

Research Note

Fathers in Prison and their Participation in the Education of their Primary School Aged Children

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Abstract: *Approximately 150,000 children in the United Kingdom are separated from their imprisoned fathers. These separations are likely to have profound consequences for both parent and child. Indeed, it is now accepted that continuing family contact is a major positive force in the process of rehabilitation.*

Despite this, little is known of the extent to which imprisoned fathers are informed about or able to participate in the education of their children. This study seeks to examine the facilities and systems in place to allow fathers to keep abreast of the academic progress of their primary school aged children, to participate in their education and therefore be involved in a crucial part of their lives. A major focus of the research will be to seek to discover the extent to which fathers, their children, schools and the United Kingdom Prison Service would welcome policy initiatives in this field.

Introduction

Within the ideological paradigm of Western Liberal Democratic theory it can be contended, that there exists a considerable degree of consensus regarding the role and purpose of the major state institutions. This is not to suggest that debate and controversy are over as Giddens (1989) demonstrates, but rather that, at the broad level of social policy-making, there is substantial agreement as to the overall purposes which state institutions are intended to serve.

In the context of state education the overarching purposes are articulated in concepts such as personal freedom, autonomy, equality of opportunity and the realisation of personal potential but there is, of course, continuing controversy surrounding the methods and techniques which are likely to secure these aspirations.

With a little less certainty it is also possible to suggest that the criminal justice system in general and the prison system in particular is concerned not merely with punishment and retribution, but with securing rehabilitation and reinstatement to full citizenship.

Professor Nicola Lacey captured something of this 'consensus' in the synopsis of one of her 2007 Hamlyn Lectures:

It is generally agreed that the humanity, fairness and effectiveness with which governments manage their criminal justice system is a key index of the state of a democracy (Lacey, 2007).

At first sight these two state institutions share little common currency; consequently they are rarely considered together. However, the point of departure for this work is the proposition that there is an important but neglected interface between them and that the failure to address it hitherto, undermines the potential of each to realise its stated goals.

The Central Focus of this Research

This study will focus on one aspect of the relationship, or rather potential relationship (interface), between the prison system and the education system (namely fathers in prison with children in state primary schools) and the schools in which their children are being educated.

It is estimated that there are 150,000 children with a parent in prison (Frankel 2006; Prison Reform Trust, 2008). Given such numbers, it might easily be assumed that appropriate systems are in place to support these children and their families. However, this is one of the most under-researched social groups (Murray, 2007).

It is stated that children benefit from parental involvement in their education (DCSF, 2007) and considerable time, effort and resources are devoted to nurturing this involvement. It is similarly understood that the success of prison as a rehabilitative experience is profoundly influenced by the extent to which involvement in family life is sustained over the course of a prison sentence (Ditchfield, 1994; Home Office, 2004; 2008).

A potentially significant point of contact exists between education policy and penal policy at the interface between imprisoned parents, the schools which their children attend and the experiences of those children and their imprisoned parents.

This study therefore aims to explore whether there are mechanisms within the prison system and within schools to permit the active involvement of the fathers of primary school aged children and if, on the assumption that these systems are underdeveloped, would there be substantial support from major stakeholders for the development of arrangements which would be likely to facilitate this involvement of fathers.

Literature Review

There is now a body of literature surrounding both mothers and fathers in prison and the effect this has on family life (Codd, 2003; Comfort, 2008). These, and others highlight the impact this can have on children's behaviour, social skills and mental health (Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Murray, 2007; Codd, 2008).

There has been consideration of the day to day lives of fathers in prison and the challenges they face in fulfilling their role. Significant attention however has been afforded to mothers in prison (Caddle and Crisp, 1997; NACRO, 2001; Gelsthorpe and Morris, 2002; Codd, 2003) as they are still perceived to be the primary care giver, but actually account for less than 10% of the prison population (Codd, 2008). However, recent research is beginning to suggest that fathers in prison also have an important role to play, if they are provided with the opportunity to play it. There is now significant research into the role of the father more generally (Lamb, 2005) which suggests that fathers' involvement in the education of their children can result in strong educational achievement (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Flouri, 2005; Collier and Sheldon 2008). However this research, as yet, does not extend to fathers in prison.

With this increase in such research, it would not be unrealistic to suppose that Government documentation and policy would follow in relation to this with a stronger focus on fathers in prison, their needs and the needs of their children. There have been a range of reports published during this period, examining the importance of fathers and parental involvement and looking at the needs of children who have challenging family circumstances (DfES, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005; 2007). However, none of these documents refer to fathers in prison. Focus is placed on families with a range of needs including, financial difficulties, traveller families, divorced or separated families. Prisoners' children were included in the

Every Child Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2003) but were removed by the time the White Paper (DfES, 2004a) was published, thus providing some indication of the priorities of the Government in relation to fathers in prison.

Proposed Methodology

The methods used will be semi-ethnographic, with a consequent focus on observation, informal discussion and semi-structured interviews, with detailed analysis of the responses. The research has already begun with exploratory informal discussions with head teachers within primary schools to discuss the provision they have in place for children with a parent in prison and their views on whether they would support the development of arrangements which would facilitate the involvement of imprisoned parents. These discussions have been beneficial in informing the development of the questions for the semi-structured interviews with the prisoners. Following the appropriate selection procedures (in line with the British Educational Research Association and University's ethical guidelines) and ensuring informed consent has been received, ten prisoners from each of three North West prisons will be interviewed. Interview themes will include the relationships they have with their children, how much they are currently engaged in the lives of their children and how much they would like to be and their own experiences of the education system.

Interviews will be analysed on an individual basis with a focus on the establishment of key themes. Particular attention will be paid to the issues related to data collection in a prison environment which include: the concept of trust, women interviewing men and the context of the interview (including the impact this has on the power relations between interviewer and interviewee).

Expected Contribution

This research will explore the needs of fathers to enable them to be involved in the education of their primary school aged children. It will examine the implications for HM Prison Service and DCSF in supporting fathers in prison in engaging in the education of their children.

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