HAMPSHIRE CULTURAL TRUST

BearFace Theatre CIC at HMP/YOI Winchester: an evaluation research study

Image courtesy of Harriet Riddell

2018 – 2025

Written by Alexandra Russell

Executive Summary

The longitudinal study provides a 'richer understanding' of prisoners 'experience and interactions' with the justice system (MoJ, 2020). It is well positioned to make a significant and important contribution to an under-researched, historically underfunded and often overlooked major societal issue of rehabilitation. The study challenges punitive discourse and supports a reformist ideology that asserts, "Prisons need to become places of purpose, not just punishment" (Wainwright et al.,2021:1). It argues that offenders can change and that a person's past does not necessarily dictate their future (Maruna, 2019).

The government prioritises rehabilitative education as, "the attainment of academic qualifications and practical skills" (MoJ, 2021). However, this fails to address the complex hierarchy of prisoners' social and emotional human needs (HMIP, 2024; Maslow, 1954). It necessitates interventions that "explore what it means to be human" (Thompson, 2020) and "help prisoners with their social skills, and techniques and strategies for dealing with their emotions" (Vacca, 2004:297).

The ethnography employs an empirically validated evidence-base (McGuire, 2004; MoJ, 2020) to contribute to the design and efficacy of rehabilitation in custody. It addresses a knowledge gap on prison theatre (Boal, 2000; Freire, 1993) and how small stories of desistance (Rudolph et al.,2002; Maruna et al., 2019), social capital (Lafferty et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 1986) and 'social' and 'personal' forms of rehabilitation (McNeill, 2018) are evident in prisoner's accounts of their experiences, to inform new modalities of rehabilitation that precede long-term life change.

The study explores the narrative experiences of prisoners and prison officers/staff participating in BearFace Theatre CIC (BFT) programmes at HMP/YOI Winchester. It is purposively qualitative (Hu et al.2018) and employs an ethically grounded methodology within the complexities of research with vulnerable groups (HMIP, 2024; ESRC, 2025; Roberts, 2008).

Research sample:

- 12 BFT programmes (2018 – 2025)
- 131 prisoners (125 unique learners)
- 38 members of prison staff (mix of education staff and prison officers)
- 113 audience member feedback from sharing events (i.e. performances at the end of a programme)
- All participants were over 18 years and identified as male
- Just over 74% were British nationals. 20% were a mix of European residence. 6% other.
- 86% attendance (for individuals that completed the programme)

- 86% attendance (for the programme)
- 69% retention (for individuals who completed the programme)

Research methods:

- Group observations and participant as observer (3 to 5 days per programme)
- 62 interviews with participants during delivery
- 18 focus groups during delivery
- 10 interviews with participants three weeks post delivery
- 2 focus groups two months post programme (a small number due to the transitory nature of a remand prison)
- 2 interviews with participants post release (via probation officer support)

Key themes:

- BFT methodologies
- Neurodivergent learning styles
- Prison officer/staff participation

Key findings:

Prisoners' narrative experience

Democratic learning environment (student centric and collaborative)
Collective responsibility and accountability to others
Joy in learning (permission to play)
Permission to be vulnerable
Permission to be oneself
Increased openness to new experiences
Positive mental health and well-being
Learning through active and creative methods (engaging body and mind)
Navigating complex social groups
Social bonds and networks of trust (community and belonging)
Creative expression of complex emotions
Emotional regulation
Being believed in (recognition from others)
New narratives of hope (i.e. ready to make a positive change)
Empathy and insight into other people's stories
Challenges dichotomous thinking (i.e. seeing the world as all good, or all bad)
Develops divergent thinking skills (new ideas and ways of seeing the world)
Non-judgmental

Motivational / inspirational
Resilience and determination
Having a voice (being heard)
A sense of pride
Humanising and de-labelling (being seen as human opposed to just a criminal)
Increased empathy and compassion for others
Self-compassion
Coping skills for stress management
Improved relationships with prison officers
Feeling safe
Belief in self and self-awareness
Exploring pro social identity (replacement self)
A sense of meaning and purpose in their lives in prison
Problem solving, negotiation, imagination, and flexibility
Healthier intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships
Confidence building
Adaptability

Prison officers' narrative experience

Increased empathy and compassion for prisoners
Job satisfaction (a sense of meaning and purpose in their jobs)
A sense of pride
Desire to use creative methods at work
Confidence building
Improved relationships with prisoners
Powerful and impactful (value of the arts in prison)
Positive self-expression
Analytic and critical thinking skills
Humanising and de-labelling (being seen as human opposed to just an officer)
Permission to be oneself
Emotional intelligence
High impact in short timeframe
Self-knowledge
Collective responsibility and accountability
New communication styles to deescalate conflict
Inspirational

Contents

Introduction

The following section presents a brief overview of literature to conceptualise the positionality of the study, which are readdressed in the key findings. They include:

1. The penal crisis
2. Mental health and well-being
3. Arts in criminal justice
4. Applied theatre methodologies
5. Neurodivergent learning styles
6. Socratic questioning
7. Self, identity & performativity
8. Secondary (or relational) desistance and rehabilitation
9. Social capital
10. Severe play deprivation

1. The penal crisis

Prisons "reveal perhaps the deepest, darkest, most vulnerable aspects of the state" (Reiter et al., 2023:770). England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe (PRT, 2023), 78% of all offenders have at least one prior conviction (UK Parliament, 2025), and "reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, costing society over £18 billion a year" (MoJ, 2021:7), with emergency measures taken to deal with overcrowding (GOV.UK, 2024).

Prisons continue to be places of "hopelessness and despair" (PRT, 2024), with offenders living in "dangerous and violent environments, with little prospect of rehabilitation" (Janjeva, 2020). Around half of adult prisoner's report being in their cell for more than 23 hours a day (Webster, 2024). A high turnover of prison staff further frustrates efficacy, with 50% of officers leaving the service after less than three years (PRT, 2022:6).

The ‘crisis in UK prisons’ (Martin, 2022) necessitates new analysis to develop our understanding of what works, why and how to best meet the needs of prisoners to improve outcomes (Maruna, 2019) and make a tangible difference to policy and practice (AHRC, 2020).

2. Mental health and well-being

Prisoners are a hugely vulnerable and disenfranchised population (HMIP, 2023; Sadeghi-Yekta, 2022). They are at “increased risk of poor mental health and self-harming behaviours (Pidd, 2024), with “suicides among male prisoners higher than that in the male general population” (UK Parliament, 2024; Newbury et al., 2020:1).

Many prisoners “experience poor mental health” due to “overcrowding, lack of purposeful activity, and inadequate access to healthcare” (PRT, 2023:12), with “44% of prisoners experiencing thoughts that they would be better off dead” or considered hurting themselves (PRT, 2022:4). Addressing the mental health and well-being of individuals in penal settings, “may help to motivate people to get through their sentence and give that time a purpose” (PRT, 2021).

A recent study into the life-long consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) found 84.2% of prisoners “had suffered at least one ACE”, and that this group were significantly more likely to self-harm in custody (Newbury et al., 2020:1). ACE “such as child maltreatment are strong predictors of poor mental health and wellbeing” (2020:1), yet despite high levels of trauma in populations, there remain “woefully inadequate” resources and staff shortages to be able to deal with “80,000 incidents of self-harm in the prison estate in the past year” (HLPR, 2024).

The high levels of ACE in offender populations (Roderick, 2019; Newbury et al., 2020) often result in prisoner’s higher human needs (Maslow, 1954) not being met. This deficit is likely to impinge on the longer-term goal of supporting desistance journeys and reducing

recidivism. Poor mental health and well-being also have negative consequences for prison staff, as “prison officers have higher rates of mental health disorders than many other occupations” (Binley, 2023:66).

A recent study found that 13.9% of people aged 16 years and older have a diagnosed personality disorder in the UK (GOV.UK, 2021). A significant increase to the general population is found within the secure estate, as closer to “60%-80% of prisoners have a personality disorder” (Williams, 2024). The situation is further frustrated by the disproportionate number of mental and physical health disorders and learning disabilities found in the prison population (PRT, 2023- 2024).

3. Arts in criminal justice

The arts are often dismissed as ‘soft touch’, and “rely too much on anecdotal evidence” (Maguire et al., 2019:3) to be able to demonstrate efficacy in relation to supporting theories of desistance. Despite this, creative arts have been linked to “improvements in the well-being of prisoners” (Walker et al., 2021:260), with “a clear link between the arts and desistance” (Hardwick, 2019). Coates (2016) states the arts are effective for engaging prisoners “when they have had negative experiences of traditional classroom subjects”, and that “They can be the first step towards building confidence for more formal learning” (p.29).

The term ‘transformative’ is frequently applied to prison theatre, although this is rarely ethically and empirically substantiated (Rasmussen, 2020), with a reliance on short to medium term impact studies and small samples. The National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance (NCJAA) (2021) asserts that access to arts and creative activity is essential for holistic prisoner health and wellbeing, and therefore these activities have a crucial role to play.

A recent study conducted by the University of Cambridge, asserts arts programmes bring about “personal, social and creative benefits…and inspired new ways of envisioning their futures’ (Lanskey et al., 2024:98). McNeill (2012) asserts that arts projects not only “develop social and human capital but demonstrate how negotiations are managed in positive personal and professional relationships” (p.2).

4. Applied theatre methodologies

Presentational knowing (as seen in theatre) “highlights the continuously creative capacity of the human individual and social mind to tell stories”' (Reason et al., 2011:15). As a form of participatory and democratic theatre making, applied theatre (AT) engages socially disadvantaged groups to tell 'their' stories (Pérez-García et al., 2021:1). It is the “art of looking at ourselves and unlocking social mobility” to establish “transformational learning experiences” (Thompson, 1998:45).

AT creates a space for critical reflection and change. By participating and performing, a person can reflect upon their lives, their environment, their community and society, and in so doing, contribute to a process of positive personal, institutional and social change (Boal, 2000; Thompson, 1998). AT is situated within narratives of hope, which challenges dominant ideologies and builds on “shared circumstances” to forge new “relationships, and organize for common goals” (Young et al., 2021:3).

Through active and creative processes, facilitators and participants “work together to address issues of mutual concern” (Reason et al., 2011:1). Performances are often collaborative and improvisational, allowing participants to reflect critically on past behaviours, and explore new and prosocial responses to challenging situations (Baim, Brookes & Mountford, 2002).

5. Neurodivergent learning styles

It is well evidenced that effective education can “lower recidivism and reduce levels of violence” to create “a more positive prison environment” (Vacca, 2024:298). And yet, a 2022 House of Commons Education Committee’s inquiry found a long-term decline in both the quality of education and the number of prisoners participating in learning or training.

Prisoners often struggle with “poor self-concepts and negative attitudes toward education” (Vacca, 2024:297), with 42% having been excluded from school, which “impacts their ability to engage” (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023). Some experts challenge the idea that the application of specific learning styles have the capacity to improve learning outcomes (Newton, 2021). However, this stance may be limiting for individuals in custodial settings, as emerging neuroscience principles evidence the significant benefits of adopting an ‘active student-centred’ learning approach, as opposed to more traditional “teacher-centered information transfer” (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:1-14). Prisoners with “a Kinesthetic preferred Learning Style [are] more likely to obtain education awards” (Duwe and Clark, 2024:143).

HMPPS has a duty of care to provide educational provision that responds to the learning needs of neurodivergent learners (MoJ, 2022). There is an urgent need to address neurodivergence in prisons, as 25% of prisoners have an ADHD diagnosis, compared to “2.5% of adults in the general population” (UK Parliament Committees, 2021; Criminal Justice Inspectorates, 2021; Young & Cocallis, 2021). This requires adaptive approaches to education, as many prisoners are less likely to thrive in traditional education environments (White Paper, 2021).

McGuire (2004) states "…learning styles of offenders require active, participatory methods of working [and] behavioural role playing, interpersonal problem solving and modelling, role reversal exercises and guided group discussion" (p.58). Experiential approaches "enhance motivation, improve retention, build higher-order-thinking skills", as well as "group work agency, curiosity, and peer-to-peer social interactions" (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:14). By "stimulating a curious mindset" the formation of "new narratives of self are created" (Hull, 2023).

These learning styles have been linked to "increased employability (Nygaard et al., 2013) and support rehabilitation, reintegration, and desistance (Willis et al., 2010)" (Baumgartner, 2020: 558). The use of active learning approaches enables individuals to "perform better and fail less than those taught through direct instruction" (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:1). It "necessitates the creation of an equal and inclusive learning space" (Baumgartner, 2020:551) to build safe, trusting and respectful learning environments. This is "vital to all learning spaces but particularly applies to prisons" (2020:552).

Furthermore, neuroscience studies on how the brain absorbs and retains memory and learning, suggests that motivation for learning derives from curiosity, which is "described as being essential for human learning and achievement" (Thomaz et al., 2022:49). Adopting methods that promote curiosity can enable "a love of learning" where people become "fascinated about new things" and is "therefore associated with positive emotions" (p.49).

Hamid and Dubinsky (2024) assert that teacher centric direct information environments "where uncertainty is low", reduces "episodic memory, attention and cognition (Monosov, 2020; Rouhani et al., 2018)", as learners "will not acquire the decision making or application skills without practice" (p. 14). In contrast, under conditions of high uncertainty [as found in applied theatre methods],

episodic memory, attention, and cognitive engagement are elevated, as agency and active exploration is necessary to address and resolve problems. Learning rates may be slower in such contexts, but the retention of acquired knowledge tends to be significantly greater. (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024).

Effective educational initiatives “reduce the chance of reoffending significantly” (MoJ, 2025:15) and can build a more constructive and supportive institutional environment for both prisoners and staff. Importantly, these educational experiences are not solely remedial; they also provide opportunities for participants to experience joy, fulfilment, and a sense of purpose within a learning context, which are key elements for long-term rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

6. Socratic questioning

Socratic questioning enables “meaningful interactions between prison officers and prisoners” (Tate et al., 2017:1). It engages prisoners in group discussions and reflective dialogues to encourage participants to critically examine their behaviours, beliefs, and the underlying factors contributing to their offenses, fostering self-awareness and promoting personal development.

This “helps people think about their assumptions, seek more evidence for their views, or work through the probable consequences of their intentions” (NOMS, 2015:2). Questions are used for “systematically narrowing down the inquiry” (Boghossian, 2006:44). The aim is to build “trust, confidence and rapport, active listening…and strengthening commitment to change” (Vickers-Pinchbeck, 2019:244).
By engaging prisoners through exploratory open dialogue and mutual respect, prisoners and prison officers have “the opportunity to explore their morals and opinions in a safe, non-adversarial

environment" (Szifris, 2016:33). This approach may be "more effective and less expensive than current cognitive treatments…improving the critical thinking and moral reasoning of prisoners" (Boghossian, 2006:43). By "starting from the point of a person in society, as opposed to an offender with deficits to be addressed", participants begin to "see themselves, and their place in the world, from a different perspective" (Szifris, 2016:33).

7. Self, identity & performativity

Goffman (1990) states there is no true self, only the roles we perform. He asserts people play a range of different parts, determined by their environment, and adapt their behaviour depending on the audience. We are always performing, rehearsing and acting out behaviours, controlling and staging how we appear, ever concerned with how we are coming across.

We exist only in so far as we play:

> *"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, they have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts"*
>
> (As You Like It, William Shakespeare, 1623)

Goffman's (1990) theory of 'self and identity' argues that our 'front stage' is not an improvisation, rather a carefully crafted representation of the self to others. It is a manipulation of the audience by the actor. In contrast, the 'backstage' is where we go to practice the techniques of 'impression management'; the actor relaxes here, and the mask is dropped, and 'backstage' thoughts, triggers and motivations can be explored.

Goffman (1961) suggests that the process of identity construction for prisoners is deeply influenced by the prison environment, where institutional norms and labels often shape how individuals see

themselves, both during incarceration and after release. Prisoners adopt identities that align with survival strategies within prison culture, but these identities can become problematic when they re-enter society, where different norms and expectations prevail (Maruna, 2001). Uggen (2004) asserts that former prisoners often face the challenge of renegotiating their identity, as the stigma of incarceration and the internalisation of a 'criminal' identity can hinder their desistance efforts.

The construction of identity in prison often involves a struggle between maintaining a sense of self and adapting to the institutional pressures of the penal system (Jewkes, 2005). To achieve long-term change relies on both an individual's self-perception and the ways in which they are perceived by others. It has been evidenced that "the longer and harsher the prison sentence – the more likely that prisoners' personalities will be changed in ways that make their reintegration difficult and may increase their risk of re-offending" (Jarret, 2018).

8. Secondary (or relational) desistance and rehabilitation

The concept of desistance is an ever evolving and contested area of study. Maruna (2019) asserts "Desistance research takes success stories seriously" and recognises "the individual as the agent of change" (p.9). Todd-Kvam (2021) asserts that desistance develops at 'micro levels' and is supported by social networks and relationships. It is typically understood to be "more than just an absence of crime, it is the maintenance of crime-free behaviour and an active process in itself. It is a journey that involves the pursuit of a positive life" (Maruna, 2007:652).

The following enablers are believed to support individuals on their desistance journeys:

1. strong ties to family and community
2. employment that fulfils them
3. recognition of their worth from others
4. feelings of hope and self-efficacy
5. a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives'

(Maruna and Mann, 2019: 7)

1. an openness to change
2. exposure and reaction to 'hooks' for change (or turning points)
3. imagining and believing in a 'replacement self'
4. a change in the way that offending and deviant behaviour is viewed

(Rudolph et al., 2002: 999-1002)

Maruna and Farrall (2004) define desistance as having primary and secondary functions. The first relates to behaviour, the second, "implies a related shift in identity" (McNeill and Schinkel, 2024:49). Secondary (or relational) desistance focuses on individuals "heavily involved in crime and criminalisation" (p.49). It is concerned with "shifts in one's sense of belonging to a (moral and political) community" (McNeill, 2015: 201), and how "criminalised people experience, or fail to experience, belonging" (McNeill, 2024:47). The concept recognises the importance of challenging "unhelpful 'Old Me' offence supportive attitudes and beliefs" (The Parole Board, 2024:31).

Effective rehabilitation can "Help to enable safe and decent prisons, with prisoners less likely to be violent when engaged in activities that are valuable to them" (MoJ, 2024: 15). HM Prison and Probation

Service has a duty of care to improve rehabilitation for prisoners and make this a key ambition of the prison system (PRT, 2025).

The following key criteria for effective rehabilitation programmes, are set out in the government's 2022 Guidance Offending behaviour programmes and interventions and the MoJ's 2020 Areas of Research Interest for offender rehabilitation strategies:

1. Whole person approach
2. Pro-social identity and strength-based
3. Well-being, resilience and good mental health
4. Nurture positive attitudes to rehabilitation
5. Improve problem solving and perspective taking
6. Better interpersonal relationships between staff and individuals
7. Managing healthy relationships
8. Addressing factors relevant to desistance, targeted at appropriate users (i.e. learning styles adapted for ADHD)
9. Motivate, engage and retain participants

McNeill's (2018) concept of 'social' rehabilitation is "focused on the traveller" and "the company that the traveller finds". It is concerned with prisoners "social position and their social identity" and centres on "their connections and resources, their social capital; [and] the help and welcome that the traveller receives on their journey" (p.17). Social rehabilitation is "a responsibility of all citizens…to support the return of those who are being or have been punished…challenging the hostility and exclusion that justice-affected people often face" (McNeill, 2018:18).

Educational programmes and interventions that aim to improve "mental and physical health and wellbeing" are encapsulated within 'personal rehabilitation' (McNeill, 2018:16). The 'personal' supports prisoners in "learning skills for change and developing self-efficacy, as part of a wider package of rehabilitative activity" (The Parole Board, 2024:13). It supports the 'strengthening of motivation' and a "shift in

personal identity often associated with desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall, 2004)" (McNeill, 2018:16).

9. Social capital

Social capital "has received little attention in the prison setting" (Lafferty et al., 2015:1). It is built on the potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through social networks (Lafferty et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 1986). It is "a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others, and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people, with the aim of supporting a well-functioning, close-knit society" (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Lafferty et al. (2015) suggests that social capital is a valuable resource among prisoners and has the capacity to improve quality of life outcomes. The relationship between social capital, rehabilitation and reintegration may "improve an individual's social and emotional well-being and foster greater treatment uptake relating to rehabilitative programmes during incarceration (Rocco & Suhrcke, 2012)" (Treloar, 2016).

10. Severe play deprivation

Play is serious stuff. It is "embedded within all humans" (Brown, 2023) and is widely considered to be a "central process in brain development" (Frost, 2010:206). Play makes humans "smarter and more adaptable…fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups" (p.208). The act of play improves "divergent thinking, which often produces multiple new ideas (Drago and Heilman, 2012)" (Russ, 2003:296).

The intrinsic urge to play is as "important to your mental health as food is to your physical health" (National Institute for Play, 2024). The

act of “free, spontaneous play [is] essential for…the development of children and for their adaptation to their culture, society, and world” (Frost, 2009:202). Through the act of play, “the child gets to imagine all kinds of variations and creative resolutions” (Chodorow, 1997:6).

Play teaches “self-regulation skills, how to identify negative schemas and change them, and how to build tools to identify and express feelings in an adaptive, prosocial way” (Hull, 2023). In this context, play is “active, creative, and social, engaging the body…and the mind in negotiation, problem solving, imagination, and flexibility” (Frost, 2009:202).

When children are “deprived of this inherent need, their development is damaged” (Frost, 2009:202). It can “jeopardize early brain development and result in immature social and emotional behavior, impulsivity, and reduced capacity for later learning” (p.205). Severe play deprivation increases the likelihood of children developing “depression, social vulnerabilities, emotional dysfunction, impaired problem solving, and formation of abnormal synapses (Frost and Brown, 2008; Brown and Vaughan, 2009)” (Frost, 2009:205). Children that are play deprived “develop brains 20 to 30 percent smaller” than play nourished children” (p.205).

Severe play deprivation in childhood can result in “self-defeating maladaptive, violent or antisocial dysfunctional solutions”, as well as “diminished impulse control, [reduced] self-regulation, increased addictive predilection, diminished management of aggression” and poor management of interpersonal relationships (Brown, 2014). The absence of “positive early play behavior, including the opportunity to play extensively in supportive, playful contexts (Brown, 1994, 1997, 1998; Perry, 1996)” can lead to “major dire consequences” for adult humans, as it “produces a rigidity in outlook and fixed ideologies” and can indicate a “predilection for antisocial criminal activities” (Brown, 2014).

Children from low socio-economic backgrounds often have poor play skills (Russ, 2003:298-299), and individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in penal settings (UK Parliament Committees, 2020). It suggests that many prisoners start life with an emotional and psychological deficit and may be less well equipped to function successfully as citizens. Prisoners lack permission to play in their childhood, often due to ACE, with 29% having experienced abuse, and 41% having observed abuse as children (UK Parliament Committees, 2020).

A systematic study conducted over forty-five years with several thousand American prisoners explored “the nature and importance of play, revealing striking commonalities” in prisoner’s accounts of their childhoods (Brown, 2014). It found that 90% of incarcerated young male murderers had no recollection of “normal” playground rough and tumble play as children, and “were characterized by either the absence of play or abnormal play such as bullying, sadism, cruelty to animals, and extreme teasing” (Frost, 2010:208). They described “isolation, bullying, inappropriately acted out aggression as their patterns of play” (Brown, 2014). A significant number of play deprived adults had a “predilection for violent criminal activities” (Frost, 2010:208).

The correlation between their “play deficiencies, and the objective problems in forming trusting social bonds with others, appears very significant and parallel” (Mader, 2022). However, the damage is not necessarily permanent, with “emerging evidence on neurorehabilitation for the debilitating effects of brain damage, injury, memory loss, learning disabilities, and emotional disorders” (Frost, 2009:206). It suggests the malleability of the human brain to adapt,

given exposure to new pro-social and strength-based experiences. Bettelheim (1987; 1950) underscores the need to reintegrate playful and expressive practices into adult life, particularly in rehabilitative contexts.

Providing Support to Families of Offenders (POPS) utilise play for maintaining healthy relationships between incarcerated individuals and their children. The act of healthy play with parental figures not only mitigates the breakdown of the family unit, but it also acts as a preventative tool to help children avoid developing the same damaging maladaptive behaviours experienced by their play deprived parent. Although, children often state that these experiences are "intimidating and stressful" (Webster, 2024), which maligns its purpose.

When considering the application of play for engaging incarcerated individuals, there is substantive literature on the use of play therapy, which often employs creative arts activities, like painting, drama, drawing and Lego building as therapeutic tools to uncover and process past traumas, often stemming from ACE. These interventions have been evidenced to "lead men closer to authenticity, intentionality, and connection in their everyday lives, helping to step closer to erasing shame, isolation, anger, and despair" (Hull, 2023). However, there is a gap in knowledge on the use of play to address the emotional and cognitive developmental needs many prisoners were denied in childhood. It raises pertinent questions around whether it might be possible to teach play deprived adults to play through structured yet non-clinical spaces in penal settings. This approach would set the purpose of play outside the realms of formal play therapy, as the act of playing itself would be its oriented goal.

The study

Note: *the term participant is predominately used to refer to prisoners and prison staff, unless drawing a distinction between them.*

Background

BFT have a demonstrable background in delivering applied theatre programmes with vulnerable and hard to reach groups, as well as with professionals working with individuals in the criminal justice system.

BFT delivered a pilot project in 2018 at Winchester prison, which was the culmination of six months of planning with the Education Manager. The pilot programme engaged ten prisoners and one member of prison staff from the education department. The introduction of staff participation aimed to support men in a process of showing vulnerability, which can be challenging in the context of a penal setting. BFT were subsequently invited to deliver a further programme in 2019 with the support of Hampshire Cultural Trust and DPS funding and have continued to be in residence at Winchester prison.

BFT have delivered 12 programmes between 2018 – 2025, with an average of two programmes a year, minus 2020 due to Covid 19. The pandemic prevented face to face delivery, so BFT designed and delivered a 'creative pack' to support men's mental health and well-being during prolonged periods of confinement (PRT, 2022).

An independent evaluator was commissioned to explore key outcomes and impact of the programme. The key findings were compiled into a short academic report and shared with the prison and external stakeholders. The same independent evaluator has followed all 12 programmes over six years.

Overview

The ethnography is purposively qualitative (Hu et al., 2018) and presents an "empirically validated evidence-base" that has "demonstrated effectiveness through rigorous research and evaluation" (McGuire, 2004:146; MoJ, 2020). It employs an ethically grounded methodology, (HMIP, 2021; ESRC, 2022), within the context of practical complexities of research with vulnerable groups (Roberts et al.,2008).

The study aims to inform HMPPS priorities and contribute to the design and efficacy of rehabilitative provision in custody. It adopts a 'whole person' approach (MoJ, 2020; PET, 2016), by encouraging participants to engage in personal exploration, by being a person rather than an offender, "or more accurately, allow them to do it for themselves" (The Parole Board, 2024; Szifris, 2016:37). The assertion is that people should be given 'second chances' (Tapper and Pearce, 2024) and afforded the opportunity to access effective rehabilitation (Viki et al.,2012:18). It asserts that under a 'moral redeemability' belief system, 'criminality' is not a permanent state of being, and can be changed by altering circumstances or self-perception (Maruna and Mann, 2019).

The study considers what offenders need in terms of 'hooks for change' (Cernkovich et al., 2002) to support narratives of desistance, by positioning prisoners as being "capable of giving credible voice to experience" and meaningfully reflecting on their lives (McKinney et al., 2012:2). It positions the "narratives and rights of participants centre stage" by enabling them to speak or "tell' their stories" (Aldridge, 2012: 116) and "co-construct experience and meanings" (Szifris, 2021:103; Freire, 1993) to address issues that are directly relevant to participants. Excluding their voice "is one way prison systems are kept closed and impervious to change" (Young et al., 2021:2).

The study examines 'restrictive narrative identity' (Keehan, 2013) and narratives of hopelessness that contribute to assumptions about crime and its 'perpetrators'. It is positioned within McNeill's (2018) secondary (or relational) desistance, specifically 'social' and 'personal' forms of rehabilitation. It examines the construction of self and identity and the relationship between social capital and networks of trust, situated around the development of self-efficacy and positive mental health and well-being, within a rehabilitative context.

The study asserts that effective rehabilitation is 'inherently relational' (McNeill, 2018:18) and requires the development and maintenance of pro social relationships. It takes a 'strengths-based approach' that focuses on the "quality of the relationship between prisoner and practitioner [prison officer]" (The Parole Board, 2024:7). These relationships can "encourage pro-social attitudes and goals for the future and…help people develop new skills to stop their offending" (MoJ, 2022). This can "help create a rehabilitative environment by adopting a positive attitude to prisoners and rehabilitation" (NOMS, 2015:1). The study is interested in how the relational qualities of these interactions are experienced by participants.

The study considers the role of structured yet non-clinical play, with severely play deprived adults, and whether the stunted social and cognitive development associated with severe play deprivation can be addressed and improved in adulthood. This frame of analysis sits outside of the realms of play therapy, as the intention is not processing past trauma, instead, it focuses on building some of the key developmental skills afforded to play enriched children.

The study presents a rare opportunity to access HMP/YOI Winchester; described by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons as "one of the 'most troubled and violent prisons in the country" with "prisoners not having enough to do" and feeling "bored and frustrated by the lack of activity" (2022). It explores BFT methodologies with prisoners and

prison officer/staff that participate alongside them. It examines how their participation contributes to the actual process of pro-social identity formation, to a large degree irrespective of content (Hinton-Smith et al.2019), and how they might inform new modalities of rehabilitation that precede long-term life change.

Methodology

The study adopts a bottom-up approach with vulnerable participants who "often require adaptive, more inclusive and sometimes individualistic methodological approaches" (Aldridge, 2012: 112). It employs an interpretative framework (Putnam et al.,2017), and an appreciative inquiry approach (Liebling et al.,1999). It is "the theory that everything is a matter of interpretation" (Van der Walt, 2020:66) and "denies the existence of an objective reality" (McCutcheon et al., 2012:67), instead favouring the "actual motivations of real people" (Heath, 2020, para 37). It is not just interested in what people are doing, it is interested in why they are doing it through lived experience (Dilthey, 1883).

The study aims to understand the world through participant's eyes, within a broader social and cultural framework (Charmaz, 2006). It compares multiple viewpoints within a group to understand how different people experience the same reality. This approach is particularly suited for understanding prisoners' perspectives on learning and rehabilitation. By prioritising meaning-making and contextual understanding, it allows for a nuanced exploration of how individuals navigate educational opportunities and their perceived impact. It is also effective for working with male prisoners (Wolff et al., 2019:1635), as "difficulties in human experience become deeply lodged within individuals and groups" (O'Connor et al., 2015: 23). This

approach may “assist in disrupting and challenging prisoners’ negative narrative identities” (Day, et al., 2014:804).

Research methods

Interviews

This instrument offers ‘reassurance’ for people that feel “intimidated by the prospect of a group discussion” (Kitzinger et al., 2011:10). In this vein, interviews offer a personalised space for participants to consider and deconstruct their thoughts outside of the complexities of group dynamics. The interview can be a more controlled environment than focus groups, meaning that they are better placed to manage disclosures and navigate potentially triggering subjects in a more nuanced and tailored manner. With the aim of providing an “in-depth but usually indicative picture about why people act in certain ways” (Barclay, 2018).

Focus groups

Focus groups are utilised at strategic points to offer a variation of viewpoints (Lunde, 1995) and examine “group interactions to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction of a group” (Morgan and Kreuger, 1988:2). They help to “generate large amounts of very rich data” (Thomas et al., 2011:4) and “involve people who might be nervous of being the sole focus of a researcher's attention”, by shifting “the balance of power in favour of the participants” (Kitzinger et al., 2011:10-18).

As far as possible, interviews and focus groups were arranged to take place in settings that would protect participants’ confidentiality and anonymity but actively avoided formal interview rooms for their negative association with being processed by the ‘system’. Key officers and education staff were made aware of interviews taking place, and

on the completion of the interview, relevant Wing/Personal Officers were informed that the interview had been completed. Focus groups took place immediately after programme delivery.

Participant-as-Observer

This method allowed the researcher to engage in activities alongside participants while maintaining a degree of analytic distance (Gans, 1968; Gold, 1958). It allowed "intensive research involvement, as observer and as participant" (Alexander,1982), "wandering together with participants in the process of arriving at insight and knowledge" (Kvale,2006:19), enabling a researcher to "speak next to, as opposed to speaking for, marginalised groups" (Hinton-Smith et al.2019).

A case study methodology (Stake, 1995) incorporates case notes that the prison use to track behavioural trends on the wings as a measure of comparison. Access to NOMIS was granted by Winchester prison.

Data analysis presents a picture of the social context of the study to "explore patterns and look for relationships between them" (Brewer,200:105). Then follows the interpretation stage (Brewer, 2000:105). It employs 'iterative-inductive' coding (O'Reilly, 2012:181) and thematic analysis (Madden, 2017:142).

Research questions

1. How does permission to play methodologies fit within a rehabilitative context?
2. How might it support the development of pro social identities, improved well-being and positive mental health?
3. How are desistance narratives performed, and do they build social capital in prison?
4. What can prisoner's learning styles teach us about effective methods of rehabilitation?

5. What are the benefits of having prison staff participate alongside prisoners?

Questions are open-ended, allowing participants to share their perspectives and contribute to the co-construction of meaning. The goal is to understand the diversity of individual experiences and the social context that shapes them (Clegg, 1999:176).

Study recruitment

Note: please also refer to the ethics section in the appendix

Recruitment was via self-response to advertisement (Hu et al., 2018, HMIP, 2021), and participation was on a voluntary basis (subject to clearance from NOMS and informed consent). The heightened risk of coercion is a central concern, as prisoners may not feel they are able to refuse research requests and may feel influenced by their relative deprivation (Hanson et al., 2015). Face-to-face conversations with prisoners on the wings helped to build rapport and promote open dialogue to address any apprehensions they may have regarding the research (this process was made easier as the researcher can draw keys).

Informal conversations on the wings cover all aspects of the research, including its purpose, how it will be conducted, their right to anonymity and withdrawing consent, dissemination, and the implications associated with their potential participation. All participants are advised that should they so wish; they can go away and consider whether they want to become involved and approach their key officer up to two-weeks pre programme to confirm their decision. The researcher revisits each applicant within this timeframe.

Once cleared by NOMS, “valid, informed consent” is obtained in accordance with NRC guidelines (2023). Verbal and written consent (UoO, 2021) minimises issues around literacy, and helps to ensure

clarity through conversation. This process is repeated with prisoners that subsequently join the programme late due to conflicting priorities (permitted up until day 3 of the programme). Where an individual indicates they are not interested in participating in the study, they are thanked for their consideration, and their contribution is not included in the research. Prison staff are also approached individually and provided with the same information.

Study sample

Small sample numbers were expected due to the nature of applied theatre interventions in custody (generally 10 – 15 per programme). The sample consisted of prisoners and prison staff, that were chosen solely on their willingness and ability to be interviewed. This meant that some informants only contributed to the focus groups or only engaged in one interview. This does not impact the value of their contribution to the overall research.

The demographic sample was a homogeneous group, with all being imprisoned at Winchester prison, participating on the same programme, either awaiting sentencing or on remand, for a range of offences. This constitutes:

- Male and of mixed ethnicity (prisoner). Mixed gender and ethnicity (prison officer).
- Just over 74% were British nationals. 20% were a mix of European residence. 6% other.
- Prisoners self-reported as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- Between the ages of 18 and 65.
- Majority repeat offenders (i.e. have served at least two previous custodial sentences).

- Prisoners self-reported having low educational attainment, low levels of self-worth/esteem and mental health and learning difficulties.
- 131 prisoners (125 unique learners).
- 38 members of prison staff (mix of education staff and prison officers).
- 113 audience feedback from sharing events (i.e. performances at the end of a programme).

Key findings

This chapter aims to present a composite picture of participant narratives pre and post programme, as framed by the research questions. It includes extracts of verbatim narrative accounts of participants (2018-2025), including feedback from invited audience and family members that attended sharing events. Additionally, it provides extracts of case notes on prisoners from programme ten.

Key findings draw from:

- Group observations and participant as observer (3 to 5 days per programme)
- 62 interviews with participants during delivery
- 18 focus groups during delivery
- 10 interviews with participants three weeks post delivery
- 2 focus groups two months post programme (a small number due to the transitory nature of a remand prison)
- 2 interviews with participants post release (via probation officer support)

Programme recruitment

As part of the BFT recruitment process, all prisoners are security vetted via NOMIS to discount offences categorised as sexually violent or violent towards women. These criteria help to reduce the threat of violence and sexual manipulation within the programme environment.

BFT programmes are not targeted or offence related, which allows the general population of the prison to apply (within the constraints of security clearance). A poster campaign is utilised to raise awareness, as well as word of mouth, and applications are submitted via key officers.

The decision to apply is complicated for many prisoners, as they have limited (if any) experience of theatre and creative participatory activities. This is a particularly daunting prospect in a penal environment that often evokes fear and mistrust. Many attribute their decision to two main factors, the pre programme relationships they form with facilitators during the recruitment stage, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback given by prisoners that have been previous participants. One participant described it as a 'bridge between uncertainty and belief'.

Prison officers are generally allocated based on availability and institutional priorities. An officer's reluctance to attend often leads to reduced participation and has a negative impact on group dynamics and engagement, as groups feel observed and less comfortable being vulnerable in front of others. It creates a division between officers and prisoners. However, most officers were willing to participate but initially cited a nervousness about looking silly in front of the men. They rationalised this position by assuming their input was solely for the benefit of the group. And yet, key findings suggest the benefits

experienced by officers exceeded this expectation, as they provided a space for their own personal development.

Attendance

An average of 86% attendance across twelve programmes based on prisoners that completed the programme. The men that are not ready to undertake this challenge often drop away from the programme within the first two sessions; commitment beyond this point invariably means full participation. Attendance is impacted by various significant factors, some of these include prior commitments to education and jobs, legal visits, health care, illness, poor mental health, restricted access to the gym and showers, and being shipped out with limited notice. Attendance also relies on key officers' timely collection of prisoners from their cells to escort them to the programme.

Year	Attendance No.
2018	- 10 (pilot)
2019	- 10 (Spring) - 13 (Summer) - 12 (Autumn)
2021	- 15 (winter)
2022	- 15 (Spring)
2023	- 9 (Autumn) - 9 (Winter)
2024	- 9 (Spring) - 9 (Autumn)
2025	- 12 (Spring)
Total	- 131 prisoners - 125 unique learners - 38 members of prison staff

Retention

Year	Average retention
2018	78%
2019	86% 50% 69%
2021	91%
2022	94%
2023	86% 94% 81%
2024	94% 72%
2025	63%

Thematic analysis

The following narratives have undergone first stage coding of thematic analysis, to systematically identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (i.e. themes) within the dataset. These are represented as highlighted words and are contextualised and interpreted in the following chapters.

Prisoners' narratives (pre programme)

"To gain more confidence in myself."
"I am really into being creative, I love writing songs and poems. I love the English language, its beautiful!"
"I would like to enjoy myself and meet new people to practice being in a group and talking in a group as this ties in with my future plans".
"To redevelop my acting skills, I haven't acted for three years"
"I feel angry; I don't want to feel angry. I want to raise my voice and listen to others"
"I want to stay out of prison and be a good member of society."
"I would like a certificate and also gain experience in interactions with others."
"I think people haven't seen the best of me yet. *I'd like to develop skills for future use in groups.*

I feel doing this course will help to prepare me for everyday life, interacting with people and being assertive, and generally a better person."
"To be able to express how I feel without hurting others. To believe in myself. To learn to trust others."
"I feel as though I am ready to change my life for many reasons that are positive to my life and those around me. Thank you."
"That it would be different and fun, with the chance of being heard and possibly reform myself."
"I don't want to come back to jail. I want to get on with people and fit into society more."
"Being more open to trying new things / improve my quality of life. I want to open up."
"I want to get new skills and maybe have a better understanding of people and their feelings."
"I am really into being creative, I love writing songs and poems. I love the English language, it's beautiful!"
"To help them with parole / be considered for special privileges."

Prisoners' post programme narratives

"My past has been quite dark, when I look back on my life, I haven't ever had the chance to have fun and play. It's bringing a soft side out of me, instead of that hard me. It's learning new things about yourself."
"That's why we do all the games, to get us out of ourselves, then we're ready to lift the mask"
"The way I learn best is when someone actually shows me – I can't do all the academic stuff, but I can watch and learn from other people. I'm a visual learner. I think Jen and Kate are visual learners just like us."
"Our lives [in prison] consist of the same thing, whether it's a Monday, whether it's a Saturday or a Sunday, it consists of the same thing. I look forward to this coz I don't know what's going to happen each week. Obviously, we knew we were going to do the performance etc., but all your tools you use are different from the tools other groups or projects use"
"This programme has helped me to believe in myself. It made me confident to feel that other people are interested in what I have to say, think positively and make positive choices. People have shown that they believe in me."
"I believe courses like this should be in all prisons, as they help build positive relationships that enable people to deal with problems and in a broad sense help with a lot of other issues like work and anything else we want to do."

"My mind works at 100mph, but that's a strength when you're working in theatre, because your brain has to be constantly on and working things out, adapting to everything changing around you. And that's what drama is all about."
"helps you to learn to juggle life again and to actually say, no, I don't want those things that hurt me, that hurt others, which is really hard".
"You can use fear as a strength, I feel like a different man now. It made me realise that everyone has their own problems and there is always a reason why someone is being the way they are. It used to just be all about me. I saw everything from my point of view, but now I see other people. It's all about us."
"The governor said at the sharing about how brave we've all been, holding a mirror up to see ourselves and then getting up and sharing that in front of an audience. I'd never met the governor until the day of the performance."
"I think all the prisoners should be able to experience this. It should be available in every prison. This experience has let me be myself and drop the mask; find out who I am and have hope."
"At the start, I felt hypervigilant, cautious. I'm in prison and I don't know these guys right and now honestly, I feel a bit confused; I feel like I've just been in a dream or something, but I like the games and that, it's been good".

"I can see myself and it gives me purpose instead of monotonous workshops making sandbags."
"I believe I've got a lot to offer, and I've never had that sort of feeling."
"This has helped me express myself in a way that is safe for me and those around me! This is an excellent way to express my thoughts, feelings and emotions. Bearface. Keep up the good work. I love it!"
"I'm gutted that its ending, however it set me up in respect of confidence and self-awareness. I'm always up to learn something new about myself. I'm so grateful for what you guys have done for me within myself growing into someone I like and one day could come to love myself."
"I think this has helped me very much with new skills and boosted my confidence very highly, especially in a group and in front of people. I want to say thanks for everything."
"I have gained a lot of confidence and have improved my mental health by attending these sessions. Thank you."
"Doing this has basically changed me, helped me cope with things and helped me deal with my family issues better"

"This group has inspired me to do better with my life. I may have mountains to climb as an ex-addict, but this has given me the tools for when I get outside to climb them."
"After seeing what we've done he's [prison officer] is more sympathetic. Whatever we've done, he's seen us as people. He understands. I think other officers would have benefited from taking part in it and see how we've benefited from it"
"I feel inspired, it's been really inspirational. It's been good to help each other. I felt quite stressed at the start, I have a lot going on out there and now I feel relaxed, it's been good to have fun and be with different people."
"It surprised me – all these games and things we play actually have a meaning. There is reasoning behind everything they do. That makes it easier to relate to and understand, rather than just sitting down talking and it being boring."
"I didn't expect to be good at it. Being part of something so positive has given me hope."
"We're being creative – it's hard to explain what it is to other people – you have to be here. It isn't really theatre – we're acting as ourselves but having fun while doing it. *Although they don't ask us specific questions about our life experiences, you end up naturally sharing stuff about*

your life and find out we all had similar outlooks that you can relate to"
"I've grown so much from this process. My dad watched me today; he's a hard man but afterwards he took my arm and told me he was proud of me. He's never said anything like that before."

Prisoners' post-delivery Personal Reflective Statements

"I've always failed at things, but when the guys watching us yesterday said how good it was, I thought, oh, they're just blowing smoke up my arse, but they weren't; it was generally good comments. They really thought it was good!"
"I'm completely different back on the wing, it's a safe space here, you can't express yourself on the wing except through violence, and you can't show your emotions."
"I can't thank you enough for helping me in such a short period of time. I am happy I can be myself around everyone, so keep up the good work. I am proud of everyone and thank you for having me"
"I have had an absolutely amazing experience participating in BearFace. I've engaged with people I could never usually open up with, to a point that surprised me. I'd like to thank all of the staff for all the encouragement and support they have shown through all

of this. Thank you so very much – in really appreciate everything they have done."
"The BFT project was a brilliant experience for me, as I was always put on the spot and had to put myself out there which was a little hard for me, but this has given me more confidence in myself. I still need to work on myself as I keep putting myself down."
"This has changed my behaviour and given me a positive outlook on life itself. Honesty and trust and care in the team and prisoners is massive. I've never done something like this before it was a very good experience for me, I look forward to the next project."
"I definitely think this has changed who I am in every way. Before this I couldn't really participate, speak in front of a new group, open up. This has made me feel a lot braver, I want to do more."
"Now I'm not scared of being in a crowd. I've seen a difference in my behaviour, this course has given me different ways of thinking. Being among people, sharing with each other motivates me and I'll try my best to hold onto it. I definitely feel more positive about my future."
"It has allowed me to be myself in such circumstances, rather than abstaining and staying withdrawn. It was liberating creatively. I will continue writing way beyond the end of my involvement in this programme."

"The governor turned round and said the difference he sees in me now is a totally different person, and he actually said to my mum yesterday, you should be proud of him coz he can do anything that he puts his mind to. All it is now, is just taking the right steps forward and getting out of all that trouble."
"Every Thursday we've been coming here, and officers will say, who's going to be the bird today? And that's continued, but this morning, I can't remember his name, but an officer opened the cell door, and said "How did it go yesterday?" I said, "oh, it went really well, I think". He said, "What do you mean you think?" I said, "yeah, it went really well". *He asked how many were there, I said, "oh, about 40/50, I think". He said "That many? I went, "yeah, I think it went really well". He went, "oh, I wish I went to see it, he genuinely said, I wish I'd come and seen it instead of going down the pub."*
"It is making me realise I can be good at things – it gives me more confidence to speak out in front of people. Challenge myself. I'm learning that you can make mistakes, but you can get through it and turn it around. I can laugh at myself and let others laugh at me, which is something I wouldn't allow people to do"
"It has taken me 20 years to find out that I can stand up and speak up in front of others. I'm so glad I did this; Having my mum come up and hug me after the

performance, after everything I've done, it just meant so much to me."

Prison officers/staff pre programme narratives

"To understand more about how people think and feel and how their attitudes change."
"I would like to continue to assist in delivering the programme as I took part in the last delivery, and I have seen the positive impact on service users. I also feel proud to be part of this concept and wish to pursue more arts in my personal and professional life."
"To grow as a person, gain confidence. I love doing my job."

Prison officers/staff post programme narratives

"That has probably been my best day at work ever, I was crying, because it reminds me of why I love my job, and why I work with these people. So, it's not just about prancing around like a fairy, it's really very meaningful, and now that more people have seen it and they understand it, that's going to stick with me and keep reminding me of why I love my job even on days when I don't love my job, I'll think about yesterday and the end goal. *I have found it really, really enjoyable and I got a lot out of it. It has allowed me to see the men in a different light. On the wing there is a lot of bravado, the men feel they*

have to present themselves in a certain way that isn't actually who they are. Here they can be themselves."
"They've had the confidence to be themselves in front of other men that they don't really know which has been really powerful. It enables you to look at your spirit, your journey, and how you can move forward with your life. We all build walls around us to protect ourselves, but the confidence the men have built after only two weeks shows that they are really getting a lot out of it. The men are expressive, reflective, creative. I am an officer, but I am also a human being and it's good for the men to see that, I have feelings too and emotions – we all have good days, and we all have bad days. It was good to share"

Sharing event (invited audience member)

"Great programme, more needs to be done to support inmates further in relation to outside support and the hope of services like BFT. Inmates should be respected more in the rehabilitation process".
"There should be a variety of arts activities in the prison, outside of education, as this would appeal to prisoners that don't like drama."
"I think it is therapeutic for the prisoners and good for staff to see it. It was amazing. I feel that embedding comic moments in such a dramatic subject has made the experience even better."

"It was emotional; I felt proud, guilty, happy. It was outstanding, something I would pay to see. I felt so emotional in parts. I feel positive about supporting the men in my role, but I know I can do more to help."
"I think everyone should have the opportunity to do it. I am more than happy to volunteer to help support the programme."
"This is an excellent method to give the men a voice."
"This will help me with my job. It has helped me to feel more positive about my role. It has inspired and moved me. I feel positive and motivated to help prisoners to become better people. I want to do more to celebrate their strengths and talents. I will offer support by raising awareness and encouraging prisoners to engage."
"It was great to hear their [prisoners] lived experience. It made me feel that we need to do more collectively to support reintegration and challenge stigma. It has reinforced my views as they are people whose experiences have extreme value. I think the prison should run more creative arts groups to help train staff"
"I feel hopeful that together we can make a change and help support each other through the gate"
"I feel uplifted now. I didn't know what to expect but I loved it. Very emotional – thoughtful. It provides a space to talk and express uncomfortable/scary feelings. It promotes skills, qualities and worth"

"I feel like we are a community; was nice to see staff, prisoners, and outside visitors all together as one"
"I was a bit apprehensive at first, but it has really opened my eyes. [The] Q&A part at the end demonstrated them with their masks off. [This approach] can be valuable to help the men view themselves, their true selves positively. I think it has shown other people how amazing things like this are"
"I feel inspired. I'm an ex-prisoner myself and would have done a similar project if it was on in the prison."
"It has made me feel responsible for doing better. The experience made me realise I need to be more personable with the men. This helps to build networks of support."
"I was humbled by the touching performance and the evident self-esteem it gave the participants. Prison is a section of society that I rarely think about. This is positive and hopeful. It reminds me of their humanity and our collective responsibility for them. The value of the arts is invaluable for their self-esteem and place in society. I can support through my attendance and word of mouth about the benefits of this work"
"I was nervous entering a prison space, but excited to see what had been created. The narrative was very strong throughout. I loved the contrast between the comedic and intense moments. I loved how you owned your stories. I loved the commitment to the acting and movement. The first poem was very powerful over the singing. I felt inspired and connected to the experiences of the men"

"It affirmed my belief in the arts as a tool to have a powerful and positive effect on all society. We are all human beings with voices, creativity and a need to be heard. I will support work like this and spread the word. Thank you for your courage."
"I was invited to see what the men had achieved, and I am now feeling privileged to have been here to listen to their stories and watch the performance. I loved all of it. I was moved by the poetry and readings. I feel uplifted – mainly because of the guys reaction to their wonderful performance. Thank you guys – you were awesome."

Sharing event (invited prisoners)

"I enjoyed every minute. Prisoners and staff coming together as one. It made me feel good. I think they've done brilliantly".
"I enjoy theatre – it was moving – great! It shows how hard it is to get employed once labelled as a convict. It made me feel more motivated to change for the better. I am a prisoner and we are often misread and labelled."
"I'm a recovering alcohol misuser. The play has given me an insight into other people's journeys. It has also given me a chance to reflect on my own past life and motivated me to maintain my recovery. Prison regiemes should use real life stories to encourage recovery and rehabilitation"

Sharing event (invited family members)

"It has confirmed my belief that rehabilitation is possible. Please keep supporting BFT. I now have a more sympathetic attitude to prisoners, a better understanding of what they go through, and now see them more human than convicts."
"I feel really proud and very emotional. My son was being so honest, and also having the confidence to do what he has done and put himself in the spotlight. Words can not express how good it was; I felt humble and proud to be able to see the celebration. I've always thought prisoners are human beings, but it proves how important it is to do things like this to help them."

Sharing event (invited university students)

"I wasn't expecting much but it blew me away! Fantastic! It was emotional, really different. You really feel sympathetic. They've made mistakes but they are people. You should get more of the community involved."
"I now feel I have a better understanding of what can impact a prisoner, and a huge amount of empathy for them. Also, the real need for prisoners to have a chance to be themselves and this is what the arts can help with."
"It has made me feel passionate that everyone, including prisoners, need to be able to express themselves. I believe that reform is the way forward. That they have positive talents that should be nurtured. I will advocate for more programmes like this."

Main themes

Note: The following themes are drawn from narrative extracts of participating prisoners, prison officers/staff, audience members and observational field notes. They provide insights into the major themes of the programme, as experienced by the participants.

Prisoners' narrative experience

Democratic learning environment (student centric and collaborative)
Collective responsibility and accountability to others
Joy in learning (permission to play)
Permission to be vulnerable
Permission to be oneself
Increased openness to new experiences
Positive mental health and well-being
Learning through active and creative methods (engaging body and mind)
Navigating complex social groups
Social bonds and networks of trust (community and belonging)
Creative expression of complex emotions
Emotional regulation
Being believed in (recognition from others)
New narratives of hope (i.e. ready to make a positive change)
Empathy and insight into other people's stories
Challenges dichotomous thinking (i.e. seeing the world as all good, or all bad)
Develops divergent thinking skills (new ideas and ways of seeing the world)
Non-judgmental
Motivational / inspirational
Resilience and determination

Having a voice (being heard)
A sense of pride
Humanising and de-labelling (being seen as human opposed to just a criminal)
Increased empathy and compassion for others
Self-compassion
Coping skills for stress management
Improved relationships with prison officers
Feeling safe
Belief in self and self-awareness
Exploring pro social identity (replacement self)
A sense of meaning and purpose in their lives in prison
Problem solving, negotiation, imagination, and flexibility
Healthier intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships
Confidence building
Adaptability

Prison officers' narrative experience

Increased empathy and compassion for prisoners
Job satisfaction (a sense of meaning and purpose in their jobs)
A sense of pride
Desire to use creative methods at work
Confidence building
Improved relationships with prisoners
Powerful and impactful (value of the arts in prison)
Positive self-expression
Analytic and critical thinking skills
Humanising and de-labelling (being seen as human opposed to just an officer)

Permission to be oneself
Emotional intelligence
High impact in short timeframe
Self-knowledge
Collective responsibility and accountability
New communication styles to deescalate conflict
Inspirational

Audience members themes

New belief in rehabilitation
Therapeutic
Permission to play (power of theatre and the arts)
Educational
Pride
Inspired
Motivated
Celebrate strengths and talents
Awareness raising
Hopeful
Unifying
Collective responsibility
Humbled
Privileged
Sympathetic
Authentic and honest
Courage
Connection
Epathetic

Barriers to participation (prisoners)

Not able to articulate feelings and thoughts
Hopelessness and fear to pursue change
Not knowing how to engage in healthy play and fun
Mistrust of others
Feeling impotent to change life circumstances
Seeing the world as dangerous and threatening
Lack of rehabilitative opportunities
Poor self-image (resigned to being a 'bad person')
Isolation
Imprisoned by addiction
Emotional dysregulation
Unable to show vulnerability and authenticity (i.e. hiding behind a mask)
Poor mental health (i.e. sadness, depression and frustration)
Not being transported from the wings to the programme on time (in some cases, not at all)
Needing to choose between a shower, gym, education, work etc. or attending the programme.

Case notes (NOMIS)

Participant A.

No show for work, dismissed from work, contraband, theft of food, disobeying commands, asked guard to bring him in a phone, homemade weapon found in cell, helping other prisoners/in good spirits.

Participant A. *Worked extremely well helping others.*
Participant B. *Makes other prisoners feel uneasy due to offence, pervasive dark thoughts and requests for single cell to protect cell mate, fermenting alcohol in cabinet.*
Participant B. *He has been helping other men with their mental health.*
Participant C. *Self-harm, suicide risk, under threat from cell mate, father committed suicide, children taken into care:*
Participant C. *He's not self-harmed for three weeks, starting to feel much better and more settled, stopped one hourly checks as didn't feel he needs them, has a new job, polite with staff, no more thoughts of self-harm or suicide, no more observation checks.*
Participant C. *He became abusive as wasn't allowed a shower, dismissed from work for poor behaviour, got angry and threatened to hit officer.*

BFT methodologies

Note: *The following section is a critique of BFT programmes at Winchester prison, contextualised by some of the major recurring themes derived from the narratives of participants, as framed by the research questions and literature review presented earlier in the study.*

BFT invites "those who have in the past so often been the mere objects of investigation become the agents of their transformation" (Nind, 2014:534). The facilitators work collaboratively with participants "to bring about change themselves, rather than having it 'taught' or imposed upon them" (The Parole Board, 2024:7). The assertion is that prisoners have agency and insight to challenge the dominant discourses about their lives and develop spaces for critical reflection and change. It is both a preemptive and responsive methodology, as it explores both collective narratives from the past, as well as how to shape future ones. This process invariably spans a range of highly complex issues associated with being human.

The programme is voluntary, not targeted, nor offence focused, has no syllabus, offers no official accreditation, pre-determined agendas, and has no definitive outcomes. The facilitators loosely pre-plan games and activities for each session, but these plans are invariably adapted during sessions to respond to the needs of a group. It affords groups the opportunity to determine and create substantive content that has the most relevance to their lives. This approach appears to differ significantly from many other educational and rehabilitative interventions in prison that are often targeted and goal orientated.

The programme centres on narratives of hope and invites participants to bring their "lived-experienced knowledge into the learning space" (Baumgartner, 2020:554). Building on shared circumstance, participants "collaborate, forge pro social and strength-based relationships, and organise for common goals" (Young et al., 2021:3). It is a bottom up and collective process that treats participants as 'co-creators' of knowledge, positioning them at the heart of the learning and creative process (Freire, 1993).

BFT employs an active, creative, participatory, participant led, and bottom-up methodological approach, facilitating play, improvisation, role-play, storytelling, and character development, to explore concepts of self and identity and re-imagine themselves through the prism of theatre. BFT methods are theatre in the sense that prisoners are performing versions of themselves, sometimes rehearsing new ones. They are the characters they explore and play with, and they form the basis of the material that is devised for the sharing event.

BFT aligns with elements of Maslow's (1954) higher human needs. These include 'Self-actualisation (morality, creativity, spontaneity, acceptance, experience purpose, meaning and inner potential), Self-esteem (confidence, achievement, respect of others, the need to be a unique individual) and Love and belonging (friendship and a sense of connection). The MoJ 2014 White paper asserts these are some of the key elements for successful rehabilitation.

Secondary (or relational) desistance and rehabilitation

The study positions BFT within ‘a wider package of rehabilitative activity’ that is “not designed to change people on their own” (The Parole Board, 2024:13). It is not a ’cure’ for offending behaviour, “nor should key findings be considered in isolation” (p.6). It suggests a correlation with ‘personal’ and ‘social’ rehabilitation (McNeill, 2018).

Participants conveyed widespread disillusionment with rehabilitation programmes, captured by the phrase “rehabilitation don’t work,” indicating a perceived failure of the system to offer meaningful reform. Many shared feelings of dehumanisation, evident in phrases like “I’m not a number”, which highlights how prisoners often feel reduced to mere statistics. Many described a sense of dissatisfaction with existing rehabilitation programmes that do not respond to their needs. They spoke about the broader structural issues within the prison system, describing it as fundamentally flawed and more interested in punitive approaches than rehabilitation.

Common themes* that arose from the narratives of participants relate to some of the key enablers of desistance (Maruna, 2019; McNeill, 2018). In this context, groups articulated the following benefits to their participation within the programme:

- Hope for the future
- Meaning and purpose in their lives’ in custody
- Openness to pursue future personal development opportunities
- Imagining and believing in a pro-social sense of self

The study found evidence of secondary (or relational) desistance narratives (McNeill, 2018), with participant describing the following:

Social:

- Pro-social bonds and networks of trust
- Feelings of community and belonging
- Feeling valued and supported by peers and others
- Being seen as a 'good person' with something positive to offer

Personal:

- Improvements to general mental health and wellbeing
- Learning skills for positive change
- Increased motivation to achieve it
- A desire to meaningfully explore a prosocial identity

The term rehabilitation is not framed by BFT as 'fixing' an individual. It is concerned with exploring and addressing some of the core psychological and emotional developmental needs of individuals through permission to play.

The process is guided by the facilitators, but any goal orientated aims come directly from participants. They set their own agendas and make the decision on what aspects of themselves to focus on and explore. It is a bottom-up approach to rehabilitation, where change is explored through the agency of the collective and the individual.

**These are most evident in the narratives of prisoners that complete the programme.*

Social bonds and networks of trust

It is a huge deal for many prisoners to trust themselves and others enough to show vulnerability, as it has often not served them well in their lives. For some, it can be too challenging, especially if they are not ready to commit to a process that requires higher order thinking and reveal what is going on underneath. It has the potential to leave them open to rejection, judgement, ridicule, and challenge a well-constructed presentation of self that has been built over years as a means of self-preservation.

Participants experience creative, social and human capital, and demonstrate how effective "negotiations are managed in positive personal and professional relationships" (McNeill, et al, 2012:2). The development of pro social and strength-based relationships, social ties and networks of trust constitute some of the key aspects of social and emotional wellbeing, which may foster greater treatment uptake relating to rehabilitative programmes during incarceration (Rocco & Suhrcke, 2012). It is no longer a prison for these men; it is an act of freedom and democracy. A non-judgmental environment that breeds equality and bonds of companionship. Participants show concern for others' well-being beyond their own needs.

A central tenant is the promotion of belonging and community, with many participants describing a strong sense of safety, trust, camaraderie, and the value of emotional support they derived from others. The theme of trust emerged as crucial, especially concerning relationships with prison officers. The promotion of trust is a valuable resource in prisons, as being trusted can "lead to hope and a belief in a better future" (PRT, 2025:6).

Participants stated that without trust in each other and the officers, relationships break down, potentially leading to further isolation and conflict. One participant stated, “It’s all about trust – that’s what make prisons work,” which underscores its importance in maintaining a functional and less hostile prison environment.

Small groups allow for trust to develop between participants and facilitators; rehearsing and directing each other through consent, mutual respect and openness that gives permission for constructive feedback from peers. Groups feel responsible and accountable for each other. They interact and perform as an ensemble, as opposed to individual participants.

Participants often describe a sense of ‘being lucky’ to have a group dynamic that encourages openness and acceptance by others, imagining that other groups would be unlikely to fare so well. The evidence consistently challenges these assumptions, as the diversity of participants still produces similar experiences across programmes.

Self and identity

Some versions of ourselves are so well rehearsed, we are often not aware we are performing them. A prisoner stated, “I’ve behaved the same way for so long, it’s become the norm” (participant, 2019).

BFT helps to develop interpersonal and intrapersonal opportunities for an authentic ‘self’ to take centre stage. It develops self-reflection and introspection to consider that much of our identity is a social construct and thus can be remolded if we have the right environment, support and tools to achieve this complex task.

Being treated as a good person with something positive, meaningful and unique to offer acts as a spur for men to de-label and re-imagine themselves beyond their offending identity. Prisoners and prison staff expressed a strong sense of being dehumanised by the prison system. The use of the phrase “I’m not just a number” or “I’m not just a guard” reveals the frustration and resentment felt by participants when they are treated as statistics or security enforcers rather than individuals.

BFT builds on strength-based approaches that nurture positive attitudes to rehabilitation and “enable the development of pro-social identity” (MoJ, 2020:21). Participants cited a shift in their self-perception, as well as how they see other participants. Prison staff described a shift in their perception of prisoners and developed increased empathy and understanding for the complexities of their life circumstances and backgrounds. These experiences are mirrored in prisoners’ narratives when considering prison staff participation. Noticeable improvements were evident between staff and prisoners as the programme progressed, with many citing these benefits extended beyond the programme back on the wings.

BFT invite participants to ‘lift the mask’ to enable them to investigate the motivations behind the performances they give in daily life and consider the complex constructs of self and identity. Lifting the mask is both a metaphorical and physical act. The physicality of mask work offers powerful insights into how real characters are formed, narratives play out, and how they are received and interpreted by others. It grants access to the inner dialogue that sits under long-established veils of rehearsed roles we all perform.

This approach allows participants to grapple with facets of personality and behaviour, using various archetypes (jester, hero, caregiver,

citizen, rebel, dreamer, servant, ruler, rescuer, reformer, hermit etc.) to explore the intrinsic complexity of developing knowledge of the self. In many cases, lifting the mask is a highly emotional and cognitively challenging task for prisoners, and staff alike, and requires a trauma inform methodology.

Mental health and well-being

Participants described the debilitating intensity of emotional strain that arises from incarceration, with many reporting feelings of isolation, fear of violence, and uncertainty about their future. Some stated the goal of prison was not necessarily rehabilitation but simply to endure. The issue of overcrowding exacerbated this tension, leading to heightened anxiety. Groups described a need for better coping mechanisms and how the experience of prison changes a person, often in ways that make it hard to retain a sense of hope and humanity. The phrase “I just want to make it out alive” reflects the extreme mental stress of living in a penal setting.

Participants described their experience of BFT as underpinned by calm and friendship. It is an “escape from the chaos and oppression on the wings” (2025). They spoke about the gratitude they felt for being part of a caring and supportive group and the inner peace this experience afforded them. One prisoner described it as pushing past ‘the demons’ to ‘find the light’. They began to experience less anxiety and improved motivation to explore other opportunities to help manage the ‘whirlwind’ of emotions and thoughts they struggle with in prison and beyond. Their general attitudes, thinking and behaviour had improved on the wings, and divergent thinking

Neurodivergent learning styles

BFT offers an effective route to engage prisoners “when they have had negative experience of traditional classroom subjects, or struggle with self-esteem and communication” (Coates, 2016:29). Many stated they found passive teacher-centric approaches hard to engage with or commit to. The playful and active nature of BFT programmes suited the learning styles of most prisoners, with creative self-expression utilised to allow participants to find joy in the process of learning while exploring personal change.

The programme may not be targeted, but it seems to attract individuals with either official ADHD diagnosis or displaying hyperactivity traits. It utilises an experiential learning (Kolb, 1998:4) design that incorporates the VARK model (Prithishkumar and Michael, 2014), with specific consideration of active kinaesthetic learning styles, which allow learners’ to physically act out events or use all their senses while learning. VARK presents opportunities to explore ‘real-life scenarios’ (Duwe and Clark, 2024:137) and positions participants as “active learners intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically”, it is a cyclical process that requires learners to “reflect, think and act in real time” (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:1).

This approach builds safe, trusting and respectful environments. By responding to the specific needs of a given group, participants feel supported to take emotional risks and become vulnerable in front of others. Participants explore “a deeper and more critical understanding of themselves by ensuring the lived experience…of all learners are integrated in the learning process” (Baumgartner, 2020: 558).

BFT exemplifies the “benefits of active, student-centered [methods] compared to a teacher-centered information transfer” (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:2). They encourage participants to “actively practice making decisions, problem solving, and evaluating progress” (2024:1).

The adoption of active learning builds “group work agency, curiosity, and peer-to-peer social interactions”, and “enhance motivation, improve retention, and build higher-order-thinking skills” (Hamid and Dubinsky, 2024:1-14).

Socratic questioning

BFT promotes democratic dialogue, opposed to pre-defined ideas or solutions, inviting participants to become co-authors of the process and develop a new creative language around their sense of self and identity. Participants displayed divergent thinking and adaptability to conceive of multiple viewpoints. The emphasis on open and democratic dialogue aligns closely with Socratic questioning, which aims to uncover deeper understanding of the self and others and forms the basis for interpretation and discussion. This approach is a vital component of permission to play, as adult engagement seems to require overt reasoning to incorporate learning from playing.

Groups begin to imagine, visualise and articulate what a better future might look like and explore what they need to achieve it in a meaningful way. Socratic questioning is a thread that runs through the whole programme and follows games that act as analogies to stimulate discussion based on the metaphorical relevance to participant’s lives. Dialogue can become animated when discussing certain themes, but participants are always respectful when listening to a variety of opinions and ideas.

Common themes included:

- trust and relationships
- self-reflection and accountability
- empathy and compassion for oneself and others
- self and identity
- emotional regulation

- impulsivity
- positive self-expression
- hope, self-belief and capacity for change
- vulnerability and authenticity
- maladaptive behaviours and past decision making

Permission to play

Permission to play is not a luxury, nor is it regression, it is an act of radical care and self-sovereignty, a conscious reweaving of identity through tenderness, creativity, and presence. The study argues that when play is repositioned as a tool with a purpose, the use of healthy, active, spontaneous play in structured, yet non-clinical spaces may offer play deprived offenders the opportunity to gain some of the emotional and cognitive developmental needs not obtained in childhood.

One of the potential barriers of this approach is the understandable entanglement of play with humour, and therefore, it is a silly thing, or just a bit of fun. But of course, it is not a joke for people who have never experienced it before. This approach does not ignore the need for personal responsibility and accountability in relation to offending behaviour. The study acknowledges that there are large swaths of the general population who have also suffered from play deprivation in childhood but have not ended up in prison. Nevertheless, the 'striking commonalities' (Frost, 2009) in the play deprived childhoods of convicted criminals should not be ignored.

A crucial part of BFT processes is the importance of voluntary play, as "play ceases to be play when it is forced" (Walsh, 2019:5). It is rule-bound, imaginative and creates a space outside ordinary life, which paradoxically helps participants to make sense of the ordinary.

Permission to play facilitates experimentation without punishment, fostering empathy through role-taking, and stimulates cognitive and emotional engagement. Play becomes a vehicle for experiential learning, critical self-reflection and introspection, which helps to facilitate change. Participants find joy in learning about themselves and others, which produces high levels of curiosity. Play becomes a vehicle for prisoners to “move closer to erasing shame, isolation, anger, and despair” and “allows for connection and relationship building” (Hull, 2023). Groups imagine, visualise and articulate what a better future could look like and what they each need to achieve it.

A significant number of prisoners reported having limited opportunities for healthy play during childhood, citing adverse childhood experiences (i.e. abuse, neglect, or systemic economic deprivation) as dominant factors. They described the experience of playing as unfamiliar and (at times) uncomfortable and often struggled to find the language to describe the programme, asserting it is not really theatre. This could be due to their association or perception of what theatre is, but equally, it may be that the term theatre does not adequately explain the new experience of healthy play.

Prisoners were initially hesitant about agreeing to play, especially in front of men they had no association with prior to the programme. To be seen playing games is an especially threatening prospect in a prison environment, where interpersonal relationships and social hierarchies can be unpredictable. Participants described feelings of anxiety about leaving themselves vulnerable to rejection, judgement or ridicule. The participation of prison officers also threatened their willingness to play, due to an implicit imbalance of power, and the possibility that officers might tell other men on the wings.

Prison officers also felt concerned that their participation would negatively impact their authority within a group, as well as back on

the wings. However, interviews with prisoners and prison officers/staff reveal that by the second or third day of the programme, the collective and democratic experience of play becomes liberating, and perceived power differentials are minimised. This might initially appear to be a threat to the security of the prison, but there was no evidence of manipulation, belittling of others, verbal abuse, violence or disrespect when engaging in play.

Permission to play strips away much of the bravado men initially perform in the first few sessions. The act of play produces rapid openness and agreeableness within groups, making them more susceptible to hooks for change (Rudolph et al., 2002). Games act as analogies and elicit laughter, humour and build pro social networks of trust that respond to the active learning styles of many prisoners. Trust becomes both a precondition and a byproduct of play. As participants begin to show vulnerability, develop a deeper "understanding of themselves" and are "more open to hearing other people's views and more willing to interrogate their own" (Szifris, 2016:33).

Play with adults necessitates the use of Socratic questioning to assist in the process of exploring complex meaning and interpretation. The facilitators participate in games "as one of the members of the community whilst also guiding conversation and maintaining focus" (Szifris, 2016:33) to stimulate those parts of the brain that have been left dormant or damaged due to severe play deprivation.

Groups work together to "address issues of mutual concern, often with a focus on social change" (Reason et al., 2011:1). This is partly what differentiates it from clinical play therapy, as it is the opportunity to play and explore collective themes that appears to be meaningful and progressive. It does not require access to unprocessed

trauma. However, Schaefer and Peabody (2016) conceptualisation of 'play' suggests that, although BFT is not a formal form of therapy, programmes do have therapeutic value.

The inclusive, democratic, active and joyful nature of naturalistic and free play allows participants to expel high levels of physical energy in a safe and controlled environment. It requires mutual consent, respect, order and cooperation. Games may appear to resemble a school playground during break time, and yet each game has a clear strategic purpose; with rules of participation, groups enter a social contract with each other to play.

The act of playing games, performing spontaneous improvisation and immersing themselves in imaginative worlds, establishes a safe environment to explore what it means to be human, and all the complexities of understanding the self. Participants must be willing to carry themselves and each other through this process, which is not an easy task, as introspection can be an uncomfortable and challenging experience. Games are played prior to circle based discussions then deconstructed based on the meaning and relevance participants attribute to them, applying symbolism, metaphors and analogies to consider complex concepts around self and identity, decision making and new perspectives on entrenched thinking.

For example, in 'bombs and shields', participants are asked to choose two people in the room, one is their bomb, another is their shield. This knowledge is only held in the minds of participants and not initially revealed. The group is then tasked with keeping their shield between them and their bomb. They are asked to move around the space safely and spontaneously. When the group are asked to freeze, participants are invited to disclose who was their bomb and who was their shield. The discussion that follows invites participants to reflect on how 'bombs and shields' have relevance in their lives (i.e. what are

the things that keep us safe, and what are the things that do not). Common themes that groups raise explore managing relationships, addiction, impulsivity, and how 'they' feel it might be possible to break free from a life of crime.

Engagement

The efficacy of an intervention depends heavily on an individual's desire to change, as well as a "considerable ongoing commitment beyond the life of the actual programme" [it is a process] "that requires work to maintain motivation" (The Parole Board, 2024:13). A willingness to change is a significant factor in prisoners' impetus for applying to the programme. The multifaceted challenges the men face on a daily basis frustrates attendance and retention, yet despite these barriers they kept coming back and pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone, exposing vulnerabilities, trusting that it will not be used against them.

BFT programmes appear to attract men that are at a stage in their desistance journey where they feel ready to be challenged, challenge themselves and willing to show vulnerability in a group setting in the pursuit of making a positive change in their lives. A willingness to volunteer requires high levels of vulnerability and introspection is a challenging task even for the most open and self-assured individual.

Participants that would not speak at the start of the programme, and appeared emotionally absent when first joining the group, develop strong creative voices. They look for approval and acceptance from within the collective and display a drive to show what they can do. They take joy out of doing something they never believed they would or could do before taking part in the programme.

Participants are treated with kindness, compassion and respect, within a non-offence orientated learning environment. They behave respectfully, they are open to debating, engaging in dialogue that often challenges them, but without appearing offended or irritable. It is perhaps not surprising that being treated as a 'good person' with something positive to offer has such a profoundly positive effect on people that often perceive themselves as bad and hopeless.

Participants 'direct the tiller' and ultimately make up the substance of the programme. This is what constitutes such high levels of personal investment, but it takes courage. Play and humour act as a pressure valve with remarkable effectiveness to reduce stress and tension. Participants have an equal stake in the success or failure of the programme, as a significant part of it relies on their collective participation and commitment.

Prison officer/staff participation

Prisoner officer/staff participation play a crucial role for supporting "democratic decision making and providing pro-social role models" (The Parole Board, 2024:22). Their active involvement in all activities helped to build prosocial relationships and motivated them to help prisoners "set and achieve goals that aim towards a life of desistance" (NOMS, 2015:2).

Staff felt safe to show a more authentic version of themselves – relating to others in the group as people, opposed to criminals. The process provides a safe platform for developing mutual understanding of the other, which builds respect and empathy beyond the confines of the programme.

Although the role of play for prison staff does not necessarily address play deprivation in childhood, the benefits and barriers experienced through their participation shared similarities with prisoners. Many spoke about a desire to integrate active, creative and democratic methods to improve and manage relationships within the wider prison population. However, interviews with officers also highlighted a troubling sense of pessimism "about whether prison provides an environment conducive to rehabilitation" (Vickers-Pinchbeck, 2019:44).

Facilitators

The facilitators put prisoners immediately at ease with their informal and lively personas. Participants (prisoner and staff) attribute their comfort in not knowing what comes next to exceptionally high levels of trust in the facilitators, and their infectious positivity. Participants believe that the facilitators have their best interests at heart and will not use their implicit authority to take advantage of them or belittle them in front of others. The facilitators display in-depth knowledge and expertise in their field, and their combined skills and approach to the work make the programme a rare and valuable find within penal settings.

Sharing event

The devising process for the final performance appears to play an entirely separate function within the context of the programme. Firstly, it is goal orientated and considerably more teacher centric, with men positioned in the role of actor (or student), which shifts the process away from permission to play.

The facilitators also shift roles and adopt a more direct information approach through their artistic direction of ideas and themes explored during the earlier stages of the programme. Findings suggest a higher degree of impact during the first five weeks of the programme. In this sense, the devising stage and ultimate performance is the tip of the iceberg, with most of the 'transformative' body of work found in permission to play. Nevertheless, the sharing event does provide numerous benefits that should be celebrated.

It could be argued that permission to play and the sharing event exist in a natural symbiosis. Permission to play establishes the necessary foundational work to enable participants to stand and tell their stories - to be heard and acknowledged as human beings. Therefore, the sharing event can be a powerful platform to rehearse and perform new insights and skills.

Groups are required to believe in themselves and trust others, have courage, and to accept that they all have something worth saying, and take personal and creative risks when exploring how to say it. Performing gives the men a voice to be heard by decision makers, a sense of pride, it is also an opportunity for community engagement, both within and outside of the prison walls.

The sharing event stimulates open dialogue between prisoners, prison staff, invites members of the community and prisoners' families to build pro social relationships, developing deeper understanding of the experiences and issues faced by families, prisoners and prison staff, and giving insight into what the prison is doing to help rehabilitate offenders.

During the latter stage of the programme (i.e. introspection based on their insights and stories), some participants begin to feel uncomfortable and display higher levels of stress and frustration. This

is often due to perceived pressure to perform in the sharing event, as well as delving deeper into their sense of self. It highlights the importance of being ready and willing to pursue change, and the vital role of play to defuse tension and maintain group cohesion.

It is generally the final two days of the programme that the group begins to discuss the option of creating a performance based on the collective themes and insights explored during the programme. Most groups choose to refine and rehearse material to perform at the sharing event. This requires significant buy in from the group – to trust the facilitators to guide them in directions that can feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. The group must feel prepared and willing to stand in front of peers, family and members of the community. This requires an immense sense of confidence and self-belief.

Those individuals that are initially hesitant to perform are encouraged and supported (not coerced) by the rest of the group. The process allows prisoners to experience the benefits of pro social and trusting relationships, self-exploration, safety, acceptance, receiving and giving of affection, and compassion.

Community engagement

Two prisoners that completed a BFT programme in 2023 have subsequently been released and remain in contact with BFT in a community setting. They have actively engaged in rehabilitation programmes for complex drug addictions. One of them has started to attend NA and support other addicts, including attending meetings.

Two interviews were conducted to discuss their motivations for pursuing community-based opportunities with BFT. They articulated a desire to continue their involvement with creative activities through

the arts, not as a performer or artist, but to maintain their motivation to keep moving forward and sustain an openness to change.

They cited the high value they place on working with BFT and how profound it is to be believed in by people that have faith in their capacity to change. They described the benefits of creative approaches in relation to helping them with decision making and problem solving, understanding themselves and others better, a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and an increased sense of hope for the future.

They attended a meeting with Hampshire Cultural Trust (HCT) and BearFace Theatre, supported by a probation officer. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss volunteering opportunities at museums and art centres to support their reintegration journey back into society, as well as providing them experience in the workplace with a vision to secure future employment opportunities. They were also invited to form part of a steering committee to advise HCT and BFT on the development of community-based approaches for supporting prisoners through the gate. In depth discussions were also had around the possibility of them re-entering prison to help to facilitate future BFT programmes in a mentoring capacity.

Case notes

Case notes were accessed via NOMIS and illustrate a complex and nuanced picture of five prisoners from the Spring programme in 2024. They were written by key officers and capture the behaviour, attitudes and thinking of prisoners on the wings, as well as their engagement in work and education outside of the BFT programme one-month pre participation, during, and one month post-delivery.

The data suggests an uncertain picture. There were less incidents of negative behaviour, but slightly less incidents of better behaviour i.e.

their participation had lessened their pattern of negative behaviours, and in some cases, improvements could be found.

Many of the negative behaviours that were present prior to participating in the programme remained evident in case notes. However, new positive behaviours were still recorded throughout the duration of their participation. Thus, it appears they gained new ways of being in the world, while simultaneously continuing to perform old maladaptive behaviours. It exemplifies change takes time and is not a linear process. Three prisoners showed improvements in well-being and mental health, including reduction in self-harm incidents and nightly observations. One prisoner began to support more vulnerable prisoners on the wings and a member of staff dealing with mental health issues. Another secured a job in the kitchen. However, poor behaviour codes were still given across the duration of their participation and self-harm incidents increased post-delivery. The other three engaged positively, had high attendance, and provided compelling narratives within the study on the transformative experiences they attributed to the BFT programme.

Limitations

Remand prisons are notoriously difficult environments to deliver meaningful rehabilitative interventions. Half of all prisoners being held at HMP/YOI Winchester are unsentenced and nearly 90% had been at Winchester for three months or less (HM Chief Inspectorate, 2023). The study acknowledges high turnover of prisoners and staff (Vickers-Pinchbeck, 2019) frustrate efficacy and make the delivery of longer-term programmes challenging. Within this context of uncertainty, BFT is precariously balanced against HMPPS priorities.

These challenges extend to conducting rigorous research in penal settings due to short sentences, individuals awaiting trial, the daily uncertainty of being shipped out to a different prison, limited resources, and security concerns that can hinder implementation and continuity. This reduces the capacity of the research to infer causality, impact and outcomes beyond the immediate timeframe of a programmme.

The facilitation skills required to deliver these types of programmes is not readily accessible in penal settings. It often requires external third sector organisations, which frustrates access to longer term programmes. This can create a culture of 'in and out' programmes that prevent them from becoming embedded into penal policy and institutional priorities. It requires expertise and grit from facilitators and 'buy in' on an institutional and policy basis. In a practical sense, it requires access to funding, the expertise of local third sector organisations, community support, and appropriate delivery spaces within a prison environment.

Once a prisoner can articulate a readiness to make a positive change in their lives, there are basic human needs must be met to enable them to move forward and thrive. These needs are the same for offender and non-offender alike, although non-offenders often take having these needs met for granted. The overwhelming majority of prisoners in the study cited not having their foundational human needs met (i.e. safety and security, health, financial stability, and protection from harm). For the 800 prisoners that are released homeless each month, this may also include limited access to food, water, shelter, and sleep (NACRO, 2024). This is likely to mean the benefits of permission to play are less accessible to them and their capacity to engage is limited. However, it raises important questions around the category of prison BFT is delivered in, and the duration of the programme. The study argues that both these considerations need to be addressed in future work.

BFT is a non-accredited and relatively short for a penal intervention. The study argues that prisoners need to be exposed to a multi-pronged approach over a longer timeframe for meaningful and lasting change. Here lies the challenge of short repetitive sentences. Never enough time to do good. For many, it can make an already challenging situation worse.

While applied theatre programmes may have profound benefits, they often face significant challenges within a prison context. A persistent issue is the lack of longer-term studies on outcomes and impact, including post release follow-up. It makes generalised assertions on effectiveness incredibly difficult to evidence. A recent large scale mixed method study on the arts in criminal justice produced "small but statistically significant positive changes" although findings in men's prisons were "not [always] statistically significant" (Lanskey et al., 2024:8).

The argument for cost-effectiveness of prison theatre remains a contentious issue for policy makers. Evaluations are often associated with 'soft' outcomes, short-term studies, small sample sizes and limited follow up to be able to infer convincing claims of outcomes and impact post custody. This is perhaps why successive governments have prioritised "the attainment of academic qualifications and practical skills" (MoJ, 2021) that lend themselves to large samples, control trials and the use of recidivism rates as a measure of success. With a sub-population of 12 participants (on average) per BFT programme, and only three applied theatre programmes delivered a year, BFT may be perceived as having limited impact.

Current evidence asserts the vital importance of positive relationships between prison staff and prisoners 'for daily harmony' and 'effective rehabilitation' (HMPPS, 2017:1). And yet, there are limited to no opportunities for relational work between officers and prisoners. BFT is one example of how this can be achieved effectively within a cost-

effective framework if delivered in a different prison setting over a longer duration.

Recommendations

- Through the gate opportunities working with local community partners and probation services
- Ringfenced funding (matched funding by the prison)
- Delivered with prisoners serving longer sentences
- Delivered in non-remand prisons
- 8 – 12 week programmes
- Longer term study on outcomes and impact
- An additional offer of weekly sessions to increase access to the wider population at the prison
- BFT to be embedded in the education strategic vision of the education department
- Formal allocation of prison officers that are willing and able to participate in sessions
- Allocated DPS funding
- Consider opportunities for accreditation
- Prisoners to be held for duration of programme
- Greater interdisciplinary collaboration to develop knowledge on use and impact of prison theatre

Conclusion

Penal reform requires new approaches to developing our knowledge and understanding on 'what works', allowing for a more personalized and effective approach to rehabilitation (McNeill, 2019). The study recognises the need for robust social science methodologies to strengthen validity and keeps causal connections in mind as there are "many reasons that a person may desist from offending" (Hamilton, 2022: 15).

The study has argued that one intervention cannot, nor should be, held accountable for an individual's compulsion to cease criminal behaviours. Instead, a whole person approach dictates that rehabilitative provision should be informed and shaped by current knowledge on what all people (offender and non-offender) require to live productive and meaningful lives.

Despite the transitory nature of remand populations, the study argues that participants' narratives offer rich and thick descriptions of how offenders experience their journeys. They indicate the value of employing the use of healthy, active, spontaneous play in structured yet non-clinical spaces to address the developmental needs of play deprived adults in closed settings.

Providing permission to play in prisons is not an indulgence; it is a recognition of the essential human need for creativity, connection, and hope (Maslow, 1954). When framed within a broader rehabilitative framework, play becomes a serious and effective tool for supporting desistance and deserves greater attention and institutional investment. Access to these types of programmes offer the opportunity for safety and self-expression in an otherwise hostile environment where self-defence, hopelessness and a constant state of vigilance were necessary for survival, both emotional and physical (Hull, 2023).

The study argues that understanding human behaviour also requires more social and personal rehabilitative approaches (McNeill, 2018) to capture the richness and diversity of human experience. The concepts and themes addressed in the study advocate for a new approach to understanding how rehabilitation functions on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Permission to play should be seriously considered as a valuable tool for working with prisoners on their desistance journeys.

Additionally, the study has evidenced the value of adopting tailored learning styles that respond to those prisoners that require active approaches with low certainty, are student centric and employs Socratic methods to create a democratic learning environment. Permission to play cultivates the very interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that are vital to rehabilitation. These include trust, empathy, problem-solving, and self-reflection, which are skills often underdeveloped in individuals who have experienced cycles of trauma, marginalisation, and institutionalisation.

As Maruna (2001) and others have argued, sustained desistance requires a shift in how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others. Play enables these shifts by disrupting entrenched narratives and introducing the possibility of alternative selves. Moreover, it does so in a context that does not pathologise or stigmatise but instead humanises and includes. While play is not a panacea, its integration into rehabilitative practice acknowledges the full humanity of those incarcerated and creates the emotional scaffolding upon which lasting change may be built. By participating in playful processes, prisoners may reimagine themselves outside of the criminal identity, taking on roles that are prosocial, creative, and relational. This act of imaginative self-extension is crucial to the desistance process, which is not merely behavioural, but deeply identity-based.

Incarcerated individuals are frequently denied not only physical freedom, but also the psychological conditions necessary for growth, expression, and connection. The role of play within the criminal justice system has often been overlooked, dismissed as frivolous or irrelevant to the seriousness of rehabilitation. Yet, as this study has demonstrated, permission to play (i.e. the non-clinical, structured opportunity for individuals to engage in spontaneous, imaginative, and socially cooperative activities) represents a powerful and underutilised vehicle for personal transformation within penal settings. Play, when facilitated with intention and respect, can restore some of these conditions by offering a non-threatening space for exploration, emotional literacy, and social reintegration.

BFT methods appear to illicit high levels of engagement and commitment from participants, which may have implications across a range of disciplines in education, skills and work across the secure estate and beyond. Permission to play may have wider interest for HMPPS, as a highly effective tool for engaging prisoners as part of a rehabilitative framework.

Bearface Theatre is not going to be the right choice for everyone, it is not solely capable of supporting incarcerated individuals to desist from crime, nor is it responsible for improving the catastrophic breakdowns of trust, order, respect and compassion between prisoners and prison officer, often resulting from a lack of investment, lack of time out of cells, lack in purposeful activity, staff shortages and high staff turn-over. Yet, the study has provided compelling evidence to suggest that BFT and the methods they employ may have striking implications for new modalities on rehabilitation, penal education, desistance and staff-prisoner relationships. It raises the question whether it is possible to deliver variations of this approach across the whole closed estate, due to an abundance of specialist applied

theatre companies. To achieve this requires a shift in political mindset, even if the evidence on the ground is screaming, ‘this works!’.

On the long journey towards meaningful penal reform, prison theatre and permission to play represents a potent avenue for understanding transformative change and rehabilitation in real people’s lives. Through a well-structured research design, the efficacy of applied theatre programmes can be rigorously evaluated, shedding light on their impact on prisoners’ mental health, social skills, and prospects for successful reintegration into society upon release. The insights gleaned from the study may offer small ‘narratives of hope’ to shape a more effective, just, and compassionate criminal justice system. It “won’t work unless we, as a society, are prepared to have a serious conversation about punishment and what it is meant to achieve” (Gray, 2024).

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Appendix

Examples of individual narratives, formed into creative collective prose

Freedom is…

I think…Freedom is

Seeing the potential & being comfortable within yourself

It is care

It is laughter

It is running carelessly laughing down hills

Freedom is being free from one's own thoughts, to own them & adjust them.

We will never reach perfection, but don't give up.. keep trying
Freedom is not having a key worker scratching down on her clipboard in front of me

It's a walk to my mum's house, a walk to my dad's house, watering the plants

A cup of tea in the garden first thing

Freedom is better heath & finding our calm

I think…being free from addiction,
free from prison, free from past mistakes. That is freedom.
I think…

Freedom is seeing the potential in things

Seeing my potential & being comfortable with myself.

A work in progress

Impermanent
I'm here I'm now
Overly overly
The replica of my father
Laughing to myself
Calm
Shameful
Embarrassed
Smiling
Scowling
Jarring at times
Misunderstood and underestimated
Shifting gears between masks
My face tells a story
Can be happy
I am a work in progress

The treasure and the weapon

My voice is a treasure
my voice is a weapon
It's my vehicle to being heard
Its right and
It's wrong sometimes
It can be toned down be less deep
I tried to change it when I was young, didn't want it to be too much
It is my past and it is my future
Can you hear me?
It is soft and gentle with some
Harsh with others
I can take things out of context, but my voice
it's mostly honest…
mostly honest
It's different and varied
Some of my words hold no meaning-
can be self sabotaging,
when articulating
Both a treasure and a weapon
truth spills out sometimes
Good intentions yet no retention
Don't want to be too much
I want it to be true
Am I too much? Honest to myself?
I'm … mostly honest
mostly honest
Are you?

I fold

It feels like we are caged creatures Echoing up and down the concrete halls Uniforms holding our unreachable pocketed freedom The same thing that takes your control gives you the control.

I want to close the outside world out
Yet I don't want to be shut in
This rectangular metal barrier Does it protect or restrain?

A glassy eye with one choice
To see in
To shut in
It's never my turn to turn it.

There's just a 30cm gap between me and the jungle Pleads, demands, frustration, profanities, debris, liquid Even a broom can fly through the small window that marks the barrier between that jungle and me My stomach tells me I need to get my shit sorted.

Pride has stopped me from speaking my truth Fear of judgement Looking weak I've suffered.

My Voice

In a life of addiction My voice was harsh Like a sword... Tearing myself and others apart

Now I have recovered Free from my past

My voice, at last... Has a comforting arm More soft, more gentle Speaking in the right direction

My voice no longer rips everything apart Riding the rough waves Now smooth and so calm

I've received God's grace

No longer disgraced.

Moving from the storm

The storm that I lived in
It's vicious, so harsh
The storm I created has ripped me apart

The Storm is so heavy, the storm is so hard
Thunder and lightning which tears out your heart

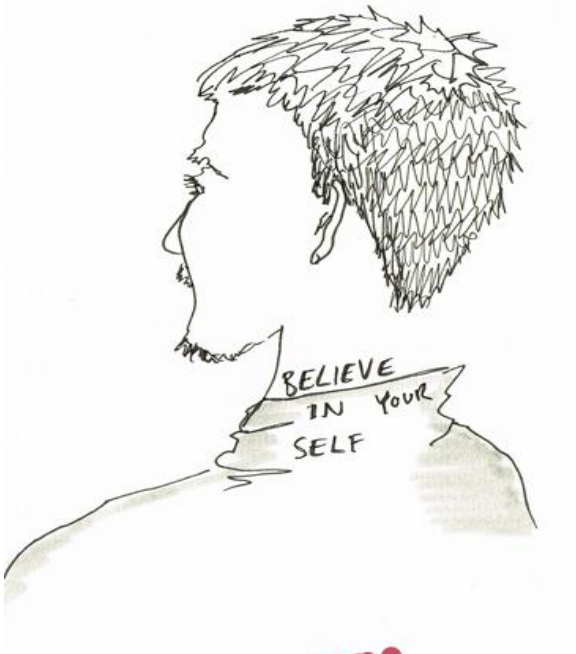
No compassion
No feeling
I hate this damn feeling

I pray to my God, please soften my heart
I've asked for forgiveness, mercy and grace
My saviour has heard
Pulled me from this dark space

Now the storm is behind me
I love this new feeling

I strive and move forward with a smile on my face
The future so clear now
No longer a cloud
I'm pushing forward
Leaps and bounds

The storm is no longer
The Sun has come out now
It's brightened my feeling
No thunder no lightning to dampen my feelings

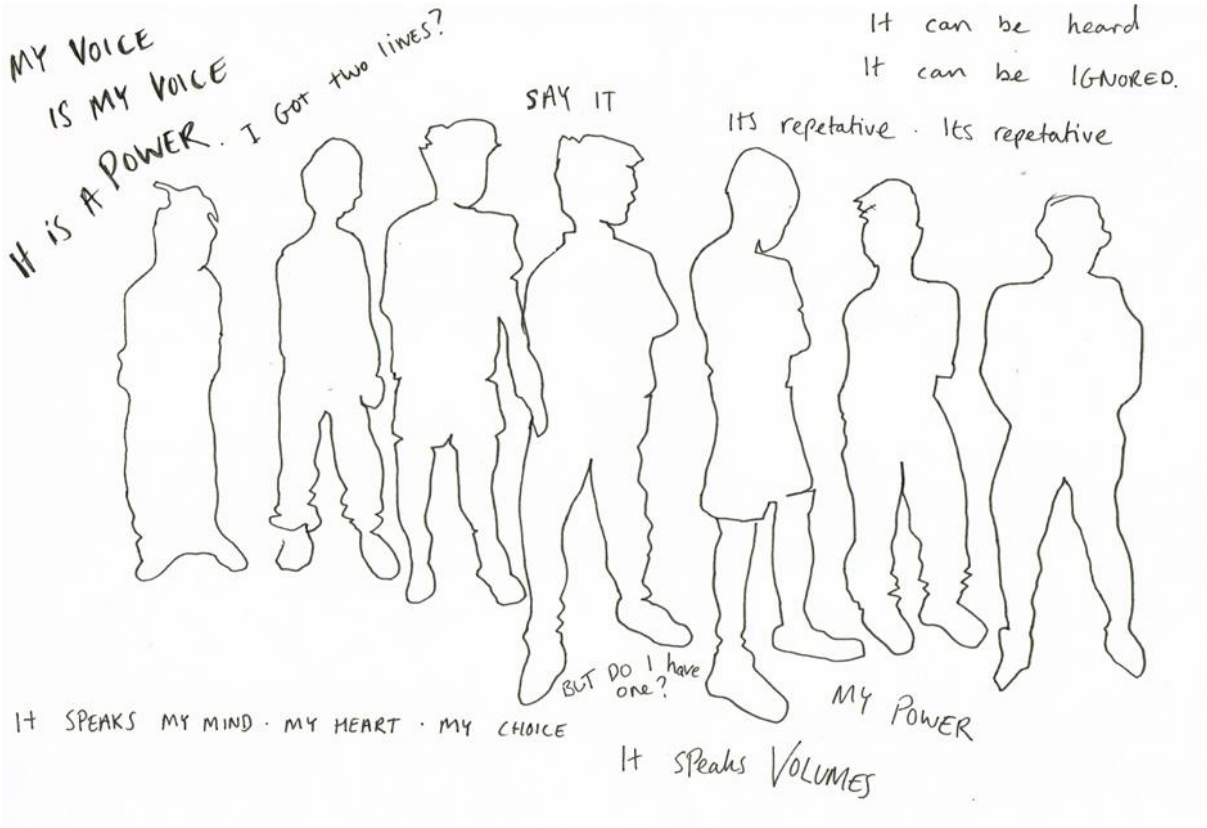


"It's an escape,
on the wing it's a front.
When we come here,
this is our freedom,
we can be ourselves"

Group Member


criminal
FORGOTTEN
Courageous.
SELF
ESTEEM
NO GOOD
OFFENDER
Independent


IT MUST BE HEARD
ITS the INNER VALUE


MY VOICE
IS MY VOICE
IT IS A POWER. I GOT two lives?
SAY IT
It can be heard
It can be IGNORED.
Its repetative. Its repetative
BUT DO I have one?
MY POWER
It SPEAKS MY MIND · MY HEART · MY CHOICE
It Speaks VOLUMES


ASK QUESTIONS.


IT MUST BE HEARD

* All images courtesy of Harriet Riddell

Ethics

The study employs an ethically grounded methodology within the context of ethical and practical complexities of research with vulnerable groups (HMIP, 2021; ESRC, 2022; Roberts, 2008). It acknowledges that capturing meaningful and rich data on the narratives of vulnerable participants raises methodological and ethical challenges, as imprisoned men's' 'powers of reflexivity are likely to have been 'temporarily suspended or impeded all together' (Vandenberghe,2005:8) due to the 'extensive and pervasive prevalence of trauma within (Bradley, 2022: 6). To address this, the study will take a trauma informed approach (CLINKS, 2020).

The significant vulnerability of prisoners contributes to numerous ethical dilemmas, with two-thirds of people in prison having mental health problems (PRT, 2023). There is a high likelihood that prisoners will be living with the trauma of Adverse Childhood Experiences, which puts them at a 'greater risk for engaging in offending behaviour' (Umpunjun et al., 2024:1). They are often dealing with complex life challenges such as emotional dysregulation, being estranged from family and friends, substance misuse, low self-esteem, poor literacy skills and mental health issues.

Research in penal settings can present an 'ethical minefield for researchers' (Field et al., 2022:139). Prisoners 'are made vulnerable through ill health, poor societal value, reduced human connection, and living in hostile environments' (Heaslip et al., 2022:123). 'Prisons are generally hostile environments where feelings of safety are limited' (Ricciardelli et al., 2022: 779).

The methodology employs a trauma informed approach to collecting data on 'creative arts' (Petrillo, 2021) practices with vulnerable

participants in custodial settings. It will purposively avoid discussing potentially triggering subjects around offences, historic abuse, bereavement, breakdown of the family unit etc.
The study recognises that 'research has the potential to be traumatising, demanding or degrading' (Roberts et al., 2008:310). The well-being of participants, facilitators, research and prison staff will be protected, including the 'rights, privacy and dignity of individuals in all research activities' (HMIP, 2021).

The study actively avoids further dehumanisation of people in prison (Jahoda, 2013) by using 'people first' language (Cox, 2020) during fieldwork to de-label (Becker,) participants, set against the problematic context of prisons that 'systematically dehumanize' (Keates, 2020). It will refer to both prisoner and prison staff as 'participant' but acknowledges a power imbalance that exists between people in prison and those who may prevent or facilitate their research participation (Hu, et al., 2018).

The study adheres to guidance set out in HM Inspectorate of Prisons Ethical principles for research (2021) and is underpinned by the ESRC framework for research ethics that acknowledges the 'importance of high ethical standards within research' (UKRI, 2022). The study seeks ethical approval from the University of Sussex and the National Research Council (NRC) to ensure an ethically robust and comprehensive framework to protect participants and researcher from harm.

Research participants may feel coerced to participate or may not fully understand their rights within the research process. All participants will be asked at the start of every session for volunteers to be interviewed at the end of the session. This aims to respond to the shifting moods and circumstances that can affect participants capacity to take part in an interview from week to week. Interviews with prison officers will be arranged by the researcher outside of the

programme – potentially on a different day when the programme is not running.

Ensuring informed consent and protecting participants' confidentiality are critical but challenging in this setting. All data gathered will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be signed to protect participants' identities. Confidentiality will only be guaranteed if participants or others are not in immediate physical or emotion danger. In accordance with GDPR (HMIP, 2021), all data will be gathered, transcribed and held securely at the prison in the Learning & Skills Manager's office. Audio interview files and research documentation will be destroyed after transcription. The researcher will keep in regular contact with all stakeholders to ensure safeguarding concerns are properly raised, and redactions are adhered to.

Anyone deciding to remove themselves from the research after the programme has begun will not have any of their contributions included in the key findings. It will be made clear to research participants that they can refuse to answer individual questions, withdraw from the research and have their data removed up to a specified date. The study will take reasonable steps to identify and remove barriers to participation, avoid personal and social harm and protect the confidentiality of information about research informants and their identities. However, there are circumstances when a researcher is under a duty to disclose certain information (i.e. harm to oneself or others).

Participants will be directed to accessible ongoing support within the prison during and after the programme, in consultation with the Learning & Skills Manager. Senior management at HMP/YOI Winchester, MoJ and all research participants will be given access to the final evaluation report to allow for feedback and gain permission before seeking any form of external publication for key findings.

The researcher informally collaboratively with the Lead Forensic Psychologist, and the Learning & Skills Manager at Winchester prison to help mitigate risk and share essential information on prisoners to protect them and others from harm. In accordance with NRC guidelines (2023), the research will ensure 'valid, informed consent' is obtained before individuals participate in any aspect of the research.

As one of the main stakeholders in the delivery of the BFT programme, Hampshire Cultural Trust has produced a Risk Assessment, in conjunction with HMP/YOI Winchester, to mitigate emotional and physical risk to all participants taking part in the research (including the researcher and facilitators). The researcher will keep in regular contact with the Learning & Skills Manager at Winchester prison post programme to ensure any retractions are adhered to.

As a fully vetted and security trained key holder of HMPPS, the researcher has conducted academic and independent research and evaluation projects within HMP/YOI Winchester. I am able draw keys at the prison and move around without supervision. Freedom of movement around the prison reduces the burden on prison resources and mitigates risk to the researcher.

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