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### **Learning, Rehabilitation and the Arts in Prison**

A Scottish Case Study

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# *Learning, rehabilitation and the arts in prisons: a Scottish case study*

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the role of the arts in enabling prisoners to engage with learning and improve their literacy, and the impact this has on their rehabilitation and desistance from crime. It draws on data collected from prisoners who participated in arts interventions in three different Scottish prisons. It argues that participating in the arts projects built an active learning culture and encouraged the improvement of verbal and written literacy skills through the use of positive pedagogical approaches. In addition participants learned to work together more effectively, developed self-confidence and were more trusting and supportive because they were working together on intensive projects that they had co-devised. For many prisoners participation in the arts projects constructively challenged and disrupted the negative identities that they had internalised. Their public successes in performances before audiences of significant others opened up new personal and social identities (as artists or performers) that helped them to begin to envision an alternative self that in turn motivated them towards future desistance from crime.

## **Key words**

learning, arts-based interventions, prisons, rehabilitation

## **Introduction**

This article investigates the role of the arts in enabling prisoners to engage with learning, improve their literacy and the impact this has on their rehabilitation and desistance from crime. It draws on data from the evaluation of a Scottish project called 'Inspiring Change' that involved collaboration between Creative Scotland (the national body for funding the arts), the Motherwell College of Further and Higher Education Learning Centre staff located in prison establishments, five Scottish Prisons, and seven national arts organisations. The rationale

for the project was that traditional approaches to education were not very effective in engaging prisoners, particularly in literacy and numeracy learning, (HMIe, 2010) whereas there was some evidence that using the creative arts was likely to enhance engagement (Arts Alliance, 2010). The prisons were encouraged to participate because the project addressed a number of the National Strategy for the Management of Offenders (NMSO) outcomes (Scottish Executive, 2006) for reducing re-offending including: 'improved literacy skills' and 'improvements in the attitudes or behaviour which lead to offending'.

The collaboration of Creative Scotland in contributing to the funding of the project was influenced by its remit to 'Promote understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the arts and culture [through]...increasing the diversity of people who access and participate in the arts and culture' (Creative Scotland, 2011: Section 3.1). Prisoners were an under-represented group, and, moreover, an earlier arts project (based in the Barlinnie Special Unit for formerly violent and resistant prisoners) had gained an international reputation for its pioneering work (Nellis, 2010) so all these factors contributed to Creative Scotland's commitment to the project.

The overall aims of the project were to: 1) stimulate prisoners' engagement with learning; 2) improve participants' literacy, numeracy and communication skills and 3) demonstrate the potential of the arts to support the process of rehabilitation. This article explores the factors that influenced prisoners' engagement with the projects, considers the ways in which the arts projects enhanced participants' learning and literacy skills and concludes with a discussion of the implications for prisoners' rehabilitation. First we briefly review what existing research shows are the benefits of using the arts to develop learning in prisons and encourage desistance from crime.

## **Learning, literacy, rehabilitation and the arts**

Research from the US, Ireland and the UK shows that prisoners are more likely to have literacy difficulties than the general population (Batchelder and Pippert, 2002; Cropsey, Wexler, Melnick, Taxman and Young, 2007; Hurry, Brazier, Snapes, and Wilson, 2005) and tend to have lower than average attainment and poor experiences of compulsory education (Morgan and Kett, 2003; Muth, 2006; Winn and Behizadeh, 2011). In prisons, particularly in the UK, the curriculum is often restricted so that prisoners are expected to engage in education that is focused on improving narrow literacy skills rather than broader, and potentially more attractive, educational areas (Hurry, Brazier and Wilson, 2009).

Many prisoners, and adults who have similar unhappy experiences of compulsory education, tend to have negative attitudes to learning and can be very resistant to education that is like school (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge and Tusting, 2007; Belzer, 2004; Kilgore, 2001; Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther and Edwards, 2008). This is especially true of provision focused only on narrow literacy skills such as spelling and thus such courses tend to promote little learning and a great deal of resentment amongst prisoners. On the other hand, Hurry, Brazier and Wilson (2009) found in their study of English prisons that prisoners became engaged and participated in more effective learning when the programme was more contextualised and active. Research from across the UK also shows that creating an

environment where learning operates from an individual's 'strengths', rather than their 'deficits' is the most effective (Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett, 2010; Entwistle and Smith, 2002). This involves building on and extending the knowledge and skills that individual's already have, an approach that has been found to be very uncommon in prisons in studies in the US and the UK (Batchelder and Pippert, 2002; Kilgore, 2001; Skills for Scotland, 2009).

Involvement in the arts is sometimes presented as an easy way for prisoners to pass the time. However, anyone who has wrestled with finding the right word for a poem, committed five more minutes to practicing a new chord sequence on the guitar or been part of a cast rehearsing for a play or a dance performance will confirm that the artistic process is often a challenging one, and one that requires dedication, patience and the learning of new skills (Arts Alliance, 2010). Participating in arts projects that take place in prisons can have a number of positive outcomes for prisoners and the prison community. Findings from research from North America, New Zealand and the UK show that arts participation can encourage the development of better relationships between prisoners (Goddard, 2005; Silber, 2005), with prison staff (Menning, 2010) and with their families (Boswell, Wedge and Price, 2004; Palidofsky, 2010). Participating in arts projects also improves self-esteem and self-confidence (Cohen, 2009; Goodrich, 2004; Silber, 2005) helps to develop communication and social skills (Cohen 2009; McCue, 2010); enables people to work together and help each other as peers (Moller, 2003; Palidofsky, 2010) and results in prisoners taking part in other education courses after completing an arts project (Anderson and Overy, 2010).

In addition to these positive outcomes, US studies that have considered the relationship between improving literacy skills and the arts in prisons have identified that activities such as creative writing, playwriting and performance encourage greater self-expression (Fisher, 2008; Fisher, Purcell and May, 2009). Such activities also draw on participants' knowledge and help them to progress in terms of the distance they have travelled personally rather than operating to a pre-set agenda, and this approach encourages deep and lasting learning (Entwistle and Smith, 2002). Moreover, studies in the UK and US have found that the arts are often a much more acceptable medium for learning since participants are more likely to have positive associations with such activities compared with formal education (Hurry, Brazier, Snapes and Wilson, 2005; Jiang and Winfree, 2006).

A final area of research is that which focuses on the impact of participation in the arts on prisoner rehabilitation and desistance from crime. Broadly, the research has shown the importance of fostering hope, motivation and responsibility and maintaining and developing positive roles and relationships in participants (Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall and Caverley, 2006; McNeill, 2006). Participating in arts projects can be particularly helpful in building social networks and providing contexts in which new identities can be embedded, nurtured and sustained (Maruna, 2001, 2011). This is especially true of those interventions that involve public performances that have both internal (e.g. prison officers) and external (e.g. family) audiences because they recognise and celebrate prisoners' achievements and hence encourage positive self-images (McCulloch and McNeill, 2008; McNeill et al., 2011). Finally, engaging in the arts has been shown to encourage self-determination through artists working *with* prisoners, not *on* them (Winn and Behizadeh, 2011).

Following this brief literature review we now turn to a description of the arts interventions on which this paper is based.

## **The projects studied**

Large data sets were generated by this project, as over 200 prisoners participated, and this means that it is impossible in an article of this length to use all of these data. Therefore it was decided to focus in depth on the experiences of participants in only three of the participating prisons: a young offenders' establishment, a prison for long-term inmates and a large general-purpose prison. The reasons that these three prisons were selected were: first because the arts interventions took place over time and were intensive so that it was possible to observe changes over the length of the project; second, because they resulted in a public performance and the literature indicated that this type of performance had a particularly strong impact on rehabilitation; third, because this subset represented the range of types of prisons in the UK as a whole and throughout the Anglophone world. This selection did, however, mean that all of the participants were male and so it is not possible to comment in this article on the impact on women prisoners.

The interventions studied were organised by the Scottish Ensemble, Scottish Opera and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and the Citizens Theatre, all of whom had an international reputation for their artistic merit. In addition they had a commitment to initiatives that developed arts in a wide variety of settings and a view that creativity can be achieved in challenging and difficult situations such as prisons. All the projects were co-devised between the arts organisation and the participating prisoners but within the parameters set by the expertise of the artists. Before the 'Inspiring Change' project as a whole was implemented discussions were held between the participating arts organisations, individual prison governors, prison officers and learning centre staff, and the prisoners themselves about the focus and scope of the interventions. These discussions enabled the identification of which organisation and what type of project would be most suitable for that individual prison. The projects described below were the result of these negotiations.

The Scottish Ensemble's Music for Change project initially involved 25 young men who worked alongside the Scottish Ensemble's Artist in Residence and the music tutor at the Young Offenders Institute in learning how to play and record music over four months. In the first session, participants were divided into four groups (guitar, keyboard, percussion and Garageband/Poetry) to work on a set song. The group then rejoined to practice the song and make a new arrangement of the piece. Subsequent sessions involved participants practising songs individually in the first half of the session with the intention to rehearse the song as a group in the second half of the session. Members of the Scottish Ensemble attended some sessions to assist in teaching playing techniques and to give individual attention to participants. As the sessions developed it was common to see the more experienced participants helping other prisoners learn the pieces. Participants contributed to the music chosen for the final performances, which included popular songs, classical pieces and original compositions by some of the participants. Fifteen participants took part in two performances in the prison,

one with members of the Scottish Ensemble and a second performance with the entire Scottish Ensemble.

Scottish Opera and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra collaborated in a 6-month project, 'From Start to Finish: How to Build an Opera', with 25 prisoners in the long-term prison. All aspects of the opera from the original story to the music were written, developed and performed by the prisoners. Initial sessions involved participants working as a group in deciding the opera's storyline and characters. Subsequent sessions involved writing character descriptions and scenes that developed into the opera, *Round Five*, which tells the story of a recently released prisoner who has a decision to make between right and wrong. The music was developed collaboratively by the Project Leader and the participants by thinking about the mood required for each scene and musical motifs that would correspond to each character in the opera. Taking text that the men had composed for the songs, the music tutor in the prison set up a chord progression and the Project Leader led participants in improvising and developing melodies to be used for the songs. Participants also learned introductory animation techniques in order to create a short animation film that was a part of the final performance. The cast learned vocal techniques and took part in rehearsing the original script for performance. Participants were also part of the production team and those that performed, on stage and in the orchestra, had the opportunity to do so with professional singers and musicians in two performances.

The Citizens Theatre led thirty-five male prisoners in the general-purpose prison over a period of 5 months towards producing and performing an original play, *Platform 2:10*, which explored choices prisoners face upon liberation. The men worked alongside industry professionals in set design, set construction, play-writing, acting, song writing, live music, lighting, sound engineering and stage management. Initial sessions focused on set design in which participants worked on designing a three-dimensional model which they later presented to the group and shared their thought process behind the design. Group writing sessions began next. Participants worked in pairs, small groups and as a whole group in creative writing exercises that were shared with the creative writing group. These communal writing exercises later contributed to the development of characters and scenes to be used in the script for the play. Once a script had been assembled participants took part in a script reading, the main roles being read by professional actors, and made final adjustments for the script's completion. With the script complete, the next stages of the project could begin: acting, music and production. The music group worked on writing songs by learning about song structures, lyrics, dynamics and form. The drama group used warm-up exercises to develop trust in the group as they very quickly moved to working with pieces of the text from the script. Subsequent sessions took on the exact rehearsal mode one would find in a professional production at the Citizens Theatre, which included working through and refining scenes. The music and acting groups came together for final rehearsals, which allowed the production team to refine their roles for the performances. The cast and band performed, alongside a Scottish Prison Services officer and a professional actress, culminating in four performances to inmates and outside guests. They also recorded their own album of the shows soundtrack entitled *Songs from the Heart*.

As can be seen what unites all these projects is that they are led by professional artists whose focus was on co-working with the participants to produce a high quality performance that reflected the issues and concerns of prisoners.

## **Method**

A team of researchers using qualitative methods conducted this study. The subjects of our investigation drawn on for this paper were the prisoners who participated in the three 'Inspiring Change' arts interventions detailed above. The research team collected a wide range of data that included: interviews with senior prison staff, learning centre staff and project leaders from the arts organisations; feedback session forms from the project leaders and records of prisoners' behaviour. However, this article is mainly based on data collected from the prisoners themselves through focus group interviews conducted at the beginning of their participation in the arts interventions and after completion of the intervention. Focus groups were chosen as being more effective than individual interviews since they enabled participants to react and respond to each other thus yielding a collective, rather than an individual, view (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). These data are the main focus of the article because we wish to prioritise the views of the prisoners themselves as the best method of gaining insights into their experiences.

An opportunity sample of prisoners was recruited to the focus groups that resulted in 33 (out of 85 participants) participating in the pre activity groups and 23 (out of 75) in the post activity groups. The focus groups lasted on average an hour. It is acknowledged that those prisoners that were most committed to the project were more likely to participate, but nevertheless the findings were collaborated by the data collected from prison and learning centre staff, the artists that led the interventions and, especially, the Activity Sheets that were completed by the artists after each session. These sheets were designed as a communication tool between the learning centre staff and visiting artists as they recorded what the prisoners had done, what they felt about their participation and how they went about it. A total of 98 were collected from project leaders. From the research perspective these documents also served as a good indicator of the prisoners' reactions to the intervention as well as their feelings about their participation and so they provided a useful source of data to supplement that obtained from the focus groups. These provide some triangulation of the findings but nonetheless the main source of data for the findings is that provided directly by the prisoners.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. This is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data that provides 'a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). The first step of the analysis was reading and re-reading the data, noting down ideas and this in turn generated initial codes through identifying interesting features of the data. These codes were collected into potential themes that were then reviewed, defined and named. Then a secondary analysis was completed and independently checked by two researchers. The analysis of the focus group data led to the identification of four themes and these are discussed in turn in the findings section that follows. The themes are illustrated

using the prisoners' own words and the quotes used have been selected on the basis of their representing common views.

## Findings

### *Theme 1) Changing negative attitudes to learning*

The majority of participants said that school had not provided positive learning experiences for them because 'in school you've got too much on your mind and you want to do other things'. Some participants now regretted that they had messed about at school, 'when I left school and I lost my job I couldn't go back to school 'cause I was fighting and all that'. However, many saw that learning in prison offered second chances and gave a variety of reasons as to why this was the case. One set of reasons related to the contrast between school and the education system in prison that had enabled them to learn in ways they had not in the past. For example:

*The school system didn't really work for me. [In] the prison system...I've learned more this time than I did the first time in school. I was too disruptive in school...[and] I just couldn't get the grasp of it at all.*

Another set of reasons was about what it was acceptable to do in life outside the prison. For example:

*When [you] come into prison, everybody's the same and it's no big deal learning how to read and write.... Whereas outside, when they've got all the money, the fancy cars, the power, the respect, the last thing they're going to want is to turn around and say to somebody is, 'Oh, I'm going to night school to learn how to read and write.' [In prison] you try to better yourself and it's not frowned upon whereas outside it would be... because everybody likes to think that they're big time outside.*

The availability of time in prison was also cited as an advantage 'because [education] gets you thinking about what you want to do'. The difficulties in getting tuition because of the embarrassment of people thinking you were 'a daftie' were acknowledged but it was suggested that 'if you offered some kind of clear path with incentives where you start from nothing and there's an easy first step you can take, which got you started on a process', then people were more likely to engage.

Many prisoners reported that accessing education was not that easy as there were delays in getting into the more popular classes, especially in the arts, and discontinuities where subjects they had enjoyed or wanted to develop to a more advanced stage simply disappeared. Some were also concerned about the timing of classes since 'if you go one day and then wait a full week to go back again... it's like starting over again'. Others pointed out that the emphasis on reading and writing in prison meant that 'the whole spectrum of different academic levels [isn't] really addressed'.

### *Theme 2) Building an active learning culture*

Another aspect of changing negative attitudes to education is to build an active learning culture where a balanced programme of opportunities is available (Skills for Scotland, 2009). Several participants thought that the project was well named



as it was 'inspiring us and trying to see that maybe we've got hidden talents we don't know anything about'. Many also thought that the project had enabled them to see what they were good at and so opened up prospects for the future. 'It's about self-achievement and learning more skills that I can add to, skills I've already got to progress through'.

Participating in the 'Inspiring Change' projects motivated participants to improve their literacy through providing engaging and challenging activities. Prisoners said that the arts projects showed 'that we're good at something'. They also suggested that participating:

*gives you extra skills...it can open your eyes and you say [to yourself] 'I didn't know I could do that before I came here' and it turns out I can and I'm quite good at it.*

This shows the value of enabling people to learn in the ways that suit them and it also means that 'It really doesn't matter what your ability is. It's about the guys having their say, irrespective of...if your grammar is accurate or not'. These examples demonstrate that the arts can motivate people to give it a go, for example 'I'm not the best at reading and writing but there's no spelling involved [so I'll] give it a bash and see how it goes'.

### *Theme 3) Enabling people to work collaboratively and responsibly*

Building on and extending the knowledge and skills that prisoners' already had and helping them to progress through working collaboratively was an important theme. An aspect of this was enthusiastic and encouraging staff that helped because 'if you've got somebody encouraging you to say you can do these things, you're not the bottom of the rung. You are able to do something'. Prisoners also valued the opportunity to work with professional artists and musicians both for the quality of the experience 'to work with people of such a standard' and for the way in which they were treated 'she was so inspiring it felt...as if I was back working with normal people'. Participants in most of the projects also got lots of feedback and this helped them 'to move on to the next achievement'. They also learnt that they had new talents and that they could build on what they had already done. 'I learnt that if I actually put my mind to it I can write a story'.

Another aspect of the projects was that they enabled better communication by creating opportunities for interaction since 'you very rarely get to speak to anybody'. Once people learned to express themselves a bit better this meant that they could use a wider range of emotions and 'let myself go a bit'. All the projects involved people in working together so that the more withdrawn participants were brought out of their shell. It also meant that 'the guy that sits at the back of the class and never says anything...[gets] the chance to get his ideas across as well because in prison, to put your point across you've got to be pretty confident'.

The arts interventions were particularly effective in encouraging participants to develop their own ideas, although some people found this difficult at first. In the end, however, this led to a much greater involvement because:

*It's our project isn't it? The guy's showing us how to go about it and how to do it, but it's us that is actually coming up with the story, coming up with the characters...with this group they're saying, you can be capable. They're not just saying, 'you do this, you do that'. It's down to us where we want to go and what we want to do with it.*

Working in this way meant that ‘you had to use your head’ and work out what you wanted to do yourself rather than being told what to do. The artists ‘wanted to see what we were coming up with [and] to use our own [ideas]’ and this meant that the participants took more responsibility for the work than they would have done if it had been more structured. They were also encouraged to do things differently and take a few risks that meant that they made progress because ‘if you only stick to what you know you’re never going to achieve anything’.

As well as a focus on individual achievement prisoners worked together and supported each other because they had an overall goal. This meant that they were putting all their different ideas together and learning from each other particularly if ‘you ran out of ideas’. The artists were particularly effective because ‘they teach you to work together, to be creative and enthusiastic’. Working together also involved people being aware of their own abilities and taking a back seat if that would help to encourage others. For example: ‘I know my grammar is good enough to write and I have reasonable ideas but [if someone] is struggling my ... responsibility is to shut up and give him a chance’.

Positive action to support each other was also apparent either through help with specific skills, such as writing clearly, or in terms of building people’s confidence. For example: ‘I had to keep telling X that he could do it and it was sounding good. And sometimes when he wasn’t singing well I said, “Listen, you’re a bit nervous. You got to relax”’. Prisoners also helped each other to ‘just keep going’ when projects got difficult and their motivation dipped or they were too stressed to think clearly. In addition, the way that the projects were set up with a performance at the end meant that everyone had to work together and this emphasised the group effort and the importance of being able to rely on each other to do their fair share. This meant that people had to take responsibility for ‘the group as a whole [whereas usually] in here you look after yourself first’.

#### *Theme 4) Increasing confidence and self-esteem*

Participants spoke about how participating in “Inspiring Change” had developed their confidence. Most referred to the psychological aspects of confidence that related to their growing sense of their potential and ability to achieve. This took a number of forms. One aspect was to do with others believing in you and seeming to care about what you did. For example, ‘when people come in and make you feel you’re worth something ... it just builds up your self esteem seeing people generally care’. Part of this was about being given a chance by those whose opinions you value especially when participants felt that they were normally judged as people that ‘should be thrown on the scrap-heap’. Working with people that trusted you and were ‘decent and positive’ helped to bring back self-esteem and made you ‘proud to be really able to do it’.

As well as gaining confidence from others’ positive assessment of the work that had been done participants also reported that they had become more able to judge their own work ‘knowing that you done a good thing’. This feeling was often contrasted with their prior experience of not doing well and being judged as failures. One aspect of being able to make these judgements related to the intensity of the projects they had been engaged in, which had been so absorbing that they had forgotten their usual anxieties and this in turn, they reported, had increased their self-esteem.

Working as a team also built confidence because every person mattered and had to participate. This experience also transferred to other parts of some of the prisoners' lives, for example, giving confidence 'to actually participate in working with groups instead of just as an individual' and to 'learn to trust others'. For some too it helped to bring 'back good memories from the past' and these good feelings in turn built confidence to participate in other learning activities.

Participants reported that when they had engaged effectively it opened up 'other prospects for us... and shows that we've got other skills'. Discovering these skills in turn led to being 'more focused' and could help people to 'break away their shell' and so open themselves up to other possibilities. These possibilities were linked to increasing abilities, and the positive feelings these generated made prisoners 'want to do good in here' and could 'bring a better side out of you'.

A final way in which 'Inspiring Change' built confidence and increased self-esteem was the positive impact of the public performances even though doing it 'took a lot out of you'. Several factors contributed to this: one was the ability for offenders to connect with their families and do something that was 'going to make them proud'; another was being able to give people outside 'inspiration'; a final factor was the impact on fellow prisoners who were 'genuinely jealous' whereas before they had been somewhat mocking of the idea of doing such non-macho things as singing. There was also the overall impact of performing in front of a mixed audience:

*The warden was there. All the social workers were there. There were other people there. And it all came together like a proper concert. Your family could come in. I thought it was fantastic.*

In very practical ways, involvement in the performances also allowed some participants to experience a different kind and quality of family contact during their sentences: one that was focused on something beyond their prison experiences.

*It was almost like your family were coming to visit you at the end of your shift at work. Normally, they ask you how you're doing and what you've been up to... but [after the performance] it was like talking about the play and all that and you forgot that you were in the jail.*

## Discussion

What are the factors that these findings show have led to more meaningful engagements with learning? One factor is the pedagogical approaches used that have encouraged broad educational development rather than focusing on building narrow literacy skills. Research shows that adults often have 'spiky' literacy profiles, with areas of strength and weakness according to how, where and when they need to use these skills (St Clair, Tett and Maclachlan, 2010). This meant that, for example, some participants were able to read song lyrics because these were important to them but found reading a novel difficult because it was not relevant to their lives. Literacy skills were embedded in the range of activities that the arts projects developed and so enabled participants to work to their strengths, enhance their creativity and reach the outcomes that they saw as desirable. This also means that it was the distance travelled by individuals that was the key measure of impact and this was much more motivating than pre-defined changes

in the narrowest skills aspects of reading and writing that was the more normal assessment in prisons (Skills for Scotland, 2009).

Belzer (2004: 42) has shown the importance of making visible the often-invisible role that prior experiences at school can play in how adults perceive their current learning context, and Barton and colleagues (2008: 24) highlight how learners' 'histories, their current identities and life circumstances, and the shifting goals and purposes they have for their future – interact to shape their engagement in and experience of learning'. In these interventions the participants' negative perceptions and experience of organized education and their views of their own literacy capabilities were positively challenged through the creation of an environment in which learning could take place in a way that built on their existing strengths and enabled personal and social development. Moreover, learning and its benefits were dynamic in the sense that benefits gained through improving literacy impacted on functioning in other domains such as family (Tett and Maclachlan, 2007).

As Crowther and colleagues (2010) have pointed out, however, sound pedagogical practices on their own are not enough to enable vulnerable adults to forge the learning identities to which they aspire. Learning can also be viewed as participation in social practice whereby newcomers to a particular community are both absorbing, and being absorbed in, the 'culture of practice'. From this perspective significant learning is what changes the ability to engage in practice and to understand why it is done, so learning arises out of 'the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning...in, with, and arising from, the socially and culturally structured world' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 51). Such learning is not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but also the formation of an identity through participating in a new practice or community (Wenger, 1998). This process of identity reformation was encouraged by the supportive relationships between the arts tutors and prisoners and amongst peers that developed and enabled participants to improve their verbal and written literacy skills. Expertise and support that enabled full participation in the projects were offered within reciprocal relationships through the exchange of skills and knowledge (Pratt and Godsey, 2003). The importance of these kinds of social interaction and support as factors in increasing confidence and self-belief should not be underestimated. For as Norman and Hyland (2003: 270) have demonstrated 'although the individual learner can affect his/her own level of confidence, tutors, peers and mentors can help increase the learners' confidence by providing support, encouragement and constructive feedback'.

Another positive pedagogic approach has been using group work to encourage prisoners to recognise and address their own needs and those of their fellow participants in a supportive way (Kilgore, 2001). Jiang and Winfree (2006: 34) have pointed out that the prison environment is often negative but that for inmates education programmes can 'provide safe havens inside prison, enhance their ability to deal with an often hostile prison environment, and enrich the quality of day-to-day life'. The degree of cohesiveness, support, shared values, and willingness to come to the aid of others evidenced in the findings show how the collaborative work had changed attitudes.

The 'Inspiring Change' projects were also able to address the mistrust between prisoners. Kilgore's US research has shown that lack of trust can lead to the

avoidance of 'interaction with other inmates, and when they do interact, they tend to keep information exchange at a minimum and this offers few opportunities to emotionally connect with other people' (Kilgore, 2006: 158). Our findings show that working together on demanding projects led to a greater ability to emotionally connect with other people and, in so doing, provided 'additional strategies for relating to others and to oneself in a variety of situations' (Kilgore, 2006: 161). In addition, because the participants had to take responsibility for developing the artistic content of the musical or drama performances, this involved the development of trust with their fellow participants because they all needed to pull together if it was to be successful. These interconnections also generated empathy towards their fellow participants and research shows that this can cause more positive feelings towards people in general (Staub, 1987). Our findings have demonstrated some of the ways in which prisoners have developed empathy and its impact not only on their fellow prisoners and prison staff but also on their family relationships.

Research in the UK into the process of rehabilitation and desistance from crime has shown that arts based interventions may enable prisoners to begin to think differently about themselves, their families and their relationships with their peers through the opportunities it offers to develop more networks, different identities and different lifestyles (Bottoms et al, 2004; Farrall and Caverley, 2006; McNeill, 2006). Our findings show that part of this change process was the creativity encouraged by the high quality of the artistic engagement. The professional artists and musicians working in a genuine partnership with the prisoners brought this about and thus forged a strong commitment to the project. Indeed the intensity offered in the prisons where those that participated 'gave it their all' (artist activity sheet comment) encouraged really 'powerful creative processes' (artist activity sheet comment) to happen. Bringing positive social contacts into the prison also enabled participants to build their social and cultural capital through the development of trusting relationships and social engagement (Maclachlan et al, 2008). Clearly arts-based interventions are unlikely to lead to rehabilitation by themselves but they can help to foster change processes.

Contemporary theories of rehabilitation and desistance also suggest that public performances may provide an important form of ritual where an esteemed audience recognises and celebrates achievement and change (Maruna, 2001, 2011; McNeill, et al., 2011). It is significant that for these projects the audiences comprised both authority and professional figures (prison governors and officers, social workers, educationalists, journalists) and family members – both the public and the private 'audience' of the prisoner's performance. Part of the function of these public performances is that they confirm, not just to the audience but also to the participant, the authenticity of their achievement. These experiences had the potential to encourage a nascent belief in the possibility of change and so helped to build new identities, social networks and contexts in which these new identities could be embedded. In addition these performances may help prisoners to 'imagine' different possible futures, different identities and different lifestyles as evidenced by the findings.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that participating in these arts projects has built an active learning culture and motivated participants to engage in learning literacy (including numeracy

and talking and listening skills) in ways that suited them and encouraged them to achieve their goals. Learning built on the participants' strengths both in terms of the arts and also in improving the verbal and written skills that were embedded in the work for the projects. As a result participants learned to work together more effectively and were more trusting and supportive of each other. Participating also built confidence through participants' growing sense of their potential and ability to achieve. This was the result of both outsiders believing in them and an increase in their own abilities to judge themselves more positively. Growing confidence led to an increase in other skills and a willingness to be open to possibilities that had not been considered before.

'Inspiring Change' has engaged prisoners in effective and motivating learning and has played a part in challenging the dominant educational discourse with its focus on narrow literacy skills that treats prisoners as lacking in agency (Winn and Behizadeh, 2011). It has shown the value of using the arts in prison to develop learning and may provide a way of challenging the focus on skills for employability by demonstrating the value of this approach in encouraging productive learning that leads to lasting change.

For many prisoners participation in the arts projects seemed to constructively challenge and disrupt the negative identities that they had internalised, and which they felt were sometimes communicated to them from others within and outside the prison system. Because the arts practitioners invested their time, talent and efforts for the participants, and established trusting and respectful relationships with them, these negative narrative identities were disrupted and challenged. The public successes of the participants' efforts – in performances before audiences of significant others – opened up new personal and social identities (as artists or performers) that confirmed the possibility and viability of change in one's character and identity and thus helped many prisoners to begin to envision an alternative, appealing, conventional self.

Moreover, the projects allowed their participants to develop a positive outlook and more mature relationships as prisoners were encouraged to reflect upon the impact of their offending on their families through the focus of their performances, and this motivated them towards change. Some also acquired skills that they felt they could use for work or develop further in training; others identified life skills that they had developed; and some planned to develop new and more positive social networks linked to arts organisations or activities in the community.

Prisoners in the UK tend to have a wide range of needs and are more likely to come from the most deprived backgrounds (Croall, 2011) and thus face significant resettlement problems. This means that it would be unrealistic to expect relatively brief involvement in arts projects to somehow 'produce' rehabilitation. However, the evidence provided by the participants themselves indicates how their involvement might have prompted progress towards desistance from crime and means that this research offers useful insights for others with an interest in using the arts to develop productive learning.

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