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The Invisible Child:

Perspectives of Headteachers about the role of primary schools in working with the children of male prisoners

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Introduction

It is estimated that there are approximately 160, 000 children with a parent in prison[1] and two recent texts[2] illustrate the difficulties children of prisoners face. Yet these are rare: much research considers the impact on families of prisoners as a homogenous group[3] with little discrete reference to children themselves. This is reflected in the fact that only three per cent[4] of all Local Authorities' Children and Young People's Strategic Plans mention prisoners' children in spite of the fact that over seven per cent of an average school population will experience the imprisonment of a parent. A report[5] in 2007 drew attention to the lack of existing support for children of offenders. It also highlighted the lack of shared information about children with a parent in prison: 70 per cent of schools hear about the imprisonment of a parent directly from the family or indirectly from the community; and only two schools in the study were informed by the relevant agencies. This seems to echo the conclusions of an earlier study which identified that,

> *One of the biggest challenges in considering the response of schools and teachers to prisoners' children is that there is little published research into the experiences of prisoners' children in school and little identification of good practice in teaching and pastoral care. (p160)*[6]

The Study and its findings

This study was carried out as part of a wider PhD study at the Institute of Education, London and examined the perspectives of eight Headteachers in relation to their work with this group of children. Part of the wider study considered the involvement of imprisoned fathers in the education of their children. This element was conducted using purposive sampling[7] of schools in the North-West of England to ensure a broad range of schools were approached. Each of the semi-structured interviews with the Headteachers lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Informing schools

Gaining information from parents was a central challenge shared by all Headteachers interviewed. This was particularly evident in relation to the children of prisoners. Several of the Headteachers commented that *'It's rubbish'* and *'It's guess work'*. *(HT School B)*.

> *It is just pot luck if we get told or not. We are always telling all parents that it is important to tell the school about any changes in a child's personal circumstances that might have an effect on school life —sometimes they do but often they don't. (HT School A).*

> *I am not aware that we currently have any children in this position. We aren't in an area where this is a regular occurrence — although I realise that this sounds bad! However, that isn't to say there aren't any — just that I don't know of any — round here, it isn't something that parents would be keen to admit to as you can probably imagine. (HT School D).*

It is acknowledged that strong lines of communications between schools and parents are very important

1. Prison Reform Trust (2011) Bromley Briefings Fact file. London: Prison Reform Trust.
2. Condry, R. (2012) in Crewe, B. and Bennett, J. *The Prisoner*. Routledge: Oxon; and Billington, R. (2012) *Poppy's Hero*. Frances Lincoln Children's Books: London.
3. Codd, H. (2008). *In the shadow of prison: Families, imprisonment and Criminal Justice*. London: Willan; Scott, D and Codd, H. (2010) *Controversial Issues in Prisons*. McGraw-Hill Education, Berkshire.
4. Action for Prisoners Families Statement 2007.
5. DCSF/MOJ. (2007), Children of Offenders Review. London.
6. Codd, H. (2008). *In the shadow of prison: Families, imprisonment and Criminal Justice*. London: Willan.
7. Oliver, P. (2006) Purposive Sampling in Jupp, v. (ed) *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods.* London: SAGE Publications.

in involving parents in their children's education[8]. All the Headteachers interviewed indicated that this is often not the case in relation to children of prisoners. Schools are not aware of all (if any) children who have a father in prison. Of the eight Headteachers interviewed, none were able to give a precise figure for their school. They highlighted that they were very reliant on the child or parent informing them.

Behaviours and the 'invisible child'

All the Headteachers commented that behaviour visibly changed when a parent was imprisoned.

> *Behaviour always changes [but] that varies massively from child to child. For my child in Reception he just gets really teary when he is tired and says he misses his Dad (although he doesn't know why he is away) and wants to give him a hug. Sometimes I see him clinging to his Mum in the morning when she drops him off, he doesn't want to come into school and leave her. I think he is actually worried that she'll go off and leave him as well. (HT School E).*

Behaviour always changes [but] that varies massively from child to child.

> *It could be that they are withdrawn or weep or fall out with their friends. [Some are] extra sensitive and not really concentrating on their work. (HT School C).*

It is evident that the imprisonment of a father can have a negative impact upon a child's behaviour, causing their behaviour to be noticeably out of character, within the school environment. However, the study also showed that the impact can be positive.

> *I knew the eldest child well and it was so significant, Dad wasn't around for quite a long time … [the child began to] show much more respect towards his mother and respect towards other adults, including supply teachers ... He didn't try to be the guy on the playground and he started to develop friendships, which was fantastic and he was really well liked. (HT School D).*

Community and the 'invisible child'

The local school is at the heart of many communities and therefore employs a large number of staff from the local area. While the school's knowledge of its area helps it understand how best to help its children, it can also inhibit the disclosure by parents of circumstances, including the imprisonment of family members. This makes the children themselves more vulnerable. One school referred to the wider community the family lives in and how that community is perceived by the mother. Often it appears they are perceived as making a judgement about the family and stigmatising the mother and the child.

> *It is a relatively small community where people socialise together and sail together and play golf together and so this is not something a family would be willing to admit to. (HT School D).*

However, another school highlighted how the term community also relates to the wider role the community can play in relation to the children of prisoners. She demonstrated her discovery of parental imprisonment through the local community and the contacts staff had there. A third school referred to the community informing the school or the community supporting a family if they require it.

> *It's because it's not unusual in this area, so if there isn't the shock factor in the community and we're not shocked are we? (HT School C).*

Partners of male prisoners are aware of the perception of them and their children within the local community. They perceive that they are 'guilty by association' as mothers but research highlights that we must not forget the 'secondary stigma' faced by children in relation to this — they are therefore victims of 'contamination' and 'shame by association' (p89)[9].The reluctance of the mother in School D to share her personal family circumstances with the school due to her status within the community, has had a significant impact upon the child.

8. Hornby, G. (2000) *Improving Parental Involvement*. London: Cassell; Epstein, J.L. (2001) *School, family and community partnerships*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; and Goodall, J. and Vorhaus, J. (2011) *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*. London: Institute of Education.
9. Condry, R. 2007 Families Shamed: *The Consequences of Crime for Relatives of Serious Offenders*. Collumpton: Willan.

Invisible child and 'cover stories'

Two Headteachers used the term 'invisible child' to describe the children of prisoners. They implied that these were children whose full stories had not been told and who were not always obvious in school, unless school were aware of their circumstances. Inevitably, schools it is more challenging for schools to support these children's needs unless they are aware of their family circumstances[10].

> *It worries me we don't know what we don't know. This is the invisible child. (HT School B).*

Cover stories were common. They provide parents with a way of preserving their reputation and of maintaining the children's peer relationships without the stigma of a parent in prison. Although in one school parents seemed far more willing to share these issues directly with the school (possibly because of the community's acceptance of imprisonment as a 'fact of life'), cover stories were generally part of the difficulties schools have to face in understanding all they need to know about a child.

> *The girls were distraught. Grandma came and said that her Mum and Dad had gone to stay near [x] for a holiday but it was in the papers, the pictures were in. (HT School C).*

> *It was actually really sad as the boy stopped coming into school for a while. That's when we knew something was wrong. Mum, we found, later on was keeping him home with her as she was distraught herself and didn't want to be left on her own. Also though, I think she didn't want to come into school and face the embarrassment. She said as much when we eventually did get hold of her. The parents here (mums particularly) at the school gate, do talk and she didn't want the shame for her and her son (HT School D).*

> *She was a bit mortified that we'd found out from her son (we kind of knew from the papers already though). There was no way she could keep it quiet — she knew that. (HT School E).*

Boswell and Murray[11] have shown how the stigma of having a parent in prison presents challenges to their children which include bullying and verbal and physical abuse. Murray re-emphasises this in his most recent research relating to the long-term impact this may have on children's life chances[12]. It is not surprising that some mothers have a concern about reputation.

Reputation is preventing the families and more importantly the children, gaining the support they need from the school both to be able to attend and be supported appropriately, but also to be able to maintain meaningful contact with their father through engagement in their education.

Training/Development

The importance of staff development was raised in all interviews but it begs large questions not just about the cost and practicability of delivering the training but of who should receive it: should schools be expected to be able to perform a quasi-counselling role in providing support which the children of prisoners need?

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> *'… and I do feel it's important that children like that who are seen to be swimming along and everything's fine, have that opportunity to offload. I'm not sure that anyone in a school establishment has got those skills to do that. (HT School B).*

> *'I think there is a lot of things here, that are potentially put on the school to have to do — more pressure for us to support families'. (HT School D).*

> *I would imagine there are some very specific things that could be done to help children understand their circumstances. However, this is very hard if we haven't been told — all we can do is guess, and then we have to tread very carefully so that we don't upset parents or children. (HT School A).*

10. Boswell, G. (2002), 'Imprisoned Fathers: The Children's View'. Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 41 (1), 14-2; Codd, H. (2008). In the shadow of prison: Families, imprisonment and Criminal Justice. London: Willan; and Codd, H. and Scott, D. (2010) Controversial Issues in Prisons. McGraw-Hill Education, Berkshire.
11. Boswell, G. (2002), 'Imprisoned Fathers: The Children's View'. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 41 (1), 14-26; and Murray, J. (2007b). The cycle of punishment: Social exclusion of prisoners and their children. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 7 (1) 55-81.
12. Murray, J. and Pardini, R.L.D. (2012) Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System and the Development of Youth Theft, Marijuana use, Depression, and Poor Academic Performance. *Criminology*. 50 (1) 255-302.

One school directly questioned whether schools should provide the emotional support the children of prisoners need. Significant training would be required for implementation of this and for schools to grow in confidence in this area. An example of potential training would be Action for Prisoners Families' (APF) support for schools and those working with the children of prisoners through their *Hidden Sentence* Training. The learning outcomes of this training aim to help participants to be aware of the context of the current criminal justice system and the offender's journey; exploring the impact of imprisonment on family members and society; and recognising specific issues for children with a family member in prison which may present barriers to them achieving the ECM outcomes[13].

This is a tall order for schools but even this does not provide the specialist counselling or support training that would be needed. HTB highlights that children often respond negatively if school staff attempt to take on this counselling role noting that 'children are very clever, they see lines … the barriers come down, it is very frustrating'. (HT School B).

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Conclusion: emerging themes

Central to the themes emerging from this study was parents' overriding concern about the local community and the perceptions of those within it. This appears to prevent mothers from sharing vital information. In turn this prevents the school from supporting children appropriately. This highlights the importance of trust in building strong working relationships with parents in schools[14]. It also illustrates how difficult it may be for 'the service resistant'[15] to trust anyone outside the family home. The conclusion to be drawn is:

> *'… position all parents not as problems, or passive recipients of school advice, but as key sources of knowledge and understanding of the child. Developing a closer home-school relationship, acknowledges that the child is part of a family and a local community as well as a pupil, and that their performance as a pupil is affected by their life outside the classroom'. (p28)*[16]

However, it is also beginning to be evident that the community has the potential to be viewed more positively and to be helpful in identifying if a family is in difficulty or if a parent has been admitted to prison.

> *Another theme was the challenge of providing the professional development and training to enable schools to respond effectively once they are aware that a child has a parent in prison. This is a particular challenge for Primary Schools. With cuts of 27 per cent to their 'formula grant' from Whitehall during the next four years*[17] *Local Authorities are making severe reductions in training. Where this is the case, schools are now looking to more innovative ways of engaging in CPD. Some primary schools are joining together and purchasing external training for clusters of schools. This presents an opportunity for charities which work with or for prisons to be involved:*
>
> *'non-governmental organisations provide invaluable help to prisoners and their families throughout the experience of imprisonment … often they provide a link between the prison and the outside which otherwise would be underdeveloped or non-existent'. (p22)*[18]

APF for example have developed training for schools in supporting the children of prisoners, although currently very few schools have chosen to access this training[19]. To support those teachers who had not worked with the children of prisoners before, guidelines would be useful to ensure a consistency of approach[20].

13. Action for Prisoners Families (2011) – Hidden Sentence Training Leaflet.
14. Estyn, (2009) *Good Practice in Parental Involvement in Primary Schools*. Cardiff: Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales; and National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *Leadership for Parental Engagement*. Nottingham: NCLSC.
15. Feiler, A. (2010) *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Parents: Teacher-Parent Collaboration to Promote Children's Learning*. Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester.
16. Vincent, C. (2012) *Parenting: Responsibilities, risks and respect: An inaugural professorial lecture by Carol Vincent*. Institute of Education, University of London: London.
17. Stabe, M. and Jones, C. (2011) *Council Cuts: UK Local Authorities Respond to Budget Cuts – Financial Times* – 22nd March 2011.
18. *The Danish Institute of Human Rights* (2011) *Children of Imprisoned Parents*. The Danish Institute of Human Rights: Copenhagen.
19. Interview with Action for Prisoners Families, June 2012.
20. Morgan, J., Leeson, C., Carter Dillon, R., Needham, M. and Wrigman, A.L. (2011) *Support Provision in Schools for Children with a Father in Prison: A Case Study of One Local Authority in the UK*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth and Choices Consultancy Service.

One school highlighted the need for the Local Authority or other agencies to be involved in the day-to-day support of the children of prisoners. It is increasingly unlikely that this would be the case, given the public expenditure cuts.

It is evident within this small scale study that there is mixed practice in relation to the children of prisoners. Given that children attend school for a minimum of six hours per day, 5 days per week for a minimum of 185 days a year, schools potentially have a significant role to play in supporting the children of prisoners in adjusting to their personal circumstances while still encouraging their academic and social development. For this to happen, families would need to feel they trusted schools enough to share this information, confident enough that the school knew how to help their child and the schools would need to be well trained enough to support each individual appropriately.