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Family literacy in prisons: fathers' engagement with their young children

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an original approach to family literacy in two UK men's prisons. Brief consideration of family literacy research precedes consideration of specific issues of imprisonment and literacy, and recent initiatives for incarcerated fathers. The significance of the study lies in the demonstration that theories of early literacy development can successfully be shared with imprisoned fathers, and related practices incorporated into the literacy-oriented family visits. A rigorous interpretivist approach highlights the importance of prisoners learning about children's early literacy development. Although the opportunity to see their children provides a strong motivation to enrol on the programme, the paper argues that the men's manifest engagement with the ideas and activities in the workshops and the literacy-oriented family visits indicate successful programme adaptation: primary success lies in influencing fathers' concern to support their children whilst incarcerated, though impact on their resolve to desist from crime and re-establish their fathering roles is also notable. Implications for policy and practices to enhance incarcerated parents' involvement with their children's developing literacy are discussed.

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Prison; prison education; fathers; early literacy; family literacy

Introduction

This paper reports an original study to identify how imprisoned fathers could be supported in their vital contribution to their young children's literacy. The UK male prison population is represented by a tapestry of low levels of educational achievement, literacy, employment, family separation and divorce. In this context, the project reported here enabled the development of a uniquely co-produced family literacy project, [*FLiP, Family Literacy in Prisons*] in two men's prisons. A University-Charity-Prisons collaboration, the project team comprised three lead Pact¹ family workers, two academics and two prisons. The composition of the project team ensured distinctive and diverse expertise in: early literacy, prison education,

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research design and prisoner and family support. This collaboration was a significant feature of the study, which sought to understand whether it was possible to adapt an established approach to family literacy (Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan 2005), for effective use with imprisoned fathers.

This paper first provides a critical overview of family literacy and fathers' involvement in children's early literacy development, followed by a consideration of the contextual issues of imprisonment and literacy. We then report recent initiatives to involve imprisoned fathers in their children's early literacy development.

The methodological approach was largely qualitative, using interviews, observations and questionnaires. The aim was to understand what ideas and practices about early literacy could effectively be shared with imprisoned fathers, to involve them in their children's literacy. Our analysis, using manual coding and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, focussed on the primary purpose of the study; the fathers' own learning about their young children's literacy, and their anticipated future contribution to that development. Findings focus on these issues and the questions of participation and programme adaptation, which we discuss as we return to the research questions and finally consider limitations and implications of the project.

Family literacy and fathers' involvement

This section critically connects literature on family literacy and fathers' involvement in children's early literacy development. It provides a brief critical overview of two decades of family literacy research before focusing on the specific roles and involvement of fathers.

Family literacy programmes

Over the last two decades, it has become widely accepted that young children are more likely to succeed in school where parents are actively involved in their learning (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus 2011). Whilst mothers typically have most involvement in their children's learning (Nichols 2000; Palm 2013) children whose fathers are involved are known to benefit academically, socially and emotionally (Amato 1998; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004), with fathers' involvement in their children's education at age seven shown to bring long-term benefits by age 20 (Flouri and Buchanan 2004).

Studies in the 1980s showed how children's early understandings of literacy are acquired within their family and community, with literacy experiences depending on their families' social and cultural practices (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988). Most family literacy programmes have focused on disadvantaged communities, with anticipated underachievement in school (Wagner, Spiker, and Linn 2002; Whitehurst, Epstein, and Angel 1994), yet a weak relationship has been identified between education, income and involvement in pre-school literacy practices (Ortiz 1996). Family literacy practices have been studied (mainly in the US and UK) in different ways, including ethnographic research (Heath 1983; Taylor 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988), interviews with parents (Nichols 2000), interviews with children (Nutbrown and Hannon 2003), direct observation (Purcell-Gates 1996; Teale 1986) and case studies of individual children (Baghban 1984; Bissex 1990; Schickedanz 1990). Taken together, these studies provide a rich understanding of how families can nurture children's early literacy development.

The role and involvement of fathers in family literacy programmes

The reported characteristic reluctance of fathers to read to their children (National Center for Fathering 1999; Solsken 1992) has been explained by the suggestion that men may be wary of involvement in something seen as a mother's role (Nichols 2000) and/or may not value reading with young children (Fletcher and Daly 2002). Mothers have been shown to have more confidence to support children's reading (Lynch 2002) and have not always encouraged fathers' involvement (Bonney, Kelley, and Levant 1999; Lamb 1997). Deficit discourses around fathers in disadvantaged communities (often with low levels of literacy), can contribute to men's inhibition in relation to their children's learning (Pattnaik 2013).

Fathers' involvement in children's literacy activities have been documented (Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan 2005; Ortiz, Stile, and Brown 1999) with an identified connection between how often fathers read to their children and children's later interest in books (Lyytinen and Laakso 1998). Middle-class mothers have been found to delegate story reading to fathers (Nichols 2000), and fathers who engaged in their children's literacy were found to have stronger relationships with them (Ortiz, Stile, and Brown 1999). In a study of over 5000 two-year olds, Baker (2013) found that 'that both fathers' and mothers' involvement positively contributed to children's cognitive and social emotional development' (1) and the frequency of home literacy activity resulted in better outcomes in attention span and behaviour.

Programmes have typically involved mothers (DeBruin-Parecki and Krol-Sinclair 2003) and, overall, mothers provide more literacy activities, more frequently, at home than do fathers. However, where fathers do provide such activities they have been found to be particularly important for the academic development of children, especially those whose mothers' own education is below degree level (Foster et al. 2016). Parent-child reading studies have traditionally focused on mothers (Malin, Cabrera, and Rowe 2014), with family literacy programmes only recently making specific efforts to involve fathers and globally the issue remains relatively under-researched (Pattnaik 2013). Whilst Potter, Walker, and Keen (2012) found that male workers can have a beneficial effect on father involvement in children's development programmes, those designed to increase father-child involvement in children's literacy development have had varying degrees of success (Green 2003) with most having difficulties in recruitment and participation.

Morgan, Nutbrown, and Hannon (2009) investigated the involvement of 68 fathers in their children's home literacy, reporting that 'although largely invisible to outsiders, in many families the fathers' presence in their children's literacy became apparent ...' (182). Ninety-three per cent of fathers in their English study were reported to be involved in their young children's literacy, and the fathers' who were higher income earners were more likely to be involved. This is not to say that fathers with lower SES cannot be successfully involved; Ortiz (2001) and Karther (2002) demonstrated that fathers of low SES were willing and able to learn how to support their children's early literacy development and literacy. A US Early Head Start programme successfully engaged fathers from 15 families of low-economic backgrounds in their young children's early literacy (Bauman and Wasserman 2010), specifically highlighting the need for evaluation of programmes involving fathers.

In the last decade, greater efforts develop father-focussed programmes have established programmes attractive to men, culturally relevant, and in some cases targeting fathers of boys in ways which both addressed the lack of father involvement and sought to narrow the

achievement gap between boys' and girls' literacy (Bauman and Wasserman 2010; Foster et al. 2016; Malin, Cabrera, and Rowe 2014).

Thus, the international literature underscores the importance of programme design, so that fathers' likelihood of engagement is maximised. It is also clear that father-engagement is important for children, especially their young boys. The challenge for the study reported here was to adapt a programme for use in prisons where the complexities of limited contact with family, constrained programme design and practice, and where the instance of adult literacy difficulty is likely to be higher. Programme 'fit' depends upon culture relevance (DeBruin-Parecki 2009) which surely pertains to the cultures of prisons as well as to cultures born of tradition, faith and heritage. Having considered fathers' involvement in children's literacy, the next section will focus on imprisonment and literacy, and in-prison father involvement initiatives.

Literacy and fatherhood in prison

We first consider the contextual issues of imprisonment, literacy and fatherhood followed by recent initiatives to involve imprisoned fathers in their children's early literacy development.

Contexts of imprisonment, literacy and fatherhood

Crime is linked with low educational attainment and, whilst not all prisoners struggle with literacy, a high percentage does. This section first considers some research, from the last two decades, about imprisonment, fatherhood and the impact on their children, before moving on to consider issues around initiatives involving imprisoned fathers in their children's literacy.

Monitoring of the parental status of prisoners is patchy, no regular annual Ministry of Justice statistics are available for the UK, and it is thus difficult to establish a representative picture. Prisons do not, for example, routinely monitor whether prisoners have children, so it is necessary to draw on other available data to assemble a patchwork of understanding around imprisoned parents and their families. This highlights one of the difficulties in researching in prisons and establishing the background picture. In this paper, we draw on the most recent, reliable data, (albeit some are as much as 10-years old). Statistics given in this paper are drawn from multiple sources including the Prison Reform Trust reviews of available data about prisoners and their families, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons reports on prison life. Both sources cite studies conducted in the past decade as the most recent, and we, therefore, believe the data re-presented here to be similarly current.

In England and Wales, some 95% of prisoners are men; and approximately 200,000 children had a parent in prison in 2012 (for the majority, their father; MoJ 2012a), this is an increase from an estimated 88,000 children (0.8%) in England and Wales in 2007, (Murray and Farrington 2008) and represents one quarter of all children affected by parental imprisonment in Europe (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna 2013). To draw an international comparison, in 2015, it was estimated that more than four million children (some 5%) in the USA had parent in prison (Murphey and Mae Cooper 2015) an increase from 1,700,000 in 2007 (Arditti 2012), and two million in 2010 (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2012). In the US, as in the UK, data are not easily or routinely obtained and surveys

often yield patchy, unreliable data due to under and over reporting, and recall difficulties (Geller, Jaeger, and Pace 2016).

The number of children affected by parental imprisonment in England and Wales is double those affected by divorce (Bromley Briefings 2016) and whilst most teachers know about the marital status of children's parents and can support children whose family make-up changes and may be causing distress, many teachers do not know if a child in their class has an imprisoned parent (Evans 2015) and so do not understand a child's feelings, and the potential impact on a child's school work or behaviour. Thus, it is unsurprising that children of prisoners have about three times the risk of mental health problems and/or anti-social behaviour than their peers (Murray and Farrington 2008) and emotional, and social effects on children can be compounded by social stigma (Murray et al. 2014). Studies in Denmark (Oldrup et al. 2016), and the US (Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012) found that children of imprisoned parents experienced increased mental health difficulties and psychosocial stress – due to separation, uncertainty, changes in routine and stress at school. In Sweden, children of prisoners reported that they coped with the distress, and stigma, of separation with support from family, friends, teachers and health professionals, believing their trauma would end when their parent was released (Steinhoff and Berman 2012). Mothers suggested that 'more frequent and longer visiting hours, child-friendly visiting environments' would enable a 'better quality of life' for their children (Fahmy and Berman 2012, 115). A systematic review of 11 studies of children with an imprisoned parent (Thulstrup and Karlsson 2017) was critical of research but highlighted international concern about the mental health of children of imprisoned parents.

In June 2017, the male population of UK prisons was given as 81,500 (National Offender Management Service 2017) and 52% of the 6362 male prisoners surveyed by HMIP (2016) said they were fathers. HMIP highlighted that maintaining contact with imprisoned parents is 'important for children in terms of their development, including educational attainment, inclusion, and mental health' (HMIP 2016, 4). According to the MoJ (2012a), 40% of prisoners believed that support from their family and seeing their children would help them stop reoffending. Parenthood can be a motivation to avoid future imprisonment (Roettger and Swisher 2013) yet cross-national comparisons have shown that parental imprisonment adversely affects the life chances and offending rates of boys in England where 65% of boys with a father in prison are likely themselves to offend (Gill and Jacobson 2013).

In 2012, 47% of UK prisoners said that they had no qualifications (compared to 15% of the working general population in the UK), 21% of prisoners needed help with reading and writing, and 41% with education generally (MoJ 2012b). An example (of many cognate) responses to this need is the Shannon Trust's *Toe by Toe*² reading programme, where prisoners peer-mentor prisoners who are learning to read; 85% of learners surveyed reported that their reading was improving.

Education in prisons can be effective (Vacca 2004) but prisoner education needs a higher level of attention, especially at the level of basic skills tuition (Shippen 2008). The Prisoners Education Trust (April 2014) has shown the positive effects of education in prison on reoffending.³ Yet, in England and Wales, prison education is widely seen as under-funded and as failing to maximise opportunities to inhibit reoffending (Coates 2016).

The dual concerns of maintaining family relationships and the need to enhance prisoners' literacy and educational engagement, have led to the development of several initiatives focusing on literacy and prisoners' families (Farmer 2017).

Initiatives around children's literacy for imprisoned fathers

The 'collateral consequences' of father imprisonment for their children (Dallaire 2007; Roettger and Swisher 2013) have led to several UK initiatives to connect imprisoned fathers with their children; these reflect initiatives in the USA which began in the 1990s (Genisio 1996; Geraci 2001; Hobler 2001). Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier (2003) reported that close family attachments give prisoners some sense of direction and meaning in their lives, bringing up children being incompatible with imprisonment (Edin, Nelson, and Parnal 2001; Moloney et al. 2009).

As well as the effect on the offender, in England 36% of boys with an imprisoned parent suffer themselves from depression in middle age and some 65% offend themselves, perpetuating a cycle of crime and imprisonment. Children of imprisoned parents are more likely to experience: mental health difficulties, school exclusion, arrest and imprisonment as young adults (Gill and Jacobson 2013); the negative effects on children are multiple (Barnardo's 2014). Given the international evidence about the centrality of families in supporting desistance from crime (Vogelvang and Van Alphen 2010), and the impact of parental imprisonment on children, the UK Ministry of Justice has for some time recommended that the National Offender Management Service [NOMS] should consider how to support and maintain family relationships (Marnua 2010).

Mostly supported by charities,⁴ the length and focus of programmes for prisoners and their families vary. For example, *Fathers Inside*, *Family Man* and *Parenting Matters* are parenting programmes designed 'to develop a better understanding of their role as a father, while challenging attitudes, developing skills essential to successful resettlement, and contributing to desistance from crime'.⁵ These programmes pay some attention to basic literacy but do not focus intently on children's literacy. Programmes such as *Daddy New Born*, *Families First* and *Homework Dads*⁶ emphasise family relationships through visits, the latter involving children working on school projects with their father's help. *Invisible Walls*,⁷ and *Inside Stories*⁸ include children and their families visiting imprisoned fathers for specially organised events, and *Inside Stories* and *Reading Dads* (Hart 2007) involve fathers reading with their children at organised family visits. *Inside Stories* includes a book-gifting element where fathers choose and wrap a book which they give to their child when they visit. *Storybook Dads*⁹ facilitates distanced contact through stories recorded by imprisoned fathers which is mailed to the child on a CD.¹⁰

These initiatives have variously engaged fathers in reading with their children. The *FLiP* Project reported here was an original initiative to enhance fathers' involvement in their children's early literacy development.

Research methods and methodology

In this section, we set out our research questions and methods and justify the methodology.

Research questions

The two research questions for this project were: (i) 'In the event of their imprisonment, how can (absent) fathers be supported in their vital contribution to young children's literacy

development?’ and (ii) ‘Can an established programme, known to be effective elsewhere, be adapted and run successfully with fathers in prison?’

The programme

The *FLiP* project was designed to help imprisoned fathers to learn about their roles in their young children’s literacy; and about how they might contribute whilst imprisoned and when released.

Over a five-month period, a multidisciplinary project team planned and delivered a series of six jointly run full-day workshops for male prisoners and six corresponding literacy-oriented family visits in two UK prisons. The workshops covered: (i) theories of early literacy development – including emergent writing, environmental print, sharing books and oral language, (ii) parents’ roles in their children’s learning – specifically ORIM – Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Model, (Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan 2005) and (iii) preparing for and participating in a literacy-oriented family event in the prison.

Sample selection and demographics

The project involved 74 prisoners, exceeding the minimum threshold of 60 with a maximum of 15 prisoners in each workshop, and literacy-oriented family visits. Pact family workers recruited participants, following their usual processes for recruitment to Pact’s other work within the prison service and working in collaboration with the prison security department to ensure that all potential participants were eligible.¹¹ The programme was open to all fathers of young children; participants were all volunteers, some identified by prison regime assessment as likely to benefit; other potential participants might have been prevented from participation by, for example, a court appearance, timetable clashes with other programmes, or medical appointments. Attention was paid to the men’s literacy needs and abilities and an inclusive approach to recruitment was taken. No potential participant was excluded on the grounds of literacy ability (which ranged from low literacy levels to degree-educated participants); programme design included mixed ability working and individual support as necessary. Table 1 shows numbers of participating fathers, their ethnicity and age ranges and numbers of partners and children attending the family literacy events. Our sole criterion was that participants were imprisoned fathers of young children, and we were not in a position to control in any way for factors such as ethnicity, age or the numbers of children they had. Any selection effects would not inhibit the exploration of our research questions, and selection reflected the reality of in-prison work. The context prohibited random selection from all prisoners with young children; instead these different criteria for researching with the ‘hard-to-reach’ (Adams 2010) were utilised. Whilst this might raise issues of validity and reliability in terms of generalizability, the selection of participants reflected the reality of circumstances in which the project was set and adopted more appropriate criteria for rigour in qualitative studies (Anney 2014). Thus, the project is better judged in terms of trustworthiness (Shenton 2004) and integrity (Israel 2015), rather than in more traditionally positivist indicators of validity and reliability.



Table 1. Numbers of participating fathers, their ethnicity and age ranges, and numbers of partners and children attending the family literacy events in each prison.

Prison	Men completing programme	Fathers' ethnicity				Fathers' age range				Partners/carers attending family day	Children attending family day
		White British	Asian British	Mixed heritage	Black	18–25 years	25–40 years	40+ years			
A	39	34	3	2	0	8	22	2	29	43	
B	35	10	1	1	19	2	29	4	46	58	
Totals for both	74	44	4	3	19	10	51	6	75	101	

Ethical issues

The project was approved by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee, and the National Research Committee of the National Offender Management Service. Issues addressed in relation to the research ethics and integrity of the project included: informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, equipment, prisoner vulnerability and researcher safety.

Informed consent

All potential participants were invited to participate by a Pact family worker. A leaflet explaining the project and participants' involvement (and the right to withdraw) was offered and explained to each father. Informed consent was obtained, in writing, on an individual basis by the Pact family worker. In instances of documented/suspected mental health issues that could affect prisoners' ability to give informed consent, the appropriate mental health worker was consulted.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Participants' personal data remained in the prisons, with all such data in the keeping of a named [charity] worker and in a secure office in the prison. Any project data leaving the prison were anonymised and stored under the University's safe storage protocols. Participants' names have not been used and no photographic data were collected. Prisons have been identified according to the wishes of their Governors.

Equipment

Audivisual training materials were given prior security clearance and resources (which included books and art materials) for the workshop and literacy-oriented family visits were approved.

Prisoner vulnerability

There were a number of potential areas where prisoners might feel vulnerable: literacy difficulties; distress when discussing their own childhood literacy experiences and those of their children; and on returning to their cells after spending time with their children.

In terms of literacy difficulties, it is Pact policy to identify any specific learning needs of prisoners they work with, and to ensure that a worker or peer-mentor is available to support them. As with any interventions, Pact had lead responsibility for vigilance during the project to ensure the well-being of participants.

Workshop included discussion of childhood experiences of reading which may be distressing for some. The same agreed protocols and practices used in other Pact-delivered initiatives were followed as appropriate. Pact family workers provided individual follow-up support for participants as necessary according to prison procedures; prisons services and the relevant departments such as Offender Management Unit and Chaplaincy were usual mechanisms of support, as well as those provided by peer-support initiatives. Ground rules were established at the beginning of workshops to ensure that participants were aware of the need for self-care and could take time for private reflection and/or discuss with a Pact worker as required. Pact family workers followed up with participating prisoners offering support as appropriate.

Safety of researchers

The University team had professional boundary, safeguarding and emergency induction. Visiting researchers did not work alone with participants and Pact family workers and prison officers were present at all times. Project team safety followed usual prison protocols, including regard for emotional as well as physical safety.

Forms of data

We took an interpretivist approach using mainly qualitative methods, including workshop evaluations, written (or scribed) feedback on literacy-oriented family visits, and post-programme interviews with a randomly selected sample of the participant fathers. The data contribute to an original understanding of what it is possible to achieve around family literacy in a prison context, including how the men received and participated in the programme, and the potential and usefulness of literacy-oriented family visits. We used a range of methods to maximise the likelihood of eliciting a range of perspectives and obtain data that were as rich as possible. Table 2 shows the data type and number of respondents.

Workshop reflections

Participants were invited to reflect on aspects of the workshop (including reasons for participating, what they had learned and negative elements) using A1 sheets or individual notes during the workshop sessions. These were available throughout the workshop sessions for participants to add their comments and short breaks were included to give time for participants to comment on anything they wished. Twenty participants (27%) chose to offer their views in this way, some choosing to use a Pact worker or another prisoner as a scribe.

Literacy-oriented family visit evaluations

Participant's perspectives on the literacy-oriented family visits were obtained from 27 men (36.5%) who gave verbal responses during the day to five key questions.

Post-project interviews with fathers

Post-project structured interviews, lasting between 7 and 15 min, were conducted with 36.5% of men (27), selected at random and interviewed individually by an independent interviewer. Interviews focused on what they had learned and positive and negative features of the workshops and family literacy event.

Observations of workshops and literacy-oriented family visits

Workshop observations (of 3 h each, totalling 18 h) generated an overall impression of the workshops and were used to gauge levels of individual participation. Observations of literacy-oriented family visits (of 3 h each, generating 18 h of observation) were conducted

Table 2. Data type, number and percentage of respondents.

	Number of respondents	% of participants
Data from participant fathers	<i>n</i> = 74	<i>n</i> = 74
Workshop evaluations (volunteered)	20	27%
Family day comments (volunteered)	27	36.5%
Post-project interviews (random sample)	27	36.5%

by a designated member of the project team; notes were taken freely with no set format, with the observer documenting what they saw and the moments that struck them as most salient or significant.

Views of mothers/carers and children were also elicited but space does not permit their inclusion in this paper, the focus of which is the fathers' perspectives.

Analysis and findings

In this section, we describe and justify the analytical processes driven by the two research questions:

- (i) In the event of their imprisonment, how can these 'absent' fathers be supported in their vital contribution to young children's literacy development?
- (ii) Can an established programme, known to be effective elsewhere, be adapted and run successfully with fathers in prison?

Using NVivo we searched all data-sets for such evidence, using the following terms, selected because the featured strongly in the programme: books, development, environmental print, interaction, learning, literacy, reading, stories, talk and writing (selected because they were aspects that featured strongly in the programme). Secondly, we considered the effectiveness of the programme adaptation by first ranking the level of participation of each father (discerned from observations), and reflecting on the fathers' comments on the programme. We then manually revisited the data to identify any other issues inadvertently minimised or otherwise overlooked in earlier searches, and looking in particular for negative comments.

Fathers' learning and their future contribution to their young children's literacy development?

Observation and interview data evidenced fathers' keenness to question and discuss aspects of their children's literacy. Typical questions included:

So is this the kind of writin' my three year old should be doing?

Does it matter if they write their letters backwards?

What if they are readin' and you know they can't really read, but they, like, pretend 'cos they, like, know the story? Is that readin'?

Some expressed worries about when and whether to correct children's reading of words, or their writing. One father was concerned that his four-year-old son had to copy rows of letters to produce well-formed letters. He thought this was wrong for such a young age, but his partner continued to persuade the child to do the exercises because she did not want to appear to question what she perceived as a requirement by the school. A lengthy group discussion developed about establishing good habits at an early age; not allowing children's mistakes to go uncorrected in case they learn 'the wrong way'; the men's own recollections about learning to write; having handwriting corrected; being left-handed; comparing a perceived importance of spelling and handwriting over creative storywriting and telling; and the importance of not being scared to 'have a go' even if it means making mistakes. The richness, length and animation of the discussion was a strong indicator of the engagement

of the fathers and of their interest in learning more about, and making a contribution to, their young children's literacy development.

Over half of the men specifically mentioned learning about aspects of early literacy development drawing attention to the activities, such as:

We made a t-shirt with my daughter's name on it and she drew me and her

We decorated biscuits with his name and, I listened to him read – he's good! – and we played throwing the balls at different letters and spelt our names with floor tiles. He loved it – and I could see him learning.

Some men talked to their partners about how the activities helped their children's literacy:

In the workshop we were talking about how many words 2 year olds know – they can understand loads before they start talking – I was well impressed.

I didn't think about words on shops, and in the street and on clothes and that as reading, but it's print, innit, and they's reading it! Well impressed!

Several fathers said that thinking about early literacy using the ORIM framework was useful, some used the terms, *interaction* and *recognition* that featured in the framework:

That interaction and recognition is important

Knowledge to help me interact with my kids – and help them with their reading and writing

Fathers also mentioned their learning about theories of early literacy development; specifically various 'strands' of literacy that were discussed in the workshops. With regard to early writing development, they commented that they had learned:

About different stages of writing.

To pay more attention to what my daughter is scribbling.

That scribble isn't rubbish – it's the start of writing – amazin'.

Fathers identified making invitations, group storywriting and theoretical elements – such as stages of early writing development – as those that they enjoyed and where they learned most.

On environmental print, participants noted their new insights into:

How to incorporate environmental signs into learning.

Children picking up words from day to day life.

Workshop observations also indicated that the men were interested in thinking about reading development as not confined to books but including drawing children's attention to the words in their homes and communities (Goodman 1986; Neumann et al. 2011). One father was concerned that drawing children's attention to packaging and clothes labels constituted over-commercialisation of their learning. This prompted a discussion about parents taking responsibility and deciding what to point out to children to and how parents could choose what to focus on.

Books featured strongly in workshops and family literacy events, including the men choosing and wrapping a book as a gift for each of their children. Discussion of books and the pleasure of reading together drew considerable discussion with men commenting:

I would usually give the kids money but now I'm goin'ta buy them books and read to them ...

She loved me reading a book to her and tried to mimic some of the words I was using.

You can give a book as a present and it means something.

The success of the workshops can perhaps be summarised by one father who said: ‘There’s so much more to literacy than reading a book’, when he was thinking about using games made from logos and letters cut from magazines to support developing word and letter knowledge.

The manifest and universal engagement with ideas around early literacy development and the men’s interaction with their children demonstrated clearly that fathers could be supported in learning about their children’s literacy and reflexively their engagement as fathers in that literacy; the first of our research questions is substantially answered by this evidence.

Our second trawl of the data for issues that were not specific to our research questions found comments on two issues. Whilst the project did not set out specifically to encourage father–child bonding, or participants’ desistance from crime, these two issues were mentioned by many participants, typically:

Not only did it make me realise how much I am missing out - but doing all the different activities with them was so enjoyable and bonding with them and watching them learn some of the activities was important for me as a father. I learnt to spend quality time with them and many of the tools I have learnt will serve me well in the future. I gained a lot from this course and this day.

The role of family literacy in promoting family bonding and intention to desist from crime are areas for further research.

The effectiveness of the programme adaptation for imprisoned fathers

The extent to which parents participate in a programme is one way of gauging effectiveness, as Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005) argue that *continued participation* and high levels of participation are important factors in judging programme success. Reporting the extent of families’ participation in that programme, using a scale (1–5) of involvement developed by their programme teachers to rate families’ involvement, the authors report:

... 92 per cent of families participating ‘regularly’ (at level 3 or higher) and 45 per cent involved at the highest possible level of participation. (Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan 2005, 167)

Thus we began our analysis to identify whether the programme was successfully adapted by considering the extent to which the fathers participated, the rationale here being that mere attendance is one thing, but engagement at high levels of participation indicates a meaningful programme, and hence a successful adaptation. Using a scale derived from Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005) specifically developed for the project reported here (Table 3), the fathers’ levels of participation in workshops were rated.

Table 3 shows that 58 fathers (78.5%), were deemed to participate at high or fairly high levels, and 69 men were judged to participate at moderate to high levels of participation, (93.5%). This represents higher levels of engagement than those reported by Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005), and can be attributed to two factors. First, in their engagement with the project sessions the fathers indicated their strong interest in learning more about early literacy development; *and* secondly the men’s expressed desire to continue to support their children’s development during their sentence and when released.

Fathers’ reasons for participating in the workshop were threefold: to see their children, to enhance their learning about children’s literacy and to be ‘a better (and, implicitly, *present*)

Table 3. Scale of levels of workshop participation with numbers and percentage of fathers participating in workshops at levels 1–5 as judged from observation of workshops and family literacy visits.

Level of Participation	Definition	Number of participants at this level		Percentage of participants
		<i>n</i> = 74	<i>n</i> = 74	
5	High level of participation – continued contributions in group sessions, discussion and activity	31		42%
4	Fairly high level of participation regularly – intermittent contributions in group sessions, discussion and activity	27		36.5%
3	Moderate level of participation – contributions in group sessions, discussion and activity	11		15%
2	Low level of participation – occasional contributions in group sessions, discussion and activity	3		4%
1	Minimal involvement – present but no noticeable contribution in group sessions, discussion and activity	2		3%

father' in the future. Unsurprisingly, the motivation to spend quality time with their children, was high, with 100% of participants expressing views such as:

To get to spend time with my family that I would not have the chance to while inside.

Second, 57% of participants reported that they wanted to learn about early literacy/child development:

To try to learn more about how children learn and read.

Finally, 67% of participants expressed the will to enhance their own parenting:

... help with family life and rehab.

No other motivational factors were given.

Clearly, the opportunity to see their children during the literacy-oriented family visit provided a strong motivation to enrol and engage in the programme. But, beyond enrolment, we suggest that the high levels of *participation* are an indicator that the programme was successfully adapted to facilitate engagement and learning.

A further indication of successful adaptation lies in whether the participants would recommend it to others; all the men interviewed said that they would encourage other prisoners to join the programme, saying, for example:

It will help to show how to use reading and writing to interact with your child.

I have already recommended to someone on the wing this lunchtime.

Some suggestions for future adaptation were offered, with the main issue being the length of the programme. Eighteen men suggested more time, workshops and family events. One father felt that more preparation would have helped:

I would like to have tried out more of the activities that we're gonna do on Family Day.

These express the very few negative comments, despite attempts to make it easy to say negative things by having independent interviewers, opportunity for anonymous written responses and anonymous written group feedback. This, again, suggests that the programme was successfully adapted.

Discussion

We were interested in finding effective ways to support fathers' involvement in their young children's literacy development and whether elements of a hitherto successful and non-prison family literacy programme could be adapted for prison use. Important lessons have been learned about: take up, participation, motivation and about literacy-oriented family visits in prisons. This section briefly discusses these and considers implications for future family literacy work with offenders.

Take up, participation and motivation

The high level of interest in joining the programme and its *take up* indicated that it was needed; target participant numbers were exceeded with prisoners recommending it to others. Participation ratings were strong, indicating successful programme adaptation.

The opportunity to see their children in a situation different in style and length from usual family visits provided a strong *motivation* to participate; but it would be wrong to

understand this as a factor without contingency: interviews were only one source of data in this study, and our judgement of participation levels, the quality of engagement and discussion, and the new knowledge that fathers obtained and later *deployed*, provide reliable indicators that any early motivation to participate solely in order to see their children later gave rise to a desire to participate and learn. Fathers indicated that ideas about early literacy development were successfully shared, suggesting that the programme was successfully adapted in the prison context. Participation levels (and findings in relation to our first research question) indicate that fathers were not simply present, but were meaningfully engaged with the programme ideas.

This study bears some similarities with elements of previous studies in the UK and the USA (Dallaire 2007; Edin, Nelson, and Parnal 2001; Meek 2007; Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan 2005). However, we believe that the unique features of this programme are the co-location of tuition on early literacy development with family visits when fathers were able to put what they learned into practice and share ideas with their partners. Together they appear to have an impact on fathers' role in early literacy development and on resolve towards desistance.

The problem of education and rehabilitation lies in prison provision for education, and not with the motivation of the prisoners themselves, many of who ask for more such opportunities (Coates 2016). Significantly, our study demonstrates high motivation and engagement in the FLiP programme, with many requesting further provision. A policy implication of this is that attention needs to be paid to the range and type of opportunities that are provided, for imprisoned parents that focus on the role in their children's literacy, including resources for delivery including, according to recent official (Coates 2016) and media reports,¹² the availability of prison officers.

Literacy-oriented family visits

Fathers reflected on having family time; their new knowledge about early literacy; enhanced awareness of children's learning and development, and roles as free fathers. They maintained a focus on their children's literacy and general development, drawing on what they had learned in the workshop sessions thus affirming previous work on family literacy which has demonstrated that fathers can be involved if a programme is appropriately designed for them (Morgan, Nutbrown, and Hannon 2009; Potter, Walker, and Keen 2012) including sensitivity to varying levels of literacy typically found in the prison population.

Of significance too, is the expressed resolve of prisoners to think differently about their role as a father in the future. This relates to what we already know about the positive effects of maintaining family connections on desistance (Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier 2003; May 2008; MoJ 2012a).

This university-charity-prison collaboration found effective ways to teach fathers more about their children's early literacy development and to involve them in supporting such learning. Such an initiative can be an effective way forward for policy, especially given Coates (2016) review for the MoJ of prison education. Of course, the men's resolve to desist from crime and to be a 'present' father is yet to be realised (and it could be some years before any such observable effects might be recorded). However, the FLiP project has implications for UK prison education policy. It has shown that male prisoners were motivated to participate in a project which led them to discover or reaffirm their role as fathers in their children's lives

and learning. This is a positive contribution for the development of UK prison education, which offers a realistic and effective approach to supporting imprisoned fathers to develop their role in supporting their children's learning and to creating opportunities for change.

Programme development for use in prisons

The ORIM framework on which the programme was based has previously been used in preschool and community settings, and adapted for use in a range of programmes run by two national charities.¹³ More recently, a suite of 20 projects was developed, using the ORIM framework, adapted for use in home, community and library settings, to meet the needs of families, providers and communities (Nutbrown, Bishop, and Wheeler 2015). Given the successful adaptation to a range of contexts, ORIM was selected for use in the programme adapted for prisons.

The content of the programme remained the same as that developed by Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005) which included sharing with parents theories of emergent literacy and discussing practical ideas for engaging young children in activities involving words, rhymes, book-sharing and early writing. Workshops focussed on how parents can provide: *opportunities* for children to engage in meaningful literacy activities; *recognition* of the developmental steps children take in, for example, their early writing; *interaction* with their children around literacy, such as sharing books together and *modelling* as literacy users themselves. What was different from the original school/community programme was the way the programme was offered to the imprisoned fathers. Whereas the original programme included one-to-one work with families on home visits before introducing group work and special literacy events, the programme for prisoners involved sharing the content in workshops for 10–15 men – with a mix of one-to-one discussion, small- and whole- group work. The family literacy event was similar to those offered in schools and communities, taking place in a large space within the prison; activities were broadly similar to those in the original programme, limited only by prison restrictions on equipment that could be brought into the prison.

Two main changes in adapting the programme for in-prison use were the lack of home visits and time constraints due to prison regimes. Nutbrown, Hannon, and Morgan (2005) found home visits to be an important element in the original programme, and this was lost in the adaptation for prison work. However, the direct work focused on imprisoned fathers, was supported by written information that could be shared with partners.

Limitations of the study

We identify three factors which might be limitations of the study: selection, motivation and multiple interviewers.

First, due to the circumstances of the participant population it was not possible, for reasons discussed earlier, fully to control those participating. The circumstances and backgrounds of each imprisoned father who participated were individual and literacy levels varied greatly. Thus, our findings should not be generalised to infer that the positive response from participating fathers would be the case for all imprisoned fathers who might take part given the opportunity, but rather used to indicate that there *is* room for such a programme in prison education and that take up and participation could be high.

Second, we acknowledge that fathers' participation included an opportunity to have an enhanced quality of visit with their family. This was, we stress, not a 'reward' for participating in the workshops but an integral part of the programme, where the literacy oriented visit was the final element. The potential social desirability (Johnson and Van de Vijer 2003) of making positive comments in individual and group evaluations must be recognised, and despite making it easy to comment negatively, no participants did so. Whilst this could raise further concerns about 'socially motivated reporting' (Krumpal 2013) we argue that the range of methods used mitigate this possibility. Whilst much of the evaluation came at the end of the programme when the visits had taken place and there was no further incentive to give overwhelmingly positive responses we must be clear that, as with any interview responses, there is the potential that participants told the interviewers what they thought they wanted to hear.

Third, in seeking independence in the interviews and the reduction of researcher bias, we engaged a range of appropriately skilled and fully briefed interviewers who were cleared to work with prisoners. These included prison work volunteers, a social work student and *Pact* charity workers who were not involved in running the programme. The interview questions were the same for all participants, and all interviewees had similar instructions and support. We cannot claim that there was no interviewer variation (a common problem when using multiple interviewers), but we can say that comments were similar across all participating groups and across both participating prisons.

Future work on family literacy in prisons could seek further to refine data collection methods and instruments so that they are more specifically tailored for the restrictive conditions in which the research takes place. A study in women's prisons could usefully identify the effectiveness of a similar programme for imprisoned mothers. Further longitudinal studies are needed to learn the effects of family literacy in prisons on (i) children's outcomes, (ii) family literacy practices, iii) desistance from crime.

Conclusion

The *FLiP* project was successful in supporting imprisoned fathers to engage with their children around their literacy. In this respect, *FLiP* appears to be a unique UK initiative to support fathers' learning about their children's early literacy development. In conclusion, we return to our research questions to reflect on how they have been answered.

First, we asked how imprisoned fathers could be support to make a contribution to their young children's literacy development. We have shown that workshops focusing on theory and practical ideas can enhance fathers' knowledge about early literacy and family literacy events are an effective way of encouraging literacy interaction between imprisoned fathers and their children.

Our second question concerned programme adaptation. Based on levels of participation and qualitative comments from the fathers, we have shown that, despite necessary limitations, the programme was successfully adapted for prison use to successfully enhance imprisoned fathers' learning about their children's early literacy development.

In addition to answering our research questions, we identified instances where fathers stated that the experiences stimulated their relationships with their children and their attitude to committing crime in the future (these present areas for future research).

Given recent reports (Coates 2016; Farmer 2017; HMIP 2016), the consequences of this study for focusing on imprisoned fathers' knowledge of and involvement in their children's literacy development will require investment in resourcing prisons and prison charities to deliver appropriate programmes, and a clearer and resources focus on the learning of young children affected by parental imprisonment and in sustaining family relationships so as to assist in the growth of desistance.

Notes

1. *Prison Active and Care Trust*.
2. Shannon Trust <http://www.shannontrust.org.uk/our-work/our-achievements/>.
3. Rod Clark, Prisoners Education Trust (PET) <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130128112038/http://www.justice.gov.uk/justice-news/prisoners-education-trust>.
4. Including, in the UK, Barnardo's, National Literacy Trust, PACT, Safeground, The Reading Agency.
5. <http://www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/fathers-inside/>.
6. <http://www.hmpdoncaster.com/reducing-reoffending/family-and-families-first-programme/>.
7. http://www.i-hop.org.uk/app/answers/detail/a_id/233/~invisible-walls-wales.
8. <http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/our-services/supporting-prisoners-children-and-families/relationship-and-parenting-courses/inside>.
9. www.storybookdads.org.uk.
10. Storybook Dads Annual Review 2014 <http://www.storybookdads.org.uk/Storybook%20Dads%20Annual%20Report%202014.pdf>.
11. Eligibility could depend on a number of factors including a prisoner's conduct.
12. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/10/prisoners-sho...ategories&utm_term=238721&subid=14617893&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2.
13. People has used the ORIM framework in its programmes for parents since 1997. The National Children's Bureau has used the ORIM framework in its national training programme and projects since 2009.

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