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My child the hero: How a collaborative writing project changes prisoners' self-concept and family connection

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a creative writing intervention which was designed to improve family relationships, self-concept and skills of people in prison. Male prisoners ($N=8$) produced a novel for their children. The novel was thematically analysed alongside interview data from the writers, their families ($N=15$) and prison staff ($N=3$) to evaluate the impact of the project. The novel had themes of “Challenging the notion of ‘bad’” and “people change for the better.” Interview data suggested that the intervention helped families feel more connected. It also led to better relationships between the participants themselves. Interviews suggested that participants felt a sense of achievement and that they had developed their skills. Findings suggest that the project was effective in enhancing connections between family members and led to a more positive self-concept and enhanced skills.

KEYWORDS

Literacy; family connections; soft skills; interventions; engagement; education

Introduction

The prison population has risen by around 74% since 1990 and there are now 78,037 people serving prison sentences in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2020). While there is evidence that engaging in educational activities while serving a sentence can help prisoners cope with prison life (Pike & Adams, 2012), create a sense of hope (Bhatti & Ghazala, 2010) and potentially reduce recidivism (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2017) the numbers of people engaging in educational activities while serving a sentence are declining (Skills Funding Agency, 2017). It is therefore vital to develop meaningful and engaging educational opportunities for prisoners. One way to enhance prisoner engagement with learning is to find a way to link it to family. 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

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to engage in education, may do so if it helps them to engage with their family. Furthermore, engagement with family may also further improve outcomes for prisoners. In the current paper we trialed and evaluated “White Water Writers” (WWW), an intervention which gave prisoners the opportunity to collaboratively write and publish a novel for their children in a week and engaged children in producing the illustrations. The aim of this paper was to explore the impact that the project had on prisoners, their family and staff.

Theoretical underpinnings

WWW is based on Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which posits that humans have an inherent tendency toward growth. Three needs must be satisfied to facilitate growth and foster wellbeing, motivation, and positive psychological functioning. These needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is feeling in control of our choices and behaviors; competence is feeling that we have the skills needed to succeed, and relatedness is feeling connected to others. In WWW authors have full control over every element of the novel. Trained facilitators set the tasks, but authors make all the decisions about the novel, including planning the novel and producing and proofreading all the text, which creates feelings of autonomy. The facilitator scaffolds the work, setting tasks which are achievable and gradually reducing support as the writers gain confidence, which leads to feelings of competence as the writers successfully achieve each milestone. Finally, the writers work together on the novel. They are also producing a book for their children and considering their children’s interests when designing the story, which creates feelings of relatedness between the coauthors themselves and with their children. Basing our work on these key tenets of SDT, we aimed to create an engaging project which would foster growth, skills and wellbeing.

Prison education

Those in prison often have low levels of education. The Ministry of Justice (2021) found that upon entering prison 57% of adults had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old. Furthermore, functional literacy, the skills needed for “real-life” purposes, is lower in prisoners than in the general population. In prison just 50% have level 1 and 2 literacy skills compared to 85% of the general population (Creese, 2015) which may make it difficult for people leaving prison to find work. Indeed, having poor literacy and numeracy skills has been found to directly increase the risk of offending (Basic Skills Agency, 2002). For example, the one-year reoffending rate was 34% for prisoner learners, compared to 43% for those

who did not engage in learning during their sentence (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2017). Furthermore, taking part in learning was more important than achieving qualifications in terms of reducing offending (Ofsted & Spielman, 2021).

This research suggests that it is important to encourage people to engage in educational activities during their sentence. However, around 60% of prisons have been graded “inadequate” or “requires improvement” for education, skills and work. The figure for provision in other parts of the education sector is just 20% (Ofsted, 2022). The numbers of prisoners engaging in learning has also declined by 12% (Department for Education, 2019). The reason for this decline may be that during the COVID-19 lockdown, 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 lack of support is likely to be particularly challenging for people who do not have a strong educational background. This suggests that there is a need to develop engaging, meaningful and collaborative educational opportunities for people in prison.

To meet this need we developed WWW. Our participants collaboratively write and publish a full-length novel in one week. While this is a very challenging goal, especially for those with low literacy levels, we have previously run the project with children and young people (see Skipper, 2022) so we were confident that adults with low literacy levels would be able to complete the project. However, while our young authors produce a novel for people their own age, in the prison setting, we knew that some people would have low literacy levels which may make them anxious about producing a novel for adults. Additionally, we believed that if we could engage their children in the process the writers might be more motivated to join the project, engage with it more and feel more connected to their children. Therefore, we decided to ask writers to produce a novel for their children.

Family connections

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) putting the number of children with a parent in prison at around 312,000 (Kincaid et al., 2019). 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. 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). Good quality relationships with family during a sentence are also associated with successful relationships post release (La Vigne et al., 2005). This literature suggests that maintaining family relationships during incarceration is vital for successful outcomes both in prison and upon release.

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). In person visits may be stressful for both the incarcerated individual (Miller, 2006) and their family (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Children report wanting to visit their parent in prison, but finding the experience emotionally challenging, for example with long travel days and sadness in having to say goodbye at the end of the visit (Lösel et al., 2012). The prison environment can also be uncomfortable for children (Healy et al., 2000; Tomaino et al., 2005). Indeed families perceive prison settings to be unpleasant and intimidating (King, 2002), unfriendly to children (Tomaino et al., 2005) and lacking in appropriate activities (Tudball, 2000). Poehlmann et al. (2010), found that when visits occurred as part of an intervention, 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. Kazura (2001) found that incarcerated parents often requested more information on improving trust and communication with their children. In a similar vein, Carlson and Cervera (1992), found that prisoners wanted meaningful communication opportunities with their families, educational programming focused on family life and access to counseling to help maintain relationships with family. They believed that these opportunities would help them maintain their family relationships, cope better with being in prison and better prepare them for release. Furthermore, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) suggest that loving contact 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). They therefore

suggest using educational activities to achieve loving contact. This literature led us to believe that engaging children in WWW would be beneficial in in creating an opportunity for loving contact between parents and children.

Literacy interventions in prisons

While projects which aim to enhance literacy and family connections exist, there is a lack of empirical research on their impact. Common difficulties with these projects include prisoners having limited engagement with families, high participant dropout rates and practical barriers such as lack of room space. 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. The books were posted home so the child could read along and enjoy the book after the session. Bartlett asserted that the programme helped children to feel connected to their mothers and feel that their mothers loved them. A similar project was developed for fathers who were recorded reading a book and the tape was then sent home to children (Florida Department of Corrections, 2000). However, this project was not empirically evaluated. 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). However, to our knowledge, WWW is the first project to invite people to collaboratively actually produce a full-length novel for their own children.

The current research

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. In WWW we asked the authors to produce a novel for their children. We believed this would help them to connect with their child, as they would be able to tailor the novel to their child's interests, for example showing that they remembered important details such as the child's hobbies, worries and favorite food. Furthermore, as part of the project we negotiated two visit days. These involved structured activities to help facilitate loving contact, for example, the authors telling the story to the children and the children producing illustrations for the novel. The finished product also allowed family members to connect after the visit, as the children could read the book and discuss it in future calls and visits, thus maintaining this contact beyond the project.

We invited eight men in a prison in England to participate in the weeklong WWW project and asked them, their families and prison staff to participate in interviews before and after the project and a few weeks later at a book signing event to allow us to answer our research question: “How does engaging in WWW in prison impact prisoners, their families and prison staff?”

Method

Participants

Participants were $N=8$ men who were serving sentences in a prison in the Northwest of England. Their ages ranged from 24 to 51. Seven were White British and one was Asian British. Prison staff invited men to participate in the project if they believed that they would engage with the project for the week and if they had young family members (typically children, but sometimes siblings or nieces/nephews).

All family members who attended the family day offered as part of the project were invited to participate in interviews. Families consisted of wives/partners ($N=8$) and younger relations ($N=7$) (no demographics were noted due to the informal nature of the interviews). Finally, $N=3$ White British female staff participated in interviews about their perceptions of the project. The staff were part of the education team in the prison, and all supported the delivery of the project.

Materials

Data were collected before the project began, at the end of the writing week at the family day and at the family book signing event which was held around two weeks later. Semi-structured interview schedules were developed for each time point, and for each participant group, to answer our research question. At Time 1 we interviewed the men and prison staff. We were interested in why the writers had signed up for the project, their expectations and what they hoped to gain from the project. At Time 2 we interviewed the men, staff and family members. We were interested in participants' perceptions of the week and what they had learned. At Time 3, we interviewed all three groups. We were interested in the longer-term perceptions of the project and the impact that it had.

Procedure

Research procedure

Men were invited to participate in the WWW by members of the education team. Participation was voluntary, and it was made clear that even if they

chose to participate in WWW they did not need to participate in the research. Informed consent was obtained from men. Due to the practicalities of working in a prison, men completed the Time 1 interviews in a quiet corner of the room where the main project was taking place and therefore other people were present. Men completed WWW during prison education hours of 9–4 from Monday to Thursday. On Friday, Time 2, a family visit day was organized. During the family day, the researcher visited each family group in turn and asked whether the families would be willing to participate in the interview. Adults consented for themselves, and parents gave consent for children. It was made clear that families did not need to participate in the interviews. Interviews took place in a group setting with all family members and the men present. Men completed individual interviews once family members had left. Again, all were in one room, but interviews took place in a quiet corner while other participants were engaged in alternative tasks. At Time 3, two weeks later, a similar process was followed.

Staff completed interviews on the same schedule as the men. Informed consent was obtained, and it was made clear that their choice to participate or not, would not impact the prisons' access to the project. Interviews took place in a private space in the prison.

WWW procedure

On Monday, the men planned the novel, each taking responsibility for a character and working together to design the overall structure of the novel. On Tuesday and Wednesday, men produced the text of the novel. On Thursday the men completed proofreading and produced the blurb and title. A key element of the project is that the writers made all the decisions about the novel, produced all the text, and proofread it themselves. The facilitator helped to structure the activities during the process but did not comment on, or edit, the plot or text. On Friday, we hosted a family day where the men discussed the story with their children and the children produced illustrations of key scenes in the book and the front cover; these featured in the final publication. Two weeks later, the family returned, and we hosted a book signing event where men and families were presented with professionally printed copies of their novel and signed them for each other.

Analysis and discussion

The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis using steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts from the different participant groups were read thoroughly and coded for units of

meaning, this coding was inductive, and data driven. These initial codes were re-read and further refined to create themes or “coherent and meaningful pattern(s) in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 120). When reviewing the codes and themes, some of the themes overlapped with other themes and so were merged, while other themes were slightly modified to capture the data extracts better. The themes were “semantic” as opposed to “latent” in that the codes and subsequent themes captured the surface level. Transcripts were continually consulted to ensure that all themes were fully captured, and the understandings were driven by data. When analyzing the novel, a similar process was followed.

Novel summary

The novel tells the story of a group of children who leave home because their parents are arguing. They find a portal to the magical world of Mysticus. In this world, Tearaway Tom, the villain who lives in Lava Land, is trying to destroy the other lands of Mysticus. The children visit the different lands in Mysticus, which include the Mystical Castle, Weather World and Fantasy Forest and complete challenges. On completing each challenge, children gain skills, allies, or items. In the final battle the children use these to save Mysticus. They learn that Ellie, the eldest child, is an old friend of Tearaway Tom. Tearaway Tom once wanted to have a relationship with Ellie, but she did not realize he liked her and dated someone else. This led Tearaway Tom to flee into Mysticus and take out his hurt on the magical land. However, when he sees Ellie, he feels sorry for what he has done and leaves Mysticus in peace to return home with her and the other children.

Thematic analysis of the novel

Challenging the notion of “bad”

In the novel it is made very clear that even the villains of the novel are not bad people. They experienced difficult circumstances which led to challenging emotions and this in turn led to bad behaviors. The main villain of the novel, Tearaway Tom likes to “*wreak havoc most days and doesn’t care who he hurts in the process... and has no care about the consequences AT ALL!!!*” Later in the novel, we learn why he behaves like this. It is repeatedly made explicit that “*Tom is not a bad person. Tom realises that the destruction he caused was not part of who he really is, just a coping mechanism.*” This quote illustrates how Tom behaves in a bad way, but that this does not mean he is a bad person, just that he was responding poorly to difficulties in his life. Furthermore, Tom “*began a quest for destruction*”

because “*he has so much sadness and anger inside him that he wants everyone to feel how he feels by causing as much trouble and hurt as he can.*” This illustrates how his strong feelings led him to make these poor choices. The implication is that his behavior was a response to the difficult things which had happened to him rather than an indication of him being a bad person.

The other villain is Tearaway Tom’s brother, Stressed Out Steve. Steve is portrayed as being able to make his own choices but lacking in autonomy because of his brother’s control over him. His badness comes from frustration at not being able to make his own decisions.

... who is always being controlled by his older brother Tearaway Tom. Steve is able to make his own decisions but are always overridden by Tom, so finds his life being under the thumb, and never being able to give, and make decisions himself frustrates him.

This illustrates that the authors created villains who were not stereotypically “bad” but people who were in difficult situations and made poor choices due to coping poorly with emotions.

People change for the better

Almost all the characters in the book experience significant change in a positive direction. For example, Buzz the Bear is one of the heroes, but is in prison at the start of the book because of his behavior. Initially, the children fear Buzz “*as all they see is a big scary bear,*” but the children make friends with Buzz, who sees this as a chance to change himself for the better. At the end of the novel Buzz plays a vital role in saving the world, putting his life at risk to do so “*Buzz had no choice, he had to finish building the last small bit of the aquaduct himself, but this may cost him his life. Regardless, he carried on.*”

Not only do the villains of the novel change, but the heroes also experience positive character change as a result of their adventure. For example, at the end of the novel, Darcie-Millie and Ismy become more confident, Ben learns to be less boisterous, while Grace learns to share:

Ben charges into the house and then stops himself and walks slowly and stays with his brothers and sisters. Grace goes to a cupboard where she hides the sweets and shares them out with the others... Ismy doesn’t feel so worried about her new class as she is braver now. Darcie-Millie is proud of what she did. She is more confident with the others.

Ellie, the eldest child learns to love romantically. It is her love for Tearaway Tom which ultimately saves everyone “*you will come to discover that the fate of Mysticus is at the mercy of (love).*” This love brings the final

battle to an end. It also helps Tom to change, as he begins a relationship with Ellie and because of this “*decides he is going to turn things around.*”

Therefore, the novel suggests that the villains experienced challenging situations and dealt poorly with their emotions and that this led them to behave badly and become villains. However, the children also experienced difficulties, such as their parents arguing, which is the reason they run away from home, and they also experience other difficult situations through the novel. The difference is that the children support each other and maintain their positive emotions. This helps them to learn from their experiences and develop positive characteristics from these challenges. Their example even helps the villains want to change themselves for the better too.

Using fiction as a method to forge connections between parents and their children is a strength of this project. The themes of the novel appear to have links to the author’s experiences, for example, that the villains were not inherently bad but that they experienced difficult situations and dealt poorly with their emotions which led them to behave badly. Furthermore, almost all the characters in the novel change for the better. This would seem to suggest that the men were communicating their feelings and experiences to their children through the story. Indeed, one of the characters in the book is in prison and feels very sorry and sad to be there. The children free him and he sees this freedom as a chance to change for the better. Family treatments often involve helping family members communicate difficult thoughts and experiences with one another (Poehlmann et al., 2010). A benefit of WWW might be the opportunity for the writers to produce stories to share their experiences in a way that might be less confronting than a direct conversation. Indeed, bibliotherapy involves the use of literature to support mental health (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2007). Outwith a formal therapeutic setting, many teachers use books as a tool to introduce social and emotional topics, and prompt discussions, or show pupils that they are not alone in their feelings or experiences (Suvilehto, 2019). Therefore, the novel might be a way for the men to explore some of these ideas with children in a less confronting way than a direct conversation.

In addition, Bishop (1990) argues that books can serve as both mirrors and windows for children. Books can become mirrors in which children see themselves, and windows where they can look out on the broader world. In the novel, most authors wrote their children into the book as characters, creating mirrors. In doing this, they were able to write about things their children enjoyed, and to show how the child had overcome a challenge (e.g. being less worried about joining a new class in school). Therefore, through reading the story, children may be able to see themselves as their family member does, in a positive light. This may help create feelings of connection and an opportunity for

loving contact, this is discussed further in the interviews. The book is also a window into their relations' experiences in prison and of being away from the family. Books can give descriptions of the thoughts and feelings of characters which provides readers with the opportunity to develop empathy and understand how characters feel (Lodge, 2002). Therefore, the book created in WWW may also help children to understand their relation's experiences.

Thematic analysis of interviews

Connection with family

Staff felt that working with families would encourage the men to engage in WWW *"It's one of the key priorities for the prison, to keep those family ties, and WWW is a really good way to tie in their education with the family."* In fact, staff described the family days as *"the carrot that led the donkey."* This agreed with comments from the men who stated that initially they were only interested in participating in the project for extra family days, *"At first, we were interested in the family day."* This suggests that the link with families was a key reason for people to initially sign up to the project.

WWW also helped to bring families together, for example, during the writing week many of the men communicated more than usual with their family. A staff member commented: *"I think they communicated more with their kids because one of them called his family every night, to let them know what was happening and how things were going on."* The project also created an engaging activity for men and their younger family members to share. As one mother said of her children:

Oh they're absolutely over the moon you know, when I said to them that they were going to be in a book, and they were coming to spend the day and they were gonna draw pictures they were so excited. That's all they've done all week is like practice drawing unicorns and pegasuses. So yeah, they're absolutely made up ... for them to spend quality time as a family is a big thing.

This quote suggests that the families were communicating more than usual over the week and that children were excited for the visit and preparing for the visit before it occurred. Additionally, during the writing week, the men developed stories related to the interests of their children. Sharing this on the visit day also helped increase shared engagement:

the dad was talking to his two daughters around the characters and around his ideas. I could definitely see that he had reflected on memories and experiences and truly thought about what his daughters would be interested in and developed characters to suit both their personalities and was quite excited to be sharing that. And the enthusiasm when he was talking through the characters was spurring the little girls onto doing what they were doing in their illustrations.

Staff also commented on the positive nature of the interactions when the men and children were working on the illustrations together during the visit day: *“When I saw the families doing the illustrations and the conversations that were occurring and how people were kind of sat nicely doing the drawings and wanting them to be proud of it, and again it’s just that real value.”*

Partners and children explicitly discussed how the books were beneficial to the family relationships: *“I think (Child) will be made up because she loves everything with food like it says in the book, she will be dead proud of her dad yeah.”* Similarly, doing the project also impacted how adult family members regarded the men, for example, *“It’s not really him to be honest with you. He can put his mind to it when he wants, he can work his mind when he wants to, but he tends not to and its quite interesting that’s he done that.”* And *“I think he did very well we are proud of him. I didn’t think he could write those words either!”* This is discussed in further detail under the theme “Surprise.”

The project also led to longer term positive impacts in family relationships as was shown by a staff member:

I think that since the book signing, the buzz that’s been on site has been fantastic. One of the men said how his child had been to school and used the character from the story as her inspiration for World Book Day. I didn’t expect anything like that. And to have feedback from the school to say the class teacher was engaging the rest of the class in the book. And just from my perspective how that young individual must feel to have something positive to share from her daddy and from her experience and then all her peers. I think for me that’s, I certainly didn’t expect that, and I think it’s a massive it’s a massive success and obviously has an impact.

This quote indicates that many of our authors stated that their main reason for participating in WWW was the visit days and that the project had a positive impact on family relationships, creating conversation between family members, giving them a shared activity and connection. This theme is clearly linked to the relatedness element of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the participants discussed how they felt more connected to their families through participation, and this led to a wealth of positive outcomes. Therefore, linking education with family may be a way to encourage learners to sign up for educational opportunities, engage in them and reap the benefits of them. This is important as evidence suggests that fewer people are engaging with education when in prison (Skills Funding Agency, 2017), but engaging with education when in prison can reduce reoffending (Ministry of Justice, 2017) and can help prisoners cope with prison life (Pike & Adams, 2012), and create a sense of hope (Bhatti & Ghazala, 2010).

Carlson and Cervera (1992) state that family visits to prison need to be supported to ensure that families can use visiting time to connect.

According to interviews, the structure of the WWW visit days, with specific and fun activities for parents and children to engage in together, helped to meet this need. Furthermore, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) discuss the importance of creating opportunities for loving contact between prisoners and their families. The fact that authors wrote a novel which featured their children helped to create feelings of connection and showed that the authors had thought about what their child liked. This fostered a sense of connection between men and their families which we hope will last beyond the project as children read the books at home.

Teamwork and interpersonal relationships in the prison

Men discussed how important teamwork had been to the process. This was portrayed as being challenging: *“Everyone had different ideas. It was implementing and putting the different ideas from everyone together so that the book worked. That was the hardest bit”* and *“Cooperating, getting on with everyone to write. It was sometimes a jumble was it not? But it all came together in the end, didn’t it?”* However, although teamwork was challenging in terms of the practicalities, the interpersonal elements of group work were viewed very positively, for example: *“I enjoyed the most the fact that the 8 of us got together and we had no idea who each other were and during that week we bonded together whilst doing the book together and now we all know each other really well and what not, so it’s kind of a bonding activity as well”* and *“I have had a really good time and made lots of new friends.”* Partners also commented on the benefits of working with others *“I think it’s been good getting you to do something different and talking to other people.”*

Staff commented positively on the teamwork elements of the process and how they had a positive impact on interpersonal relationships:

I think a better understanding and tolerance of each other. I didn’t hear one of them ask: What you are in for? How long you have got left?” Because that is one of the major questions that they ask. I didn’t hear that, there was none of that. They just accepted each other.

Staff also commented on how teamwork skills improved: *“I liked how (NAME) took the lead in the very beginning, but nobody realized that he was doing the lead. He was asking: ‘So what are we going to be doing? He used the word ‘we’ a lot, not ‘you’ or ‘me.’ That was really good, and they showed respect for each other which was really good.”*

Again, self-determination theory would suggest that belonging and relatedness needs are vital to psychological functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and WWW appears to have helped men to feel better connected to others in prison and developed teamwork skills. The teamwork elements of

the project were discussed as being challenging for some participants in that they had to work collaboratively and bring together varied ideas. However, participants also stated that they enjoyed the teamwork and got to know each other better. Partners and staff also commented on the development of new friendships and interpersonal skills. Having positive relationships enhances wellbeing and reduces distress (Amati et al. 2018) and these relationships are likely to be particularly important for people in prison who are isolated from family and other relationships.

An unexpected achievement led to improvements in self-concept

Many of the participants expressed surprise that they were able to write a novel in a week. For many of the participants this surprise came from lack of positive previous educational experience: *“It was all a challenge, it was new to me. I had never done anything like that before”* and *“The last time I had done some English writing was in school.”* Some of this sense of surprise also seemed to come from their self-concept of not being a “writer” *“You would never have seen me do this thing”* and *“I don’t write, never mind writing a thousand words, it’s surprising”* and *“The fact that I can write a full chapter of a book of about a thousand words long, I am stunned.”*

Their unexpected achievement seems to have had a positive impact on their self-concept *“who can say I went to prison and came out an author?”* and *“Never thought, ever, at all, at any point I’d get the opportunity, never mind actually writing it, it’s just not me. But I proved myself wrong”* and *“I realize what I’m actually capable of.”* This gave participants a sense of pride and pleasure: *“Proud of it yeah. Proud of it definitely yeah”* and *“You know it’s a once in a lifetime thing, cheesy that, but it is though innit,”* *“I’m made up!”* and *“I’m now an author which is an achievement, I feel.”*

Partners also discussed how surprised they were at the achievement:

I was surprised, obviously. I didn’t realise it was literally going to be a week that they had to do it in, I thought it would be something that would be done over maybe a couple of months so to have found out it was done in a week and when he phoned me that night to say, I’ve done mine I’ve written a thousand words I thought “oh my god.”

Partners also discussed how they thought the writers had surprised themselves *“(they) surprised themselves with what they can actually achieve if they set their minds to it. You were never asked to do anything like this before ... and they’ve probably just all amazed themselves I think.”* Staff echoed these feelings *“they’ve probably never thought of themselves of being able to write a book or being interested in writing a book.”* Thus, their

success in project seems to have surprised the men and their partners and led to positive feelings of pride and pleasure and a more positive self-concept.

This is related to the competence element of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many of our authors and their family members were surprised about their achievement. This may have been because many people in prison have had negative experiences of school and low qualification levels (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002), so they did not expect to succeed in this project. However, upon succeeding they felt very positive about themselves. Their unexpected achievement seems to have had a positive impact on their own self-concept and the way their partners viewed them. They felt more competent after participating in the project. This is important as high self-esteem has been linked to positive outcomes such as higher academic performance, higher persistence less depression and lower levels of stress (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Enhancement of writing skills

Participants discussed how the writers had developed their writing skills including writing, typing, and planning. The men said *“(I improved) typing and the writing,”* and *“It was sound yeah and I got a bit better on the computer,”* and *“I had never done his before, to put a book together. So obviously I have learnt to put a story together.”*

Staff also discussed how this learning was quite implicit and came organically through the project rather than being taught more explicitly and this was a benefit: *“... without realizing they’re learning (punctuation and grammar) because it’s within a project”* and *“and I could hear one of them going no it’s their, T H E I R, and like correcting each other’s grammar and stuff so without them realizing they are developing those skills and utilizing those skills it’s just a different way to engage.”*

Many talked about how the project enhanced their creativity. For some this was because they were writing for children: *“It exercises you a little to do better creative thinking, descriptive writing as well. Because you are writing for kids you got to explain colors, powers, sight otherwise it will be boring.”* For others creativity came from having responsibility for an element of the story *“There was a few instances where when we were in charge of making our own characters and the chapters and that, we really had to use our brains to make it creative as well and that was a bit challenging.”* Partners also recognized their creativity: *“They’ve all put their imagination and you know it’s got to be hard in this situation, but you know it’s really good,”* as did staff *“I don’t they think they knew they could be so creative and go down the imagination track. Because as one of them said earlier to*

me- I didn't think I had that imagination. It's really good, I said you just let yourself go, we are not confined by reality, everything is possible."

Another element that was commonly discussed was the project providing a space to use their brain in a different way through creative expression, *"It has been cool yea and exciting and that you know to write this book. It's been expanding for the mind"* (writer) and *"I think it would help a lot of people as well, that's what I think. If I was in here, I'd go over my head stuck in here so it's good to use the brain"* (partner) and provide a psychological escape from being in prison *"Takes you away for the time you're writing, you're thinking things to write in the story, you're away from here"* (writer).

Therefore, the project led the authors, staff and partners to comment on improvements in writing skills such as writing and typing. A perceived strength of WWW was that the learning was implicit, as it did not involve formal teaching, but the learners working together to develop their skills. This active learning approach has been found to be much more effective than traditional teacher led learning (Hake, 1998). In addition, the authors discussed how the project enhanced their ability to express themselves creatively which expanded their minds. The freedom they had in developing the content of the novel allowed them to be creative and creativity has been associated with positive outcomes such as improved mental health, happiness and improved brain function (National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing, APPG). Therefore, this theme is linked to the competence and autonomy elements of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The authors felt more competent in their writing skills following the project and the freedom they had in being creative in developing the novel led to feelings of autonomy.

Changing teaching styles in staff

A common theme in the staff interviews was that the project had led them to reflect on their own delivery: *"I thought it was a really good opportunity, not just for the men but for the members of staff as well because it gives us ideas and new things we can take from the programme to implement into our delivery as well, like the men leading on sessions."* Staff discussed how it helped them to reflect on their practices

I think for the tutors to see something delivered in that way is different because people get embroiled in their own delivery styles, in their own process of delivering the curriculum so it can get a little bit kind of same...having that running in the class just shows an alternative way how you can bring a group together, how you can task individuals and I think it was just a real refreshing element to have on site for that reason as well, not just for the family gain and the children gain but just bringing something new to the department.

This led staff to reflect on their practice and make changes “*It made a difference to someone’s delivery in an IT suite. Seeing how someone can facilitate a group in such a way. Yeah it’s just been a real lift to the establishment definitely*” and to support others to change their practice “*So, you know it has given everyone a food for thought. Because one of them said, ‘I want to write short story with the lads,’ and I said you can do that starting next week. And they all looked at me, and I said ‘why not?’*” This suggests that the changes were not just seen in the men, but also in the practice and intentions of the staff who had been involved in the delivery. This change may be related to autonomy and competence elements of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As staff engaged with a different method of delivery and assisted with this during WWW, they seem to feel that they can make changes to their own delivery and feel competent to do so.

General discussion

Summary

Analysis of the novel suggested the writers produced a story which explored the notion of what makes people “bad.” In the novel, the villains were not inherently bad, but when confronted by difficult situations they managed their emotions poorly and behaved badly. The novel also discussed how people changed for the better, both villains and heroes. The authors had also considered their children when producing the novel, with many writing their children into the novel as a character and including events and details which were linked to their interests. Regarding the interviews, writers, family members and staff commented on the positive impacts of the project across various domains. WWW enhanced connection, both with family and with people in prison and led to a more positive self-concept through achieving something they did not believe they could. The project also enhanced participants’ perceptions of their writing skills and led staff to reflect on their current practices and consider how they could change these to teach in novel ways.

Considerations for future projects and research

The numbers of prisoners engaging in learning has declined by 12% (Department for Education, 2019) even though, engaging in education in prison is associated with a wealth of positive outcomes such as helping prisoners cope with prison life (Pike & Adams, 2012), creating a sense of hope (Bhatti & Ghazala, 2010) and potentially reducing recidivism (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2017). Therefore, there has been interest in how best to encourage people to engage in education

in prison settings. Our results suggest that linking education with family was successful in increasing engagement with WWW. This may suggest a way for other projects to engage people in education. However, it is important to consider when this would be appropriate and how it can be done effectively. In WWW, the novel is produced collaboratively, which may have reduced pressure on the authors. As the writers 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, which may have reduced anxiety. If they 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 reduced engagement and led to 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 WWW, literacy and family interventions in a prison setting often run into challenges around implementation. By linking WWW, initially conceived of as a literacy project, with family visits we engaged learners who may not have otherwise participated. However, while it is vital that the prisoners themselves are keen to participate, the success of these projects depends on the dedication of prison staff (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Results from our study suggest that staff were also keen to trial WWW as it spanned both family and education elements of their role. They also perceived that the benefits to the writers were very high and reported that they intended to incorporate elements of the project, such as freedom for the writers, into their future practice. Thus, future projects may also want to consider engaging with staff at 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. This may ensure that there is a good fit between project and setting and increase the likelihood of staff backing the project, encouraging prisoners to engage, and maintaining the project.

While the results of this study suggest that WWW led to positive outcomes within this group of participants, future research should explore the impact on a larger number and more diverse group of participants. The participants in this project were chosen by the prison staff and were all male and mainly White British, therefore in future research it would be interesting to work with more diverse groups of participants, for example female prisoners. Furthermore, future research may employ a mixed method approach, complementing qualitative data with quantitative,

including measures of self-efficacy, literacy and skills. This research could also consider broader outcome variables such as engagement with other forms of prison education and even recidivism. It would also be interesting to measure the long-term impact of the project to see if effects are maintained or have impacted practice in the longer term and how to best to maintain any positive effects.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appeared that WWW had a positive impact on writers' family connections, links with other people in prison, self-concept and writing skills. This was reported by the writers themselves, their family members and staff. Following the project, staff indicated that they would also change their practice. We suggest that other interventions in prison consider when and how to link education and family, create opportunities for loving contact and consider how best to ascertain the views of prison staff to maximize the positive impacts of any projects and ensure longevity.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I am a trustee of a charity that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. I have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and I have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement.

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