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## **Learning and training while serving time: Conflictual dynamics and cooperation techniques between prison actors and vocational experts**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the findings of empirical research on vocational training activities within the Italian prison system. Through the lens of prison sociology, it seeks to connect the rhetoric of rehabilitation with the realities uncovered in interviews with inmates, educators, and vocational trainers. The study delves into the dynamics of professional cultures within the prison context, examining how the norms of teaching professions intersect with the institutional environment and its actors. By reconstructing the fragmented nature of penal control, the paper aims to map the complex network of interactions among the professional and legal cultures of educators, prison officers, and vocational trainers.

### **Key words**

Prison; rehabilitation; vocational training; legal culture

### **Resumen**

Este artículo explora los hallazgos de una investigación empírica sobre las actividades de formación profesional en el sistema penitenciario italiano. Desde la perspectiva de la sociología penitenciaria, busca conectar la retórica de la rehabilitación con las realidades reveladas en entrevistas a personas privadas de libertad, educadores y formadores profesionales. El estudio analiza las dinámicas de las culturas profesionales en el contexto carcelario, examinando cómo las normas propias de las profesiones docentes se intersecan con el entorno institucional y sus actores. Al reconstruir la naturaleza fragmentada del control penal, el artículo tiene como objetivo trazar el complejo entramado de interacciones entre las culturas profesionales y jurídicas de los educadores, los funcionarios penitenciarios y los expertos en formación profesional.

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### **Palabras clave**

Prisión; rehabilitación; formación profesional; cultura jurídica

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of vocational training within the Italian prison system, particularly its relation to the rehabilitative principles inherent in sentencing. The analysis examines vocational training programs' incidence and their practical implications on the daily experiences of incarcerated individuals, employing Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociological framework to uncover hidden aspects of legal practices. Drawing from Garland (1999), the study highlights how the institutional focus of modern criminal law can obscure broader social implications. Utilizing a sociology of law approach, the paper investigates the implementation of vocational training norms within prisons, characterized by complex interactions between diverse professional and legal cultures. As Pennisi (2022, 1352) stated "legal culture is used to show the sociological dimensions (professional, cognitive, valuative, organizational, etc.) involved in setting legal change, without deducing said change from the contents of the legal rules but maintaining its explanation open to empirical hypothesis about the role played by each component of the process". This study triangulates interpretations of the rehabilitative paradigm among educators, trainers, and custodial officers, offering insights into how professional and legal cultures interact within the prison environment. These dynamics unfold within the local legal culture of prisons (Nelken 2004, Cotterrell 2006), which shapes institutional practices and interactions (Sarzotti 2000, Sbraccia and Vianello 2016, Maculan and Santorso 2018, Prina 2018, Prina and Vianello 2020).

Central to this exploration is the recognition that the prison constitutes a microcosm of society, where different social actors, each embedded in their own professional and legal traditions, converge and interact within the confined space of the institution. Within this context, custodial officers and penitentiary workers bring with them the ethos of the prison field, characterized by a focus on security and control, while external training agencies - together with prison educators - introduce different perspectives shaped by their own organizational mandates and professional norms, more oriented to the care and training of the person.

By focusing on these distinct groups, this contribution seeks to shed light on how legal culture is not static but rather dynamically constructed, negotiated and mitigated within the prison setting. This process is perpetually enacted through the daily practices, interactions, and interpretations of official rules and regulations, which often diverge from their intended functions and are subject to multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations.

Moreover, the institutional environment of the prison is permeated by a dense network of official rules and regulations, which govern various aspects of inmate life and institutional functioning. However, the practical application of these rules often deviates from their formal mandates, leading to informal practices and interpretations that reflect the complex social dynamics and power relations within the institution (Sykes 1958, Sparks *et al.* 1996, Crewe 2007). In essence, prison serves as a microcosm where legal and professional cultures intersect and evolve through ongoing negotiation and contestation. By examining these dynamics, the research conducted tries to give valuable insights into the complexities of power, control, and social order within the prison environment, where the various layers of intentionality, action, and educational encounters intersect, often revealing imbalances and incongruities between theoretical principles and

practical applications. This underscores to both detainees and educational practitioners how the conventional categories of freedom struggle to find relevance within a context characterized by constraints and limitations.

## 2. Methodology

In planning research within the prison system, it is not uncommon to experience critical issues related to the difficulty of accessing homogeneous qualitative and quantitative data.

As it is well known, information in this field is often particularly difficult to access, as prisons are characterized by their separation from the external environment and the inherent closure of their institutional social actors (Drake *et al.* 2015, Sbraccia and Vianello 2016). To address this barrier, after a formal request that explained the aim and the methodologies that would have been used, the research was authorized by the National Prison Service. The formal authorization allowed the conduction of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with inmates, prison educators, prison officers and vocational trainers. The research initially targeted 12 correctional facilities, selected among penitentiaries and detention houses in major metropolitan areas, representing the contexts of Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. Of these, 11 facilities participated: 10 detention houses (Case circondariali) and 1 penitentiary (Casa di reclusione).

Although penitentiaries are institutions designated for serving final sentences, while detention houses are intended for non-finalized judgements, this distinction is often theoretical. From a practical standpoint, treatment activities are not exclusively for those serving a final sentence, they are open to a broader population, and the number of individuals with final sentences has increased over time even within detention houses<sup>1</sup>. Detention houses were prioritized as they constitute 73% of Italian penal institutions, thus, they represent the majority category represented. Furthermore many detention houses include a penal section, defined as “reclusione”, dedicated exclusively to individuals with final sentences.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in prison from the end of 2020 to the end of 2021 and their length varied from 30 minutes to 2 hours. All of them have been audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The collective interviews and focus groups involved a total of 92 incarcerated individuals. Specifically, 31 participated in collective interviews, while 61 took part in focus groups. All the interviews aimed to assess their expectations and motivations for participating in training courses, their relationships with prison staff and training personnel. Additionally, the research was aimed at exploring the feedback on the needs and evaluations of the courses attended, along with an understanding of the projects completed within the broader context of the inmate’s personal life experience.

Regarding prison staff and trainers, the research involved interviews and focus groups with 32 prison staff members, including 9 educators and 23 correctional officers. These were divided into 4 focus groups and 12 individual interviews- Additionally, 19 vocational trainers participated, through 3 focus groups and 9 individual interviews, all

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008, individuals with final sentences constituted 45.8% of the total, while in 2021, the percentage rose to 71.6%, significantly reducing the use of pre-trial detention in our legal system.

focused on their relationship with the inmates, the criteria for selecting participants for training courses, the evaluation of treatment objectives and any emerging challenges, as well as the relationships between training entities and the penitentiary institution, through the lens of the professional and legal cultures.

Despite the formal authorization, conducting empirical research in prisons involves navigating resistance that limits the researcher's field of observation. Such resistance systematically excludes outsiders from the more sensitive spaces of detention and sometimes pre-selects subjects for the researcher's interviews based on their trustworthiness and alignment with acceptable narratives about prison life (Sbraccia and Vianello 2016).

Researchers must often overcome initial skepticism from prison administrations and treatment areas, stemming from the heavy workload of prison staff, which forces prioritization of daily activities.

The preselection of incarcerated individuals for interviews frequently results from filtering by the treatment area, which selects participants from the limited pool engaged in training course. In essence, this establishes, as Ferreccio and Vianello argue (2014), selective strategies that can take the form of filters or "viaticums". In the first case, the researcher is granted access to a specific group of inmates, while the others remain inaccessible. In the second case, the ostensible collaboration of the staff is aimed at containing and directing the research towards spaces where the penitentiary can implement the rehabilitation project, often through recognized symbols (such as classrooms, workspaces, equipped areas for family visits, and similar).

However, there is no escape from the confines of this filter: the compromise in the sample selection is indeed an unavoidable element due to the nature of research in a penitentiary context. The choice of subjects considered interviewable is, in fact, an assessment by the prison administration from which the researcher struggles to disentangle. These selection filters also mirror internal hierarchies within the prison, aligning with what Becker (1967) defines as the "hierarchy of credibility," wherein accounts from those in positions of power are deemed inherently more reliable. This dynamic extends to relationships among incarcerated individuals, further complicating the research.

It is essential to be aware that social credibility can dramatically influence the possibility of understanding the environment under study in social research. Interviewing only the treatment area, trainers, or model inmates exposes the researcher to an ideological or biased position. Moreover, incarcerated individuals themselves may attempt to present a favorable image of educational and treatment activities, reinforcing the preselection biases of the treatment area. To counteract these challenges, researchers must foster a relationship of openness and mutual recognition with inmates (Ferreccio and Vianello 2014). Nonetheless, reluctance among interviewees may persist, often driven by protective mechanisms against external intrusion or adaptation strategies within the prison context. These behaviors, as Sykes (1958) suggests, reflect the inmate's efforts to avoid being perceived as complicit with the penitentiary institution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As Sykes (1958, 87) stated, the ban of communication is extended to cover all but the most routine matters: "the word rat or squealer is a familiar label for the man who betrays his fellows

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### 3. Exploring the Penitentiary Field: A Sociological Examination of a (non) Formative Environment

The development of modern penitentiary institutions and the decline of rehabilitation as a central goal of punishment have long been topics of cultural debate. Over time, various theoretical visions have questioned the multiple functions of punitive power, particularly whether punishment achieves its intended purposes – like rehabilitation – or instead contradicts them. This raises the fundamental question: to what extent does punishment align with its ideal purpose versus its actual practice (Pavarini 1996)?

In reality, prisons often seem far removed from the rehabilitative ideals that the Constitution assigns to punishment. The concept of rehabilitation, so often emphasized in contemporary discussions, has frequently shifted from being a myth to a reality in which public attention has moved from fostering reintegration into society to a primarily defensive stance: safeguarding human dignity, in the Kantian sense of the irreducibility of man to a mere means (Gonnella 2014).

This raises critical questions how can custodial impulses be reconciled with rehabilitative aspirations? How do prison actors address the paradox of pursuing resocialization in the inherently coercive environment of prison?

In analyzing the dynamics of the prison environment, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the field and habitus to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework. The penitentiary field, as a distinct sociological space, operates as a structured network of relations where power, resources, and symbolic capital are contested and negotiated. Within this field, social actors—both inmates and staff—engage in practices that reflect and reinforce the structures of the prison environment. These practices are shaped by what Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1987) describes as habitus: a system of durable and transferable dispositions, or “structured structures,” that function as “structuring structures.” The penitentiary habitus emerges through the daily routines and pervasive discipline of incarceration, deeply internalized by actors who are continuously exposed to the total institution of prison. It is through this habitus that individuals come to navigate the penitentiary field, adapting their behaviors and perceptions to its specific logic without explicit awareness or mastery of its underlying operations. It is in fact necessary to point out that prison is a sociologically peculiar environment where the operational mechanisms governing this social milieu are characterized by a specific “environmental culture” (Buffa 2013) that influences how people interact. This local legal culture (Church 1982) consists of deeply ingrained messages that go beyond formal rules, allowing for informal, irregular, and sometimes even illegal behavior. The penitentiary habitus draws strength from comparing itself with similar situations, which are constantly evolving within the daily routines of confinement. It is therefore acquired by social actors who are significantly and prolongedly exposed to a specific social environment. As Caputo-Levine (2013) suggests, this secondary *habitus* reflects the

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by violating the ban of communication (...) it represents the most serious accusation that one inmate can level against another, for it implies a betrayal that transcends the specific act of disclosure. The rat is a man who has betrayed not just one inmate or several; he has betrayed inmates in general by denying cohesion as a dominant value when confronting the world of officialdom”.

profound influence of the penitentiary on all those within it, shaping their outlooks and practices in ways that are both reflective of and adapted to the institutional field.

A key aspect in discussing education and vocational training is the network of relationships not only among inmates but also between them and prison staff (educators, prison officers, and administrators) as well as external agents, such as private organizations and companies that invest in training and work programs within prisons.

The right to education and vocational training is recognized as an individual right, and instruction is seen as a strategic tool for rehabilitation and social re-integration. Yet vocational trainers often face constraints in their daily activities within prisons, as their work is subordinated to the prison administration's organizational and security priorities. The prison system has a pervasive ability to shape the practices and objectives of external actors to align with its own cultural paradigm, which is primarily embodied in dynamics of control. Consequently, the implementation of norms governing vocational training and rehabilitation is subject to local power dynamics and a negotiation process among the various groups participating in the daily life of the prison (Sarzotti 2010).

Within this framework, professional cultures act as instruments of resistance within the realm of the law in action, underscoring the need to analyze their methods within particular contexts to grasp the complexity of institutional structure and the balance of power within correctional facilities. The culture of prison is interwoven with a logic of sanctions and rewards, which often tacitly reinforces the informal objective of inflicting suffering and humiliations (Scruton and McCulloch 2009, Sbraccia and Vianello 2022). Concurrently, the legal culture observed among educators and vocational trainers is centered on defending inmates' rights, even as these professionals struggle to maintain their own cultural identity in the encroachment of institutional pressures.

In the following paragraphs, I will explore how the normative characteristics of vocational trainers (Wright 2005) respond to the penal institution. I will also examine how these cultures influence, and are in turn influenced by, the legal cultures of other institutional actors, such as educators and prison officers.

#### **4. Synergies and Discrepancies in Relational Dynamics: The Impact of External Influences in the Prison field**

##### *4.1. Training while Serving Time: Vocational Agencies and Trainers*

With the Italian penitentiary reform of 2018, vocational training was included as a part of the treatment for convicted individuals and detainees. Alongside education, work, religious activities, and public utility projects, the reform emphasized the role of training as integral fundamental step for an effective socio-labor reintegration process (Bozick *et al.* 2018). This addition underscores the critical importance of vocational training in preparing detainees for life beyond prison.

Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA) coordinate education and training programs across Italy. They are organized vertically within the school system and horizontally with other regional training agencies to provide an appropriate response to demand from both individuals and institutions or the labor market. Vocational training



institutions responsible for vocational education operate in collaboration with third sector' training agencies contracted by regional governments. Through operational protocols established with correctional facilities, they deliver specialized training programs to detainees. Despite the national and European regulations guaranteeing the right to education and lifelong learning, vocational training still faces persistent obstacles. These include shortages of prison staff and security personnel, inadequate facilities for training activities, and a lack of qualified instructors.

Other factors also influence the delivery of vocational training, such as structural conditions, spaces dedicated to training – often completely absent – and prison overcrowding. Prolonged exposure to the rules and practices of the penitentiary system, which would be inconceivable outside prison, further complicates the situation. As Vianello (2018a, 109) observes, this exposure represents “one of the most disturbing effects of prolonged exposure to the penitentiary culture”.

The organization of training courses is further constrained by the need to introduce materials into the prison, subject to authorization by the prison administration. This process is shaped by the bureaucratic rigidity and security protocols characteristic of the penitentiary environment (Torrente 2016). The delicate balance between security and treatment often justifies significant restrictions on rights, affecting both delivery and participation in vocational courses.

The entrance procedure today was not very quick because they couldn't find some documents. Today, you could see that there was a buzz in the institution, you notice that too. For example, I had to get undressed to enter, something that hardly ever happens. It's also true that it's right for it to be done every day and you get annoyed when it happens to you that one time, but the rule is the rule, in prison that's how it works. You can't even think of bringing a toothpick if it's not authorized first. And then there are prohibitions: I don't bring glass bottles, I have to transfer them or try to find alternatives or I have to replace them completely. Let me give you an example, right? I want to use a certain oil, which has a different value, and they don't make it in a plastic can, obviously, so I have to transfer it. (Collective interview with training operators – Penitentiary Institute No. 9 Southern Italy)

Inside prison “nothing is ever guaranteed, but only permitted, and everything can be delayed or forbidden at any moment” (Sbraccia and Vianello 2022, 1475).

The scrutiny of tools used for training reflects the paternalistic legal culture of custody (Sarzotti 1999). This culture, which influences the decisions of the involved operators, often restricts the operational scopes of re-educational treatment. The aforementioned interview highlights how custodial and security concerns frequently overshadow rehabilitative objectives. Such obstacles should be removed not only because they hinder the right to education as regulated by the legislative will of the Penitentiary System but also to uphold the principle of substantive equality between inmates and students outside prison. Another significant issue is the lack of space. This shortage affects not only daily life within the prison but also professional training activities. Many Italian prison facilities are architecturally inadequate to support educational objectives, as their rigidity prevents the creation of spaces suitable for vocational training. Research in education has shown a strong positive correlation between learning and a healthy physical environment –one that offers sufficient space, proper lighting, and ventilation (Hawley *et al.* 2013). Vocational trainers emphasize that dedicated areas for education

and training, such as classrooms or workshops designed for both theoretical and practical activities, can foster an educational atmosphere distinct from the prison environment, which is far more conducive to learning.

In addressing some of these challenges, it is worth noting that training agencies often integrate elements driven not by rehabilitation goals but by economic considerations. These agencies apply specific criteria to meet predetermined benchmarks, particularly regarding the so-called “expected value”, which refers to the anticipated number of participants successfully completing the training course. This includes a minimum attendance requirement of two-thirds of the total course hours.

To participate, inmates must meet formal requirements, such as having at least an eighth-grade diploma and serving a final sentence of at least five years. Beyond these formal requirements, informal criteria are often applied in the final selection of participants. Having prior experiences related to the subjects taught in the course falls within these informal criteria.

I asked if there was a possibility of working, I am able to do a few things, but I was not accepted. After a couple of days, my educator and these people from the vocational agency came and told me: ‘You’ve been chosen, you can attend the bricklayer course!’ I was so surprised. I thought they were joking. I don’t like lying, so I told them: ‘Look, I already have 25 years’ experience in the field, I’ve always been a bricklayer in my life.’  
(Inmate interview – prison no. 5 – central Italy)

Training individuals who are already skilled represents another form of selection, prioritizing those who possess personal resources and are often already employed outside prison. For these individuals, reintegration into the job market is not a significant concern, especially in sectors like construction, where undeclared work constitutes the predominant form of informal labor. This selection process, once again, leaves behind those with fewer personal resources or deemed “unreliable”, reinforcing the subordinate social position they held even before incarceration (De Giorgi 2002, Pavarini 2012, Baratta 2019).

Additionally, trainers also adopt a personalized approach with inmates, going beyond considerations of reliability to encourage them to complete the course. These efforts are deemed essential to prevent dropout rates and achieving predetermined benchmarks, which directly influence the funding agencies are eligible to receive. However, the implications of this approach are significant: requiring a minimum sentence of five years excludes approximately 52% of inmates serving final sentences shorter than that, effectively disqualifying half of the prison population.

The reliance of Third Sector activities on public funding ties them to political decisions and organizational timelines. This dependency contributes to their discontinuity and precariousness within the prison system, directly affecting the sustainability and consistency of their interventions.

Nonetheless, encounters with external individuals who interact with the prison environment are highly valued by the incarcerated population. Indeed, these interactions play a critical role in the social reintegration process, as external figures, “bearers of change” (Vianello 2019, 67), provide a connection to the outside world. Their unfamiliarity with carceral contexts brings perspectives that challenge established

prison culture (Acocella and Pastore 2020). More broadly, their approaches remain unconditioned by prior experiences of managing total institutions (Torrente 2016).

This course has changed my life. I was depressed, I wouldn't get out of bed, I was always taking medication. I started it just to get out of the section, but then it really got to me. Also, because the teachers, the things they tell you, that they teach you, are different from the way of thinking that exists here in prison, right? I was treated as a student, not as an inmate. I will always be grateful for that. (Focus group inmates – Penitentiary Institute No. 4 Northern Italy)

We can acknowledge the reflection they have on the daily life of imprisonment: in a prison where work is available or access to various activities is possible, life can potentially be better. All these elements, in fact, contribute to reducing the pain of imprisonment (Sykes 1958, Scott 2008, Scraton and McCulloch 2009, Crewe 2011), which arises from the deprivation of freedom, loss of goods and relationships, and diminished autonomy.

Interactions with trainers belonging to an external legal culture can also foster processes of hetero-categorization and self-categorization. These processes move beyond simply reducing individuals to the label of “deviant” or focusing solely on their crimes. Instead, they shift attention toward future possibilities, offering a perspective rooted in potential rather than past actions.

#### *4.2. The maternal code of prison educators*

As easily inferred, the implementation of various treatment initiatives falls under the responsibility of officials with legal-pedagogical expertise: prison educators. They play a central and proactive role in designing and coordinating pedagogical and training programs within penitentiary institutions. Specifically, in the area of vocational training, prison educators work with the prison administrations to articulate the institution's educational needs to the relevant regional Prison administration (Provveditorato), which then liaises with regional authorities to formulate training calls for proposals based on these needs. Once a training contract is awarded to a training agency, prison educators oversee the selection of participants for the courses. Some formal criteria for accessing these courses are pre-established by the training agencies. Training coordinators then serve as a secondary layer in the selection process, adding an additional filter beyond the discretion exercised by prison educators.

Prison sociology highlights the critical role of discretion and reward systems in shaping rehabilitative treatment within custodial settings (Sbraccia and Vianello 2022). However, the right to study and to attend vocational training is too often not guaranteed. In practice, the dynamics differ from what regulations prescribe, revealing two contrasting scenarios: on one side, there are poorly structured programs of little value, designed merely to occupy time outside the cell; on the other, there are excellent courses reserved for “good” or enterprising inmates who possess significant personal resources. In some institutions, launching training programs remains challenging, especially since management has shifted to the regional system. As a result, training proposals are not always implemented, consequently leaving some institutions without professional development opportunities. This limitation has prompted educators to prioritize enrolling individuals deemed reliable and likely to complete the courses successfully.

This strategy ensures that agencies can meet performance benchmarks (the so called “expected value”), securing the continuation of programs in future years. In this regard, the professional cultures of educators and trainers converge united by the shared goal of maintaining course availability.

At the same time, frustration exists within the treatment area over managing the time dedicated to incarcerated individuals and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable imprisoned population – those with fewer personal and social resources –. Additionally, there is a tendency toward infantilization in the educational relationship, where the educator assumes the authority to decide when an inmate is ready to commit to their rehabilitative project. This reflects a view of the inmate as an object of treatment rather than an active participant in it (Allegri 2020). The professional culture of educators, predisposed towards therapeutic paradigms, embodies a maternal ethos (Sarzotti 1999), focusing on care and reintegration, particularly for reliable individuals. This strategy transcends merely “rewarding the best ones” to create a cadre of good inmates, who, despite their constrained experiences, serve as testimonials for the efficacy of the rehabilitative initiative. These individuals validate the penitentiary system’s rationale, legitimizing incarceration through the lens of successful reformation (Ferrecchio and Vianello 2014, Sbraccia and Vianello 2022).

However, since access to vocational training courses is restricted to highly selected inmates, it often occurs that some participants find the course unmeaningful. Many prisoners recognize the lack of professional skills relevant to the labor market and the limited effectiveness of the training and treatment activities offered. Nevertheless, they engage in these activities regardless. This enthusiastic participation reflects their desire not merely for personal growth but also for active engagement in the treatment process. This instrumental approach is primarily a means of presenting themselves as “committed” and “deserving” to prison educators, in alignment with the typical mechanism of reward within the prison environment (Salle and Chantraine 2009, Ronco 2016).

As in many other situations, there is also a tendency for educators to take over decisions on behalf of inmates. This, combined with educators’ anxiety to complete all the activities they are responsible for, is closely tied to the issue of staff shortages in the treatment sector.

With inmates, consistency is extremely important. The moment you tell an inmate something, the moment you engage them, you must then be able to fulfill certain expectations: they show something to you (which is to prove they are reliable, that you have made a good investment in them) and they expect you to respond (...). And you must provide that response, without getting caught up in urgencies. We’re always in a hurry, but you must be careful not to betray expectations, promises. Feedback is important, it would be nice to have the time to do everything well. I realize that empowering an inmate by offering them a chance in a course is a step forward from the detention they’re undergoing, right? (Interview with a penitentiary treatment area operator – Penitentiary Institute No. 9 Southern Italy).

They indeed complain about disproportionate workloads and the bureaucratization and securitization of work management, which have reduced the actual time they can dedicate to educational discussions with inmates. The prison context imposes numerous

obligations, as does the administrative handling of cases and criminal proceedings that shapes inmates' stories and their relationships with the Supervisory Magistracy.

The emergence of these bureaucratic rigidities and security protocols, in the perpetual balance between security and treatment, justifies significant limitations on the exercise of vocational rights, affecting both the provision and participation in training courses.

### *4.3. The role of Surveillance in Vocational Training*

Within the operational scope of prison administration, the role of the penitentiary police goes beyond conventional security protocols, extending to active participation in observation and rehabilitative treatment of detainees and internees. Recent policy directives, such as those introducing dynamic surveillance measures,<sup>3</sup> have reshaped the operational framework of correctional facilities by emphasizing a more nuanced understanding of detainee behavior and social dynamics. Dynamic surveillance represents a shift away from conventional custodial models, seeking instead to foster a deeper comprehension of inmate populations through simplified, rationalized monitoring. While this approach not only strengthens observation capabilities but also offers insights into the underlying dynamics within detention sections, its implementation is not without challenges. Although dynamic surveillance may involve strategies like open cell regimes, its success relies on more than technological solutions alone. Ultimately, its effectiveness depends on prison officers' ability to navigate the intricate social terrain of carceral environments, including power structures and the social hierarchies among incarcerated individuals. By embracing this dynamic perspective, officers can more effectively work toward positive outcomes for incarcerated individuals and society as a whole.

There are truly some exceptional young men who have abilities, know how to do things, and learn quickly. One should then have a bit of time to get to know them better, even to provide feedback, shouldn't one? (Interview with a security area prison operator – Penitentiary Institute No. 1, Northern Italy)

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for this dynamic surveillance to be reduced to mere supervision through video surveillance means, rather than also being utilized as a tool for understanding the detained population.

- Officer: We are here to guarantee security. That's our role, our task is this. There are roles, tasks, and duties. Our duty is this. So, for every activity, every moving detainee, there's one person watching, period.

- Interviewer: So, this is your organizational model...

- Officer: Yes, yes. In the sections, there's dynamic surveillance, so they use video surveillance, and the officers just stay in place... there's always someone in control, let's say, watching the footage. (Focus group with security area prison operators - Penitentiary Institute No. 4, Northern Italy)

The focus group mentioned above illustrates how the incarcerated population is managed, with surveillance practices shaping daily interactions within prison sections.

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<sup>3</sup> Dynamic surveillance, introduced with a DAP circular (3663/6113) in 2015, constitutes a new model for managing custody, control of inmates, and overall security of the institution, and is primarily aimed at penitentiary police staff.

These practices largely center on administrative tasks related to detainee control and movement, rather than specialized interventions (Buffa 2022). This custodial and surveillance-focused perspective prevents the security sector from viewing itself as actively involved in penitentiary treatment initiatives. Consequently, the security department rejects any association with treatment roles or closer involvement with detainees, emphasizing its identity as a comprehensive law enforcement entity. Examining the attributes of its legal culture reveals that prison officers often identify with a purely control-oriented model, in contrast to the treatment perspective typically associated with the educators and vocational trainers.

The security department frequently asserts its organizational authority through interaction patterns characterized by a certain detachment from detainee requests and by how interpersonal relationships are managed. When a detainee presents a request (for an item, a service, etc.) to an officer, the request is typically dismissed through what could be described as “non-engagement” (Di Marco and Venturella 2016).

They constantly ask you; they ask questions you don't even know how to answer. Sometimes you refer them to the educators, other times you know they're just nuisances and you ignore them. (Interview with security officer – Penitentiary institution No. 1, Northern Italy)

In this perspective, an inmate who does not cause disturbances, create problems, or ask questions is considered a “good” detainee, while others are viewed as nuisances. This mindset rests on the principle that an inmate is only recognized as well-behaved when they exhibit complete submission to the prison rules and surveillance orders (Frediani 2018).

If you don't know their name, it means they are a good detainee, it means you've never had to write a report about them. (Interview with security officer – Penitentiary institution No. 5, Central Italy)

The officer often responds with a quick, targeted reply aimed at minimizing the “relational” workload. According to the legal culture within the penitentiary police, addressing needs that do not fall within their sphere of action is considered unsuitable, as it would undermine their legitimacy. The extensive rules regulating prisoners conduct inevitably lead police officers to perceive these regulations as essential for maintaining prison order and security, deemed necessary to counter the perceived “threats” posed by an inherently unpredictable and potentially violent inmate population (Drake 2011, Ugelvik 2014, Maculan and Santorso 2018, Maculan 2022). As a result, compliance with certain norms is frequently enforced through the use of threats, the use of force (Gariglio 2018), and the removal of the privileges (Liebling *et al.* 1999, Salle and Chantraine 2009), particularly when there is a lack of genuine agreement among prisoners. However, in situations where staff-prisoner relationships are close and well-regarded, the withdrawal of privileges is employed less often, as staff rely more on their “tactics of talk” (Liebling 2000, 337) and strategic communication techniques to gain prisoners compliance.

The perception of rules as essential tools for maintaining order underscores the intricate dynamics between regulatory frameworks and the management of prison violence. The coercive enforcement of rules highlights the interplay between institutional control mechanisms and inmate behavior. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these regulations in

reducing violence may depend on prisoners' degree of compliance and cooperation, shedding light on the nuanced nature of power dynamics within carceral settings.

These factors inevitably heighten polarization between officers and inmates and lead to greater conflict in daily life, leading to more punitive responses (e.g., disciplinary isolations, reduced privileges associated with dynamic surveillance) and further hierarchical reward systems (Salle and Chantraine 2009, Verdolini 2022). The situation fosters a perception that sending a detainee to a course is merely another managerial problem added to an already heavy workload, akin to dealing with a detainee idling in the section and potentially causing disciplinary issues.

- Officer 1: As far as I'm concerned, the more courses there are, the quieter things are on the floor because the detainee is out. Instead of having to deal with 50 detainees, you deal with 15, and there's a slightly more peaceful harmony.

- Officer 2: Well, but then you're just shifting the problem from yourself to me. We have to watch over them, when they're not in the section, you still have to watch over them outside because they're at the courses. You're never at ease! (Focus group with prison staff – Penitentiary institution No. 4, Northern Italy)

The organization of daily life within the prison context must accommodate the work rhythms of the prison police personnel (Anastasia and Gonnella 2005). In this view, officers often avoid tasks they consider outside their official role, thus perpetuating what Buffa (2013) defines as the "competence trap". This mindset enables them to dismiss requests not only from the detainee population but also from other treatment operators.

However, the security sector's approach does not always result in "conflictual cooperation," a term describing the behavior of individuals within organizations who, despite pursuing multiple objectives, maintain an often tense balance (Friedberg 1994, Crozier and Friedberg 1995). While some prison staff emphasize control, institutional responsibilities are generally carried out along a continuum – ranging from the formal asymmetry required by mandates and roles to more informal practices –. These informal dynamics can facilitate daily interactions and support interventions (Oggionni 2021), especially when they facilitate the tasks of prison actors.

## 5. Mutually Utilitarian Relational Strategies

Despite the numerical imbalance between educators and prison officers, a noteworthy phenomenon emerges in which genuine collaborations take shape between these two spheres. These collaborations extend the contours of social capital beyond the boundaries of each legal culture within the carceral environment, particularly when shared objectives – such as preventing manipulation by detainees – are pursued. The synergy between prison officers and educators reflects a nuanced awareness of the evolving roles of officers and their specialized skills in navigating the complexities of the incarcerated population. In certain prisons, these collaborations become institutionalized, seamlessly integrated into the processes governing the selection of participants in vocational training programs. Occasionally, the officers responsible for supervising educational or vocational training courses perceive themselves as active contributors to reintegration efforts. As a result, they not only monitor educational activities but also organize and coordinate them.

The correctional officer overseeing the gardening course has gradually taken on the role of organizer over time. Indeed, he not only outlines the attendance and absences during the day but also assists in engagement, motivation, and supervision. In this way, we are able to monitor over the long term if anyone is absent from the course and for what reason. We communicate with police officers, and in such cases, our educational officers intervene to understand. (Focus group with prison staff – Penitentiary institution No. 4, Northern Italy)

The interaction dynamics between the security sector and vocational trainers in correctional facilities often engender defensive reactions aimed at preserving the entrenched institutional culture. Nevertheless, this relationship can also help mitigate potential conflicts within the detention wing, fostering collaboration between prison officers and vocational instructors.

Agencies introduce various projects within a comprehensive framework and strive to develop resources and models that enhance educational offering for effective reintegration. However, several limitations exist in the prison setting. As Vianello (2018b, 74) observes, the “fragility of the environment, the scarcity of resources, and the feeling of precariousness and insecurity affect not only the detained community but all actors involved in the penitentiary, shaping forms of adaptation and common response models”. When training agencies integrate in a cooperative – rather than competitive – manner, their inclusion in the penitentiary context can yield benefits (Buffa 2013), especially if it reduces workloads and supports the daily management of prison life.

The Penitentiary Administration always plays a role in the selection of inmates. More often, prison officers try to insert someone who doesn't care about the course, but maybe causes some trouble in their section, so they tell you to include them, and they facilitate your job. (Interview with a training operator – Penitentiary Institute No. 1 Northern Italy).

Within this framework, surveillance tends to be pervasive, typically taking the form of routine tasks involving supervision and movement control. When vocational activities serve the broader goal of occupational relief, external agencies offering such services receive institutional support. Conversely, if these activities diverge from that relief function, conflicts may arise. In such cases, prison officers may hinder organizational efforts by withholding inmates from scheduled classes or intensifying access restrictions by implementing more stringent checks on both instructors and the materials they bring into the correctional facility.

- Officer 1: As far as I'm concerned, the more courses there are, the quieter people are. Instead of arguing with 50 inmates, you argue with 15, there is a more peaceful harmony in the detention wing.

-Officer 2: In this way you just move the problem from yourself to me. We have to supervise, that's our role! If I'm not on the detention wing, I'm still supervising outside anyway: these courses are an added workload because in addition to doing what you do on a daily basis, you also have to take care of these activities. You just can't relax! (Focus group prison officers – prison no. 4 – northern Italy)

When training agencies adopt a cooperative rather than competitive approach, their integration into the prison environment can offer practical benefits, particularly if the established relationship aids in alleviating tasks and supports the management of daily prison routines, given the scarcity of educators.



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In order to make a good selection you need a sufficient number of people to be able to make this observation. Over the years we have tried to make up for staff shortages by also looking for other figures who could help out: training agencies, for example. For us they are an essential resource. (Educator Interview – prison no. 7– southern Italy)

The interactions between inmates and prison staff – including educators, correctional officers, and prison administrators – as well as with external vocational trainers, are often shaped by mutually utilitarian relational strategies. In settings where cooperative dynamics prevail, the professional and legal cultures of these actors converge, tempering more extreme positions.

## 6. Conclusion

In conducting qualitative investigations like the one presented here, it is not unusual for the data to suggest hypotheses of conflict and multi-causal explanatory models. Searching for an educational or formative function in a prison context—where functionality and education are clearly lacking—appears difficult. However, adopting a realistic, non-normative perspective on treatment activities allows us to acknowledge that educational and professional training can replace inertia and immobility with an active life, countering some of the negative effects of the prison’s artificial environment (Margara 2004). From the research, it emerges that training activities can serve as acts of resistance against the incarceration process, providing participants with opportunities to reimagine and redefine both their identity and how they manage time, even within the framework of the “least bad policy” (Sallée and Chantraine 2020)—that is, making the best of a bad situation. This approach offers a chance to humanize spaces that might otherwise remain under custodial rather than rehabilitative imperatives. Therefore, in this context, we must determine whether there are practices capable of achieving at least a “harm reduction” of the adverse effects produced by incarceration. While some authors (Chappell 2004, Duwe and Clark 2014, Nally *et al.* 2014) suggest that participation in prison education programs appears to positively influence employability, others (Newton *et al.* 2018) question whether education and vocational training can reduce recidivism or serve as a decisive factor in securing ongoing employment. Although the collected studies and meta-analyses do not offer a definitive answer in this regard, the training moments where an educational relationship is established openly and distinctly from the penitentiary reality are invaluable in restoring reciprocity to relationships. This highlights the importance of conducting educational and work activities outside the prison institution or, at least, contributing to “contaminate” the prison with the “germ” of a free society, helping to counteract the absorbing mechanisms of the carceral context and encouraging a reconfiguration of its culture and subculture (Clemmer 1940). Establishing this type of relationship involves redefining reciprocity in terms of dialogue and constructive engagement, enabling individuals to distinguish gratitude from obedience and appreciation from servility. However, the constraints and conditionings embedded in the daily rules of prison life are not easily dismantled and can resurface even in these supposedly separate spaces, diminishing their transformative potential (Acocella and Pastore 2020). Returning to the initial research questions about how vocational training functions within a setting that is often restrictive, the findings reveal that while these programs may help humanize the prison sentence and safeguard dignity, they also risk perpetuating inequalities if

selection processes favor already skilled or employed individuals. The lack of comprehensive vocational programs, situated within a complex network of actors, each with their own culture or subculture and often conflicting objectives or methods, contributes to selection mechanisms that can exacerbate existing disparities, culminating in a broader process of marginalization and exclusion. In this sense, a common thread uniting all parties is their voluntary or involuntary participation in excluding “unreliable” groups from the labor market; the intersection of labeling theory, surplus disciplining, and the specific effects of incarceration shows how many vocational training programs — often geared toward low-skilled roles — entrench social inequalities by reinforcing occupational segregation and limiting opportunities for individuals after release. Nonetheless, looking ahead, policy interventions that broaden the inclusion criteria of these programs, integrate genuine support for post-release transitions, and diversify the range of skills offered could help vocational training better fulfill its rehabilitative promise and provide meaningful pathways for social reintegration. Comparative studies across different prison systems could shed further light on how various policy frameworks influence the success of these programs, while longitudinal research following inmates beyond incarceration would clarify whether prison-based training significantly reduces recidivism or improves long-term employment prospects. Such initiatives, if implemented in tandem with a concerted effort to dismantle selection biases, might ensure that vocational training truly represents a pragmatic avenue toward rehabilitation, rather than a mechanism that inadvertently perpetuates social disadvantage.

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