

SECURITY, STRUCTURE AND LEARNER VARIABILITY: CORE DETERMINANTS OF TEACHING PROCESSES IN CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

Márta Miklósi

Institute of Educational Studies and Cultural Management, University of Debrecen (Hungary)

Abstract

Teaching in correctional institutions takes place in both an educational and a criminal justice environment. In correctional institutions, security dictates the daily schedule, making the situation more difficult for teachers, who face serious challenges due to the closed institutional environment and the specific characteristics of the target group (Malvaso, Day & Boyd, 2024). The diverse psychosocial and learning needs of students in correctional institutions require a pedagogical approach that differs from the strategies used in traditional schools (Flores & Barahona López, 2021; Gagnon et al., 2025). In my research, during autumn of 2025, I asked teachers and educators at four juvenile detention centers in Hungary (Budapest, Rákospalota, Aszód, Debrecen) using semi-structured interviews. I conducted 32 interviews with teachers and analyzed them using Atlas.ti software. In this presentation, I will present the main findings of the interviews, focusing on the differences compared to traditional teaching in a regular school. The interviewees' responses can be divided into four main groups: teachers expressed their opinions on the differences in the teaching process, the closed environment, the curriculum, and the characteristics of the target group. According to the interviewees, teaching in correctional institutions is fundamentally determined by a closed, strict set of rules and the primacy of security protocols. Security regulations limit the range of pedagogical tools available and the organization of student interactions and often interrupt the continuity of teaching. The results of the interviews coincide with the findings of the literature regarding the focus of correctional education. The interviewees confirm that education is often more important than teaching itself, that the nature of teachers' administrative and organizational tasks differs from that in traditional schools, and that the work of teachers in correctional institutions is primarily determined by safety regulations, which overshadow a significant part of the usual school administration. According to teachers, the level of the curriculum in reformatory education must be lowered due to the significant knowledge and skill deficits of the students, as young people who end up in reformatories have serious knowledge gaps. The extremely heterogeneous composition of the students also poses a serious challenge, as young people arrive with different levels of prior schooling, resulting in complex educational needs. Based on the results of interviews with teachers, I will present how teaching in a correctional facility differs from teaching at other schools and what pedagogical strategies can be successful in this environment.

Keywords: *Correctional facility, teacher, difference, method, Janus face.*

1. Introduction

Juvenile detention centers serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, detention in a juvenile detention center is a criminal law measure that may be imposed on juvenile offenders who have committed a crime; on the other hand, they also serve an educational and rehabilitative function. (Section 108(1) of Act C of 2012) Education in correctional institutions takes place simultaneously within both a pedagogical and a criminal justice context; therefore, in addition to the goals of education and instruction, the rules governing the enforcement and implementation of legal sanctions also influence daily practice during educational activities in these institutions.

In addition to performing worse in school than their peers, a significant proportion of juvenile offenders struggle with learning difficulties and past academic failures; they form an extremely heterogeneous group from an educational perspective and arrive at the correctional facility with diverse psychosocial backgrounds. (Gemignani, 1994; Sedlak & McPherson, 2010; Thomsen & Wren, 2024; Walker et al., 2018) The situation is complicated by the fact that juvenile detention centers generally lack the capacity to provide a "traditional" school environment with classrooms designated for specific grade

levels and teachers specializing in different subjects. Instead, teachers often have to teach students of different ages and grade levels together in a single classroom. (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2014) At the same time, due to students' varying cognitive abilities and learning difficulties, differentiated, personalized instruction is essential for effective learning. (Gagnon et al., 2025) It can be said that the learning diversity of the juvenile detention center population poses a systemic challenge that can only be addressed through flexible, adaptive pedagogical strategies. (Thomsen & Wren, 2024) The classroom environment in a juvenile detention center is unique compared to traditional schools for several reasons, as the system's structure differs significantly from the typical structure of educational institutions. While the former can be characterized as an authoritarian, often militaristic system, the organizational structure of traditional schools clearly focuses on the development of young people. (Beach and Reinhartz, 2000) Schools operating within juvenile detention centers generally function within a culture that relies on fear, control, the threat of isolation, and further punishment, rather than emphasizing proactive and positive approaches to promote prosocial behavior, thereby posing a challenge to teachers. (Gagnon et al., 2008) As a result, educators are required to demonstrate exceptional flexibility, disciplined situation management, and heightened emotional labor to effectively achieve educational goals even within the constraints of a closed environment. (U.S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2014)

2. Objectives and methods

I used semi-structured interviews as my research method, since the goal in exploring this topic was not to collect quantitative data, but rather to understand the interviewees' opinions and attitudes. When compiling the 18-question questionnaire, I sought to approach the topic from multiple perspectives to determine in what ways and to what extent this work differs from traditional school education practices. The questionnaire was structured around five major thematic groups:

- 1) icebreaker, introduction, motivation, preparation (Questions 1, 2, 3)
- 2) differences between teaching in a reform school and previous (regular school) teaching experiences, motivation, differences in the target group (Questions 4, 7, 8, 9)
- 3) advantages and challenges of working in a reformatory (questions 5, 6, 14, 16)
- 4) students' attachment to teachers, changes in their attitudes (questions 10, 11, 12, 13)
- 5) Different pedagogical strategies, ideas for improvement, and other observations (Questions 15, 17, 18)

The interviews were conducted at four reform schools in Hungary: in Debrecen, Aszód, and at two locations in Budapest, Rákospalota and Szőlő Street. Participation in the interviews took place with a research permit, the prior approval of the institution directors, and on a voluntary basis, in full compliance with research ethics guidelines. Audio recordings were made of the conversations, which I later transcribed in anonymized form; during the analysis, the researcher worked with these transcripts. Each interview lasted an average of 20–40 minutes. I conducted a total of 32 interviews with teachers between October 7, 2025, and December 7, 2025. I performed the coding and labeling using the Atlas.ti software. During the labeling process, I took into account the requirements of triangulation (Denzin, 2017), which is why the coding process took a longer period of time. Two weeks after the initial development of the codes, I reviewed, refined, and rephrased them, resulting in the final code categories. The collection of narratives began in parallel with the coding process.

3. Discussion

The interviewees' responses can be categorized into four main groups; the teachers expressed their views on the differences between the teaching process and that of a traditional school setting, as well as on the characteristics of the closed environment, the curriculum, and the target group.

The teaching process differs in many respects from education in a traditional school setting with regard to the pedagogical process, including the primacy of education, less administration, the structure of class periods and the system of rules, and the enforcement of those rules.

Those teachers who identified the most significant differences in the teaching process compared to work in traditional schools emphasized the role of education, citing less administration, the absence of parent-teacher conferences, and the different class schedules as favorable conditions, or highlighting adherence to rules in teaching work in their responses.

Some of the interviewees (n=6) stated that education is more emphasized in the reform school than instruction. One of the reasons for this is that the teacher plays a more decisive role in the students' lives at the institution because family and friends are absent from their lives. The emphasis between the two areas – teaching and education – differs between reform schools and traditional schools outside the institution, as one interviewee succinctly put it:

“In a school outside the institution, the student is a member of the class and teaching is the primary focus. Here, it’s the opposite; education is more emphasized than teaching.” T6

Incorporating education, humanity, empathy, and a willingness to help into our work is essential; only in this way can we achieve results and ensure that educators contribute to the young person’s future social integration and resocialization. This also includes individualized attention, which is another key difference from traditional schools:

“The individual attention is stronger than in regular schools. I have a basis for comparison, and I’ve found that education in regular schools is more impersonal. When I came here, I noticed that we talk about a young person ten times as much as we do out there.” T6

In the reform school, the rules governing daily life are much stricter than in a traditional school, as discipline and adherence to rules are of paramount importance. Every activity in the institution follows a strict protocol, which serves to ensure safety and order. While the rules are much stricter, it is easier to prevent problems – such as drug use – under controlled conditions, which are harder to manage in a regular school due to legal constraints.

We can see from the interview responses that the teacher’s role may be even more decisive in a reform school than in a traditional school—in part because the students are exposed to far fewer external stimuli—and the role of upbringing may be more emphasized than that of instruction, since one of the main functions of reform schools is to educate the students, in addition to imparting knowledge.

The teachers’ responses also highlighted the challenges of teaching in a closed environment, including the emphasis that, given the institution’s nature, safety takes precedence over education, as several respondents (n=3) noted.

Confinement and uncertainty (for example, due to a court decision) cause significant internal tension among the young people, which affects their learning process and behavior. Furthermore, the closed institutional conditions themselves limit the sense of freedom, which places an additional psychological burden on them.

Teaching in a juvenile detention center is also different because the primary focus is on ensuring safety, which takes precedence over all educational activities. Before teaching, teachers must address any potential conflicts or problematic situations; otherwise, they would not be able to teach the students, who would be unable to concentrate on the curriculum or class assignments.

“The priority is always to ensure safety rules are in place, and once that’s done, then we can begin teaching. If something snaps in a child or they have serious issues, we have to address that, and I can’t start teaching until then, because it wouldn’t be effective.” T17

In addition, students need to be provided with a strict framework, since they haven’t previously experienced the importance of rules and respect, so establishing these is a fundamental educational task.

“They like predictability – the fact that things don’t change on a whim. If I say there will be a test on Tuesday, then there will be a test on Tuesday. Whether they’ve studied or not, there will still be a test on Tuesday. So let’s plan ahead, because that’s what’s important to them, too.” T18

The framework must be reinforced consistently and repeatedly; only after all this can actual teaching begin, which is thus overshadowed by safety and educational tasks.

Many educators highlighted that instruction in the reform school proceeds based on a different curriculum; this curriculum is more limited, and teaching in the reform school does not follow the core curriculum. In correctional facilities, lower expectations (n=4) must be set during instruction due to cognitive abilities; *“the bar must be lowered.” T31*

Young people often arrive at the reformatory with serious problems; they are illiterate or functionally illiterate, so educators must be much more flexible with them due to their low level of knowledge.

“The juveniles come here with very serious problems and deviant behaviors, so we have to be a little more tolerant. Whereas 20 years ago, we were amazed that an illiterate 18-year-old child had been admitted to our institution, today it is becoming increasingly common even among children with an 8th-grade education to be illiterate or functionally illiterate, and their knowledge level does not even reach that of a second-grade student.” T3

Education in the reformatory does not follow a centralized curriculum (n=4), because this allows teachers to freely adjust the pace of progress and the curriculum to the young people’s abilities, as one interviewee (T3) puts it: *“We have a free hand regarding the pace of progress and the topics.”*

This freedom is particularly important to teachers; as one interviewee put it:

“I always say that whenever anyone asks why I like working here, one of the reasons is that there is no curriculum, no framework. Here, no one tells me what to teach or how to teach it; here, the results are what matter—as much as we can achieve, of course.” T9

The interviewees highlighted as a key difference the fact that, due to the specific characteristics of the target group, differentiated, individualized attention is required, with a strong emphasis on helping students catch up; all of which is complicated by the constant movement and turnover of students, as well as the fact that they are often unpredictable, requiring teachers to adapt to their needs during each class.

Individual attention and differentiation (n=6) are important in the reform school because juveniles arrive with very different levels of prior knowledge and academic deficits.

“The key here is to try to help the young people catch up in a personalized way, because there are as many different types of them as there are students, with as many different academic backgrounds and learning deficits.” T9

The situation is further complicated by the fact that a single class may include students from multiple grade levels, so they can only be brought up to speed and developed through personalized methods.

Differentiation helps ensure that everyone progresses at their own pace, and that more talented students are also given appropriate challenges. We must constantly give them tasks, in a differentiated way, so they don't get bored, because boredom is a breeding ground for disruptive behavior, as one teacher put it so aptly: *“The key is to keep them engaged. Don't let them tie me down; I'll tie them down. I always say in class, ‘The paper fills up, the pencil wears down.’”* T18

The interviewees noted that, unlike teaching in regular schools, the primary task here is to fill in and reinforce the basics, since the young people arrive with significant gaps in their knowledge. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive foundation in every subject during the short time spent in the facility, which limits further learning. Teaching in the reform school is also made difficult by the lack of stability. The students are constantly changing due to court rulings and varying lengths of stay. This prevents the development of long-term, stable teacher-student relationships, which can take years to build in traditional schools.

Another complicating factor is the unpredictability of teaching in a juvenile detention center, as the teacher never knows in advance what state the group will be in, so they must constantly adapt to the situation. It often happens that the planned lesson must be completely restructured because the students' current mood or circumstances do not allow for the curriculum to be covered. This requires a high degree of flexibility, as the teacher must immediately come up with alternative solutions.

The interview responses suggest that the success of the teaching process stems primarily from emphasizing the central role of education in this special environment; furthermore, delivering a limited curriculum to a highly specialized, problem-stricken target group presents numerous challenges for teachers.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the interviews align with the conclusions of the literature regarding the educational and resocialization focus of correctional education. According to the research (Gagnon et al., 2025; Muñiz, 2025; U.S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2014; Wills, 2025) indicate that in this setting, the role of teachers extends beyond the transmission of subject-specific knowledge, as supporting young people's social reintegration, imparting community norms, and fostering empathetic, trust-based relationships are equally important tasks. This is also confirmed by the interviewees when they emphasize that education is often more important than teaching itself, particularly because these young people frequently lack a family background, making the teacher a key adult role model.

The claim found in the literature that youths in reform schools are often alienated from school and distrustful or hostile toward adults is precisely reflected in the teachers' accounts as well, who state that without an authentic, empathetic presence, there is no learning (Muñiz, 2025; Sifelani & Tsabedze, 2025). The interviews further support the finding in the literature that an inseparable part of education here is the development of social competencies and the provision of a stable, supportive environment, which is a prerequisite for resocialization (Gagnon et al., 2004; Wills, 2025). The individual attention, personalized support, and values formation emphasized by teachers are all elements that research (Gagnon et al., 2004; Muñiz, 2025).

The literature highlights that behavioral problems and the ongoing pedagogical work required to maintain discipline further reduce the time available for teaching the curriculum (Leone & Weinberg, 2010), which is consistent with the experiences reported in the interviews. In juvenile detention centers, teachers often deviate from the core curriculum and enjoy greater flexibility in determining content and the pace of progress, which allows for remedial instruction tailored to individual needs (Clark et al., 2016). Based on interviews, this freedom has a motivating effect, and according to educators, it is essential for young people to achieve real progress, even in small steps. We can thus see that empirical findings fully corroborate the literature's descriptions regarding the importance of a reduced curriculum, flexible pedagogical adaptation, and small successes.

Overall, both the literature and the findings from the interviews indicate that education in the reform school takes place within a specific, highly regulated pedagogical space, where safety, the establishment of boundaries, and educational tasks typically take precedence over the delivery of the curriculum, and where every element of teaching is inseparable from the structural characteristics of the closed institutional environment.

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