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Authored by:- Sambhrant Yadav, Research Scholar, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

THE CLASSROOM AND THE COURTROOM: INTERSECTIONS OF EQUITY, POLICY, AND REFORM IN INDIA

Abstract

Education and criminal justice are often treated as parallel policy domains in India, yet their intersections are deeply consequential. This paper examines how inequities in the classroom can shape pathways to the courtroom, while also exploring how criminal justice reforms employ education as a tool for rehabilitation. Drawing on theoretical perspectives of social reproduction, critical pedagogy, and restorative justice, the study situates the Indian experience within global debates on the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The analysis focuses on three interlinked dimensions: first, how exclusionary practices in schools, through language policies, caste-based discrimination, and punitive discipline, can perpetuate cycles of marginalization and delinquency; second, how education within correctional settings, particularly under the Juvenile Justice Act and prison education programs, is positioned as central to rehabilitation and reintegration; and third, how key policy frameworks such as the Right to Education Act and the National Education Policy intersect with criminal justice reforms in promoting equity. By bridging the classroom and the courtroom, the paper argues for an equity-centered framework that recognizes education as both a preventive and

reformatory mechanism. Such an approach highlights the need for interdisciplinary reforms that integrate pedagogy, policy, and justice in shaping India's future.

Keywords: Education, School-to-Prison Pipeline, Equity, Juvenile Justice and Policy

Introduction

In India, education and criminal justice are largely treated as separate domains within policy and practice. Education is conventionally viewed as a developmental sector concerned with learning, literacy, and human capital formation, while criminal justice is framed as a matter of law, order, and security. Yet, their intersections are both profound and consequential. Schools, as the first major institutional sites of socialization, do not merely transmit knowledge but actively shape children's life trajectories. When these spaces are inclusive and empowering, they can prevent cycles of marginalization by creating pathways of dignity, opportunity, and equity. However, when educational spaces reproduce inequality through rigid language policies, caste- or class-based exclusion, or punitive disciplinary practices, they risk criminalizing vulnerability rather than alleviating it. The result is that marginalization in the classroom may often find its extension in the courtroom, a phenomenon globally discussed as the "*school-to-prison pipeline*" (Skiba et al., 2002). While this concept has been extensively examined in the United States and parts of Europe, its relevance in the Indian context requires critical attention, particularly given the layered complexities of caste, tribe, region, gender, and language (Shah, 2001; Kisana, 2020).

If the classroom represents a starting point of opportunity or exclusion, the courtroom represents a site where the state adjudicates on justice, discipline, and rehabilitation. Criminal justice reforms in India increasingly recognize the role of education in both rehabilitation and reintegration. Evidence from global studies indicates that prison education significantly reduces recidivism and supports successful reintegration (Davis et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2020). In India, education in prisons, juvenile reform homes, and correctional facilities is no longer seen as an optional welfare add-on but as central to dignity and rehabilitation (Pandey, 2017). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act (2015), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) reveal overlapping commitments where the state negotiates questions of punishment, discipline, and reintegration. Yet, policy and practice remain fragmented, with education on one side and

justice on the other. Examining their intersections offers a richer understanding of how equity can be advanced not just in theory but in lived experience. This is particularly urgent in India, where children and young people from marginalized communities are overrepresented both among school dropouts and among juveniles in conflict with the law (NCRB, 2022).

Table: Marginalized School Dropouts and Juvenile Offenders in India

<i>Category</i>	Dropout Rate/Data
<i>Dalit children (elementary)</i>	51%
<i>National average (elementary)</i>	37%
<i>Dalit/Adivasi/Muslim girls (adolescents)</i>	Up to 64%
<i>Juvenile offenders: family income < ₹25,000</i>	55.6%
<i>Juvenile offenders: illiterate or with primary education</i>	53%
<i>Juveniles in conflict with the law (16-18 yrs)</i>	76.2% (2021 NCRB)
<i>Juvenile offenders: boys</i>	99%

Source: International Dalit Solidarity Network, Hindustan Times, Rural India Online, and Factly, respectively.

This paper, therefore, argues that education must be understood as both a preventive and reformative mechanism in the broader agenda of criminal justice reform. By bridging the classroom and the courtroom, it seeks to uncover the ways in which educational practices and policies contribute to criminalization or rehabilitation, the ways in which criminal justice reforms incorporate education as a tool for equity, and the lessons that can be drawn for India’s reform trajectory. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and restorative justice (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012), the paper situates the Indian experience within wider global debates on equity and justice. Ultimately, it contends that education is not peripheral but central to reimagining criminal justice reform in India, and that only an integrated approach, where pedagogy, policy, and justice converge, can deliver a truly equitable future.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in four complementary theoretical perspectives that together illuminate the intersections of education, equity, and criminal justice reform in India: social reproduction theory, restorative justice frameworks, critical pedagogy, and a rights-based approach.

Social Reproduction Theory

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction posits that schools are not neutral spaces but institutions that reproduce existing social hierarchies by privileging certain forms of cultural and linguistic capital while devaluing others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the Indian context, inequities related to caste, class, and language often determine who succeeds in educational spaces and who is excluded. This exclusion can contribute to pathways of vulnerability that increase the likelihood of children entering the juvenile justice system. By applying social reproduction theory, this paper examines how educational practices can unintentionally reinforce structural inequalities that mirror patterns of marginalization within the criminal justice system.

Restorative Justice Frameworks

Restorative justice emphasizes repairing harm, restoring relationships, and reintegrating offenders into the community rather than prioritizing punishment (Zehr, 2002). Within schools, restorative practices seek to replace zero-tolerance disciplinary policies with dialogue and accountability, reducing the risk of criminalization for minor infractions (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). In correctional settings, education becomes a core restorative practice that supports rehabilitation and reintegration. This framework provides a lens to analyse how education can function as a tool of restoration in both classrooms and courtrooms.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's notion of critical pedagogy views education as a site of either emancipation or oppression, depending on whether it empowers learners to question and transform their realities or merely reproduces dominant ideologies (Freire, 1970). In the context of criminal justice reform, critical pedagogy underscores the transformative potential of prison education and juvenile rehabilitation programs. It also problematizes schooling practices that silence marginalized voices, making them complicit in cycles of exclusion and criminalization.

Rights-Based Approach

Finally, a rights-based approach situates education as a fundamental human right intertwined with the right to dignity and justice (Sen, 2009; United Nations, 1948). In India, this perspective is reflected in the Right to Education Act (2009), which guarantees free and compulsory education, and in the Juvenile Justice Act (2015), which mandates rehabilitation and reintegration through education. By framing education as both a preventive and reformative right, the rights-based approach bridges policy commitments with ethical imperatives, underscoring the need for an integrated equity framework that connects pedagogy and justice. Together, these frameworks allow this paper to analyze the classroom–courtroom nexus in India as a dynamic space where exclusion and opportunity, punishment and rehabilitation, oppression and emancipation intersect.

3. Education as Prevention: The School-to-Prison Pipeline in the Indian Context

The metaphor of the “school-to-prison pipeline” has become a powerful framework for understanding how educational policies and practices can funnel marginalized students from classrooms into criminal justice systems. Originally conceptualized in the United States to critique zero-tolerance disciplinary measures, racial disproportionality in school punishments, and the overrepresentation of minorities in prisons (Skiba et al., 2002), the framework resonates in India in distinct ways. While India does not explicitly use the term, many systemic practices within schools reproduce vulnerability and exclusion, creating trajectories that increase the likelihood of young people, particularly from marginalized communities, entering the juvenile justice system.

Zero-tolerance and punitive discipline in schools

Globally, research has shown that zero-tolerance policies, where minor infractions result in suspensions, expulsions, or police referrals, contribute significantly to student criminalization (Kupchik, 2010). In India, although formal zero-tolerance regimes are less prevalent, punitive discipline remains embedded in educational practice. Corporal punishment, despite being legally prohibited under the Right to Education Act (2009), continues in many schools, disproportionately affecting children from Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Nair, 2005). Harsh disciplinary practices often alienate students rather than reintegrating them, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, and eventual dropout. This creates a pathway in which disciplinary exclusion functions as a precursor to social exclusion, increasing contact with law enforcement systems.

Language, caste, and economic exclusion as hidden drivers of criminalization

Beyond formal discipline, structural inequities within Indian classrooms, particularly those linked to language, caste, and poverty, act as hidden drivers of exclusion. Schools that prioritize dominant languages such as English or Hindi often marginalize children who speak tribal or regional languages, diminishing their sense of belonging and success (Kisana, 2020). Similarly, caste-based discrimination persists in subtle and overt forms, with Dalit and Adivasi children often stereotyped as “troublesome” or “unfit,” reinforcing stigmatization that may follow them into encounters with the justice system (Shah, 2001). Economic deprivation compounds these disadvantages: inadequate resources, irregular attendance, and poor performance create cycles where marginalized children are labelled as failures or

delinquents rather than supported as learners. These exclusionary dynamics in the classroom mirror the biases that mark India's criminal justice system.

Dropout rates, child labor, and pathways into juvenile delinquency

One of the most direct links between education and criminalization in India lies in the high rates of school dropout. According to the Ministry of Education's Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE, 2021–22), dropout rates remain significant at the secondary level, particularly among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged groups. Dropouts often face limited livelihood opportunities and are more vulnerable to child labor, trafficking, or petty criminal activity (Saxena, 2005). Juvenile Crime Statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022) confirm that a majority of juveniles in conflict with the law come from families with low educational attainment or high dropout histories. Thus, the absence of sustained educational engagement emerges as a strong predictor of juvenile delinquency, making school retention a crucial preventive tool.

Comparative global scholarship vs. Indian realities

The Indian case also invites comparison with global scholarship on the school-to-prison pipeline. In the United States, studies highlight the disproportionate targeting of Black and Latino students under punitive policies (Wald & Losen, 2003), while in the UK, exclusionary practices disproportionately affect working-class and minority ethnic youth (Gillborn, 2008). While India shares similarities in the overrepresentation of marginalized communities, its dynamics are further complicated by caste, tribal identities, and language hierarchies. Unlike Western contexts, where school policing and surveillance are central concerns, in India, the drivers are structural inequities and systemic neglect rather than overt criminalization within schools. This suggests that while the metaphor of the "pipeline" is instructive, Indian realities demand a contextualized interpretation that centers caste, class, language, and regional disparities. In sum, schools in India can either serve as protective spaces that reduce vulnerability to criminalization or as sites of exclusion that exacerbate it. Understanding the school-to-prison pipeline in the Indian context highlights the urgent need for equity-oriented educational reforms that treat prevention not as an external law-and-order measure but as an intrinsic function of inclusive schooling.

4. Education within Criminal Justice Reform

While exclusion from education often accelerates pathways into criminalization, access to education within the justice system can become a powerful instrument of rehabilitation and social reintegration. Globally and within India, criminal justice reforms increasingly recognize that incarceration without education reinforces cycles of marginalization, whereas providing literacy, skills, and critical learning opportunities can reduce recidivism and foster equity.

Juvenile Justice Act: role of education in rehabilitation

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, places a strong emphasis on education as a rehabilitative tool for children in conflict with the law. The Act mandates that juveniles should not merely be punished but must be provided opportunities for reformation through access to schooling, vocational training, and counselling (Choudhury, 2016). Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Care Institutions thus serve as spaces where education becomes central to rehabilitation rather than peripheral. However, in practice, resource constraints and uneven implementation often mean that the rehabilitative mandate is weakly fulfilled, with many children exiting institutions without meaningful educational gains (Sharma, 2020). Nevertheless, the Act's provisions mark an important shift from punitive to reformatory orientations.

Prison education programs in India: literacy, vocational training, and higher education

Adult prisons in India have also increasingly integrated education as part of correctional reform. Several states run prison schools that provide basic literacy and numeracy programs, vocational training (such as tailoring, carpentry, and agriculture), and in some cases, access to secondary and higher education (Rao, 2018). The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) have collaborated with prison departments to offer continuing education programs, allowing incarcerated individuals to pursue academic qualifications (Chaurasia, 2021). Evaluations suggest that such initiatives not only improve employability but also enhance self-esteem and reduce disciplinary infractions within prisons. Still, participation remains limited, with infrastructural deficits and stigma continuing to hinder scalability.

Comparative evidence: Scandinavian models, U.S. prison education reforms, etc.

Comparative international experiences demonstrate that robust prison education programs significantly reduce recidivism. Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Denmark adopt a “normalization” model, where prison education mirrors mainstream schooling, with curricula tailored to inmates’ needs (Pratt, 2008). This reflects a belief that education fosters reintegration into society rather than perpetuating cycles of exclusion. In the United States, despite a punitive tradition, reforms such as the Second Chance Pell Program have expanded access to higher education in prisons, showing measurable reductions in reoffending (Davis et al., 2013). These global examples illustrate how education, when structurally embedded in correctional systems, can shift criminal justice from retribution to rehabilitation.

Digital education and open universities in correctional settings

The digital revolution is reshaping the possibilities of prison education. In India, partnerships with open universities like IGNOU have increasingly leveraged digital platforms to offer distance education within correctional settings (IGNOU, 2022). Pilot projects involving e-learning modules, video lectures, and secure digital classrooms allow inmates to overcome the limitations of in-person instruction. Such programs also align with the National Education Policy 2020’s vision of technology-enabled learning and inclusivity. Yet challenges remain, including limited digital infrastructure, security concerns, and uneven digital literacy among inmates (Kumar, 2021). Despite these constraints, digital education offers a transformative pathway for democratizing access to knowledge and aligning prison education with 21st-century skills.

In sum, embedding education within criminal justice reform is not merely an act of benevolence but a structural necessity for equity and rehabilitation. From the Juvenile Justice Act to prison education programs and digital innovations, the trajectory suggests a slow but significant recognition of education as a right and a reformatory tool. Comparative evidence further underscores that where education is prioritized, criminal justice systems are more humane, effective, and socially restorative.

5. Policy Intersections in India

The intersections between education and criminal justice reforms in India become most visible when examining policy frameworks. While education policies emphasize universal access, inclusion, and equity, criminal justice policies aim at discipline, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The challenge lies in harmonizing these agendas so that children and adults in

conflict with the law are not treated as marginal to educational rights but as central subjects of policy concern.

Right to Education (2009) and its implications for juvenile/at-risk children

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), established education as a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14 years. Although not explicitly framed in terms of criminal justice, its mandate has direct implications for juvenile and at-risk populations. Ensuring enrolment, preventing dropouts, and prohibiting corporal punishment address many of the structural drivers of criminalization (Ramachandran, 2015). Yet, implementation gaps remain stark: many children in observation homes or from marginalized communities fall through the cracks, with limited monitoring of their access to quality education (Srivastava, 2019). Thus, while the RTE offers a preventive framework, its lack of integration with juvenile justice systems limits its transformative potential.

National Education Policy (2020): inclusion, equity, and second-chance education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 expands the equity agenda by emphasizing inclusion of disadvantaged groups, reducing dropout rates, and creating flexible learning pathways. It's called for "second-chance education" for school dropouts and non-traditional learners is particularly relevant for children and youth who intersect with the juvenile justice system (NEP, 2020). The policy also highlights vocational education and digital learning, which could be extended into correctional spaces to support rehabilitation. However, the NEP stops short of explicitly connecting its equity vision to criminal justice, leaving the task of integration to state governments and correctional institutions.

Correctional reforms, prison modernization, and rehabilitation policy

Parallel to education policy, India's correctional reform initiatives, including the Model Prison Manual (2016) and ongoing prison modernization schemes, emphasize rehabilitation and re-socialization. Education, skill training, and cultural activities are integral components of these frameworks (Bedi, 2016). The Model Prison Manual explicitly recommends collaborations with open universities and vocational institutes, recognizing that reintegration requires both literacy and employable skills. Yet, the prison system's chronic underfunding, overcrowding, and punitive culture often undermine the rehabilitative vision, making education a low-priority intervention rather than a systemic right (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Where policies converge and where they conflict

The convergence of education and criminal justice policy in India lies in their shared rhetoric of equity, inclusion, and rehabilitation. Both the RTE and NEP underscore the importance of universal access and second chances, while correctional reforms emphasize education as a tool of dignity and reintegration. However, conflicts emerge in practice. While education policies are rights-based, justice policies often remain control-oriented, treating education as an add-on rather than a legal entitlement for incarcerated or at-risk populations. Moreover, jurisdictional silos, where education ministries and prison departments operate independently, limit coordination. Without structural mechanisms to ensure policy convergence, the promise of equity remains unfulfilled. In essence, India's policy landscape contains strong normative commitments to equity and rehabilitation, but operational divides hinder their realization. Bridging these silos is not merely a technical matter of coordination but a political question of whether the state views marginalized children and incarcerated individuals as rights-bearing citizens or as expendable subjects.

6. Equity and Identity in the Classroom–Courtroom Nexus

The intersections of education and criminal justice in India cannot be understood without engaging with the social structures that shape exclusion and vulnerability. Classrooms and courtrooms alike are not neutral spaces; they reflect and reproduce hierarchies of caste, language, gender, and region. Examining these axes of identity reveals how certain populations are disproportionately pushed toward criminalization, while others access protections and privileges.

Caste continues to play a defining role in shaping educational experiences and criminal justice outcomes in India. Dalit and Adivasi children frequently face stigma in schools, including segregation, teacher bias, and denial of equal participation (Nambissan, 2009). These exclusions often intersect with language hierarchies, where children whose mother tongues are tribal or regional languages struggle in classrooms dominated by Hindi or English (Mohanty, 2010). Such linguistic marginalization undermines self-esteem, increases dropout risks, and creates vulnerabilities that echo in the justice system. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reveal a disproportionate representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes among juveniles in conflict with the law, underscoring how classroom inequities map onto courtroom disparities.

Although the majority of juveniles in conflict with the law are boys, the experiences of girls highlight unique intersections of gender, education, and justice. Girls often encounter layered

vulnerabilities: school dropout due to child marriage, domestic responsibilities, or gender-based violence increases their susceptibility to trafficking, exploitation, and criminalization (UNICEF, 2019). Education serves as a protective factor, with studies showing that access to secondary education reduces early marriage and enhances girls' agency (Jha & Jhingran, 2002). Yet, when girls do come into contact with the justice system, rehabilitative educational opportunities are often weaker than those provided to boys, reflecting systemic gender bias in both educational and correctional institutions (Kumar & Rai, 2020).

Regional and tribal contexts further complicate the classroom-courtroom nexus. In states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and parts of the Northeast, tribal children face not only linguistic and cultural exclusion in schools but also securitized state responses that criminalize their communities (Shah, 2018). In conflict-affected regions, schools are often militarized spaces, and children may be caught between state forces and insurgent groups, blurring the line between education and surveillance. For Adivasi children, displacement from land and lack of culturally responsive schooling increase dropout risks and create pathways into exploitative labor or justice systems (Xaxa, 2020). The justice system, in turn, frequently fails to account for the structural disadvantages faced by these groups, treating criminality as individual deviance rather than a product of systemic exclusion.

In sum, the classroom-courtroom nexus is deeply mediated by identity. Caste, language, gender, and region not only determine access to quality education but also shape one's likelihood of criminalization or rehabilitation. Recognizing these inequities is essential for envisioning reforms that move beyond universalist rhetoric to address the lived realities of India's most marginalized populations.

7. Case Studies / Illustrations

Case studies provide concrete illustrations of how education intersects with criminal justice reform in India, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of policy on the ground. These examples also reveal the transformative role of education in correctional settings and its potential in reducing reoffending.

State/NGO initiative providing education in correctional settings

One widely cited example is the partnership between Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and prison departments across India. Since the early 1990s, IGNOU has provided incarcerated individuals with opportunities to pursue higher education, from certificate

courses to postgraduate programs. According to IGNOU's Prison Education Report (2022), over 35,000 inmates have enrolled in various programs, with states like Tihar (Delhi) and Yerwada (Maharashtra) becoming flagship centers. NGO collaborations such as those by Prayas (TISS initiative) further support vocational training, life skills, and post-release rehabilitation (Jain, 2019). Evaluations show that such programs improve inmates' self-confidence and job prospects, thereby reducing recidivism rates.

Juvenile reform homes: successes and failures

Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Care Institutions (CCIs) are meant to integrate education into rehabilitative care. The Observation Home for Boys in Delhi introduced regular schooling with support from the Delhi Education Department and NGOs like Salaam Baalak Trust (Kumar, 2018). While some juveniles were successfully reintegrated into mainstream education, systemic challenges persisted: overcrowding, a shortage of teachers, and a lack of vocational linkages limited long-term impact. In Jharkhand, a study by Singh and Ghosh (2020) revealed that while reform homes offered basic literacy, most failed to provide sustained academic or skill-based opportunities, leading many juveniles to return to vulnerable circumstances upon release. This underlines the gap between legal mandates and institutional realities.

Educational interventions preventing re-offending

The Tihar Jail education and vocational program stands out as a success story. Inmates enrolled in NIOS and IGNOU programs, coupled with vocational training in bakery, carpentry, and computer skills, have shown lower reoffending rates compared to national averages (Bhatia, 2016). Former inmates trained under the Tihar bakery program have successfully established livelihoods post-release, providing anecdotal evidence of education's role in reintegration. Similarly, a pilot project in Kerala prisons that used digital literacy training reported high participation and positive outcomes, with many inmates using acquired skills in post-release employment (Joseph, 2021). These examples echo global findings that access to education is one of the strongest predictors of reduced recidivism (Davis et al., 2013).

Together, these illustrations highlight both promise and limitation. While state-NGO partnerships and innovative prison education initiatives show measurable benefits, juvenile institutions often lag behind, constrained by systemic neglect. The case studies suggest that

when educational opportunities are structured, sustained, and linked to livelihood pathways, they significantly enhance rehabilitation and reduce cycles of reoffending.

8. Discussion

The preceding sections demonstrate that education operates at two critical junctures in the criminal justice landscape: as a preventive tool in the classroom and as a reformative mechanism in the courtroom. Yet, despite strong normative commitments in policy and promising initiatives, systemic gaps and tensions persist.

Education as both preventive and reformative

On the preventive side, schools function as early arenas where inclusion or exclusion is determined. As the analysis of the “school-to-prison pipeline” in India reveals, disciplinary practices, language hierarchies, and structural inequities can increase the likelihood of children, particularly from marginalized communities, entering the justice system (Skiba et al., 2002; Mohanty, 2010). Conversely, inclusive schooling, dropout prevention, and equitable pedagogy can disrupt these trajectories. On the reformative side, education in correctional settings, whether through literacy programs, vocational training, or higher education, has consistently been shown to reduce recidivism and improve reintegration outcomes (Davis et al., 2013; Bhatia, 2016). Thus, education is uniquely positioned to serve as both a preventive intervention and a rehabilitative tool, bridging the gap between classroom and courtroom.

Gaps in current policy and practice

Despite these possibilities, substantial gaps remain in India’s education-justice nexus. Policies such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and National Education Policy (2020) contain strong equity mandates but rarely engage explicitly with at-risk or incarcerated populations (Ramachandran, 2015). Juvenile institutions, though mandated to provide schooling, often lack adequate teachers, infrastructure, and monitoring, resulting in perfunctory programs (Sharma, 2020). Prison education initiatives, while innovative, remain unevenly distributed, benefiting some states (e.g., Delhi, Kerala) more than others (Jain, 2019). Moreover, digital education initiatives are still at a pilot stage, hindered by infrastructural and security limitations (Kumar, 2021). This fragmented approach reflects a deeper structural problem: education and justice policies operate in silos, with limited cross-ministerial coordination.

The tension between punitive vs. rehabilitative approaches

Underlying these gaps is a fundamental tension between punitive and rehabilitative orientations. Education, by its very nature, is rehabilitative and emancipatory, yet much of

India's justice system remains embedded in punitive logics, overcrowded prisons, underfunded juvenile homes, and surveillance-oriented school practices (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Shah, 2018). While the Juvenile Justice Act and Model Prison Manual envision rehabilitation, everyday practices often prioritize control and discipline over empowerment. This tension undermines the transformative potential of education, reducing it to a peripheral activity rather than a central pillar of justice reform. Bridging this divide requires a paradigm shift: treating incarcerated or at-risk populations not as objects of control but as rights-bearing citizens entitled to equitable education. In sum, education occupies a dual role in shaping India's justice trajectory, but systemic silos and punitive legacies limit its effectiveness. A robust integration of education into both preventive and reformatory strategies is necessary to move toward an equity-centered reform agenda.

9. Way Forward

The exploration of education and criminal justice in India reveals that classrooms and courtrooms are not isolated domains but mirror each other in their struggles with equity, discipline, and reform. Classrooms can become spaces of empowerment or exclusion, just as courtrooms can tilt toward rehabilitation or punishment. Together, they form a continuum where the denial of educational opportunity often translates into heightened vulnerability to criminalization, while meaningful access to education within correctional systems offers pathways to dignity and reintegration. This shared terrain underscores the urgency of integrating educational and criminal justice reform agendas.

Firstly, preventive interventions must begin in classrooms by addressing structural inequities such as caste-based discrimination, language hierarchies, and gender exclusion. Schools should move away from punitive, zero-tolerance models toward restorative practices that emphasize dialogue, conflict resolution, and inclusion (Braithwaite, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). Embedding critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000) within curricula can foster resilience and empower students to challenge systemic marginalization. Secondly, within correctional settings, education must be seen not as an optional add-on but as a central pillar of rehabilitation. Scaling up literacy programs, vocational training, higher education opportunities, and digital access can help incarcerated individuals reintegrate successfully into society (Davis et al., 2013; Bhatia, 2016). Models from Scandinavia, where prison education is integrated into broader welfare systems, offer valuable lessons for India's reform trajectory.

Thirdly, a key policy challenge remains the siloed operation of education and justice frameworks. Coordination between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the Ministry of Home Affairs is necessary to ensure continuity of educational rights for at-risk children and incarcerated individuals. Embedding education explicitly into correctional and juvenile justice reforms and vice versa would create a common equity framework where the right to education and the right to dignity intersect (UNESCO, 2021). Finally, moving forward requires an interdisciplinary approach that brings together educators, criminologists, policymakers, social workers, and community actors. Research should explore the lived experiences of children in conflict with the law, the effectiveness of prison education programs, and innovative digital models that bridge classroom and correctional settings. A sustained dialogue across these domains can help India reimagine education not just as preparation for employment but as a tool of justice and social transformation. In conclusion, the classroom and the courtroom are deeply intertwined sites where India's equity project is contested and realized. Reimagining their intersections through restorative, rehabilitative, and rights-based education holds the potential to transform exclusionary cycles into pathways of empowerment and justice.

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