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UNDERSTANDING DISTANCE LEARNING CONTESTS IN PRISON SETTINGS THROUGH THE LENS OF BOURDIEU'S SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and critically analyze the contests faced by incarcerated students engaged in distance education, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence as a theoretical lens. By drawing on accounts and experiences from participants within a Namibian prison setting, the study aims to uncover how institutional practices, cultural assumptions, and structural inequalities subtly reproduce educational disadvantage and reinforce marginalization. Data was collected using a tape recorder, and semi-structured interviews were recorded. Inmate students who were studying using e-learning were purposively selected as participants. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber who gave the transcripts to the researcher to interpret. The researcher employed an interpretive paradigm to analyze the transcribed information. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence describes the subtle, normalized processes by which systems of inequality in prison are sustained and misrecognized as natural. Symbolic violence is perpetuated not only through material deprivation but also through pedagogical and institutional practices that implicitly marginalize incarcerated students.

Keywords: Symbolic violence, Bourdieu, Distance learning, Prison education, Inmate perspectives

1. Introduction

Pitsoe and Vlăduțescu (2024) believe that "the power/knowledge framework illuminates the multifaceted nature of scholarly endeavours, acknowledging that the production of knowledge is not a sterile and objective process but a journey fraught with the influences of institutional structures, disciplinary regimes, and the pervasive forces that dictate the contours of academic life." The purpose of this study is to explore and critically analyze the contests faced by incarcerated students engaged in distance education, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence as a theoretical lens. Distance education is increasingly touted as a solution for equitable access to learning across geographies and social contexts. However, within prison settings—spaces of institutional constraint and layered marginalization—such education often reproduces forms of exclusion. This paper uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of ''*symbolic violence*'' to understand the subtle and often invisible mechanisms by which distance learning in carceral environments may alienate, disempower, or marginalize incarcerated students. The question that is asked concept of symbolic violence help explain these educational barriers?"

Bourdieu conceptualizes symbolic violence as a form of non-physical violence manifested in the imposition of norms, values, and expectations that benefit dominant social groups while being misrecognized as legitimate or neutral (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1998). Symbolic violence operates through cultural capital and the habitus, leading marginalized groups to internalize inferiority or exclusion. Within education, symbolic violence manifests when pedagogical structures reflect the worldviews and assumptions of dominant groups (Atkinson, 2025; Pangestuti, 2025). These assumptions are embedded in language, curriculum, and institutional expectations—often invisibly disadvantaging those without access to the same cultural or technological capital.

In prison settings, symbolic violence is amplified by structural barriers. Maculan (2024) interprets law and institutional procedures in prisons as forms of objectified cultural capital, suggesting that navigating the system requires familiarity with codes often inaccessible to prisoners. When applied to distance learning, this insight reveals how course materials, modes of delivery, and institutional communication may unintentionally reinforce

educational exclusion by presuming access to infrastructure, digital fluency, or academic self-sufficiency. Participants in the field often voice feelings of disconnection, inferiority, or demotivation, rooted not only in material deprivation (e.g., no internet or devices) but also in the internalization of systemic neglect. As Atkinson (2025) notes, symbolic violence includes "knowing they would be looked down upon by others and feeling shame… about their tastes and interests" (p. 2). In the prison education context, this translates to students feeling unworthy or incapable of learning due to the lack of institutional support or personalized instruction. As Pangestuti (2025) shows in the context of integrative education, doxa—or taken-for-granted beliefs—can normalize educational practices that systematically exclude those without the "right" habitus or capital. When support services are absent or non-responsive, prisoners internalize the perception that their education is not taken seriously (Atkinson, 2025).

2. Literature Review

Distance education is increasingly heralded as a tool for expanding educational access across diverse geographies and populations. In theory, it provides flexibility and reach, particularly beneficial in remote or underserved areas. However, in carceral contexts, where institutional constraints and systemic marginalization are deeply entrenched, distance learning often reproduces rather than mitigates educational exclusion. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence—the process by which social hierarchies are maintained through misrecognized, non-coercive means—offers a critical lens for examining this paradox (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990).

Symbolic violence operates subtly, embedded in the structures and assumptions of education that presume learner autonomy, digital fluency, and uninterrupted access—conditions often inaccessible to incarcerated individuals. For example, inmates frequently lack reliable access to internet-enabled devices, electricity, or printed course materials, yet are held to academic standards designed for students in free society (Pangestuti, 2025). Such structural neglect sends a symbolic message: incarcerated students are not full academic citizens, despite their participation in formal education systems. Moreover, institutional disinterest—manifest in unresponsive support services, restricted communication with instructors, and opaque bureaucratic processes—further alienates incarcerated students, reinforcing a hierarchy of educational legitimacy (Simon, 2025; Maculan, 2024). These mechanisms do not rely on overt denial of education but instead function through the normalization of inequity, making the marginalization of incarcerated students appear natural or justified (Atkinson, 2025). As a result, carceral distance learning risks becoming a site not of empowerment, but of symbolic exclusion.

2.1 Symbolic Violence and Reproduction in Education

Bourdieu conceptualizes symbolic violence as a form of non-physical violence manifested in the imposition of norms, values, and expectations that benefit dominant social groups while being misrecognized as legitimate or neutral (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1998). Symbolic violence operates through cultural capital and the habitus, leading marginalized groups to internalize inferiority or exclusion. Within education, symbolic violence manifests when pedagogical structures reflect the worldviews and assumptions of dominant groups (Atkinson, 2025; Pangestuti, 2025). These assumptions are embedded in language, curriculum, and institutional expectations—often invisibly disadvantaging those without access to the same cultural or technological capital.

2.2 Prison Education and Carceral Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence refers to the subtle, often unrecognized forms of domination that occur through cultural and social systems, where the oppressed internalize the logic of their oppressors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the carceral context, symbolic violence operates through normalized bureaucratic and educational practices that obscure structural inequality and the reproduction of racialized and class-based oppression (Simon, 2025). Simon (2025) identifies five "legal-rational" myths—including punishment as a civic religion — that uphold the legitimacy of the carceral state despite its evident moral failings and systemic violence. These myths serve as the cultural infrastructure through which carceral education operates, normalizing subjugation under the guise of rehabilitation and legal order.

On one hand, prison education has the potential to humanize and empower. In a Walls to Bridges (W2B) classroom setting, students expressed that they felt "not like we're in prison," which is a powerful indicator that meaningful educational experiences can counteract the dehumanization of incarceration (Annamma et al., 2023). However, this affective transformation is fragile and context dependent. Peacock (2025) expands this critique by situating prison education within a broader settler-colonial and necropolitical framework. Here, the prison is not merely a site of confinement but a structural mechanism for producing racialized disposability. Education within such a system risks becoming a mechanism of symbolic recognition without redistribution, offering surface-level

inclusion while leaving colonial-capitalist hierarchies intact. Prison- race, disability, and carcerality. Annamma et al. (2023) argue that disabled Girls of Color are disproportionately represented and subjected to “dehumanizing and (de)socializing mechanisms,” which include surveillance, social control, and emotional suppression. These mechanisms echo the broader symbolic violence found in adult prisons but are even more insidious due to their educational framing.

The article underscores how sociocritical literacy courses can disrupt these logics by offering abolitionist praxis. Yet, such efforts are limited by their embeddedness in punitive institutions. Therefore, while education can offer moments of resistance, it is not inherently liberatory when nested within systems designed to control and punish. Kilty et al. (2025) emphasize the emotional geography of incarceration. Educational spaces in prison may offer reprieve, but the overarching architecture of control ensures emotional regulation, suppression, and psychological discipline. The classroom becomes a battleground of conflicting logics: humanizing pedagogy versus institutional dehumanization. Symbolic violence, then, is not only linguistic or ideological but also spatial and affective. The carceral state's power is felt in the very design of classrooms, visitation rooms, and segregation units, all of which discipline bodies and emotions through space. In prison settings, symbolic violence is amplified by structural barriers. Maculan (2024) interprets law and institutional procedures in prisons as forms of objectified cultural capital, suggesting that navigating the system requires familiarity with codes often inaccessible to prisoners. When applied to distance learning, this insight reveals how course materials, modes of delivery, and institutional communication may unintentionally reinforce educational exclusion by presuming access to infrastructure, digital fluency, or academic self-sufficiency.

To fully reckon with the contradictions of prison education, one must adopt an abolitionist perspective. Education that occurs within punitive structures risks reinforcing. As such, abolition does not merely mean removing prisons but reimagining the social relations, institutions, and pedagogies that make them seem necessary. As both Annamma et al. (2023) and Peacock (2025) argue, real educational justice for incarcerated people requires dismantling carceral logics and building systems rooted in care, equity, and freedom.

2.3 Symbolic Violence in Prisons: A Bourdieusian Perspective

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence refers to a form of non-physical coercion that is subtle, often internalized, and misrecognized as legitimate by both the dominant and subordinate groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In the context of prisons, symbolic violence operates as a powerful mechanism through which the carceral system naturalizes inequality, reinforces hierarchical structures, and maintains social control without relying on overt physical force (Schubert, 2008). Incarcerated individuals are subjected to symbolic violence through routinized degradation, the institutional denial of autonomy, and the silencing of their voices—all of which serve to normalize their subordinate status and obscure the underlying power relations (Wacquant, 2009; Rodgers, 2025). Maculan (2024) demonstrates how prisoners strategically navigate the "prison field" using legal language and rules as forms of objectified cultural capital. Despite this agency, the structure itself remains skewed in favor of institutional power, reflecting Bourdieu’s assertion that symbolic violence arises from social asymmetries embedded in habitus and field interactions.

The denial of access to educational materials, digital tools, or qualified facilitators constitutes another form of symbolic violence. These barriers are normalized and often justified by institutional narratives that prioritize security over educational equity (Maculan, 2024). Furthermore, symbolic violence in prisons is intensified through dehumanizing language, spatial segregation, and bureaucratic opacity (Chapman & Cottingham, 2025). Ferreira and Maschietto (2025) contextualize symbolic violence within broader patterns of state formation and the entrenchment of apeirophobia and racism, revealing how prisons serve as nodes in a larger apparatus of state-sanctioned exclusion. In prison settings, the internalization of inferiority and misrecognition of rights often result in incarcerated individuals perceiving educational deprivation as a personal failure rather than institutional neglect. Symbolic violence is particularly insidious because it does not rely on overt coercion but on the internalization of dominant norms by the subjugated. As Maculan (2024) notes, prisoners often adapt to carceral logics, aligning themselves with normative expectations to avoid punishment or gain minimal privileges. This aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of “illusio,” where actors are invested in the game even when it is stacked against them.

Gimeno Torrent (2024) highlights that symbolic violence often escapes recognition because it operates under the guise of neutrality or standardization. In prisons, this is evident in the structured denial of educational content or arbitrary enforcement of rules that hinder learning—actions that are presented as routine but have deep discriminatory effects. Symbolic violence in prisons perpetuates structural inequalities through mechanisms that are often invisible or legitimized. Applying Bourdieu’s framework reveals how the denial of educational rights, the normalization of exclusion, and the misrecognition of subjugation function to maintain the power of carceral institutions while diminishing the agency of incarcerated students.

2.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore and critically analyze the contestsfaced by incarcerated students engaged in distance education, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence as a theoretical lens. By drawing on accounts and experiences from participants within prison settings, the study aims to uncover how institutional practices, cultural assumptions, and structural inequalities subtly reproduce educational disadvantage and reinforce marginalization.

2.5 Research Question

The main research question that is asked is, "How do incarcerated students experience and navigate the contestsof distance learning within prison settings, and in what ways can Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence help explain these educational barriers?"

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretive paradigm that seeks to understand human experiences and the meanings individuals assign to them within specific social contexts (Clandinin, Estefan, & Caine, 2025). Data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were tape-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of participants' responses (Williamson et al., 2025). These interviews aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of incarcerated students engaged in distance education. To ensure the fidelity of the participants' voices, a professional transcriber was employed to transcribe the recordings verbatim, preserving the integrity of language, emotion, and emphasis, which are critical in interpretive qualitative research (Barnwell, 2025). Once transcription was complete, the transcripts were provided to the researcher for systematic thematic analysis, which involved iterative reading and coding, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data (Kelly & Sennott, 2025). This analytical approach was aligned with the study's theoretical framework—specifically Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence—to explore how power dynamics and institutional structures manifest in prison learning environments (Johannessen, Rasmussen, & Haldar, 2025). The interpretive analysis aimed to illuminate the often-invisible educational barriers incarcerated students face and the sociocultural forces shaping their engagement with distance learning.

3.2 Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were entrusted to a professional transcriber, who meticulously transcribed the data verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of the participants' narratives (Barnwell, 2025). This process ensured the integrity of the original speech, including elements such as tone, pauses, and phrasing—features that carry significant interpretive weight in qualitative research (Panadero et al., 2025). Following transcription, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely recognized approach in qualitative research that involves the identification and interpretation of recurrent themes and patterns (Mwita & Mwilongo, 2025). The themes were derived inductively from the participants' accounts, facilitating a grounded understanding of their experiences within prison-based distance education systems. Guided by an interpretive paradigm, the researcher prioritized participants' subjective meanings and social contexts (Bouncken, Czakon, & Schmitt, 2025). This approach allowed for deeper exploration of how systemic power relations and educational structures are internalized and experienced by incarcerated students. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence served as the overarching theoretical framework, enabling a nuanced analysis of how institutionalized forms of dominance influence educational access and reinforce structural inequality within carceral settings (Rodrigue & Kuyken, 2025).

4. Findings

The collected voices from incarcerated students highlight several symbolic mechanisms at play:

4.1 Lack of Material Resources

Absence of laptops, internet access, or printed materials—often regarded as technical issues—impose symbolic boundaries between "real students" and those merely attempting to learn under constraint (Participants A, I, J).

4.2 Pedagogical Alienation

Course content and delivery methods often presume autonomy, digital literacy, and uninterrupted access—assumptions that reflect the habitus of non-imprisoned students (Participants D, E, F).

4.3 Institutional Neglect

When support services are absent or non-responsive, prisoners internalize the perception that their education is not taken seriously (Participant C; Atkinson, 2025).

4.4 Social Isolation and Motivation

The lack of face-to-face interaction or peer engagement creates a symbolic separation from the educational community and belonging (Participants B, H).

Participant A: *"It is like if I think of we are not having access to e-learning during night time, and we don't have hard copies, in fact unless you are lucky enough, what do you call this, photocopies, photocopy machine, printers so that you can print some copies so that you can read them, print them then you can time to read. So, in others words we don't have more time for e-learning on a laptop''.*

Participant B: *"Factors, one might be as I pointed earlier that to understand the concept, mostly the background it is also playing a very important role for some of us who were not like be willing to go out, and when we go out, we are not have the resources like libraries and so on. Our mind was not trying to read more, we rely on somebody to explain or to facilitate the things so that we can better understand. It is one of the factors which can discourage somebody to study on his own, because it is difficult to understand''.*

Participant C: *"The one, I believe lack of motivation. Lack of motivation from self, lack of motivation from let me say from the side of the institution, because it is like whenever you do distance, you are segregated from, you are far from the institution, thereby you do not have this that familiar link or that link between you and the institution, so that might also encourage students".*

Participant D: *"The other is lack of clarity whereby the lecturers either, the lecturers or the students support staff has to offer if it is not clear between from their side for the student, it an also discourage the student''.*

Participant E: *"The factors that can discourage is that we don't have time or kept the opportunity to ask questions that we don't understand that time when you are doing your interviews. A person needs face to face classes so that we can also hear and understand ideas from others in the class''.*

Participant F: *"The distance mode is quite challenging, but it is doable. Especially financial, maybe you find that everyone wants to help you in the payments and sometimes you find some things that you cannot do on your own, especially in research. You have to send someone to ask somebody outside to do it for you. So if these things are not in place then you become discouraged. Like here in the situation where we are, we the lack of motivation can discourage you, and also lack of motivation, yes''.*

Participant G: "*First of all it will be the internet, secondly the treatment from the officers also. Like if the officers do not help you, then you cannot go forward with your studies''.*

Participant H: "*What I observed sometimes if you are not dedicated you don't do your assessment on time, you might be discouraged to continue, if you start failing then you feel like you just gave up. The first one you find that people they sometimes they also associate with the wrong people, for instance that you associate with the person which tried that was not having the vision, automatic that person in your opinion they are not important like the others, because they don't give information about the distance mode, but to me I see the most contributing factor is if you associate with the wrong people. If you associate with the right people''.*

Participant I: *"The factors that one that can discourage one, is once you are not have a device it is an internet device modem, first of all and mostly it is contributed by the power shut downs, especially those contestsare mostly around remote areas or urban areas where you have access to internet, because Africa, in such a way that I mean, in comparison to the European countries, so the contestsstthat we are facing especially is rural areas, in a set up like this, this one, I mean the correctional environment, maybe where you are restricted to in comparison with the students who are outside, so those are the things which can discourage the student, I mean we are no having full time access to the internet''.*

Participant J: *"You know when there is power shutdowns, because of some security reasons one could not be accorded like the students who are outside. Firstly, financial constraints, secondly there is no support from your family, there is no other person who can assist you. Thirdly it is the bureaucracy for NSC, sometimes manpower is not enough to take us outside and then it builds up to a resistance that you see that they don't want to assist you. Sometimes when you call from here, the institute that I am studying with, they don't pick up the phone, and then the right applications to be taken outside. That is also part of the e-learning contestsstthat we have''.*

5. Discussion

5.1 Bourdieu's Symbolic Violence: Voices from the Field

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence describes the subtle, normalized processes by which systems of inequality are sustained and misrecognized as natural. In the context of prison education, symbolic violence is perpetuated not only through material deprivation but also through pedagogical and institutional practices that implicitly marginalize incarcerated students.

Participants A, I, and J describe how the absence of basic educational tools—such as laptops, reliable internet, and printed materials—becomes more than a logistical barrier; it signifies a deeper exclusion. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is enacted when dominant cultural capital is required to succeed but is withheld from certain groups, who then internalize failure as personal inadequacy (Bourdieu, 1984). The denial of educational resources in prison settings thus demarcates who counts as a "real student" and who does not, perpetuating feelings of academic illegitimacy (Simon, 2025).

Participant C and others highlight the symbolic violence embedded in the absence of institutional support. When support services are unresponsive, the implied message is that the incarcerated learner is undeserving or invisible. This resonates with Atkinson's (2025) research, which found that people from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to feel disrespected or disregarded by institutions, especially when those institutions are unresponsive to their needs. Simon (2025) calls this a manifestation of "surplus legitimacy"—where the carceral state's authority is so deeply entrenched that its neglect is normalized and unchallenged.

Participants D, E, and F describe pedagogical models that presume high levels of autonomy, digital fluency, and continuous access. These are reflective of the dominant habitus—the ingrained dispositions of the non-incarcerated learner. Bourdieu (1990) noted that when institutional practices reflect only the habitus of dominant groups, they alienate those whose lived experiences diverge from these assumptions. The result is an educational model that unintentionally excludes and disempowers incarcerated students by misrecognizing their reality (Mayhew, 2025; Cates & Gerty, 2025).

Participants B and H illustrate the demotivating effects of educational isolation, which reinforces symbolic separation from academic community and belonging. According to Kilty et al. (2025), carceral spaces intensify emotional detachment and disrupt meaningful social learning, creating what has been described as an "emotionally affective geography" that amplifies loneliness and disconnection. Such emotional disaffiliation from the learning environment constitutes a form of symbolic violence by eroding the social identity of "student" and reinforcing marginality. Bourdieu's framework illuminates how prison education is not just hindered by material shortages or inefficiencies but is systemically structured to replicate inequalities. Symbolic violence operates not through overt coercion but by embedding exclusion into pedagogical norms, resource distribution, and institutional responsiveness. Recognizing and challenging these forms of violence is essential for transforming prison education into a space of genuine empowerment. Participants in the field often voice feelings of disconnection, inferiority, or demotivation, rooted not only in material deprivation (e.g., no internet or devices) but also in the internalization of systemic neglect. As Atkinson (2025) notes, symbolic violence includes "knowing they would be looked down upon by others and feeling shame… about their tastes and interests" (p. 2). In the prison education context, this translates to students feeling unworthy or incapable of learning due to the lack of institutional support or personalized instruction.

5.2 Prison Education and Carceral Symbolic Violence

The testimonies of Participants A and B poignantly illustrate the intersection of prison education and symbolic violence. These narratives shed light on how structural limitations—such as restricted access to e-learning, the lack of physical materials like photocopiers, and the absence of conducive environments for self-study—constitute a form of symbolic violence in the Bourdieusian sense. Symbolic violence operates through internalized perceptions and consent, masking coercion as normalcy (Bourdieu, 1991). Within carceral education, this manifests not only as restricted resources but also as diminished expectations and support for incarcerated students.

Participant A's description of limited access to e-learning and resources reflects how institutional routines deny prisoners basic educational infrastructure, subtly reinforcing their marginality. This is emblematic of what Rafaela Granja (2019) terms the "permeability of prison walls"—where social inequalities outside are reproduced within, maintaining the incarcerated as symbolically subordinate even when engaging in reformative practices like education. Similarly, Participant B points to the compounded disadvantage of lacking academic preparation and institutional support. Their narrative underscores how internalized inferiority—feeling unworthy or incapable without external explanation—reinforces exclusion. This aligns with Deirdre Caputo-Levine's (2018) analysis of symbolic violence during reentry, where ex-prisoners are subtly coerced into self-discipline through internalized stigmas about their intellectual and moral worth.

Participants' testimonies reflect multiple layers of exclusion and constraint typical of carceral education settings. Participant A identifies a lack of material resources and time for digital learning, stating, "We don't have more time for e-learning on a laptop" due to the unavailability of hard copies, printers, and general access restrictions. This reflects how material deprivation intersects with symbolic violence, wherein institutional neglect becomes internalized and normalized as a condition of imprisonment (Atkinson, 2025; Pangestuti, 2025).

Participant B's comments about the lack of educational background and external academic support point to the invisibility of prior inequalities that continue within the prison. Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as the imposition of cultural arbitrariness by dominant groups, internalized by the oppressed as legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The prison's failure to scaffold education to inmates' lived realities perpetuates symbolic marginalization under the guise of equal provision (Tafti et al., 2025). Participant C underscores a disconnection from the institution—"You" are segregated… you do not have this familiar link"—which corresponds to the symbolic alienation in Bourdieu's theory. Carceral institutions, through their hierarchical structures, assert dominance not through physical force but by framing distance and disempowerment as standard operational procedures (Belisle-Pipon, 2025). Participant D emphasizes the lack of clarity in instruction and support, a subtle yet pervasive form of symbolic violence. Educational communication in prisons, when deliberately opaque or insufficient, acts as a gatekeeping mechanism that implicitly judges the learner as deficient (Maculan, 2024).

The relational aspect of learning, articulated by Participant E, who yearns for "face-to-face classes," aligns with Freire's notion of dialogical education. Its absence in prisons is both a pedagogical and symbolic failure—a denial of recognition and interactive human dignity (Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970). Participant F reveals the compounding contestsof finance and research support. These barriers highlight how incarcerated students are forced to outsource educational engagement, undermining their agency and reinforcing the institution's authority over knowledge and its gatekeeping (Tafti et al., 2025).

Participant G's reference to the treatment by officers aligns with Maculan's (2024) perspective of law as objectified cultural capital. prisons, officers' discretionary behavior can facilitate or obstruct access to education, making the gatekeeping deeply personal and symbolic.

The testimonies of Participants H–J reflect complex contestsexperienced in prison-based distance learning environments, which can be analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to the subtle and often unrecognized mechanisms through which social hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced and legitimized via systems like education, without explicit coercion (Bourdieu, 1984). Participant H mentions lack of motivation and the social influence of associating with peers lacking vision. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus—the internalized social structures that shape perceptions and actions. The absence of a motivating peer environment reflects how disadvantaged students internalize failure and low expectations, a hallmark of symbolic violence in educational systems (Atkinson, 2025).

Participant I points to structural and infrastructural deficiencies—lack of devices, internet, and frequent power outages—highlighting unequal access to cultural capital in correctional settings. Bourdieu emphasized that institutional education assumes the possession of such capital, which many incarcerated students lack, resulting in systematic misrecognition of their efforts and abilities (Pangestuti, 2025). Participant J further underscores bureaucratic inefficiencies and institutional neglect, such as unanswered calls and administrative inertia, contributing to students' alienation. Such neglect can be viewed as symbolic violence enacted through institutional omission, reinforcing a sense of inferiority and marginalization (Maculan, 2024). The carceral field reproduces power through mechanisms of control and isolation. Maculan (2024) conceptualizes law within the prison as a form of objectified cultural capital—a tool that inmates may strategically use or be denied access to, reinforcing internal hierarchies, and reproducing marginalization under the guise of neutrality or legality. Furthermore, Atkinson (2025) identifies those individuals with limited cultural and economic capital are more likely to internalize social judgment, viewing themselves as undeserving or inadequate—a psychological manifestation of symbolic violence.

Annamma et al. (2023) articulate how educational environments in prisons dehumanize and desocialize marginalized youth, especially disabled Girls of Color. The participants' reflections resonate with these findings, highlighting how prison schooling often fails to nurture autonomy or critical thought, instead reinforcing dependence on authority for comprehension and validation. This structural undermining of self-directed learning reflects a broader carceral logic where autonomy is not cultivated but constrained. It aligns with Cates and Gerty's (2025) assertion that carceral education often produces an "incarcerated mind," shaped as much by the social environment as by the physical prison. Rebecca Trammell (2011) frames symbolic violence in prisons as a regulatory force, shaping gendered and hierarchical dynamics through consent rather than overt force. Although focused on gender roles, her findings parallel the educational context: symbolic violence conditions incarcerated individuals to accept their subordinate status without overt coercion. In educational terms, this subordination translates to limited access to quality instruction, technology, and pedagogical autonomy.

6. Conclusions

The testimonies of incarcerated students illustrate how prison education is not merely hindered by logistical contestsbut is embedded within a structure of symbolic violence. Through the denial of cultural capital, demotivation, and bureaucratic neglect, these inmate students experienced an education system that often

delegitimizes their aspirations, perpetuating inequality, and discouragement. Abolitionist pedagogy, as advocated by Annamma et al. (2023), pushes back against these normalized injustices by fostering empowerment, community, and critical engagement. This requires not just curriculum reform but a dismantling of carceral logics that permeate prison education—challenging its symbolic and material violence simultaneously.

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