

Sentence reduction through reading in prisons: a case study on the challenges faced by psychosocial teams in Brazil

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical, operational and interdisciplinary challenges encountered by psychosocial teams in implementing the sentence reduction through reading programme within the Brazilian prison system. Drawing on a qualitative multiple case study conducted in five penitentiary units in the state of Maranhão between 2022 and 2025, the research analysed the practices of seven professionals (five social workers and two psychologists) through documentary analysis and participant observation. The findings indicate that, although reading constitutes a potentially emancipatory tool, its impact is constrained by the lack of standardisation, limited institutional resources and tensions between professional spheres. The study concludes that the work of the psychosocial team, guided by ethical-political projects committed to human rights, is essential to challenge the punitive logic and to strengthen more humanised processes of social reintegration.

Keywords: Prison system, sentence reduction through reading, social work, psychology, human rights.

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1. Introduction

The Brazilian prison system has historically been a setting shrouded in severe and systematic human rights violations, marked by a host of structural problems that challenge the very notion of justice and social reintegration. Prison overcrowding, institutional violence, penal selectivity and the social exclusion of incarcerated people remain persistent features that undermine the promise of social reintegration as a purpose of serving sentences (MDHC, 2025).

This reality turns prisons into actual human warehouses, where dignity is continually eroded and the resocialising function of the State proves ineffective. Idleness, which affects more than two thirds of the incarcerated population, is not merely a statistical figure; it represents the obliteration of time and of people's life force, creating conditions conducive to psychological distress and to the strengthening of criminal factions that offer a sense of belonging which the State denies. This enforced inactivity is, in itself, a form of violence that corrodes subjectivity and drastically constrains the possibilities of future social reintegration.

Recent data, such as the statistics released by the National Observatory on Human Rights in 2025, reveal the alarming scale of the crisis: 3,091 deaths were recorded in the prison system in 2023, 703 of which resulted from violence. Moreover, studies show that only 17% of detainees participate in educational activities (MDHC, 2025), demonstrating the system's failure to provide opportunities for development. Judicial delays and criminal policies that promote mass incarceration further aggravate the situation, reflecting the country's deepest social contradictions. This bleak landscape calls for a search for alternatives which, even when operating within the confines of the prison institution, could create fissures and counterpoints to a purely punitive logic.

Within this context of social and penitentiary fragility, initiatives such as sentence reduction through reading have emerged, established by Recommendation no. 44/2013 (CNJ, 2013) and updated by Resolution no. 391/2021 of the National Council of Justice of Brazil (CNJ, 2021). This policy allows for a four-day sentence reduction for each book read and approved, while ensuring the application of fundamental rights such as education, culture and human dignity. By implementing this measure, the CNJ recognises that access to knowledge is a core component of dignity and constitutes a necessary counterweight to a solely punitive logic.

The goal of the policy is not only to reduce the length of prison sentences, but also to offer a path towards lending new meaning to the prison experience, encouraging people to reflect and to build new life projects. Its spirit lies in the belief that engagement with literature and knowledge can serve as a catalyst for personal and social transformation.

However, the implementation of this measure is not without its contradictions. The gap between legislation and reality is immense. A CNJ census (2023) revealed that 30.4% of prison units do not have libraries or reading spaces, and 26.3% fail to offer any educational activities. Scarce

resources, poor infrastructure and a punitive organisational culture generate an environment that is at odds with the programme's effectiveness.

Academic literature has explored the theoretical benefits of reading in prison (Freire, 1987; Foucault, 1975; Bourdieu, 1998; Iamamoto, 2007), yet empirical studies that delve into the "factory floor" of implementation remain limited; that is, there is an absence of studies that analyse day-to-day practices, dilemmas and the strategies employed by the professionals on the front line of this policy (Minayo, 2017; Bardin, 2011).

This research addresses this gap. Despite the well-known benefits, literature in the field has scarcely examined the practical challenges involved in implementing this policy, particularly from the standpoint of the psychosocial teams responsible for carrying it out. Amid these dilemmas, social workers and psychologists emerge as strategic actors whose practice transcends punitive logic in order to safeguard rights. Understanding these challenges is paramount for improving professional practice and raising the standards of public policy.

In light of the above, this research sought to answer the following question: What are the main ethical, operational and interdisciplinary challenges encountered by psychosocial teams during their interventions when implementing the sentence reduction through reading programme in prison units in Maranhão?

The general objective is to analyse the challenges faced by social workers and psychologists in the implementation of the programme. The specific objectives are:

- To map the difficulties related to the evaluation of reading.
- To identify organisational failures that affect access to the benefit.
- To analyse the tensions and points of convergence between the knowledge bases of social work and psychology.
- To discuss the ethical dilemmas experienced by professionals in balancing their roles of control and care.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Iamamoto (2007), professional practice within the prison system requires a critical-theoretical support structure capable of decoding the complex power relations and contradictions inherent in this setting. This study is grounded in a dialogue between four theoretical pillars which, taken together, provide a powerful lens through which to analyse the research findings.

2.1. The social question in prison and the ethical-political project of social work

As a profession, social work intervenes directly in the expressions of the *social question*, understood –following the critical perspective of au-

thors such as Marilda Iamamoto— as the set of social, economic and political inequalities produced by the contradictory relationship between capital and labour in capitalist society. In the prison setting, the social question appears in its most acute and condensed form, revealing the structural inequalities of class, race and gender that determine who becomes the main target of the penal system. The prison becomes a repository for poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Consequently, the role of the social worker cannot be limited to managing poverty or administering benefits, for this would risk merely managing misery and replicating a logic of control. Guided by the profession's ethical-political mission, whose principles include the unwavering defence of human rights and the pursuit of social justice, practitioners must act in ways that place pressure on the very structures that generate oppression.

In the context of sentence reduction through reading, this means going beyond the verification of a written report. It involves seeking to understand the life pathways followed by those involved, deciphering the social determinations embedded in their histories, and ensuring that access to culture becomes a genuine universal right rather than a privilege.

2.2. Prison as a disciplinary institution and reading as resistance

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975), Michel Foucault argues that the modern prison cannot be understood merely as an institution that fails in its aim to socially reintegrate individuals. On the contrary, the prison is highly successful in its real function: producing delinquency as a manageable category and exercising disciplinary power over individuals.

The prison thus operates as a *total institution*, organising and controlling every aspect of prisoners' lives and ensuring that power is exercised constantly and subtly, well beyond physical confinement. Through mechanisms such as the panopticon, a model of ceaseless surveillance, control becomes internalised by the individual, who is compelled to become their own overseer, as this system seeks to oversee every component of these individuals' lives. Within this environment of omnipresent control, reading can emerge as a practice of freedom and resistance. It creates fissures in the walls of confinement, opening access to other discourses, narratives and imageries that challenge institutional logic.

Reading becomes an act of symbolic insubordination, a space of autonomy and of "care of the self" within an environment designed to extinguish individuality. However, this study begins from the hypothesis that the prison institution tends to absorb and neutralise such practices of freedom, allowing them to become new instruments of control. As will be shown in the findings, the assessment of reading may paradoxically turn into yet another mechanism of surveillance and normalisation; one in which professionals are called upon to exercise disciplinary micropower by judging, categorising and monitoring individuals.

2.3. The contribution of legal psychology and subjectivity in prison

In a complementary way, legal psychology offers a perspective centred on processes of subjectivation under conditions of deprivation of liberty. While social work examines the social determinations that bring individuals into contact with the penal system, psychology investigates how they psychologically elaborate the experience of incarceration, violence and exclusion. Its focus lies on the singularity of the subject, their defence mechanisms, their traumas and their capacities for resilience. Prison is an atmosphere that directly undermines psychological integrity through despersonalisation, infantilisation and constant exposure to violence.

Within the context of sentence reduction, psychologists may analyse how reading affects the individual's psychological structure, symbolic capacities, reconstruction of personal narratives and formulation of life projects. Interdisciplinary practice therefore enables a more holistic understanding, bringing structural analysis into dialogue with an appreciation of subjective processes, avoiding both the psychologisation of social problems (blaming individuals for their circumstances) and the neglect of the uniquely personal nature of human suffering and of the human capacity for transformation.

2.4. Education as a practice of freedom

Paulo Freire's pedagogical thought offers an important counterpoint to the disciplinary logic that permeates prison life. Freire (1987) maintains that education must be an act of liberation, in which "reading the world precedes reading the word." He critiques what he terms "banking education," where knowledge is merely deposited into learners as if they were empty vessels, and instead advocates a "problem-posing education," grounded in dialogue and critical reflection on reality. Transposed to the prison context, this perspective transforms sentence reduction through reading from a simple bureaucratic mechanism into a powerful tool for humanisation and empowerment.

The programme risks slipping into a *banking model* if it is reduced to the distribution of a book and the marking of a written summary. For it to become a practice of freedom, it must be mediated by professionals who cultivate dialogue, connect the text to readers' lived experiences and foster a critical reading of the world. Reading and reflecting and writing about texts read thus become exercises of citizenship and construction of a critical understanding of one's own condition and of society, enabling individuals to move from being merely the objects of punishment to becoming subjects of their own knowledge.

3. Methodology

This article draws on qualitative research employing a multiple case study design. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth, contextualised investigation of the phenomenon across different settings, allowing the study to explore the complexities and specificities of the challenges involved in implementing sentence reduction through reading from the standpoint of psychosocial teams.

3.1. Participants and research context

The study sample consisted of seven professionals from psychosocial teams –five from the field of social work and two from psychology– intentionally selected through non-probabilistic sampling on the basis of their direct involvement in carrying out the sentence reduction through reading programme in prison units.

The selection of participants sought to ensure territorial and contextual diversity in professional experiences, incorporating individuals working in five penitentiary establishments in the state of Maranhão, Brazil: three located in the capital, São Luís, and two in inland municipalities, Viana and Imperatriz. These latter regions present more pronounced logistical, structural and human-resource challenges when it comes to implementing the programme.

This strategy made it possible to capture different institutional realities and varying degrees of programme consolidation, from more structured contexts with stable technical teams and institutional backing to settings marked by significant limitations in terms of infrastructure, professional training and working conditions. The composition of the sample thus supported a comparative and contextualised analysis, essential for grasping the complexity and particularities of professional practice within Maranhão's prison system.

3.2. Data collection procedures

Data were collected in two periods between 2022 and 2025 using two complementary techniques:

1. Documentary analysis, which involved reviewing psychosocial reports, reading assessment forms, follow-up reports and written materials produced by persons deprived of liberty (such as reading summaries). The aim was to identify categories related to access, participation and ethical dilemmas.
2. Observation, conducted directly in the professionals' work environment, paying attention to team interactions, assessment routines and informal conversations about programme challenges. All observations were recorded in a field diary, with full adherence to confidentiality with regard to the information.

3.3. Data analysis

The collected data were subjected to thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011). The process involved pre-analysis, exploration of the material through coding of recurrent topics and subsequent processing of results. The main analytical categories that emerged were:

- Challenges in the standardisation of assessment
- Organisational failures and their impact on assessing benefits
- Interdisciplinary tensions in assessment practice
- Ethical dilemmas between control and care

Each category was constructed on the basis of recurrent topics found in field diaries and documents, with the aim of revealing underlying patterns in professional practice.

3.4. Ethical considerations

All procedures were conducted in full compliance with applicable ethical standards. Participants were duly informed of the study's objectives, and anonymity was ensured through the assignment of identification codes (TS1 to TS5; PSIC1 and PSIC2). It is important to note that the purpose of the research was not to quantify impacts, but rather to understand the meanings attributed by participants and the challenges they confronted, fully aligned with the principles of qualitative inquiry.

4. Findings: the many faces of everyday challenges

A close analysis of the field data revealed a complex landscape in which the sentence reduction through reading policy emerges as a site of tensions, negotiations and contradictions. Far from being merely bureaucratic, the work of the psychosocial team proved central in mediating these conflicts. The findings are organised into the four analytical categories previously identified, which are explored in detail below. To illustrate the vividness of the phenomena observed, we draw on in-depth descriptions from field diaries and documentary analysis.

4.1. Challenges in standardising assessment: between equity and regulation

This category emerged as the most prominent in the discourse and practice of professionals. It encapsulates the core dilemma of how to apply an assessment criterion that is, at once, fair, equitable and technically rigorous in keeping with the programme's standards. The extreme heterogeneity of the prison population –ranging from individuals who are not at all literate to those with higher education– renders any attempt at stand-

ardisation a monumental challenge. One social worker (TS2) articulated this crossroads powerfully:

How can I use the same yardstick for a man who can barely write and for another who finished secondary school?

If I'm rigid, I exclude the person who needs this most; precisely the one for whom reading is an entirely new world. If I'm too flexible, the programme loses credibility and the administration accuses me of being "soft" and granting benefits without merit.

This statement distils the dual pressure faced by professionals: an internal pressure grounded in ethical commitment to the fostering of inclusion, and an external pressure arising from a punitive institutional culture that calls on them to uphold control and discipline. The absence of clear institutional guidelines for conducting assessments intensified the problem. In practice, each professional developed their own "informal criteria". For instance, psychologist PSIC1 explained during a conversation that her primary criterion was the inmate's "emotional connection" with the story. She sought, in speech or writing, excerpts that imbued signs that the reading had prompted some reflection on the individual's own life.

By contrast, social worker TS1, working in the same unit, focused on "argumentative capacity", valuing summaries that articulated a central thesis about the book and defended it, even in simple terms. This disparity –although rooted in good intentions– could lead to different outcomes for detainees with similar profiles depending on which professional carried out the assessment.

The transformative potential of individualised support nevertheless emerged as the main antidote to this dilemma. A particularly emblematic case involved an inmate of around 50 years of age, serving a long sentence, who displayed marked apathy and resistance to all proposed activities. For weeks, he rejected books, insisting that he was "too old and unable to read an entire book". The psychologist (PSIC1) initiated a gradual, relational approach, speaking with him about other interests and discovering that he enjoyed stories from his home region. The team located a collection of regional tales. After three guided reading sessions in which the psychologist read excerpts aloud and connected them to memories he shared, the inmate not only completed the book but asked to have a conversation to enable him to deliver an "oral summary".

For nearly an hour, he spoke with striking lucidity, comparing one of the character's experiences of exile with his own sense of being imprisoned far from family. The summary, later transcribed by the professional, was considered one of the most insightful produced in the programme. This case illustrates that overcoming barriers does not depend on diluting standards but on the quality of a mediation that must be sensitive, patient and tailored to the unique characteristics of each individual.

4.2. Organisational failures and their impact on assessing benefits: the violence of bureaucracy

This category brings together observations on how material precariousness and administrative disorganisation become specific obstacles that undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the programme, generating frustration among both professionals and inmates.

The scarcity of books was the most broadly shared complaint. In two of the inland units, the situation was particularly severe: the “library” consisted of a metal shelf in an administrative office with books piled haphazardly and lacking any form of cataloguing. Most of the collection was made up of outdated legal texts, donated encyclopaedias and primary-level textbooks.

When invited to participate in the programme, one inmate responded with irony:

There are only law books. I already live under the law. I want to read something else, a story that takes me out of here for a moment.

This testimony highlights how inadequate materials affect participants’ motivation and underscores the need for more organised management and a more varied book collection that genuinely meets inmates’ interests and needs.

The absence of appropriate physical spaces was also a persistent obstacle. Reading sessions and discussions took place in improvised settings: a corner of the yard, an overcrowded consultation room or even a corridor in the administrative wing, all punctuated by frequent interruptions. This lack of a calm, welcoming environment symbolically conveyed the low institutional value placed on educational activities within the prison’s hierarchy of priorities (Bourdieu, 1998).

Yet the most harmful impact of these organisational shortcomings was the denial of rights through procedural errors. A particularly revealing case involved a misplaced reading assessment form. An inmate, J.C., aged 28, had met all requirements for a 12-day sentence reduction, with two summaries approved by the team. The documentation had been sent to the prison’s administrative sector to be attached to his file and forwarded to the judge overseeing sentence enforcement.

Two months later, during a routine consultation, the inmate asked social worker TS1 why his sentence had not been reduced. Upon investigation, the professional discovered that the documentation had been “misplaced” and never forwarded. The entire process had to be repeated from scratch.

The professional’s sense of frustration was captured in their field diary:

We struggle to make the programme work, to ensure that reading means something, and in the end the person’s right is denied because of a bureau-

cratic failure. How do I explain to him that his effort was wasted because a piece of paper was mislaid? It is Sisyphean work. This destroys the trust we try to build.

This episode shows that precarious organisational standards not only affect the programme's effectiveness; they also erode trust between inmates and professionals, leading to lack of motivation and generating a sense of injustice.

It also demonstrates that institutional violence is not limited to physical aggression; it is equally manifest in bureaucratic negligence, which produces despair and reinforces inmates' perception of the State as arbitrary and ineffective (CNJ, 2023; Iamamoto, 2007).

4.3. Interdisciplinary tensions in assessment practice: dialogue between knowledge bases

The composition of the psychosocial team, bringing together professionals from different fields, proved to be both a source of richness and of tension. This category examines how the distinct professional logics of social work and psychology were expressed in assessment practice, generating debates that –although sometimes confrontational– ultimately contributed to a more complex and reflective approach. The central tension observed revolved around the ultimate purpose of reading assessment.

This was made explicit during a team meeting on 15 March 2022 convened to discuss the standardisation of assessment criteria. Psychologist PSIC2 opened the discussion by arguing that the assessment should be primarily clinical and qualitative, focused on the inmate's "subjective appropriation" of the text. For her, the key issue was whether the work had mobilised affective responses, provoked reflection on the person's life history or enabled the elaboration of psychological conflicts. As she put it:

What matters most is the internal process, the psychological elaboration that reading provokes. A summary may be poorly written yet reveal a powerful insight into the person's own condition. That is an indicator of mental health and change, and it is what we should value.

In response, one of the social workers (TS2), with extensive experience in the field, argued that while this perspective was important, it was insufficient. He maintained that the programme should also have a clearer education and citizen-centred orientation. He stated:

Reflection is essential, but they also need to learn how to put it on paper, to defend an idea, to organise thinking logically. That is a tool of power they will use on the outside to look for work, to demand a right in a written submission, to write a letter. If we focus only on the subjective dimension, we miss the opportunity to offer a specific tool for exercising citizenship.

Another social worker (TS3) added:

An emphasis on writing is also a way of valuing the inmate's work, treating it as intellectual production that deserves to be developed.

After a lengthy debate, the team reached a consensual and creative solution: the development of an assessment form with two distinct yet complementary fields. The first, titled "Reflective and subjective analysis", would be completed primarily by the psychologist, focusing on aspects of psychological processing. The second, "Critical analysis and textual structure", would be completed by the social worker, assessing argumentative capacity, cohesion and coherence.

The final mark would be a weighted average of the two assessments. This solution not only resolved the impasse but also institution-alised interdisciplinarity, recognising the legitimacy and complementary nature of both professional knowledge bases, strengthening confidence in the process and offering inmates a more structured and meaningful learning experience.

4.4. Ethical dilemmas between control and care: everyday resistance

This category addresses the central tension experienced by professionals between, on the one hand, their role as agents of care guided by the ethical principles of their professions and, on the other, their position as state employees within an institution of control. This dilemma was felt most acutely in the act of "passing" or "failing" a written assignment – a responsibility shared by social workers and the teacher– which placed them in an uncomfortable position of authority.

Under the reading programme, each person deprived of liberty was allowed to redeem a limited number of books, usually three, and given roughly 15 days to complete their summaries. Some finished their readings ahead of time and occasionally asked for additional books, even knowing that these would not be counted officially; yet the pleasure they derived from reading was evident. This dynamic created pressure to meet deadlines but also revealed the participants' intrinsic motivation to learn and engage with the texts.

One social worker (TS4) articulated the anguish this system triggered:

The worst day is when I have to tell someone their summary wasn't good enough. I feel like part of the same machinery that oppresses them. My role should be to open doors, not to police whether they completed a task to earn a few days. It's a contradiction I carry home every day.

This dilemma intensified whenever the unit's management or security staff attempted to co-opt the programme for disciplinary purposes.

On one occasion, a security director suggested that only individuals with “good behaviour” without recent disciplinary sanctions should have access to the programme.

The psychosocial team unanimously opposed the idea of conditioning access to reading on prisoner behaviour, adopting a strong stance in this regard. During a meeting with management, they argued that reading is a right guaranteed by the Prison Execution Act and CNJ regulations, and therefore could not be restricted. Social worker TS5 was unequivocal:

Conditioning access to reading on behaviour is illegal and, in educational terms, counterproductive. It is precisely those prisoners labelled as “difficult” who stand to benefit most from an activity that invites reflection. Using the programme as a reward or punishment completely distorts its purpose.

The team succeeded in overturning the proposal, yet the episode illustrated the need for constant ethical vigilance and an everyday stance of resistance. Professionals had to negotiate their scope for technical autonomy continuously, reaffirming the principles of their professions in the face of an institutional culture that often operates under a purely security-driven logic.

This stance of resistance –though psychologically taxing– was understood by all team members as a non-negotiable professional obligation, grounded in their respective codes of ethics, which establish the defence of human rights as a fundamental and inalienable principle. Their experience demonstrated that even within high-pressure environments marked by institutional rigidity, defending rights and ensuring the quality of social practice requires persistence, technical reasoning and team cohesion.

5. Discussion: interpreting the tensions in the field

The findings presented in the foregoing section, with a wealth of detail about everyday life, reveal a complex, challenging landscape that goes far beyond the mere application of a legal rule. Rather than a matter of formal compliance, the situations observed expose frictions between the aims of the policy and the real conditions of the contexts in which it is implemented.

In this section, the evidence is interpreted in light of the theoretical framework with a view to enhancing an understanding of the social and human phenomena that emerge from these interactions, and in order to illustrate how rights, institutional expectations and individual experiences become intertwined in everyday practice.

5.1. Disciplinary power and subjectivity in assessment practice

The difficulty of standardising assessment and the ethical dilemmas arising from it offer a textbook illustration of Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Assessment –which should be a technical activity– becomes an exercise of micro-power. The professional, placed in the position of judge, finds themselves at a crossroads: by applying rigid and ostensibly “neutral” criteria, they risk reproducing exclusion and punishing again the very person who has already been marginalised by the education system. By opting for more flexible, subjective criteria, they exercise a form of pastoral power, determining who is “deserving” of the benefit on moral or emotional grounds.

In both scenarios, the professional is drawn into the institutional logic, becoming –however reluctantly– an agent of normalisation. The case of the man who only opened himself to reading through an affective and personalised form of mediation shows, moreover, that the only real escape from this disciplinary trap lies in building a caring relationship that subverts the logic of control, aligning instead with Freire's vision of an education grounded in dialogue and emotion.

5.2. Bureaucratic violence and the denial of rights

Organisational failures cannot be interpreted as mere administrative shortcomings; they are the textbook expression of precariousness as policy, and they operate as a subtle yet brutal form of institutional violence. The lack of an adequate book collection and the absence of suitable physical spaces are clear examples of how material scarcity limits the programme's effectiveness and generates frustration among both inmates and professionals.

The case of the misplaced assessment sheet is symbolic of this. The loss of a single document –a seemingly trivial act– has the power to render null and void a person's effort and deny a right legitimately earned, reinforcing the message that their life and their time hold little value for the State. This phenomenon can be understood through Iamamoto's perspective on the “social question”: state bureaucracy, far from being neutral, functions as a mechanism that replicates structural inequalities.

For the prison population –largely poor and black– state inefficiency is not the exception; rather, it is the rule. The professional's frustration, captured in the social worker's reflection (TS4) – “It is Sisyphean work. This destroys the trust we try to build”– reveals an acute awareness that the very structure in which their practice is embedded continually sabotages their attempts to uphold rights.

In contrast, some social workers stressed that, beyond guaranteeing rights, the programme should also equip inmates with specific tools for the exercise of citizenship. As one professional (TS2) stated:

Reflection is essential, but they need to learn how to put it on paper, to defend an idea, to organise thinking logically. That is a tool of power they will use on the outside to look for work, to demand a right in a written submission, to write a letter.

The solution agreed among the team in order to create an assessment form with two complementary fields –one for reflective and subjective analysis (completed by the psychologist) and another for critical analysis and textual structure (completed by the social worker)– not only resolved a methodological conflict but also formally embedded interdisciplinarity into the institutional process. It acknowledged the legitimacy of distinct yet complementary bodies of knowledge.

The episode involving the proposal to tie access to reading to inmates' behaviour illustrates how ethical vigilance and professional resistance become necessary daily practices for safeguarding detainees' rights in the face of an institutional culture shaped by security-driven logic. Upholding human rights –understood as an inalienable principle– demands ongoing negotiation, team cohesion and persistence, even in environments marked by intense pressure and structural precariousness.

5.3. Interdisciplinarity in practice: from tension to synthesis

The tensions observed in the assessment process between social work and psychology offer exceptionally rich material for analysis. The debate around whether to prioritise “subjectivity” or “tools for citizenship” reflects the epistemic cores and ethical–political projects that underlie each profession. Psychology, with its emphasis on singularity and intra-psychological processes, seeks to ensure that reading becomes an experience of personal processing and re-signification.

With its focus on social determinants and citizenship, social work seeks to ensure that the task of reading translates into social and cultural capital, into specific tools for life in society. The strength of the process that unfolded lies not in one perspective prevailing over the other, but in the construction of a dialectical synthesis.

The creation of a joint assessment form put interdisciplinarity into practice in a specific way: it acknowledged that each person is at once singular in their psychological endurance and universal in their social rights. The resulting practice is more powerful than the sum of its parts.

5.4. Professional ethos as an everyday practice of resistance

Lastly, the ethical dilemmas and the team's stance in the face of institutional pressures confirm that professional ethos is not an abstract document, but instead constitutes a specific instrument of resistance in daily work. By opposing the proposal to use reading as a reward for good behaviour, the team was not only defending a public policy; it was affirming a fundamental principle: the universality of rights.

Though psychologically demanding, this constant process of confrontation and negotiation is at the heart of critical practice in settings defined by control. Defending access to reading as a right independent of inmates' conduct exemplifies how professionals exercise their relative autonomy: although part of the state apparatus, they retain room to steer their practice toward social justice and human dignity. It is not absolute freedom, but rather a clearly defined space in which it is possible to make a difference in the lives of people deprived of liberty.

Small, everyday acts of resistance, decisions, emotionally-driven mediation and insistence on guaranteeing rights are what allow the prison, albeit as a restrictive and hostile environment, to offer moments of humanisation and symbolic freedom. These actions keep alive the possibility of dignity and change, even within a context marked by control and bureaucracy.

6. Final considerations

This study confirms that sentence reduction through reading holds significant potential as a tool for social reintegration, but its successful application depends on an approach that is critical and firmly grounded in human dignity. Far from being a bureaucratic mechanism, reading must be promoted as a fundamental right and an instrument of transformation.

The research answered its central question by showing that the challenges involved in implementing this policy are ethical (the tension between care and control), operational (material and bureaucratic precariousness) and interdisciplinary (the complex but necessary interweaving of different knowledge bases).

Within this context, the qualified presence of the psychosocial team emerges as an essential pillar. Their practice functions as a vital mechanism of mediation between the oppressive reality of imprisonment and the possibility of reclaiming subjectivity and citizenship.

By fulfilling the objectives set out, this study demonstrated that the challenges in assessment, structural shortcomings, interdisciplinary dynamics and ethical dilemmas form the central pillars that underpin professional practice in this field. It is not solely incumbent on frontline professionals to overcome these obstacles; broader institutional commitment is also required.

For this work to be effective, penitentiary institutions must recognise and support the technical and political role of psychosocial teams. This entails providing ongoing training and adequate resources –including a diversified library collection– as well as creating an environment that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration.

The findings point to the urgent need for flexible, collectively developed assessment protocols and for continuous training programmes in reading mediation to be put into practice for psychosocial teams. The successful experience with the joint assessment form created by the team studied may serve as an inspiring model for other institutions.

In addition, this study reinforces the need for future research to broaden understanding of the long-term impacts of these programmes. It is essential to incorporate the perspectives of the inmates themselves, examining how reading and participation in initiatives such as this shape their post-imprisonment trajectories, their social reintegration and their likelihood of reoffending.

Longitudinal studies and comparative case analyses in different penitentiary contexts could provide valuable evidence for improving existing policies and developing new intervention strategies.

Lastly, for sentence reduction through reading to fulfil its emancipatory potential, a profound rethinking and transformation of the punitive and exclusionary penal policies that are widely prevalent in Brazil and much of Latin America is required. Under its current structure, the prison system often perpetuates cycles of violence and exclusion rather than promoting social reintegration.

Social work and psychology, with their ethical-political commitment to social justice and the defence of human rights, have an irreplaceable role to exert in this mission. In promoting a more humane penitentiary system that is fairer and more protective of fundamental rights, they contribute not only to the dignity of those deprived of liberty but also to the development of a more equitable society as a whole, one embedded in solidarity.

In this respect, reading can be understood as a beacon illuminating the path toward freedom; not only physical freedom, but the freedom to think, to question, and to envision and carve out a different future.

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