Twists and turns – The careers of Finnish disabled and Deaf artists

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Abstract
This article analyses the equality of the Finnish field of arts and the career paths of disabled and Deaf artists. It presents three artist path types: typical artist path, “special” artist path, and becoming impaired pushes one to artistry. It also discusses the factors that affect the careers of disabled and Deaf artists in Finland. The main focus is on professional art education, work, and livelihood. The experiences of the artists are analysed in a theoretical framework based on the social model of disability and other social perspectives to disability, particularly the concepts of disablism and ableism. The results show that many unequal practices prevail in art education and the overall arts field. The data consist of writings and interviews of disabled and Deaf artists as well as the artist archive of the Finnish DuvTeatern. The data were collected in 2017–2018 and analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Keywords
Ableism, artist, career, Deafness, disability, disablism, equality

Introduction
This article aims to explore how equal the Finnish field of arts is from the perspective of disability and Deafness.1 It hopes to fill a gap in Finnish research. The numerous quantitative Finnish surveys on the status of artists have mainly ignored the perspective of disability and Deafness. Some dissertations touch on the topic but from a narrower perspective, like that of, for example, music education (e.g. Laes 2017). We have some master’s theses on visual arts and learning disability2 in the field of art education (e.g. Piipponen-Karkulowski 2010; Tuiskuvaara 2014). Internationally, there are some studies of the status of disabled and Deaf artists (e.g. Basas 2009; Gill & Sandahl 2009; Bang & Kim 2015; Norðdahl 2014). However,

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1. The article is based on my Master’s thesis (Salonlahti 2019, University of Jyväskylä).
2. A person with a learning disability is someone who has, from childhood, had difficulty in learning and processing information so that it reduces their ability to carry out everyday tasks (Learning Disability 2020). I have chosen to use the word “learning disability”, which is used in the United Kingdom. For example, “intellectual disability” and “developmental disability” are more commonly used concepts in some English-speaking countries (Learning Disability 2020; University of Hertfordshire 2020).
we lack empirical research on the opportunities of disabled\textsuperscript{3} and Deaf people as artists in Finland.

My analysis of the situation of disabled and Deaf artists is based on cultural policy research, approaching the topic through the following research questions: What kind of career paths do disabled and Deaf artists have? Which factors affect their opportunities to become artists and work as artists? Seeking answers to these questions, I look at the writings and interviews of these artists. I examine the life paths of the artists and present three artist path types: \textit{typical artist path}, \textit{“special” artist path}, and \textit{becoming impaired pushes one to artistry}. I also analyse the artists’ own experiences of art education and working life.

This article focuses on professional artists. The professionalism of artists can be defined, for example, based on their education, memberships in artists’ associations, incomes gained by doing art, or the recognition they get for instance through prizes and grants (Karttunen 1988: 12–14). However, disabled and Deaf artists may not always be able to meet these definitions because of for example discrimination. Therefore, I based my definition of an artist mainly on the participants’ self-identification.

The context of this study is the Finnish field of arts. By “field of arts” I mean the professionals, institutions, and structures that are connected to art: art education organisations, art funders, art administration, cultural policymakers, cultural services, and art institutions such as museums, theatres, and orchestras.

I will first explain the theoretical framework of my research and the data and methods applied. Next, I will present three artist paths types. After that, I will analyse the artists’ experiences of art education. I will also explore the equality of the arts field from the perspectives of work and livelihood.

\section*{Disability and Deafness as social phenomena}

The theoretical framework used in this article is mainly based on the social model of disability, but my approach is also influenced by other social perspectives on disability. The basic idea of the social model is to separate impairment, which is a physical or mental condition, and disability, which is a social phenomenon (Barnes 1998: 72–76; Barnes 2020: 16; Hughes 2002: 59; Kuppers 2014: 27; Vehmas 2005: 120–123). The model focuses on how society includes or excludes and oppresses people, instead of individuals and their physical or mental characteristics (Barnes 2020: 20; Shakespeare 2006: 29; Thomas 2002: 38–40).

The social model of disability is based on Karl Marx’s materialistic understanding of history and it examines disability especially from the economic and social perspective (Barnes 1998: 72; Vehmas 2005: 119–120).

One main critique of the social model is that it does not acknowledge people’s differences and life experiences related to, for example, impairment, gender, and ethnicity/”race” (Barnes 2020: 24; Oliver 1996: 37; Thomas 1999: 25; Vehmas 2005: 141). Many scholars feel that the model does not provide tools for analysing personal identity or issues related to the body (Lee 2002: 150; Morris 1991: 10) and that it does not see impairment as part of life, but

\textsuperscript{3} Both "disabled people" and "people with disabilities" are commonly used concepts. "Disabled people" is often seen as a better concept in, for example, critical disability studies and among activists (Shildrick 2020: 42). According to the social model of disability, "disabled people" indicates that the society disables people, not their body or mind, whereas many think that "people with disabilities" refers to a person’s defects (Shakespeare 2006: 32). Some people think however that "people with disabilities" does not refer so strongly to the body or mind (Davis 1995: xiii; Wendell 1996: 176) and tries to indicate that disability is only one of a person’s characteristics (Kuppers 2014: 13). In this article, I have chosen to use the word pair "disabled people/artists".
only as a social construct (Kuppers 2014: 32; Morris 1991: 10; Thomas 1999: 25). Many think that the model exaggerates similarities between all disabled people, and for example, Deaf people and people who have learning or mental disabilities have questioned the inclusivity of the model (Chappell 1998; Corker 1998: 38; Ladd 2003: 166; Stalker 2012: 122–123; Thomas 1999: 25, 101; Vehmas 2005: 145). Feminist researchers have also pointed out that disability studies, in general, have dismissed gender issues, and demanded a more intersectional point of view (Asch & Fine 1988; Bê 2012: 366; Meekosha 1998; Morris 1991: 9; Thomas 1999: 26–30; Vehmas 2005: 145).

Critical disability studies pay attention to, for example, intersectionality, the excluding circumstances in society, embodiment, and identity politics (Goodley 2017: 81–82). The approach does not aim only to “add” intersectional perspectives to thinking, but to rethink society in a new way (Shildrick 2020: 32). It understands disability as, among other things, a sociological formation, a civil and human rights issue, and a minority identity (Garland-Thomson 2019: 12).

The cultural model on disability recognises disability as a politically informed identity and the body as a social construction (Snyder & Mitchell 2006: 7–10). Impairment is seen as human variation, but also as socially mediated difference (ibid.). The model considers impairment, disability, and especially normality as effects created by for example art, media, and everyday discourses (Waldschmidt 2017: 24–26). It changes disability studies into “dis/ability studies”, calling for discussion on the interplay between “normality” and “disability” (ibid.). The cultural model tries to recognise how abnormality is developed and used to make some people inferior (Snyder & Mitchell 2006: 7–10, 12).

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the different models on disability comprehensively. In this article, a disabled person is a person who faces everyday barriers and challenges because the environment and society are not adjusted to their impairment. Deaf people do not usually identify themselves as disabled persons. They are part of the Deaf culture and consider themselves as a linguistic and cultural minority (Davis 1995: xii, xiv; Ladd 2003: xvii, 166). Capitalised D refers to people who are culturally Deaf. They are members of the Deaf community and use Sign Language (Ladd 2003: xvii). Hearing loss is not what makes them Deaf (Bauman & Murray 2014: xiii).

In this study, disability and Deafness are seen as social phenomena. The analysis focuses on how the structures, practices, institutions, and norms of Finnish society affect the opportunities of disabled and Deaf artists. Thus, the division between impairment as an individual characteristic and disability as a social phenomenon is important. I counterpoint the social model with the ideas of critical disability studies. My approach emphasises the social dimension, but I do not exclude issues of the body either. I examine gender briefly. The personal experience of the artist is emphasised in this article, as it is the starting point of the analysis.

Disablism and ableism are the main theoretical concepts in my analysis of the experiences of the artists. Disablism refers to discrimination and exclusive practices with regard to disabled people, for example on cultural and organisational levels (Campbell 2008: 152–153; 2009: 4). The concept of ableism describes the social undervaluing of disability (Kuppers 2014: 24). Ableism is a system of beliefs, which is based on normative ideas of the body, mind, and ability (Bê 2012: 373). It includes an idea that disability is something negative, disability should be avoided, or disability is something we need to get rid of (Campbell 2009: 5; Hehir 2002: 1–3; Vaahtera 2012: 42). Fiona Kumari Campbell (2008: 152; 2009: 5) notes that the concepts of ableism and disablism are often used as synonyms, which they are not. According to Campbell (2008: 152–153), disablism refers to productions of disability...
and the forms of discrimination that follow from them. Ableism, however, is connected to the ideals of a perfect body and ability, and who is seen as a “full” human (ibid.: 152–153; Campbell 2009: 5).

**Data and methods**

The research data in this article consist of two parts: *The life stories of disabled and Deaf artists* along with the artist archive of DuvTeatern. The first part was collected by the author in 2018. It includes ten writings by artists (W1–W10) and two artist interviews (I1–I2), as well as background information on these artists. The 12 participants were recruited via an open call for writings, which was sent to artists’ associations, art information centres, disability and Deaf organisations, and disability culture organisations and festivals. The call was available in Finnish, Swedish, and English, and it was possible to participate using any of these languages. To increase the accessibility of the call, videos in three languages and with captions were linked to the call. On the videos, I read aloud the call and included some pictures to help people understand what the call was about. The artists were instructed to write their “life story”. They were asked to tell about their experiences of childhood art hobbies, art education, and working as an artist, with the help of auxiliary questions appointed by the researcher. It is not easy or possible for everyone to write, so the artists were also given the option to participate in an interview instead of in writing. In these semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked the same questions as with the people who participated by writing.

The participants were informed about the research objectives, how and for which purposes the data would be used, and how the data would be protected and anonymised. They were also told that it was voluntary to participate and they could cancel their participation at any time before the research report would be published. The participants were asked for consent to use the data when they sent in the e-form or were interviewed.

Besides, I asked for permission to use the DuvTeatern’s artist archive. DuvTeatern is a Swedish-speaking theatre based in Helsinki. The theatre’s ensemble consists of both disabled and non-disabled artists (DuvTeatern 2019). The archive was collected in 2017–2018 by one of the theatre’s employees, Sara Sandén. The purpose was to document the history of the theatre’s actors and allow for future research, and the participants have given their consent to the usage of the data for research purposes (DuvTeatern’s artist archive 2018). The archive data I received include interviews (D1I–D7I), artist CVs (D1CV–D8CV), and background information (D1B–D8B) on eight disabled actors of the theatre. They also include two parent interviews (D7P–D8P). The artists are presented in the archive by their names. I discussed anonymity with DuvTeatern and we decided together that I will mention the name of the theatre in my research, but anonymise the individual participants.

In total, 20 artists participated in the research. A complete list of research data is presented in Appendix 1. The group of participants was quite diverse. Some were born impaired and some had become impaired later in their life. The mentioned impairments included physical impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, learning disabil-

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4. One participant sent only their background information. This was left out of the data.
5. Examples of the questions: Do you have an educational background in art? What was your experience like when applying for studies and during the actual studies? What kind of challenges have you faced? What kind of opportunities have you experienced? How do you make your living?
6. Also, ten artists gave their permission to archive their data in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (see Salonlahti 2020).
ities, learning difficulties, mental disabilities, problems with memory, chronic pain, diabetes, and epilepsy. Some of the participants had more than one impairment. The participants’ native languages were Finnish, Swedish, and Finnish Sign Language. The participants worked in various fields of art: music, visual arts, art education, film, literature, and performing arts. The data are in Finnish and in Swedish. The data quotes have been translated into English, but the original text is presented in the footnote.

The data were analysed with qualitative content analysis. I made summaries of the life phases of the artists, such as childhood and working age. I used these summaries to construct the artist path types. I also searched for themes related to the factors that affected the subjects’ artistic careers. I sought out problems, challenges, and opportunities faced in education and working life as well as in the overall arts field. My content analysis was mainly empirical, but I did not construct the theoretical concepts from the data. After finding the main themes and types, I used the concepts of disablism and ableism in the analysis.

The two data sets, *the life stories of disabled and Deaf artists* and *the artist archive of DuvTeatern* have been collected from different starting points and with different methods, and therefore their content varies. For example, I asked the participants to tell about their childhood relationship to art. This guided the participants to tell about their art hobbies and what role art played in their families. In the DuvTeatern’s data, this is not reflected quite as clearly. On the other hand, the background documents of the DuvTeatern artists list very detailed information about which schools the artists have studied at and what kind of jobs they have had. The data I collected do not include equally detailed information, although the participants do tell about their education and work. The differences in the data presented a challenge, but the two data sets also complete each other. If I had used only one of the data sets, my possibilities to explore my research objectives would have been much narrower.

As a qualitative analysis, this article does not aim to make representative generalisations regarding the situation of disabled and Deaf artists. Besides, the data mainly concern the past, so it is not fully possible to use the data to analyse the current situation. One remarkable aspect is that there was only one participant whose native language is Finnish Sign Language. This is possibly due to the fact that I did not provide the call in any of the Sign Languages. The data do however offer a lot of information about issues related to my research questions. It was possible for me to examine, how the participants’ artistic career has developed and what kind of factors have helped them, slowed them down, or hindered them. Although the two data sets give different kinds of information regarding the life paths of the artists, it is still possible to distinguish the main lines in the data and analyse the artist paths.

**Three artist paths**

In this chapter, I will analyse what kind of artist paths the participants have had. By “artist path” I mean the route to becoming an artist: the family background, childhood hobbies, education, and career of the artists. I constructed three artist path types from the data. These are ideal types, which means that the path of an individual participant might not fall into any of these types unambiguously.

**Typical artist path**

I call the first type *typical artist path* (Figure 1), where the way towards artistry has been somewhat straightforward. I categorised the paths of five of the participating artists into...
this type. This path type resembles the “normal story” of a Finnish artist, which Mikko Piispa and Mikko Salasuo (2014: 116–117, 119–120; Salasuo, Piispa & Huhta 2016: 233) found in their data: the family has provided the artist with cultural capital (in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms), which is developed in art education and leads to an artistic career. Although their paths have led them towards artistry, this does not mean that the study and career paths of these artists would have been easy. Some of the artists had faced discrimination and barriers in, for example, education.

Figure 1. Typical artist path.

The artists with a typical artist path came from homes that had a positive attitude towards art. Salasuo, Piispa and Helena Huhta (2016: 57–62) call them “culturally inclined homes”. They all had had art hobbies in their childhood and youth. Some of the artists had studied at secondary vocational art school or at an upper secondary school specialised in art. Almost all of them had also tertiary education in art or some other creative field. 8

All the artists with a typical artist path have worked as artists. However, at the time of the research, most of them got their main income from other work.

“Special” artist path
The “special” artist path (Figure 2) clearly stood out in the data, as twelve artists represented this path. The main characteristics of the “special” artist path type are 1) special education in other fields than art, 2) working in day centres or supported employment in other fields than art, 3) becoming an artist involves the influence of other people and “the element of chance”, and 4) artistic work in an organisation that supports making art.

All the artists with a “special” artist path are in need of support. Many of them have a learning disability. Some come from art and cultural homes, some from culturally inclined homes. “Art and cultural homes” means that the parents were art professionals or passionate art amateurs (Salasuo et al. 2016: 57–59). Many of the participants had also had artistic hob-

7. One artist had a life path that contained characteristics of both the typical and the “special” artist path. It has been counted in both of these path types. Also, one of the writings was so brief that it did not include enough information to be typed. This artist path is not included in any of the path types.

8. The Finnish education system has three levels: the first level is the nine-year compulsory basic comprehensive school, secondary education includes general academic and vocational education (post-compulsory until 2021), and the tertiary level includes higher education (universities and universities of applied sciences).
bies. Some of the data did not, however, give enough information about the participants’ home and childhood backgrounds.

Most of the participants with a “special” artist path have studied only in special education at for example vocational school, preparatory courses for upper secondary vocational education, or adult education centres. In most cases, they have not studied art. Disabled young people may not get to study the field that they are interested in (Ahonen & Lampinen 2017: 52). There might be only a few schools or programmes suitable, or which are seen as suitable for the person’s needs. People with learning disabilities have very different study opportunities depending on where they live (Haveri 2018; Jokelainen 2019: 6, 12). There are even fewer alternatives for those who are Swedish-speaking (Tallberg 2017: 68), not to mention the other minority languages. Michael Oliver (1996, 77) remarks that the exclusion of disabled people starts very often in the education system. If a person has a learning disability diagnosis and they are put into special education, it significantly narrows down the later educational possibilities (Hakala 2013: 218). Segregating children into special schooling leads them to certain social positions, roles, and careers (Loijas 1994: 136; Vehmas 2005: 14). It could be argued that this is a disablist practise of society to push certain people in the margins.

The “special” artist path continues to work activities of some kind – and then maybe back to school, then to work, in a loop. Most of the participants worked in work activity centres for people with learning disabilities. The work was usually something like cleaning or kitchen work. A couple of the participants worked with handicraft and two with visual art, but otherwise, the work had nothing to do with art. Even the people who have studied art might face a wall right after graduation. All artists with learning disabilities do not have a place where they could get support for working (Jokelainen 2019: 13).

The data show that the “special” artist path leads people to a totally different direction than towards arts. How did these people become artists? In some cases, it happened by chance. I29 even described themself that “there was an element of chance”10. “Chance”

9. “I” refers to an interview in the set the life stories of disabled and Deaf artists.
10. Original text: seki oli ihan sattuman kauppaa.
might be a misleading word, though: the participants did not end up as artists randomly, without any previous interest in art. My interpretation is that the participants have found the channel to live out their artistry by chance. The artist has for example come across an inclusive art organisation:

[D8] and I were at a FDUV meeting. -- There was Mixu (the artistic director), who held a workshop, a drama workshop. [D8] - wanted to start working with the theatre.15 (D8P)

Some of the data imply that family or acquaintances might have had some impact on how the persons ended up working with art:

Mother -- asked me will you come to listen to a spring concert -- I went and got excited about it to that extent that -- at half-time, I told mother to-- sign me up there [work place] as a music student and, well, she signed me up then -- that’s how it started.17 (I2)

Once the connection to an art organisation has been found, the participants have started to educate themselves as artists and worked with determination to develop their artistry. They work professionally but need and get support from the organisation.

“Special” is a problematic word. According to Simo Vehmas (2005: 94), “special needs” is a euphemism without actual content. The path of the artists in this type has nevertheless been almost completely determined by “speciality”, which has been dictated by other people and society. Only “special” schools and “special” work has been seen possible for them. Thus, the word “special” marks this path strongly. When using this word I do not mean that the artists are special, but that their life path has been directed from outside to so-called special terrains.

Becoming impaired pushes one to artistry
Likewise, the third type involves an important turning point in life. In this path type, the participants had got a direct or indirect push to become artists when they became impaired (Figure 3). Three artists had this kind of an artist path.

All the persons with the third path came from culturally inclined homes or art and cultural homes. They were active art hobbyists in their childhood. Some of them had dreamed about the profession of artist and developed their artistic skills very determinedly in school age. However, for some reason or another, these persons have studied something other than art and worked in another field.

Becoming impaired had however changed the life course of these artists in working age. When they were no longer capable of working in their field, they had to conceive their life from a completely new perspective. This made them, for example, stake up their past hobby again:

11. Pseudonymised or anonymised information (names of persons, places or organisations, or years and ages changed or categorised) are marked with square brackets.
12. Inclusion Finland FDUV is a non-profit organisation for Swedish-speaking persons with intellectual [sic] disability in Finland. www.fduv.fi/en
13. -- = the citation has been abridged.
14. The researcher’s notes are marked with double round brackets.
16. "D" refers to DuvTeatern’s artist archive, and "P" to a parent’s interview.
I was on a one-year sick leave when I was [47] years old, waiting for a pension decision. -- I bought a basic 35-mm. camera and thought I’d concentrate on giving photography a try. It had been on my mind all the time and now I had the time.18 (W419)

All the artists with this path type had determinedly started to develop their artistry after becoming impaired. Some had studied art independently, by reading, going to courses, and learning by doing. Others had applied to secondary and tertiary art schools. The artists of this path type were all working as freelancers, one of them was also an entrepreneur. However, the main income source was pension or other social security.

In a study by Gui Hee Bang & Kyung Mee Kim (2015: 548), artistry was for some the only possible profession after becoming impaired. In my data, starting an artistic career after becoming impaired is described as returning to art: "My old hobby, photography, started to rear its head at that time"20 (W4); "I drifted however back into music --. I started to write and compose songs again"21 (W7). One person stated that becoming impaired had been a fortunate event: "Becoming impaired brought me a new, better life."22 (W4)

Navigating professional art education

Through art education, it is possible to gain a degree and competence, but also important networks and contacts, know-how about the practices of the arts field, and social capital (Gill & Sandahl 2009: 15; Salasuo et al. 2016: 70–73). Especially secondary and tertiary art

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19. "W" refers to a written life story in the data set The life stories of disabled and Deaf artists.
20. Original text: vanha harrastukseni, valokuvaus, alkoi tuolloin nostaa päätään.
21. Original text: Ajauduin kuitenkin takaisin musiikin parin --. Aloin taas kirjoittamaan ja säveltämään omia biseja --
22. Original text: Oma vammautumiseni toi minulle uuden, paremman elämän.
education are important themes in the study of the careers of artists. Applying to art school requires awareness about the different options and the actual possibility to choose. For instance, persons who have studied in special education will probably be given narrow options to choose from (Niemi & Kurki 2013: 207). Moreover, role models influence what people think is possible for them:

-- I thought, that the Deaf cannot be visual artists and that Deaf visual artists do not exist, because I had never heard of them. I heard for the first time about three Deaf artists only as a final-year student (in upper secondary education) --. My jaw dropped, why were we not told about them. I knew then what I wanted to do when I grow up and decided to apply to [tertiary school of visual arts].23 (W10)

Applying to secondary or tertiary art education usually includes an entrance exam. These exams were mentioned a couple of times in the data. One person did not report any problems concerning the exam, so it can be assumed it was organised in an accessible way. Yet, the application processes of art schools have not always been equal:

I applied [to tertiary school of performing arts] in [2001] to study acting. I was totally amazed by the entrance exam when I was not allowed to explore the space in advance, the reason was that no one else could either and the space was completely safe, except that there were walls and chairs all around. I had to be careful all the time not to bump into anything and because it is not easy to picture a space in such a sudden situation, it was really hard for me to perceive the directions and distances.24 (W8)

A disabled applicant might even be rejected before they get to show their skills:

In autumn [2001], I was accepted to study [in school of performing arts], and afterwards the director of the school said that if I’d mentioned that I was blind when I enrolled in the entrance exams, they would not have accepted me to the exam. But as I did not tell them, and just marched right in without apologising and did what was required, I got in.25 (W8)

It is not easy for anyone to get into art school and many of the applicants have to try several times (Houni 2000: 176–177). The applicants must be very good to get in. The examples above are, however, not about screening applicants based on skills, potential, or talent. Seeing disabled people as non-relevant applicants is an ableist attitude. Rejecting applicants based only on their disability and not providing the needed accommodations in the entrance exams are disablist practices.

Being accepted to art school is only the first step. In 2014, the Helsinki Design School refused to accept a Deaf student, when they heard that the student would come with interpreters (Helpinen & Heikkilä 2016). A disabled or Deaf student can be left out of teaching because the teachers may assume that the student cannot participate in some of the exer-


cises at all (Belghiti 2018: 11, 25, 35; Gill & Sandahl 2009: 1, 12–14). The buildings and teaching might be inaccessible. Lack of accessibility is one form of disablism that prevents equal opportunities to study art. There are some examples in the data about problems with accessibility in art schools:

I survived my studies by sitting in the library every evening and cramming art history and other possible subjects: my fellow students got the information by sitting at the lectures, but I couldn’t hear anything and I would have never seen well enough to write anything down in the dark lecture hall.26 (W6)

The next quote shows that students might also face disablism resulting from the attitudes of the teachers:

-- it was often pitch-dark at the lectures when we watched slides (art history and film course classes were the worst). I couldn’t see the interpreter in the dark. I asked the teachers to put a small light on, but they wouldn’t -- because it would supposedly weaken the quality of the slide and film… The solution was a small desk lamp directed at the interpreter. I got tired at every class, as I had to follow the interpretation in low light.27 (W10)

Flexibility of studies is one aspect of accessibility. For example, if an impairment or illness causes absences, there should be alternative ways to complete the studies:

The studies were however very hard, and I felt that the school did not fully understand my illness and the fact that I had to be absent a lot because of pain.28 (W7)

On the other hand, some of the participants brought up only positive things about their education or did not mention any difficulties. A few of them had become impaired after their studies. However, some of them had their impairment already at the time of their studies, so it can be assumed that not all disabled art students face problems during their education path.

When the study environment had been accessible and inclusive, it was brought up with joy. For example, studying in a DeafSpace felt like “heaven” for a Deaf student. DeafSpace is a visually accessible place where people communicate in Sign Languages (Bauman 2014: 375–377, 384–384; Solvang & Haualand 2014: 5). Also accommodated learning environments had made it possible to study art:

I -- started artisan school, it was accommodated so it was okay to be different there, we all were, and we were allowed to be creative at our own pace --29 (W2)

During the 2010s, some surveys were performed on the accessibility of tertiary education in Finland (e.g. Heini & Klemetti 2018; Penttilä 2012; Villa & Kivisalmi 2016), but the data on


28. Original text: Opinnot olivat kuitenkin hyvin raskaat ja koin ettei opinajiosoja täysin ymmärretty sairauttani ja sitä että jouduin olemaan kipujen vuoksi paljon pois.

29. Original text: Jag -- började i en skola där man blev artesan, den var anpassad så de var okej att vara annorlunda där, de var vi alla, vi fick vara kreativa i vår egen takt --
the art schools have not been analysed separately. There is only one preliminary study focusing on the accessibility of tertiary art education. According to the study (Purhonen 2012: 9), most of the interviewed disabled artists did not feel they had been directly discriminated against in art schools. However, both the artists and the schools themselves reported that the schools were not accessible enough (ibid.). Some artists felt that disability was seen as a problem in art schools, especially regarding aesthetics (ibid.: 12). The participants stated that theatre was the most difficult field for disabled people to study, and acting was seen as almost impossible (ibid.: 12–18). Moreover, Silva Belghiti (2018) reports that she has struggled to attain appropriate studying arrangements in the Theatre Academy in Helsinki.

In conclusion, according to my data and other sources, art education institutions have had and might still have disablist practices, which can exclude disabled and Deaf artists from art education and make studying difficult for them. On the other hand, accessible and inclusive learning environments have played a supportive role.

**Working as an artist**

Earlier studies (Bang & Kim 2015; DADAA Inc & Arts Access Australia 2012: 6–7; Solvang 2012: 183) show that there is discrimination against disabled and Deaf artists in working life. Also, some of the participants in my study referred to discrimination in employment. Sometimes the discrimination has been quite blatant. It could also be invisible and more subtle, like an ableist attitude, which gives more appreciation and bigger salaries to non-disabled employees.

Different art fields might respond to disability and Deafness differently. According to Alex Lubet (2011: 32–43, 99), the classical music field is a very strict cultural system, which does not tolerate any variation in playing. Even a small hand impairment might become a huge barrier. On the other hand, punk rock culture might even take pride in not playing perfectly (ibid.: 58–59). Performing arts and film have a problematic relationship with visible impairments:

> The more I learned to know people in theatre and worked with them, the clearer it became that they prefer to hire a seeing, not a blind, person to play blind in a performance. I knew I was a brilliant actor and very creative director, but still, I did not get roles in professional ensembles.  

Not being hired to play either non-disabled roles or disabled roles means that there is no chance for a disabled actor to be employed in the so-called mainstream. The body is an important tool in performing arts. Because of the ableist culture, the disabled body is laden with meanings, and the disabled actor is not “neutral” enough (Davis 2017: 43–45).

According to Carrie Griffin Basas (2009: 614), attitudes are one of the biggest barriers to the employment of disabled artists. My data also imply that there is ableism in the form of negative attitudes in the arts field. Prejudices among the audiences, as well as among art professionals, were reported. Considering artist careers, the most notable attitudes are the ones that influence education and employment possibilities:

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30. Original text: Mitä enemmän opin tuntemaan teatterialan ihmisistä ja tein töitä heidän kanssaan, kävi selvemäksi se taisiolla, että mieluummin sokeaksi esitykseen otetaan näkevä kuin sokea. Tiesin olevani loistava näyttelijä ja erittäin luova ohjaaja, mutta silti en saanut ammattiryhmistä rooleja.
Attitudes are so difficult to change, I have to always be 200% better than a seeing peer to get the job.\(^{31}\) (W8)

Because of ableism, disabled artists may be ignored or not seen as “real” artists, or their art may be considered low-quality. Sometimes impairment is all that people see:

I am totally trivial and sometimes I feel that I am seen more as a Deafblind person than as an artist or under some other title, both in society and in working life.\(^{32}\) (W6)

The artists interviewed by Per Koren Solvang (2012: 183) remarked that one of the forms of discrimination against disabled artists is to connect disability to art therapy and seeing the artist as a patient. This came up indirectly also in my data:

Labelled as a disability artist (\((vammaistaiteilija)\))\(^33\), I have often been placed in the sphere of social care. As a creator of political disability art, I have felt freer to apply equally to, for example, exhibit my work in galleries.\(^34\) (W3)

The accessibility of art institutions is one factor that enables or disables artists. I initially assumed that accessibility would be an important theme in my data, as it was in, for example, the study by Carol J. Gill and Carrie Sandahl (2009: 1, 17–19). It was however mentioned only a few times. Accessibility problems were reported with music venues and galleries, as well as web accessibility issues. For example, the grant application e-forms might be inaccessible for artists with visual impairments. They may need to use an assistant to fill the forms, which complicates the application process.

In my data, some of the artists have been employed many times by disability or Deaf organisations or disability/Deaf culture organisations and festivals. Disability and Deaf organisations had also bought artworks or organised exhibitions. Basas (2009: 665–666) notes that disabled and Deaf artists often have the best chances to be employed in organisations that are connected to disability or Deafness. To some extent this is natural: the artists might have wide networks in the disability and/or Deaf community. And who would be invited to the disability and Deaf art festivals, if not disabled and Deaf artists?

The results of my study show that there is some segregation in the Finnish field of arts into disability and Deaf-related art networks and other art networks. Moreover, Katriina Rosavaara (2018) points out that there are “parallel art worlds” in Finland for artists with and without need of support. It can be stated that the disablism and ableism in the arts field have contributed to the birth of these parallel art worlds. A new field may start to form when it becomes too difficult to enter the mainstream (see for instance Barnes & Mercer

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31. Original text: Asenteet ovat niin vaikeasti muutettavissa, minun on aina oltava 200 % parempi kuin näkevä verrokki, jotta saan paikan.
32. Original text: Olen aivan triviaali ja minusta tuntuu, että minuun suhtaudutaan niin yhteiskunnassa kuin työelämässä enemmän kuulonäkövamminaisenä kuin taiteilijana tai jollain muulla tittelillä.
33. The Finnish language has only one word for “disabled” and “impaired”: \(vammaisen\). The direct Finnish translation of “disability art” is \(vammaistaide\). Referring to an artist, it becomes \(vammaistaiteilija\), which sounds like “disability artist”, but also like “disabled artist” or “impaired artist”. The concepts \(vammaispoliittinen taide / taiteilija\) (“political disability art / artist”) draw attention to the content of the art instead of the characteristics of the artist.
34. Original text: Nimikkeellä vammaistaiteilija minut on luokiteltu usein sosiaalihuollon piiriin kuuluvaksi. Vammaispoliittisen taiteen tekijänä olen kokenut itseäni vapaammaksi hakemaan yhdenvertaisesti esimerkiksi pitämään näyttelyjä gallerioihin.
In the disability context, “mainstream” means everything that is not disability culture (Williamson 2011).

The situation is not however like this entirely: there are some examples of disabled and Deaf artists succeeding in the mainstream. Still, segregation does exist to some extent and this causes restricted opportunities. It is not possible to make a living as a full-time artist in a disability and Deafness context in Finland. Segregation is a question of resources:

Luckily, I had quite a good network in the Deaf community, and I received illustration commissions. But unfortunately it was not enough, because the Deaf community is quite small. -- Another problem is that many Sign Language organisations are “poor”, so the wages they offered were small.35 (W10)

Likewise, art organisations often have insufficient funding, but national and municipal art institutions have bigger resources than small associations. A large part of the state funds is channelled to institutions (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2019). If some artists are excluded from these institutions, there are fewer opportunities for them to get sufficient incomes as artists.

The amount of practical and social support the artists received affected their satisfaction with their current work situation. The artists who got support did not experience so many problems. Artists who need “special” support usually work in inclusive art organisations. They have a space for working, colleagues and a supporting community. The organisations might for example apply for grants for the artists, report the funding, sell artworks, or organise gigs (Jokelainen 2019: 21–24). These are things that many artists must handle alone.

Some inclusive art organisations may also be called “outsider art organisations”. “Outsider art” refers to art created by self-taught visual artists who work outside the traditional and mainstream practices and institutions of the arts field (Solvang 2018: 241–242; Rhodes 2004: 7–8, 15.) In Finland, both contemporary folk art (ITE art) and art created by artists who need support because of for example a learning disability, are usually defined as outsider art. Outsider art is a debated concept and the very existence of the term has been questioned. The outsider art context might help the artists network and present their art (Haveri 2018; Knutes Nyqvist & Stjerna 2017: 975), but some artists labelled as outsider artists do not identify themselves as such (Rhodes 2004: 13–14; Sandahl 2013; Solvang 2012: 180, 183). It is especially questionable to label someone as an outsider artist just because of disability, as many disabled artists have received arts education (Elovirta 2007: 73; Halmetoja 2018). There are a number of outsider art studios, organisations, and networks in Finland. For the first time, we also have a regional artist36 in outsider art. He promotes the artistic work opportunities of outsider artists and other marginalised artists and reinforces the structures for the related activities (Arts Promotion Centre 2019).

Some of the participants of this study referred to a lack of support. In Finland, disabled and Deaf artists, in general, do not have the kind of communities that outsider artists do. There are some Deaf and disability art and culture organisations and networks, but their

35. Original text: Minulla oli onneksi melko hyvä verkosto kuurojen yhteisössä ja sain kuvitustilauksia. Mutta se ei valitetavasti riittänyt, koska kuurojen yhteisö on aika pieni. -- Toinen ongelma on, että moni viittomakielinen taho on ”köyhä”, joten ne tarjosivat pientä palkkaa.
36. Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taike) has about 40 regional artists all around Finland (Arts Promotion Centre 2020). They carry out national and regional arts promotion projects, which implement Taike’s development programmes (ibid.). Their task is to advance their field of art in their region (Oesch 2012: 163). The regional artists have temporary contracts, usually for 2-5 years (ibid.: 173). Despite the title, the regional artists are more like producers or project managers than artists, since they are not supposed to use their working hours to create art.
work does not include individual support for artists. On the other hand, artists in need of “special” support are dependent on support: without these organisations, they might not be able to work as artists at all (Isomäki 2006: 8).

In the data collected by the author, the informants were asked to tell about the significance of gender. However, gender was mainly ignored in the data. This implies that gender was not considered a relevant issue. Two participants said that gender has no relevance. W10 felt that gender at least has less significance than being Deaf. W6 had a stronger opinion:

The gender issue means little compared to the impact of being disabled or non-disabled.37 (W6)

It is possible that compared to disability or Deafness, gender does not have so much impact on individual lives. One interpretation that goes even further is that people do not even face gender equality problems in the arts field if they are excluded from it altogether.38

The data also show that there are many factors outside the arts field that have an impact on the artists’ opportunities to work and study. Disability services are one of them. Disabled people may need for example assistive devices, personal assistance, and transport services. Deaf people use Sign Language interpreters. It is impossible to work or study if these services are not sufficient.

**Making a living**

The precarious status of artists and balancing between salary, artist grants, social benefits and pensions was brought up in the data. For most artists, livelihood is uncertain (Salasuo et al. 2016: 73, 185). None of the participants made their living solely by doing art and many had several sources of income, such as social benefits or other work in addition to artistic work. When incomes from artistic work are mentioned in the data, the participants often underline that they are small. For some, money was a very important theme:

((starts immediately when the recorder goes on)) -- I don’t know if you are going to ask about it, but I think the salary. It is the biggest problem.39 (I2)

Some of the artists worked full-time or part-time in work activity centres. In Finnish work activity centres the disabled person is not an employee, but a customer of a disability service. This means they do not get a salary but a small incentive payment:

But it sounds totally crazy, I study four years to become an artisan and then I sit at a work activity centre and get a small, less than 100 €, incentive payment/month.40 (W2)

Many stated that their livelihood was based on a pension or some other form of social security. Pension was in some cases described as a positive safety net. For example, W4

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37. Original text: Joku sukupuoliasia ei vaikuta kyllä mitään siihen nähden paljonko vammalsuus tai vammattomuuus vaikuttaa.

38. Female artists still have lower incomes than male artists and the differences in the incomes of artists are even higher than in other professions (Roiha, Rautiainen & Rensujeff 2015: 5, 32–39; Rensujeff 2015: 128–129). Discussion and studies on sexual harassment, brought up by the #MeToo movement, also show that the art sector is not equal yet from the perspective of gender (see for example Helavuori & Karvinen 2019; Paanetoja 2018).


40. Original text: Men de låter ju helt tokigt, jag har studerat i fyra år till artesan och så sitter jag i en arbetscentral och får en liten flitpeng under 100 € /mån.
remarked that the pension enables artistic freedom. Social benefits can make it possible for some artists to do art and this can be seen as a possibility, but living on social benefits is an indicator of discrimination in working life (Solvang 2012: 183). The Finnish society has been more eager to put disabled people on pension instead of trying to make working life more equal (Rautiainen 2017). This kind of disablism is visible also in my data.

Living on social benefits usually means poverty (Jakonen 2019: 110). In many cases, the disability pension sets a strict limit to other incomes. The disability pension can be “set aside” if a person receives more income temporarily. Of course a person might land a decent salary but it happens only rarely (Hakala 2013: 231–232). One participant said that their salary raise was cancelled to keep them from losing the pension. Non-disabled artists also share some of these problems. The social security system does not understand the precarious position of artists, with a mixture of different incomes: salary, fees, grants, and entrepreneurship (Rensujeff 2015: 53). However, there are some issues related especially to disability, like disability pensions.

According to Gill and Sandahl (2009: 2, 16), many disabled artists have to use a lot of time on paperwork related to social benefits. This point of view was brought up in the context of grants:

Receiving a grant caused problems and a lot of extra work with my employment pension.41 (W3)

Some of the participants are happy with their current situation. These participants do not however aim for full employment in the arts. For them, working in another field and doing art part-time or securing their livelihood with a pension was a suitable combination. The barriers to employment might not become concrete in their situation, as they might for those who aim to work fulltime as artists.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have analysed the experiences of disabled and Deaf artists in the Finnish field of arts. I have approached the research questions by using the concepts of disablism and ableism. My data included participants from different art fields and they had different kinds of impairments. Thus, it was possible to examine the arts field widely, and from the perspective of disability in the overall. The data show that the artists face to some extent similar but also different issues depending on their art field and impairment. For example, performing arts are especially prejudiced against visible impairments.

I have presented three artist path types. The typical artist path leads towards artistry via formal art education. Some participants have returned to art after becoming impaired. The “special” artist path stood out in the data most strongly. It seems that people with learning disabilities need particularly much luck: the place where they live, the people around them and even pure chance might affect their opportunities to become an artist more.

Are the paths of disabled and Deaf artists different from other artist paths? According to Piispa (2013: 151–152), it is common for artistic careers to include many turns, and the beginning of the career is often difficult. These characteristics are a part of the careers of both disabled and non-disabled artists. However, as the analysis shows, the paths of disabled and Deaf artists have extra twists and turns since they face disablism and ableism in different phases of their careers. Discriminatory practices, lack of accessibility and ableist

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41. Original text: Apurahan saaminen tuotti ongelma ja paljon työtä saamani työeläkkeen kanssa.
attitudes among the staff make studying harder. Disabled and Deaf artists have fewer opportunities to be employed because of discrimination. None of the participating artists made their living solely by doing art. Many try to balance with the social security system and other incomes. Also, Finnish disability services influence the opportunities of the artists. Considering the data, the Finnish field of arts is not equal.

As far as the data show, the families of the artists tended to be interested in arts and culture. Previous research shows that successful artists can also come from non-cultural homes (Salasuo et al. 2016: 62–63). It seems possible that the family background influences the careers of disabled people even more. However, this theme calls for further study before anything certain can be said.

The experiences of the artists vary: some of them are satisfied with how they have been able to live off their artistry. Some have the support they need. At the same time, some feel that they must constantly struggle to work as artists, and some have faced discrimination. The experienced problems and the role of the structures of the society should not be belittled, but at the same time, one must be careful not to see the artists just as victims of the existing structures.

Some of the inequalities mentioned in this article can be tackled through cultural policy, but some need to be addressed by wider social and educational policies. Inside cultural policy, there are different levels for action: 1) cultural policy actions regarding the cultural administration, institutions, structures, and funding of the arts field; 2) actions regarding practices in the arts field and the know-how of arts professionals; 3) actions regarding the equality of art education; and 4) actions to provide grassroots-level support for disabled and Deaf artists.

During the 2000s, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture has established many working groups to develop the accessibility and equality of the arts field. However, only a few concrete cultural policy actions have been taken to promote the equality of disabled and Deaf artists. In Arts Promotion Centre Finland, the most important developments in the 2010s are the hiring of a regional artist of outsider art and asking candidate proposals for art councils also from disability culture organisations. After this, at least two disabled persons have been appointed to arts councils.

There are many organisations that promote accessibility, equality, and inclusion in the arts field, but they usually do not give individual support for artists. The perhaps most significant efforts to support disabled artists at grassroots-level in Finland have been project-based (for example TARU projects I and II in 2001–200742 and Vertaistaiteilijat 2018–202043). However, the timeframe and number of artists involved in projects are limited. They are one way to develop the equality of the arts field, but we need also broader and more stable work to that end.

The data of this article refer mostly to the past. Many things are better now than decades ago, and we can see developments towards equality. For example, in 2018–2019 some artists in need of special support had participated in mainstream exhibitions and a group of artists in need of special support were accepted in a residency programme (Rosavaara 2019; Kone Foundation 2019).

Promoting equality always requires work and resources. It does not happen by itself. We need cooperation in the whole arts field to make the opportunities equal for disabled and Deaf artists. The staff of arts education institutions and other professionals in the field need

42. For more information on the TARU projects, see www.taru.info (in Finnish only) and Kylänpää & Niemi 2008.
43. www.ertaistaiteilijat.fi (in Finnish only)
to educate themselves about disability, Deafness, equality, equity, and accessibility. Artistry should not be restricted by ableist attitudes and rigid practices.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for helping me improve this article. Thanks are also due to Mikko Jakonen for his useful comments during the early stages of writing.

**References**


Appendix 1 Research data
The life stories of disabled and Deaf artists

Written life stories

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<td>W10</td>
<td>Finnish</td>
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Interviews
I1, 11 June 2018.
I2, 11 June 2018.

The background information of the artists
12 background information forms, received 18 May – 9 Sept. 2018.

The artist archive of DuvTeatern
The number (1–8) refers to the individual artist.

Interviews of the artists
D1I 23 Oct. 2017
D2I 19 Sept. 2017
D3I 25 Aug. 2017
D4I 17 Aug. 2017
D5I 8 Sept. 2017
D6I 15 May 2017
D7I 26 Sept. 2017

The interviews of the parents of the artists
D7P 11 Oct. 2017
D8P 25 Jan. 2018

Artist CV’s
D1CV not dated
D2CV not dated
D3CV 5 April 2018
D4CV 5 April 2018
D5CV not dated
D6CV not dated
D7CV 5 April 2018
D8CV not dated
Documents including information about the artists’ background, regarding e.g. their education and work history

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