

Arts intervention with female offenders

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Abstract

The research looks at the uses of museum and gallery education with female offenders. It aims to:

- provide evidence that working with the arts has a positive effect on the rehabilitation of female offenders;
- argue that participation in arts projects for offenders is their cultural entitlement and should be facilitated by the authorities as a human right;

- investigate the problems that arts organisations have in delivering projects to female offenders and suggest ways to overcome these problems.

This qualitative research used observations, questionnaires, field notes and semi-structured interviews through to participation and action research. Projects were undertaken with the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V&A), in HMP Askham Grange and in HMP Holloway.

Findings

- Cultural communities such as museums, artists, theatres and musicians have a growing social influence which can be harnessed. 'A strong culture of art practice can promote a positive and humanising atmosphere for staff and prisoners in an otherwise stressful environment'. Head of Learning and Skills at HMP Holloway.
- Participants in such projects should not be passive, they must take personal responsibility for their involvement.
- It is always important to have the staff at the prison

involved in, and part of, projects. Prison officers can be obstructive in the delivery of the project if they do not see the worth for themselves.

- Specifically in relation to the V&A project:
 - twelve out of the twenty female offenders who took part wanted to continue art education and ten wished to visit more museums and galleries;
 - sixteen of the twenty were proud of their achievements and ten felt they were better at communicating ideas.

Recommendations

- Education departments in prisons need to look outwards and welcome partnerships with artists and should be open to working with outside arts organisations and institutions.
- As the prison population is so transient, arts projects should be delivered intensively with support of other departments to give the participant a chance to immerse herself in the project.
- Prison education and regimes should have a set yearly budget to contract visiting arts organisations.
- Staff from the prison, including officers, should be given a chance to experience the workshops and be involved in the planning and delivery.
- Prisons should have designated space for arts and crafts activities in their routine learning journey and within the physical prison estate.
- Policy makers should accept the growing collection of soft outcomes, feedback and evaluation as proof of the worth of involvement in the arts.
- Third sector arts organisations should be supported by government initiatives without needlessly long application processes.
- Resources for arts projects such as recycled arts materials, clothes, packaging, that could be collected from business should be collected at regional centres and distributed to education departments in prisons.
- Where the offender can progress from an arts workshop to a work placement the prison should be able to give full support and make the transition as obstacle-free as possible.
- Funding should be available for arts charities and projects that can offer this progression and see the skills started in the on-site provision used and continued off site.