

Creating the Roots of Hope: Using Art to support well-being in prison

Mark Jones is Director at Higher Plain and visiting Professor at the Centre for Criminology at University of South Wales.

'Art is about changing what we see in our everyday lives and representing it in such a way that it gives us hope.'



There is growing understanding of the power of art as a transformational experience that can support rehabilitation and the desistance journey of those who reside in prison.² There is also evidence art can support the development of positive overall well-being, which is also important for desistance.^{3,4} This article shares the research of the impact felt by all stakeholders

who engaged with an arts project called 'Creative Roots' that was facilitated in HMP/YOI Parc, Wales, UK from September 2022 to May 2023 by 'Das Clarks'.⁵ The research used the CHIME (Connected, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment) recovery model for mental health as a lens to understand the narratives and the well-being of the men during and following their

1. Wiley, K. (2016). Jerry Saltz and Kehinde Wiley Explain How Art Invents New Ways of Seeing. The Cut. <https://www.thecut.com/2016/11/jerry-saltz-tiffany-new-ways-of-seeing-whitney-biennial-video-series.html>
2. Atherton, S., Knight, V. and van Barthold, B. C. (2022). Penal Arts Interventions and Hope: Outcomes of Arts-Based Projects in Prisons and Community Settings, *The Prison Journal*, 102(2), 217 – 236.
3. Link, N.W., Ward, J.T., Stansfield, R. (2019). Consequences of mental and physical health for re-entry and recidivism: Toward a health-based model of desistance, *Criminology*, 57, 544–573.
4. Wallace, D., & Wang, X. (2020). Does in-prison physical and mental health impact recidivism? *SSM - Population Health*, 11, 100569.
5. <https://www.mrandmrsclark.co.uk/>

engagement with the project.⁶ Recent research has evaluated how inclusive and transferrable the CHIME framework is for substance use, addiction, and a variety of mental health conditions and has high relevance across a high variety of recovery contexts.⁷ The CHIME framework also has high relatedness to important factors needed for positive well-being and desistance and has recently been used within an arts project in a prison setting.⁸ This research therefore chose to use the CHIME framework as a lens for analysis and discussion because it related well to previous use and the residents engaging with the project

experienced poor mental health and used substances. Additionally, the CHIME elements relate well to the needed conditions of not only recovery, but desistance and rehabilitation as will be discussed in this article.⁹

Ultimately, all residents who engaged described increased feelings and experiences of connectivity, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. It has given those involved an opportunity to take off the 'prisoner mask' and be more relaxed, more open, and creative, and in doing so they felt more human and reported enhanced well-being.



Understanding the connection between desistance, well-being and the use of art in prison

Desistance can be defined as a process of stopping criminal behaviour and includes theory and practice understandings of 'how and why people stop and refrain from offending' (p.95).¹⁰ The desistance journey

is not a linear one but one usually with a pattern of multiple relapses due to the 'pains of desistance'. The pains of desistance are described as the multiple challenges and needs that are faced in this difficult transition, commonly including substance use and poor mental health.¹¹

Central to much of the literature on desistance is the need for structural opportunities that provide

-
- 6. Leamy, M., Bird, V., Le Boutillier, C., Williams, J. & Slade, M. (2011). Conceptual framework for personal recovery in mental health: systematic review and narrative synthesis, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 199(6), 445-52.
 - 7. Lases, M. N., Bruins, J., Scheepers, F. E., van Sambeek, N., Ng, F., Rennick-Egglestone, S., ... Castelein, S. (2024). Is personal recovery a transdiagnostic concept? Testing the fit of the CHIME framework using narrative experiences. *Journal of Mental Health*, 1-9.
 - 8. See Footnote 2: Atherton et al. (2022).
 - 9. See Footnotes 10-17; 23, 24
 - 10. Weaver, B., & McNeill, F. (2015). Lifelines: Desistance, Social Relations, and Reciprocity. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 42(1), 95-107.
 - 11. Nugent, B., and Schinkel, M. (2016). The Pains of Desistance. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 16(5) 568-584

'hooks for change' (p. 992) such as employment, education, and family relationships. These can support the development of new positive social identities that discard the old criminal identity and provide hope and increased self-esteem and confidence in a new self.^{12 13}

The cycle of returning to prison is a common struggle and the prison environment has its own challenges due to a culture of stigma, labelling, discrimination, and often a lack of positive opportunities.^{14 15} It is often difficult to feel positive and have hope and motivation for personal growth within prison settings.¹⁶ Ultimately, this contributes to negative justice capital where lack of resources, positive opportunities, and a stigmatising and discriminatory culture do not offer pro-social opportunities to develop positive social capital and rehabilitation towards desistance.¹⁷ This is important as it shapes successful desistance as not simply an individual's responsibility but also dependent on institutional and workforce provision. Therefore, appropriate and equitable access to social and justice capital opportunities is the responsibility of the institution and they should be accountable for providing such a culture and environment.^{18 19}

It is not surprising that positive well-being is central to desistance, as feeling healthy is a need for all people to be able to function effectively in daily life.^{20 21 22}

Well-being and accurately defining and measuring it is still subject to debate within the academic literature.²³ Michaelson, Mahony, and Schifferes offer a definition that 'Well-being can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.' (p. 6)²⁴

Art, well-being, and desistance

Art can support positive physical and mental health and can be used as a preventative and promotional approach to well-being.²⁵ Art has also been found to support well-being when supporting people with neurodivergent conditions and in their recovery from substance use and mental health. Indeed, Fancourt and Finn found that art can support the development of social cohesion, positive social relationships, and reduce effects of trauma and abuse, and was particularly useful in engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups.²⁶

Art engagement within prison has been found to support the creation of positive communication and social skills, more positive social relationships with peers, between prison staff and residents, and with residents and their families.^{27 28 29 30} Art within prison settings also supports the development of positive self-

12. Giordano, P., Cernkovich, S., & Rudolph, J. (2002). Gender, Crime, and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation 1. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (4) 990-1064.
13. McNeill, F. (2018). Rehabilitation, corrections and society: the 2017 ICPA Distinguished Scholar Lecture. *Advancing Corrections Journal*, 5, 10-20
14. Jones, M. & Jones, D. (2021). Understanding Aspiration and Education Towards Desistance from Offending: The Role of Higher Education in Wales. *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry*, 7(1), 23-49.
15. Best, D., Hamilton, S., Hall, L. & Bartels, L. (2021). 'Justice capital: A model for reconciling structural and agentic determinants of desistance', *Probation Journal*, 68(2), 206-223.
16. Dufour, I., Brassard, R., & Martel, J. (2015). 'An Integrative Approach to Apprehend Desistance'. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 59(5), 480-501.
17. Kemshall, H. & McCartan, K. (2022). Desistance, recovery, and justice capital: Putting it all together. HM Inspectorate of Probation: Academic Insights 2022/10. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/10/Academic-Insights-Kemshall-and-McCartan-Oct-22.pdf>
18. McCartan, K. (2022). Refining processes in policy and practice in working with people accused or convicted of a sexual offence, HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights 2022/01. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/01/Academic-Insights-McCartan-v1.1.pdf>
19. Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service (2022). Offending behaviour programmes and interventions. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/offending-behaviour-programmes-and-interventions>
20. Link, N.W., Ward, J.T., Stansfield, R. (2019). Consequences of mental and physical health for reentry and recidivism: Toward a health-based model of desistance. *Criminology*, 57, 544-573.
21. Wallace, D., & Wang, X. (2020). Does in-prison physical and mental health impact recidivism? *SSM - population health*, 11, 100569.
22. World Health Organisation. (2021). WHO remains firmly committed to the principles set out in the preamble to the Constitution. Online available at: <https://www.who.int/about/accountability/governance/constitution>
23. Jarden, A., & Roache, A. (2023). "What Is Wellbeing?" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20(6), 5006.
24. Michaelson, J. Mahony, S. Schifferes, J. (2012) Measuring Wellbeing: A Guide for Practitioners; New Economics Foundation: London, UK, 2012. Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/measuring-wellbeing.pdf>
25. See footnote 2: Atherton et al (2022).
26. Fancourt, D. & Finn, S. (2019). Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67 What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. World Health Organisation and Health Evidence Network.
27. Miles, A. & Strauss, P. (2008) The Academy: A Report on Outcomes for Participants, June 2006 - June 2008. Available at: <https://www.artsevidence.org.uk/evaluations/academy-report-outcomes-participants/>
28. Littman, D. M., & Sliva, S. M. (2020). Prison Arts Program Outcomes: A Scoping Review. *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974), 71(3), 54-82.
29. Menning, N. (2010). Singing with Conviction: New Zealand prisons and Māori populations. *International Journal of Community Music*, 3 (1), 111-120.
30. Palidofsky, M. (2010). If I Cry for You...Turning unspoken trauma into song and Inspiring Change: Final Report. 107 musical theatre, *International Journal of Community Music*, 3 (1), 121-128

esteem and self-confidence.³¹ All of these attributes support positive personal and pro-social development aligned to facilitating positive experiences and desistance, as outlined earlier.

Indeed, Atherton and colleagues found that their art project had significant positive effects on those who engaged with it in relation to well-being and supporting the desistance journey both within prison and within the community.³² The project found that engagement with art triggered feelings of hope and resilience and supported the building of trust and social skills. Another central element to the success and impact of the project was how the project was delivered by practitioners focused on developing respectful humanistic relationships that were non-judgmental, supportive and motivational, and where residents were called 'artists' to de-label and de-stigmatise.

Overview of the Creative Roots project

The Creative Roots Project aimed to provide a safe space for residents to take time out of their daily routine to engage in a range of mindfulness and creative activities. The main focus of the project was to provide opportunity to take part in printmaking, fine art and painting, photo journalism, and creative writing. There were additional activities which included an introduction to yoga, with a focus on mindfulness and breathing exercises. Art was also created from some of the HMP/YOI Parc prison staff and the artists that facilitated the project. Everyone who took part displayed their artwork in an exhibition inside HMP/YOI Parc in May 2023. Visitors to the exhibition were people that work in the Criminal Justice System such as prison officers, probation officers, and those that provide support services, other residents from HMP/YOI Parc, as well as the men who created the art. There was also an exhibition at the Newport Riverfront Theatre and Arts Centre in June 2023 called 'Freedom and Constraints' which ran for ten days.

Methodology and approach to research

Approval for the research was gained via the Partnership In Research and Interventions Panel at HM Prison Parc and the HMPPS National Research Committee. The ethical guidelines used to inform this research were from the British Society of Criminology (2015).³³

One of the core ethical considerations for this research was the need to share power, and support real and non-tokenistic participation with a 'story-telling' approach so all involved felt listened to and heard. 'Pictorial Narrative Mapping' was used to capture the focus group narratives which are hand drawn art graphics of the discussions and stories being shared.³⁴

During the project a total of ten focus groups were facilitated; eight with 33 residents who engaged with the project, one with four people from the rehabilitation prison staff team, and one focus group with the Creative Roots project team which had six participants. Focus groups all lasted for between one hour and one hour thirty minutes and all were audio recorded. Notes were taken during all focus groups. A final set of focus group narratives were developed using the audio recordings and the focus group notes and these were then analysed.

Focus groups were informally structured primarily using the CHIME framework as a basis to discuss well-being and how the residents had experienced their well-being throughout the project.³⁵ Participants were also asked for their reflections on what had gone well with the project, and what they thought should be changed.

The approach to analyse and thematically code the focus groups was using deductive coding with the CHIME framework as the themes.³⁶ The CHIME framework has been used in research within prisons as a lens for analysing well-being and in relation to the experience of art education and learning.³⁷ Therefore, using a deductive approach with

It is often difficult to feel positive and have hope and motivation for personal growth within prison settings.

31. See Footnote 26: Littman & Sliva (2020).

32. See footnote 2: Atherton et al (2022).

33. British Society of Criminology. (2015). Statement of Ethics 2015. <https://www.britisoccrim.org/documents/BSCEthics2015.pdf>

34. Lapum, J., Liu, L., Hume, S., Wang, S., Nguyen, B. & Harding, K. (2015). Pictorial Narrative Mapping as a Qualitative Analytic Technique, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5).

35. See Footnote 6: Leamy et al. (2011).

36. Bingham, A. J. (2023). From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.

37. See Footnote 30: Atherton et al. (2022).

the CHIME themes as a lens for analysis seemed wholly appropriate.

Although a primarily deductive approach was used, the researcher was open to inductive themes presenting themselves within the focus groups. This open-minded grounded theory approach supported the inclusion of all narratives within the CHIME themes.³⁸

At the conclusion of the focus groups the audio recordings, focus group notes, and the narrative mapping illustrations were all reviewed and coded within the themes of the CHIME framework. This approach led to the immediate triangulation of the data analysis, which is something that has been identified as bringing about increased trustworthiness of the findings.³⁹



Analysis and discussion of how Creative Roots supported positive well-being

The conversations during the focus groups with residents who engaged with the project illustrated the challenging reality of living in prison. The narratives are

captured below within the CHIME model themes with illustrative support from the Narrative Map graphics. Focus group analysis from both the rehabilitation staff and the Creative Roots arts team are also captured to illustrate their experiences and observations.

38. Denscombe, M. (2014). *The Good Research Guide: For Small-scale Social Research Projects*. Fifth edition. Open University Press.

39. Glaw, X., Inder, K., Kable, A., & Hazelton, M. (2017). Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Autophotography and Photo Elicitation Applied to Mental Health Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1-8.

Feeling connected and sense of community

All the residents who engaged believed that they felt greater connection to each other and the artists. The residents said the project had *'helped me make friends and feel comfortable'* and that we are *'all different but it's brought us all together.'* It was clear that positive social connections with peers and *'being with different people that are not from here is positive'* supported the residents to build *'positive relationships and I can be myself. I'm relaxed here.'* Almost all the residents stated that they *'feel respected here and treated as a human'* within the project and many stated they did not feel valued or respected in the prison most of the time.

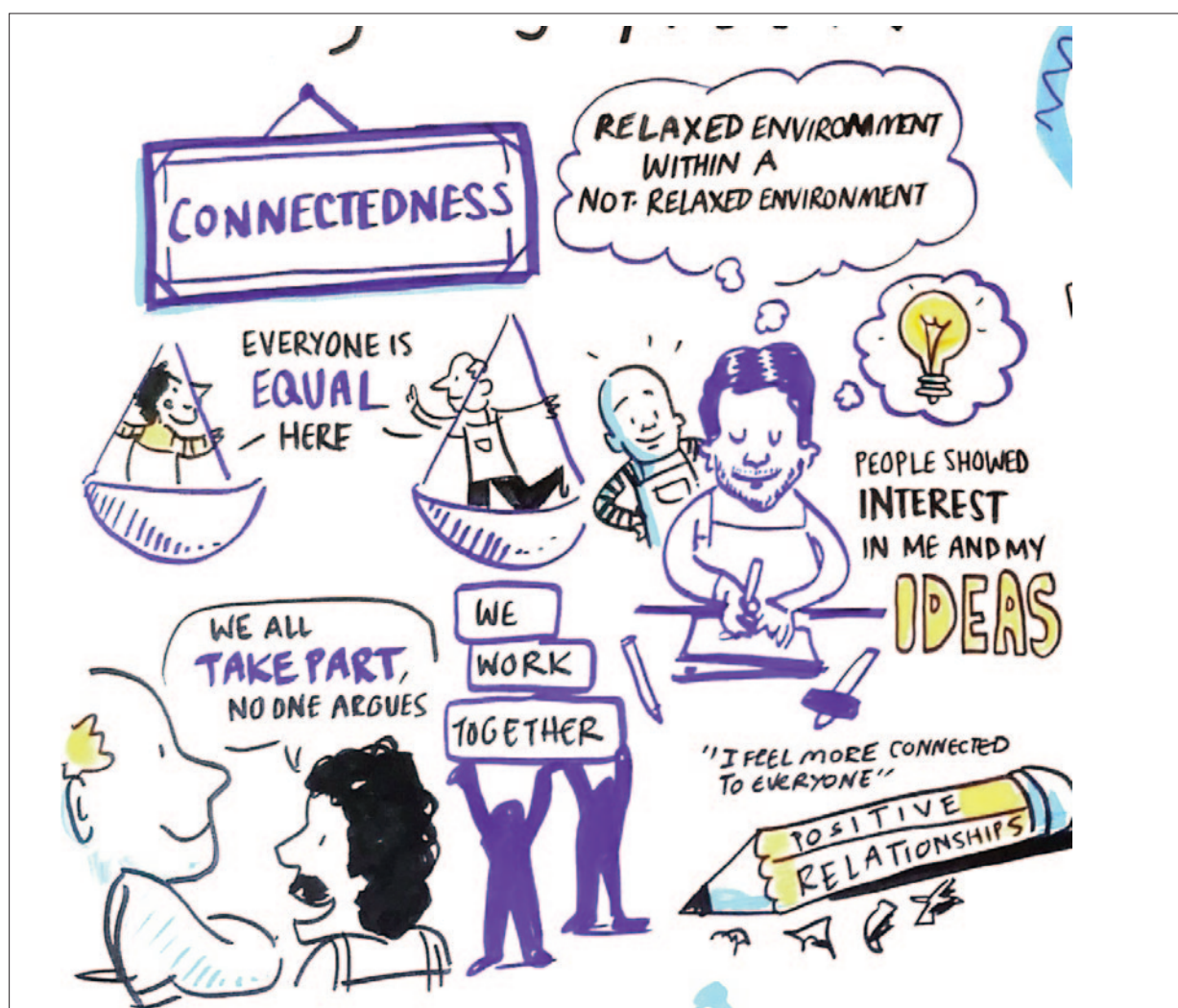
The experience of feeling part of a community and connected to others in meaningful and pro-social relationships with a shared purpose was enjoyed and appreciated. The relationships were based on mutual respect, support, and a sense of equality and non-judgment. The main theme is that the relationships developed were impactful because the residents felt they were being treated as fully human and stripped of the stigma of being seen as a criminal or prisoner.

The Creative Roots team felt the same and one artist said in relation to discussing the connectedness

and building of community during the project, *'boundaries blurred in some ways, and it was a strength and gave power to the project, the experience, it was real, we were real.'* Another nodded and reflected, *'Yes, creativity held the space and it is why they trusted us and our expertise and this allowed for deeper conversations, all whilst doing the art.'* The development of connection was further supported by the rehabilitation team with one member stating, *'a focus on positive relationships using an informal approach with credible and real practitioners that treated people that live in prison as fully human with respect and have genuine interest in them. This project did that and it clearly worked very well.'* Another member added that residents needed to be *'treated as real people, full humans, not criminals and then they can experience the possibilities of what they could become.'*

Weekly Hope and Optimism

The residents spoke of increased hope and optimism during and following the project with many explaining that they *'opened up and want to try new things'* and how because they had been *'treated*



differently, that's given me hope, hope we can be seen and treated differently to how we normally are' and that 'I don't feel like a prisoner and I feel that I won't always be.' Some residents said, *'I just feel more optimistic for the week'* and that *'it gave new meaning and hope to an otherwise quite negative world.'* These feelings created the motivation for positive behaviour change and *'I made sure I kept my behaviour tidy as I didn't want anyone to take this away from me.'* These perceptions were further supported by the rehabilitation staff and the Creative Roots artists; one artist said, 'well, they've all told us that it gives them hope from week to week, something to look forward to, they get nothing in here really. It can be a dark place to live.'

During the exhibition in prison many of the residents who participated in the project said they were *'buzzing this morning. I'm so happy, proud, and I feel full.'* The project had given the residents hope and optimism that they could achieve and complete a programme of activity and create art work; one person stated: *'Knowing I can and have done this when they tell you that you can't so often. Well look at me now!'*

Providing opportunities for engagement with art created hope in the immediacy and within the short-term duration of the project. Interestingly, it also provided hope and optimism for the longer term with a belief they could achieve in the future if they were committed.⁴⁰



40. See footnote 9: Giordano et al. (2002).

Developing elements of new identities and re-engaging with vulnerability

The way residents viewed themselves appeared to change throughout the project. Many spoke about how they could see themselves in more a positive light, *'I can be more myself here and I'm not just a criminal'* others clearly enjoyed learning and stated, *'I'm treated as a pupil and as an equal not a prisoner.'* Indeed, not being seen as a criminal and almost needing to act in a certain way in prison to survive is captured well by one man who said *'I can take my mask off once I'm here. I don't have to look tough or kind of, you know, you have to be a certain way out there. You can't be vulnerable out there.'* For many, letting go of a prisoner identity was positive and many stated that the project had supported greater freedom and that *'It's about exploring and trying new things and not feeling embarrassed or defensive. I've just let my guard down.'*

Some of those that engaged also spoke passionately about developing current identities as fathers, and before the project some men felt they could not do much with their children. However,

following learning about art techniques and creating their own art they felt they would *'be a better dad now and do this with my kids. I never thought I'd do this sort of thing. It's great.'*

One Creative roots artists adds weight to the change in personal identities when they shared that, *'once they trusted us they really let go and dared to create, to really express themselves, it opened up doors I feel, in them, in how they saw themselves.'*

The confidence of the participating residents also seemed to grow and some men started to develop new identities through acting in supporting roles with their peers. Some of the men felt that they could progress with a peer support role in the future as *'I've loved this, I've loved supporting people, I'd love to teach others.'* So, for some, the experience of learning and supporting others created opportunity to develop and aspire to a new potential pro-social identity. The development of such positive identities are important to desistance as discussed earlier and illustrates some of the potential of art-based projects within prison and community settings.⁴¹



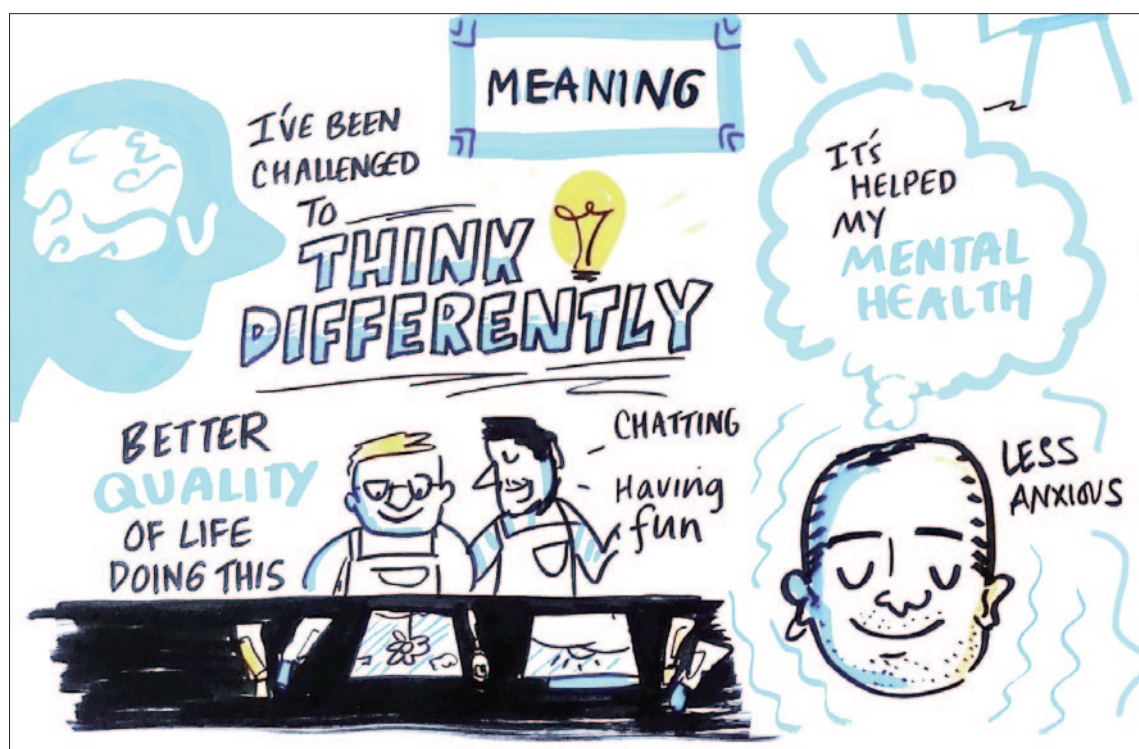
41. See footnote: 7, 9, 10, 11 & 13

Developing new meaning to self, socialisation, and better mental health

The project appeared to give greater meaning to the residents who took part and many felt that *'I'm bettering myself with this. It's become more than the art'*. Some of the men explained that they felt they had *'been challenged to think differently'* and that the yoga and mindfulness exercises *'helped my mental health. I'm less anxious. I can calm myself down with breathing.'* The development of breathing techniques supported the men to feel mentally more positive and one resident stated that the yoga and breathing practice has been *'like a health pill. I feel better about myself. I feel calmer. I feel more human. I feel alive.'* All residents who engaged spoke of how positive it was to do something new and that the creative process had ignited something in them and they were *'hungry to learn more and do other projects. It feels so good to*

learn and to do new things.' The want to engage with education has been found to be important to the desistance journey and the experiences of residents on this project support the wider literature.⁴²

The development of deeper meaning was also witnessed by the Creative roots team. An artist explained that *'we were told that during the project mental health was better with lower rates of self-harm and substance use. That hit hard. It made a difference to the pain they were feeling and how they dealt with it.'* Another artist agreed adding, *'so many of the men told me how the yogic breathing had helped them to calm down and be more present and be less reactive and a few even said it helped their ADHD and substance use.'* The rehabilitation team offered similar narratives and believed that *'it was so clear that many of the men had developed positive social relationships, and the breathing and yoga stuff just helped their mental health and self-control.'*



Greater Choice, Control, and Freedom

The experiences during the project contributed to residents describing they felt they had choice and control over their learning and so felt more committed to the learning. One resident openly talked of how anti-establishment he was, *'I had choice and respect so I didn't rebel. I had control over my learning'* whilst another stated *'We have choice here, I'm free to decide. I love that freedom.'*

Although linked to mental health the men who lived in prison talked of greater self-agency and control with their mental health. The learning related to breathing, meditation, yoga, and mindfulness and many stated that they found this useful for self-control and that *'the breathing and calming mind stuff. I've new skills to help my mental health and anger'* and another person agreed and said that *'It's helped my ADHD, slowed me down, helped my focus, my self-control.'*

42. See footnote 11: Jones & Jones (2021).

The Creative Roots team felt the project had real impact because, 'we treated them with respect and gave opportunity of choice and a process of decision making' and so 'we worked with them, not on them or to them, they were partners in learning, it was a different relationship to what they are used to. Dare I say they felt empowered.'

Educational opportunities offering choice and freedom as well as a therapeutic element can be useful in supporting well-being in prison. Residents who engaged with this project stated they felt more empowered and felt greater self-agency and control in their lives. These themes align well to the needed elements and outcomes for positive desistance where empowerment, choice, and self-agency are all central to successful desistance.⁴³ The Creative Roots team concluded that, 'The whole culture of lock them up and make it safe needs to be challenged and all people working in this space need to know that rehabilitation and supporting positive change doesn't work like that. There needs to be a change to focusing on positive

opportunities that offer social interactions, trying new things, talking in groups, and being treated with respect and as a full human and not just a criminal who is a risk.'

The rehabilitation team also supported the need for change, 'it's not beyond projects like this to change people's lives but it needs longevity to have any chance to do this. This was so positive, but it was a patch on a much bigger problem and issue and that is high quality education and learning opportunities are not consistently available in prison settings.' However, as one staff member reflected, 'the prison system was often seen as a blocker to such opportunities and that there is a real nervousness about supporting any type of freedom like with this project where residents could move around as it's easier to rule by lock and key and make things secure but that's not rehabilitation is it.' Another member agreed and suggested 'a complete rethink about what prisons should be doing to actually support rehabilitation because it currently isn't working.'



43. See Footnote 10: McNeill (2018).

Final Thoughts and Recommendations for Future Practice

Ultimately, everyone involved in the project felt that it supported an increase in well-being, greater connectivity, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. It gave those residents who engaged an opportunity to take off the 'prisoner mask' and be more relaxed, more open, and creative, and in doing so the experiences and outcomes were positive. It is not over-stating the impact of this project to propose that it provided excellent opportunities for personal growth and greater self-respect and hope and belief that change was possible.

Although this was a small-scale project in one prison it does have some useful learning and application to wider prison settings. To support positive well-being for residents in prison, and to support their desistance and rehabilitation journey, education provision should provide an environment that supports the development of informal learning. Such environments support people to feel respected, have choice, have opportunity for creativity and expression, feel safe, and ultimately feel they are being treated as humans within a community and not just criminals and prisoners. There were also powerful experiences from engaging with and then practising yoga and

mindfulness by the residents who took part in the project, with many explaining how they would use it to support their well-being, neurodiversity, and substance use.

This project also illustrated that art projects in prison can have powerful learning for artists and that it can support greater insights into the human condition, and challenge pre-conceived ideas of what a 'prisoner' is and acts like. Practitioners that work in prison also found the Creative Roots project and the approach to delivery powerful and provided clear learning on how art can support well-being of residents in prison. The approach of being respectful, genuine, with inclusive communication and the building of relationships were a foundation for supporting residents to feel hope, connected, and empowered to want to change. Ultimately the project supported the residents who engaged to feel fully human and to be 'humanised.'

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks and gratitude to the inspiring, creative, and committed residents who engaged with this project and created such beautiful art and with who I had such powerful conversations. Art really can give the opportunity for meaningful connection, hope, choice, and freedom wherever it is supported.