

From A Cell to A Classroom

*Adult Education, Identity,
and the Teaching Journey
After Incarceration in
Ireland.*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who have pursued or attained teaching roles in Ireland through adult education pathways. While education is widely promoted as a tool for rehabilitation and social reintegration, the journey from prisoner to professional teacher remains fraught with symbolic, institutional, and moral barriers. Grounded in a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, this study centres the voices of six participants five men and one woman who have transitioned from imprisonment into various educational contexts, including adult, community, and further education. Their accounts reveal how personal transformation, often catalysed by prison education and peer-led learning, collides with enduring stigma, opaque regulatory systems, and conditional inclusion within the teaching profession.

Drawing on the work of Goffman, Maruna, Mezirow, Wacquant, Inglis, and Bates Evoy, the analysis traces three interwoven strands: stigma and identity, transformative learning, and institutional recognition. These themes illuminate how educational growth is often undermined by discretionary vetting processes, professional gatekeeping, and the absence of structural recognition. The study contributes new knowledge by addressing a gap in Irish and international research on post-prison access to regulated professions particularly teaching and reveals how adult education serves both as a site of empowerment and a space of subtle exclusion.

Positioned within both academic and lived experience, this research offers a reflexive, critical account of what it means to seek legitimacy after incarceration. Its findings have implications for policy reform, teacher registration, vetting transparency, and inclusive adult education practice. Ultimately, it asks whether the Irish education system is truly prepared to recognise transformation or whether it remains bound by symbolic boundaries that deny full professional belonging to those who have already changed.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
CAP	Care After Prison
CBHFA	Community-Based Health and First Aid (Irish Red Cross Programme)
CSO	Central Statistics Office
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FET	Further Education and Training
FOI	Freedom of Information
IRC	Irish Red Cross
IPRT	Irish Penal Reform Trust
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MU	Maynooth University
NACRO	National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (UK)
NVB	National Vetting Bureau
PES	Prison Education Service
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SETU	South East Technological University
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VIT	Victorian Institute of Teaching (Australia)

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CHAPTER 01: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

What once felt out of reach has now taken shape in these pages a path forged through doubt, determination, and unexpected possibility. This research explores what it means to move from a prison cell to a classroom, not just as a student, but as someone seeking to become a teacher. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to widening access to education for individuals from marginalised backgrounds. However, while access to education has widened, access to professional work especially in fields like teaching remains uneven and fraught with moral and institutional barriers. Globally, and in Ireland, education is often framed as a vehicle for rehabilitation, inclusion, and the transformation of lives once shaped by exclusion or incarceration. Yet the journey from student to teacher for former prisoners remains deeply unequal, particularly in a profession so bound up with moral authority, trust, and institutional legitimacy. Teaching, more than many other professions, carries a particular ethical weight.

It is seen not just as a job, but as a role model position a space where the past is not easily separated from the person. For those with convictions, this makes the path into teaching uniquely exposed and conditional. While access to education may be expanding, access to professions especially regulated ones is still governed by hidden rules and deeply moralised assumptions about who belongs. This thesis is situated within the field of adult and community education, where questions of identity, transformation, and institutional legitimacy are central (VIT, 2023). For individuals with convictions, adult education often marks the beginning of change but the road from personal growth to professional inclusion remains deeply uncertain. In the Irish context, the contradiction is especially sharp when compared to jurisdictions like the UK or Australia, where more transparent and proportionate approaches to professional registration for people with convictions have been adopted (NACRO, 2020).

Initiatives such as Turn to Teaching and College Connect have made small steps in challenging educational disadvantage and supporting access to teacher training for under-represented groups. Yet for those with convictions, the path remains fraught with barriers that extend well beyond access to training encompassing vetting, regulation, and persistent doubt. Despite Ireland's rhetorical commitment to rehabilitation, its frameworks remain marked by discretion, silence, and limited guidance. The result is conditional inclusion. This tension between stated policy goals and actual gatekeeping raises serious questions about the limits of inclusion in the Irish education sector. Who is allowed to become a teacher, and on what terms? How are notions of risk, trust, and redemption negotiated when the applicant is also an ex-prisoner?

These questions are not only procedural they are symbolic. As Goffman (1963) observed, institutions do not simply exclude; they manage and define moral boundaries through the labelling of "spoiled identities."

Wacquant (2009) deepens this by showing how carceral logic the mindset of punishment and surveillance spills over into other institutions, including education, shaping access long after release. This study draws on in-depth interviews with six individuals five men and one woman who have experienced imprisonment and are now working in or actively pursuing roles in education in Ireland. Their stories reflect a range of teaching contexts, including adult, community, and further education. What unites them is not just their past involvement with the criminal justice system, but their shared pursuit of legitimacy, contribution, and belonging within the teaching profession. Through their accounts, the study explores how identity, stigma, transformation, and systemic barriers are navigated on a daily basis. Three core strands guide this analysis: identity and stigma, transformative learning, and institutional recognition and gatekeeping. This research is rooted not only in academic inquiry, but in lived experience. I did not come to this topic as a neutral observer.

Like the participants in this study, I too have travelled the path from a prison cell to teaching in a classroom. I have sat in many prison education units, not as a researcher, but as a student trying to make sense of who I was and what was still possible for me upon release. I have completed assignments behind bars, doubted my right to belong in lecture halls, and stood before numerous panels where my past was laid bare and judged. The questions that drive this research about identity, legitimacy, disclosure, and recognition are not abstract to me. They are questions I have lived, and in some ways, I am still struggling to answer. Holding both lived experience and a research role has been a source of strength and tension. On one hand, it allowed for a depth of empathy and understanding that shaped every stage of the project, from interview design to analysis. Participants trusted me not just because I was a researcher, but because I was one of them.

I knew the shorthand, the silences, the coded ways we speak about the past and its weight. I understood the emotional risks of disclosure, the exhaustion of constantly managing how one is seen, and the vulnerability that comes with wanting to teach when society still sees you as a former prisoner. On the other hand, this closeness to the subject matter brought with it discomfort and challenge. There were moments during interviews where participants' words erected my own past so sharply that it became difficult to maintain distance. I had to work hard

to ensure that their stories were given space to breathe on their own terms, rather than becoming extensions of my own. The analysis, too, required careful reflexivity. I kept a journal throughout the research process, noting when my emotions were triggered or when my own assumptions risked clouding the data. At times, I questioned whether I was too close whether this research was, in part, an attempt to legitimise my own position as a teacher.

For those of us with convictions, the question is not just “have I changed?” but “will anyone believe that I have?” And if belief is withheld, what does that say about the systems we claim are built on rehabilitation? But it was precisely this tension that made the work worth doing. If people like me are still unsure whether we can fully belong in education, even after achieving qualifications, contributing to communities, and undergoing personal transformation, then something is structurally wrong. This thesis is not a defence of my right to teach, nor a romanticised account of change. It is an attempt to document, with honesty and complexity, what it means to seek professional legitimacy after incarceration, and to ask whether our education system is truly ready to recognise that journey. While existing research has examined prison education, desistance, and social reintegration (Warner, 2017; IPRT, 2024; College Connect, 2021), there remains a significant gap in understanding how people with convictions navigate the transition into professional roles that are regulated, scrutinised, and morally framed such as teaching.

This thesis focuses specifically on the lived experiences of individuals who, after serving custodial sentences, pursued teacher training or employment in education. This study is guided by four core research questions. First, how do formerly incarcerated individuals make sense of their identity as educators, and how does that identity intersect with their past? Second, what barriers legal, institutional, and symbolic do they encounter in accessing the teaching profession in Ireland? Third, how do educational experiences shape participants’ sense of legitimacy and belonging and to what extent do they support or challenge the process of transformation? Finally, how do participants negotiate stigma, disclosure, and recognition in their efforts to become teachers? These questions are explored through a qualitative, phenomenological methodology that centres the voices and perspectives of six participants who have lived this transition. Their stories are examined not as isolated case studies but as windows into a broader system that often promotes education as a tool for change, while quietly limiting the spaces in which that change can be recognised.

The purpose of this research is not to make policy recommendations alone, but to contribute a more nuanced understanding of what rehabilitation, inclusion, and transformation look like when viewed from the standpoint of those who must prove their right to belong again and again within the very system that claims to support their reintegration. To understand the complexity of moving from incarceration to the teaching profession, this study draws on six key theorists whose work aligns with the core tensions voiced by participants. Goffman (1963) and Maruna (2001) inform the analysis of stigma and identity, particularly around disclosure and the performance of moral credibility. Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theory of transformative learning speaks to how education enables identity shifts — though such transformation is not always institutionally acknowledged. Wacquant (2009) shifts the lens to structural control, showing how carceral logic continues to shape professional access long after release. Inglis (1997) and Bates Evoy (2024) deepen this view, highlighting how working-class and non-traditional educators are required to conform to middle-class norms of respectability. Rather than treating these theories in isolation, they are used throughout the findings to interpret key themes especially around stigma, transformation, and institutional recognition.

This thesis is structured across five chapters, each building toward a deeper understanding of what it means to seek legitimacy as a teacher after imprisonment. Chapter One (Introduction) outlines the context, rationale, personal positioning, research questions, and theoretical framework for the study. It frames the work as both an academic contribution and a personal inquiry into inclusion, legitimacy, and change. Chapter Two (Literature Review) critically examines the existing research on prison education, desistance, and access to teaching. It maps the structural, symbolic, and policy-level barriers that individuals with convictions face, while identifying the significant absence of research focused on post-prison transitions into regulated professions like teaching. Chapter Three (Methodology) details the philosophical and methodological foundations of the study. It explains the interpretivist, phenomenological approach used, outlines participant selection, ethical considerations, and describes the data collection and thematic analysis process. Chapter Four (Findings and Analysis) presents the core themes that emerged from six in-depth interviews. These include identity and stigma, systemic barriers, and transformative elements. Each theme is explored using participant voices and is interpreted through the study's theoretical framework. Chapter Five (Discussion & Implications) reflects on the implications of the findings for policy, pedagogy, and adult education.

CHAPTER 02: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review explores the transition from incarceration to the teaching profession, focusing on the Irish context. While education is widely promoted as a tool for personal transformation and societal reintegration, entry into regulated professions such as teaching, often associated with high moral and ethical standards, remains shaped by complex systemic, bureaucratic, and cultural barriers. These barriers often conflict with the ideals of rehabilitation, raising critical questions about who is deemed 'fit' to teach and on what grounds. For individuals with criminal convictions, these obstacles may significantly complicate their efforts at personal and professional development (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2024).

The review begins by analysing the history and current practices of prison education in Ireland, highlighting its role in fostering self-worth, reflection, and desistance from crime. This section primarily engages with the strand of transformative learning, exploring how prison-based education supports identity change and desistance through reflection and personal growth. It then explores post-release supports and access pathways — including initiatives like Turn to Teaching and College Connect — that engage with the possibility of transformation beyond prison, before critically examining the institutional and regulatory barriers that shape professional recognition. A critical analysis of institutional and regulatory obstacles follows, especially those associated with Garda vetting and Teaching Council registration.

The analysis is structured through three interwoven conceptual strands: stigma and identity, transformative learning, and institutional recognition and exclusion. These strands draw on a range of theorists, including Goffman, Maruna, Mezirow, Freire, Wacquant, Inglis, and Bates Evoy. Together, their work provides a layered perspective on identity, power, legitimacy, and social inclusion. Goffman and Maruna illuminate the psychological and narrative dimensions of stigma; Wacquant and Inglis offer structural critiques of exclusionary practices; Mezirow articulates pathways to identity transformation; and Bates Evoy highlights the ongoing negotiation of professional identity among marginalised educators.

Rather than simply documenting barriers, this review interrogates the systems and narratives that enable or deny the legitimacy of personal transformation and raises questions about the role of education in mediating these contradictions.

2.2 Reflexive Positioning

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is not abstract or detached, it emerged from lived proximity to the research context. As someone who has personally navigated the transition from prisoner to teacher, I recognised patterns in participants' stories that resonated with my own experiences of stigma, institutional gatekeeping, and identity reconstruction. These connections informed the selective use of theory: Goffman and Maruna clarified the emotional complexity of stigma and disclosure; Mezirow and Freire illuminated learning as a process of transformation and resistance; and Wacquant, Inglis, and Bates Evoy exposed the systemic logics that continue to regulate legitimacy in professional contexts.

This reflexive stance is not a limitation, but a source of analytical insight. As Pillow (2003) argues, reflexivity enables researchers to recognise the ways in which their positionality shapes both the production and interpretation of knowledge. Similarly, Merriam et al. (2002) note that reflexivity in qualitative research strengthens rigour by making transparent the lenses through which data are understood. In this study, theory was not imposed on participant narratives but used to deepen interpretation in ways that honoured both their voices and my own trajectory.

2.3 Prison Education in Ireland

Like the author, and the majority of the participants of this study of formerly incarcerated individuals, the journey to the role of educator begins long before teacher training or registration with the Teaching Council. More often than not, it begins behind the walls in a prison classroom. This section engages most directly with the transformative learning strand, while also introducing themes of identity reconstruction and the limited institutional recognition afforded to such change.

While prison education in Ireland has long been framed as a central component of rehabilitation policy, its delivery and impact remain uneven and often symbolic. Its ethos, shaped and developed through the work of the Irish Prison Education Service (PES), emphasises a humanistic and learner-centred approach, offering a range of subjects from literacy and numeracy to Open University degrees designed to support both personal development and prepare individuals for social reintegration. Yet according to IPRT (2017,2022) reports the gap between aspirational policy and actual provision remains stark. Although framed as a right in the Irish Prison Service Strategic Plan (2019), educational opportunities in practice are often constrained.

This philosophy builds on the legacy of the Whitaker Report (1985), which reframed prison policy around reform and rehabilitation rather than solely punishment. The Irish Penal Reform Trust's 20-Year Review of the Whitaker report emphasises how central education was, and continues to be, the primary source of human dignity within the prison system (IPRT, 2006). As Kevin Warner (2010), former head of education in Irish prisons, argues, education in custody must support the full personhood of the learner and resist the “corrosive effects” of imprisonment. He emphasises the importance of treating education not merely as preparation for employment, but as a means of cultural engagement, critical thinking, and self-respect. Warner's perspective invites further reflection on whether prison education in Ireland aspires merely to integrate — or whether it could, under different conditions, support a more critical and transformative form of learning.

However, the reality on the ground remains uneven. The CSO (2021) reported that over half of people in Irish prisons left school before the age of 16, and nearly one in five had only primary school education. These statistics point to persistent systemic educational disadvantage long before prison, reinforcing how prison education often represents a first meaningful contact with structured learning for many. Yet, despite progressive policy aims, the implementation of prison education remains hampered by staffing shortages, inconsistent provision, and weak post-release pathways. These goals often lack binding commitments, adequate funding, or measurable outcomes — raising questions about the credibility and impact of the reform agenda (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2019).

This raises important questions about the extent to which prison education strategies can meaningfully address such deeply rooted structural inequalities, particularly when post-release supports remain fragmented and under-resourced (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2024).

International studies reinforce the transformative potential of prison education in supporting reintegration. In England and Wales, the Coates Review (2016) found that education in custody significantly improves confidence, motivation, and employability among incarcerated individuals. Similarly, a meta-analysis by the RAND Corporation concluded that participation in prison education reduces recidivism by 43% and improves employment outcomes (Davis et al., 2013). These findings parallel Irish experiences, where education often acts as a catalyst for personal change, particularly when it is voluntary, learner-centred, and focused on reflection rather than compliance (Davis et al., 2013).

However, questions remain about the extent to which positive educational experiences within custody translate into stable and meaningful post-release outcomes. Structural barriers — including access to further education, employment discrimination, and professional regulation — may continue to constrain the long-term impact of prison education initiatives (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2024).

Jack Mezirow's (1978, 2000) theory of transformative learning provides a valuable lens for understanding how adults critically reassess assumptions and reconstruct identity through reflective dialogue and experience. In prison settings, this process often unfolds through peer-led education, open discussion, and exposure to new perspectives. Illeris (2014) extends this by emphasising that meaningful learning involves not just cognitive development but emotional and social dimensions — all of which are deeply shaped by context. For many participants, learning marked a shift away from criminalised identities towards narratives of growth, contribution, and possibility. Yet this transformation is constrained by structural barriers: uneven access to education, undervaluing of peer teaching, and weak links to post-release progression all limit the extent to which prison education can fully support sustained identity change.

However, the durability of these emerging identities remains uncertain. Without structural support and ongoing opportunities for reinforcement, the personal gains made through prison education can be vulnerable to erosion after release. Reflection and transformation may begin inside, but sustaining change requires pathways forward. Prison education alone does not guarantee access to further learning or professional opportunities. For many, the transition from learner to aspiring educator depends on targeted support that bridges the gap between custody and community (College Connect, 2021). The following section examines initiatives designed to create such bridges — enabling individuals with convictions to pursue higher education and, ultimately, professional roles like teaching.

2.4 Pathways from Incarceration to Teaching

This section engages all three strands simultaneously: transformative learning is traced through peer teaching and access initiatives; stigma and identity are explored in how aspiring teachers frame their ambitions; and institutional recognition is assessed in how these initiatives are acknowledged — or ignored — by formal systems.

A very important, but often overlooked, early stage of the journey from the cell to the classroom can begin inside the prison. Across many Irish places of detention, peer teaching plays a central

role in educational delivery. Organisations such as the Irish Red Cross (IRC) and Care After Prison (CAP), working alongside Education and Training Board (ETB) staff, train suitable individuals with specific skills to deliver various modules in healthcare and mentorship to fellow prisoners. These peer educator roles, while informal, often mark the beginning of a shift in self-perception, from learner to leader, from prisoner to teacher, developing both confidence and teaching skills (Care After Prison, 2021.; Irish Red Cross, 2019).

Douglas et al. (2021), in their study of prison education and self-stigma, describe this as the Empowerment Continuum: a progression from self-doubt and internalised stigma toward increased confidence, social contribution, and the reclaiming of identity. The act of teaching others in prison, especially in an environment so heavily structured around punishment, represents a form of resistance. It allows individuals to construct a prosocial identity rooted in care, knowledge, and leadership. As one participant in Douglas et al.'s study reflected, "Teaching someone in here helped me believe I wasn't just a number anymore, I had something to offer."

This early experience of peer education can serve as a catalyst for identity transformation, aligning with Mezirow's (1978), emphasis on critical reflection and perspective shift. Yet questions remain regarding the extent to which these emerging educator identities are formally recognised or supported beyond the prison setting. Without accessible and structured pathways into higher education, the momentum generated through peer teaching risks stalling upon release.

Recognising the need for structured supports beyond custody, several initiatives have emerged to facilitate access to higher education for individuals from under-represented and non-traditional backgrounds, including those with criminal convictions. College Connect, a collaborative project involving four higher education institutions in the Midlands and East of Ireland, adopts an inclusive approach to widening participation. Funded by the Higher Education Authority, it offers preparatory programmes, outreach initiatives, and retention supports to learners traditionally excluded from third-level education (College Connect, 2021).

For those who successfully navigate undergraduate study and aspire to enter the teaching profession, Turn to Teaching at Maynooth University provides a tailored access route. Developed in response to persistent inequalities in access to the teaching profession, the programme offers academic bridging modules, mentoring, and peer support designed to prepare participants for entry into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (Maynooth

University, 2023). Its ethos is grounded in principles of social justice, diversity, and the belief that the teaching workforce should reflect the full breadth of Irish society.

These programmes play a dual role. On the one hand, they offer practical resources, academic skills, guidance, financial assistance, and peer support. On the other, they perform symbolic work by affirming that individuals with convictions can be legitimate candidates for professional careers. This dual function is essential, it bridges the psychological distance between prison and professionalism, between perceived stigma and reclaimed possibility (Garrihy & Bracken-Roche (2024).

Yet the transition into educators remains precarious. Many learners entering these programmes do so with hesitation, often after being advised against pursuing teaching due to their criminal record (Rosenthal et al. 2015). This research will show some internalise the belief that the profession is off-limits, while others move forward anxiously, unsure how Garda vetting or Teaching Council registration will unfold. The fragility of hope in these cases is palpable, and reflects the “conditional inclusion” that characterises much of Irish professional regulation.

International comparisons offer both contrast and validation, suggesting that when meaningful educational opportunities are extended to this cohort, positive outcomes can occur. In the USA, *Changing Minds* (Fine et al., 2001) and other college-in-prison programmes have demonstrated that some formerly incarcerated individuals not only succeed in higher education but go on to become educators, researchers, and social leaders. These programmes aim to promote the transformative potential of prison education by establishing more formalised pathways into professional roles. However, without addressing the broader punitive logic of the prison system or tackling systemic social inequalities, such initiatives may risk overstating their reach or replicating access models that presume an even playing field. As Rosenthal et al. (2015) found, requiring applicants to disclose convictions during college admissions significantly reduced application completion rates. In response, the Beyond the Box (US Department of Education, 2016) initiative recommended removing such questions entirely.

These international examples raise a critical question when it comes to an Irish context: if other systems have begun to reconcile safeguarding with rehabilitation, why does it remain so cautious, opaque, and slow to evolve here? While Turn to Teaching and College Connect are promising models, they operate within an education system that continues to view past convictions through a lens of moral suspicion. These initiatives, while innovative, are also tiny in scale and reliant on short-term funding streams. As of 2025, College Connect has been

discontinued, raising further concerns about the sustainability of such access work and long-term commitments to the educational inclusion of marginalised groups. At the same time, informal teaching that begins in prison — whether through peer education, mentorship, or addiction recovery work — is rarely acknowledged as valid prior experience. The absence of meaningful Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms reinforces the idea that transformation must be formally certified to count, despite often emerging in some of the most challenging learning environments. As a result, many individuals who demonstrate the capacity and commitment to teach are left navigating a landscape defined more by uncertainty and stigma than by opportunity and recognition. In this context, the walk from incarceration to education, to teaching, is less a structured path and more an unlit back road — one that can only be traversed with personal resilience, supportive networks, and a deep belief in transformation. The next section explores how this belief is often undermined by the barriers imposed by professional regulation, and the symbolic violence that continues to mark people long after their sentence has ended.

In this context, the walk from incarceration to education, to teaching, is less a structured path and more an unlit back road — one that can only be traversed with personal resilience, supportive networks, and a deep belief in transformation. Yet this belief is repeatedly tested: by the uncertainty of recognition, the fragility of access initiatives, and the enduring suspicion embedded in professional vetting systems. This raises a critical question — one that the following section begins to explore: how do professional gatekeepers reconcile the rhetoric of inclusion with practices that continue to mark people long after their sentence has ended?

2.5 Barriers to Registration and Employment

While education can offer a powerful sense of renewal and possibility, the shift from academic participation to professional recognition — particularly in roles such as teaching — introduces a new set of institutional hurdles to be overcome. For individuals with criminal convictions, the hope cultivated through initiatives like College Connect and Turn to Teaching is often met with uncertainty, as aspiring educators encounter systems that remain ambivalent at best, if not actively suspicious of their inclusion, based on trustworthiness and perceived risk. Access to regulated professions is shaped by more than qualifications alone; as Friedman and Laurison (2019) argue, professional fields often operate with hidden rules of classed legitimacy, favouring those whose backgrounds align with unspoken standards of respectability, neutrality, and moral character.

The following section examines the opaque and often discretionary nature of Garda vetting and Teaching Council registration — mechanisms that, rather than supporting transformation, frequently serve to reinforce stigma, deny legitimacy, and reassert professional boundaries.

This section is dominated by the third strand — institutional recognition and gatekeeping — while continuing to draw on the first two: identity and stigma persist in how regulators interpret disclosures, and even completed transformations remain subject to moral suspicion.

In Ireland, registration as a teacher is governed by the Teaching Council Acts (2001, 2006, 2015), which require applicants to undergo Garda vetting and disclose any previous criminal convictions. The Council then applies a discretionary “fit and proper person” test to determine eligibility. However, this process lacks published criteria, timelines, or clear avenues for appeal, creating a high degree of uncertainty for applicants with convictions. The opacity of the decision-making framework raises questions about consistency, fairness, and institutional accountability.

As a result, many individuals are left in limbo — qualified, committed, and ready to teach, but unsure whether they will be permitted to do so. This study explores how such individuals make sense of these moments of exclusion, and asks how systems that promote education as transformation continue to reassert control through frameworks that re-stigmatise those who have already changed.

This discretionary power sits at the heart of professional regulation. As Bates Evoy (2018) argues, the Teaching Council does not merely assess qualifications; it also performs a legitimising function, determining whose identity, experience, and values align with its professional ideal. In this way, regulatory structures operate not as neutral systems, but as sites where inclusion is granted selectively, often without accountability to those excluded. For individuals with convictions, the lack of transparency and the perceived moral scrutiny compound existing stigma, transforming hope into anxiety and preparation into doubt.

This regulatory approach intersects with broader limitations in Irish legislation on spent convictions. The Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016 allows for only one non-custodial conviction to be considered “spent” after seven years, provided certain conditions are met. Custodial sentences over 12 months are excluded entirely. The Law Reform Commission (2020) has criticised the narrow scope of the Act, arguing that it fails to accommodate the realities of long-term desistance and disproportionately affects people with complex life histories. As a result, many people must repeatedly disclose offences

long after they have re-entered society, completed education, and demonstrated sustained rehabilitation.

The situation is further complicated by the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012, which mandates Garda vetting for all teaching roles. While this is essential for safeguarding, it grants significant discretionary power to regulatory bodies such as the Teaching Council in interpreting disclosures. Participants in this study described how, in some cases, registration meetings included reference to newspaper articles detailing their convictions. This suggests that access to the profession is not based solely on the offence itself, but also on how that offence continues to circulate through public narrative.

Even after a sentence has been served, a criminal conviction rarely disappears. Instead, it often becomes a defining feature — a master status that overshadows education, qualifications, and personal growth. Individuals with convictions are repeatedly called upon to legitimate themselves, not only through formal achievements, but by proving they are morally trustworthy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in professional vetting contexts like teacher registration, where disclosure processes can reanimate past offences, inviting renewed moral scrutiny. Here, Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of the "spoiled identity" helps illuminate how stigma persists long after formal punishment ends. Institutions act as gatekeepers, classifying individuals based on perceived risk, and treating past convictions as moral indictments rather than time-served histories. Goffman observed that stigma management often relies on a person's ability to conceal discrediting information — yet in cases like this, the system not only demands disclosure, but uses it to re-evaluate worthiness. Media amplification further complicates this, framing transformation as suspect and reinforcing public doubt. This raises difficult questions about whether vetting systems serve primarily to safeguard the public, or whether they function more symbolically — reinscribing the very identities that education claims to help transform.

From a wider structural lens, Loïc Wacquant's (2009) concept of the "carceral state" deepens this analysis by tracing how punishment and surveillance extend well beyond prison walls. In this view, regulatory bodies such as the Teaching Council are not simply neutral administrators of policy, but part of a broader apparatus that enacts what Wacquant calls "symbolic violence" — the reproduction of inequality through bureaucratic procedures that appear objective. Teaching, in particular, is framed as a profession of moral trust and social responsibility. The discretionary "fit and proper person" requirement, while framed in procedural terms, echoes

cultural narratives about redemption, purity, and risk. Despite Ireland's stated commitment to rehabilitation, the structures surrounding teacher registration often serve to maintain symbolic boundaries, separating those considered trustworthy from those whose past continues to shadow their present.

International comparisons reveal more inclusive approaches. In the United Kingdom, the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 allows certain convictions to become spent after specified periods, after which they do not need to be disclosed for most roles. Organisations such as NACRO provide guidance to educational institutions on interpreting criminal records fairly, emphasising the importance of case-by-case assessment rather than blanket exclusion. NACRO's (2020) recommendations highlight that safeguarding should not be used as a proxy for moral vetting, and that many people with convictions pose no risk and bring valuable experience to teaching.

In Australia, states such as Victoria apply a conditional registration model that stands in contrast to Ireland's more opaque approach. The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) (2023) publicly outlines how it assesses applications involving criminal convictions, considering factors such as the nature of the offence, time elapsed, rehabilitation efforts, and relevance to the teaching role being applied for. Applicants may be granted limited or supervised registration, with structured pathways to full recognition based on demonstrated integrity and performance over course of their work. Crucially, the system is transparent, enabling individuals to understand the criteria, engage with the process, and prepare accordingly. This clarity not only supports safeguarding but affirms the legitimacy of personal transformation. What does it say about a system when the criteria for professional reintegration remain hidden, even from those trying to meet them?

In contrast, Ireland's current approach lacks transparency, proportionality, and a coherent ethos of rehabilitation. The absence of published guidelines leaves applicants with little information on how to prepare, advocate, or appeal. Over time, the cumulative effect is one of conditional inclusion: individuals are encouraged to pursue education, but remain under moral scrutiny when seeking re-entry to professions such as teaching. This gap between aspiration and access invites a wider question: can education truly function as a tool of reintegration if the systems that follow remain opaque and discretionary?

As Inglis (1997) points out, adult education in Ireland has long occupied a dual position — offering both empowerment and regulation. It creates opportunities for social mobility and self-

development, yet often within a framework that reflects dominant norms around respectability, class, and moral worth. This contradiction is especially sharp when education intersects with professional regulation, where the boundaries of legitimacy are quietly redrawn.

This contradiction, between education as a tool of transformation, and regulation as a gatekeeper of legitimacy, sits at the heart of the prison-to-teaching transition. Individuals who have undertaken the difficult work of personal change, who have excelled in education and demonstrated social contribution, remain structurally marginalised from the very professions that depend on empathy, lived experience, and resilience. Ireland's traumatic vetting and registration systems will be discussed more in-depth later in this research.

2.6 Stigma, Identity, and Transformation: A Theoretical Lens

Understanding the barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals seeking to become teachers requires more than a structural analysis of policy and regulation. It also demands attention to the symbolic, psychological, and social processes that shape identity, belonging, and recognition. These processes influence how individuals see themselves, and how they are recognised—or misrecognised—by institutions and professions. Without attending to these deeper dynamics, it becomes difficult to understand how someone might thrive in education while still being denied entry into teaching.

Throughout this research, a number of theoretical perspectives are used as sensitising concepts, drawn not to impose structure but to deepen understanding of the lived experiences shared. The work of Erving Goffman, Shadd Maruna, Loïc Wacquant, Jack Mezirow, Tom Inglis, and Sarah Bates Evoy provides critical insight into how education can foster transformation, while systems of stigma and gatekeeping continue to reinforce exclusion. These thinkers are not treated as definitive frameworks, but as tools for thinking with—as ways to explore how identity reconstruction, symbolic violence, and professional legitimacy operate in the context of prisoner-to-teacher transitions.

2.7 Goffman: Spoiled Identity and Internalised Stigma

Erving Goffman's seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) remains foundational because it captures how social judgment becomes embedded in everyday interactions and institutional practices. Goffman's theory of stigma has since been widely applied in criminology and education to explore how people with criminal convictions experience marginalisation, particularly when seeking re-entry into professional roles. He

defines stigma as an attribute that is “deeply discrediting,” reducing the person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p.3).

Originally developed to explore the treatment of individuals marked by visible and invisible difference, Goffman’s insights remain highly relevant in examining how a criminal record can function as a lasting moral indictment. In professions like teaching — closely tied to ideas of care, character, and public trust — past convictions often trigger an implicit judgment of unfitness, regardless of time passed or evidence of reform. This dynamic underscores how stigma is not simply internalised but structurally reinforced through institutional processes such as Garda vetting and professional registration.

Goffman’s insights extend beyond interpersonal interactions. His concept of *impression management* reveals the emotional labour required to anticipate and respond to others’ perceptions. This aligns closely with more recent literature on internalised stigma, where individuals absorb and reproduce the negative judgements imposed upon them (Corrigan et al., 2009). Shame, self-censorship, and self-doubt become recurring themes, even in the face of educational success.

Douglas et al. (2021) expand this analysis through their Empowerment Continuum, developed through research on prison education and self-stigma. They describe a journey from “existential doubt” toward empowerment, where participants begin to see themselves as capable, resilient, and valuable. However, this progression is not linear. For many individuals, moments of confidence—often sparked by educational achievement—are interrupted by institutional reminders of past wrongdoing. The role of education, they argue, is not just to teach content but to enable individuals to re-author their identities in spite of enduring stigma.

This concept builds on Goffman’s (1963) notion of stigma as a socially assigned, persistent identity — one that can only be disrupted by consciously reworking how the self is seen and understood. Mezirow’s (1991) theory of transformative learning provides a useful lens here, suggesting that education can catalyse this reworking by prompting critical reflection and dialogue. But how far can education go in shifting a label that society at large continues to reinforce? For people with convictions, the Empowerment Continuum highlights how learning is not just academic but psychological and symbolic. It offers a structured space for reimagining a spoiled identity, and for constructing a sense of social and professional legitimacy — even when institutions remain resistant to such transformation.

Shadd Maruna's (2001) concept of redemption narratives builds directly on Goffman's work by showing how people desisting from crime resist stigma through storytelling. In *Making Good*, Maruna explores how individuals construct narratives of change, portraying themselves as reformed, responsible, and driven by a desire to give back. These narratives are essential to identity transformation, especially for those seeking roles in education or care work.

Crucially, Maruna highlights the social dimension of these narratives: they require validation from others. Without external recognition, redemption stories can collapse. The individual begins to doubt their transformation if institutions, gatekeepers, or employers continue to define them by their past. This tension is particularly acute in the teaching profession, where being a "role model" is not just a pedagogical quality but a moral expectation. For individuals with convictions, institutional silence or rejection can fracture even the most coherent narrative of reform.

As Maruna notes, "The challenge for desisting ex-offenders is to overcome a sense of hopelessness and internalised shame and to see themselves as capable of a good, socially acceptable life" (2001, p. 7). Education can be the medium through which this shift occurs—but only if the transformation is recognised beyond the classroom.

2.8 Wacquant: Symbolic Violence and the Carceral State

While Goffman and Maruna explore stigma and identity at the interpersonal level, Loïc Wacquant (2009) offers a structural critique that helps explain how institutions participate in maintaining exclusion. In *Punishing the Poor*, Wacquant introduces the concept of the "carceral continuum," showing how the logics of criminal justice—surveillance, discipline, classification—do not end at the prison gate but spill into adjacent domains such as housing, welfare, and education. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding how professional regulation in Ireland functions not only as a safeguard but as a mechanism of social control.

Within this framework, regulatory bodies such as the Teaching Council cannot be viewed as neutral gatekeepers. They operate within a broader social logic that links moral worth to institutional trust. Requirements to be deemed a "fit and proper person" draw on assumptions about character and risk, echoing broader narratives around redemption, suspicion, and deservingness. What appears as a technical procedure—vetting, registration, disclosure—often carries implicit moral judgments, making visible the kind of symbolic violence Wacquant

describes. Rather than simply assessing professional capacity, these systems reinscribe inequality by embedding criminal history into the very conditions of inclusion.

Wacquant's analysis of the carceral state, though grounded in the USA, offers a useful conceptual lens for understanding how professional regulation can extend penal logic into civil life. In the Irish context, where individuals applying to teach must prove they are "fit and proper persons" under a criterion left intentionally vague, his work invites us to ask: what forms of power persist after prison? Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977), concept of symbolic violence, referring to a form of non-physical coercion, exercised through dominant norms that are accepted as legitimate and internalised by those they marginalise. It is this subtle power, embedded in silence, ambiguity, and institutional rituals. Wacquant (2009), describes how exclusion is often maintained not through overt punishment, but through subtle, institutionalised processes that shape who is seen as legitimate. In the case of the Teaching Council, this manifests in the use of discretionary authority, a lack of published criteria, and the absence of a formal appeals process.

2.9 Inglis and Bourdieu - Adult Education, Cultural Capital and Classed Gatekeeping

Tom Inglis (1997), offers a sociological analysis of adult education in Ireland that highlights its dual function: while often celebrated as a pathway to empowerment, adult education also serves as a mechanism of regulation. Inglis argues that participation in adult learning frequently requires working-class learners to adopt middle-class norms around respectability, discipline, and moral conduct. For individuals with convictions, these demands are amplified: they are expected not only to learn, but to demonstrate moral reform in ways that align with dominant cultural expectations.

This mirrors Bourdieu's (1984), argument that education systems reward those who possess the forms of cultural capital already valued by dominant institutions, such as styles of speech, conduct, dress, and moral disposition that align with middle-class habitus. The teaching profession, in particular, functions as a site of symbolic legitimacy, where applicants are evaluated not just on their qualifications, but on their ability to embody culturally approved forms of trustworthiness. In this sense, access to the profession is not simply a matter of skill, but of symbolic legitimacy, a match between the applicant's performance and the profession's unspoken social codes. For people with convictions and working-class backgrounds, these codes can represent invisible but powerful barriers.

2.10 Mezirow: Transformative Learning and Institutional Non-Recognition

Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning offers a valuable lens for understanding how education can support deep personal change, particularly among marginalised adults. At its centre is the idea that learners can revise previously held assumptions through critical reflection, typically sparked by a "disorienting dilemma" — an experience that unsettles how they see themselves or the world (Mezirow, 1991; 2000).

In the context of prison or post-prison education, this often involves rethinking internalised narratives of failure or deviance. Learners begin to see themselves not as offenders, but as capable, responsible, and socially valuable. Education, in this framing, is not just academic — it becomes a space to reconstruct identity and reclaim legitimacy.

Yet this process is not without limits. Mezirow focuses on personal meaning-making but pays less attention to how institutions respond to these transformed identities. As Douglas et al. (2021) point out, the problem is not always a lack of transformation — it is the failure of external systems to recognise it. Even after internal change has occurred, institutional responses like Garda vetting or teacher registration may continue to interpret the individual through their criminal record, not their present self.

This highlights a broader contradiction: education encourages reflection and redefinition, but structural gatekeeping can deny that redefinition legitimacy. While Mezirow helps explain how change happens, it is only part of the story. For those seeking to teach after prison, the challenge is not just becoming someone new — it's being seen and accepted as such.

Mezirow's model (1991; 2000), while powerful, presumes that transformation will be recognised by others, a presumption that proves problematic in the context of regulated professions. Individuals may internalise new values, develop reflective capacities, and acquire professional aspirations, yet still be denied access based on past convictions. But what happens when personal transformation is real, yet institutional systems refuse to acknowledge it? As Douglas et al. (2021), observe, empowerment in prison education is always "vulnerable to invalidation" when external authorities fail to affirm it. The problem, then, may lie not in the learning process itself, but in the space between personal change and institutional legitimacy.

While Mezirow (1991; 2000), offers a compelling framework for understanding internal change, Paulo Freire (1970), draws attention to the collective and political dimensions of education. Freire's concept of *conscientização* — or critical consciousness — suggests that transformation is not simply about reinterpreting one's personal experience, but about

recognising and challenging the structural forces that produce exclusion in the first place. In the context of prison education, this means that empowerment cannot be reduced to individual reflection alone; it must also involve a critique of the systems, including professional regulation that continue to marginalise. Where Mezirow centres the learner's ability to shift perspective,

2.11 Bates Evoy: Conditional Inclusion and Professional Legitimacy

Sarah Bates Evoy's (2024) doctoral research on practitioner identity in further education brings these theoretical strands into a contemporary Irish context. Through interviews with educators who entered the sector via non-traditional routes, including those with lived experience of marginalisation, she shows how professional identity is never simply granted by qualification — it must be constantly earned and performed. Her participants spoke of needing to “over-prove” legitimacy, engaging in selective disclosure, impression management, and extra emotional labour to be accepted. This mirrors Goffman's notion of stigma management and Maruna's understanding of fragile redemption, where the burden of proving change rests on the individual.

Evoy's work highlights how inclusion in further education is often conditional, shaped less by formal credentials than by informal judgments of character and risk. Institutions may celebrate diversity in rhetoric but default to conformity in practice. This reveals what Wacquant (2009) calls “moral outsourcing” — exclusion enacted not through direct denial, but via discretionary barriers like placement decisions or registration processes.

Taken together, these insights deepen understanding of the prisoner-to-teacher pathway not as a simple progression but as a negotiation of identity, risk, and legitimacy. While Mezirow offers the promise of transformation, Bates Evoy reminds us that institutional cultures may still frame lived experience as a liability, requiring constant justification. Her work bridges the personal and structural, illuminating how even when entry is possible, full acceptance remains precarious. This renders adult education both a potential site of empowerment and a space where symbolic gatekeeping persists — a tension that sits at the heart of this study.

2.11 Conclusion

This literature review has explored the complex; often contradictory terrain that formerly incarcerated individuals must navigate in their efforts to become qualified teachers in Ireland. It has mapped the role of prison education as a transformative force; outlined access pathways such as Turn to Teaching and College Connect; critically examined the regulatory and

institutional barriers that inhibit professional recognition; and applied a robust theoretical lens to understand the interplay of identity, stigma, and power.

Across each section, a central contradiction has emerged: while education is promoted as a tool of personal development and social reintegration, access to the teaching profession remains deeply conditional. The very systems that encourage educational participation often fail to recognise the legitimacy of the transformation that follows. This contradiction is not only structural and symbolic, but also technical and moral, raising pressing questions about who is deemed “fit” to teach, and on what basis such judgments are made. These tensions are best understood through the interaction of three core strands explored throughout this review. Stigma and identity continue to shape how individuals with convictions are perceived, both by themselves and by institutions, often reactivating shame even in moments of success. Transformative learning, while real and powerful in prison classrooms and access programmes, cannot fulfil its potential in isolation. Without institutional recognition and gatekeeping reform, personal growth is too often invalidated by opaque processes, moral suspicion, and bureaucratic discretion. Together, these strands reveal that transformation, however profound, is only as meaningful as the systems willing to acknowledge it.

The literature consistently demonstrates that prison education has profound rehabilitative potential. Irish and international research affirms that learning within custodial settings can foster reflection, build self-esteem, and support desistance from crime (Coates, 2016; Warner, 2010; Davis et al., 2013). Within Irish prisons, the ethos of the Prison Education Service and the legacy of the Whitaker Report (1985) have supported a human-centred vision of education focused on dignity and personal growth. Learners often begin to reimagine themselves not as offenders but as students, contributors, and in some cases, future educators.

Yet while the classroom may provide a space for transformation, the path beyond it is uncertain. Programmes like Turn to Teaching and College Connect attempt to bridge the divide between prison learning and higher education, supporting individuals from under-represented backgrounds, including those with convictions, to access Initial Teacher Education (ITE). These initiatives are significant and necessary. However, they remain limited in scope and constrained by broader systemic forces, including precarious funding streams. The journey from access to qualification to employment is riddled with hidden criteria, moral judgement, and discretionary power.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the regulatory frameworks governing teacher registration in Ireland. The Teaching Council’s use of the “fit and proper person” standard, applied in the context of mandatory Garda vetting and self-disclosure—creates a gatekeeping mechanism that is opaque and unaccountable. Applicants with convictions are not only required to disclose their history but must do so without any guarantee of how that information will be interpreted. The lack of published criteria, formal processes, or transparent timelines reinforces the sense of precarity and judgement that characterises many post-prison professional aspirations.

This dynamic is powerfully explained through the theoretical perspectives examined in Goffman’s (1963) concept of the “spoiled identity” captures the way a criminal conviction can eclipse all other aspects of a person’s character or achievement. Maruna’s (2001) work on redemption narratives underscores how identity change requires not just internal transformation but external validation. Wacquant (2009) situates these issues within the broader logic of the carceral state, revealing how barriers are reproduced through bureaucratic discretion and symbolic violence. Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning, while offering hope, is shown to be limited in its impact without structural change. Inglis (1997) and Evoy (2024) both reveal how adult education and professional identity are shaped by classed, moralised norms, which often work to the disadvantage of those from criminalised or marginalised backgrounds.

Importantly, while this review has identified relevant insights from prison education, adult learning, desistance theory, and professional regulation, it has also uncovered a significant gap in the literature. There is a marked lack of research specifically addressing the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals attempting to become teachers, both in Ireland and internationally. Most of the available literature focuses either on access to education in prison, or on broader issues of re-entry and employment. The intersection between criminal justice, teacher training, and professional regulation remains under-explored.

This absence has real consequences. Without data, narratives, or policy evaluations, assumptions about risk, morality, and suitability go unchallenged. Without research, professional bodies can continue to apply vague criteria without accountability. And without critical scholarship, the voices of those most affected remain unheard in debates about inclusion, professionalism, and justice. In this context, the voices of the participants contained

within this study takes on added value, not just as an academic project, but as a contribution to social dialogue and institutional reflection.

International comparisons suggest that alternatives are possible. The United Kingdom's Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, while not without limitations, offers a more expansive and time-bound approach to spent convictions. Organisations like NACRO work to ensure that criminal records are interpreted fairly in the context of safeguarding. In Australia, the Victorian Institute of Teaching offers conditional registration based on case-by-case risk assessments. These models are far from perfect, but they demonstrate that systems can balance protection and inclusion. They offer practical examples of how institutions can assess character and risk without defaulting to trauma or exclusion.

Ireland's current framework, by contrast, lacks both empathy and clarity. It places the burden of proof on individuals while withholding the standards by which they will be judged. It encourages people to participate in education and then questions the very legitimacy of their inclusion. This contradiction is not merely technical, it is ethical. It reflects a broader discomfort with the idea that people can change, and with the notion that lived experience, particularly of crime and punishment, might enrich rather than diminish a person's capacity to teach.

This literature review has shown that transformation is real. It happens in classrooms, in reflective practice, and in acts of teaching within and beyond the prison walls. But it also revealed that transformation is rarely enough. Without institutional recognition, policy reform, and cultural change, individuals who have done the hard work of change are still likely to encounter more locked doors, that can only be opened at a personal cost.

The journey from incarceration to the classroom is not just about personal ambition, it is a test of how seriously Ireland takes its commitments to inclusion, rehabilitation, and social justice. The education system cannot remain split between rhetorical inclusion and regulatory barriers. If teaching is to be truly representative, empathetic, and transformative, then it must open itself to those who have lived the very struggles education seeks to address.

This review provides the foundation for further empirical research on the lived experiences of those seeking to become teachers after incarceration. It also invites a broader conversation about how society defines professional legitimacy, and who is allowed to embody it.

CHAPTER 03: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study is rooted in an interpretivist research paradigm that prioritises understanding how individuals make sense of their lived realities. Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions, cultural practices, and language. Rather than viewing reality as fixed and measurable, interpretivism suggests that human experiences are fluid, contextual, and embedded in specific social environments (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Cohen, Manion et al., 2018). This philosophical foundation is appropriate for a study that explores how formerly incarcerated individuals experience reintegration into the educational sector, a journey shaped by identity, social stigma, and institutional gatekeeping.

The ontological stance underpinning this research is relativist, meaning that reality is seen as multiple and subjective. Each participant's truth is valid within their own social and psychological context. From this perspective, no single account of the transition from incarceration to education can be considered universally true. Instead, each story reveals important dimensions of how identity is negotiated and performed under specific social conditions (Scotland, 2012). The epistemological position is constructivist, which views knowledge as co-created between researcher and participant. This aligns with the aim of this research to engage deeply with the personal accounts of participants and to interpret how they construct meaning through their experiences. This constructivist position also recognises that the researcher cannot be a neutral observer. As someone with lived experience related to the research context, I occupied a dual role as both insider and investigator. This positioning enriched the depth of engagement with participants, but also introduced dilemmas around familiarity, assumed knowledge, and emotional proximity — all of which required active and ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process.

Phenomenology, as a methodological approach within the interpretivist tradition, is particularly suited to this inquiry. Developed by Edmund Husserl and later refined by thinkers such as Heidegger and van Manen, phenomenology offers a way of understanding the lived and felt dimension of experience (Finlay, 2009; van Manen, 1990; Smith et al., 2009). It emphasises consciousness, intentionality, and perception, recognising that people encounter the world through embodied, affective, and meaning-laden processes. For this study, phenomenology supports a close engagement with how participants made sense of their transitions — not just what happened, but how it was *felt*, interpreted, and carried forward. This orientation is

particularly useful when working with individuals whose life stories have been shaped by stigma, carceral exclusion, and institutional gatekeeping. By focusing on their meaning-making processes, the research remains attentive to subjectivity and emotion, while also exposing how exclusion persists even in spaces of opportunity.

Phenomenological inquiry also supports the exploration of identity as a dynamic and evolving construct. In this study, participants are navigating a shift in their social positioning—from criminalised individuals to trusted educators. Phenomenology enables the analysis of how these individuals make sense of their internal transformations while responding to external perceptions and societal expectations (Smith et al., 2022). Through this lens, their narratives are more than recollections. They are expressions of how participants interpret their own redemption, legitimacy, and purpose within the educational field.

This philosophical and methodological approach supports the core focus of the study — making visible how stigma, identity, and transformation are experienced and narrated by individuals navigating exclusion. By foregrounding lived experience, phenomenology enables attention to the often-unspoken moments in which former prisoners reframe who they are and how they are seen. In my own experience, this process was rarely linear or conscious — identity was something that had to be negotiated again and again, especially in educational and professional spaces. Phenomenology does not treat participants as passive subjects but recognises them as meaning-makers. Their accounts challenge normative assumptions about who is allowed to become a teacher, and in doing so, reclaim agency on their own terms.

Furthermore, this approach integrates seamlessly with the study’s theoretical framework. Theories of stigma (Goffman), transformative learning (Mezirow), and carceral continuity (Wacquant) are well-supported by phenomenological analysis because they all address how individuals make sense of marginalisation, growth, and resistance. Phenomenology creates the space for these concepts to be explored in context, with participants’ stories revealing the interplay between personal transformation and structural constraint.

In conclusion, the use of an interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological method ensures that the research remains focused on understanding experience as it is lived and interpreted by participants. This commitment to subjective meaning, contextual analysis, and identity construction provides a robust foundation for examining the complex realities of individuals transitioning from incarceration into the teaching profession.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by the interpretivist and phenomenological perspectives outlined previously. The objective is to understand how formerly incarcerated individuals interpret their transition into educator roles in Ireland. A qualitative approach is most suitable for this inquiry because it provides the tools necessary to explore complex human experiences that cannot be quantified or reduced to numerical data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). It enables the researcher to capture the meanings participants assign to their past and present, especially in relation to identity, stigma, and professional legitimacy.

Phenomenology, as a specific mode of qualitative inquiry, was selected for its focus on uncovering the essence of lived experiences. Unlike grounded theory or ethnography, phenomenology is not concerned with generating theory or observing group culture. Instead, it seeks to reveal how individuals perceive and make sense of significant experiences in their lives (Smith et al., 2022). In this study, the transition from incarceration to teaching is understood not merely as a change in occupation but as a transformative reconstitution of identity. While this emphasis on personal meaning-making may seem at odds with more structural analyses, such as Wacquant's critique of carceral power, the two are not incompatible. In fact, phenomenology can help illuminate how systems of surveillance and exclusion — what Wacquant might call carceral residue — are felt, internalised, and resisted at the level of lived experience. The phenomenological design allows the researcher to investigate how transformation is narrated by those who have lived through both oppression and the tentative possibilities of renewal.

The choice of phenomenology also aligns with the study's conceptual framework, which centres on lived experience, meaning-making, and personal transformation. This approach supports an inquiry that seeks not just to describe events but to explore how individuals make sense of identity, change, and social constraint. Rather than positioning participants as objects of analysis, phenomenology creates space for their interpretations and insights to shape the narrative. In this way, the methodology provides a grounded platform for examining how formerly incarcerated individuals navigate the tensions between past and present selves, marginalisation and inclusion, and external judgement and self-authorship.

Furthermore, phenomenological design supports a reflexive and relational approach to data collection. The interview process is not simply a method of extracting information but a co-

constructed space in which meaning emerges through dialogue. This is particularly important when working with marginalised populations, where sensitivity, trust, and empathy are essential. The design facilitates open-ended, nuanced discussions that honour the integrity and complexity of each participant's journey.

In sum, the qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to enable a deep, contextualised understanding of how formerly incarcerated individuals make sense of their identities, experiences, and aspirations within the context of working within the Irish education sector.

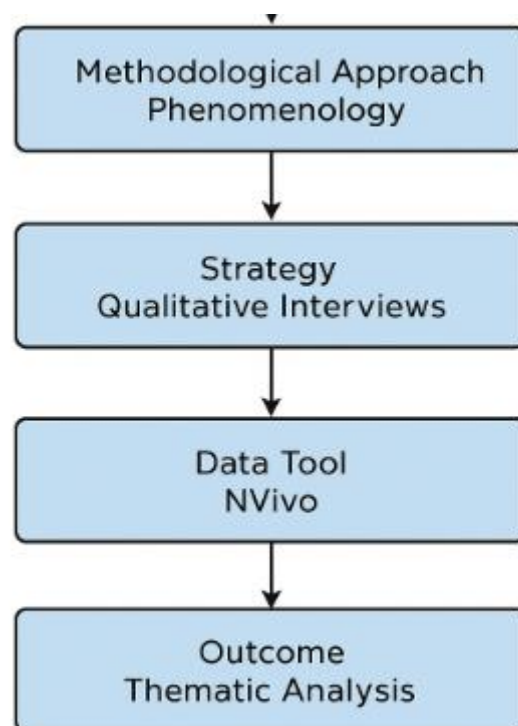


Figure 1. Overview of the interpretivist and phenomenological research design process.

3.3 Participant Selection and Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to identify individuals who could offer rich, experience-based insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is widely used in phenomenological research because it enables the selection of participants who have directly experienced the central phenomenon and are able to articulate its meanings and implications (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, the central phenomenon is the transition from incarceration to teaching, a journey that encompasses personal reinvention, identity negotiation, and professional adaptation.

Six participants were selected: Markus, Liam, Brendan, Jonathan, Aoife, and Michael. All had personal histories of imprisonment and were either engaged in or actively pursuing teacher training or employment within educational settings in Ireland. Drawing on my own experience and existing relationships within this community, I was able to identify and approach individuals whose journeys reflected the core concerns of the study. Participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks, community connections, educational programmes, and referrals from initiatives such as the Education Service to the Prisons. This insider-informed sampling strategy helped ensure that each participant could provide first-hand, in-depth reflections on the challenges and possibilities of pursuing a professional teaching role following release from prison.

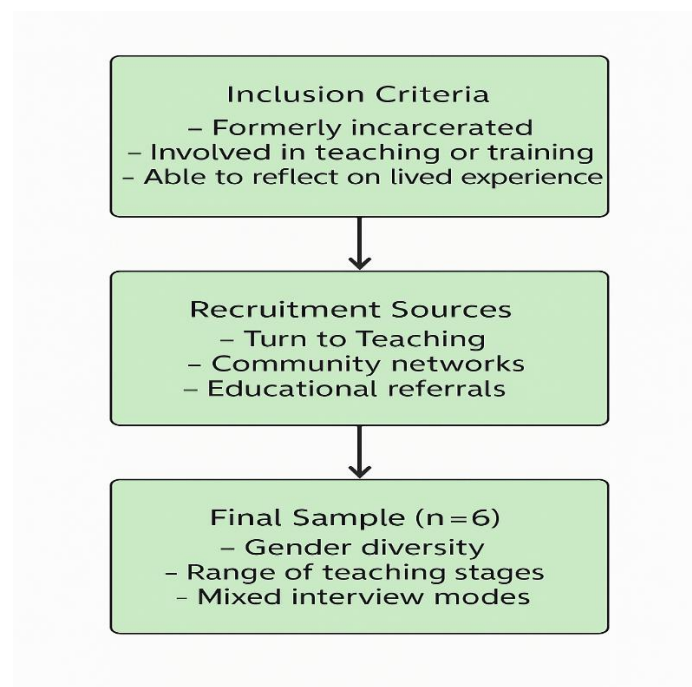


Figure 2. **Participant Recruitment and Inclusion Flow**

Efforts were made to ensure variability in terms of gender, subject specialisation, and stage of engagement with teaching. For example, some participants were undertaking postgraduate teacher education programmes, while others were already working in adult or further education contexts. This heterogeneity was important for capturing a broader spectrum of experiences and avoiding an overly narrow perspective. At the same time, all participants shared the core characteristic of having experienced incarceration and subsequently seeking or securing an educational role, ensuring coherence with the research aims.

Diversity in interview modality was also considered. Interviews were conducted in person, online, or through written responses, depending on participants' availability, comfort levels, and communication preferences. This flexible approach facilitated inclusion and respected the logistical and emotional needs of participants, many of whom were managing competing demands and sensitivities related to their past.

This sample size of six aligns with phenomenological research norms, which privilege depth over breadth. Guest et al. (2020) suggest that six to twelve interviews can be sufficient in studies where participants share a defined experiential context and where the goal is to explore meaning rather than to generalise. In this study, six participants provided enough rich, overlapping data to support thematic saturation — understood here not as the exhaustion of new information, but as the point at which recurring themes could be identified with sufficient variation and nuance. At the same time, the small sample allowed for sustained attention to the unique voice, context, and trajectory of each individual.

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Teaching Stage</i>	<i>Mode of Interview</i>	<i>Background Notes</i>
Markus	Male	Qualified	In-person	Registration conditions, still in prison.
Aoife	Female	Qualified & employed	Written response	Secondary teaching
Liam	Male	In training	Online	Post release centre advocate
Michael	Male	Qualified	Online	Working with young People
Brendan	Male	Qualified & employed	Online	Education in prison
Jonathan	Male	Qualified & employed	In-person	Worked in community education

Table 1. Overview of participant demographics and interview modalities

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, a method well-suited to phenomenological research as it allows participants to articulate meaning in their own words. This flexible yet focused format encouraged deep reflection while remaining aligned with the

study's research questions (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews explored key areas such as stigma, transformation, institutional barriers, and identity reconstruction, while also remaining open to unexpected insights.

Each participant took part in a one-on-one interview, with the mode of interaction tailored to their preferences and circumstances. Three interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, two in person, and one via written response. This multi-modal approach ensured accessibility, comfort, and ethical responsiveness—particularly important given the sensitivities surrounding imprisonment and reintegration.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol that included open-ended questions such as “Can you describe your journey from prison to the classroom?”, “How has your past influenced your role as an educator?”, and “Have you faced any institutional barriers during your transition?” These questions were informed by the study's conceptual framework and were intended to elicit detailed, reflective narratives. However, participants were encouraged to diverge from the guide where relevant, and their responses were followed up with clarifying or exploratory questions. This adaptability helped build rapport and fostered a conversational tone that enhanced the authenticity of the responses.

While my shared background often helped participants feel safe and understood, it also shaped the dynamics of the interviews. In several cases, participants assumed a level of shared understanding, using shorthand or coded references that I recognised immediately. While this sometimes-deepened rapport, it also required me to pause and intentionally probe these moments for clarity and depth, rather than rely on mutual familiarity. This tension between insider knowledge and research rigour was carefully managed to ensure meaning was made visible and accessible for broader analysis.

Data collection was conducted with attention to emotional risk and psychological safety. The researcher approached each conversation with empathy, active listening, and non-judgemental engagement. While no participants requested external support, information on counselling and advocacy services was provided in advance.

All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. For the written interview, the participant provided an extended narrative in response to the same prompts, which was analysed in parallel with the transcripts. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details.

In summary, the use of semi-structured interviews provided a rich and ethically grounded method for capturing the nuanced, reflective accounts that are central to phenomenological research. This approach facilitated the co-construction of meaning and enabled participants to articulate — often with great emotion and insight — how they came to see themselves not just as former prisoners, but as educators. It created space for stories of frustration, hope, resilience, and reinvention to unfold naturally, revealing the deeply personal ways individuals navigate the transition from incarceration into teaching.

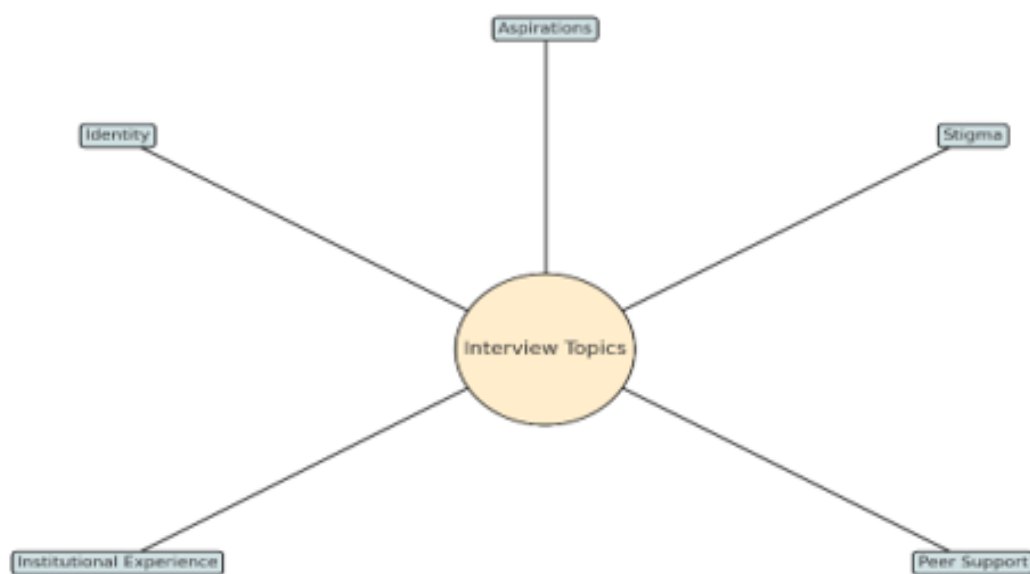


Figure 3: Semi-Structured Interview Guide Structure

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis process in this study was guided by the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019), which is widely recognised for its flexibility and rigour in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is particularly compatible with phenomenology, as it allows for the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns of meaning within rich textual data. The approach enabled the researcher to explore how formerly incarcerated individuals articulate their journeys into teaching, with specific attention to themes of identity, stigma, transformation, and systemic constraint.

3.6 Analytical Framework and Philosophical Fit

Thematic analysis aligns with the interpretivist and phenomenological foundations of this study, allowing for close attention to the complexity and richness of participants' lived narratives. It supports a grounded yet conceptually informed approach to meaning-making, where emergent insights can be critically examined in relation to the study's core questions and theoretical framework. Three guiding principles shaped the analytic process. First, the coding strategy balanced inductive openness with later deductive reflection. Initial codes were developed directly from participant accounts and only later examined through the lens of existing theory. Second, the analysis maintained a strong experience-centred focus, privileging participant voice and interpretation without prematurely imposing abstract assumptions. Finally, themes were developed and refined iteratively, with attention to coherence, divergence, and the integrity of lived experience.

NVivo 14 software was used to support this process. It facilitated secure organisation and storage of transcripts, systematic coding, and the generation of visual tools such as concept maps, matrix queries, and code trees. NVivo also enabled detailed memo writing, which documented evolving interpretations and analytic decisions throughout the project.

The analytic procedure followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step model. Familiarisation began with multiple close readings of transcripts, supported by note-taking and reflective memos that captured affective tone, tensions, and early thematic possibilities. Coding was conducted at both semantic and latent levels using a combination of descriptive and in vivo strategies, ensuring that participants' own language and meanings remained central. Examples of early codes included "feeling judged," "peer encouragement," "teaching as redemption," and "gatekeeping by institutions."

These codes were then grouped into initial themes, guided by conceptual similarity and frequency. NVivo's word frequency and auto-coding tools assisted in identifying potential patterns, which were refined through visual mapping and comparison across transcripts. As themes were reviewed, the analysis actively retained divergent and minority voices to reflect the range of experience. Definitions were developed for each theme, and sub-themes were introduced where greater nuance was required.

The final structure included three overarching themes. *Identity and Stigma* incorporated the sub-themes of Prisoner Identity, Self-Stigma, and Disclosure Anxiety. *Systemic Barriers*

included experiences with Garda vetting and Teaching Council restrictions. *Transformative Elements* drew together narratives of Peer Support and personal growth through education.

To illustrate the relationship between these themes and the conceptual framework, analytic links were made explicit. Goffman’s theory of stigma informed the interpretation of identity concealment and shame; Mezirow’s work on transformative learning illuminated moments of reflection and reorientation; and Wacquant’s analysis of carceral continuity contextualised the institutional reproduction of exclusion through education and regulation.

Matrix queries were also used to examine how thematic patterns varied across the participant sample. NVivo supported cross-case analysis by allowing comparisons of theme presence by pseudonym, intersections between codes such as “self-stigma” and “peer support,” and differences by gender, educational stage, or interview format. A visual matrix was produced to support internal saturation and to demonstrate the shared and differentiated character of participant experiences. This matrix has now been placed in Chapter Three to reflect its role in the analytic process.

Table 1. Matrix Coding Output: Code Presence by Participant (1 = Theme Present)

Participant	Prisoner Identity	Internalised Stigma	Disclosure Anxiety	Peer Support	Education as Transformation	Teaching Council Barriers
Markus	1	1	1	1	1	1
Liam	1	1	1	1	1	1
Michael	0	1	1	1	1	0
Brendan	0	0	1	1	1	1
Jonathan	1	1	1	1	1	1
Aoife	1	1	1	1	1	0

Finally, to ensure rigour and trustworthiness, an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the study. Thematic structures were peer-reviewed by an academic colleague, and participants were re-engaged to confirm the accuracy and context of selected quotations and interpretations.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research involved sensitive subject matter and a potentially vulnerable population, requiring careful ethical planning and ongoing reflection. Ethical approval was obtained from Maynooth University ethics committee prior to data collection. The study adhered to ethical

principles outlined in the university guidelines, ensuring the protection, dignity, and autonomy of all participants.

3.7.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

All participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study. They received an information sheet and signed a consent form prior to participation. For the written interview, informed consent was obtained digitally. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty or need for justification. This safeguard was particularly important given the personal nature of the topics explored.

3.7.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reporting materials. Digital files were encrypted and stored on password-protected USB key, accessible only to the researcher. NVivo files were likewise anonymised and stored securely. In quotations included in Chapters 4 and 5, care was taken to protect participants' identities while preserving the emotional and analytical integrity of their narratives.

3.7.3 Sensitivity to Emotional Risk

Given the potential for emotional distress when discussing incarceration, stigma, or exclusion, interviews were conducted with compassion and care. The researcher adopted a trauma-informed and non-judgemental approach, responding to participants' emotional cues and offering pauses or topic shifts when needed. While no participants requested external support during the study, information about counselling and advocacy services was made available in the participant information sheet.

Respect for Vulnerable Status and Power Dynamics

Recognising the social marginalisation of formerly incarcerated individuals, the researcher was attentive to power dynamics throughout the study. The interview process was structured to prioritise participant voice and agency. Language was inclusive, and questions were open-ended to allow participants to guide the conversation and reflect on what mattered most to them. In summary, ethical integrity was upheld through rigorous planning, compassionate engagement, and commitment to protecting participants' wellbeing, confidentiality, and autonomy. This foundation was essential not only for meeting institutional requirements but

also for building the trust required to explore deeply personal and socially significant experiences.

3.8 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The researcher's positionality was a central consideration throughout this study. As someone who shares a similar background to the participant group, I approached the research with a strong commitment to social inclusion and educational equity. This insider position brought distinct advantages—fostering trust, enabling rapport, and allowing for a deeper emotional understanding of participants' experiences. However, it also introduced challenges that required ongoing reflexive awareness.

A key dilemma emerged during interviews when participants used coded language or referred to prison life in shorthand. For example, during one conversation, Markus referenced “seg time” and “landing rules” without elaboration, assuming I would understand. While I did recognise these terms immediately, I had to resist the urge to move on and instead asked for clarification to ensure that meaning was fully expressed and accessible to readers outside the prison context. This moment reflected a broader tension: insider knowledge deepened connection but risked obscuring the richness of participant narratives if not carefully managed.

There were also points where personal resonance created emotional pull. Liam's account of disclosure anxiety, for instance, mirrored aspects of my own experience. Maintaining critical distance in such moments required conscious effort. To support reflexivity, I kept a journal throughout data collection and analysis to surface assumptions, record emotional responses, and monitor interpretive decisions. Supervisory dialogue also played a vital role in challenging my perspectives and ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participant voice.

In phenomenological terms, these efforts reflected a commitment to *bracketing*—the process of setting aside preconceptions to engage openly with lived experience (van Manen, 2017). Rather than eliminate subjectivity, reflexivity made it visible, allowing the research to benefit from insider insight while remaining critically aware of its limits.

- **Credibility**

Credibility was prioritised through prolonged engagement with the data and participants. Interviews were designed to promote open, reflective dialogue, and participants were re-engaged where clarification was needed. Direct quotations are used throughout the findings chapter to support authenticity and allow readers to trace interpretations back to the original

narratives. Participants were also invited to verify excerpts and thematic interpretations to ensure that their experiences were represented accurately and respectfully.

- **Dependability**

To support dependability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This included detailed records of coding decisions, analytic memos, changes to the interview protocol, and thematic refinements. NVivo software was used to document each phase of the analysis, ensuring that the research process was both traceable and replicable. Consistent documentation helped ensure that the logic of interpretation remained coherent over time.

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability was addressed through ongoing reflexive practice. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record thoughts, assumptions, and emotional reactions during interviews and analysis. These reflections helped surface potential biases and ensured that findings were grounded in participant data rather than researcher expectations. Analytic decisions were shared with an academic supervisor to provide an external check on interpretation.

- **Transferability**

While the study does not seek to generalise findings beyond the specific context, it offers thick description of participant experiences and settings. This allows readers to assess whether insights may be relevant to other contexts, such as re-entry into other professions or different educational systems. Participant diversity in terms of teaching stage, gender, and setting also enhances the scope for broader resonance.

- **Reflexivity**

The researcher's positionality was acknowledged throughout the study. As someone who shares a similar background to participants, but being committed to social inclusion and educational equity, the researcher was aware of the potential for both empathy and bias. Reflexive journaling and supervisory dialogue helped maintain critical distance, while also affirming the ethical commitment to honouring participants lived experiences.

In sum, trustworthiness was achieved through methodological transparency, participant involvement, and critical self-awareness, all of which reinforced the interpretive integrity of the study.

Trustworthiness Criterion	Strategy Used
Credibility	Member checking, prolonged engagement
Dependability	NVivo audit trail, documented coding logic
Confirmability	Reflexive journaling, supervisor review
Transferability	Thick description, diverse sampling

Table 3: Strategies for ensuring qualitative trustworthiness

3.9 Limitations of Methodology

While the methodology adopted for this study is well-suited to its aims and research questions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations relate primarily to the study's scope, participant selection, and methodological choices inherent in qualitative, phenomenological research.

Firstly, the sample size of six participants, though consistent with best practice in phenomenological inquiry, restricts the breadth of perspectives captured. While the emphasis was on depth rather than breadth, the findings cannot be generalised to all formerly incarcerated individuals pursuing careers in teaching. The aim was to provide insight rather than statistical representation, and the voices included offer rich, context-specific narratives rather than universally applicable truths.

Secondly, the study focuses exclusively on individuals within the Irish context. As such, the legal, cultural, and institutional frameworks that shape their experiences may differ significantly from those in other jurisdictions. This contextual specificity enhances the study's relevance to Irish education and justice systems but limits its immediate transferability to international contexts without adaptation.

Another important limitation relates to gender representation. Of the six participants included in this study, only one was female. This imbalance reflects the difficulty in accessing formerly incarcerated women who have pursued or are pursuing teaching roles in Ireland — a group that is statistically smaller and often more marginalised within both criminal justice and education systems. Recruitment challenges were compounded by issues of visibility, trust, and institutional gatekeeping, which made it harder to reach women willing and able to participate. While the experiences shared by the sole female participant provide valuable insight, the overall gender imbalance limits the ability to fully explore how gender may intersect with incarceration and professional identity in educational contexts. Future research should seek to

address this gap by actively prioritising the inclusion of more women, potentially through targeted recruitment strategies or partnerships with women-specific post-prison support services.

A further limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported data through interviews. While this method is essential for capturing lived experience, it is subject to the complexities of memory, self-perception, and social desirability. Participants may have emphasised particular aspects of their journey or withheld others, consciously or unconsciously, in response to the researcher's role and framing.

Additionally, the study does not incorporate the perspectives of institutional stakeholders such as employers, teaching council representatives, or educational policymakers. While this exclusion preserves the centrality of participant voice, it also limits insight into how systemic practices and perceptions are constructed from the institutional side.

In sum, the limitations reflect choices made to prioritise depth, subjectivity, and participant-centred interpretation. They do not undermine the value of the findings but highlight the need for future research to expand the scope and triangulate perspectives across broader samples and institutional contexts.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundation of the study, anchored in an interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological approach. It has detailed how participants were selected, how interviews were conducted and analysed, and how ethical integrity and trustworthiness were upheld throughout. The chosen methodology allowed for deep engagement with the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who have transitioned or are transitioning into teaching roles.

However, the research process also raised complex questions about identity, proximity, and power. As an insider to the context, I was constantly navigating the tension between shared understanding and critical distance. While this position allowed for trust and openness during interviews, it also brought challenges. At times, I had to unlearn what felt instinctively familiar in order to fully listen — not as a peer, but as a researcher responsible for accurately representing each participant's voice.

The act of researching those with stories similar to my own required more than methodological rigour; it demanded self-awareness, humility, and emotional honesty. Reflexivity became not just an academic obligation, but a methodological tool for surfacing insight and checking assumption. In this way, the chapter has not only established the technical structure of the study, but also marked its emotional and ethical terrain.

This reflective and participant-led methodology now forms the foundation for the next chapter, where findings will be presented thematically, informed by both theory and the voices of those who have lived the journey from incarceration to the classroom.

CHAPTER 04: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the core findings of the study, based on in-depth interviews with six individuals who were formerly incarcerated and are now working in or navigating the path into teaching roles in Ireland. Building on the qualitative, phenomenological design outlined in Chapter 3. These narratives offer insight into how participants, with lived experience of imprisonment, understand, manage, and reconstruct their identities in the face of systemic barriers and internalised stigma. While deeply personal, the findings also reflect broader social dynamics, complexities around exclusion, professional recognition and barriers within education or professional contexts.

This chapter is structured around three overarching themes: (1) Identity and Stigma, (2) Systemic Barriers, and (3) Transformative Elements. Each theme includes subthemes that emerged during analysis and are supported by illustrative participant quotes. These quotes are presented alongside interpretation and, where appropriate, are framed using relevant theoretical insights introduced in the literature review. Particular attention is paid to contradictions and points of divergence, as these moments often reveal tensions within the process of becoming and being seen as a teacher.

The chapter concludes with a cross-thematic analysis that highlights intersections between identity, institutional power, and personal transformation. This final section offers a bridge to the discussion chapter by exploring how the findings complicate dominant narratives of rehabilitation, professionalism, and legitimacy in education.

4.1 Overview of Analytical Approach

The analytical process underpinning these findings followed Braun and Clarke's (2019), six-step framework for reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined in Chapter 3. This approach provided a flexible yet systematic structure for engaging with participants' narratives, while maintaining a focus on meaning-making, context, and lived experience. Reflexivity was central throughout the process, supporting a critical engagement with the data and with the researcher's dual identity as both practitioner and someone who has walked this path.

The data analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts, accompanied by detailed to capture emotional tone, initial reactions, and emerging ideas. NVivo software was used to manage the data and organise codes. A combination of in vivo and interpretive codes was generated inductively, with close attention paid to preserving participant language and

nuance. Phrases like “*I still feel like a prisoner*” and “*you’re doing time on paper*” were noted early and became anchors for later subthemes.

As coding developed, patterns began to emerge across the six cases. These were grouped into candidate subthemes, such as prisoner identity, disclosure anxiety, peer support, and Teaching Council conditions. Visual mapping tools were used to examine consistency, co-occurrence, and divergence across participants. The coding was not purely descriptive: it was shaped by the theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review — notably Goffman’s (1963) concepts of stigma and impression management, Wacquant’s (2009) theory of carceral spillover, and Mezirow’s (2000) account of transformative learning. These were not imposed on the data, but used reflexively to deepen the interpretation of participant meaning.

Themes and subthemes were refined and finalised through a process of iterative review. This involved returning to the full dataset to test definitions, compare experiences, and explore contradictions. Particular care was taken to retain divergence and tension, not as outliers to be resolved, but as meaningful elements in the analysis. Where participants described conflicting emotions or shifts in tone, these were treated as important moments, unique to the individual testimony, rather than inconsistencies.

A thematic matrix outlining code distribution by participant was developed during analysis and is included in Chapter Three (Table 2). This matrix was used to map how key subthemes — including prisoner identity, internalised stigma, disclosure anxiety, peer support, and others — were distributed across accounts. It allowed for a comparative view of shared patterns and divergent narratives, supporting internal saturation while respecting the individuality of each participant’s voice. What follows is a more detailed exploration of how these themes were experienced, described, and negotiated in context.

The chapter that follows explores these themes in depth, situating each within the broader context of educational access, structural exclusion, and identity transformation. Each theme includes direct quotes, interpretive commentary, and theoretical framing where it enhances the analysis. The structure of this chapter is designed to keep participant voice central, while offering a critical, theory-informed understanding of their pathways into teaching.

4.2 Theme 1: Identity and Stigma

Across all six narratives, the question of identity surfaced repeatedly. While each participant had made obvious tangible progress in education or was actively pursuing teaching roles, their sense of self remained tethered — at times loosely, at times tightly — to their former prisoner

identity. This identity struggle reflects the “self-stigma empowerment continuum” described by Evans, Pelletier and Szkola (2018), where individuals in prison or post-release often fluctuate between internalised shame and emerging self-worth, particularly in educational settings. This theme explores how participants made sense of who they were in relation to who they had been, and how the lingering effects of stigma, both internal and external, shaped their professional aspirations.

Unlike more linear narratives of rehabilitation or reform, the participants’ stories rarely presented identity as a resolved destination. Instead, identity emerged as something fluid and often contested, shifting under the weight of institutional judgment, social expectations, and personal doubt. Goffman’s (1963) concept of the spoiled identity is useful here, particularly his claim that the management of a discrediting past is often an ongoing process, a theme that echoed across participants’ accounts.

Three key subthemes underpin this broader theme: Prisoner Identity, Self-Stigma, and Disclosure Anxiety. Together, they offer insight into the ways formerly incarcerated individuals navigate their place within a profession that often frames legitimacy through moral optics.

4.2.1 Prisoner Identity

The first subtheme explores how participants continued to experience themselves as criminalised subjects, even while stepping into classrooms as educators.

“No matter what I do, or where I go, I always feel like a prisoner in someone’s eyes, especially my own.” — Jonathan

For most participants in this study, the identity of “prisoner” was not something neatly left behind at the prison gate. Even after years in education and personal transformation, the imprint of incarceration remained, not just as a memory but as an ongoing part of how they were seen and how they saw themselves. Jonathan’s reflection was echoed by others who spoke of the persistent weight of their past, despite external progress. For many, identity after prison was not about reinvention but negotiation — a constant juggling act between who they had become and how the world continued to position them.

The label of “prisoner” operated as a persistent shadow identity, shaping how participants were seen and how they saw themselves — long after release, it continued to surface during vetting, job applications, and even in everyday classroom moments,

“Even when I was in college, there was still this thing following me around — like I was still only a prisoner, but in a different way.”- Markus

His words illustrate what Wacquant (2009) refers to as *carceral residue*: the ongoing reach of the penal system into civic and professional life, even after a sentence was completed. The structures of the carceral state, Wacquant argues, don’t merely punish, they reclassify and relegate, reshaping post-prison identities through bureaucratic and cultural means.

This enduring classification had implications for how participants understood their place in the teaching profession. While they expressed pride in their educational journeys and in the work they were doing with students, especially in adult education and community contexts, there was often an undertone of ambivalence.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m pretending to be a teacher, and any day now someone will say, ‘You’re not supposed to be here.’”- Aoife

This wasn’t simply impostor syndrome in the usual sense (the feeling of being a fraud despite evidence of competence; see Clance & Imes, 1978)—it was compounded by the awareness that their histories could be reactivated at any moment through disclosure or institutional scrutiny. This conclusion emerged from participants’ reflections on the constant tension between belonging and exposure, revealing that their self-doubt was intensified by the real risk of past convictions being reawakened through vetting or disclosure. Several participants described moments when they felt reduced to their criminal record, regardless of their qualifications.

“They didn’t ask about my degree or my experience. It was all about what I did fifteen years ago. Like that’s the only thing that matters.”- Brendan

Such experiences illustrate what Goffman (1963) identifies as *spoiled identity*, where past stigma is reasserted in new contexts, undermining the individual’s current role and accomplishments. Goffman’s work on *impression management* also speaks to the ongoing effort participants described in curating how they are seen, navigating disclosure, and constantly weighing whether to reveal or conceal. Yet this identity was not only externally imposed — it was also internally sustained. When discussing self-identity several participants acknowledged that, even in moments of achievement, they continued to see themselves through the lens of their past.

“There’s this thing in your head that tells you, no matter what you do, you’re still that bloke that ended up where I ended up.”- Markus reflected

Also, the participant expressed a similar struggle, saying:

“You can have all the degrees in the world, but part of you still walks like you’re being watched. Like you don’t fully belong.” - Michael

For many, identity remained contingent and fragile — shaped by setting, audience, and stakes. It often had to be actively renegotiated in unfamiliar or professionally exposing situations.

Despite these challenges, none of the participants rejected their pasts entirely. For some, embracing the label of “ex-prisoner” was not just a personal stance but a deliberate pedagogical and political act, a way to challenge stigma by confronting it publicly.

This act of self-identification served as a form of critical pedagogy, modelling openness and resilience for their learners — many of whom carried their own stigmas. Jonathan noted,

“I don’t hide it. It’s part of what makes me good at this. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

In this way, prisoner identity was not just a site of limitation but also of potential resistance and pedagogical authenticity. As adult educators, participants used their lived experience not as a deficit but as a resource, aligning with ALE principles of experiential learning and critical reflection. This echoes Freire’s (1970) conception of *conscientização* — the development of critical consciousness through naming one’s reality and using it to transform the world through dialogue. Similarly, Merrill and West (2009) argue that biography is not peripheral to adult education but central to its most transformative forms. By making their stories visible, participants enacted a pedagogy grounded in lived experience, one that disrupted conventional avenues of knowledge and affirmed the educative power of survival, failure, and change. Still, as the next subtheme will explore, carrying this identity came at a cost, particularly when its internalisation became a barrier to self-belief.

4.2.2 Self-Stigma

While the previous section explored how participants strategically engaged with the label of “ex-prisoner,” this subtheme focuses on the internalised weight of that identity. For many, the boundaries of incarceration extended far beyond prison walls. The most enduring constraints were not always imposed by institutions, but internalised through the lingering weight of shame. Participants described a persistent sense of unworthiness that continued to shape how they viewed themselves and their capacity to belong in professional, educational, and social spaces.

“You don’t need anyone to remind you who you were. You wake up with it. You carry it. It’s in your head most days.” — Michael

Michael’s words speak to a form of identity embedded not just in memory, but in embodiment. The sense of being “marked,” even when others could not see it, surfaced across several interviews. One described this feeling in terms of invisibility and performance:

“I used to walk into the classroom and think, ‘What if they knew?’ I could be smiling, teaching, doing great — but part of me felt like a fake. Like I was still hiding something dirty.” - Brendan

This internalised stigma reflects what Goffman (1963) called the “discreditable” identity, one that is potentially spoiled, even if not visibly so. Participants constantly managed how much of themselves to reveal, and how to live with what remained concealed. The shame most of them spoke about was not always linked to the crime itself, but to how they believed others would judge them if the truth ever emerged. In this way, self-stigma was shaped by anticipated rejection.

“They don’t even have to say anything. You just feel it coming before it happens. So, you hide, even before anyone’s looked at you.” — Aoife

Aoife’s reflection captures the anticipatory nature of stigma. The fear of judgement led participants to censor themselves, withdraw, or avoid professional situations where disclosure might occur. This meant questioning his right to pursue teaching in the first place:

“There was a point where I thought, what’s the use? Why go through college, do all this, just to be told ‘no’ when they see your past? So, you start thinking, maybe I don’t deserve it anyway.” - Liam

This aligns closely with Corrigan et al.’s (2009) concept of the “why try” effect, a psychological consequence of self-stigma where individuals internalise society’s low expectations and begin to self-exclude from opportunities. Liam’s questioning wasn’t about his ability, but his perceived legitimacy. Participants weren’t only battling systems of exclusion; they were also navigating their own internalised narratives that threatened to undermine progress from within themselves.

“You try to change your life, you get clean, you study, you teach — but some part of you still say’s to you, ‘Who do you think you are?’” — Markus

This inner voice, sceptical, shaming and persistent, reveals how deeply stigma becomes embedded in the interviewee's concept of self. Even as participants achieved educational and professional milestones, many remained haunted by doubt. Jonathan noted that it wasn't just a matter of time passing, but of "earning" a new sense of self — and even then, it felt precarious.

What emerged across accounts was an inner struggle between past and present identities. Self-stigma wasn't static; it evolved, resurfaced, and sometimes receded in response to the context in which one found themselves. Several participants described themselves in conflicted terms. Brendan said he was:

"Still a prisoner at heart,"

Liam described himself as:

"Someone who just got lucky,"

and Markus referred to himself as:

"A prisoner in a teacher's jacket."

This internal dialogue was often marked by doubt, where moments of confidence were quickly followed by reminders of their past. Some participants described this as a burden they carried alone, even when outwardly succeeding. This unspoken dimension of internal gatekeeping of self-worth underscores the emotional cost of entering professional life after time spent in prison. It echoes Butler's (2005) argument that our identities are always narrated through frameworks sanctioned by society, where the ability to give a coherent, acceptable account of oneself is shaped by the very norms that once excluded us. For these participants, becoming recognised as "teachers" required more than competence; it demanded a reworking of self in systems still haunted by their histories.

4.2.3 Disclosure Anxiety

Across all interviews, the topic of disclosure emerged as a potent and recurring concern. While it may seem like a one-time event, participants described it as a continuous process, tied not only to legal requirements but also to the careful management of identity. The act of revealing a criminal conviction was rarely neutral; it was charged with risk, emotion, and unpredictability. Disclosure was not just about the past; it was about the stakes of the present and the uncertainty of the future all had worked hard to achieve.

“It’s not like you disclose once and it’s done. Every new job, every new form, you’re back to square one. You never really stop going through it.” – Aoife

This recursive nature of disclosure created a sense of enduring vulnerability. Even after years of education, training, and voluntary service, participants remained acutely aware that their past could re-emerge at any given moment, jeopardising everything they had built. Disclosure, in this sense, was not a single hurdle but an ongoing test, a kind of ethical tightrope between honesty and self-protection. For Jonathan, the stakes became painfully real when he pre-emptively disclosed during a teaching placement meeting:

“I told them up front, because I wanted to be honest. They said it wasn’t a problem. Then the vetting came back and the placement disappeared. That was it. I was out.”

His experience reveals the fragility of trust and the ways in which institutions can default to caution once formal records are involved. This aligns with Wacquant’s (2009) notion of *carceral leakage*, where punishment seeps into the civilian world through bureaucratic processes, background checks, and moral judgments, long after custodial sentences have ended.

Yet not all experiences of disclosure were solely negative. Markus recalled an unexpected moment of affirmation during his college teacher training interview:

“I said it in the interview, straight out. And the guy just goes, ‘Fair play to you.’ That’s what he said. ‘Fair play to you for getting this far.’ And I’ll never forget it.”

This response stood out not only because it was rare, but because it disrupted Markus’s expectations. It showed that disclosure could sometimes create space for recognition, even respect. But even these moments were delicate. As Markus reflected later in the interview

“You remember the good ones because there’s not many.”

These rare affirming encounters didn’t erase the anxiety, they coexisted with it, underscoring how unusual positive reactions were in an environment steeped in surveillance and suspicion. Other participants described developing careful strategies of *selective disclosure*. Brendan spoke of learning to read the room:

“You get good at reading people. You start to know who needs the whole story, who just needs the basics. You disclose, but you do it in a way that lets them still see you as capable.”

This approach reflects Goffman’s (1963) theory of *impression management* — the idea that individuals actively curate how they are perceived in social settings, particularly when

managing a stigmatised identity. Brendan's disclosure was calibrated, not deceitful. He framed it as a way to preserve his dignity and to avoid being reduced to his past. Others described outright avoidance. Liam explained:

"I didn't say anything until I had to. Because I knew if I said it early, that'd be it. They'd never see past it. I've been here before"

This withholding strategy was often born not from shame, but from experience. Five of the six participants described learning often the hard way that full transparency did not guarantee fairness, and that early disclosure sometimes led to premature exclusion. Jonathan shared that disclosing during college interviews had once resulted in a withdrawn placement. Brendan explained that he delayed mentioning his past until trust was built:

"If you say it too early, that's all they see — not the degree, not the work, just the record."

Even Markus, who spoke openly in other contexts, described disclosure as not a moral obligation.

"a tactical choice,"

These experiences taught participants that managing the timing and framing of their histories was essential to navigating professional life. And yet, some did find empowerment in controlling the narrative. Aoife reflected:

"In the end, the ones who will find out anyway, I always tell them myself. I'd rather they hear it from me than from someone else or the internet. That way I can explain who I am now, not who I was."

Aoife's mention of *articles online* introduces a modern twist to disclosure, the digital permanence of criminal records. Several participants worried about media coverage still lingering online, outside of their control. Even when names weren't mentioned, or articles were years old, the fear remained that someone might connect the dots. As one participant put it,

"The internet doesn't forget, just because you're trying to move on. Sadly, it doesn't work like that"

This challenge the digital trace that cannot be erased makes disclosure more than a personal decision. It becomes a reactive process, one shaped by the potential actions of others. Disclosure is no longer just about forms and conversations; it's about anticipating what someone might Google, what might surface, and how that might change everything.

While all participants viewed disclosure as a site of risk, four of the six saw it as a test of integrity, a way to own their story and demonstrate accountability. But even then, the anxiety never fully disappeared. The recurring theme was not the act of disclosure itself, but the unpredictability of how it would be received. Would it lead to understanding, or rejection? Support, or silence? This tension, between honesty and protection, between transparency and self-preservation, sits at the heart of the findings. It also raises a broader question: If our systems claim to support rehabilitation, why does disclosing evidence of that journey often result in exclusion?

4.3 Theme 2: Systemic Barriers

While participants in this study demonstrated resilience, self-awareness, and professional commitment, they encountered serious systemic barriers, that in the end did not obstruct their entry into teaching, it did however make the journey more fraught and extremely complicated. These obstacles did not stem from a lack of qualification or capability, but from the constant effects of a criminal conviction in tightly regulated professional spaces such as teaching. For participants, becoming a teacher involved more than gaining a degree; it required navigating opaque institutional processes, unpredictable outcomes, and enduring stigma. This theme explores three key barriers:

The Teaching Council's regulatory framework, the Garda vetting system, and a broader institutional culture of gatekeeping that frames some individuals as permanent risks. These are not neutral processes, they reflect deeper assumptions about trust, morality, and professionalism. As Wacquant (2009) argues, the penal state extends well beyond prison gates, shaping how institutions regulate re-entry into civic life. In Ireland, the Teaching Council operates as a filter of legitimacy, determining who may enter the teaching profession and under what conditions. Bates Evoy (2018) highlights how this filtering process is especially fraught in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector, where lived experience and non-traditional routes into teaching are often undervalued or misread. These systems rarely exclude outright, but participants described how they consistently encountered subtle signals of misrecognition reinforcing a sense of conditional belonging, even after years of transformation.

4.3.1 Teaching Council

As of early 2025, the Teaching Council had processed over 122,000 vetting applications since assuming responsibility for vetting in education (Teaching Council, 2025). While this volume demonstrates the scale of safeguarding efforts, it also reflects a shift in power where teaching

eligibility is increasingly regulated through background checks and administrative scrutiny. For those with criminal convictions, this system can feel less like protection and more like persistent punishment. Participants in this study described the vetting process not as a formality, but as a site of fear, exposure, and potential exclusion. For all six participants, the Teaching Council represented one of the most significant and anxiety-inducing hurdles. While none disputed the Council's need to assess fitness to teach, they found its processes opaque, inconsistent, and slow-moving, particularly in cases involving previous convictions.

Jonathan recounted the uncertainty he faced:

“I had the degree, the placement, the backing of my tutors. But once it went to the Council, everything just stopped. Months went by. I couldn't plan anything. No one would give me a straight answer.”

His experience reflects not only bureaucratic delay but the emotional and professional limbo it creates. The lack of transparent timelines or clear outcomes placed participants in an extended state of uncertainty, undermining their sense of professional identity.

Michael, similarly, described the Council's process as vague:

“It was like there was no real criteria. I was told there would be a review of my case by the panel, then silence. Eventually they said I could teach adults, but not kids. No explanation. Just a condition stamped on me.”

That condition — allowing him to teach only in adult education — illustrates how regulatory decisions often carry symbolic as well as practical weight. They mark individuals as different, potentially unsafe, even when they have completed accredited teacher training. As Goffman (1963) suggests, institutions often communicate stigma not through open rejection, but through partial acceptance laced with restriction. Michael's case exemplifies what Bates Evoy (2018) identifies as a tension within the FET sector: the gap between inclusive rhetoric and exclusionary practices. Liam's experience added another dimension. He described being asked for character references and written explanations, even after disclosing his past and completing placements:

“They wanted proof that I'd changed, and that's fair, but it went on and on, again and again, like I had to keep proving I wasn't that person anymore. But who decides when that proof is enough? I nearly gave up”

Another striking example came from Markus, who recalled being questioned by the Teaching Council about news articles that had surfaced during his registration:

“They brought up an old article from years ago. Half the stuff in it wasn’t even true. They didn’t ask about my degree, my teaching, just that. It was like that one story defined me.”

These accounts capture the enduring power of public narratives which impact future opportunities. Despite academic achievement and professional readiness, the participant’s identity remained constrained by a reductive processes and outdated media portrayals. As Maruna and LeBel (2010) argue, successful reintegration depends not only on desistance from crime, but on the ability to author a new, socially recognised identity — what they call a *redemption script*. Yet institutions, including the Teaching Council, may inadvertently undermine this narrative by relying on *condemnation script* preserved in digital or media archives. In doing so, they participate in what Maruna identifies as *narrative failure*, where the past is allowed to define the present regardless of personal transformation. This dynamic mirrors the structural barriers to inclusion that many formerly incarcerated individuals face years after the original sentence has been completed, where stigma is maintained not through overt exclusion, but through the silent authority of records, headlines, and outdated identities. Despite these challenges, participants remained committed to their teaching ambitions. They navigated disclosure, delays, and conditional approvals with frustration but also with a strong belief in their own capacity. The issue was never about their ability to teach; it was about how the system read their histories.

As Brendan put it:

“I’ve worked in addiction services, youth projects, classrooms — I had done the job. But still, when it came to the Council, that was the biggest trauma. It took three attempts for me to be registered.”

While most applicants with convictions are ultimately permitted to register with the Teaching Council (Teaching Council, 2025), this statistical outcome offers little comfort in the moment of waiting. For participants, the process itself marked by uncertainty, prolonged delays, and opaque discretionary conditions was experienced as an extension of carceral control. The period between application and outcome was described as a time of heightened anxiety and self-surveillance, where past identities were reactivated and placed under institutional scrutiny. Wacquant (2009) observes that the carceral state extends well beyond prison walls, seeping into administrative systems that govern everyday access to civil and professional life. What

surfaced in these narratives was not outright denial, but a steady disruption of confidence and stability.

As Goffman (1963) argues, stigma often exerts its power not through direct exclusion, but through conditional inclusion provisional acceptance that is dependent on others' ongoing assessments of risk. This resonates with Bates Evoy's (2018) analysis of Further Education in Ireland, where the inclusive ethos frequently clashes with institutional cultures of compliance and risk aversion. For participants in this study, such tensions became especially visible during moments of professional transition registration, placement, or vetting where decisions could hinge more on past convictions than present capacity. Delays, requests for additional character references, and vague or shifting conditions were not uncommon, and often felt disproportionate to participants' qualifications or demonstrated abilities. These experiences echoed Bates Evoy's concern that inclusion, particularly for those with non-traditional trajectories, is often contingent and fraught. For many, eventual acceptance did little to lessen the emotional toll or symbolic message: that transformation, while encouraged rhetorically, must still be repeatedly proven. Their pasts, no matter how far behind, remained something to justify, explain, and manage even within a profession that claims to value growth and lived experience.

4.3.2 Garda Vetting

For all participants in this study, Garda vetting was not a one-time hurdle to be traversed but a recurring barrier that cast a long shadow over their professional aspirations. Even after completing degrees, teacher training, and placements, the vetting process will continue to retain the power to revoke opportunity at the final moment. It is not the conviction itself that is the issue, participants had long since disclosed their pasts, but rather how vetting formalised this past into an institutional red flag that could override trust already built.

Markus described the uncertainty bluntly:

"You don't know what they're going to say. Every time I've done it, it's never the same and I could be waiting months, and there's no update. You're stuck in limbo, there is no one to ask, what's going on?"

Several participants noted that the vetting process took months longer for them than for their peers. In many cases, the delays weren't accompanied by explanations, leaving them feeling both powerless and singled out. This extended scrutiny often resulted in feelings of

marginalisation, reinforcing the notion that, despite their achievements and qualifications, they remained under suspicion.

Jonathan reflected:

“Everyone else got theirs back in a few weeks. I was waiting nearly six months. And you’re sitting there thinking they’re reading every detail of your past, every charge, even ones I was never convicted of.”

Participants described a “bout of panic,” a constant worry that their progress could be reversed by forces beyond their control. For those in this study, vetting was not simply a safety check, it was experienced as a reactivation of institutional power, where old narratives were revisited under the guise of assessment. The logic of punishment, as several described, seemed to persist long after release, reframed as professional scrutiny.

Brendan expressed it this way:

“It’s like you never get to move on. You’re not in the cell anymore, but you’re still being watched. Still being judged.”

The psychological weight of vetting often led participants to question whether their ambitions were truly viable. Even when the process ended in approval, the experience was not empowering. Aoife shared:

“I got through it, eventually. But I was different after. I don’t trust it now I don’t trust that I’m ever fully accepted. It’s like I passed, until the next time. I really just want a life where this is behind me. I did my sentence, served my time, why can’t I just move on?”

What stands out in Aoife’s comment is the sense of conditional legitimacy, that permission had been granted, but without a full embrace of her professional identity. She remained conscious of the system’s power to revoke what had been allowed a form of institutional precarity that is another example linking Wacquant’s (2009) carceral logic further embedded in civil life. It was not physical punishment, but a kind of conditional legitimacy sustained through procedural opacity."

Others described how vetting triggered feelings of shame they thought they had already processed. Liam explained:

“I thought I’d dealt with my past, put it behind me, but when I saw it all written down, all official like, it hit me again. It was like being dragged back there. The shame of it.”

Here, the vetting document itself becomes a site of not just stigma, but also trauma, an institutional artefact that reactivates past identities. In Goffman's (1963) terms, the "spoiled identity" is not just remembered but reissued every time a vetting comes back. For participants, this paper trail often stood in tension with their sense of personal growth and transformation. While all participants were eventually cleared to register a fact that deserves emphasis many still felt that the process functioned more as a test of character than of eligibility. They spoke of "performing remorse," of anticipating what officials wanted to see. Brendan reflected:

"You learn to write it the right way, to show you've changed, to prove it. But who decides when enough is enough? Who gets to say you're safe now?"

These questions point to the discretionary character of the vetting process one that, despite formal guidelines, still relies on human interpretation and judgement. That said, not all vetting experiences were negative. One participant encountered a rare compassionate and pragmatic response, from an individual likely familiar with the context:

"One principal said, 'I see what you've done since. That matters more so don't worry about it.' That stuck with me, really meant so much, it was an emotional moment for me."- Aoife explained

Moments like this did not erase the stress of vetting, but they disrupted the dominant narrative. They offered proof that professional judgment could be human, not just procedural, that discretion and common sense could serve better than avoidance or judgement. Vetting was experienced not just as an administrative step, but as a moment of reckoning, or a process that re-inscribed past experiences onto the present self. The participants' accounts suggest that while vetting is intended to ensure safety, its current form also reproduces stigma, trauma, and moral scrutiny. If individuals can pass through the vetting process yet still feel untrusted, what does that say about the limits of procedural inclusion? Can a system design for risk management ever truly recognise rehabilitation, or is it fated to extend suspicion on a person indefinitely?

4.3.3 Navigating Institutional Gatekeeping

While much attention was given to formal barriers such as vetting and registration, participants also described a deeper layer of obstruction rooted in informal institutional practices and unclear decision-making. These forms of gatekeeping often occurred at the level of placement providers, college staff, or administrative actors' individuals or bodies not officially tasked with deciding who becomes a teacher but who nonetheless exerted decisive influence.

Brendan recalled an early moment in his teacher training when he felt discouraged before even beginning:

“One of the tutors said to me off the record ‘With your past, I’m not sure this is the right course for you.’ That stayed with me. I hadn’t even started yet.”

This subtle, almost offhand suggestion had a chilling effect. It was not a formal denial, but a gesture that carried institutional weight. As Foucault (1977) argued, power often operates not through direct punishment but through the regulation of possibilities, shaping what can be imagined, encouraged, or permitted. Brendan’s experience reflects the internalisation of such micro-level control, where dissuasion replaces open exclusion.

Liam shared a different, more encounter:

“There was nothing in writing, no official reason. Just radio silence. I applied for three placements who were aware of my background and heard nothing back. It’s like I was screened out before I even got a chance.”

Markus’s story adds further complexity:

“I had one person in the college who backed me, and that made all the difference. They went out of their way for me to get a placement. But without them? I don’t think I’d be here.”

This underscores the importance of individual advocates within institutions, what some participants called “mentors.” These individuals, often tutors or someone with a similar background, functioned as boundary-negotiators, pushing back against institutional bias. Their role complicates a binary view of institutions as wholly obstructive. Instead, it reveals a terrain of negotiation, where access often depends on interpersonal relationships rather than transparent procedures.

Aoife described a moment of contradiction between formal policy and personal judgment:

“They told me officially that my past wouldn’t be an issue. But one of the lecturers said, ‘We’ll have to think very carefully about where you do your placement.’ That said it all.”

Here, formal inclusion is undercut by informal reservation. Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma is again relevant, not simply because of the participant’s conviction, but because of how institutional actors “manage” their presence through cautious language, hedging, and discretionary decision-making. The persistent gap between written policy and lived experience

is a structural site of tension, one that consistently shapes how inclusion is felt and negotiated. Jonathan was blunter:

“If someone high enough up doesn’t want you there, you’re not getting in. Simple as that.”

His comment and previous statements highlight the concentration of power within institutional hierarchies. While systems may appear procedural and fair, participants described how discretionary authority often overrides inclusive policies. This raises pressing questions about accountability in educational spaces: Who determines what level of “risk” is acceptable? And on what basis? This is not simply a critique of individual policy decisions, but a broader insight into how institutional gatekeeping often functions through interpretation as much as through formal rules. Access is not solely determined by what is written, but by how it is read, by whom, and under what conditions. Participants’ experiences of delayed Garda vetting results, conditional Teaching Council responses, and unexplained placement barriers illustrate how informal judgments, hidden bureaucracies, and unchecked discretion shape outcomes. What appears procedural on the surface can, in practice, hinge on unspoken norms and shifting assessments of risk. These reflections underscore how the vetting process, though governed by formal procedures, inevitably involves subjective interpretation not as an exception, but as a built-in feature of how professional judgment operates.

4.3.4 Transformative Elements

While much of the journey into teaching was marked by institutional resistance and personal risk, participants also spoke of moments of growth, resilience, and empowerment. These transformative elements were not framed as linear victories, but as ongoing processes grounded in relational, emotional, and intellectual shifts. For all, the classroom, whether in prison, college, or community settings, became a space where they began to reimagine who they could be. These shifts were not merely educational in the traditional sense, but deeply existential and identity-forming. What emerged strongly across accounts was the role of peer support, critical learning, and purpose-driven teaching in reconstructing a new identity and resisting internalised stigma. These were not abstract concepts but lived experiences grounded in solidarity, self-recognition, and moments of being seen differently by others- and more importantly- by themselves. For some, it was the first time they had been recognised for their ability rather than their past. Others described how teaching became a way of reclaiming legitimacy and contributing to their communities. The transformative processes described here align with key aspects of Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) theory of adult learning, particularly the role

of disorienting dilemmas in prompting critical self-reflection and shifts in perspective. While the theoretical language of transformation was not used by participants themselves, their accounts pointed to specific psychological and emotional changes. These included: reclaiming a sense of purpose, reframing their identity beyond criminality, and experiencing renewed confidence through acts of trust and recognition. Markus described how supporting others in prison through fitness and overdose prevention helped him feel

“Like I had a purpose again.”

Liam reflected on being seen differently in college

“Not as someone with a past, but as someone who could help others move forward.”

For Michael, being trusted to teach felt like a turning point:

“I realised I could actually do this not pretend, not blag it, but really do it.”

Such shifts may not have been articulated in formal terms, but they represented meaningful changes in self-perception and motivation what Mezirow might call the beginning of a new frame of reference. These changes align with what Evans et al. (2018, p. 6) describe as an “empowerment continuum” a process of identity rebuilding that happens gradually, through learning and shared experience. What was transformed was not just how participants understood education, but how they understood themselves: not as broken or deviant, but as people with insight, strength, and something meaningful to contribute. The following subthemes explore how peer dialogue, educational opportunities, and emerging forms of professional belonging all played a role in that shift.

Conditions of change and transformation

For all participants, peer support was not simply helpful it was fundamental to their journey. The relationships they formed with others who had similar lived experience offered a rare space of understanding, safety, and motivation. Several described how it was only through seeing someone “like me” succeed in education or stand in front of a classroom that the possibility of becoming a teacher felt real. Peer relationships disrupted the isolation that often-followed release and countered the dominant messages of unworthiness they had internalised. Michael reflected on his early doubts about higher education and how meeting others on a similar path helped him reframe his expectations:

“I remember thinking; this isn’t for people like me. And then you meet someone with a story like yours who’s smashing it suddenly, you’re thinking, just maybe I can do it too.”

These moments of recognition of being seen and seeing oneself in others can mark the beginnings of what Freire (1970, p. 66) called *conscientização*: the emergence of critical consciousness through dialogue that reveals structural oppression and the possibility of change. Peer conversations often served as informal pedagogy, helping participants develop confidence, challenge stigma, and build realistic but hopeful goals. For some, this began in prison classrooms; for others, in community projects or mentoring arranged with past students by lecturers.

Brendan described the impact of mentoring others while still inside:

“Even when I was in prison, I was doing literacy work with lads. I didn’t think of it as teaching at the time — but that’s where it all kind of started for me. Seeing that I could help someone, that I had something to offer.”

His experience reflects what Mezirow (2000) would describe as a transformative shift — one in which new roles are tried on and internalised through reflective engagement. Yet for Brendan, it wasn’t abstract theory that drove change; it was the moment of being useful, of having knowledge that mattered to someone else. Peer support created a feedback loop of confidence, purpose, and re-imagined identity. Liam also credited peer spaces with helping him navigate the emotional toll of disclosure and rejection. He recalled one meeting in a college support group:

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

Peer support, in this sense, functioned not just as encouragement but as epistemic grounding. It became a counterbalance to the dominant narratives of risk and unfitness that participants faced in formal institutions. As Bates Evoy (2024) suggests in her work on practitioner identities, relational support in the further education sector can foster professional self-belief in those whose backgrounds place them at the margins of legitimacy. It is important to note that peer support was not universally accessible and was usually ad hoc. Some participants spoke of having no one to talk to during key transitions, particularly when navigating Teaching

Council procedures or applying for placements. The absence of a shared experiences or identity exacerbated feelings of isolation. Markus put it plainly:

“I was googling everything. There was no one I could ask, no roadmap. Just me, the forms, and the silence.”

This absence highlights the need for institutional structures that go beyond formal access and actively cultivate peer-informed support models. Where such structures existed, in college access programmes, prison education groups, or lived experience networks, they made a profound difference.

4.3.5 Education as Redemption and Transformation

For every participant, education represented more than a pathway to employment — it was described as a form of personal redemption, a chance to rewrite narratives shaped by past incarceration, addiction, or exclusion. This redemptive quality was not always immediate or uncomplicated. Participants spoke of slow, sometimes painful shifts in how they saw themselves, often prompted by classroom experiences, peer validation, or moments of academic achievement that disrupted long-held assumptions. Jonathan reflected on how returning to education after prison became a catalyst for identity transformation. Initially, he felt alienated and unsure of his place, but the process of academic engagement began to shift his self-perception:

“At the start, I didn’t belong there. Sitting in lectures with people ten years younger than me, using big words, and I’m thinking — I shouldn’t be here. But then I started handing in assignments, getting feedback. It changed something in me. It wasn’t just passing. It was proving to myself I could be more than just an ex-prisoner.”

This quote captures a moment of transition from self-doubt to self-recognition — a clear example of what Mezirow (2000) describes as transformative learning, where critical reflection leads to a redefinition of one’s identity and capabilities. Jonathan’s shift was not abstract; it was grounded in tangible academic practices and internal validation. For Liam, education didn’t offer instant redemption, but it created the conditions for it. In early recovery, still uncertain and *“a bit shaky,”* he described college as something steady to hold onto, a place where learning became a way to rebuild self-worth.

“I was in early recovery, still a bit shaky in myself. But college gave me a good routine, something solid to hold on to. I was learning things I knew a little bit about psychology,

youth work, addiction. And I started seeing myself differently. Maybe I can actually do this stuff.”

This moment wasn't a completed transformation, but it marked the beginning of one. Liam's narrative reflects a shift in self-perception from surviving to slowly believing he had something of value to offer. Drawing on Goffman (1963, p. 14), this could be seen as the early management of a spoiled identity, not through concealment, but through contribution and participation. The transformation here is subtle but significant: a change in how Liam viewed his capabilities and potential, even if full self-belief was still emerging. But the transformation was rarely straightforward. Markus spoke about the language of academia as a barrier:

“I found the college talk hard all that academic speak. I'd be sitting there thinking, what are they even saying? It felt like I was back in school, but this time I knew I couldn't just run. I had to stick this one out, because I knew what was on the other side.”

His comment reflects a tension within the redemptive narrative that transformation through education can be fraught with moments of alienation, especially for those who associate formal education with earlier experiences of exclusion or humiliation. Bates Evoy (2024) critiques how institutional discourse in further education can both enable and constrain adult learners, depending on their familiarity with the dominant norms of academic language and behaviour. This experience can be understood through Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, which suggests that success in educational spaces often depends not only on ability, but on possession of the linguistic and symbolic resources valued by the institution. For learners from marginalised or working-class backgrounds, academic discourse may feel like a “foreign language,” further entrenching a sense of not belonging. What is often framed as “difficulty with the material” may in fact reflect deeper structural misrecognition a clash between habitus and institutional expectations. For some, the shift in identity was less about confidence and more about contribution. Brendan, now working in education, described this transformation not just in terms of self, but of role:

“It's not just about me anymore. It's about what I can bring into the room lived experience, empathy, honesty. That's what makes me a teacher now.”

This illustrates a deeper turn in the journey, where transformation isn't only internal, but also relational and professional. The process aligns with Brookfield's (1995) concept of critical reflection, where learners move from personal insight to collective contribution, shaping not

only their identity but their praxis. Still, not everyone experienced education as a clean arc of redemption. Michael described moments of doubt even as he progressed:

“I was flying through the course, but I kept thinking what if they Google me? What if they find out? So even when I was doing well, it was like there was this cloud.”

Here, transformation sits alongside anticipatory stigma, demonstrating that even redemptive experiences are shadowed by fear of re-disclosure. This duality complicates any linear story of rehabilitation, reminding us that identity reconstruction in the post-prison context is often unstable and contingent.

In sum, education for these participants was not just a means to an end, but as Michael put it

“A way to prove to myself I could be something else, something different.”

It offered structure, like Liam described when he said college gave him

“Something solid to hold on to,”

and it offered validation, especially in moments when tutors or peers recognised their potential. For Brendan, being seen as more than his record was

“Like getting my name back.”

These experiences allowed participants to shift not just public perceptions, but their own internal narratives of who they were and who they could become.

But these shifts were not without cost. Markus spoke of

“Still feeling like a prisoner in a teacher’s jacket,”

highlighting how transformation remained fragile. Others described strategic silence, moments where they chose not to disclose, or avoided certain placements, to manage the risks of stigma. These stories remind us that transformation is not always triumphant. Redemption in education, for these participants, was as much about endurance as it was about change, a process of holding on, adapting, and moving forward in the face of ongoing scrutiny and doubt.

4.3.6 Becoming a Teacher: Claiming Legitimacy through Lived Experience

For all participants in this study, the transition from learner to teacher was not simply a change in role, it was a transformation in how they were seen and how they saw themselves. This shift was both empowering and fraught, as participants navigated the tension between their pasts and their present aspirations. While gaining qualifications and entering classrooms was a

significant milestone, many described the act of *being recognised* as a teacher, by students, institutions, and themselves, as the most profound challenge of all. The only woman in the study, spoke to the fragile and dynamic process of self-recognition:

“Even now, with the degree, the HDIP, and the job, I still sometimes feel like I’m pretending. But when I’m in the room, and they’re listening, and I see them getting it that’s when I feel like a teacher.” - Aoife

This reflects a deeply relational understanding of teaching identity, one rooted not only in credentials, but in presence, responsiveness, and connection. As Butler (2005) suggests, identity is not fixed but *performed* always in flux, constituted through interaction and recognition. Aoife’s words echo this: legitimacy emerges not from a label, but from the *doing* of teaching. Others described becoming a teacher as a political and ethical act, a way of asserting their place in a profession that had once seemed unreachable. Brendan framed his teaching as a form of activism:

“I don’t hide where I come from. I use it. Not to shock but to show that people like us belong in these spaces too. That we have something to teach, not just to learn.”

Here, lived experience becomes more than background; it becomes *pedagogical capital*, a resource for connection, credibility, and disruption. Bates Evoy (2024, p. 198) writes of “professional multiplicity” in further education, where non-traditional educators bring diverse expertise to bear. Brendan’s stance embodies this, challenging dominant norms of teacher identity by centring his own journey as educational praxis. Yet this claiming of space was not without hesitation. Several participants wrestled with questions of *enoughness*, whether their past disqualified them, or whether they would ever be fully accepted by the profession. Liam put it plainly:

“I know I can teach. I’ve seen the change in people. But when I’m around other teachers, I wonder do they see me as one of them? Or am I still just the ex-prisoner who made good?”

This underscores the enduring symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 2001) that former prisoners must navigate — invisible lines that separate who is recognised as legitimately belonging within a profession and who remains suspect. Even after institutional milestones like graduation or registration have been achieved, participants described feeling as though they still had to prove their worth. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not just about qualification but *recognition within a cultural field* that remains cautious about lived experience that deviates from the norm.

Still, many described powerful moments where the teacher identity *settled in*. Michael recalled an interaction that shifted something internally:

“A student came up after class and said, ‘Thanks you explained it in a way I could get it. Shame teachers in school don’t do it like that.’ That floored me. I realised I wasn’t trying to be a teacher anymore. I was one.”

This moment of affirmation, modest and spontaneous, speaks to the transformative power of relational teaching. It aligns with Mezirow’s (2000) concept of *perspective transformation*, where new ways of seeing the self often emerge through meaningful encounters that disrupt prior assumptions. In this case, recognition by students became a mirror that reframed how participants saw their own value not just through internal reflection, but in the shared space of classroom interaction. Crucially, the transition to teaching also marked a break from older narratives of failure and stigma. Markus described his teaching as a quiet, daily act of resistance:

“When I stand in front of that room, I’m not just teaching health or literacy — I’m showing that change is real. That your past isn’t all you are.”

This aligns with Corrigan and Sayer’s (1985) analysis of how the state operates through the moral regulation of everyday life. In this light, seemingly ordinary acts, like teaching a class, carry subversive weight when performed by those once written off. In becoming teachers, participants were not simply moving forward. They were rewriting scripts, for themselves and for others, about what counts as professionalism, credibility, and belonging. In sum, becoming a teacher was both a personal and political milestone for these participants. It was the culmination of learning, transformation, and resistance but also the start of new negotiations around identity, legitimacy, and visibility. These individuals were not just entering a profession. They were expanding its boundaries.

4.3.7 Cross-Thematic Insights: Navigating Identity, Exclusion, and Possibility

Across the three central themes ***Identity and Stigma***, ***Systemic Barriers***, and ***Transformative Elements*** a number of powerful patterns, tensions, and intersections emerged. These insights extend beyond individual subthemes and deepen our understanding of how formerly incarcerated individuals navigate becoming teachers in Ireland.

The Persistence of the Carceral Mark

A recurring insight across all themes is the inescapability of the “ex-prisoner” label. Whether participants were reflecting on their sense of self, engaging with vetting processes, or stepping into teaching roles, the shadow of incarceration remained close. Markus’s description

“You’re never not a prisoner in their eyes”

was echoed in different forms throughout the narratives. Even as participants achieved academic success or began professional placements, the past remained a reference point, often reactivated through institutional procedures like Garda vetting or Teaching Council review. Wacquant’s (2009, p. 309) notion of the carceral continuum, where the boundaries between prison and civil society blur, offers a compelling lens here. While not uniformly experienced, many participants described moments where the reach of the prison extended well into their educational and professional lives. They may have exited the physical prison, but they continued to feel its presence in the conditions placed on their teaching careers. This insight complicates simplistic narratives of rehabilitation and re-entry. Participants were not passive recipients of second chances; they were active navigators of ongoing surveillance and soft exclusion. For some, like Jonathan, professional opportunities were withdrawn once formal systems flagged their record, despite prior disclosure and perceived trust. For others, like Aoife, the anxiety of being found out shaped every interaction with potential employers. These experiences affirm that exclusion is not only legal or institutional; it is also emotional, anticipatory, and relational.

Tensions Between Transparency and Self-Preservation

A second cross-cutting theme is the delicate negotiation between openness and protection. Disclosure was described as a moral act, a strategic calculation, and sometimes a survival tactic. Participants like Brendan spoke of “reading the room,” tailoring their disclosures based on how they sensed they would be received. This form of *impression management* (Goffman, 1963) was not about deception, but about control, over narrative, identity, and the potential fallout of stigma. While many disclosed to employers, supervisors, or peers, few did so without careful forethought. At the same time, participants wrestled with the emotional toll of this repeated negotiation. The recurring nature of disclosure, having to constantly revisit past convictions with each new form, placement, or job, generated a cumulative fatigue. And yet, as Markus pointed out,

“You can’t just pretend it didn’t happen. But you don’t want it to be the only thing they see.”

This paradox, between revealing and preserving the self, ran throughout the findings. Importantly, some participants found disclosure unexpectedly affirming. Michael shared an example of disclosing to a college mentor who responded with empathy and encouragement. This moment stood in contrast to other accounts where disclosure led to exclusion. Such divergence reminds us that while systemic barriers are real, they are not insurmountable. Institutional culture, individual actors, and context does matter. As Bates Evoy (2018) argues, the “interpretive discretion” of those in gatekeeping roles can either reinforce or soften formal policy.

Education as Both Tool and Test

Education emerged in every narrative not only as a source of transformation, but also as a terrain of challenge. On the one hand, participants described powerful shifts in identity, from prisoner to student, student to teacher, underpinned by classroom success, critical reflection, and recognition by others. Jonathan described education as

“The first time I was seen as someone with a bit of potential, not just a problem.”

For Aoife, studying and eventually teaching gave her a new frame for understanding her past

“Not as something to hide with everyone, but as part of why I can reach certain people.”

Yet the theme of transformation was not universally celebratory. Some participants, such as Markus, described difficulty adjusting to academic language and feeling out of place in professional settings. Others found that educational achievement did not protect them from vetting-related rejection or institutional hesitation. Education, in this sense, was not an automatic bridge into legitimacy. It had to be continually re-earned, re-proven, and, in some cases, defended. This complexity reinforces Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning, which emphasizes that change is often preceded by discomfort, disorientation, and struggle. But it also raises questions: Can transformation ever be fully recognised when the system continues to treat individuals as risky? Does the very need to “prove” transformation undermine its legitimacy?

The Role of Peers in Navigating the Grey Areas

Throughout the findings, peer support surfaced as a cross-cutting scaffold. Whether in prison classrooms, college corridors, or WhatsApp groups, participants leaned on one another to make

sense of unfamiliar systems, build confidence, and validate their journeys. This support was often invisible to institutions but central to participants' progression. It was also one of the few consistently safe spaces where disclosure did not require justification or fear of reprisal.

Peer relationships offered something that formal structures did not: shared understanding, immediate trust, and emotional safety. In the absence of institutional assurances, peers filled the gap, helping participants translate confusing forms, rehearse interviews, or manage the psychological toll of rejection. This echoes Freire's (1970) emphasis on dialogical learning, where knowledge is built through mutual engagement and solidarity.

4.4 Conclusion

Taken together, these thematic insights suggest that the journey from incarceration to teaching is neither linear nor uniformly redemptive. It is shaped by contradiction: visibility and invisibility, support and suspicion, recognition and rejection. The same systems that provide access education, professional training, policy reform also enact constraint through bureaucracy, stigma, and discretionary power. What stands out is not just the presence of barriers, but how individuals respond to them: through tactical disclosure, reframing of identity, peer-led resilience, and deep engagement with education. These responses challenge the deficit lens often applied to people with convictions. Instead, they foreground agency, reflection, and adaptability. As Chapter 5 will explore, these findings invite a rethinking of how we understand professional legitimacy, inclusion, and rehabilitation. They also call into question whether systems truly believe in second chances or simply tolerate them under tightly controlled conditions

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

This chapter brings the research full circle by interpreting the findings in relation to the wider literature on incarceration, education, and the teaching profession. Rather than offering a summary of what has already been said, it seeks to deepen understanding by examining how they lived experiences of formerly incarcerated teachers challenge, complicate, and at times reaffirm existing knowledge. At its core, the discussion is not about confirming hypotheses, but about creating space for complexity for moments of transformation and contradiction to co-exist. The findings presented in Chapter 4 offer powerful insights into how identity, exclusion, and institutional structures shape the journey from imprisonment to professional education. These accounts do not align neatly with any one theory, but instead draw attention to the gaps between policy ideals and lived realities.

As Inglis (1997) reminds us, adult education often carries the double bind of empowerment and regulation, promising transformation while subtly reinforcing what counts in society as legitimate knowledge and identity. This tension was felt acutely by participants, who moved through spaces that simultaneously invited and often resisted their presence. As previously stated, this is a dynamic, I am familiar with, having taken similar steps into teaching after imprisonment. As Merrill and West (2009, p. 150) suggest, narrative interviews can become “affective spaces,” where shared experience and emotional resonance create conditions for openness and trust. That was certainly the case in this study. The fact that I had lived some of what participants described often helped build rapport quickly and allowed conversations to move beyond surface narratives. Rather than creating bias, this shared experience allowed for a deeper understanding of the emotional texture of the stories shared, especially around stigma, doubt, and the fragility of professional belonging.

The discussion that follows is structured around the three core strands developed in the findings: identity, systemic barriers, and transformation. Rather than revisit the stories already told, this chapter re-engages them through a critical lens bringing participant insights into conversation with the key theorists introduced in the literature review. These include Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma, Wacquant’s (2009) concept of carceral logic, Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning, and Corrigan’s (1979) analysis of moral regulation. Additional perspectives from Freire (1970), Maruna (2001), and Bates Evoy (2024) are considered where they help extend or complicate interpretation. In this way, the chapter marks a shift: not just from narrative to analysis, but from experience to insight. It explores what these

accounts reveal about legitimacy, gatekeeping, and the uneasy place of lived experience in professional education.

5.1 Section 1: Re-engaging the Research Question

This study explored the lived experiences of individuals in Ireland who have transitioned from imprisonment to teaching or are currently on that path. The central research question asked: How do formerly incarcerated individuals experience the journey toward becoming teachers in Ireland, and what personal, structural, and institutional factors shape this trajectory? The aim was not only to document barriers, but to examine how identity, stigma, systemic regulation, and personal transformation intersect in shaping these pathways.

Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, the study focused on meaning-making, prioritising participant voice while situating individual stories within broader social contexts. This approach allowed deeper insight into how former prisoners narrate their transitions into professional education. Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities — rather than to seek neat conclusions — capturing the layered realities of identity, institutional response, and the complex promise of education.

This chapter now shifts to interpretation and synthesis. Its aim is not merely to re-state findings, but to connect them to wider literature, identify original contributions, and reflect on what they reveal for adult education, policy, and teaching in Ireland. Particular attention is given to under-explored areas: the emotional toll of repeated disclosure, informal gatekeeping, and the uncertain promise of educational transformation.

While grounded in participant experience, the discussion also engages critically with the theoretical and policy contexts outlined earlier. Additional theorists, including Brookfield (1995) on critical reflection, Inglis (1997) on control and education, and Bourdieu (1984) on symbolic power — are introduced where they clarify underlying dynamics. Institutional evidence, including Teaching Council FOI data and spent convictions literature, is re-engaged where relevant.

Revisiting the research question, this discussion does not aim to resolve all contradictions. Rather, it embraces them as inherent to a process in which personal transformation, professional aspiration, and institutional judgement are continually negotiated. The tension between becoming and being recognised as a teacher is not merely a flaw in the system, nor a

matter of personal resilience alone. It reveals deeper questions about the relationship between education, punishment, and belonging in contemporary Ireland.

5.2 Section 2: Integrating Key Findings with Literature

One of the most consistent threads across participant narratives was the enduring effect of prisoner identity — a status that, while legally time-bound, often functioned as socially permanent. Markus’s reflection that “you never stop being a prisoner — it’s like you’re doing time on paper now” captures what Wacquant (2009) described as the spillover of carceral logic into civil and professional life. This supports existing research showing that imprisonment continues post-release through mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, and social suspicion (Garland, 2003; Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2015).

These dynamics were intensified by self-stigma internalised beliefs that mirrored external judgement. Brendan described entering college as “like walking into a place where I didn’t belong — even if no one said it, I felt it.” This resonates with Corrigan et al.’s (2009) concept of self-stigma as identity threat. Bates Evoy (2024) extends this critique in the Irish context, highlighting how institutional discourses favour normative academic identities, sidelining alternative learner narratives. Brendan’s alienation from “academic speak” also reflects Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of symbolic violence — where dominant cultural norms subtly delegitimise working-class and non-traditional learners by making them feel inadequate.

Disclosure anxiety revealed stigma not as a one-time event but a recurring emotional burden. The repeated demands to disclose — during teacher training, vetting, and employment — kept participants in a state of vulnerability. Jonathan’s account, in which a placement offer was revoked after vetting, illustrates how institutional decisions can override personal progress. His story complicates simplistic notions of transformation, aligning with Foucault’s (1977) insight that power operates not just through prohibition but through the regulation of possibility.

Participants also described complex strategies of impression management (Goffman, 1963). Brendan’s comment — “You get good at reading people... you disclose in a way that lets them still see you as capable” — points to the ongoing labour involved in navigating professional spaces while carrying a stigmatised identity. Far from being deceptive, this was often a survival strategy: a means of balancing truth-telling with the hope of being seen for more than one’s past. These findings deepen Maruna’s (2001) concept of the redemption script, showing that redemption must be continually negotiated and performed.

A notable addition to the literature is the discussion of digital stigma. Participants expressed concern over archived media coverage of past convictions — court reports and newspaper articles that resurface during vetting or public searches. Craig recalled, “an article from years ago got brought up... they didn’t ask about my degree, just that.” This aligns with Moore et al.’s (2015) analysis of digital traces as enduring forms of stigma, disconnected from rehabilitation timelines. It also exposes a gap in Irish policy: while spent convictions legislation has progressed, it does not extend to digital archives, leaving individuals exposed to a permanent public record. This technologically amplified form of stigma demands urgent attention from both education and policy sectors.

Importantly, the data do not present stigma as wholly incapacitating. Some participants experienced moments of empowerment through self-disclosure. Aoife noted, “being upfront actually helped me — I didn’t have to hide anything, and some people respected that.” While not the dominant narrative, it adds nuance, suggesting that disclosure can sometimes foster connection. These moments support Brookfield’s (1995) view of critical reflection as a tool for reclaiming voice and agency. For some, reflecting on stigma enabled them to reframe it — not as something to erase, but as something to confront and transform.

Overall, these findings affirm and extend existing theoretical frameworks. They reinforce Wacquant’s and Goffman’s analyses of carceral and social stigma, while introducing new dimensions around digital permanence and emotional labour. They echo Bourdieu’s and Bates Evoy’s critiques of institutional discourse and underscore the value of adult education spaces that support identity reconstruction. At the same time, they raise hard questions about whether such spaces are truly open — or whether hidden boundaries rooted in surveillance, cultural capital, and public record continue to narrow the terms of inclusion.

5.3 Section 3: Transformative Elements

While stigma and systemic exclusion shaped much of the participants’ journeys, their narratives also revealed moments of deep personal and professional transformation. These were not tales of simplistic redemption, but accounts of hard-won shifts in self-perception, identity, and social positioning. Crucially, these shifts occurred not in spite of their histories, but often because of the resilience and critical insight formed through them. Education — particularly in its adult and prison forms — played a catalytic, though complex, role in this process.

Theoretically, these shifts align with Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning, which frames adult transformation as emerging from “disorienting dilemmas.” In this study,

incarceration — and subsequent exclusion from mainstream educational pathways — served as such a context. Participants began to reassess their assumptions about themselves and their roles in society. However, this was rarely an individualistic process. Rather than isolated epiphanies, transformation emerged dialogically — in peer learning spaces shaped by shared struggle and mutual affirmation.

Here, Freire's (1970) pedagogy of liberation offers a more grounded lens than Mezirow's abstract model. For participants like Brendan and Markus, transformation was not just personal insight but a political act — reclaiming legitimacy in spaces that once denied it. Education, especially in humanising prison and community classrooms, enabled them to reject passive narratives of rehabilitation and instead step into roles as agents, peers, and educators. Douglas et al.'s (2021) "Empowerment Continuum" supports this view, showing how the journey from internalised shame to contribution marks a trajectory of resistance as much as recovery.

Yet this process remained fragile. Transformation was often threatened not by personal failure, but by institutional doubt. As Maruna (2001) notes, successful desistance requires external validation — without it, even sustained identity shifts can collapse into "narrative failure." Participants who had earned degrees and taught with skill still felt like provisional members of the profession, vulnerable to vetting, regulation, or cultural suspicion. This challenges Mezirow's model, which assumes transformation leads to integration; here, transformation was conditional — achieved, but revocable.

Peer support played a key role in sustaining this process. Participants repeatedly described how relationships with others who had walked similar paths grounded their confidence during moments of uncertainty. This echoes Bates Evoy's (2024) argument that relational legitimacy — validation from peers rather than institutions — is an overlooked pillar of adult education. These informal networks functioned as parallel systems of affirmation, especially where formal recognition was delayed or denied.

These relationships also disrupted standard ideas of teaching expertise. Participants did not see teaching as the delivery of content by credentialed experts, but as empathetic and context-aware practice rooted in lived experience. Brookfield (1995) argues that authentic teaching begins with the recognition of learners' contexts — a view that places many participants at the very centre of what teaching should be. Still, institutional definitions of teacher identity, shaped by respectability and credentials, often leave no space for this kind of authority.

This raises deeper questions about professional transformation. Who decides what counts as legitimate teacher identity? Goffman's (1963) notion of "spoiled biography" helps explain why participants' new identities remained vulnerable. Even when they demonstrated compassion and competence, the mark of a conviction lingered. Bourdieu's (1984) idea of symbolic violence is useful here: exclusion persists not just through denial, but through subtle signals — vetting, silence, or reputational doubt — that question legitimacy without saying so outright.

In this light, the transformation achieved by participants is more than personal — it is structurally subversive. Standing in front of a classroom as a former prisoner challenges dominant ideas about who belongs and what counts as expertise. As Butler (2005) suggests, such acts are a form of performative resistance: stepping into identities not yet fully recognised by the institution. Their presence demands a rethinking of how teacher formation is defined — one that embraces ethics, empathy, and lived insight alongside formal qualifications.

But this subversion comes at a cost. As Aoife's and Michael's stories show, the effort of constantly managing stigma, disclosure, and legitimacy takes a toll. This labour is not incidental to transformation — it is part of it. The identities described were dynamic and reflective, but also under pressure, shaped by ongoing surveillance and symbolic negotiation.

In the end, participants' transformation was real — but not always recognised. It was enabled by education, but often undermined by institutional inconsistency. It was deeply personal, yet never only individual. In challenging labels like "ex-prisoner" or "risk," these educators sought more than inclusion. They called for a reimagining of what it means to be a teacher, how transformation is understood, and whose stories are allowed to serve as legitimate foundations for pedagogy.

5.4 Section 4: Cross-Thematic Insights

What emerges across the three central themes — identity and stigma, systemic barriers, and transformation — is not a unified story, but a complex, often contradictory set of lived realities. While participants shared a general journey from incarceration to education and, in many cases, teaching, the routes they travelled, the barriers they met, and the meanings they made diverged in significant ways. These differences are not marginal. They expose the uneven ground of rehabilitation, the selectivity of professional inclusion, and the fragility of transformation under institutional and cultural constraint.

A core contradiction lay in how transformation was both recognised and resisted — often by the same institutions. Brendan and Jonathan described moments of affirmation from mentors,

principals, or students. Yet these were quickly undercut by vetting reviews or Teaching Council decisions. The same individuals trusted to teach could be told they were only provisionally suitable — or restricted to working with adults. This duality reflects a deeper tension between personal growth and institutional logics of risk, echoing Wacquant’s (2009) critique of carceral rationality extending into civic life.

The contrast between Markus’s and Aoife’s experiences further illustrates this. Both disclosed convictions, both completed qualifications, and both engaged in meaningful teaching. Yet Markus remained under conditional registration, shaped by past media coverage, while Aoife experienced more institutional acceptance — though her anxiety persisted. These outcomes reflect not only inconsistent discretion, but what Bates Evoy (2024) calls “soft exclusion” — the quiet filtering out of some individuals without explicit denial, even when the evidence of transformation is comparable.

Participants also varied in how they related to their past. Brendan and Jonathan embraced the label of “former prisoner” as part of their educator identity, using it to build rapport and credibility. Liam and Markus, by contrast, described strategic silence and ongoing self-doubt. These were not contradictory but coexisting strategies, shaped by context. Goffman’s (1963) theory of impression management helps explain this — navigating a “discreditable” identity requires constant negotiation, with emotional labour that varied but remained present throughout.

Perhaps the most telling contradiction was between the promise of adult education and the reality of professional gatekeeping. Many participants were encouraged into education through community groups, prison educators, or access initiatives. But once they entered teacher training and registration, a different logic applied — one of heightened scrutiny and delayed trust. As one put it, “They told me I’d be great for teaching, and then they told me maybe I shouldn’t.” This reflects Inglis’s (1997) critique of adult education’s “double bind” — where transformation is encouraged, but always under institutional terms of acceptability and control.

These insights also complicate Mezirow’s (2000) model of transformative learning. While participants did reflect and change, their experiences weren’t linear or secure. Critical reflection didn’t always lead to empowerment, especially when recognition by institutions remained conditional. What emerged was a tentative, often interrupted process — always one form, one disclosure, or one resurfaced article away from collapse. In this way, the findings

align more closely with Brookfield's (1995) and Freire's (1970) emphasis on struggle, collective resistance, and ongoing critical awareness.

The role of gender also surfaced, if subtly. Aoife, the only woman in the study, described a heightened fear of judgement — concerned about being seen as “doubly deviant” due to both her conviction and gender. While the sample is too small for broad claims, her experience signals an intersection of stigma that future research should explore. As Butler (2005) notes, identity is shaped not just by personal claims, but by what cultural scripts permit.

Class was another persistent undercurrent. Participants frequently referenced working-class backgrounds, early school leaving, or instability tied to housing or addiction. These factors didn't just precede incarceration — they shaped the long-term struggle for legitimacy. As Bourdieu (1984) argued, symbolic violence operates by defining who fits in professional spaces and who doesn't. For many, class and criminal record formed a compounded barrier that education alone couldn't fully dismantle.

Finally, the disconnect between policy rhetoric and institutional practice was stark. Initiatives like Turn to Teaching and College Connect promote inclusion and social justice. Yet participants often found that these values were not reflected in responses from placement providers, vetting panels, or regulatory frameworks. As Corrigan (1979) observed, social institutions often regulate morality not by explicit rejection, but by controlling the terms under which inclusion is permitted.

These divergences do not weaken the findings — they enrich them. They show that post-prison transformation is not a straight path, but a negotiation shaped by context, power, and luck. The same system that invites participation also withholds full belonging. For these participants, legitimacy was never automatic — it was partial, precarious, and always political.

5.5 Section 5: Implications, Applications, Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to re-evaluate how the Irish education system engages with, supports, and at times impose barriers for individuals with criminal convictions who pursue teaching. Participants demonstrated resilience, pedagogical capacity, and a deep sense of commitment to education, but their journeys were marked by institutional opacity, cultural hesitation, and uneven support. The implications of these findings stretch across four key areas: policy reform, structural support in higher and further education, professional culture, and critical reflexivity in practice and research.

5.5.1 Policy and Regulation: From Risk Logic to Transparent Pathways

At the core of many participants' difficulties was a regulatory structure that prioritises perceived reputational risk over evidence of personal growth. The Teaching Council's discretionary vetting processes, experienced by several participants as inconsistent and drawn out, functioned less as safeguarding and more as symbolic gatekeeping. Goffman's (1963) theory of the "spoiled identity" remains disturbingly resonant, as individuals are made to re-perform their past — often in silence, without clear feedback or pathways for appeal.

To address this, the Teaching Council should publish transparent decision-making criteria for applications involving criminal convictions, drawing on best practice internationally. The Victorian Institute of Teaching in Australia, for example, offers clear eligibility guidelines that consider rehabilitation, time elapsed, and offence relevance, with proportionate registration outcomes. In the UK, NACRO (2020) advocates for consistent and non-discriminatory vetting aligned with desistance research. In Ireland, the Law Reform Commission (2020) has called for expanded spent convictions legislation, yet this remains unrealised, leaving applicants in a legal and moral grey zone. As Wacquant (2009) notes, the carceral state often extends its reach through bureaucratic routines that mask themselves as neutral.

There is a clear policy imperative to reform spent convictions legislation and to create clear, appealable routes through professional registration, so that institutional discretion is exercised fairly and consistently — not arbitrarily or punitively.

5.5.2 Higher and Further Education: Embedding Support Across the Learning Journey

While initiatives like College Connect and Turn to Teaching have made strides in widening access, participants in this study reported a sharp drop-off in support at the point of transition to professional training and registration. This reflects Inglis's (1997) caution that adult education often promises transformation while quietly reinforcing existing norms of inclusion and respectability. One practical and structural response would be the development of a formalised peer mentoring programme for students with convictions, embedded across disciplines in higher and further education. This was a recurring need expressed implicitly and explicitly by participants for someone "who'd been there" to walk alongside them, particularly during moments of disclosure, placement uncertainty, or self-doubt. There are strong international and domestic models for this. In the United States, the Rising Scholars Network supports formerly incarcerated students through structured peer mentoring, helping them

navigate everything from academic systems to disclosure decisions. Evaluations show that such programmes increase retention, reduce isolation, and promote self-advocacy.

Closer to home, the *Boxed-Out* report (IPRT & Maynooth University, 2023) explicitly recommends peer-led support structures for people with convictions in higher education, citing the importance of belonging, identity validation, and lived experience leadership. Maynooth has since launched a peer mentoring pilot within its School of Law and Criminology and established a Prison Education Taskforce aimed at coordinating support across the education journey. Building on these models, Irish institutions should take meaningful steps to formalise peer mentoring as a central pillar of inclusive education. Where possible, mentors should be recruited from lived experience particularly those who have successfully navigated complex processes like Garda vetting, registration, or disclosure. Training and ongoing support would be essential, but so too would be the institutional recognition of their unique expertise. Such initiatives should not be framed as remedial or exceptional, but as part of inclusive pedagogical design that recognises structural inequality a point made powerfully by Freire (1970) and reaffirmed by Bates Evoy (2024), who argues that relational recognition must be built into institutional processes, not added after the fact.

5.5.3 Professional Culture: Recognising Lived Experience as Educational Capital

Participants repeatedly demonstrated how their past experiences far from disqualifying them enhanced their educational practice. Brendan and Jonathan spoke about the depth of empathy, honesty, and credibility they bring into the classroom; Aoife and Liam highlighted the nuanced care they offer to marginalised learners. These are not incidental traits, they are forms of professional knowledge, developed through adversity and reflection.

As Brookfield (1995) and Mezirow (2000) remind us, effective teaching depends not just on credentials but on critical insight, emotional intelligence, and the ability to facilitate transformation in others. Yet current recruitment and assessment models remain biased towards linear, middle-class trajectories. To change this, professional bodies and education providers should:

- Recognise peer teaching in prisons and community settings as valid prior experience through RPL mechanisms.
- Include lived experience competencies in interview rubrics and training assessments.

- Promote co-teaching models that blend formal and non-traditional educator backgrounds.

The profession must move from tolerating lived experience to valuing it structurally, or it will continue to exclude those best positioned to challenge educational injustice from within.

5.5.4 Critical Reflexivity: Reframing Transformation and Success

Finally, this study challenges overly neat narratives of desistance or “redemption.” Most participants were still navigating transformation, as an ongoing process, not a final state. Their stories were filled with effort, resistance, uncertainty, and relational labour. As Butler (2005) argues, identity is not a possession but a performance negotiated and regulated in context. Even those deemed “rehabilitated” must keep proving it, again and again. This places a responsibility on researchers, educators, and policy makers to remain critically reflexive. As Wacquant (2009) and Corrigan (1979) remind us, inclusion often occurs under terms not of our own making. We must resist the temptation to use individual success stories as evidence that the system is working. Instead, we must design systems that expect inequality and intervene structurally, not only when exceptional individuals demand change, but before they have to.

CHAPTER 06: CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore what it means to become a teacher after prison in Ireland not just as a linear journey through education, but as a complex negotiation of identity, legitimacy, and institutional power. Through six in-depth participant narratives, the research traced how former prisoners navigate the promise of adult education while still being subjected to forms of soft exclusion. Along the way, three thematic strands—identity and stigma, systemic barriers, and transformative potential—revealed themselves not as separate stages, but as intertwined forces shaping the entire journey from incarceration to the classroom. Across the literature review, methodology, and findings, a paradox consistently emerged: adult education, often framed as a redemptive or empowering space, can also act as a site of symbolic gatekeeping. This is not always overt. As shown in the participants' experiences with Garda vetting, Teaching Council registration, or even placement approvals, exclusion is often bureaucratically justified but emotionally brutal.

Institutional processes may not always block access outright, but they place the onus on individuals to disclose, to perform respectability, and to justify their legitimacy sometimes repeatedly. As Brendan put it, *"You can be in the room and still feel like they're waiting for you to prove you belong."* These moments expose the conditional nature of professional trust and the fragility of transformation when recognition is always provisional. Personally, this study is not something I approached from a distance. As someone who has also walked this path, I was continuously confronted by the tensions of proximity. I understood the silences in certain interviews not because I had studied them, but because I had lived them. This insider position gave me access to a depth of disclosure that might otherwise have remained hidden. But it also forced me to examine my own blind spots, my assumptions about what change looks like, or how legitimacy is earned.

Doing this work was not just academically rigorous; it was emotionally exposing. I often had to hold back my instinct to reassure, to jump in as a peer, and instead sit with discomfort mine and theirs. What this thesis ultimately argues is that we must move beyond simplistic redemption narratives when it comes to education and re-entry. Transformation is not a one-time event, nor is it always visible in neat outcomes. For many participants, becoming a teacher was as much about managing stigma and maintaining hope as it was about passing exams or gaining qualifications. The "carceral residue" Wacquant writes about persists long after physical release, and institutions—whether schools, universities, or regulatory bodies—play a role

in either softening or hardening that residue. In terms of contribution, this thesis offers several critical insights.

First, it highlights the emotional labour required to teach with a conviction the hidden work of navigating disclosure, managing identity, and performing professionalism under a watchful gaze. Second, it shows that lived experience is not always recognised as a form of expertise. While some participants found value in their stories being acknowledged, others were made to feel that their pasts were liabilities to be managed, not insights to be welcomed. Finally, the study underscores the need to rethink how access is structured not just in terms of admissions, but in terms of who gets to be seen as trustworthy, employable, and “safe.” There are, of course, limitations to this work. The sample, while rich in depth, remains small and situated within specific educational pathways. Future research might explore parallel experiences in other professions, or examine how race, gender, and class further complicate the transition from prison to professional life.

It might also be worth exploring how institutions themselves are shaped by those who enter them with complex pasts whether their presence ultimately disrupts or reinforces prevailing norms. In closing, this study does not claim to offer easy solutions. Instead, it invites a more honest conversation about what rehabilitation really means in a society that continues to judge worthiness through the lens of respectability and control. If we are serious about inclusion in adult education, we must confront the contradiction at its core: that the same systems that preach transformation often demand compliance with middle-class norms of conduct, identity, and disclosure. What is needed now is not just more access, but a deeper reckoning with what counts as legitimate knowledge, who counts as a teacher, and what it means to be truly free.

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APPENDICES

<i>Appendix Number</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
Appendix 1	Ethical Approval Form	Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education ethical approval submission, outlining methodology, recruitment, and ethical protocols.
Appendix 2	Participant Information Sheet	The document provided to potential participants detailing the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and rights.
Appendix 3	Participant Consent Form	Consent form used to obtain written permission from each participant to take part in the research and be audio recorded.
Appendix 4	Interview Schedule	The list of guiding, semi-structured interview questions used during the research process.
Appendix 5	Teaching Council FOI Response – Vetting Outcomes 2019–2024	Freedom of Information release obtained from the Teaching Council, detailing conditional registration outcomes over a five-year period.
Appendix 6	NVivo Codebook	Finalised thematic codebook used in NVivo, showing codes, subcodes, definitions, and sample quotes from the analysis phase.
Appendix 7	Student Declaration	

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval Form



ERASMUS MUNDUS INTERNATIONAL MASTER
**ADULT EDUCATION
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Department of Adult and Community Education Ethical Approval Form

Brief Title of Thesis	"From the Cell to the Classroom" Exploring the Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Transitioning into Educator Roles.
Student name:	Patrick Skelly
Supervisor(s):	Dr Fergal Finnegan

Research Methods

Please outline

- Proposed methodology
- Methods of data collection
- Types of analysis

Proposed methodology

The proposed methodology for this research I would intend to use would be a Phenomenological approach.

Methods of data collection

The method of data collection I intend to apply would be semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and detailed responses.

Types of analysis

I intend to transcribe these interviews and focus on significant statements or phrases. Identify patterns through this analysis and group together themes that reflect the essence of these experiences.

Participants

Please outline

- Who will take part?
- Where will the research take place?
- How will you gain access to or recruit participants?
- Does your research involve gatekeepers?

Who will take part?

- I would be seeking participants who:
- Have been formerly incarcerated
- Are currently working or have worked as a teacher in further education throughout Ireland.
- Have previously qualified as a teacher but have not taken up a teaching position.
- Currently in the process of acquiring a teaching qualification and have previously spent time in prison.

Where will the research take place?

At a safe and confidential location mutually agreed upon by me and each participant prior to meeting in the offices of Care After Prison or the Bridge project.

Or if a meeting in person is not feasible an online meeting through Microsoft Teams or Zoom may be arranged.

How will you gain access to or recruit participants?

Word of Mouth: Through my employment with the CDETb's Prison Education Service, I am extremely fortunate to be in a position whereby a number of my colleagues have personal knowledge of potential participants who fit the criteria for this research and have agreed to support me in contacting these individuals on my behalf.

Program Partnerships: Approach initiatives like College Connect or Turn to Teaching, who may help identify participants for this research.

Social Media: Utilise platforms like Social Care Workers of Ireland or relevant Facebook groups (e.g., FE Teachers/Tutors Ireland) to share your recruitment call.

Snowball Sampling: Ask initial participants to recommend others who meet the criteria.

Does your research involve gatekeepers?

I will provide a letter of introduction outlining the research proposal with my name, phone number and Maynooth University email address as avenues for contacting me directly in relation to any queries with a clear option to opt out.

Demonstration of Ethical Considerations

Please outline the ethical issues which will need to be managed during the course of the thesis. You need to consider relevant research integrity, GDPR, and ethics policies in your discussion.

Please discuss

- What ethical issues do you anticipate to encounter in the course of your research?
- How you will obtain informed consent?
- How you will ensure that participants are protected and sensitively managed?
- What types of power relationships (student/employee/employer/colleague etc.?) exist in the research and what steps will you take to manage these?
- If gatekeepers are involved, what procedures have been agreed?
- How will you limit the collection of personal and sensitive data?
- How will you anonymise the data?
- How will you secure the data?
- How and when will the data be destroyed on completion of the MEd?
- Any other issues that you consider important or that your supervisors have raised in discussions?

What ethical issues do you anticipate to encounter in the course of your research?

As a researcher with lived experience of imprisonment, I recognise the potential ethical and wellbeing challenges and intend to implement safeguards to address them. Key considerations will include:

Dual Relationships: To avoid boundary issues with participants I may know professionally or personally, recruitment and participation will be voluntary, with clear communication emphasising confidentiality and professional boundaries.

Trauma Sensitivity: Both participants and I may encounter emotional challenges during interviews. I am well versed in Trauma-informed practices, such as allowing participants to skip questions, take breaks or discontinue at any point and will explain this from the outset. I will also maintain self-care practices and seek supervision when necessary.

Confidentiality: Given the small community involved, extra care will be taken to anonymise data and findings to protect participants' identities. Participants will be informed that, due to the relatively small population of potential participants, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. A detailed explanation of the limitations of confidentiality will be provided in the participant introduction letter. This will include information on the legal and institutional obligations that may require the disclosure of certain information, such as risks of harm to self or others, in compliance with applicable laws. The letter will also outline the university's ethical guidelines on data handling, storage, and access to ensure transparency and understanding.

Informed Consent: Participants will receive clear information about the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Bias Mitigation: Reflexivity will be prioritised through a reflective journal and consultation with my supervisor throughout to ensure the integrity of data analysis and interpretation.

These ethical approaches will mitigate any potential well-being issues for participants and maintain credibility of the research throughout the study.

How you will obtain informed consent?

To ensure participants fully understand their involvement and provide voluntary, informed consent, the following steps will be implemented:

Clear and Accessible Information: Participants will be given an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, objectives, what participation entails, potential risks and benefits, and how their data will be used.

Opportunity for Questions: Participants will have the chance to ask questions before agreeing to participate. Contact details for the researcher and also my supervisor will be provided for follow-up queries.

Voluntary Participation: Participation will be explicitly stated as voluntary. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without explanation or consequences.

Written Consent: Participants will sign a consent form confirming their understanding and agreement to participate. This form will also ask for explicit consent to audio-record the interview and use anonymised data in publications. If participants prefer not to sign their name, an alternative method (e.g., verbal recorded consent) will be offered, in compliance with ethical guidelines.

Consent Revisited: Before starting the interview, consent will be revisited to ensure participants remain comfortable with their decision. Participants will also have the opportunity to review and approve their interview transcript for accuracy and content.

Safeguarding Privacy: Participants will be assured that their data will be anonymised, securely stored, and used only for the stated research purposes only. Any limitations to anonymity will be clearly communicated.

It is hoped combining clear communication, voluntary participation, and ongoing consent processes will ensure participants are fully informed and respected throughout this study.

How you will ensure that participants are protected and sensitively managed?

Protecting and sensitively managing participants is the overall core priority in this research. Due to the shared lived experience between myself and participants I am fully aware of the potentially

sensitive nature of this topic. This study involves exploring personal journeys from imprisonment to teaching, which may evoke emotional responses or touch on past traumas.

The following measures which I intend to employ as measures to ensure participants' well-being will be safeguarded, maintaining ethical practices at all times, while fostering a respectful research environment.

Trauma-Informed Approach: Participants will be informed about the nature of the study and the topics to be discussed to minimise unexpected distress. They will have control over their participation, including the ability to skip questions, take breaks, or withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Coding will be used, and identifying details will be removed to protect participants' identities. Data will be securely stored on encrypted devices, and participants will be informed of the limits of anonymity due to the small population being studied.

Support Measures: A someone with a long history working in the area of prisoner reintegration and trauma, I have a wide knowledge and network of counselling and support services that can be provided to participants if required. I plan to monitor for signs of distress during interviews, pausing or ending the session if needed.

Participant Empowerment: Consent will be revisited before and after each interview to ensure participants are fully informed and participants will have the option to review their interview transcripts and withdraw or amend any statements.

Researcher Reflexivity: I will maintain a reflective journal and engage with my supervisor to ensure objectivity and sensitivity. Self-care practices will be followed to manage my own emotional health during this research.

These strategies will at all times prioritise participant safety, respect, and well-being throughout the research process.

What types of power relationships (student/employee/employer/colleague etc.?) exist in the research and what steps will you take to manage these?

The types of power relationships which exist in any research such as gender, age, class, race, and my position as a researcher.

I must also acknowledge other the potential power dynamics that may arise with participants, including prior relationships as colleague, former teacher, or professional peer. To manage these dynamics effectively I plan to implement to following.

Researcher-Participant Power: Participation will be voluntary, with clear, informed consent processes. The collaborative nature of interviews will reduce perceived hierarchies, and participants will retain the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Colleague Relationships: Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, and professional boundaries will be respected at all times. A neutral third party may assist with recruitment to minimise any sense of obligation.

Student-Teacher Relationships: Current and former students will not be recruited to avoid any coercion, perceived impact on academic progress, or feelings of obligation.

Employer-Employee Dynamics: Recruitment materials will emphasise the independent nature of the research, separate from any professional organisation.

Participants will be assured that their involvement (or non-involvement) will have no effect on workplace relationships.

Additionally, recruitment will occur through impartial channels, transparency will be prioritised throughout the study and ongoing reflective practice will help manage and mitigate power imbalances.

It is hoped these measures ensure an ethical and respectful approach to participant engagement.

If gatekeepers are involved, what procedures have been agreed?

If gatekeepers are involved in this research, individuals or organisations that facilitate access to participants, a clear and transparent procedure will be established to ensure ethical collaboration and participant protection.

Study Purpose and Role: Gatekeepers will be provided with a detailed explanation of the research objectives and their role in facilitating access to participants.

Voluntary Participation: It will be emphasised that participation is entirely voluntary, and gatekeepers must not exert any pressure on potential participants to take part.

Recruitment Boundaries: Recruitment will follow ethical guidelines, with gatekeepers sharing my contact details rather than me contacting potential participants directly. Gatekeepers will not have access to participant identities or data at any time.

Confidentiality: Gatekeepers will be informed of the strict confidentiality measures in place to protect participants and ensure no sensitive information is shared with them.

Power Dynamics: Steps will be taken to address any power imbalances between gatekeepers and participants, ensuring that individuals feel free to make independent decisions about participation.

Formal Agreement: A formal agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU) will outline the gatekeeper's role, ethical responsibilities, and scope of involvement.

Ongoing Communication: Regular communication with gatekeepers will ensure they remain informed about the research progress while upholding ethical standards.

Ethical Oversight: Gatekeeper involvement will be reviewed with my supervisor if they are to be involved in this research and any issues arising will be addressed promptly.

These measures will ensure gatekeepers contribute to the research in a way that respects participants' autonomy and upholds the integrity of the study.

How will you limit the collection of personal and sensitive data?

To minimise the collection of personal and sensitive data, this study will adhere to the following practices in an effort to ensure data collection is ethical, respectful, and strictly limited to the study's requirements.

Data collection will be limited to information directly related to the research objectives, avoiding unnecessary personal details.

Coding and pseudonyms will be used, and identifiable information will be excluded or anonymised as early as possible.

Participants will have the option to skip questions, withdraw, or review and approve their transcripts, ensuring they maintain control over shared information.

Collected information will be securely stored on encrypted devices, with access restricted to the myself and my supervisor.

Participants will be discouraged from sharing identifiable details about third parties.

Participants will be fully informed about the type of data being collected and how it will be used, ensuring transparency and understanding.

How will you anonymise the data?

In an effort to protect and ensure participant confidentiality throughout the entire process, all data will be anonymised using the following procedures:

Codes and Pseudonyms: Each participant will be assigned a unique code (e.g., Participant A1) for transcripts and analysis. If necessary, pseudonyms will be used to maintain clarity while avoiding real-world associations.

Removal of Identifiable Information: Personal details such as names, locations, and organisations will be removed or replaced.

Anonymised Transcripts: All transcripts will be anonymised immediately after being transcribed, and original recordings will be securely stored and then deleted at the earliest time possible time, which could be up to 10 years in duration.

Secure Storage of Key Codes: A master list linking codes or pseudonyms to participant identities will be stored in a password-protected, encrypted file accessible only to the myself and will be destroyed after the study has been completed.

How will you secure the data?

The following measures will be implemented ensure data confidentiality, integrity, and compliance with ethical and legal standards throughout the research process

Encrypted Storage: All digital data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and analysis files, will be stored on encrypted devices and password-protected folders known only to me.

Access Control: Data access will be restricted to myself and my supervisor. A master list linking participant identities to codes or pseudonyms will be stored separately in a password-protected, encrypted file known only to me.

Physical Security: Physical documents, such as signed consent forms, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to me.

Data Retention and Disposal: Data will be retained only as long as necessary for the study. Audio recordings will be deleted after transcription, and paper documents will be shredded. Digital files will be securely deleted as soon as possible.

Regular Backups: Encrypted backups will be created to prevent data loss, with access restricted to myself.

How and when will the data be destroyed on completion of the MEd?

All data collected during this research will be securely stored for a retention period of 10 years in accordance with university policies and ethical guidelines. Following this period, all data will be destroyed once the MEd is approved and any necessary follow-up or verification processes have been completed. These measures ensure the complete and irreversible destruction of research materials while safeguarding participant confidentiality and maintaining compliance with ethical standards.

Digital Data: Audio recordings, transcripts, analysis files, and the master list linking participant identities to codes and pseudonyms will be permanently deleted using secure deletion process to prevent recovery.

Physical Data: Physical documents, such as signed consent forms or my notes, will be shredded to ensure irreversible destruction.

Backup Data: Any encrypted backup copies will also be securely deleted at the same time as the primary data.

Any other issues that you consider important or that your supervisors have raised in discussions?

I foresee no other issues at this point in time.

Please append a copy of your information sheet and consent form to participants.

Further information on Maynooth Research ethics policies is available here
<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/research-development-office/ethics/ethics-general-policy-documents>

Declarations

I confirm that the statements above describe the ethical issues that will need to be managed during the course of this research activity.

Postgraduate Student	Signature: Patrick Skelly Date: 22 nd December 2024
MU course director	Signature: Date:

Please email a copy of your completed ethics form to your supervisor and cc
Michael.J.Murray@mu.ie; angela.mcginin@mu.ie

You will receive a reply within 10 days of submitting the form

For Department Use Only

Supervisor use only:

Date Considered: _____

Approved

☐

Approved with recommendations (see below)

☐

Referred back to applicant

☐

Referred to Department Research Ethics Committee

☐

Recommendations:

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



My name is Patrick Skelly, and I am a postgraduate student at Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education. I am conducting research as part of my Master's thesis, titled **"From the Cell to the Classroom: Exploring the Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Transitioning into Educator Roles."** I am writing to invite you to participate in this study.

Purpose of the Research

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have transitioned from incarceration to becoming educators. By examining your journey—a path I have also walked—I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and impacts associated with this transition. The study also seeks to identify ways to support others who may choose to follow similar paths.

Why You Were Invited

You have been identified as someone who fits the criteria for this study, specifically:

- Formerly incarcerated.
- Currently working, or having previously worked, as a teacher in further education in Ireland.
- Or currently pursuing, or having completed, a teaching qualification but not yet taken up a teaching role.

What Participation Involves

If you agree to participate, you will take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. This will take place at a safe and mutually agreed-upon location or via an online platform such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. During the interview, I will ask open-ended questions about your experiences, challenges, and insights related to your journey into the field of education.

The interview will be audio-recorded, with your permission, to ensure the accuracy of the information. You will have the opportunity to review and approve your interview transcript.

Your Rights as a Participant

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to:

1. Withdraw at any time without explanation or consequences until **the 15th May 2025**.
2. Skip any questions you are uncomfortable answering.
3. Review and amend your interview transcript.
4. Be assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of your data.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and held securely for **ten years**. Your identity will be anonymised through coding, and any identifiable details will be removed from the data. Digital data will be securely stored on encrypted devices, and physical documents (e.g., signed consent forms) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. All data will be destroyed after the retention period in accordance with Maynooth University's ethical guidelines.

Limitations to Confidentiality

A commitment to confidentiality for participants is a vital part of the research process. This right to confidentiality is an important, but not absolute, principle that the University will strive to uphold by lawful means. Subject to the requirements of legislation, including the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act, researchers should protect the confidentiality of research participants. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that participants understand the extent of anonymity and confidentiality offered at all stages of the research from data gathering to dissemination. Participants will be apprised of the limits of confidentiality prior to providing any information.

It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent. In so doing, research

data and records may be accessed and held by the University (through the President or Vice President for Research) and its legal advisers, to determine their relevance to any proceedings.

Potential Benefits and Risks

While there are no direct benefits to participating, your insights will contribute to important research that could inform educational policy and practice. Some questions may touch on sensitive or emotional topics; however, the interview process will be conducted in a trauma-informed and supportive manner. You may pause or stop the interview at any time, and I can provide information on support services if needed.

Next Steps

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email at **patrick.skelly.2024@mumail.ie** or phone at **085 1615784**. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Fergal Finnegan, at **fergal.finnegan@mu.ie**.

Should you decide to participate, I will provide a consent form for you to review and sign prior to the interview.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences and contribute to this important research.

Kind regards,

Patrick Skelly

Postgraduate Student,

Department of Adult and Community Education,

Maynooth University.

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study

I am Patrick Skelly, a Master's student in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Fergal Finnegan.

The study explores the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who have become, or are seeking to become, teachers in Ireland. It examines how they navigate stigma, institutional barriers, and identity during this transition.

What will the study involve?

The study involves a one-to-one, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview will explore your experiences of education before, during, and after prison, as well as any experiences related to training, employment, and teacher registration. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. A transcript will be created, and all personal identifiers will be removed.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from the Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education Ethics Committee. A copy of this approval is available upon request.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been invited to participate because you have experience relevant to the topic — as someone with a conviction history who is currently teaching or pursuing a teaching career in Ireland.

Do you have to take part?

No, participation is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to take part, and choosing not to participate will not affect any existing relationships with Maynooth University, service providers, or community organisations.

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You may withdraw from the study at any point before or during the interview. You may also request withdrawal of your data up until the point of anonymised analysis (August 30, 2025). After that point, withdrawal will not be possible.

What information will be collected?

The study will collect your personal views and reflections shared during the interview, including experiences of education, identity, stigma, institutional interactions (e.g. with the Teaching Council), and perceptions of the teaching profession.

Will your participation be kept confidential?

Yes. All information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality. A pseudonym will be used in all transcripts and any publications. Only the researcher and academic supervisors will have access to identifiable data, which will be stored securely and password protected.

“It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.”

What will happen to the information you give?

The data you provide will be stored in a secure, anonymised format. It will be retained in accordance with GDPR and Maynooth University’s data protection policies. You may request a copy of your transcript or of the anonymised findings.

What will happen to the results?

The findings will be presented in a thesis submitted for the MEd in Adult and Community Education. They may also be published in academic articles, presented at conferences, or used in policy discussions around education and reintegration. No identifying information will be included. You can request a summary of the findings upon completion.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Although I do not expect this research to cause distress, discussing past experiences — particularly those related to incarceration and stigma — may be emotionally difficult. You are free to pause or stop the interview at any time. Support information will be made available if needed.

What if there is a problem?

If you are concerned about any aspect of the study or your participation, you may contact my supervisor:

- Dr. Fergal Finnegan: fergal.finnegan@mu.ie

Any further queries?

If you have any questions before, during, or after the interview, please contact me:

Patrick Skelly

Email: Patrick.skelly.2024@mumail.ie

Phone: 085-1615784

If you are happy to proceed, please complete and sign the consent form below.
Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this research.

Participant Consent Form

I,, agree to take part in Patrick Skelly's research study titled:

“Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Becoming Teachers in Ireland: A Qualitative Exploration.”

Please tick each box to confirm:

- ☐ The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me.
- ☐ I am participating voluntarily and can withdraw at any time.
- ☐ I give permission for the interview to be audio-recorded.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw my data up until August 30, 2025.
- ☐ I understand how my data will be managed and stored securely.
- ☐ I understand the limits of confidentiality, including possible legal disclosure.
- ☐ I understand that anonymous data may be used in academic or policy-related outputs.

Please tick as appropriate:

- ☐ I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
- ☐ I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
- ☐ I agree for my data to be used in future research
- ☐ I do not agree for my data to be used in future research

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Participant Name (Block Capitals): _____

I, the undersigned, confirm that I have explained this study to the participant in full, including the voluntary nature, risks, and benefits.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Name (Block Capitals): Patrick Skelly

If you have concerns about this study, you may contact:

Dr. Michael Murray (michael.j.murray@mu.ie) or Dr. Angela McGinn (angela.mcginn@mu.ie). Your concerns will be addressed sensitively and confidentially. **Please retain one signed copy for yourself. The researcher will keep the second signed copy**

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule



Participant Research Questions “From the Cell to the Classroom: Exploring the Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Transitioning into Educator Roles.”

1. Can you describe a moment or experiences that inspired you to pursue teaching after your time in prison?
2. What does education mean to you personally, and how has it influenced your journey of reintegration?
3. How do you experience your identity as a former prisoner and as someone qualified to teach? How do these identities influence your life?
4. How do you feel about sharing your past with colleagues, potential employers, or students? Can you describe what it's like to make that decision, and what reactions you've encountered?
5. In what ways has your decision to disclose or not disclose your past shaped your professional or personal relationships?
6. Have you felt treated differently by colleagues, potential employers, or others because of your past? If so, what has that experience been like for you?
7. Reflecting on your journey from prison to becoming qualified to teach, what or who has been the most significant influence or source of support for you?
8. What has been your experience navigating barriers in accessing teacher training or finding teaching roles? How have these challenges shaped your journey?
9. How do you experience the connection between your past and your teaching or your aspiration to teach? In what ways do you feel your lived experiences influence how you would approach teaching or interact with students?
10. When you think about your role as an educator, or your aspiration to work as one, what do you feel is the unique value your experiences bring to the classroom and the wider community?
11. How do you perceive the influence of your past on your future opportunities and prospects? Can you describe how this makes you feel?
12. What advice or message would you share with others who may have been through similar experiences and are considering becoming educators?

Appendix 5: Teaching Council FOI Response – Vetting Outcomes 2019–2024

Applications where we received a trace disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau			
Year	Number	Female	Male
2021	2*	2	0
2022	164	80	83
2023	484**	240	244
2024	198	98	100
Total	848	420	427

- *The figure above from 2021 is for December 2021 only. Statistics are not available before December 2021 as prior to the Teaching Council's My Registration online system going live in Q4 2021 we did not record a status of trace disclosures.
- ** This figure is higher as we received a higher volume of re-vetting applications in 2023

From 1/1/2019 to 31/12/2024.

Applicants who were not registered following a decision by the Fit and Proper Person Panel and this decision was upheld by the Registration Review Committee			
Year	Number	Female	Male
2023	1	0	1

Applicants who were not registered following a decision by the Fit and Proper Person Panel			
Year	Number	Female	Male
2023	1	1	0
2024	1	0	1

Applications where we received a trace disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau				
Year	Number	Female	Male	Total number of vetting processed
2021	2*	2	0	
2022	164	80	83	41,752
2023	484**	240	244	51,980
2024	198	98	100	28,300
Total	848	420	427	122,032

- *The figure above from 2021 is for December 2021 only. Statistics are not available before December 2021 as prior to the Teaching Council's My Registration online system going live in Q4 2021 we did not record a status of trace disclosures.
- ** This figure is higher as we received a higher volume of re-vetting applications in 2023

From 1/1/2019 to 31/12/2024.

Applicants who were not registered following a decision by the Fit and Proper Person Panel and this decision was upheld by the Registration Review Committee			
Year	Number	Female	Male
2023	1	0	1

Applicants who were not registered following a decision by the Fit and Proper Person Panel			
Year	Number	Female	Male
2023	1	1	0
2024	1	0	1

Appendix 6: NVivo Codebook

Concept Map / Code Tree Preview

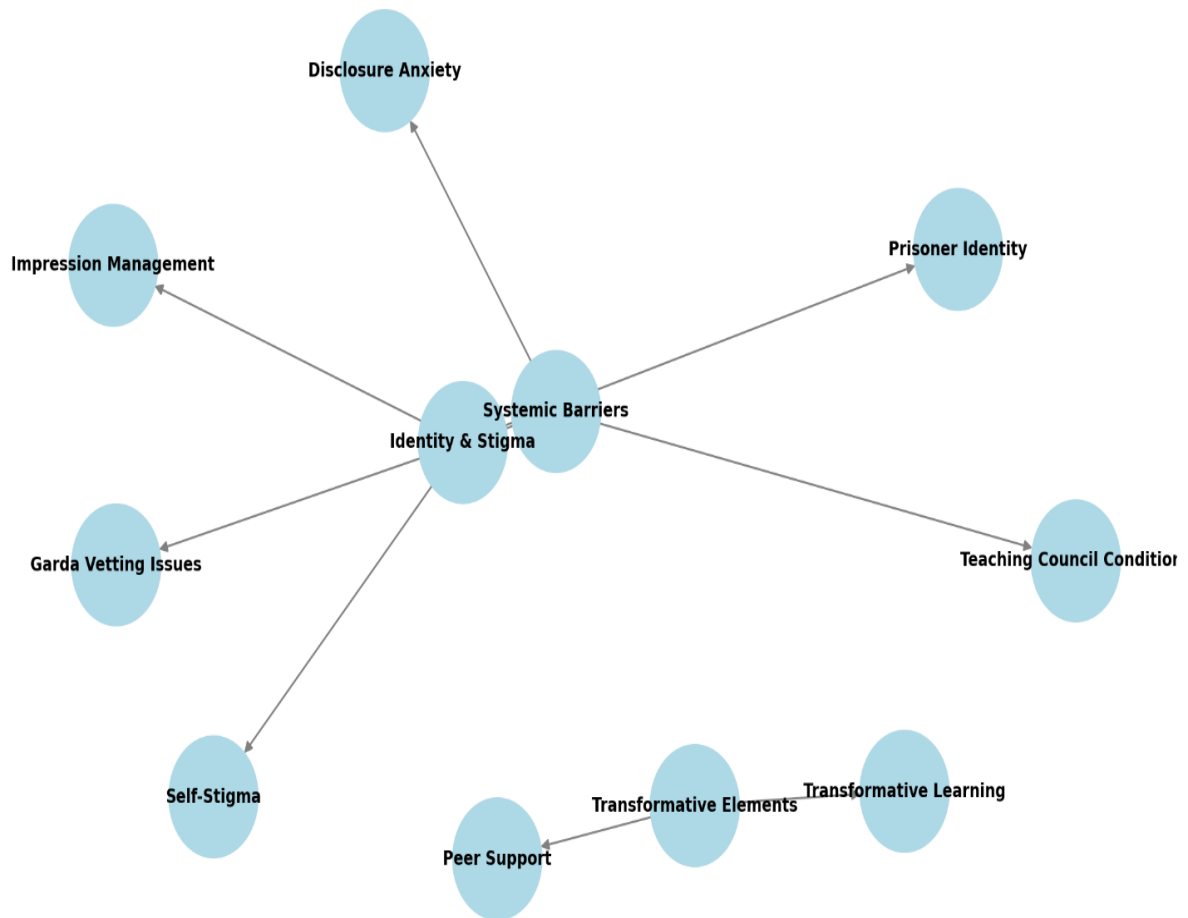


Figure 3. Concept Map

Appendix 7: Declaration

Student Declaration

The material presented here for examination for the award of a higher degree by research has not been incorporated into a submission for another degree

Permission is given for the thesis to be uploaded to Maynooth University Library for general access

I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

SIGNED:  DATE: 29-6-25