ABSTRACT. The aim of the study was to examine the impact of geographical and cultural affiliation and learning problems on prison inmates’ intentions to embark on education above their obtained level of education. Younger inmates, inmates who had reading or writing problems and inmates with less geographical and cultural affiliation to Norway were significantly more likely to report that they wished to start upper secondary school than older inmates, inmates who had no reading or writing problems and inmates with a strong affiliation to Norway. Likewise, younger inmates, inmates who had a non-Norwegian affiliation and inmates who had no problems with arithmetic or mathematics were significantly more likely than others to say that they wished to embark on university studies or other higher education.

KEY WORDS: cultural differences, education, gender, mathematics problems, prison inmates, reading problems

INTRODUCTION

Education is now recognized as a basic human need and as a human right, also for prison inmates (e.g., United Nations and UNESCO 1995). Accordingly, in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of interest internationally in prison education and education after inmates have been released into society. This interest is also in line with the concept of lifelong learning, which sees each educational activity as part of a lifelong process. From this point of view, there is no reason why the learning process should be interrupted by previous learning problems, negative educational experiences, or imprisonment. The aim of the present study is thus to examine prison inmates’ intentions to embark on education above their obtained level of education and some factors that impact such wishes.

Most literature suggests that crime and recidivism are inversely related to the educational attainment of the individual (e.g., Batchelder and Pippert 2002). Findings of the national Adult Literacy Survey (Kerka 1995) show that only 51% of inmates had completed high school, compared to 76% of the general population. Similarly, Eikeland and Manger (2004) found that 51% of the inmates in Norwegian prisons had completed 1, 2, or 3 years of upper secondary school (school for those between 16 and 19 years of age). However, only 35% of inmates under 25 years of age had completed any level of upper secondary education. In comparison, 74% of the equivalent general population age group in Norway had completed 3 years of secondary education.
Despite these typical characteristics of prison inmates, this group shows great diversity in learning ability and educational history. Eleven percent of the inmates in Norwegian prisons had completed single courses or degrees at university or other higher education (Eikeland and Manger 2004). This variety in educational background is in line with the development taxonomy of antisocial behavior, which suggests two primary prototypes: life-course-persistent (LCP) offenders versus adolescence-limited (AL) offenders (e.g., Moffitt et al. 2002; Patterson et al. 1998). The LCP offenders are the traditional educational nonparticipants, and among the AL offenders are the well-qualified offenders (Costelloe 2003; Forster 1990). Thus, with respect to future education, both in prison and after release, prison inmates have different needs. However, the initial decision to become involved in education in prison, either at lower or higher levels, may for various groups be related to the lack of choice of other activities or the inevitable deprivation in prison. According to Forster (1990, p. 18), the previously educationally deprived inmate finds himself in a paradoxical situation: “the ‘new experience’ of education, which the constraints of prison push him into, makes him aware of some of the shortcomings of this provision compared with opportunities outside – yet without the constraints, he would never had tasted the experience.” For the previously educated inmates, education in prison is often seen as the only part of his former life he can continue.

Independent of their age, a significant number of prison inmates have a history of substance abuse and mental health problems (Friestad and Skog-Hansen 2004) that have interfered with reading and writing skills and thus with further education. The British Social Exclusion Unit Report (2002, cited in an All-Party Parliamentary Group report on prison education, 2004) concluded that half of all prisoners are at or below Level 1 (the level expected of an 11-year-old) in reading. Svensson et al. (2003) concluded that most of the inmates with literacy difficulties in Swedish prisons had a background from infancy and onwards characterized by severe social and emotional problems, interfering with the development of literacy and literate culture.

Although reading and writing skills are the most needed educational skills in a modern society, arithmetic and mathematics skills are also important. Fridhov (1991) found that 50% of inmates in a sample of Norwegian prisoners reported that they needed help with such problems. However, at the time of writing of the present paper, a search in the databases Eric and PsychINFO revealed no studies of prison inmates’ arithmetic or mathematics problems. For inmates who have reading and writing problems or arithmetic and mathematics problems, education in prison and after release may be perceived to have an “enabling” function and be designed to repair clearly defined inadequacy (Forster 1990).