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'Pure bonding time':

Prisoner and staff perceptions of the impact of taking part in a drama project for imprisoned men and their children

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Introduction

Research has shown that prison visits have the potential to improve prisoners' mental wellbeing, increase social support and reduce the inmate-perceived stresses associated with imprisonment.¹ Identifying effective ways to promote the health and well-being of prisoners is important because although they are not a homogeneous group, they often have unhealthy lifestyles and poorer health compared to the wider population.² Fazel and Baillargeon³ suggest that prisoners bear a 'substantial burden of physical and psychiatric disorders relative to the general population'. In particular, evidence suggests that prisoners experience higher rates of mental health issues including suicide.⁴ Improving the health of individuals in the criminal justice system is recognised to be a key element of the reducing re-offending and health inequalities agendas. The determinants of offending are similar to the determinants of health; poor housing, low levels of social capital, stress, substance misuse, low educational attainment.⁵ By adopting a social rather than medical model of health, it could be argued that increasing the health of an individual

could also potentially be beneficial in terms of reducing re-offending and lead to better rehabilitation outcomes.

Over the last decade the Government has taken many steps towards reducing re-offending which has proven to have little effect on reconviction rates.⁶ A Ministry of Justice⁷ Green Paper has stated that prisons are expensive to run and further commitment to reducing re-offending is needed. There is growing interest in the relationship between offenders and their families, the Ministry of Justice⁸ found that maintaining family relationships can help prevent re-offending. Maintaining family ties during imprisonment holds many benefits both during and after confinement; research indicates possible reductions in intergenerational offending,⁹ better chances of resettlement on release,¹⁰ and improved mental health outcomes for prisoners.¹¹ Policy frameworks have focused on reducing re-offending endorse supporting family ties.¹²

The drama based-intervention

This research study set out to explore a drama based intervention delivered at a category B prison in northern England as a vehicle for improving prisoner-

1. de Motte, C., Bailey, D., and Ward, J. (2012) How does prison visiting affect female offenders' mental health? Implications for education and development. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*, 7 (4) 170–179.; Jiang, S., and T, Winfree, Jr. (2006) Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life. *The Prison Journal*, 86 (1) 32-55.; Casey-Acevedo, K., & Bakken, T. (2001). Effects of visitation on women in prison. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 25 (1), 49-70.
2. World Health Organization (2014) Prisons and Health. [Internet] World Health Organisation Europe. Available from: <http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/249188/Prisons-and-Health.pdf?ua=1> [Accessed December 2014].
3. Fazel, S. and Baillargeon, J. (2011) The health of prisoners. *The Lancet*, 377, 956-65.
4. Howard League for Penal Reform (2014) Young adult prisoner suicides: cries for help are going unheard. [Internet], Available from: <<http://www.howardleague.org/young-adult-prisoner-suicides/>> [Accessed 15th September 2014].
5. Sherman, T. (2011) Offender Health [Internet] North Somerset Council. Available from: <<http://www.nsomerset.gov.uk/Community/Partnerships/JSNA/safer+and+stronger/offenderhealth.htm>> [Accessed 24th November 2012].
6. Ministry of Justice (2013) Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform, London, The Stationary Office.
7. Ministry of Justice (2010) Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders, London.
8. Ministry of Justice (2013) 12 months supervision for all prisoners on release. Press release. [Internet] Ministry of Justice. Available from: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/12-months-supervision-for-all-prisoners-on-release>> [Accessed 16th February 2012].
9. Ministry of Justice (2010) Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders, London.
10. Niven, S. and Stewart, D. (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison in 2003. Home Office Findings No. 248. London, Home Office.
11. Woodall, J., et al (2009). Healthier prisons: The role of a prison visitors' centre. *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, 47 (1) 12–18.
12. Ministry of Justice (2009) Reducing re-offending; supporting families, creating better futures. A framework for improving the local delivery of support for the families of offenders. London, Department for Children, Schools and Families.; Ministry of Justice (2013) Transforming Rehabilitation: a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending, Analytical Series 2013. London, The Stationary Office.

child relationships. The intervention was delivered in the form of an arts-based, extended prison visit. Codd¹³ emphasises that prison visits are an important way to maintain family connections, while research by Nugent and Loucks¹⁴ advocate the use of arts-based interventions in prison settings. The category B adult male prison is based in northern England and holds over 1000 prisoners remanded or sentenced by the courts. Approximately 55 per cent of the men have a child under the age of 18 years. The prison has an attached, purpose built prison Visitors' Centre which aims to improve family health and well-being for prisoners and their families. The Visitors' Centre was awarded a small amount of funding (from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS)) dedicated to art interventions in prisons. The funding enabled two members of staff (a manager and a project lead) from the Visitors' Centre to co-ordinate the implementation of a drama project within the prison. Three drama practitioners from a third sector organisation (external from both the prison and the Visitors' Centre) were recruited to deliver the drama project. This involved facilitating, interactive games, relationship building through drama and helping families create a play they could perform at the end of the week to their family and friends.

The drama project invited a selected group of prisoners to spend time with their children under the facilitation of three drama practitioners and the supervision of a prison officer. The project was delivered over a week in the autumn of 2012; it ran for five days, from 10am to 3pm in the prison chapel. The project was advertised on posters throughout the prison. Prisoners then applied to attend the project; those that met security requirements were then enrolled.

Aims and objectives

The study aimed to gain insight into perceived changes in family connections as a result of taking part in the drama project. The rationale for the project was

The rationale for the project was to provide opportunities for prisoners and their children to spend time together, develop deeper bonds and strengthen family ties.

to provide opportunities for prisoners and their children to spend time together, develop deeper bonds and strengthen family ties. Three research aims guided the development and implementation of the study;

- ❑ To explore prisoner perceptions of the impact of taking part in the drama project, specifically to identify whether there were any perceived changes in family connections.
- ❑ To build an understanding of how the drama project was delivered and identify any suggestion for improvement in the future.
- ❑ To explore prison staff perceptions of the impact taking part in the drama project had on prisoners.

Methods

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six prisoners who participated in the project, the prison officer who supervised the project and the Visitors' Centre staff who helped to implement the project. One-to-one interviews were selected on the basis that they provide the opportunity to gather rich, in-depth information and to probe the responses of participants, enabling a detailed understanding of the issues of interest to be developed.¹⁵ Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for consistency across interviews and to aid the researcher to keep fluidity of the

interview and offer a loose structure for the researcher in order to gain a more detailed response from the participant.¹⁶ The semi-structured interviews allow prisoners to talk about their own social situation in their own language and to convey their thoughts and feelings without being restricted to pre-determined quantitative responses.¹⁷ Interviews are an inclusive way of collecting data as they do not discriminate against participants with low literacy levels and those who have difficulties with reading and writing. This is particularly pertinent given that 60 per cent of the prison population is said to have difficulties in basic literacy skills.¹⁸ A standard topic guide was used to help focus the conversation on key issues in line with the proposed

13. Codd, H. (2008) *In the shadow of prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice*. Cullompton, UK, Willan Publishing.

14. Nugent, B. and Loucks, N. (2011) *The Arts and Prisoners: Experiences of Creative Rehabilitation*. *The Howard Journal*, 50 (4) 356-370.

15. Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed, Thousand Oaks: CA, Sage.

16. Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

17. Sofaer, S. (1999) *Qualitative methods: What are they and why use them?* *Health Services Research*, 34 (5) 1101-1118.

18. National Literacy Trust (2008) *Literacy changing lives: The role of literacy in offending behaviour*. London.

research questions and provide an opportunity to probe and question.

Additionally, a focus group was held with three drama practitioners (who delivered the project). Initial contact was made through the project lead at the Visitors' Centre, as she was influential to implementing the drama project within the prison and was able to access the prisoner participants. Focus groups have traditionally been used in market research with credible and useful results.¹⁹ The focus groups were used amongst the practitioners to try and encourage group discussion around their own views and those of their colleagues in relation to delivering a drama intervention in prison. Focus groups can be advantageous when used for evaluation purposes, Patton states: *'the group's dynamics typically contribute to focusing on the most important topics and issues in the programs'*.²⁰ Although it is noted that it is possible for conflicts may arise when participants know each other.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews drawn on principles from Braun and Clarke.²¹ Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim by the researcher which allowed familiarity with the content of the transcripts. Initial codes were generated by reading through the transcripts and making detailed annotation, this included manually colour coding the transcripts, highlighting, using post-it notes and writing notes on the text, followed by the grouping together of codes to identify themes. Based on this a coding framework was developed, codes were based on reoccurring themes interpreted as 'prominent issues' emerging from the data.

Ethical considerations

Prisoners are a vulnerable sub-section of the population and it is clear that a sensitive approach is required when conducting research with this group.²² The study conformed to recognised ethical practice by ensuring: informed consent, confidentiality, secure

information management, attention to risk reduction and the right to withdraw from the research. Written consent to undertake the research was gained from the Governor of the prison in northern England and the manager of the Visitors' Centre and ethical clearance was given by Leeds Beckett University Ethics Committee in 2012.

Results

For ease of presentation, and to aid understanding, an overview of findings from the interviews and the focus group discussion have been collated and presented together. The findings of the interviews and focus group are presented as five broad overarching themes. Verbatim quotes from the data are provided for illustrative purposes and to support the interpretation and findings. In line with ethical considerations these have been kept anonymous.

Theme 1 — Perceived benefits of taking part in the drama project

Most prisoners reported that the drama project differed greatly from standard prison visits. The project provided the prisoners with an improved environment and an opportunity to interact with their children in a more relaxed and natural way. This was welcomed by the prisoners as it was felt that their standard visits are restrictive and allow them very little physical contact with their children. The drama project helped to remove these environmental restrictions and families were able to freely interact.

It is more personal you can speak to your kids without an officer coming and telling you let go and keep your hands off and stuff like that. There was no officers hovering over you or nowt. It was more personal like that and you've got to interact with other families as well. (Prisoner_2)

The study discovered that the project was as a method for giving prisoners a sense of normality,

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19. Patton MQ. (1990) Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods. (2nd ed). Beverly Hills, CA, Sage Publications.

20. Ibid.

21. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2) 77-101.

22. Smith, C. and Wincup, E. (2002). Reflections on fieldwork in criminal justice institutions. Quoted in: Welland, T and Pugsley, L (Eds.) *Ethical dilemmas in qualitative research*. Aldershot, Ashgate.; Liamputtong, P. and Ezzy, D. (2005). *Qualitative research methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

enabling them to feel like they are in a normal surrounding where they can interact as human beings and discover their identity as a father rather than simply being identified as a prisoner. An overwhelmingly positive finding was reported that some prisoners became so engrossed in the drama project and spending time with their children that they did not feel like they were in prison.

With it being civilians and with the staff not in their uniform, they are in their own clothes and you kind of feel a little bit free. For the couple of hours that you do that you don't feel like you're in prison. (Prisoner_2)

In addition to benefits in terms of bonding and interpersonal relationships, prisoners benefited on an individual level. Several prisoners reported an increase in confidence as a direct result of attending the drama project. They reported feeling more confident in; their own abilities as a father, speaking to other people and in being able to relax and 'make a fool of themselves' in front of their children.

'[The benefits were] Family time, quality time with my kids, I feel more confident doing things like that. I feel more confident as a person...Showing other people that you can do things like this and have a laugh. (Prisoner_4)

Theme 2 — The fathering role

The family separation that occurs as a consequence of imprisonment is often unavoidable; one overarching theme to emerge was that the drama project genuinely allowed prisoners to re-establish their role as a father. This included both the positive and negative aspects of parenting, noted by prisoners taking on an active fathering role during rehearsals; evidenced through examples of prisoners feeling empowered to discipline their children when they misbehaved or alternatively praise them or offer guidance during the project. Findings indicate that the most valued aspect of the project was the opportunity to spend quality time with their children, and to bond and build on their relationship.

You can feed me bread and jam, I am not bothered, it is about being with my family and doing something with my family. (Prisoner_8)

All of the prisoners valued the quality time they got to spend with their children. They explained that there were no other courses or opportunities within the prison that would give them a week to engage with their children. Prisoners identified how being on the project for a week with their children helped them bond and improve their relationships.

The drama project is brilliant because it's just pure bonding time...it's helped while I have been in prison to bring them closer to me because the less you see them then you become distant. (Prisoner_1)

Some prisoners reported that the project had led them to consider the extent to which they had been involved in their children's lives in the past. With some admitting that they had not previously had a high level of involvement.

It gives a different view of 'right I do need to spend a bit more time with my daughter or son. (Prisoner_4)

It shows more to what I can do out there to my boy. I don't really do much with him out there. (Prisoner_8)

A common theme to emerge from the study was that participation in the project had led some prisoners to reflecting on their crimes and the resulting separation from their children. The engagement with their children during the project was a reminder of the family life they were detached from and it provided a reminder that they were missing out on seeing their children grow up. This had encouraged some prisoners to become more engaged in their children's lives. Several acknowledged that upon their release they hope to spend more time with their children.

Theme 3 — Perceived outcomes for children

All of the prisoners who took part in an interview indicated that their children spoke very highly of the drama project. The main benefits mentioned were being able to spend time with their father, and being

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able to see their fathers having fun and dressing up in costumes. One father spoke about how his son had been less boisterous since spending a week with his father on the drama project. He said that spending this time with his son not only helped build upon their relationship but it also had a wider impact on other members of the family as his partner noticed a positive change in his behaviour at home.

My little boy is a bit better within himself and he has just had a week with me. (Prisoner_9)

Theme 4 — Perceived impact on rehabilitation

The project prison officer spoke of the many benefits of the project in terms of prisoners building upon bonds and relationships with their children. It was highlighted that such interventions are a vital part of rehabilitation as they reconnect prisoners to their life outside of the prison. It was suggested that such interventions can be an incentive for good behaviour because prisoners are able to look forward to seeing their children and this can have positive effects on their mental health during incarceration.

One prisoner suggested that if the course was run several times a year it could encourage offenders' good behaviour as all of the prisoners who attended the course view it as a privilege.

It would give a lot of the prisoners something to look forward to; it might make people think about their actions while they are in prison, so they might think I have to be a respectable person so that I can go on this project. (Prisoner_4)

One prisoner reported that since his participation on the project he is keen to increase his skill set and will be more likely to register for other courses and activities within the prison. A common theme to emerge was that the project has reconnected the prisoners to their children and encouraged them to think about the family life that they are missing out on during their time in prison. Several prisoners suggested that the project has made them want to become more involved in family life and given them something positive to focus on upon release.

Hopefully it will make an impact on them not coming back to prison because they can see

what they are missing out on while they are in here...hopefully it will drum into them that there is more to life than coming to prison and they have children to think about as well as themselves. Hopefully it will stop them reoffending and committing more crime when they are released. (Visitors' Centre Manager)

Theme 5 — Delivery and implementation

Prisoners credited the drama practitioners for treating them with decency, respect and dignity. The drama practitioners were described as 'polite' and 'friendly'. It was agreed that it is appropriate to use the drama practitioners (third sector organisations) to deliver interventions such as the drama project. There was a general consensus that the project would not have been as successful if it had been run by staff within the prison.

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Overview of the findings

There was a very positive response to the drama project from the prisoners who took part. They highly valued the time it enabled them to spend with their children. It helped them to maintain their family bond with their children. It was a fun and enjoyable experience for both fathers and children, that was enhanced by employing a third

sector organisation (external drama practitioners) to deliver the project. The drama practitioners were seen to be friendly and non-judgmental and offered a wealth of knowledge and experience of drama. The positivist findings should be treated with some caution for it could be argued that (despite being informed that the interviews were confidential) some prisoners might have been wary in giving their honest opinion of the drama project in case it affected them taking part in further projects and courses run within the prison. A sceptical opinion could suggest that the drama project offered the prisoners five days away from their 'normal prison routine', thus this could be their motivation for taking part in preference to spending time with their children. It is important to note that most prisoners who attended the project stated that they had a fairly positive relationship with their children prior to attending the project.

Discussion and conclusion

The study has identified the importance of maintaining family connections during imprisonment.

Whilst the study was small scale, it has attempted to add both prisoner and staff voices to the support of interventions delivered by third sector organisations. Taking part in the project has the potential to reaffirm or challenge the fathering identity. There is potential for the intervention to help towards reducing reoffending but further longitudinal research needs to be undertaken. The project can be delivered using very few resources to comply with security restrictions within prisons. The application process includes a vigorous security check to protect the safety of the prisoners and their families; however this does mean that non-compliant prisoners might be excluded from the project and thus miss out on the opportunity to bond with their children. Third sector organisations are key mechanism to ensuring the project is run in a fair and engaging manner. In order to reduce barriers to recruitment of prisoners, promotional leaflets must emphasise the project is focused on building bonds and relationships. In a broad sense, it could be suggested that the drama project potentially provides an opportunity for prisoners to contribute to their families, which in effect links with empowering prisoners, and encouraging generativity, to achieve a sense of competence and finally work towards rehabilitation.

The study was informed by a social constructionist perspective therefore the results reflect the unique perspectives of individuals; nonetheless the findings still have wider resonance and application to other prisons. If the intervention was to be implemented in other prisons the outcomes achieved will reflect the unique circumstances in each one for example; the way they are governed and the way the intervention is implemented. Although the potential benefits of such interventions are becoming increasingly recognised²³ there is no policy in place to make such interventions mandatory in prisons. However, the evidence suggests that these interventions have the potential to help to maintain family bonds which in turn can help to reduce reoffending an issue that current policy is focusing upon.²⁴ Policy makers should consider both the potential benefits for society and cost savings in terms

of reduced re-offending and the improved family outcomes.

Limitations

The data presented in this study was limited by the relatively small sample size (n=12) however this was due to several limitations of the intervention that are listed below. The project was only delivered to a small number of prisoners (n=6) and all of these prisoners were offered the chance to take part in the research. Only one prison officer worked on the project and she provided a prison staff perspective on the project. It would have been advantageous to the research to interview other prisoner officers working in the prison to gain insight on their perspectives of such interventions but due to time constraints and the logistics of arranging further interviews inside the prison this was not possible. One limitation regarded problems encountered in the data collection process, whereby one prisoner transferred to another prison therefore he could not take part in the research.

Recommendations for policy, practice and further research

The findings from this study should be considered for both commissioners and prisons wishing to implement similar interventions that build on relationships between prisoners and their children. The current provision for prisoners and their children during imprisonment can be improved upon therefore policy development should aim to promote maintaining family bonds. When developing policy related to such interventions, the following should be taken into consideration; the potential social capital gains for prisoners and their families, the potential cost saving of the interventions lead to a reduction in reoffending, better mental health from prisoners, and social outcomes for their children.

As a result of the research study, the following recommendations have been identified:

- Allow third sector organisations and independent practitioners to deliver interventions in prisons.

Although the potential benefits of such interventions are becoming increasingly recognised there is no policy in place to make such interventions mandatory in prisons.

23. Ministry of Justice (2014) Proven Re-offending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin: January to December 2012, England and Wales. London, Ministry of Justice.

24. Hunter, G. et al (2013) Intermediate outcome of family and intimate relationship interventions: a rapid evidence assessment: Analytical Summary. Institute for Criminal Policy Research and New Philanthropy Capital, National Offender Management Service.

❑ Within the prisons budget constraints, provide funding for interventions that support family bonds and relationship building. Implementing regular interventions may produce more positive outcomes than 'one-off' interventions.

❑ Encourage interventions to be delivered in relaxed environments as this helps remove barriers for both prisoners and their families, encourages interaction and provides a sense of 'normality'.

❑ Allocate greater resources to implement interventions that target disengaged fathers; encourage a mechanism for prisoners who might not qualify for the initial application process of an intervention.

❑ Try to minimise the barriers to recruitment when advertising family building interventions in prisons. Promotion leaflets should be clear, using visuals where possible to compensate for prisoners with low literacy levels.

The evidence suggests that interventions that allow prisoners to spend an extended amount of time with their children may contribute to stronger family ties although further evidence will be required to test this further. It is important to acknowledge that there

are definite gaps in the study where a more in-depth investigation could have provided a wider range of perspectives. Further research could include; a longitudinal evaluation that encompassed a specific focus upon the perspectives of children and prisoners' partners. The longitudinal evaluation could be combined with a quantitative element to measure outcomes around; reoffending, and the wellbeing of prisoner's and their children. Further investigation into external factors that can influence such interventions would offer additional insight. For example; exploring whether it made a difference at what point in a prisoner's sentence the intervention was delivered, would it be more effective to deliver at the beginning, middle or towards the end of a sentence. Furthermore, it would be interesting to provide a comparable group where prisoners could spend a similar amount of time with their children without the facilitation of a practitioner and a structured intervention, although this could be difficult to implement due to many factors such as finding a comparable baseline. For example it would be challenging to find prisoners with; similar lengths of sentence, similar pre-existing bonds with their children.