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## Vocational Education and Training in Finnish Open Prisons: A Multilevel Approach to Young Incarcerated People's Barriers to Participation

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**Abstract:** *Having relevant skills and education are considered the best indicators of reintegration into society after release from prison, but majority of young, incarcerated people have a lower education level and participate less in education compared to the same age population at large. This article focuses on finding solutions for overcoming the barriers to prison education in Finland. We explored those barriers, asking: What are the perceptions and experiences of barriers to education among prisoner-students, educators, and other professionals engaged in vocational prison education in Finland? The research data consists of 29 interviews of vocational education and training (VET) students (11), teachers, prison staff and other experts (18). The analysis is based on a framework of the comprehensive lifelong learning (LLL) participation model (Boeren, 2017). The analysis demonstrated that the conflicting policies and practices of education and jurisdiction, the two sectors involved in prison education, challenge low educated individuals' successful entry to and participation in education while incarcerated.*

**Keywords:** *Barriers to Adult Education (AE), Low Educational Level, Participation in AE, Prison Education, Vocational Education and Training (VET)*

### Introduction

Finland, among other Nordic welfare states, has traditionally emphasised education as an individual right and a resource for the state (Cummings & Bain, 2014, p. 40). The population's education level in Finland is above the average of the European Union Member States, and according to large comparative surveys, Finland is among the countries where participation in adult education (AE) is consistently around 50% of the population (Rubenson, 2013). AE in Nordic countries has a long history of combatting social exclusion, and research has shown its linkage to wider social and personal benefits, both monetary and non-monetary (Schuller & Desjardins, 2011). The favourable participation pattern is explained by the impact of the welfare state regime to the funding and opportunity structure (Rubenson, 2013). This approach entails the idea that education is a means to increased equality in the society and that all citizens should have equal opportunities to participate in AE, either for completing their interrupted education, for gaining skills and qualifications needed in work life, or for other purposes, such as self-fulfilment or pleasure. However, large-scale surveys have shown that AE, as many other societal goods, accumulate to certain individuals, leaving others excluded from its benefits (European Commission [EC], 2016; Merton, 1968; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017).

Compared to the population at large, incarcerated people in Finland are in a vulnerable position and



socially excluded in many ways: they are less educated, have lower socio-economic statuses, have been unemployed longer, or have no occupation at all (Aaltonen et al., 2011, p. 169–170). In addition, research has found strong evidence of the link between low education and the risk of crime (ibid.). Register-based studies have revealed correlation between incarcerated people's low education level and recidivism (i.e., convicted criminals' tendency to reoffend) which indicates that education has wider societal implications (Aaltonen et al., 2017). Thus, investing in prison education would seem a good choice for reducing recidivism and curb corrections spending, increase tax revenues, and improve public safety (Duwe & Clark, 2014).

Szifiris et al. (2018) have articulated a general theory of prison education, describing the benefits of education for the incarcerated people themselves. The theory is formulated as three context-mechanism-outcome configurations. First, engaging in prison education can be a 'hook to change' as it has an impact on personal identity. Second, prison education provides 'a safe space' within prison, having thus relevance to social identity. Third, 'qualification' refers to education as a means for gaining skills and qualifications to access the job market. In their review of prison education research, Szifiris and colleagues noted that an instrumentalised approach considers how education relates to the expectations of outcomes, such as decreasing reoffending.

In Finland labour market integration is often considered essential in preventing recidivism (Danielsson & Aaltonen, 2017), and hence offering education that provides skills and competences relevant to the local job market is seen as crucial to enhance employability and societal integration after release from prison (Hawley et al., 2013, p. 13; Virtanen et al., 2020, p. 4). Virtanen and colleagues (2020, p. 10–16) demonstrated in their study on the effectiveness of prison education after release that the impact of education to recidivism and employment is difficult to prove, and results can be mixed. The (register-based) study showed that although completing upper secondary education (VET or general) in prison has a notable positive effect on incarcerated people's employment after release, the effect on recidivism is more complicated. Moreover, since the group of incarcerated people in Finland is quite small (average daily number appr. 3000 persons), their lower education level is not visible in country level education statistics that are used in policymaking (Kuusipalo & Rasku, 2019).

Based on the European Education and Training Monitor, the current European policy considers reaching upper secondary level by the age of 24 as the minimum competence level for entering the labour market. This is the European target to enhance social cohesion and growth to participate in the labour market (European Commission, 2023). The European report showed that over 87% of Finnish 20–24-year-olds had attained at least upper secondary level (ISCED 3). A study based on population register data in Finland indicated that in 2015, 83% of all 25–30-year-olds had attained at least upper secondary level education (ISCED3). But, when distinguishing the group of criminal sanctions agency clients from the register data by combining the Criminal Sanctions Agency (CSA) and Statistics Finland data, the combined data revealed a remarkable difference in CSA clients' education level in comparison to the overall population. Only 27% of the 25–30-year-old CSA clients had reached ISCED3 level education, leaving the vast majority, 73%, of CSA clients below the ISCED3 threshold (Kuusipalo & Rasku, 2019).

In addition, based on CSA statistics, their clients' time spent on education was only around 8% of the total active time, hence, at a seemingly low level. Moreover, this annually reported figure of active time seems quite static, suggesting that the barriers to education in prison might be structural, even deep-rooted (Criminal Sanctions Agency [CSA], 2020a, p. 37).

These figures above demonstrate a necessity to explore how specific situations are recognised and whether individual needs are met when enhancing social inclusion and incarcerated people's equal access to AE. Hence, the figures showing incarcerated people's low education level and low participation in education provide the starting point for our article exploring this issue.

### **Aims and purpose of the study**

Reasons for nonparticipation in AE have been studied from various perspectives, including motivation, attitudes, and barriers (Kalenda & Kocvarová, 2022), as well as combining different explanations (Boeren, 2017). In this article we analyse the barriers to education in prison, applying a framework of lifelong learning participation as a layered interplay of individual, institutional, and country level barriers, as presented by Ellen Boeren (2017).

The study was conducted within a larger European research project, Adult Education as a Means to

Active Participatory Citizenship (EduMAP), that focused on the question of how AE can contribute to active citizenship of young and vulnerable population groups in different European countries. The larger study described ‘success stories’ rather than focusing specifically on barriers. The successful cases of AE as a means to active citizenship were chosen from each European Union member state and Turkey according to set criteria and including a large scope of different vulnerable life-situations. In Finland, one of the chosen cases was vocational education and training (VET) in open prisons.

However, the three interviewee groups representing VET in prison: policy makers, teachers, and students themselves also talked about barriers to education. In the case of incarcerated young people, it seemed obvious that, despite their significantly lower educational level compared to the general population of the same age group and the knowledge that education is strongly correlated with recidivism, education was not automatically offered to all those who did not have an ISCED 3 level education while in prison.

Thus, our sub-study presented in this article focuses on barriers to AE participation by exploring the interview data that was gathered about VET in open prisons.<sup>1</sup>

The research question is formulated as follows:

What are the perceptions and experiences of barriers to education among incarcerated people, educators, and other professionals engaged in vocational prison education in Finland? In addition, we explore how the framework of the comprehensive lifelong learning participation model (Boeren, 2017) works as an analytical tool in this context. In the following, we will refer to the model as the ‘LLL model’.

### **VET in the Finnish prison system**

Finland has a relatively large geographic area with a relatively small population. Although most larger cities are in the south, the population is somewhat dispersed across the country. Finland’s 28 prisons are located in all parts of the country from capital Helsinki area to Lapland in the north.

In Finland, prison education is not organised by a dedicated prison education department as in most Western countries (Szifiris et al., 2018). Instead, all education from basic literacy skills to higher education is provided by the local mainstream education organisations authorised by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). When these education organisers work in prisons, they operate under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice (MJ), cooperating with the justice sector authorities and prison staff. At the policy level, responsibility is shared between two sectors: education and justice. Operationalisation is shared between the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) and the Prison and Probation Service of Finland (PPSF).<sup>2</sup>

Competence-based VET is offered in all 28 Finnish prisons (PPSF website). VET has the most participants of all formal educational programmes in prisons. At the time of the study, a major reform of the whole VET system was ongoing (Law 11.8.2017/531). During the reform VET was integrated into the prison work activities and workshops, enhancing the incarcerated people’s opportunities to gain qualifications while participating in work activities in prison. The most common branches of prison work are construction, wood and metal work, and car mechanics. The choices and opportunities for studies are narrower in female-only prisons.

EDUFI is responsible for drafting the national vocational education and training (VET) curricula. The contents and requirements of the programmes offered in prisons follow the national curricula and provide the same standards, qualifications, and diplomas as similar studies organised outside prison. In practice, education in prisons is a multi-professional effort involving teachers, prison workshop supervisors, and CSA officers who all have different sets of competences and qualifications (Toiviainen et al., 2019).

### **Barriers to adult education**

In research literature barriers to adult education are often addressed in a descriptive manner. Large-scale surveys such as the European Adult Education Survey (AES) apply a pre-established list of barriers. However, this approach does not easily reveal the situation of specific population groups, such as incarcerated people. First, their situation differs from the imaginary average adult learners that are depicted in the surveys; second, they are often excluded from these population-wide comparative surveys; and third, quantitative statistics tend to “lose” marginal phenomena<sup>3</sup> (Kuusipalo & Rasku, 2019).

The discussion on barriers to AE participation has revolved around a divide of structural and dispositional factors, or the so-called sociological and psychological perspectives. The first emphasises the effect of external conditions on individual agency, while the latter focuses on personal factors such as motives, needs, attitudes, etc. (Radovan, 2012, p. 91–92). Many of the current approaches incorporate both perspectives, and the analytical models utilised are based on K. Patricia Cross's (1981) work *Adults as Learners*. In her work, Cross classified educational barriers into situational, institutional, and dispositional categories. Situational barriers refer to barriers that arise from a particular life situation at a given time (e.g., high cost of studies, lack of time, work or care responsibilities, lack of child-care, or transportation); institutional barriers refer to the type of educational provision, their schedule, requirements, and outcomes (e.g., crediting); and dispositional barriers are linked to expectations, previous learning experiences, and attitudes towards studies, such as being uncertain of having enough energy or estimates of the consequences of learning (ibid., p. 98–99).

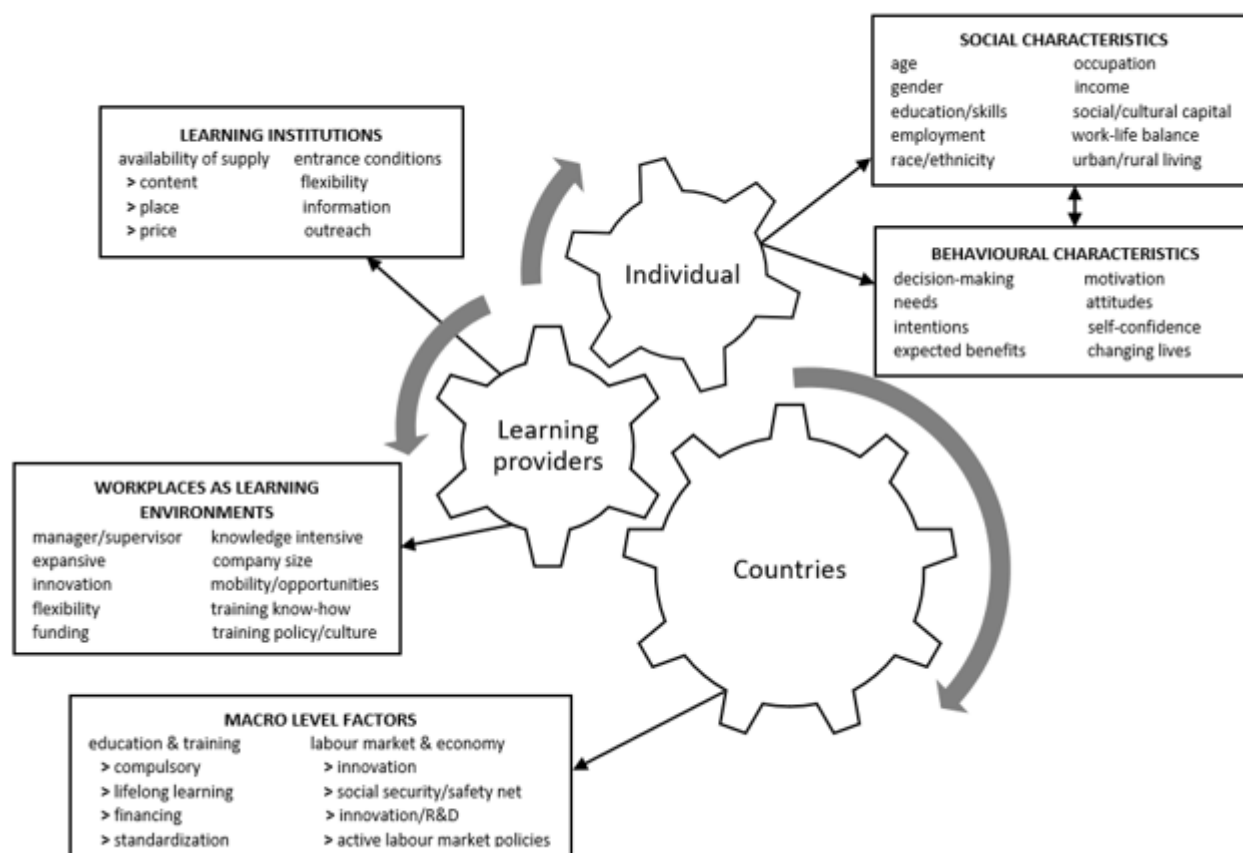
Research of barriers to prison education seems to follow the framing of similar categories. For instance, a recent study in Norwegian prisons on barriers to education and development of the “Perceived Barriers to Prison Education Scale (PB PES)” instrument adapted the categories to study differences in how barriers are perceived depending on age, gender, educational level, etc. (Manger et al., 2018). Research on eLearning in Portuguese prisons (Moreira et al., 2017) highlighted the difficulty of introducing new technology in a prison environment and added questions of security as well as the dilemma of rehabilitation versus punishment when considering education in prison to the list of barriers.

Building on extensive earlier research on adult participation in education, Ellen Boeren (2017) has introduced an analytical model that depicts lack of participation in AE as a ‘layered problem’. The core idea of the model is to perceive lifelong learning (LLL) as an integrated system of three analytical levels: individual (micro), learning providers (meso), and countries (macro). All three levels interact with each other in various ways to form a system where a person's educational choices and possibilities are closely linked to what happens on policy and organisational levels. The LLL model separates analytically the individual level into social characteristics (e.g., age, gender, occupation) and behavioural characteristics (e.g., motivation and self-confidence). The country level refers to national-level policies and consists of two categories: education and training (education policies, autonomy, configuration, and financing of education) and labour market and economy (labour market policies and social security systems, investments in RDI). In the model, learning providers are differentiated into educational institutions and providers of workplace learning.

The LLL model is depicted as a system that consists of three turning cogs (Figure 1). If one of the cogs jams, participation will be harder to achieve. For example, countries may enhance or hinder participation through policy design and implementation, which directly affects the operational preconditions of learning providers (e.g., by regulating funding criteria). In turn, the operational framework in which learning providers then offer AE directly affects the potential learners looking for meaningful and affordable educational opportunities.



**Figure 1: Comprehensive lifelong learning participation model (Boeren, 2017, p. 168)**



In the following, we present our findings using the analytical categories presented in the LLL model. First, we describe the data and method of analysis. Then, after presenting the findings, the article concludes with discussion and some practical implications.

### Data collection and analysis methods

Our research was conducted within a larger research project that focused widely on AE policies and practices that serve young adults who face the risk of social exclusion in Europe. The larger research project (EduMAP) was aiming to understand how AE contributes to young adults' active participatory citizenship. This contribution was interpreted as changes in terms of development of learners' competences or providing opportunities for socio-economic and civic-political participation. The empirical research was based on a sample of selected AE programmes that had successfully reached the target population of learners and was expected to enhance their active participatory citizenship. The selected sample included 40 'good practice' cases in European Union Member States and Turkey. The cases were pre-selected by the research team of each country and presented to the European research group for discussion and balancing the choice of cases by the type of programmes and vulnerabilities. The researchers selected their cases according to agreed criteria that assessed the programme's effectiveness in enabling vulnerable learners to access and participate in programmes that enhanced their social, political, and economic activities (EduMAP Research and Analysis Design, 2019). Interviews concerning these selected cases were gathered from learners, educators, and experts<sup>4</sup> in 20 European Union countries and Turkey. In addition to the interview data, we have examined publicly available policy documents about AE in each of the selected locations. The interviews were conducted by applying a designated template and using the same guidelines and interview questions at all different locations in Europe. All in all, over 600 interviews were conducted, with 99 experts, 211 practitioners, and 382 learners (Schmidt-Behlau, 2019, p. 208).

This article focuses on one of the selected 40 cases, namely VET programmes in Finnish open prisons. The interview data concerning this case-study covers the three stakeholder groups: *experts*, *educators*, and

*learners*, comprising altogether 29 interviews.

We contacted the interviewees initially by connecting to a professional prison learning coaching network. Participating in the network meetings allowed us to introduce our research and to contact key informants (prison staff and a teacher) of one of the prisons. To gain permission to access the prisons and interview the incarcerated learners, we contacted the national Criminal Sanctions Agency and acquired formal authorisation to interview the prison staff and incarcerated people. To have access to prisons and to be able to inform the learners of the opportunity to participate in the interviews, we contacted each prison's local management. Eleven (11) interviews were conducted with incarcerated persons inside open prisons or with persons who had been already released from prison. Eighteen (18) interviews were conducted with administrators and teachers of the educational providers in prisons, CSA staff, Public Employment Services, and the Ministry of Education and Culture. All interviews were arranged one-on-one apart from three group interviews with experts. The interviews were conducted at different locations by the authors of this article. We interviewed the incarcerated learners and staff inside three different prisons.

### *Research ethics*

When interviewing young adults in vulnerable positions and handling the research data, we have followed the strictest ethical guidelines defined by the legal and professional codes of the countries in which the research was undertaken and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023). Moreover, we planned and monitored the research according to the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region's ethical review of the project proposal (EduMAP Data Management Plan, 2019). To maintain scientific rigour, we followed the research and analysis design that was established and shared among the EduMAP research project partners, covering the whole research span from data collection to analysis (EduMAP Research and Analysis Design, 2019).

Participating in interviews was based on voluntary individual consent. However, in prison environments the concept of consent is not as simple as outside prison, although the prisons where we conducted interviews were open prisons, meaning that the incarcerated people could move freely in and out of the premises in the prison area and with permission to work and study outside the prison. Nevertheless, the invisible walls, official and unofficial hierarchies, and rules were in place. Information of the possibility to participate in the research interviews was only possible through official channels—in practice through the local prison managers. Therefore, the researcher, when entering prison, is not in charge of the choice and consent of the interviewees. We informed the participants of voluntary participation and the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time. We did not offer any economic benefits to the participants, but presented as incentive the chance to have a say and influence through research in educational opportunities.

In the initial data analysis process, we have distinguished the chosen excerpts by applying a simple coding scheme indicating the country of the interview, the role of the interviewee (Educator [Edu], Learner [Lea], or Policy expert [Exp]), interviewee's sex (F or M), and the interview date. However, to secure privacy of our sample of a quite small population group, we have deleted this information from the publication. Instead, we use simple coding indicating the interviewee as 'Edu', 'Lea', or 'Exp' and distinguish each by number.

### *Analysis and Findings*

In the following we apply the LLL model to analyse the barriers to education in the prison environment. Our aim is to portray the complex interplay of individual, learning provider, and country level factors and conditions related to the barriers. The analysis focuses on the expressions of perceptions and experiences of prisoner-students, educators, prison staff, and administrators who oversee and organise the studies at the local and national level. We have analysed the interview data by means of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014), using analytical categories based on the LLL model presented above in figure 1.

All interviews in the EduMAP project used the same set of themes and interview questions to explore, for example, the conditions and ways of participation in AE in the selected 'good practice' cases (EduMAP Research and Analysis Design, 2019). The 'VET in open prisons' case study proved to be particularly informative especially in two thematic areas: participation to education and barriers to education. Thus, in the first analysis phase, we identified and coded parts of the interviews that dealt with the themes of *participation to*

*education* and *barriers to education* and selected them for further scrutiny. Then we sorted the selected data into categories and subcategories of those factors that related to barriers as depicted in the LLL model (individual, learning providers, countries). Last, we grouped and merged the findings by combining similar subcategories. (Table 1.)

We found altogether 280 relevant excerpts to the theme barriers to participation in education. Table 1 below exemplifies the range of possible barriers identified in prison VET as portrayed in our interview data and demonstrates how the data fits in the LLL model framework. While analysing the data, we have highlighted the complexity and overlapping nature of the discussed themes. However, in our presentation of findings we will focus on the recurring ones that were emphasised and mentioned most often in interviews.

**Table 1. Barriers to participation in prison VET interview data framed by the LLL model (Boeren, 2017).**

Level	Individual	Learning providers	Countries
	<b>SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS</b> <b>BEHAVIOURAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>LEARNING INSTITUTIONS</b> <b>WORKPLACES AS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS</b>	<b>MACRO LEVEL FACTORS</b>
<b>Barriers mentioned in interviews</b>	substance abuse/addictions, neuropsychiatric disorders, poor physical health, learning disabilities, other psychological challenges, lack of social & cultural capital, socioeconomic situation, gender, lack of education/skills, language issues, age, decision-making, motivation, attitudes, self-confidence	prison / education institution staff motivation, inflexibility, resources, prison system, security, infrastructure, educational know-how, educational culture, complexity, lack of transparency, CSA evaluation & placement, organised crime, length of sentence, prison culture, educational offering, supply of education, content of education, entrance requirements, outreach	VET policy reform, funding, prison education as part of general education system, housing, basic income, financial incentives, social benefits, bureaucracy: e.g., disability & housing benefits

In the following sections, we present our findings while applying the LLL model's categories: individual / learning providers / countries, and their subcategories. In addition, we have complemented each of the three layers of the LLL model with additional prison context specific features that we identified in the interview data (Table 2). First, we complemented the layer "individual" with a category of psychic and physical characteristics. Then, in the layer "learning providers" we merged learning institutions, workplaces, and prisons as one entity. Finally, we added security issues in the layer "countries".



**Table 2. Finnish prison VET specific additions to the LLL model .**

Level	Individual	Learning providers	Countries
Subcategories	Social characteristics	Learning institutions	Education and training
	Behavioural characteristics	Workplaces as learning environments	Labour market and economy
	<i>Psychic and physical characteristics</i>	<i>Prisons as learning environments</i>	<i>Security issues</i>

### Individual level barriers

#### *Social characteristics*

All our interviewees who participated or had participated in VET while in prison were in their thirties, although the larger research project targeted a wider age range of 16–30-year-olds.<sup>5</sup> The interviewed teachers and prison staff's explanation for this was that incarcerated people in their thirties are usually more motivated to quit crime and to study than younger incarcerated people.

The number of women in our data is lower than the number of men. The same is true for incarcerated people in general. Only 8% of the daily average number of Finnish incarcerated people are women (PPSF Statistical Yearbook, 2021, p. 35). Some interviewees mentioned gender-based conditions that have been previously identified by experts (Tammi-Moilanen, 2020) as contributing to the 'male standard' in prisons. This standard appears to leave female incarcerated individuals in a subordinate position and neglects their needs. After reforms to take better account of incarcerated women's rights, a modern all-female closed prison was opened in 2020. In 2021, mixed open prisons were abolished and women in open prisons are now housed in two prisons nationwide. Male and female inmates may still be held in the same closed prisons but in different wards. Finland is a country of long distances and moving to serve a sentence in an all-female prison can be a challenge to maintaining family life.

Over the last ten years, the proportion of foreigners in prison has fluctuated between 15% and 18% without affecting the total number of prisoners. According to the 2022 prison population census, 18% of foreign prisoners<sup>6</sup> were Estonian, 10% Iraqi and 10% Romanian. The total number of different nationalities was 67. (PPSF Statistical Yearbook, 2022). Our sample of VET students did not include foreign or migrant incarcerated people,<sup>7</sup> but at the time, this group was growing in Finland. Nevertheless, the interviewed educators and experts mentioned deficient language skills as a common barrier to prison education:

*There might be some guy who has never really lived in Finland but gets caught for smuggling and gets a really long sentence and tries to get into anything to be even a bit part of this unfamiliar environment. Then it's really sad to say that sorry, can't do it because your language skills are not at the level to study in Finnish. (Edu4)*

The interviewed educators and experts agreed that the current organisation of education served only a part of the prison population—a part that is predominantly male, interested in the study fields that are available, and have good Finnish language skills. Finnish society's gendered labour division and the non-existent language support for non-Finnish speakers is reflected in the vocational choices that are provided for incarcerated people.

While incarcerated people may have the ability to discover educational opportunities on their own,

they frequently require assistance from guidance counsellors or other specialised prison personnel to fully understand and navigate the options available to them, as explained by a prison guidance counsellor,

*They are not sure what the whole scale is, what's possible to do in there. They maybe know about the most common things. What the guidance counsellor has maybe suggested them at some point on ninth grade in comprehensive school. (Edu5)*

Our interviews confirmed earlier research findings of the poor socioeconomic status of incarcerated people. Poor socioeconomic status is reflected in the prison population in many ways: from poor dental health to lack of education (Vainionpää et al., 2017).

Some educators stated that their students' learning to learn skills are poor and thus, the leap into a programme that aims at a qualification was often considered too demanding (Edu). According to the interviewee, these students need considerable support in the beginning, from basic practical issues (e.g., paperwork) to social support, to cope with the stress generated by insecurities and lack of confidence in one's own capacity to learn.

*[when] a person starts those studies, then creating and maintaining of the support network [is important] because there are so many other issues and need for support that it easily shows in studying... (Exp4)*

In addition, study practices today involve work with modern ICT tools, although the amount depends on the programme. Many incarcerated people lack basic ICT skills and have problems with written material and interpreting blueprints. According to an experienced educator, most of his students in prison describe themselves as “doers and not readers” (Edu5).

### *Behavioural characteristics*

Behavioural characteristics are entangled with the already mentioned social characteristics of age, gender, and ethnicity. Overall, the motivation to study in prison was connected to the idea of expected opportunities after release. Many incarcerated people struggle with poor health or substance abuse, focusing on day-to-day survival, which means that studying is not seen as a top priority. Yet, another evidence from the experts suggested that for many, studying during imprisonment may be easier than after release when everyday routines, food, and shelter are no longer provided institutionally. During our interviews and prison visits, we did not observe any physical conditions (e.g., overcrowding<sup>8</sup>) that would make studying difficult, which does not mean that the conditions are optimal in all Finnish prisons. The experienced problem of boredom and how to spend time while incarcerated is more of a motivation factor for taking part in education. After release, the expected challenges were expressed in comments describing the concerns of everyday life such as “all energy goes to thinking about money” (Lea) and “is it any use to study a profession if all income then goes to pay off old debts?” (Lea).

Many of the interviewed students had negative to very negative previous experiences from education, which has been noted as potentially influencing incarcerated people's decision to participate in education (Roth et al., 2017). Many educators and experts described their clients' poor social skills and their problems with personal relationships. Difficulties in communication and social relations (e.g., fear of social situations) were mentioned as educational barriers. In concrete terms this can mean, for example, not being able to use standard language or fear of entering a classroom full of other students.

Moreover, the unofficial prison hierarchy creates barriers as those at the bottom of the prison system's social ladder might not even dare to take part in education. These specific prison environment and culture issues entail the type of social and cultural capital which is needed to cope with the situation while incarcerated, but may in turn hinder reintegrating into society at release. Thus, a prison workshop provides a learning space and opportunities to improve social and communication skills as described by an educator:

*...if I have a guy at the workshop who comes from the stone house [slang for closed prison] and he has extremely poor social skills and he can't explain himself without saying fuck three times... and then when he develops in that aspect, it reflects in everything... it influences the*

*belief in future, learning and dealing with others and it influences the whole outlook... (Exp2)*

The experts raised the concern that without exposure to the norms and communication styles of normal working life, it is difficult to train the social skills one needs to succeed outside prison.

#### *Psychic and physical characteristics*

The mix of diagnosed learning difficulties, mental health problems, and substance abuse was a recurring theme in our data, and thus we added this category into our analysis. Previous studies have shown that many psycho-social barriers of learning feature more prominently among incarcerated people compared to the rest of the population (Virtanen et al., 2020, p. 3–4; Asbjørnsen et al., 2015, p. 9; EDUFI, 2012, p. 9–10). These problems were brought up most often by educators and other experts who worked with incarcerated people.

The following quote sums up how these characteristics also have a direct impact on educational institutions organising VET courses for incarcerated people:

*Prisoners have for instance a lot more learning difficulties and intoxicant and mental health related problems, which of course also influence the training and group size and all kinds of things. And the need for special education. (Exp1)*

In many cases unattended psychological or neurological problems might have shaped earlier learning experiences. One educator noted that the underlying cause for criminal behaviour can be traced back to unattended learning disabilities: "...maybe the criminal life has also begun because of those learning disabilities" (Edu9). Whatever the root cause, incarcerated people themselves also brought up their learning difficulties, most regularly mentioned were diagnoses such as ADHD, dyslexia, and panic disorder.

*Yeah, I have dyslexia and they said I should go to get tested for ADHD but there's not much use in that kind of diagnose. I'm not going to start eating any drugs, I'm a calm guy, it's just the ability to concentrate, that you can't stay there [in focus]. (Lea3)*

To conclude, it is not easy or straightforward to distinguish the correlation between the experienced substance abuse, mental health problems, and learning difficulties, nor to find the correct interpretation of a cause-effect relation between them.

#### **Learning provider level barriers**

The LLL model separates the learning provider level into learning institutions and workplaces, which fits with the division of responsibilities in the Finnish competence-based VET system. However, in the prison environment, this layer of the LLL model is more complex and difficult to categorise. The educators and CSA staff, although employed by different organisations, work side by side with the students in prison workshops and working sites outside prison. They share common challenges, which was underlined by two interviewees who wanted to share their views in one interview. Therefore, in this section, we chose to analyse learning institutions, workplaces, and prison as one entity, concentrating on three themes: supply, entrance conditions, and prison culture.

#### *Supply: availability of study options*

What education can be provided and organised in each prison depends on the location and size of the institution as well as the availability of nearby educational providers and/or workplaces. Smaller prisons in scarcely populated areas have more challenges in terms of VET supply. The competence-based and practice-oriented VET requires vocation-specific set-ups, either prison workshops or practice workplaces outside prison. However, the required equipment, physical environment, and safety measures vary considerably from prison to prison.

*Facilities, equipment, and everything, so in many ways there were so many costs that the education provider didn't have a chance to focus so many resources to these [VET courses]. Plus, then [...] the prison as operational environment is like that every prison is a little bit different. So, for the same provider in different prisons, there were different practices [...] so*

*the provider withdrew because they thought they can't organise it according to law... (Exp4)*

In closed institutions only those programmes that can be provided within prison walls are available, narrowing the selection considerably. Prison workshop traditions and what kind of work is available determine which VET programmes can be organised and for whom. These realities have made it difficult to expand the traditional VET offering in prisons, as one expert hoped: "...if we could also expand VET education, like more different fields, now we have pretty much metal, wood[work] and construction" (Exp1).

Open prisons allow studying outside prison walls and thus give access to wider educational offerings. Still, geography plays a part, and proximity to bigger towns means broader choice. Many of the activities are therefore dictated by what a particular prison has to offer, and not only in terms of physical infrastructure and safety classifications, but also in, for example, educational know-how, organisational culture, attitudes, and makeup of the CSA staff, as the following quote shows:

*It makes a huge difference how we, the prison staff, are [committed] in this. Because it won't be a problem from their side [the VET provider]. They'll come and teach if everything else is in order and the prisoners are in here. But then they don't have any influence on that. (Edu2)*

### *Entrance conditions*

Among the many preconditions of organising VET in prison, experts mentioned student selection. The safety regulations of prison and their implementation were mentioned as limiting the educators' statutory right to define access conditions and student selection to education. Educators must accept CSA risk assessment during the student selection phase: "it's part of the prison world [...] that you can't release all information to other authorities and then, for one reason or the other, some applicants just can't get here" (Edu2). Or, as one counsellor remarked ironically about incarcerated people's enquiries about how they could get into training: "I always answer everyone that it's always about individual paths and banging your head against so many doors that one of them opens" (Edu5). These regulations are not transparent to educational staff, but they simply have to accept them.

Another issue concerning the selection process that came out in the interviews had to do with the timing of the sentence. Based on the interviews, the optimal prison sentence (from a pragmatic point of view) should not be too long or too short.

*...we don't choose those who have only few months left. [...] and maybe if you are in the first years of a life sentence, then we see that maybe at this point it's not so smart to get an education, because then it can take 10 years after the training before you can actually use the vocation in practice. (Edu4)*

Another issue with timing of a sentence is linked to the view that the release phase creates a risk of dropping out. Educators agreed that release from prison has a negative impact on degree completion: "...even if one has studied intensively in prison, there's always the risk, when you are released that the continuation doesn't work somehow" (Exp3). The education providers' impressions of the risks, such as securing livelihood, underline the importance of careful before-release-planning between stakeholders:

*When the prisoner moves from the open prison to our school, then these money issues come up [...] those things should be cleared already in prison before they come to the school, so the studies are not bogged down because there's no money coming in. Then one must get the money somehow. And we all know the means they have. (Edu9)*

The observation that short-time incarcerated people are blocked from educational activities might point to more profound problems. Sentence-timing-based bias neglects individual educational needs and may violate compliance with the principle of normality that should, according to legislation, guide sentence implementation.

*If we could get those on short sentences more included. Because now these prison study programmes are a bit like who has long enough sentence. They benefit, they complete it here. But we should tailor those programmes more and more accordingly. (Edu2)*



The education providers explained that sometimes a sentence is either too short to complete a full degree or so long that it makes no sense to start a VET degree. Both from the CSA and educators' point of view, it seemed reasonable to focus limited resources towards those who are likely to bring results in terms of completed degrees and reduction in recidivism.

### *Prison culture and practice*

'The term of punishment plan' is a guidance document that is made for each prisoner in the beginning of the sentence. The plan dictates much of the activities a prisoner will engage in during their imprisonment. According to our interviews, there is a lack of education-related content in these plans. One possible explanation for the lack of educational focus during the sentence planning was brought up by an education expert from the CSA:

*If you think how many things are scrutinized in the early assessment; all family matters, education, work situation, issues with intoxicants, other addictions, health, and you name it. At the moment, most of our personnel who manage these early assessments are Bachelors of Social Services by profession, so I do have to admit that education is not the number one thing they focus on when they go through this with the customer. (Exp1)*

The observed lack of educational culture in PPSF operations of which we saw many examples in our data at different levels manifests itself when, for example, different rehabilitative activities are pitted against each other. Often education is depicted as something that follows rehabilitation from substance abuse or exit from organised crime. Or it is manifested by the restrictive use of study equipment when, for example, incarcerated people would need to use computers for their studies, as one student explained:

*We got these memory sticks from the school with all kinds of materials for self-learning but then you'd need a permission for your own computer to use in the computer room... but apparently you don't get permissions based on study and the prison computer you can only use some hours per week... (Lea9)*

Different types of hurdles related to institutional regulations and practice can appear at any point of the process. The interview data exposed a certain shroud of uncertainty, even unpredictability, surrounding the decision-making concerning prison VET. Educators can never really know if a potential student can start and finish a degree. This concerns both potential students, "prisoners themselves think that they decide by throwing dice who gets to go and when" (Lea1), and educators, "the teacher and education provider don't have [...] information why something was done like this and why this student doesn't appear in class anymore" (Exp3).

CSA safety regulations and placement practices were often mentioned as being at the heart of the problem when studies are interrupted. Sometimes due to violations and sometimes for other reasons. Since planning and executing VET programmes in prison takes much effort and individual counselling, frustration among educators is understandable. As described here by an instructor: "...in here people are placed and then there are these disciplinary measures that can disrupt the whole training. It is unreasonable" (Edu1), and by a CSA officer who works with education planning: "studies can be well underway but then there's a substance use violation and they get sent to closed prison. For an undefined time" (Edu2).

### **Country level barriers**

Country level factors (policy) refer to legislation and financing of education and training on one hand and the structure of the labour market and economy on the other. Our case adds another sector to the policies that steer prison education, namely criminal justice regulation, aiming at preventing recidivism and increasing safety, hence, security issues steering the PPSF policy and practice.

### *Education and training*

As explained earlier in this paper, education provided in prison is part of the mainstream education system in Finland and thus the same standards apply to incarcerated people and other students. This approach has notable pros and cons: "it's good that it is part of the normal system, because we can then guarantee that the teaching is based on the same curricula [...] we [in CSA] can't really give too many goals or obligations to



the education providers, because we are not funding it” (Exp1). In other words, mainstream education providers and control by the MEC guarantee the overall quality and validity of VET studies, but at the same time, limit the scope of flexibility sometimes needed in the prison environment.

Another issue is the lack of coordinated steering and ownership of prison education, as explained by one expert:

*One thing we could think is since there's no [...] overall strategy of prison education or such thing. That there's no paper on objectives, nor has there been one, so I don't know if that would bring some more determination so this wouldn't be so supply-based. If there'd be clear objectives and we could see some impact. [...] I have coordinated this a little at the Finnish Board of Education, but it's not really like that, hey your task is to do that this and that many hours, but more like, let's see what comes... (Exp3)*

According to the interviews, VET in prison requires more resources per participant compared to conventional arrangements, mainly due to smaller group sizes, students' personal needs for support, and adjusting education to the CSA and prison environments. Consequently, insufficient funding was considered one of the biggest barriers by many experts. Policies related to VET funding are regulated at the national level and therefore provide us with a concrete example of how macro-level decision-making trickles down.

*So, the funding, applying the normal funding system to prison education is a big challenge, because there's no way we'll ever get the kind of group sizes as with normal education [...] even if it sounds a bit crazy at times how much it can affect practices, but still, it does. (Exp1)*

#### *Labour market and economy*

Although participation in prison education has wider benefits regardless of the content, when considering employability, education should reflect labour market demands to ensure finding a job at release. The VET qualifications in Finland have no indications that the education was conducted in prison due to the same-standard policy, and thus no prison stigma. However, the time spent away from the labour market means that finding employment is harder due to lack of experience and networks. In addition, balancing between openness versus keeping silent of personal history in prison is always risking rejection because of “criminal” stigma which increases stress in job hunting.

Perceived barriers mentioned in this category were in most cases linked to the release phase. Some service system policies and bureaucratic procedures can create real Catch-22 situations for incarcerated people as they try to re-enter society and new hurdles start to appear at the worst possible moment. Without the help from a professional network, these problems, connected to navigating the welfare system, can easily turn into barriers to education. Many learners told us that it would be easier for them to just sit back and receive social benefits than try to finish their qualifications and get ahead in life. Those with more precarious life situations can find it hard to motivate themselves to see the long-term gains of getting an education. As one student pondered:

*One thing I have noticed that these days if you try to study, it is harder to get money than if you would just lie around. If you wouldn't do anything, you will easily get income support and your flat gets paid and everything but now when you study, you have to work for it a bit. I think it's pretty weird and now with the new law there's the student loan thing; that you have to apply for a loan just to be able to study. (Lea7)*

Similar views were expressed by experts and educators as well. The system does not seem responsive to transitions in which people move from one category to the other: from prisoner to student, for example. There were often gaps in income and many had faced situations that went against their sense of justice. Without basic sustenance, health, and security, studying alone will never be a cure-all solution as one expert noted:

*As a society we should look more widely at what kind of measures of support we can provide individually so that one would get what one needs first and foremost. Education needs to be*

*timely, also with prisoners it has to be well-timed because otherwise, and I've said the same about immigrants, it will provide another experience of failure. (Exp4)*

Experts who work with incarcerated people expressed the variety of pitfalls that can jeopardise their clients' income and life situation at release. Our interviews provided a variety of different, sometimes very specific, real-life anecdotes about rules and regulations that people must navigate to be able to study. This is how one educator tries to explain to her students that their financial situation will worsen when they transition from rehabilitative work to studying:

*I always tell everyone in advance, so that it won't be a surprise, and even then the reality always comes as a surprise and it feels wrong, but then we of course talk how studying is an investment in the future and maybe someday you'll get rid of these times of labour-market subsidies, social welfare and Kela<sup>9</sup>, that you just need to think these things ahead [...] they are totally confused about their money. Everyone gets just a little bit; everyone is tight with money. (Edu8)*

### *Security issues*

The security issues penetrate the three layers from country to learning provider and individual levels as exemplified in our findings. The Imprisonment Act (Law 23.9.2005/767) states that a prison sentence should be enforced in such a way that is safe for society, prison staff, and prisoners. The prison staff is trained to guarantee safety and to "prepare for life without crime" as stated by the PPSF (2022). Risk assessments play an important part in the PPSF's implementation. For example, contacts to organised crime may bring anticipated education to a halt. One student explains how his previous connections to organised crime affected his admission to open prison and joining a study programme:

*It took around five months. I was under intensive surveillance and monitoring, so that I don't have any connections, although they could just call the police. They know it for a fact. But the assessment centre wants to monitor carefully. (Lea9)*

## **Discussion**

In the following we discuss our findings, tying together the different layered issues: the individual prisoner-student perspective, the practice of studies in prison, and larger societal processes.

### *Individuals as psycho-physical entities*

Our study shows that not only individual characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity but also mental or substance-abuse-linked issues prevent incarcerated people from actively seeking and finding suitable learning opportunities. Our interviewees expressed similar worries with earlier expert observations about female and ethnic minority incarcerated people's subordinate status in PPSF practice.

Since ethnicity, or non-binary gender, are not legitimate categories and thus not reported in Finnish statistics, it is not a straightforward matter to make claims about structural racism or gender-based exclusion in prisons based on figures. However, our observations during the interviews point to the same direction as the expert report of the alarmingly high number of Roma incarcerated people compared to the "white" majority (Roma Civil Monitor [RCM], 2020).

Due to interpretations and practices connected to ethnicity, gender or language skills needs, many potential students are not in education, nor are there necessarily resources to actively recruit them. The ignorance of gender and ethnicity-based barriers to education in prisons can be interpreted as indications of epistemic injustice (Bain, 2023). It seems that these characteristics are accepted as grounds for denying access to education or pursuing the education of one's choice, which appears to have created unjust practices in Finnish prisons.

Virtanen et al. (2020) also point out that a wide variety of factors affecting incarcerated people's learning abilities need to be considered when we think about how education should be organised to incarcerated people. Learning ability, or lack of it, is often linked to poor health, substance abuse, or unattended neurological issues.

*Prison as a learning environment*

Based on our findings, the prison context and institutional realities steer education supply rather than individual need or societal demand. For instance, incarcerated people's access to education can be hindered by institutional regulations, prison culture, and institution level practices. Although educators and CSA work closely together, decision-making is somewhat opaque and, in many cases, ruled by CSA's 'safety-first' principle. For instance, even though the education provider is legally responsible for the admission criteria for VET, while operating within the CSA system, the CSA rules and decisions weigh more in practice. Therefore, the punitive aspects often overrule the equal right to education and skills and qualifications as a necessity to enter the job market and to avoid committing crimes.

Moreover, based on our findings, we argue that the low level of active-time-spent-in-education rate in Finnish prisons is at least partly connected to the high share of short-time sentences and the deep-rooted practice of not placing short-time incarcerated people in education. Following Roth et al. (2017), this practice can be explained in two ways: first, prisoners who serve shorter sentences do not see education as worthwhile, or second, as experts' narrow perception of education as a path to employment and desistance, which might also explain the idea of the "perfect timing" for education in prison as the guiding principle of student recruitment. Our research findings of VET in prison are mostly connected to the perspective of future planning (Roth & Manger, 2014). The main educational motive is linked to the expectations of life after prison. However, our data includes indications that demonstrate the wider benefits of education. Participation in education provides fora for individual, personal growth, and building social relationships, which connect to the ideas of education as a 'hook to change' and 'safe place' (Szifiris et al., 2018). But, if prison education is seen narrowly, merely to produce qualifications, then incarcerated people's wider educational needs are not recognised.

The prison environment is restrictive in many ways, and thus, by nature and design, creates barriers to learning. Still, we also found evidence to the contrary. For a person in a chaotic life situation, prison can provide the optimal support and learning conditions. As VET is organised in close cooperation with education providers and the prisons they operate in, a unique learning environment is created. However, successful culture for education in prison is possible only if both parties agree to cooperation. Furthermore, the open prison environment enables incarcerated people to gain at least some of their agency as they are free to move within the prison area and even beyond.

*Societal level policy*

Ignoring educational targets in the PPSF performance indicators and statistics leaves an important mismatch unnoticed: incarcerated people's low education level and the education level that is needed to enter the labour market. This is an example of ignorance at policy level that calls for a deeper epistemological analysis to understand the ways of domination, injustice, and oppression in prison management (Bain, 2023).

A previous CSA inquiry has indicated the connection between individuals' low level of education and the lack of participation in education offered in prison (Koski & Miettinen, 2007). In other words, those most in need of education are not always the ones actively seeking it. However, the aim to improve incarcerated people's ability to live without crime and reintegrate into society as its full members after serving a sentence is jeopardised by not focusing on individual educational needs, low education levels, and societal demands. It seems that not only the national and European policy goals of raising the population's education level are not fully recognised in the PPSF but more profoundly the capacity of the marginalised prison population as knowers is denied, leading to epistemic injustice based either on their personal characteristics or group membership (Bain, 2023).

In 2019, the MEC and the MJ released guidelines to consolidate the cooperation between educational providers and prisons. The guidelines state that VET should provide prisoners with the needed competences to support their re-entry into society and life without crime. Moreover, to enhance these goals, prison education should be flexible and responsive to the current and future needs of the labour market (MEC, 2019, p. 3). Despite the stated aim of matching the current and future labour market needs, the education programme offering has remained relatively similar over the years. The emphasis is on vocational programmes that are easily adaptable to the prison environment. For instance, in 2020 the most offered vocational programmes were construction, gardening, property maintenance, metal work, and catering (CSA, 2020b). To maximise

employability at release, programmes should reflect labour market demands.

### **Implications for practice**

Keeping in mind the multitude of social and communication-related challenges and learning difficulties among the prison population, taking part in VET per se cannot be considered a cure to all problems. Instead, a more holistic approach that combines rehabilitation and AE is needed. To achieve this, we suggest that more importance be placed on guidance practices when planning the individual sentences.

Based on our findings, we suggest that for overcoming the barriers to education in prison it is necessary to concentrate on elements that could improve the outcome of prison education, reduce dropout rates, and help include more potential students. First, each incarcerated person should be provided with information about prison study opportunities and their agency of making educational choices should be supported so that both individual needs and larger societal interests are considered. Second, we suggest that educational expertise should be increased in PPSF for developing “educational culture” in the Prison and Probation Service. Education is recognised as one of the crucial elements of societal integration and thus as a starting point for individual sentence planning aiming at decreasing recidivism, which could enhance both willingness and resources for creating flexible and individualised study paths. Along with timely social support and counselling provided to the individuals in prison, these elements would improve the current situation. Finally, the transition from prison to release is a particularly risky phase and has consequences to studying and completing a degree. Without proper planning and cooperation between different stakeholders, dropping out of the well-begun education in prison is a serious risk at release. Various social and financial incentives to the individual student, PPSF, and the education provider for degree completion after release could create better results. In turn, leaving individuals to cope alone with the complexities of the welfare system is not efficient in avoiding risks that lead to recidivism.

VET in prison focuses primarily on skills and qualifications as the key to enter the labour market and starting a life without crime. In addition, participation in education has an impact on personal identity and provides social experiences that may contribute to transforming to a life without crime after release. Therefore, participation in education needs to be perceived holistically, as means of fulfilling both individual and social needs, and thus providing education in prison a larger role to also provide ‘hooks for change’ and ‘a safe space’ as Szifiris and colleagues have described (2018). Moreover, increasing educational opportunities in prison can be seen as enhancing epistemic justice for those socially marginalised groups whose ability as knowers has earlier been denied (Bain, 2023; Fricker, 2007).

### **Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

The article has presented a method for analysing barriers to education in prison. However, it is important to note that the study only includes interviews with individuals who had the opportunity to participate in education while incarcerated. As a result, the research may not fully address all potential reasons for not participating in adult education, which is a significant limitation.

Moreover, it is beyond this study to consider what should be done differently in the initial education system to include everyone and prevent students from dropping out of school as had happened in most of our interviewees’ cases. School is not an isolated institution but part of the societal system, and therefore the mechanisms of exclusion in school reflect the society’s values, blind spots, and history that could be elucidated by further research of those habiting the society’s outskirts, such as, for example, the incarcerated people in our study (Sassen, 2014).

### **LLL model: a note**

We have applied Ellen Boeren’s LLL model for achieving a more comprehensive understanding of educational barriers in Finnish open prisons. The LLL model provided us a viable analytical tool that takes into consideration the layered, interrelated nature of the “participation puzzle” (Boeren, 2017, p. 167). In the context of prison education, we complemented the model with factors affecting prisoner-students and noted that it is not always easy to separate layers from each other. We suggested that identifying and adding a psycho-physical category to the analysis of barriers to AE could help addressing these issues at an earlier stage and even prevent societal exclusion that can be linked to criminal behaviour in the first place.

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## Endnotes

1. In Finland, prisoners serve their sentences in either closed or open prisons. The distribution of prisoners is such that 70% are in closed prisons and 30% in open prisons or units. Prisoners who are deemed able to adapt to the more lenient conditions of open institutions compared to those of closed prisons are placed in the former.
2. As a part of the organisational reform introduced on 1 September 2022, and to have an explicit name that is easily recognised and understood internationally, the Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency changed its English name to Prison and Probation Service of Finland. In the text we will use the previous name and the abbreviation CSA when referring to the conducted research.
3. For instance, in our case, the number of all 25–30-year-olds in Finland was 412 103 persons in 2015, and the number of criminal sanctions clients of the same group was only 1365 persons, representing thus less than 1% (= 0,33%) of the population. At the population level, this figure could be interpreted as ‘0%’.
4. The interviewee group of “experts” includes professionals who design and implement national and regional policies related to the programmes.
5. At the time of the interviews, the compulsory education age limit in Finland was 16 years, thus making it possible to quit school as early as that. Later, the age limit was raised to 18 years by legislation starting from 1 August 2021.
6. The authors of this article use ‘incarcerated person/people’. Many sources or interviewees however use the term prisoner(s)—including many of the prisoners themselves.
7. No incarcerated foreign individuals volunteered for our study. One possible explanation is their lower participation in prison education in general.
8. Finland still has one of the lowest prison populations in Europe. In relative terms, the United States and Russia have about 10 times more prisoners than Finland. In the other Nordic countries, the relative prison population is about the same as in Finland.
9. The Social Insurance Institution of Finland

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