**FLiP Project overview**

The *Family Literacy in Prisons* [FLiP] project was a collaboration between the School of Education (University of Sheffield) and Pact (Prison Advice and Care Trust) which focused on fathers in prison and sought to address the question: *in the event of their imprisonment, how can absent fathers be supported in their vital contribution to young children’s literacy development?* In the context of a UK male prison population significantly represented by a complex of low levels of educational achievement, literacy, and employment, and by family separation and divorce, the project was a University-Charity-Prisons collaboration which enabled the development of a uniquely co-produced family literacy project, [FLiP] in two men’s prisons. We were interested in whether it was possible to adapt a tried and tested approach to family literacy (Nutbrown, et al. 2005), for effective use with imprisoned fathers.

Our methodological approach was largely qualitative, seeking above all, an understanding of what it was possible to achieve on early literacy development with fathers in prison, and to understand what was meaningful and effective in creating ways to involve them despite the circumstances of enforced absence. Interviews, observations and feedback questionnaires were used to elicit views of the fathers, their partners and their children.

Our analytical approaches first involved a rating of the participation of the fathers in the early literacy workshop sessions using an adapted rating scale (Nutbrown et al. 2005) and observation data. Second, a thematic analysis of fathers’ perspectives on the workshops was completed. Finally we drew on questionnaire and observational data to develop a thematic evaluation of the literacy-oriented family visits from the perspectives of the fathers, and their families. Findings focus on issues of participation, and the perspectives of all family as we return to our research questions to discuss how imprisoned fathers can be supported to understand and contribute to their young children’s literacy development and whether an established programme can be adapted to a prison context to facilitate this.

The study found: that ‘take up’ of the programme indicated that there was a need for such an initiative, with target numbers for participants being reached and a waiting list of men wishing to enrol; participation ratings were strong, with sixty-nine men (93%) judged to participate at moderate to high levels on a 1-5 rating scale; the opportunity to see their children during the literacy-oriented family visit provided a strong motivation to enrol in the programme; ideas about early literacy development were successfully shared with imprisoned fathers thus confirming that this element of an established and effective programme could be successfully adapted for prisoners.
Literacy-oriented Family Visits

All families engaged in and reported that they benefitted from the literacy-oriented family visits. The children focussed on: ‘spending time with daddy’, having fun and feeling happy, and the various activities and many mentioned being given a book to take home as a gift from their fathers. Mothers/carers focused on relationships: child/father bonding by spending time as a family and an appreciation and style of the family literacy visit which facilitated such bonding. The men gave detailed comment on: bonding and spending time as a family; appreciation and style of the literacy-oriented family visit; new knowledge about early literacy; enhanced awareness of children’s learning and development generally, and their future roles as fathers.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the children would focus on ‘spending time with daddy’, the event itself and the activities available for them to do. Similarly we might expect mothers to stress the importance of spending time as a family and the way in which the event was planned to facilitate this. It seems, however to be the case that the fathers maintained a focus on their children’s learning and development, both literacy and general development – bringing with them to the family event, what they had learned in the preparatory workshop sessions. This affirms previous work on family literacy that fathers can be involved if the programme is appropriately designed for them (Morgan et al 2009, Potter et al. 2012). Of importance too, is the expressed resolve of the men to think of their role as a father differently in the future. This relates to what we already know about the positive effects of maintaining family connections on desistance and resisting reoffending (Maruna et al., 2003;May et al. 2008; Ministry of Justice,2012a).

This university-charity-prison collaboration has effectively found ways to teach fathers more about their children’s early literacy development and to involve them in supporting their children’s learning. Such an initiative can be an effective way forward especially if supported by current MoJ resolve to improve prison education. Of course, it is too early to say whether the men’s resolve not to reoffend and to be a ‘present’ father when released was followed through. However, the FLiP project has implications for UK prison education policy. It has been shown that male prisoners were keen to enrol and participate with a high level of motivation in a programme which leads them to reaffirm their important role as fathers in their children’s lives and learning. Literacy-oriented family visits were also shown to support them in this. This is a positive starting point for UK prison education reform which offers a realistic and effective approach to supporting imprisoned fathers to develop their role in their children’s lives and learning and create opportunity for change.

References

MoJ (2012a) Prisoners’ childhood and family backgrounds London: MoJ
MoJ (2012b) The Pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly sentenced prisoners London: MoJ


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