

# **Grundtvig Project : Effective Induction for Prison Teachers**

## **Focus Groups Report: Finland**



### ***Interviewees:***

**One: Teacher with long teaching experience in prison (vocational training)**

**Two: Teacher with no teaching experience in prison (general secondary education, academic subjects)**

**Three: Teacher with long teaching experience in prison (general secondary education, academic subjects)**

**Four: Teacher with long teaching experience in prison (general secondary education, academic subjects)**

**Five: Prison officer, study instructor, with long experience**

### ***Teaching and Learning***

**1. What types of information about Prisoners' backgrounds - educational background, learning difficulties, psychological/mental health problems - would help you do your job more effectively and why?**

- Knowledge of previous educational background and qualifications
- Information on whether previous learning/school experiences were positive or negative
- Learning difficulties that might have an impact on the ability to learn
- Information on possible tests on dyslexia or other learning difficulties and what has been done to facilitate learning

**2. How do you currently assess student educational level and their progress in prison? Would you benefit from training in this regard? What kind of training would you like to see?**

- Self-assessment after the course

- Teacher wants to assess not only the students' performance but also their behaviour as prisoners (in vocational training)
- Student's progress is assessed by traditional types of exams based on national criteria; we should get rid of that type of exams and the exams should be adapted to suit prison education (academic subjects)
- individual and flexible forms of assessment during the course, not only one test (academic subjects)
- there should be national guidelines on assessment for prison education

**3. How do you motivate and encourage Prisoners to engage in learning? To what extent is this process encouraged and supported by the prison authorities?**

- everybody must be allowed to try to study
- support and thanking is important for everything well done
- give oral feed-back in private about the student's progress
- make students realize that education is a bridge to the other side of the prison walls and it carries them further in life
- try to create a warm, relaxing, non-threatening environment to encourage attendance and participation
- ensure there is a large variety of adopted learning and teaching materials
- encourage the change from external to internal motivation - from focusing on bonuses to developing oneself
- really think things over and give feed-back and allow failures as well
- prison authorities' attitudes are getting better and better all the time; ignorance causes negative reactions
- the overall attitude is positive as our prison school has existed for such a long time

**4. What is the content of the curriculum in your prison? Do you think the current curriculum is adequate? What would you add/change?**

- We have the same curriculum as in other units but the curriculum has to be applied to suit to prison teaching, especially at the start. (academic subjects)
- I wish we could make the curriculum more flexible. (academic subjects)
- The national matriculation exam should have different assessment criteria and methods for students with learning difficulties. (academic subjects)
- We use a special curriculum meant for starting vocational training. This is an experimental project started by the National Board of Education three years ago, and it is meant to fill the gap between the comprehensive school and vocational training.

- Prison teachers should have a say in the compilation of national curricula.

**5. What specific teaching and learning approaches do you adopt in your prison? Do you think these are adequate? What would you change?**

- independent learning methods for those who don't attend classes or have been absent because of court hearing. (academic subjects)
- a lot of teacher oriented approaches. The use of video conferencing in teaching defines the teaching methods you can use. When choosing your methods you have to make sure that it works in distance learning as well. (academic subjects)
- If you could make them work so that the more advanced would help those less advanced that would be great, but it is rare and very difficult as there might be all sorts of tensions between students.
- Teacher oriented approach wouldn't work with us (vocational training)
- a flexible learning plan to encompass the needs of the group;
- taking into consideration the three different types of learners: the audio, the visual and the kinetic type of learner.
- contextualising teaching where appropriate
- Access to a wider range of e-learning options would be helpful.

**6. What is the balance between one to one tuition and group teaching? Do you think the current balance is correct? What works best (methodologically) for both approaches?**

- All our groups are small and so the teaching is very individual; a small group is the only way in this kind of teaching
- Peer tutoring is well accepted
- Supportive, private classes are always available; individual guidance and supportive classes are common towards the end of the graduation

### ***Prisoner Psychology and Health***

**1. Do you need/want more information on mental health issues of Prisoners? How would this help or hinder you?**

- "If I could use the information, I could foresee certain things. On the other hand, the knowledge might influence my work."
- Most interviewees do not necessarily want to know too much information about a prisoner as this could have a negative effect: perhaps wouldn't know how to make use of the information.

## **2. Have you experienced manipulation by Prisoners?**

- Most interviewees had experienced manipulation.
- In some groups it is so common that you learn to ignore it.
- Common sense, sense of humor and long experience help you forward.
- None of the interviewees has been given training in the area.

## **3. Is it important to know the Prisoners' criminal record? What sort of information would be useful and why?**

- All prefer not to be aware of any details around a prisoner's criminal record unless it affects the teacher's security.
- Knowledge of the nature of the crime would be useful in some cases since it reveals certain things of the student's personality.
- Knowledge of the length of the sentence is useful in many cases, e.g. planning the studies.

## **4. How do you manage group situations where some prisoners may have mental health problems and others don't?**

- Experienced staff react responsively to the needs of everyone within the group and ensure attention is not drawn to any mental health issues for an individual.
- It is certainly important to keep up with the situation and long-time observation is equally important. In case it looks like there's a time-bomb ticking, the prisoner is removed from the group. It's hard if there is a different guard every day.
- Situation awareness and alertness are vital.
- Teachers tend to ease tension and to create a relaxed and laid-back atmosphere.

## ***Security***

### **1. Were you provided with formal training regarding security issues prior to starting work in the prison?**

- Those interviewed have not been given any formal security training, but the situation has changed and is getting better all the time.

**2. Who provided this training and what form did it take? (i.e. which areas were covered, how long did it last?)**

Interviewer: The question can be skipped because no one was provided with formal training.

**3. Were you given a paper copy of security guidelines when you started as reference? If yes, who provided these?**

- Most of the group were not given a paper copy when they started.
- Security issues were discussed with the then chief prison officer.
- Oral instructions were given to vocational teachers by the assistant prison director. They were also provided with security guidelines by their own institute.
- A few years ago all the teachers were provided with printed national security guidelines by Oulu Prison.

**4. Do you think the training provided was adequate? If not, what sorts of issues would you like to have seen covered? Please be specific and relate your answer to questions and problems you had as a new prison teacher.**

- This is an old prison with myriad non-documented rules and practices that an outsider can't know. It takes time to learn them. Oulu Prison and my school are working on an induction guide. (vocational training)
- Training should cover issues like how to act if something unexpected was about to happen in the classroom. How to respond? How to get help? Who to contact?

**5. Do you receive regular updates to security training? How often do these take place?**

- There are courses available, but you have to be active yourself, nobody offers them to you.

**6. Did you make any mistakes in relation to security when you first started? How could you have been prevented from making such a mistake?**

- Most have made mistakes that were caused by not being aware of the security code and the great number of unwritten rules that every prison, especially old ones, have.
- Staff would benefit from receiving awareness training on simple items of material that could be potentially used as a weapon etc.

**7. Would better 'intelligence' (i.e. knowledge) of prisoners' criminal convictions, mental health status help in managing classroom discipline? If yes, tell us how you think it would help?**

- not the knowledge of the sentence necessarily, but upcoming trials and sentences show in teaching and the atmosphere of the class
- knowledge of the conviction is important only if the prisoner's release is approaching
- mental health status only if there is something very exceptional

**8. Do you feel there is any tension between your role as a teacher and security considerations? If yes, please tell us what they are.**

- Being on too familiar terms can cause problems on one hand, on the other hand chatting creates a working relationship.
- Nowadays the teacher is also a facilitator, but in prison school study books are the only sources of information we have – there is no access to the Internet for prisoners, only for the teacher
- The tension between the teacher's role and security issues sometimes pops up in autumn when new groups start because some students take teachers for fully authorized prison officers.

### ***Prison Teacher Networks***

**1. Would you find it helpful to have access to an electronic forum which links prison teachers and acts as a source of advice and information for the profession?**

- Some interviewees would find it important to have more contacts between different education providers inside the prison.
- For some an electronic forum would be usable.
- One interviewee doesn't know.

**2. How would you use new means of communication in a teachers' network? What issues do you think you could debate and resolve with these new means of communication?**

- At this point the majority do not know exactly how to use the new means of communication and what issues to debate and resolve.
- exchange ideas about ordinary issues

**3. How can teachers in prison - as a community - encourage government aid in implementing/setting up networks for teachers in prison?**

- by actively promoting wider awareness of this field of education
- It is important to consider how to develop a common register to avoid overlapping work.

**4. How much time would you, as a teacher, be ready to devote to communicating with other colleagues at a distance from home - to help you in your work?**

- Not much more than telephone calls and email take at present.
- At the moment, no knowledge of how much exactly.
- As much as it takes, but not too much.

**5. Are you currently involved in any prison teacher networks?**

- One member of the group: The prison teacher team in my college.
- One member of the group: European Prison Education Association
- The majority: none

**6. Are you aware of the European Prison Education Association? If yes, do you think it does a good job of representing you?**

- Two were aware of the association and that it arranges conferences.
- The rest were not aware of EPEA.