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Education in Prisons

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Education in Prisons

In much of the world, the numbers of people serving prison sentences has been rising. For example, since 2000, they have tripled in South America and doubled in South East Asia and Oceania (ICPR, [2021](#)). In the UK, the prison population has risen by around 74% since 1990 (Ministry of Justice, [2020](#)). Those in prison often have low levels of education. The Ministry of Justice (2021) found that upon entering prison 57% of British adults had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old. Furthermore, functional literacy, the literacy skills needed for “real-life” purposes, is lower in prisoners at 50%, compared to the general population at 85% (Creese, 2015). This lack of skill may make it difficult for people to find work and to lead to lower earnings (Kerr, 2021). Furthermore, having poor literacy and numeracy skills directly increases the risk of offending (Basic Skills Agency, 2002), whilst engaging in education can reduce reoffending. For example, the one-year reoffending rate for people who engage in prison education is 34%, compared to 43% for those who do not engage (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2017). Furthermore, evidence suggests that taking part in learning can reduce reoffending even when learners do not achieve formal qualifications (Ofsted & Spielman, 2021). This suggests that is not just the qualification which reduces reoffending, but the skills developed and improvement in self-concept which make a difference. The UN Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education (SDG 4) aims to improve access and provision of quality education by 2030. It is therefore vital that we consider how best to create opportunities for education in prison settings.

Engagement in prison education

Many countries, such as the UK offer educational opportunities to prisoners. This can involve academic courses, on literacy and numeracy, and vocational courses, such as joinery and bricklaying. However, the numbers of people engaging in education while serving a sentence in are declining (Skills Funding Agency, [2017](#)). This is partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the suspension of education opportunities in prisons not only in the UK, but globally (Global Prison Trends, [2021](#)). During the lockdown in the UK, much prison education involved giving learners in-cell work packs to explore independently with little opportunity for collaboration and discussion with tutors (Ofsted & Spielman, 2021). This model of education is likely to be particularly challenging for those who do not have a strong educational background, which may explain the decrease in engagement during the pandemic. However, this trend began before the pandemic and is continuing now. Some have argued that this may be explained because the quality of prison education is declining. In the UK, Ofsted reported that around 60% of prisons have been graded “inadequate” or “requires improvement” for education, skills and work. The equivalent figure for provision in other parts of the education sector is just 20% (Ofsted, 2022). It is therefore vital to reverse this trend and develop quality educational opportunities in prisons.

Maintaining family relations during prison sentences

In addition to providing quality education, it is important to encourage learners to engage with these learning opportunities. One way to do this is to find a way to link it to family. Around 54% of prisoners in England and Wales are parents to children under the age of 18 when they enter prison (Ministry of Justice, 2010). The strain of being separated from family members can be challenging for parents who may feel disconnected from their children or worry about being forgotten. Many prisoners feel disconnected from their family and there is often a lack of

meaningful contact between parents and children. Therefore, people who may not typically choose to engage in education, may do so if it helps them to engage with their family.

Maintaining positive family relationships during incarceration can lead to a wealth of positive outcomes (See Roberts et al., 2017) including reducing reoffending (Mills & Codd, 2008; Savolainen, 2009; Trice & Brewster, 2004) and more successful reintegration to the community upon release (Hairston, 1991; May et al., 2008; Niven & Stewart, 2005). While it is important to maintain regular, meaningful contact to enhance family relationships (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Hairston, 1991) it can be challenging to maintain these relationships as parents are separated both socially and geographically from their families (Lopoo & Western, 2005). Most family contact is via mail or phone (Seymour, 2001; Travis et al., 2001) and in-person visits may be stressful for both the incarcerated individual (Miller, 2006) and their family (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Poehlmann et al. (2010), found that when visits occurred as part of an intervention with structured activities, they led to positive outcomes. However, when the visits were less structured and not part of a specific intervention they often led to negative outcomes for prisoners and their family members.

Therefore, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) argue that rather than simply increasing visitation in prisons, it is more important to focus on developing programmes which increase parents' "loving contact" with their children. Loving contact involves activities and conversations which help children to feel accepted and cared for by their parents and which indicate parental involvement in their child's life (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). However, creating meaningful opportunities for communication and contact between families and people in prison can be challenging and prisoners might need support for this to occur. Kazura (2001) found that incarcerated parents reported needing more information on improving trust and communication with their children. Carlson and Cervera (1992), found that prisoners wanted meaningful communication opportunities with their families, educational programming focused on family life and access to counselling to help maintain relationships with family. Furthermore, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) suggest that interventions should avoid focusing on emotional elements of the child's life as this may make it hard to manage emotional intensity before and after the visit (e.g., Beyer et al., 2010). This suggests that educational activities may be a way to achieve loving contact between parents and children.

Family literacy interventions in prisons

Bartlett (2000) reported on a reading programme, where incarcerated mothers had a 1-hour live video chat with their children and read books with them. This helped children to feel connected to their mothers and feel that their mothers loved them. Storybook Dads and Storybook Mums in the UK does a similar activity, where parents are recorded reading bedtime stories to their children. They report that 97% of participants state that the project helps children to feel closer and maintain contact with their incarcerated parent and that it helps them worry less (Storybook Dads, 2021).

Combining engaging opportunities for learning with family visits and connections may therefore be a fruitful way to engage learners in educational activities and create opportunities for loving contact between family members. Our own work developed an intervention 'White Water Writers' which invited a group of men in prison to collaboratively write and publish a full-length novel for their children. This project took place in just one week and the children contributed illustrations for the novel, which was professionally printed and put up for sale online. Our findings suggested that linking the literacy element of the project to their families was the reason many participants gave for engaging in the project. Interview data suggested that the intervention helped families feel more connected to each other. It also led to better relationships between the participants

themselves. Data also suggested that participants felt a strong sense of achievement after writing their own novel and that they had developed their skills not just in literacy, but also soft skills such as teamwork.

Considerations when linking education with family work

However, it is important to consider when it is appropriate to link family to education provision and how this can be done effectively. In our intervention, the novel was produced collaboratively, which may have reduced pressure on the participants. As they planned, wrote, and edited the story together it was not possible to tell who had produced which section of the book, or who was responsible for any errors. This may have reduced participants' anxiety. If each participant had produced something for their child independently, for example their own short story, the pressure of creating it themselves and the possibility of it not being "good enough" or including errors may have led to increased anxiety about the outcome. This may have led to disengagement and dropout. Therefore, it is important that future projects consider when it might be appropriate to link family and educational activities and how this can be done in a way that does not provoke anxiety.

Furthermore, while we had a high level of engagement in our intervention, literacy and family interventions in a prison setting often run into challenges around implementation. While it is vital that the prisoners themselves are keen to participate, the success of these projects depends on the prison staff (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Results from our study suggest that staff were keen to trial the intervention as it spanned both family and education elements of their role. They also perceived that the benefits to the writers would be high. They also reported that they intended to make changes in their own practice due to their involvement in the intervention. Thus, future interventions should engage with staff in the design stage to ascertain their views on the key areas of need in their setting and their perceptions of the efficacy of any proposed projects and even practical issues such as availability of laptops. This partnership model will ensure a good fit between project and setting, increasing engagement of participants and efficacy of interventions.

Further information

The paper exploring the impact of White Water Writers can find the paper here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ref/10.1080/10509674.2023.2193435?scroll=top&role=tab>

An article for the Conversation based on this article can be found here: <https://theconversation.com/how-our-collaborative-writing-project-helped-prisoners-connect-with-their-families-204711>

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning has organised 6 webinars on topics related to education in the prison which can be accessed here: <https://www.cmv-educare.com/en/activities/webinars-2/>

More information about White Water Writers can be found at: www.whitewaterwriters.com

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