regulatory processes, and how participants navigate uncertainty through strategies of adaptation and peer support.

The article contributes to scholarship on adult education, professional identity, and reintegration by distinguishing between personal transformation and institutional recognition. It examines how educational transformation and institutional recognition intersect as formerly incarcerated individuals navigate pathways into teaching, with particular attention to the role of peer support in negotiating institutional uncertainty.

The article commences with an outline of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform the study, including scholarship on stigma, carceral governance, transformative

learning, and professional boundary-setting. It then details the methodological approach before presenting the findings thematically. The discussion explores the relationship between educational transformation and professional recognition before concluding with a reflection on the implications of these findings for pathways from incarceration into teaching.

2. Literature

Existing research on rehabilitation and reintegration has consistently highlighted the role of education in supporting reflection, identity reconstruction, and social participation (Mezirow, 1991; Maruna, 2001; Davis et al., 2013). However, considerably less attention has been paid to the experiences of individuals who seek entry into regulated professions after imprisonment, where educational achievement alone may not be sufficient to secure professional recognition. To explore this gap, the article draws on several intersecting bodies of scholarship, including research on stigma and identity, carceral governance beyond prison, transformative learning in adult education, and institutional boundary-setting within professional fields.

2.1 Stigma, identity, and professional legitimacy

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding post-conviction identity is Goffman's concept of stigma. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963, p. 3) describes stigma as an attribute that is "deeply discrediting," reducing an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." Stigma is not only a social label but an interactional process through which individuals anticipate judgement and manage how they are perceived by others. For people with criminal convictions, this can involve ongoing forms of identity management as they navigate workplaces, educational settings, and professional environments where their past may shape expectations of trustworthiness. Research on reintegration has similarly highlighted the tension between emerging identities and lingering social perceptions tied to prior offending (Maruna, 2001). Within professional contexts such as teaching, these dynamics may become particularly pronounced, as individuals negotiate disclosure, legitimacy, and assumptions about moral suitability.

2.2 Carceral governance beyond prison

While stigma highlights interpersonal dynamics, scholarship on the contemporary carceral state draws attention to the institutional structures that extend the effects of punishment beyond the prison sentence itself. Wacquant (2009) argues that modern penal systems increasingly operate through dispersed mechanisms of governance that continue to regulate the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals long after release. Through administrative

processes such as background checks, professional vetting procedures, and bureaucratic monitoring, the boundaries of the penal system extend into civil life. These mechanisms do not necessarily exclude individuals outright, but they may reintroduce forms of surveillance and moral assessment that shape access to employment and professional recognition. As a result, transitions into professions associated with public trust may become sites where past convictions are repeatedly revisited and reassessed. In this sense, processes that appear administrative or procedural may also function as forms of regulation, shaping who is recognised as legitimate within professional fields.

2.3 Transformative Learning and Conditional Inclusion

For individuals with experience of imprisonment, participation in education has frequently been associated with increased confidence, new aspirations, and the possibility of imagining different futures (Costelloe, 2014). Within the field of adult education, theories of transformative learning offer an important lens for understanding how individuals reinterpret past experiences and revise their sense of self through education. Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as a process through which individuals critically reflect on previously held assumptions and revise their "frames of reference," shaping how they understand themselves and their place in the world. Educational engagement can therefore support shifts away from identities defined primarily through past wrongdoing toward orientations grounded in responsibility, contribution, and professional purpose. However, transformative learning theory also suggests that such changes are relational and socially situated, meaning that recognition by others may play an important role in sustaining revised understandings of self within professional and educational contexts.

At the same time, access to professional fields is shaped by institutional processes that regulate who is recognised as legitimate within particular occupations. Within the Irish context, research on further and adult education has highlighted how professional boundaries may be maintained through subtle forms of gatekeeping (Bates Evoy, 2018). Systems may appear inclusive while simultaneously limiting who is able to fully belong, particularly where discretion, delay, or ambiguity shape decision-making processes. Such dynamics can create conditions in which individuals are technically permitted to participate but remain uncertain about whether recognition will ultimately be granted. These processes reflect what has been described as forms of "soft exclusion," where opportunities appear open while the conditions for full participation remain unevenly distributed. Within professional contexts, this may result in individuals feeling required to continually demonstrate legitimacy, suitability, and trustworthiness in ways that extend beyond formal qualification alone.

2.4 Professional recognition and institutional boundary setting

Questions of professional recognition can also be understood through Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, which emphasises the importance of social acknowledgement in the development and maintenance of identity. From this perspective, personal change alone is insufficient if revised identities are not recognised by others within meaningful social and institutional contexts. Recognition is not simply a matter of individual achievement but involves processes through which individuals are acknowledged as legitimate participants within social life. This perspective is particularly relevant to transitions from imprisonment into teaching, where educational achievement may support significant personal transformation while institutional recognition remains uncertain, conditional, or contested.

Taken together, these bodies of scholarship suggest that transitions from incarceration into professional roles are shaped by ongoing negotiations between personal change and institutional regulation. While education may support revised understandings of self and the development of new professional aspirations, access to professional fields continues to be mediated through systems of vetting, accreditation, and discretionary judgement. As a result, entry into professions associated with public trust may involve not only demonstrating competence and qualification, but also navigating uncertainty around legitimacy, disclosure, and acceptance. Understanding these transitions therefore requires attention both to individual educational experiences and to the institutional contexts in which professional identities are assessed, recognised, and sometimes contested.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of individuals who transitioned from incarceration into teaching roles in Ireland. Qualitative inquiry is well suited to examining lived experience, identity formation, and meaning-making within complex social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the study sought to understand how participants interpreted their educational journeys and negotiated professional identities, prioritising participant voice, reflexivity, and meaning-making rather than predefined outcomes.

3.1 Participants and sampling

The study involved six participants — Markus, Liam, Brendan, Jonathan, Aoife, and Michael — who had served prison sentences and were either working in teaching roles or actively pursuing pathways into teaching within the Irish education system. Participants were recruited through educational and professional networks connected to adult and further

education contexts. All had engaged in significant educational activity following imprisonment and had pursued or completed qualifications associated with teaching or educational practice.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect participant confidentiality. While participants' pathways differed, they shared common experiences of engaging with educational institutions, professional accreditation processes, and the social implications of past conviction while pursuing roles as educators.

3.2 Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. Semi-structured interviewing is well suited to qualitative research that seeks to explore lived experience while allowing participants flexibility in how they describe and interpret their own narratives (Kallio et al., 2016). Topics included participants' educational journeys, experiences of teacher training and professional accreditation, encounters with disclosure and vetting processes, and reflections on identity and belonging within educational spaces.

Interviews encouraged participants to describe not only significant events but also the meanings they attached to those experiences. This approach enabled the research to capture both the practical and emotional dimensions of pursuing professional pathways after imprisonment. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.3 Data analysis

The analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This approach was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data while remaining attentive to context, interpretation, and researcher reflexivity.

Analysis involved several stages. Transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data and to identify preliminary patterns. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful segments of participants' narratives. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that reflected shared experiences across participants.

3.4 Ethics and reflexivity

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant university ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received information about the purpose and scope of the research and provided informed consent before taking part. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect participant confidentiality and identifying details have been removed

where necessary. Particular care was taken throughout the research process to ensure that participants' contributions were represented respectfully and accurately.

Qualitative research recognises that interpretation is shaped by the perspective of the researcher as well as by the narratives of participants (Finlay, 2002). In this study, the researcher's own experiences informed both the development of the research questions and the interpretation of the data.

The author has personal experience of imprisonment and now works within Educational Services to Prisons in the City of Dublin FET. This positionality provided insight into the educational contexts being explored while also requiring ongoing reflexive awareness throughout the research process. The aim was not to position the research as neutral or detached, but to remain attentive to how lived experience shaped engagement with participants' narratives and the interpretation of their accounts.

Throughout the study, particular care was taken to ensure that participants' voices remained central to the analysis and that interpretation remained grounded in their accounts rather than the researcher's own experiences.

4. Findings

The findings are presented under three interrelated themes: (1) the persistence of prisoner identity beyond prison; (2) disclosure anxiety and conditional trust; and (3) education as transformation without guaranteed legitimacy. Across these themes, participants described complex and often contradictory experiences of moving from imprisonment into professional educational spaces. Rather than presenting these journeys as linear narratives of rehabilitation or redemption, the analysis attends to tensions surrounding identity, belonging, institutional recognition, and professional legitimacy. Running across all themes was the importance of peer support, which frequently operated as an informal source of guidance, solidarity, and recognition where formal systems often fell short.

4.1 The persistence of prisoner identity beyond prison

Across all six narratives, imprisonment did not end at the prison gate. Prisoner identity emerged as a status that, while legally time-bound, continued to shape how individuals were seen — and how they saw themselves — in educational and professional spaces.

Markus captured this most starkly when he observed: "*You never stop being a prisoner — it's like you're doing time on paper now*."

His reflection illustrates how the effects of imprisonment can continue long after release, shaping experiences of belonging, trust, and legitimacy within professional life.

For several participants, this enduring identity was experienced not only through external judgement but also through internalised self-perception. Entering colleges, classrooms, or staff rooms often felt like moving into spaces where they were tolerated rather than fully accepted. Brendan described this as a constant awareness of difference: "*Even when I was in college, there was still this thing following me around — like I was still only a prisoner, but in a different way*."

Similarly, Michael reflected: "*You can have all the degrees in the world, but part of you still walks like you're being watched. Like you don't fully belong.*" For some, this produced an ongoing sense of professional fragility. Aoife described moments where becoming a teacher still felt provisional rather than secure: "*Sometimes I feel like I'm pretending to be a teacher, and any day now someone will say, 'You're not supposed to be here.'*"

This was not simply a matter of self-confidence. It reflected the tension between personal transformation and uncertain institutional recognition, leaving participants positioned between identities: no longer defined fully by imprisonment, but not always accepted fully within the profession. Yet participants did not passively accept these forms of positioning. Many described becoming highly attentive to institutional cues, learning to read interactions carefully and calibrate how they presented themselves in professional settings. Brendan explained: "*You get good at reading people. You start to know who needs the whole story, who just needs the basics.*"

This constant self-monitoring highlights how stigma becomes lived labour — ongoing emotional and cognitive work required to remain within spaces where belonging feels conditional. Imprisonment was not always framed solely as a source of limitation. Some participants described their lived experience as shaping forms of empathy, credibility, and connection within educational settings. Jonathan explained: *"I don't hide it. It's part of what makes me good at this. But that doesn't mean it's easy."*

Rather than rejecting their past entirely, some participants sought to integrate it into their emerging professional identities. In these moments, lived experience became not only a source of stigma, but also a basis for relational understanding and pedagogical authenticity. This reflects broader traditions within adult education that value experiential knowledge and critical reflection as meaningful forms of learning and practice.

Identity transformation remained unsettled, with participants continuing to negotiate between past and emerging professional identities. Markus captured this tension when he

described himself as: *"A prisoner in a teacher's jacket."* His reflection illustrates how the transition into teaching was not experienced as a clean break from the past, but as an ongoing negotiation between competing identities. As participants attempted to move beyond prisoner identity, disclosure became the point at which this identity was repeatedly reopened, reassessed, and made vulnerable once again.

4.2 Disclosure anxiety and conditional trust

Building on the persistence of prisoner identity, disclosure emerged as the point at which participants' transformed identities were repeatedly reopened to institutional scrutiny. Each disclosure renewed feelings of vulnerability and the possibility of exclusion rather than resolving uncertainty.

Aoife reflected on the repetitive nature of this process: *"It's not like you disclose once and it's done. Every new job, every new form, you're back to square one. You never really stop going through it."* Her account captures how disclosure functioned less as an administrative requirement and more as an ongoing negotiation of legitimacy. Feelings of conditional inclusion emerged repeatedly across the interviews, as participants remained aware that their pasts were permanently available for reassessment, regardless of educational achievement or professional experience. Brendan explained: *"You can be in the room and still feel like they're waiting for you to prove you belong because they know your history."* This illustrates the fragile nature of trust described across the interviews. Even where participants were formally accepted into programmes or placements, legitimacy often felt provisional rather than secure. Inclusion was experienced as contingent — dependent on continued assessments of character, risk, and professional suitability.

The discretionary nature of institutional responses intensified this anxiety. Participants described situations in which positive educational progress could be disrupted or overridden by vetting outcomes or institutional hesitation. Jonathan recalled disclosing during a teaching placement meeting: *"I told them up front, because I wanted to be honest. They said it wasn't a problem. Then the vetting came back and the placement disappeared. That was it. I was out."* His experience reflects how disclosure could quickly shift participants from being viewed as students or educators to being reconsidered primarily through the lens of past conviction. In this sense, disclosure became a point where transformation itself was tested and, at times, questioned.

Participants also described the uncertainty surrounding Garda vetting as emotionally exhausting. Markus explained: *"You don't know what they're going to say. Every time I've done it, it's never the same and I could be waiting months, and there's no update. You're stuck*

in limbo, there is no one to ask, what's going on?" His description highlights how vetting produced not only delay but also a prolonged sense of instability that disrupted professional planning and personal confidence. Several participants spoke about periods of waiting that left them feeling unable to move forward, despite years of study or professional preparation. In response, participants developed careful strategies for managing disclosure within professional spaces. Brendan described learning to calibrate how much to reveal: *"You disclose, but you do it in a way that lets them still see you as capable."*

Participants did not frame these strategies as deceptive. Rather, disclosure became a form of protective navigation, balancing honesty with the desire not to be reduced entirely to past convictions. Importantly, disclosure did not always lead to rejection. Some participants described moments where openness was met with empathy or encouragement. Markus recalled disclosing during a college interview: *"I said it in the interview, straight out. And the guy just goes, 'Fair play to you.' I'll never forget it."* These moments mattered precisely because participants often expected the opposite response. Positive reactions did not erase the anxiety surrounding disclosure, but they complicated more straightforward narratives of exclusion. They also highlighted the importance of individual actors and institutional culture in shaping how formal policies were experienced in practice.

For several participants, disclosure extended beyond official forms or interviews into concerns about media coverage and digital permanence. Aoife explained: *"I'd rather they hear it from me than from someone else or the internet."* Participants recognised that online records, newspaper articles, or past reporting could reactivate stigma in ways beyond their control. In this way, disclosure became not only a personal decision, but also a response to the possibility of involuntary exposure.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that disclosure operated as far more than a procedural requirement. It became a recurring site where trust, legitimacy, and belonging were continually negotiated. Despite evidence of personal and educational transformation, participants remained aware that acceptance within professional spaces could still feel conditional and uncertain. Nevertheless, education continued to represent one of the few spaces where participants described the possibility of being recognised differently, even if that recognition remained incomplete and at times precarious.

4.3 Education as transformation — but not protection

Despite the barriers identified across the previous themes, participants consistently returned to education as the foundation of their personal and professional transformation. However,

participants were clear that educational achievement alone did not guarantee acceptance within professional spaces.

For many, education marked the first time they experienced a sense of agency or intellectual possibility. Jonathan reflected: *"Education gave me something prison never could — it gave me a different way to see myself."* Similarly, Aoife described education as creating distance between who she had been and who she was becoming: *"It was the first place where I wasn't just my past anymore."* Across the interviews, qualifications were valued not as an end in themselves but as evidence of a broader process of identity reconstruction.

Educational success did not necessarily remove the structural or institutional barriers associated with past conviction. Markus explained: *"You can transform yourself all you want, but there's still systems there that might never fully trust you."* His reflection highlights the limits of transformation when institutional recognition remains uncertain. While participants often described profound personal change, they also remained aware that legitimacy within professional settings could still be conditional and fragile. Educational achievement was meaningful, but it did not always translate into acceptance.

For several participants, teaching itself became a way of reclaiming voice and experience rather than escaping the past entirely. Brendan explained: *"I'm not trying to erase where I came from. I'm trying to use it for something better."* Rather than rejecting their histories completely, some participants described integrating lived experience into their educational practice. In these moments, experience of imprisonment became a source of empathy, relational understanding, and connection with learners who had themselves experienced exclusion or marginalisation. This reflects broader traditions within adult education that value experiential knowledge and critical reflection as important dimensions of learning and practice. Participants frequently described their experiences not as something to be hidden from educational work, but as something that enabled them to connect with learners in ways that might otherwise have been difficult.

Participants also spoke about the significance of peer encouragement and informal support networks throughout their educational journeys. Michael reflected: *"Most of the time it was other people around me who kept me going — people who understood it without me having to explain everything."*

For several participants, peer support extended beyond encouragement and became an important source of practical guidance, emotional safety, and professional confidence. Whether in prison classrooms, college corridors, or informal WhatsApp groups, peers provided spaces where disclosure did not require justification and where shared experience generated immediate trust. Participants relied on one another to decode bureaucratic systems,

rehearse interviews, interpret vetting processes, and manage the psychological toll of rejection. Liam described the importance of meeting someone who had already navigated the pathway he hoped to follow:

> "I swear I was ready to pack it in. I thought, what's the point in this if they're always going to see the past first? But I was introduced to someone like me, who had done the course the year before and got approved by the Council, and that gave me hope. He walked me through the process. To be honest, just hearing it was possible kept me going."

His account illustrates how peer support functioned not only as emotional reassurance but also as practical guidance in navigating complex institutional processes. For many participants, seeing somebody with a similar history succeed in education or teaching challenged assumptions about what was possible for people with convictions and created opportunities to imagine alternative futures for themselves.

These relationships provided emotional safety, practical guidance, and professional recognition that formal structures often struggled to offer. In contexts where institutions were often experienced as uncertain, inconsistent, or difficult to navigate, peers filled important gaps by offering practical advice, sharing experience, and validating participants' developing sense of self. Peer conversations frequently became spaces where fears could be voiced openly and where uncertainty could be managed collectively rather than alone.

Crucially, peer networks also operated as alternative sites of legitimacy. Within these spaces, participants were recognised first as learners, educators, and contributors rather than as risks. While this did not erase stigma, it often mitigated its effects by creating communities where belonging was grounded in shared experience rather than institutional approval. Several participants suggested that these relationships became particularly important during periods when formal systems offered little clarity or reassurance. In this sense, peer support operated as a largely hidden resource that sustained participants through some of the most difficult stages of their educational and professional journeys.

At the same time, participants remained conscious of the tensions involved in entering professional educational spaces that have traditionally excluded people with criminal convictions. Aoife described this contradiction directly: *"You're encouraged to transform yourself through education, but then you still have to convince people you deserve to be there."* Her reflection captures one of the central tensions running across the study. Education created genuine opportunities for transformation, confidence, and professional aspiration, yet institutional acceptance often lagged behind these personal changes.

Overall, the findings suggest that education functioned as both a transformative and contested space within participants' lives. Participants frequently described education as opening new

ways of understanding themselves and their futures, creating opportunities for confidence, growth, and professional aspiration. At the same time, movement into teaching remained shaped by questions of trust, legitimacy, and institutional recognition. While education enabled participants to imagine identities beyond imprisonment, professional acceptance was often experienced as uncertain and subject to ongoing scrutiny.

5. Discussion

Building on the findings presented, this discussion considers how participants' experiences illuminate the relationship between educational transformation and professional recognition within regulated professions. This section interprets these experiences through several analytical perspectives, including stigma, carceral governance, transformative learning, peer support, and professional boundary-setting. Together, these perspectives help illuminate how participants navigated pathways into teaching that were marked not only by opportunity, but also by uncertainty and conditional acceptance.

5.1 Stigma, Identity, and Conditional Belonging

Participants' accounts consistently revealed that entry into teaching was shaped by the persistence of stigma rather than resolved through educational achievement alone. Despite qualifications, professional experience, and demonstrated commitment, inclusion within educational spaces was often experienced as conditional rather than assumed. Rather than signalling the end of exclusion, educational achievement marked the beginning of a different form of negotiation in which professional legitimacy remained contingent upon institutional and interpersonal recognition.

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma provides a useful lens through which to understand these experiences. While participants had developed new identities as students, educators, and professionals, these identities coexisted alongside the possibility that past imprisonment could be reactivated through disclosure, vetting procedures, or public visibility. Accounts suggested that imprisonment continued to operate in terms of what Goffman (1963) describes as a "spoiled identity" — one that remained vulnerable to reactivation in new social and professional contexts. Participants' achievements in education did not erase the awareness that their histories could become newly visible through disclosure, vetting, or institutional scrutiny. Stigma did not disappear as participants progressed through education. Rather, it remained embedded within professional interactions and broader questions of trust, credibility, and professional standing, illustrating Wacquant's (2009) argument that carceral

logics extend beyond physical custody into civic and institutional spaces, where suspicion and moral judgement persist even after formal punishment has ended.

Importantly, participants did not portray themselves as passive recipients of stigma. Instead, they engaged in ongoing forms of identity work through which they sought to establish credibility, professionalism, and trustworthiness within educational spaces. Goffman's (1963) work on impression management is particularly relevant here, as participants frequently described managing visibility, disclosure, and perception simultaneously. These efforts were often shaped by an awareness that inclusion remained contingent. Participants frequently described feeling required to demonstrate responsibility and professional competence in ways that were not expected of others entering the profession. This suggests that professional legitimacy functioned as an ongoing performance of credibility rather than a status conferred through qualification alone.

Educational achievement enabled participants to construct new professional identities, yet those identities remained vulnerable to reassessment. Access to teaching spaces did not necessarily translate into a sense of full acceptance, and stigma continued to shape how participants navigated professional life and anticipated the perceptions of others.

Rather than diminishing through educational achievement, stigma continued to shape how professional identities were recognised within institutional settings. These accounts highlight the extent to which changed identities continue to be shaped by wider social and institutional perceptions rather than educational achievement alone.

5.2 Carceral Spillover and Institutional Gatekeeping

While stigma shaped participants' experiences at an interpersonal level, their transitions into teaching were also influenced by institutional processes that extended beyond imprisonment itself. Rather than functioning as isolated administrative requirements, these regulatory processes became the principal mechanisms through which professional recognition was negotiated.

Wacquant's (2009) analysis of carceral spillover provides a useful framework for understanding these experiences. Participants frequently described Garda vetting and Teaching Council registration not simply as administrative procedures, but as moments in which past imprisonment was reopened and reassessed. Access to professional roles remained dependent upon decisions made within regulatory structures that participants often experienced as distant, opaque, and difficult to navigate.

A defining feature of these experiences was uncertainty. Progress could be delayed, paused, or subjected to additional scrutiny without clear explanation, leaving participants unsure

whether their educational and professional efforts would ultimately be acknowledged. Limited communication and unclear timelines created extended periods of waiting during which participants were unable to plan with confidence or fully commit to future professional identities.

The impact of this uncertainty extended beyond administrative processes themselves. Participants frequently described frustration, powerlessness, and emotional exhaustion as they attempted to navigate systems whose expectations were often unclear. In this respect, institutional control was experienced less through direct exclusion and more through prolonged assessment and the possibility of reassessment. Opportunities remained available, but progression was often experienced as uncertain rather than secure.

These accounts suggest that the transition from prison to professional life did not represent a complete departure from systems of regulation and oversight. Rather, mechanisms of assessment and scrutiny continued to shape participants' opportunities and expectations in new forms. Although distinct from punishment, these processes nevertheless extended participants' experiences of institutional uncertainty into professional life. These concerns reflect broader research showing how criminal stigma can persist long after formal punishment has ended, shaping reintegration, identity, and social belonging in enduring ways (Moore, Stuewig and Tangney, 2015).

Viewed in this way, participants' experiences point towards the continuing influence of carceral logics beyond the prison gate. Although educational achievement opened pathways towards teaching, access to professional roles remained mediated through institutional processes that ultimately determined whether changed identities would be accommodated within professional educational spaces.

5.3 Transformative Learning and Institutional Recognition

Participants' accounts consistently demonstrated that educational transformation extended beyond the acquisition of knowledge or qualifications, providing the foundation for broader changes in identity and professional aspiration. Education was not experienced simply as the acquisition of qualifications or vocational skills. Rather, it functioned as a process through which participants began to imagine different futures and alternative ways of understanding themselves.

These experiences resonate strongly with Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning. Participants frequently described moments in which previously held assumptions concerning their capabilities, opportunities, and place within society were reconsidered. Educational participation created opportunities for critical reflection, personal growth, and renewed

confidence. For many participants, becoming a student represented the first meaningful step towards becoming a teacher.

The findings also suggest that transformation should not be understood as a complete or settled process. Participants rarely described a definitive break between past and present identities. Instead, educational achievement frequently coexisted continuing concerns regarding trust, disclosure, and professional acceptance. While participants often experienced profound personal change, recognition of that change remained uneven and, at times, uncertain.

A key insight emerging from this study is that personal transformation and institutional recognition operated as distinct processes. Educational participation enabled participants to reconstruct identities, develop professional aspirations, and establish themselves within learning communities. Yet recognition of those transformed identities was not always automatic. This distinction challenges linear accounts of reintegration by demonstrating that educational transformation and institutional recognition may progress at different rates and according to different forms of evaluation.

Viewed through Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, participants' experiences suggest that personal change alone was insufficient to secure professional legitimacy. While education supported revised understandings of self, recognition of those revised identities remained dependent upon institutional acknowledgement within professional contexts. Participants frequently described situations in which transformation was experienced as real and meaningful, yet acceptance within professional spaces remained uncertain, negotiated, or conditional.

Taken together, these findings suggest that transformation and recognition should not be understood as sequential stages within a single process. Participants frequently described transformation as something that had already occurred through education, reflection, and professional development. Recognition, however, remained dependent upon external actors and institutional processes beyond their control. This distinction is significant because it challenges assumptions that educational achievement alone can secure professional inclusion. Instead, participants' experiences suggest that transformation may be necessary for entry into professional life, while recognition remains contingent upon how institutions interpret and respond to that transformation.

This distinction between transformation and recognition is particularly important within the context of adult education. Mezirow's work emphasises the capacity of learning to reshape meaning perspectives and support new understandings of self. The experiences described here support that argument while also highlighting its limitations. Transformation may alter how

individuals understand themselves, but recognition of that transformation remains dependent upon wider social and institutional processes that sit beyond the control of the learner.

The broader significance of education extended beyond professional outcomes. Even where participants encountered barriers, delays, or continuing scrutiny, educational experiences remained central to how they understood their own journeys. Education provided confidence, purpose, and opportunities for contribution that extended beyond formal employment outcomes. Rather than eliminating the effects of imprisonment, it enabled participants to develop identities that were not wholly defined by it.

Viewed collectively, these experiences suggest that the significance of adult education lies not only in its capacity to facilitate personal change but also in its ability to create opportunities for participation and contribution. However, the findings also indicate that educational transformation alone cannot guarantee acceptance within professional fields. The relationship between learning, identity, and professional legitimacy therefore remains more complex than many accounts of reintegration acknowledge.

5.4 Peer Support as Informal Infrastructure

Alongside formal educational opportunities, participants consistently highlighted the importance of peer support throughout their journeys into teaching. Rather than duplicating formal educational provision, peer relationships addressed forms of support that institutional structures were often unable to provide. These relationships became particularly important during periods of uncertainty surrounding disclosure, vetting, and professional progression.

The significance of peer support extended beyond emotional encouragement. Participants often described peer networks as sources of practical knowledge, guidance, and reassurance. Shared experience enabled forms of understanding that did not require explanation, creating spaces in which participants could discuss challenges associated with imprisonment, education, and professional aspirations without fear of judgement. In this respect, peer support functioned as an important resource for navigating both educational systems and professional pathways. The importance of these relationships highlights the deeply relational nature of educational transformation. While participants described education as profoundly significant, they rarely portrayed change as something achieved entirely through individual effort. Instead, progress was often supported by networks of encouragement, mentorship, and solidarity that sustained confidence during periods of uncertainty. This reflects Mezirow's (1991) emphasis on dialogue and critical reflection as important dimensions of transformative learning, while also resonating with Freire's (1970) understanding of learning as a relational process shaped through engagement with others.

Freire's (1970) emphasis on dialogue and collective learning provides a useful lens through which to understand these experiences. Personal change was often sustained through relationships that fostered reflection, mutual support, and a shared sense of possibility, rather than occurring in isolation. Participants frequently drew confidence from witnessing the achievements of others with similar backgrounds, reinforcing the belief that educational and professional progression remained attainable.

Peer support functioned as more than a source of encouragement. It functioned as an informal infrastructure through which participants experienced affirmation, acceptance, and connection at times when formal systems offered limited reassurance. While these networks could not remove structural barriers, they frequently provided the support necessary to persist in the face of them. As a result, peer relationships emerged as an important, though often overlooked, element of participants' educational and professional journeys.

5.5 Soft Exclusion and Professional Boundaries

Participants' accounts suggest that their experiences were shaped less by overt exclusion than by a form of conditional access. While none were formally barred from pursuing teaching, inclusion remained fragile and uncertain. This dynamic reflects what Bates Evoy (2018) describes as soft exclusion, where systems appear open while simultaneously limiting who can fully belong.

Soft exclusion differs from both overt exclusion and interpersonal stigma. Rather than operating through direct prohibition, uncertainty emerged through prolonged assessment, discretionary decision-making, inconsistent communication, and the possibility of renewed scrutiny. Access remained technically available, yet inclusion was frequently experienced as provisional rather than secure. In this sense, soft exclusion operated not through formal denial of opportunity, but through conditions that left belonging and professional recognition open to question.

Within further and adult education, soft exclusion can operate through discretion, delay, and uneven access to information rather than explicit prohibition. Participants were often permitted to apply, study, and in some cases teach provisionally, yet remained unsure whether professional recognition would ultimately be secured. Participation was therefore technically inclusive but experientially precarious.

A defining feature of this process was ambiguity. Participants were rarely told that they did not belong; instead, belonging was deferred. Rather than being excluded outright, participants frequently described existing in a state of prolonged uncertainty where acceptance remained possible but never fully guaranteed. Prolonged timelines, limited communication, and the

absence of clear criteria created conditions in which legitimacy could never be assumed. This uncertainty constrained agency, encouraging caution while limiting opportunities to challenge or clarify decisions.

Soft exclusion also functioned through professional boundary-setting. Even where competence and commitment were evident, recognition remained subject to continuing assessments of suitability and risk. Participants described learning to adapt aspirations and manage expectations, anticipating that progress could be interrupted at any stage.

The contrast between informal learning environments and regulated professional arenas further illuminates this dynamic. Within peer-supported educational spaces, participants frequently experienced affirmation and trust. It was at the point of transition into regulated roles that boundaries tightened. Education enabled participants to reimagine themselves as educators, but professional systems retained authority over whether that identity would be formally acknowledged.

Pathways into teaching after prison are shaped not by a clear divide between exclusion and inclusion but by ongoing processes through which access, trust, and professional standing are continually negotiated. Through soft exclusion, professional systems maintain authority over entry and participation while preserving the appearance of openness.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of individuals transitioning from prison into teaching roles in Ireland, examining how educational transformation intersects with professional recognition within regulated educational contexts. Drawing on the experiences of six participants, the findings demonstrate that while education can provide powerful opportunities for identity reconstruction, personal growth, and professional aspiration, the recognition of that transformation is neither automatic nor guaranteed.

Across the participants' narratives, education emerged as a significant catalyst for change. Learning provided opportunities to develop confidence, acquire qualifications, and imagine futures that extended beyond imprisonment. For many participants, becoming a student represented the first step towards becoming a teacher, enabling the development of professional identities grounded in contribution, responsibility, and care. However, the findings also illustrate that educational achievement alone does not resolve the challenges associated with stigma, disclosure, and professional acceptance.

A central contribution of this study is the distinction between personal transformation and institutional recognition. Participants consistently described meaningful changes in how they

understood themselves and their futures, recognition of those changes remained mediated through broader social and institutional processes. Experiences of vetting, professional registration, and regulatory oversight demonstrated that access to teaching was often shaped not only by educational attainment but also by continuing assessments of trust, suitability, and legitimacy. In this respect, the findings suggest that transitions from prison into professional educational roles are best understood as ongoing negotiations between transformation, recognition, and access.

The study also highlights the importance of peer support within these journeys. Participants repeatedly described the value of relationships with others who shared similar experiences, particularly when navigating complex educational and professional systems. These informal networks provided encouragement, guidance, and practical knowledge that often-complemented formal educational provision. Their significance suggests that peer-based supports may represent an important, though frequently overlooked, component of inclusive pathways into teaching and other professional fields.

The findings highlight the importance of educational and professional systems that are not only open in principle but transparent and accessible in practice. Greater clarity within regulatory processes, recognition of demonstrated educational change, and support for peer-led forms of engagement may help strengthen pathways into teaching for individuals with histories of imprisonment. More broadly, the study raises important questions about how professional legitimacy is constructed, how trust is granted, and how transformed identities are recognised within regulated professions. While education created opportunities for participants to reimagine themselves and their futures, their experiences demonstrate that the journey from the cell to the classroom remains shaped by both possibility and constraint.

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