

Beyond the Walls: The Social Reintegration of Prisoners through the Dialogic Reading of Classic  
Universal Literature in Prison

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**Abstract**

This study analyzed whether it was possible to successfully transfer an experience of dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs) developed in a prison in the Basque Country (Spain), which was found to enhance the participants' readiness to return to their communities. A case study was conducted in a different prison in Catalonia that comprised interviews and focus groups with a group of female prisoners and volunteers involved in the DLG. The communicative analysis conducted showed that the replication of the DLG allowed the participants to discuss and reflect on their biographies and their expected pathways upon release, thus opening possibilities for personal and social change. The results show that participants perceived the dialogic literary gathering as a helpful resource for social reintegration and suggest that DLGs can be transferred to different correctional institutions.

**Keywords**

social reintegration, prisoners, inclusion, dialogic literary gathering

Before participating in the literary gathering, I did not believe in myself. Since the gathering, I am more self-confident, I believe more in my possibilities because, from the outside, everybody has prejudices about us, and then you think that you are not able to do anything. Through reading these classics, listening to my fellow inmates and seeing what we are able to do, that they have respect for you, believe in you... And now in July, I'll probably be released on parole, and I want to register myself to get access to university through adult education. I would like to be a social worker and work in prisons to help other inmates. (Iona, female inmate participant in DLG)

Participation in Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs), an education program where inmates read universal classic literature, provided this particular inmate with the capacity to realize her dreams of becoming a social worker. The stigma of having been in prison had negatively diminished her self-esteem, and she underestimated her personal potential to return to society. She explains how participating in DLGs has had a direct effect on her realization that she is able to decide on her own biography. Iona is well aware of the pressures that she will face outside prison, but through the DLG, she has imagined another possible future for herself that involves moving away from relapse.

Iona's testimony is not an isolated case but is common among all inmates who are participating in DLGs in Spanish prisons. First, we conducted a case study in a penitentiary institution in the Basque Country. We demonstrated that the inmates who had participated in the DLG increased their possibility of social reintegration and redirected their lives once their imprisonment was over (Flecha, Garcia & Gomez, 2013). In this prior study, a longitudinal analysis was performed, and interviews were conducted with people who had already served their prison sentence and had been socially integrated from two to six years after at the time of the interview. The most relevant contribution of this first case study is the analysis of how participation in DLGs had affected the participants' later process of social reintegration. Thus, the main findings of the case study conducted in the Basque Country show that DLGs contributed to the promotion of the further social integration of prisoners. Drawing on this prior study and with the aim of determining whether the

results obtained in the DLG in a prison in the Basque Country were an isolated case or are transferable to other penitentiary contexts, the present case study was designed in a prison located in a different social context with different professional teams, organizational structures and inmates. Specifically, we have conducted communicative life stories and a focus group with female inmates participating in the DLG, in addition to in-depth interviews with volunteers who were involved in the development of the program. In addition, in the first case of the penitentiary institution in the Basque Country, the participants were men, whereas in the second case study in Catalonia, they were women. The results obtained in the case study conducted in Catalonia suggest that DLGs can be replicated; the evidence indicates that the female prisoners perceived that their participation in DLGs is also contributing to preparing them for and to facilitating their process of social reintegration.

### **Social Reintegration of Prisoners**

The need to improve the programs to support the social reintegration of prisoners is urgent and widely recognized by both researchers and policy-makers (Jacobs & Western, 2007; MacKenzie, 2000; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Cole, Smith and Dejong (2014) identify three models of incarceration: the custodial model, which is characterized by traditional custodial lines of securing the confinement of prisoners and punishment in the case of prisoners' misbehavior; the rehabilitative model, which emphasizes the goal of reforming the offender; and the reintegration model, which is linked to the structures and goals of community corrections. This latter model emphasizes the need to work with offenders' families and communities to develop strategies to ensure social reintegration once the prisoner is released.

Examining the international data on incarceration and prison population reveals that primarily the poor and men from ethnic minority backgrounds are incarcerated, with an increasing number of imprisoned women (Asberg & Renk, 2014; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2005). Incarceration is part of the invisible reality that such data hide. For instance, black prisoners comprise a large portion of young black unemployment—one-third of young black men who are not working are in prison, compared to

10% of unemployed young white males in the US (Western, 2002; Western & Pettit, 2005). Along these lines, many minority young men leaving prison face difficulties when searching for a job (Pager, 2007; Pager, Western & Sugie, 2009). In recent years, other authors have emphasized that noncitizens (the foreign-born population, both legal and undocumented) are one of the most vulnerable groups in the imprisonment system (Light, Massoglia & King, 2014). This overrepresentation of some of the most vulnerable groups in prison (i.e., ethnic minorities, or immigrant population) coexists with the growing presence of the ‘get tough’ policy (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Cullen, Fisher & Applegate, 2010), characterized by increasing punitive measures.

Turning to Europe, we do not find a very different picture. Although there is no unique pattern across countries, prisons are typically filled with minority groups with low educational levels. In the case of Spain, although during the economic recession the number of prisoners decreased (ACAIP, 2013), Spain continues to be one of the EU countries with the highest imprisonment rates, alongside Portugal, England and Wales (Cid, 2005). Following an in-depth analysis of the Spanish penitentiary system, Cid (2005) concludes that the use of imprisonment in Spain is excessive and that the duration of incarceration is longer than in other European countries. Moreover, the current legal framework does not support a practice based on rehabilitation. There is a real need to promote sustainable reintegration programs in prison and upon release because these are identified as one of the weaknesses of the Spanish penitentiary system (Cid, 2005). Research has illuminated some solutions. In our review, we have identified two main bodies of literature on effective measures that promote inmates’ social reintegration: first, the role played by educational activities inside the prison; second, the role of the community in supporting the reintegration process.

### **The Effect of Educational Activities inside Prison on the Subsequent Social Reintegration**

Abundant research has focused on showing how education can be an effective strategy in preparing inmates to transition to their communities. Petersilia (2003) notes that effective programs that

contribute to overcoming the challenges associated with reintegration after prison and improving the lives of incarcerated people by including an educational component tend to reduce recidivism. Casey and Jarman (2011) argue that penitentiary institutions should make special efforts to improving the educational levels of inmates to increase their possibility of social reintegration.

Furthermore, some authors have highlighted the growing importance of a ‘new accountability agenda’ (Gendreau, Listwan, Kuhns & Exum, 2014: 1081), which implies a greater level of responsibility of the prison population in their own process of reintegration. In their meta-analysis of proposals for intervention that effectively respond to these accountability-type policies, Gendreau and his colleagues (2014) highlight contingency management (CM) programs, which include different educational and vocational purposes among their target behaviors, such as increasing school performance, increasing participation in educational programs or increasing reading ability.

More effort should be oriented toward identifying the specific features that make these reintegration programs effective. For example, recent research has gathered data on the voices of prisoners regarding the factors that they regard as important for their social reintegration; among others, family support, certain types of friends and personal motivation to change are highlighted (Davis, Bahr & Ward, 2012). Studies conducted according to the ecological approach have emphasized that ‘context matters’ in several transitional programs from prison to society that aim to provide housing, employment or health (Wright, Pratt, Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2013). Nevertheless, Solum, Rengifo, Choi and Herrman (2013) highlight that studies with such an approach have omitted the effectiveness of some organizations (community and religious) in reducing crime in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Educational activities have been promoted not only by penitentiary institutions but also by other organizations that intervene inside prisons. Since the 1970s, libraries have been established in some prisons, either inside the facilities or as mobile libraries that periodically visit prisons. Vaccarino and Comrie (2010) observe and evaluate the use that prisoners made of these library services in New Zealand. The authors explain that reading practices opened up

new worlds and possibilities to prisoners; they argue that prisoners not only enjoyed and learned from the books but also had regular informal chats about the books that they were reading. Some prisoners highlight that librarians treated them as citizens, which they appreciated, and that the librarians were an encouraging force for them to continue reading and learning. Other studies analyze the implementation of reading and literacy programs in different correctional contexts (Clemente, Higgins & Sughrua, 2011; Guerra, 2012; Vacca, 2008). Their main results point to the relevance of interventions based on critical literacy, which not only positively impact on participants' literacy skills but also allow them to critically reflect on their life trajectory and future expectations.

All of the studies reviewed indicate that education can enhance prisoners' readiness to return to their communities not only by improving their skills and, thus, prospects in the labor market but also, beyond technicalities, by providing a more humanistic dimension that should be further explored.

### **The Role of the Community in the Transition from Prison to Social Reintegration**

The second strategy that has been identified in the specialized literature revolved around the role played by communities in supporting ex-convicts in the process of social reintegration. During imprisonment, actions focused on strengthening inmates' ties with their family and friends have been considered positive steps toward further social reintegration. In this sense, Visher and Travis (2011) remark that men and women returning to their communities from prison have high needs for connecting with others and that the most efficient programs are those that provide former prisoners strong community support networks and comprehensive services. In this regard, the most successful re-entry programs offer drug treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy, vocational education programs, employment training and job assistance and basic adult education. Additionally, we find restorative programs, which are primarily tasked with facilitating the inclusion of prisoners within the community's values (Hass & Saxon, 2012). However, as MacKenzie (2000) highlights, there is a need to explore further re-entry policies based on evidence of best practices.

Research that looks into the strengthening of community ties has also explored the transition from the prison to the community. Western (2008) recommends improving the transition from prison to society by strengthening ex-prisoners' ties with mainstream institutions. This proposal not only responds to normative values in trying to build a fairer society; it is also worth highlighting that increasing incarceration rates have financial consequences for society. Thus, investing in restorative justice also has two benefits: more social justice and fewer economic costs for society. In an effort to reverse this dynamic, rehabilitation, transitional employment, and housing programs have been explored and recommended. For instance, Jacobs and Western (2007) evaluate the ComALERT (Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together) program, which provides counseling for substance abuse treatment, employment and housing services in Kings County (New York). They conclude that the percentage of recidivism decreases and a high percentage of participants find jobs that allow them to live without criminal activity.

Furthermore, Visher and Travis (2003) examine the four main dimensions of the pathways from prison to returning to community: individual characteristics, family relationships, community contexts and state policies. In relation to the first, individual characteristics, many studies have focused on recidivism by predicting ex-prisoners' re-arrest, reconviction and re-incarceration. Significant contributions to this field have been made by Laub and Sampson (2001), who have researched individual criminal careers in depth by trying to answer the question of 'Why do they [criminal offenders] stop?' They identify that individual decisions of desistance from crime were related to an individual decision or to a motivating event, such as having a child, getting married, having a stable job, or having different social networks connected to these lifestyle changes. In terms of family relationships, Visher and Travis (2003) identify serious gaps in the research with respect to the analysis of the relationship with family ties both prior to prison and in the post-prison transition, in addition to the impact of family on the process of social reintegration of prisoners upon release. The third dimension involves the set of characteristics of the environment to which the former



prisoner returns. In this regard, some structural factors that may affect inmates' experience after release are highlighted, such as housing and labor opportunities or access to healthcare or substance abuse services (Harm & Phillips, 2001; Travis, Solomon & Waul, 2001; Western, Braga, Davies & Sirois, 2015). Beyond structural factors, some social features linked to satisfaction with the neighborhood, the existence of social networks, or the ability of the community to establish common goals are identified (Sampson, 2002). Finally, Visher and Travis (2003) highlight the impact of the existing public policies, which have a major influence on the trajectories and transitions of the prison population.

These myriad factors illuminate the complexity of the reintegration of prisoners into society from a communitarian perspective. Reintegration can only be achieved through a collaborative effort between the penal system and society at large. The process is recognized as being twofold: On the one hand, it implies supporting people in fulfilling their vital needs (housing, employment, and nutrition), and on the other hand, it implies supporting people to find ways of being accepted and not rejected by society. In terms of McNeill (2014), this implies broadening the conception of desistance, considering what he conceives as 'tertiary desistance', which is understood not only as a personal process but also as a social process related to the offender's sense of belonging to his/her community and the manner in which he/she is viewed by others. This perspective redirects responsibility because the burden is focused on restoring ex-convicts' responsibility and actions to society for what they have done. The motivation of every person to perform these actions is encouraged; prisoners should feel the need to participate in these programs and focus on restoring justice through social services work in the community.

## **Dialogic Communicative Acts: Interactions concerning Classic Literature that Promote Social Reintegration**

DLGs originated in the 1980s in the La Verneda-Sant Martí School for Adults in Barcelona (Sanchez, 1999), where illiterate participants started to meet to read and discuss classic works of literature. In DLGs, an environment characterized by respect for diversity and egalitarian dialogue is created in which all participants, regardless of their origin, cultural background or social position, feel free to share their vision of the text, nourished by their personal life experiences. The basis of DLGs is to share thoughts on classic literature. DLG participants agree on the book to be read. Once the book is chosen, every participant individually reads the pages agreed upon, selects at least one paragraph, and explains why he/she chose a certain idea. Then, all participants share their reflections on it. Since this first implementation, DLGs have spread to different educational levels (kindergarten, primary and secondary education, family training and penitentiary contexts). Throughout the years, DLGs have demonstrated their influence on the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (Soler, 2015).

The theory of acts informs the DLG, particularly the differentiation between dialogic interactions, which are communicative interactions that promote social inclusion, and power interactions, which lead to social exclusion (Searle & Soler, 2004). The role of the moderator is to reassure equity in the dialogue and thus to promote dialogic interactions. To ensure these dialogic interactions, it is necessary to meet four conditions (Soler & Flecha, 2010). The first condition is the inclusion of *verbal and non-verbal aspects*. Listening to others in DLGs is crucial. Respect is measured not only by participants' silence when someone is making a contribution but also by their corporeal attention and gestures. Listening and respect can be communicated by verbal (how an intervention is taken into account) and non-verbal language (the tone that is used, the expression). The second condition consists of the aim to reach a *consensus*. This aim does not involve reaching a consensus on the interpretation of the text; every participant has a different perspective, which

enriches the joint interpretation. The consensus is based on respecting the opinion of all participants, under the condition that their opinions respect the Human Rights Declaration. The third condition involves the *absence of coercion*. In the case of dialogic literary gatherings, no coercion regarding interpretation or speech is allowed among participants or the moderator. The fourth and final condition is *honesty*. The comments shared are about the book and are honest and sincere.

Last but not least, the influence of the social context on communicative acts should be acknowledged. The moderator should be aware of the power position that he or she holds because this role is socially considered a level of hierarchy that is different from that of the participants and should promote the prominence of the participants' interventions and give voice to those who tend to speak less. In some cases, the moderating role is passed among the participants so that each holds this responsibility at some point. Meeting all of these conditions is what characterizes the communicative acts in DLGs as dialogic.

The opportunities for reflection and dialogue that are generated within the DLG as a result of these dialogic interactions generate a favorable environment for 're-enchantment' and meaning-making among participants (Flecha, 2000). With the interactive and joint interpretation of literary classics, a more complex interpretation of individual and social processes is promoted, encouraging the ability of participants to better understand their lives and find new paths for transformation (Soler, 2015). In this sense, the implementation of the DLG in the prison context is an opportunity to promote among prisoners a process of personal and social change that is in line with the need to recover the sense of community belonging (McNeill, 2014; Western et al, 2015).

Exploring such opportunities for personal and social transformation (which correspond to the transformative dimension that is discussed in the Data analysis section) was the aim of this study on the replicability of the DLG in the prison context.

## Methods and Data

The communicative methodology of research (Gomez, 2014) was employed in this study. One of the most relevant premises of this methodological framework is the construction of dialogic knowledge based on the contrast of scientific knowledge and the contributions of the research subjects' life experiences (Gomez, 2014). The data reported here come from a case study of a DLG in prisons held for one year, starting in May 2012. The DLG is part of the range of education programs developed in a specific unit for female inmates with substance abuse problems in a prison in Catalonia. All inmates in the unit are allowed to participate in these education programs. According to the case study, the number of inmate participants in the DLG changed over the time period (due to changes in internal placements or the end of their incarceration). However, 10 participants were permanently involved in the selected DLG. 8 of the 10 participants voluntarily participated in the communicative life stories, and 2 preferred not to be interviewed. Participants included 3 young women with an age range between 25 and 35 years old (2 Roma and 1 Moroccan) and 5 older women with an age range between 40 and 55 years old (2 Roma, 1 Moroccan and 2 Spanish). None of them had received basic education, and the majority had difficulties reading and writing. The 8 communicative life stories helped the researchers gather rich knowledge from the participants about the effect that the DLG had on their personal process of social reintegration. In gathering the life stories, the following themes were covered: the participants' personal views on the DLG, the elements of the activity that were noteworthy, the changes that the participants perceived in themselves and in their peers, and the participants' expectations for the future. To complete the analysis of the effect of dialogic literary gatherings on inmates' reintegration process, 2 in-depth interviews were included to collect the testimonies of the volunteers who moderated the gatherings. These volunteers were a university professor and a PhD student at the University of Barcelona. The in-depth interviews with the volunteers provided an overview of the inmates' personal transformations due to their participation in the DLG. Finally, 1 communicative focus group was held with 6 inmates. The group size was

determined by the number of women who decided to participate. This focus group created the space for an interpersonal dialogue that promoted collective reflection on shared experiences. In particular, a strong awareness of the effect of the gatherings on the participants' lives was afforded through the collective analysis. The use of different techniques for data collection allowed for triangulation of the information.

According to the communicative methodology – and the ethical recommendations on how to conduct research with human beings – an information process was developed to ensure informed consent and the ethical use of the data. Thus, the researchers also obtained consent from the institutional representatives, who gave their consent to the research on the condition that each participant explicitly gave her personal consent. All of the women gave their written consent for participation and recording. Both the communicative life stories and the focus groups were audio recorded for further analysis. The research team was responsible for ensuring the ethical process, guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants and rigorously codifying the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the premises of the communicative approach, in our analysis, we have considered two fundamental dimensions: the exclusionary dimension and the transformative dimension. The exclusionary dimension involves the barriers to social transformation, whereas the transformative dimension corresponds to the elements that create pathways to overcome these barriers, enabling social transformation. In this paper, we focus on the transformative dimension, that is, the aspects of DLGs that promote the process of the inmates' social integration. Specifically, three categories of analysis were defined to identify the results that enhance the social reintegration of inmates: a) the effect of reflection on participants' personal and collective biographies, b) the effect of dialogue on participants' capacity for personal and social transformation, and c) participants' desire for change. Pseudonyms were used to guarantee the anonymity of the data. The data were coded and categorized

using MAXQDA software. Nonetheless, we should note that we did not conduct interviews with inmates who had been released; thus, we focus only on those who were still incarcerated.

## **Results**

In this section, the main results of our study are presented. First, we show how the DLG allowed the participants to engage in a process of critical reflection in relation to their biographies and their stays in prison. Second, we discuss the opportunities for personal and social transformation generated as a result of dialogue among the participants. Third, we show the ways in which participation in the DLG aroused the desire for change among the participants.

### **Effect of Reflection on the Participants' Personal and Collective Biographies**

The dialogue-based reflection component of the DLG encourages a deep awareness of the participants' personal and collective biographies, which is known to lead to personal transformations in the life trajectories of the inmates. Along these lines, Iona, a young Roma woman who had participated in the gatherings since the beginning, explained the effect that seeing one of her mates (Sherezade) reading Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* had on her:

I got to know her in 2011... and we only spoke a few times... After three days, they caught her, and they brought her here to the penitentiary institution, and I had a completely different vision of her from what I have now – like from the streets, a bit aggressive, a bit cocky in her words... And when I saw her here in (therapeutic unit), and I saw her one year later in (therapeutic unit), she instilled respect in me; I didn't approach her because I saw her a bit... but here in the (therapeutic unit), when I saw her, and with *Mother Courage*, I remember that once, reading, we had done it in groups, we had been reading, and I, to a certain point, was a beginner; when I still didn't follow the...

Researcher: ...the gathering...

I saw her marking and reading aloud and I, I said, ‘Come on, let’s go’, but no, no... and she said, ‘No, no, because I like it’ (...) I was very motivated by the change in Sherezade because she instilled even more respect in me... if she could do it, I also had to make it.

In her life story, Iona explained how Sherezade was considered a person who did not respect the norms and who was confrontational, but because of her involvement in the reading group, Iona saw Sherezade preferring to stay in the DLG to read instead of going to the courtyard. This observation made Iona join the gathering and engage in the same process as Sherezade. This story illustrates that dialogic interactions can promote a change in perspective and motivation without coercion. These women decided to engage in the DLG not only because it was open to everybody but also because of the climate of egalitarian dialogue, which was unusual in the institution.

Reflection on one’s life and actions, which is enhanced by discussions in the DLG, promotes the recovery of key interactions from the past that may become a positive reference for participants. In her life story, Maria (older Moroccan inmate) recalls interactions with her uncle in which he recommended that she spend time reading. Participation in the DLG made Maria reassess her uncle’s opinion on reading:

[Referring to the DLG] Yes, it is indeed very – it can be very determinative of the future or no (...) For me, it has been determining because, as I said, reading enriches, and it reminds me of, very much of one of my father’s brothers, my godfather, who always told me not to waste time fighting but to spend it reading.

Furthermore, reading and discussing the stories and themes raised in classic literature, which entail very human dilemmas and passions, promoted the participants’ reflection on their own personal biographies, enhancing constructive self-criticism and fostering values that were blurred or lost during their criminal trajectory. In this sense, Sherezade reflected on her mistakes and was

explicit in rejecting them. She placed more value on studying and being a role model for her children:

I truly studied, right? In some moment of my life, but when I started in the bad life, I forgot all the books. And now (with the gathering), well, I realized that it is necessary to feed the brain; you can't just put it on hold because it will grow old, and you learn and you feel much better about yourself; and I can also take it as an example for my children so that they read.

In her interview, Silvia, a PhD student involved in the gatherings as a volunteer, stressed some of the issues that had emerged in discussions between the participants in the DLG: '(...) separation or the loss of a child, the need to resist temptation, the importance of values, the challenge of raising a child, the ability to forgive, the aesthetic sense, solidarity and compassion, the strength of love....'

Simultaneously, reflection on the collective biography is promoted due to the opportunities in the DLG for dialogue about the social conditions of incarcerated people. The gathering further promotes the awareness of how they can redirect their personal and social trajectories by counting on their own personal circumstances and choices. As Sofia put it:

Everything in classic literature educates you when learning, and even more with people like us, who did not have a proper education, who did not have parents... who, for whatever reason ... we could not enjoy this for whatever reason at that time, and it is so nice, learning is so nice, but it is good to learn, it is very good to learn. This is learning, and as you move up in the ranking, you set short-term goals with specific goals, and at the end, you make a career. A person from the lowest rank can make it and reach university studies. I will have this as a goal, and I know that I will make it.

Through the dialogic interactions that emerge from the debate on classic literature, the DLG also becomes a space for respecting and understanding the trajectories of diverse cultural groups. The cultural and ethnic diversity of the participants enriched the collective interpretation of the text



while promoting a deeper understanding of the different cultural perspectives. As Maria explains,

(...) But, well since there are so many races, or to say it right, ethnicities, you reach the conclusion that we end up debating what each of us believes, right? And even if you don't agree, you have to respect it because we all are human beings and we are people, right? And especially, debating it is very good because maybe you don't know about it and say, why do they do so? Right? You can get to ask yourself, why do they do that? To me, this is weird... and they give you their conclusion, and you say, well, they are right; whether you agree with them or not is another issue, but it is very good.

As noted above, one of the conditions for dialogic communicative acts is respect (Soler & Flecha, 2010). In the DLG, listening to others and respecting their opinions allow participants to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and life experiences, and this atmosphere supports learning from each other. In a globalized society in which professionals are required to be able to work in culturally diverse teams, listening to others and respecting diverse cultures and worldviews is a fundamental competence. In this regard, DLGs promote the development of this ability.

### **Effect of Dialogue on the Participants' Confidence in their Capacity for Personal and Social Transformation**

The participants' recognition of their ability to generate positive change in their lives is also developed in the gatherings. This recognition relates to the dialogues, which expand the horizons of the inmates, who contemplate new possibilities in different dimensions of their lives for themselves and for their families. As Maria said, 'Regarding the issue of personal transformation, yes, because it opens up many, well, it opens a window to a world that you didn't know before.'

Maria explained how the gatherings illuminate possibilities that they did not contemplate before and how the new realization enhanced their capacity for personal transformation. The following quote shows that the interactions established in the gatherings facilitated the acquisition of

new communicative competencies (such as increasing their vocabulary or changing their behavioral patterns) and highlights the relevance of using these competencies outside the gatherings.

Since we have this little space, right? We can debate. (...) We each of us debate what she thinks, always respecting the turns; and you learn new behavioral patterns as well, okay? This is very important for life and to also focus these patterns outside, the vocabulary, as I say, the turns, to not always interrupt the person who is speaking.

The capacity for personal transformation seems to be conditioned by the social interactions that occur inside the prison. The inmates stressed that their ability to improve their lives is enhanced by the communication established in the gathering, where everyone develops high expectations of each other's capacity to generate a transformation and make a difference. Iona explained how having only one person believe in you facilitates the process of change. In this sense, the inmates' confidence in their ability to escape exclusion and have a satisfactory life is promoted by the climate of the DLG:

It also makes it possible for each of us to freely think and say what we think, without the feeling of being judged, without the feeling of being considered strange or incomprehension (...) those who have suggested the gathering have in mind that, in freedom, there are prejudices that there are people without education who don't dare to open a book, a work, or classic literature, and when you see people who know that you can do so, who believe in you and give you the opportunity to believe in this, that's when you get enthusiastic, right? And you say, well, if this person says that you can do it, at least you try.

The confidence created in the DLG helps the participants feel more secure and improve their self-concept, something that affects them in spaces beyond the DLG. This improved self-confidence enables them to participate more, believe more in themselves and transform their experiences and their social relations, including their relations with the correctional officers. Iona says:

Yes, much more self-confident... at least I, because before my voice was shaking when I had to speak, right? In the gatherings, right? And in activities where you have to speak or debate, in

activities such as the gathering, one gets unblocked and comes out of one's shell and starts to believe, to listen to each other, to get confidence in what one says, in what one feels, and you say it in some way. Before, I could not do that, and now, I can even communicate better with the public employees.

Participation in the gatherings also encourages the transformation of personal relationships and thus of other central spaces in the women's lives. In this regard, the participating mothers wanted to share what they learned in the DLG with their children afterwards. According to Mabel, one of the participants in the focus group, one of the inmates shared her wish to start reading classic universal literature with her six-year-old daughter, who is waiting for her outside of the prison, so that the young girl can also access the best works of classic culture. 'One peer, from here as well, who participates in the gatherings told us one day that she wanted to give her daughter *The Odyssey* as a present.'

It was also possible to observe that the gathering had opened a door to consider new educational paths, such as going back to school and finishing academic degrees. The debates on classic literature enabled them to reconsider alternatives; what had been unimaginable became possible in their minds. Silvia explained the participants' reconsideration of their educational trajectories as a result of the changes produced by the DLG:

[...] the gathering has opened up a new perspective... the effect of reading and debating classic literature, the best ones, in an environment such as a penitentiary institution, has 'empowered' them ... some of the participants have asked us for information about ways to start their education again in the future, to take the test to enter university....

### **Participants' Desire for Change**

The scientific literature highlights the desire for change as one of the elements that promotes the social reintegration of prisoners (Davis, Bahr & Ward, 2012). According to Elster (1999), emotions

are essential in a subject's actions, and in this case, passion and the desire for something are the main engines that drive the pursuit of change. In this regard, the inmates acknowledge the motivating force that the DLG has evoked in them and express their willingness to extend this opportunity to many others in the same situation. They were well aware of the difficulties in terms of social acceptance that they might face once they left prison, and for the same reason, they viewed the DLG as an activity that could help them develop a pleasure for reading and learning, something that is socially valued, during communicative focus groups. Virtudes, a Roma woman, said:

Yes, because there are people in the prisons and in penitentiary institutions for minors who are people with many prejudices who are labeled, people who don't believe in themselves, who don't feel able because society also rejects them due to the lack of education, the lack of knowledge, the lack of, you know? Well, it has motivated us, and we have started to enjoy reading. As we have been involved in reading, in the gathering, it would be very interesting if these people had the same opportunity to try; at least, having the opportunity to try is important.

In addition, because the gathering facilitates the sharing of reading, and when this occurs, all participants' contributions are valued, it increases the participants' motivation to continue reading and to make progress. For the first time, many of them gain a positive image of themselves. As they put it, the day of the gathering is a special day because they manage to debate without having arguments. This occurs because of the inclusion and acknowledgement of all voices. Maria said:

[...] but it is a different day for us in here in prison; it is a pleasant day, happy because we all reach a conclusion; we debate with no risk to having a discussion, right? Afterwards, you have dinner, and you leave with the satisfaction of, well, look, I have read, and you see women as I say, right?, who don't know how to read, and they make an effort, and they also debate, and it is a different day inside the prison.

Silvia, a volunteer with the DLG, agrees on this point and in her interview reflects on how this desire for change among the participants motivated by the DLG became visible in

their attitude toward the activity:

Changes have also been extended to the quality of their contributions; you can tell that they are more cheerful, and even more beautiful! Really, it's amazing... They themselves discuss in informal conversations what the DLG has meant and is meaning for them and how much has changed them.

Some inmates state that their way of communicating in the DLG should be the way that they communicate in their everyday lives outside the prison. The participants observe that communication procedures are central in the current labor market and society, and for this reason, they state that the gatherings also help them practice communicating more professionally. Sherezade said:

[...] A group activity respecting the turns, sharing ideas, thoughts, different perspectives, and thus, well, I don't know, we become educated for the day after tomorrow, to know how to stay, and if there is something we don't know, we can look for it or ask, and this is what we try, right?, to start practicing here [...]

Another element that was identified by the participants was the desire to change their lives for the better once they were released from prison and to change the exclusionary routines that led them to prison. Sofia, an older Roma woman, stressed that participation in the DLG opened her mind and fostered her ability to make the changes that she wanted to make in her present and future lives:

In all this learning, this improving of myself, it fills me, it fascinates me, and I want to learn; and the gathering, the classics, well, it's a dialogue, the way of speaking, of educating me, the way of expressing myself. It educates my mind; I see everything differently. I can get much further; with this, I can get much further. And this is quite a good challenge to continue life, outside on the streets.

Last but not least, this desire for learning and change is also present in the participants' wish to continue participating in the DLG once they finish their incarceration. They are very aware of their

need to have a role model once they are out of prison, and for this reason, they have often asked the volunteers where they can go to continue participating in the DLG. This space has opened up the possibility for them to enter the processes of transformation, learning, and cultural development that they do not want to lose when they leave prison. Lucía, one of the volunteers, explains this analysis as follows:

One of the things that they ask us most is whether they can continue in any gathering when they finish their time in the penitentiary institution. They tell us that it is very important to them to continue participating in a DLG to continue their learning, to get to know people, and to continue reading universal classics.

### **Conclusion**

The question of how to better prepare inmates for their social reintegration upon release remains open. Therefore, further research must be conducted to provide sound evidence to effectively address this challenge. The research reported in this article supports the idea that DLGs have been identified as a potential intervention to be developed inside prison and may positively influence the process of social reintegration. The main findings of our study indicate at least three specific features of DLGs that may be transferable to different penitentiary institutions and promote positive personal and social gains among the participants.

First, our study shows the impact of the DLG in creating opportunities for dialogue and communication among participants on the basis of dialogic interactions. Despite the efforts of many educational programs to promote genuine dialogue and interaction among participants, dialogic-based education that ensures equality and mutual respect is still neglected, particularly for the most vulnerable populations (Soler, 2015). By reducing the predominance of power interactions, DLGs generate a dialogic space that seems to enable women to express their views and feelings, offering the possibility to generate new relationships inside the prison (Severance, 2005). In particular, these

relationships develop through sharing profound discussions and debates about their past, personal lives with a transformative approach that increases their expectations and self-confidence. These women develop a more critical vision of their lives and of their collective trajectories by engaging in dialogic interactions among them and with outsiders, such as the volunteers who were involved in the development of the DLG.

Second, access to the best works of classic literature has been a critical element in the DLG. Although providing libraries in prison makes inmates feel like citizens (Vaccarino & Comrie, 2010), offering the opportunity to read these types of books means taking them seriously. These universal stories have opened a new door for inmates to go in depth into their own personal and collective biographies, to be critical of themselves and to analyze the possibilities of change. In this sense, the DLG brings to penitentiary institutions a type of education that is aligned with social justice (Prilleltensky, 2014) and transformative learning (Gitlin, 2014). The uniqueness of reading and discussing the best literary creations relies on the possibility of breaking down the cultural barriers and stereotypes that inmates prominently suffer. For some inmates, being challenged by these texts in the gatherings was a driving force for changing their academic identities to visualize themselves as being capable of continuing studying and earning a degree, which would strengthen their social reintegration process (Casey & Jarman, 2011; Petersilia, 2003).

Overall, the main findings illuminate the positive gains of implementing DLGs in prison and their implications for the development of educational programs that may improve inmates' lives in prison and promote their social reintegration. These results are relevant to the current challenges faced by prisons in Spain and Europe due to their need to generate educational interventions that enhance the sense of agency to transform one's life trajectory, strengthening the inmates' beliefs in their own abilities and their capacity to make personal choices and decisions to develop new life trajectories. Without denying the power of the social structure and its impact on inmates' lives, the transformative experiences analyzed in this article counteract determinism and allow for a glimpse of

hope for their future. The fact that DLGs contribute to improving literacy and oral skills while fostering a sense of agency and the desire for change among participants makes it a particularly suitable program for working with inmates when they are in prison as a means of equipping them to regain their sense of belonging to the community upon release (Western et al, 2015).

The lessons learned from this case study reveal that DLGs have been successfully replicated in another prison, in another context and in a female context. Despite the different features of the DLG in the penitentiary institution in Catalonia and in the DLG in the Basque Country, similar results have been obtained. This similarity supports the premise of the transferability of DLGs to different institutions and contexts and to different populations coping with similar challenging life circumstances (i.e., high-risk youths).

### **Limitations of the Study and Further Research**

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. On the one hand, we recognize the small sample of participants involved in the study. The reason more inmates were not involved in the DLG involves the structure of the therapeutic unit where the study was developed. Due to changes in the internal placements of prisoners in the unit, it was not possible to have a larger sample of participants who met the criteria of being permanently involved in the gathering during the time of the study. On the other hand, the fact that we were able to collect the voices of participants who are in prison has enabled us to achieve great depth regarding their views on the impact of the DLG while in prison; however, we have not collected the voices of the participants once they had already left the prison. Whether DLGs will facilitate the social reintegration of the participating women in our study is a question that we have not been able to answer here. From our previous study, we continue to have contact with some of the inmates who are fully integrated into society ten years after being released. However, the long-term effect on their life courses is an unknown question that should be explored in further research. Further research on this particular long-term effect would enable us to



compare these results with those obtained in the research on the DLG in the penitentiary institution in the Basque Country. This comparison would illuminate how participation in dialogic literary gatherings can help consolidate the process of social reintegration once an inmate is released from prison. Advancing knowledge and understanding in unveiling similar processes of personal and social transformation justifies all of the effort.

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