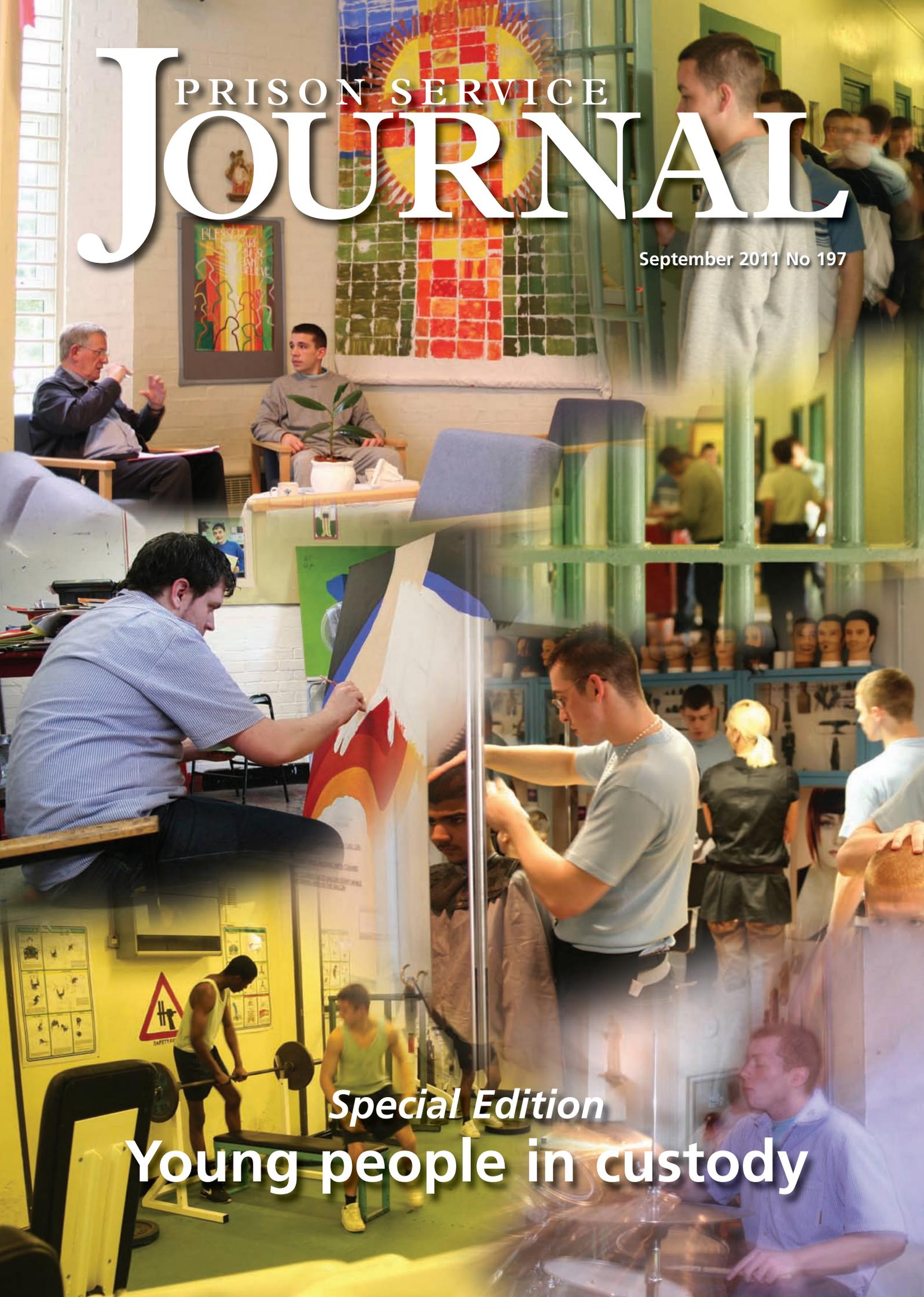


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**Young people in custody**

# Young Offenders and the Arts:

## A review of three *Inspiring Change* arts projects at HMYOI Polmont, Scotland

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### Introduction

**Recent research has shown that arts interventions in prisons can have particular benefits for participants, including the opportunity to have a positive learning experience<sup>1</sup>, improvements in self-esteem<sup>2</sup> and development in the capacity to trust others<sup>3</sup>. These benefits are at least suggestive of the potential contribution that such interventions might make to encourage desistance from crime. In this article, we discuss some of the benefits of three arts interventions that took place as part of *Inspiring Change*, a pilot scheme that occurred across five Scottish prisons in 2010.**

*Inspiring Change* was a one-year long pilot project involving seven national arts organizations working in five Scottish prisons in 2010. Motherwell College, a leading provider of education in Scottish prisons, led the project and worked alongside the Scottish Prison Service and participating arts organisations in the planning and application stages of the project. Creative Scotland awarded the majority of the funding needed for *Inspiring Change* to take place. Three of the 11 arts projects (two music projects and one visual arts project) are discussed in this paper, all of which took place in HMYOI Polmont.

### Methodology

Multiple methods were employed in evaluating all three arts projects, including pre- and post-focus groups with participants, questionnaires about self-confidence and literacy, interviews with Learning Centre staff, session feedback forms completed by the arts practitioners and the reviewing of prisoners' records concerning engagement with education and behaviour in prison. Follow up interviews were also attempted

with those participants who had been released after the completion of the project. Due to space constraints, in this article we will draw data from the focus groups with participants and the interviews with Learning Centre staff and arts practitioners.

### Project Descriptions

The first project to take place at Polmont (28 January 2010 — 27 April 2010) was *Music for Change*, led by the Scottish Ensemble. This four-month project paired the existing music tutor at Polmont with the Scottish Ensemble's Artist in Residence, to work with 25 young offenders in learning how to play and record music together. Participants were self-selected into four music groups, each one focusing on a particular instrument or composition method: guitar, keyboard, percussion or Garageband/Poetry. Sessions included individual practice on selected instruments as well as group rehearsals. Several Scottish Ensemble players attended later sessions to give participants further individual instruction and help the group prepare for two final performances. Fifteen young offenders participated in the final performances, the first an informal concert in the Learning Centre for staff and invited family, and the second a larger concert in the prison gym, with the entire Scottish Ensemble and invited guests.

The National Youth Choir of Scotland (NYCoS) led the second music project (15 April 2010 — 24 June 2010). *VoiceMale* included weekly workshops in song writing, group singing and vocal training with 16 young offenders. Popular songs, as well as original songs composed by the participants, were rehearsed and later performed in a final performance for the prison and invited guests. The group also recorded their original songs and each participant was given a copy of the CD.

1. Anderson, K. and Overy, K. (2010) 'Engaging Scottish young offenders in education through music and art'. *International Journal of Community Music*, 3 (1), pp.47-64.
2. Digard, L., Graf von Sponeck, A. and Liebling, A. (2007) 'All Together Now: The therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme', *Prison Service Journal*, 170, pp. 3-14.
3. Cohen, M. L. (2007) 'Prison Choirs: Studying a Unique Phenomenon' *The Choral Journal*, 48 (5), pp. 47-50.

The final project to take place was led by the National Galleries of Scotland (4 May 2010 — 20 July 2010). Two professional artists led 22 young offenders in a ten-week project. Works from the National Galleries collection were used as a platform to discuss various styles of portraiture, after which the men created life size portrait figures, based on their own self-image and life experiences. The figures were then taken outside by the artists and photographed in specific places around Edinburgh. The photographs, as well as some of the original figures, contributed to the larger *Mirrors* exhibition of *Inspiring Change* art held in the National Galleries of Scotland.

All three arts projects were led by experienced, professional artists/musicians. Each project stressed the importance of individual contribution and also allowed opportunities for the young men to work in groups. Finally, each project had a goal, a performance or exhibition, to work towards.

## Findings

### *Artistic Engagement: process and product*

Although some men who signed up for the projects did not stay until the end (there was a natural attrition rate for reasons such as release/transfer, timetable clashes, or lack of sustained interest), the men who were involved throughout were overwhelmingly positive about the artistic process and expressed this enthusiasm during the final focus groups: 'I looked forward to going every week just to sing and that. Mixing in the group', 'I've never done nothing like this before in my life', 'You feel better when you're doing it' 'You just get right into it', 'It helps you and lets you relax'. This positive engagement was noticed by the Learning Centre staff and the artists: 'one boy said to me: I love coming to this project... because I feel so stressed and anxious, but when I start singing that all leaves me and it makes me feel good', 'Some of them were quite surprised at their own ability to paint and with encouragement they thought, well yeah I can do this. I'm enjoying this'.

The men also expressed their appreciation of this unusual opportunity to work with each other, and with professional artists: 'You need to work as a unit. You need to work as part of a team with other folk. You need to try and help each other. There are no other classes where you do that', 'We got a chance to work with a professional orchestra'. Working towards a final performance or art exhibition also seemed to be a

highlight for the men: 'I've never really had a chance to do anything like that. Never really had a chance to put on a show for anybody', 'You had a goal. You were working towards something as a team', 'At the end of the performance I actually got compliments. They said it was good and I should carry on when I get out. It was surprising and it was good to hear, you know what I mean?' A number of participants also mentioned the value of having something to share with others, including family: 'I felt I got to share something with other folk'. 'I got a chance to share my taste in music with folk. Maybe it broadened their horizons a wee bit. And I got a wee bit of pride. I actually stuck it out and done it', 'I got to meet my pal's family'. Such reports suggest that the men had a variety of positive learning experiences during the arts projects, both via the artistic process itself, and in relation to the final artistic product.

### *Engagement with Education*

Participants in all three projects reported that the approach and delivery of the art and music classes were more positive than previous learning experiences they had in school. This positive learning experience apparently encouraged many of the men to continue with further education, both in the prison and once released. Two of the participants from the Scottish Ensemble project described how they responded to the project:

'Some of them were quite surprised at their own ability to paint and with encouragement they thought, well yeah I can do this. I'm enjoying this'.

**Sean:** *I was just more eager to do it. It was something you wanted to do.*

**Interviewer (INT):** *Yeah.*

**Sean:** *Other things you wouldn't want to put the time and effort into. I actually tried. I tried and made an effort for it. You know what I mean?*

**INT:** *Yeah.*

**Ian:** *Even if the other boys want to make an effort or not. It showed if you wanted something and you get it together...*

**Sean:** *You can pull it off.*

**Ian:** *You can pull it off. You know what I mean? You can do it if you try. Nobody else really thought about it before. If you stick in, it all comes together.*

The approach by which the arts practitioners interacted with the prisoners did not go unnoticed: participants reported the arts practitioners as being

'relaxed' and letting them 'learn at their own pace.' However, the men were also quick to explain that this relaxed approach did not mean that there were no expectations of them: 'They told you what to do but they never pushed you or forced you. They helped you. They weren't too bossy. And the way that they did it, it worked out good, you know what I mean? You learned from them.'

The music tutor at Polmont also suggested that the teaching approach taken by himself and the Scottish Ensemble's artist in residence was vital to the project's success: the artist in residence did not 'try to teach by injection method' — rather the Scottish Ensemble musicians shared their playing with the participants and used their skills as musicians to engage the men in learning how to play pieces that they wanted to learn. The men were encouraged to share their personal musical preferences and these were incorporated into the programme performed at the project's conclusion.

Participants in the National Galleries project reported that the arts practitioners 'helped you if you needed any help' and 'motivated' the men in their work. At the same time, participants enjoyed that they were encouraged to make their own artistic choices when creating their self-portraits. John and Peter discussed this process:

**John:** *Because I more or less expected to get told [what to do]. We had a lot of options. I expected to get told this was going to happen. This is what you're going to do. But you could more or less...*

**Peter:** *You could do what you want.*

**John:** *Aye.*

**Peter:** *Not in a bad way, do what you want in an arty way type of thing.*

The artists acknowledged that they created 'more of a studio practice' environment where the men 'could make their own decisions about where their work should go.' The artists recalled how many of the men 'were quite nervous' and 'not confident in their own abilities' in the beginning of the sessions. However, the men 'were able to get into it' once the practitioners got them started.

Even though the arts practitioners centered their teaching approach on the ideas and experiences of the participants, practitioners and participants in all the projects reported that it took some time before the group truly started to work together as a team. One of the arts practitioners from the NYCoS project described the moment in which a shift was noticed: 'I think there was a moment, sort of half way through, or maybe six weeks in, when there was just that feeling of a turning point here. We suddenly actually started working together.' Similarly, the participants in the NYCoS project noticed a turning point in the sessions. The conversation below picks up after the interviewer asked what expectations the men had for the project:

'They told you what to do but they never pushed you or forced you. They helped you. They weren't too bossy. And the way that they did it, it worked out good, you know what I mean? You learned from them.'

**INT:** *What did you expect?*

**Jason:** *Just to have a laugh with your pals, man. I didn't even care about it till later down the road.*

**David:** *It changed though, didn't it?*

**Jason:** *Aye.*

**David:** *We liked coming up, didn't we? It changed after a while.*

**Jason:** *It got better.*

**David:** *Everybody got into what we were doing.*

**INT:** *How did it get better? How did it change?*

**John:** *We started enjoying it.*

**Jason:** *The group started getting better.*

**David:** *And everybody started trying.*

**Gavin:** *You got confident with each other and your singing and that.*

**Jason:** *I think we started getting a bit more confident with each other.*

**David:** *It was brilliant, man.*

The approach of the arts practitioners in the delivery of their sessions was crucial to participants valuing the projects, which in turn made the sessions more meaningful to the participants and the arts practitioners. The arts practitioners took a supportive approach in leading the men to engage with making music and art, used positive reinforcement in the learning environment and encouraged the men to make personal choices about the direction of their artistic pieces. This positive experience allowed the

men to express personal preferences and develop multiple skills.

### *Skill Development*

The projects aimed to build on young offenders' existing strengths, both in terms of the arts and in terms of the verbal and written skills that were embedded in some of the work. Some participants suggested that the arts classes were more acceptable ways of engaging with education, since men that went to classes specifically to improve their writing skills might be seen as 'a daftie'. Many of the young offenders reported that they had 'messed about' at school but that in the arts projects 'there's a point in learning here' because it was clear that there would be a final product. Some mentioned specific skills that they had gained: 'music gives you extra skills... it can open your eyes and you say [to yourself] I didn't know I could do that before I came here and it turns out I can and I'm quite good at it'. However, it was also suggested that you needed to be pretty sure of yourself if you were going to participate since 'people were slugging folk that were singing'.

One way in which the arts interventions were particularly effective in building skills was by encouraging participants to develop their own ideas. At first some men found it frustrating when the artists insisted that it was their ideas that were important. However, working in this way meant that 'you had to use your head' and work out what you wanted to do by yourself, rather than being told what to do. The artists were seen as particularly effective because 'they teach you to work together, to be creative and enthusiastic'. In addition, the way that many of the projects were set up meant that everyone had to work together, which emphasized the group effort and the importance of being able to rely on each other. Working together meant that 'the people you were doing it with became part of your family and kept you going'. This was presented as a contrast to what many described as their more normal behavior of 'trying to bring each other down'.

### *Self-Confidence*

The participants' confidence was built through a growing sense of their potential and ability to achieve. This seemed to be particularly affected by the way the men were treated by the arts practitioners. For example, one participant said 'people [here] are saying, you can do this', which gave him confidence to try even when it was difficult. Another positive aspect mentioned was having a clear goal that 'you're getting pushed towards', encouraging participants to do their best and keep persisting.

The men also gained confidence from the artists' positive assessment of their work, because they 'believed in you and seemed to care about what you did'. As well as gaining confidence from others, participants also reported that they had become more able to judge their own work 'knowing that you had done a good thing'. This is an extremely important aspect of learning; research has shown that being able to make your own judgments is the first step in being able to motivate yourself to persist in the face of difficulties<sup>4</sup>.

Working as part of a team also seemed to build confidence because every person mattered, leading to improved self-esteem. Sometimes this experience transferred to other aspects of the men's lives, helping to 'bring back good memories from the past'. In turn these good feelings built confidence to participate in other learning activities as 'it just makes you feel good'. Such participation also showed the men that they had skills they had not previously discovered, opening them up to new possibilities and leading to them 'becoming more focused'.

### **Steps towards Desistance**

Drawing on the existing desistance literature,<sup>5</sup> we reviewed our focus group data to see to what extent they provided evidence around 'maturation' (i.e. evidence that the arts projects contributed to

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4. Crowther, J. Maclachlan, K. and Tett, L. (2010) Adult literacy, learning identities, and pedagogic practice, *International journal of lifelong education*, 29 (6) 651-664

5. Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association Books; Farrall, S. and Calverley, A. (2006) *Understanding Desistance from Crime*, Crime and Justice Series, London: Open University Press.

developing personal maturity), 'social bonds' (i.e. evidence that the arts projects positively affected constructive social ties and relationships) and 'identity' (i.e. evidence that the arts projects influenced positive identity reformations), since explanations for desistance are thought to be found in the inter-connections between these three sets of factors.

### Maturation

In many respects, prisons represent a poor environment in which to develop maturity, at least if we assume that maturity involves a growing sense of personal responsibility and a capacity to plan and order one's life, as well as appropriate concern for the welfare and interests of others. Engagement in the arts projects seemed to challenge the passivity of prison life. For the young men at Polmont, this was bound up with issues around working together as a group, but it also related directly to working successfully to achieve one's goals:

**Jack:** Confidence.

**Ian:** Bringing everybody together, aint it?

**Paul:** Aye, teamwork.

**Jack:** It is bringing everybody together but its instilling in you that you can do stuff. You're current situation doesn't make you affected the rest of your life.

You might be in the jail, fair enough, but you're going to get out of the jail one day. And there's plenty of options out there.

**INT:** Yeah.

**Jack:** And I think you're just coming and letting us know that. Even if its music or going to a painting class or something. You can overcome obstacles to do what you want to do.

**Paul:** Having a goal to work towards, aye.

**INT:** Yeah, so you have a plan to reach this goal.

**Paul:** Cause it means you have a deadline so you need a certain amount of effort to meet your deadline.

**Callum:** You're not just wallowing. Just waiting for something to happen.

It is not surprising in the context of an institutional setting that by its nature routinely diminishes agency and control, to find that the creation of spaces where a

sense of personal agency can be respected and developed are important to prisoners. Certainly, with respect to desistance, there is evidence that moving beyond fatalism and passivity and into a more mature agentic position is a significant part of the process of change<sup>6</sup>.

### Social bonds

Although the arts projects did not aim to engage directly with issues around family and employment (the two most significant and most obviously 'generative' social bonds discussed in the desistance literature), these were nonetheless recurring themes in the focus groups. Beyond the 'surfacing' of family concerns in the process of the work itself, performance and exhibition provided vital opportunities for families to have some involvement in the process. The desire, of which many participants spoke, for their families to see them in a different role or a different and more positive light invoked considerable pride and satisfaction:

**Alex:** ...The warden was there. All the social workers was there. There was other people there. And it all came together like a proper concert. Your family could come in. I thought it was fantastic. Very good... Your family got to see you do

something good... Something that they thought you could never do... They motivate you. If you were just doing it and nobody could really see it...but with your family coming in to see it then that motivates you to want to do it. It makes you want to learn harder. It makes you really want to do it and do it right.

The connection between the skills and interests developed in the projects and future training or work was another recurring theme. Several participants had developed aspirations that were directly or indirectly related to their role and activities in the projects:

**Barry:** I want to be a musician when I get out. I want to play the guitar on a full time. I feel inspired to take it and practice it. You know what I mean? Where as I was quick to quit at things before that. But, I used to kind of fancy being a guitar player and I think I'm going to take professional lessons when I get out and

6. Ibid.

*follow up on what I want to do. It's giving me a bit of inspiration.*

For some, the skills that had been acquired in the projects mattered irrespective of work opportunities that might or might not arise; beyond potential pathways to employment some felt they had acquired life skills and the possibility of accessing new social networks linked to the arts.

### *Identity*

The significance of performance and exhibition arose not just in relation to families, but also in relation to other audience members, including prison managers and staff, social workers and others more used to dealing with and perceiving prisoners as prisoners, rather than as performers or artists.

**Callum:** *You don't know how it's going to go down and you're in front of the governor and the deputy and what not. I thought it was a success because I got my message across. I enjoy what I do. Personally, I think I'm quite good at it and people agreed with me, you know what I mean? They thought it was good.*

Being seen in a new and positive light by authority figures and professionals (and in some cases by the wider public) also relates to questions of identity, and particularly to its reconstruction in and through revised personal narratives. Several participants in the projects spoke about their 'spoiled identities' as 'addicts' or 'offenders' or prisoners — and the associated feelings of stigma and worthlessness. For many participants, these negative perceptions were challenged (often perhaps unwittingly) by the arts practitioners and by the artistic process itself:

**Jack:** *Cause it helps to build up character and they're hoping it turns the prisoner into a different person. Not totally different, but different views and how things should go and that...*

Because the arts practitioners invested their time, talent and efforts for the participants, and established trusting and respectful relationships with them, these negative and hopeless narrative identities were disrupted and challenged. The public successes of the participants' efforts — in performances and exhibitions before audiences of significant others — opened up new personal and social identities that confirmed the possibility and viability of change in one's character and identity; in the language of desistance research, the projects perhaps helped many prisoners begin to imagine or envision an alternative, appealing, conventional self<sup>7</sup>.

Though these are very positive and encouraging findings, it is important to note that the resources available to this evaluation did not allow for the longer term follow up required to produce more conclusive evidence about the links between participation and desistance; in any event, the links between the projects and post-prison outcomes would necessarily depend on the extent to which the progress begun in the arts projects was followed up in other aspects of prison regimes and resettlement processes.

### **Conclusions**

Young offenders often have negative attitudes towards education and learning. The music and arts projects reported here seemed to help in changing such attitudes, and increasing self-confidence in learning new skills. We suggest that these projects were valuable to the participants for a variety of different reasons: because the project leaders used positive reinforcement throughout the learning process; because participants were able to make artistic choices that related to their personal interests; and because there was a balance of individual attention and group work towards a final performance/exhibition goal. It seems likely that such arts projects have the potential to contribute to prisoners taking steps towards desistance, by building their skills, increasing motivation, creating new opportunities and celebrating and affirming progress.

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7. Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A. and Rudolph, J. L. (2002) 'Gender, Crime and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107: 990-1064.