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“Something we don’t normally do”: a qualitative study of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award in the secure estate

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Abstract

The paper is based on findings from a qualitative study of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award (DofE, 2008a) in the secure estate, drawing on focus groups with young people in young offender institutions in England and Wales (pre- and post-implementation of the DofE programme) and qualitative interviews with staff delivering the Award within the establishments. In exploring participant perceptions of the DofE, the paper focuses on the way in which programme participation provided young people with new experiences, arguing that it offers them some insight into alternative ways of existence, other than crime. At the same time, the programme was perceived by young people as instrumental to accessing this ‘existence’ and hence a possible route to realise their ambitions. Young people were acutely aware of having discredited identities as a function of their offending and the Award, by dint of attributes it was perceived to confer upon recipients, was understood as a way of repairing this damage and easing entry into, and acceptance by, mainstream society. Moreover, the skills and experiences imparted by the DofE were perceived as appropriate and useful for acquisition of social skills necessary to make this transition. The authors conclude that the DofE programme may usefully form part of a broader offending prevention programme because, based on the findings of this study of young people in custody, it may appeal to disadvantaged young people, disillusioned by mainstream education, who may be on the cusp of offending.

Keywords: The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, young offenders, secure estate and imprisonment

Background

Public concern in the UK about the anti-social behaviour of young people continues to increase (Liddle, 1998; Muncie, 2001; Margo, 2008). By April 2008, the number of young people in the secure estate had risen to over 3,000, of whom 85% were in Young Offender Institutions, and the remaining 15% in secure facilities (Youth Justice Board, 2008a). Dealing with these young people is challenging, particularly where the repertoire of offending is serious, variable, disorganised and acquisitive, and where custody followed by re-offending has become an entrenched pattern.

Systematic reviews of interventions tackling offending indicate that they have tended to rely on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), be informed by North American approaches and comprise self-contained correctional interventions which are more amenable to assessment than wider multi-agency community-based or national level approaches (see Maruna & Liddle, 2007). The evidence of their successes is variable (Home Office, 2005). Whereas CBT programmes appear to do well in North American evaluations, in the UK the evidence regarding their effectiveness has been described as limited (Cann *et al.*, 2003; Falshaw *et al.*, 2003; Harper and Chitty, 2005; Hollin, 2008). Hence, a systematic review of the evidence indicated no

difference in reoffending rates of adults or young offenders in England and Wales who underwent Accredited Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) and Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) programmes, compared to individually matched comparison groups (Cann *et al.*, 2003). However, it is noted that, in both international and national research, those who complete intervention programmes do better than non-starters, non-completers and comparison groups, and that those who start and fail to complete do much worse than the other groups (see for example: Feilzer *et al.*, 2002; Cann *et al.*, 2003; Van Voorhis *et al.*, 2004). Notwithstanding this, there is some evidence that treatment is likely to have a short-lived impact on reconviction (Farrington *et al.*, 2002).

More recent research in the UK context suggests that a move away from the American model to a holistic, multi-faceted approach (involving, for example, job training and education) may prove more effective (Francis *et al.*, 2008). The literature indicates that repeat offenders typically face a variety of social problems, including addiction, mental health problems, lack of skills and poor employment records (Kemshall, 2008). Thus, interventions addressing these multiple needs are arguably most likely to be effective in overcoming the multiple disadvantages in young offenders' lives and assist them in desisting from lives of criminality. Accordingly, concepts of risk, which gained currency in terms of tackling youth offending have moved from narrow 'socially exclusive' models to inform more holistic, or inclusive, approaches (Case, 2007; Haines & Case, 2008; O'Mahony, 2009). In a review of offender rehabilitation, Andrews *et al.* (1990) argued that, overall, the inclusive type of initiatives appeared more successful. While their review was criticized for excluding what the authors deemed to be inappropriate studies (Logan & Gaes, 1993), the influential 'Maryland Report', *Preventing Crime: What Works,*

What Doesn't, concluded that the rehabilitation of offenders was most effective when interventions used multiple treatment components and focused on developing social, academic and employment skills, as well as using behavioural (including cognitive-behavioural) methods (Sherman *et al.*, 1998).

Indeed, evidence from a number of studies attests to the importance of approaches focusing on educational ability and skill development. In one study, for example, ex-prisoners with poor educational attainment, and those who had not taken part in education or training while in prison, were three times more likely to be reconvicted than those who had participated (Clark, 2001). Indeed, participation in basic skills has been linked in Canadian research to a 12% reduction in re-offending (Porporino & Robinson, 1992). Moreover, educational ability and oral skills have been highlighted as key to understanding 'what works' (Hayward *et al.*, 2004). The benefits associated with participation in initiatives aimed at rehabilitation, whilst in custody, include increased skills, self-confidence, motivation, work ethic and a sense of responsibility (Hunter & Boyce, 2009).

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) Youth Inclusion Programmes (YIP), which target young at-risk people in the community, claim to have contributed to a 10% reduction in young people becoming involved with crime between 2007/8 and 2005/6 in England and Wales (YJB, 2008b). More recently, however, the Youth Crime Action Plan (YCAP) has challenged the YJB, local authorities and their partner agencies to engage more determinedly not only with a preventive agenda, but also with 'robust management' of offenders (HM Government, 2008). While the YCAP includes a raft of enhanced prevention and support measures to be delivered via new partnerships with Children's Services, to reduce further the overall incidence of youth

crime, it is recognised that those already in custody are likely to be amongst the hardest to reform (HM Government, 2008, p.4).

While the YJB plays a key role in implementing the government’s Action Plan, it relies upon a range of partners to deliver the required changes. The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award (DofE) is a UK-wide voluntary provider operating at the interface of the secure estate and the community. The DofE, established in 1956, was designed for all young people aged between 14 and 25. Participation is voluntary and its key features include: non-competitiveness; encouragement of self-discipline, self-reliance and a sense of responsibility to others; teamwork; enterprise and perseverance. Achievement of a Bronze, Silver or Gold DofE requires the completion of four or five elements depending upon the programme level. These are Volunteering, Physical, Skills, Expedition and Residential (Gold level only). The organisation and delivery of the DofE relies traditionally on schools and youth organisations, which are licensed to run the programme as Operating Authorities.

In 1998, the DofE in Scotland launched a pilot programme ‘New Start’ which promoted the DofE to organisations working with young people at risk of participating in offending and/or risk-taking behaviour. The project targeted young people (aged between 14 and 25) considered at risk of offending, serving custodial and non-custodial sentences, and those released from prison. Assessment of the scheme suggested that it had increased self-esteem and confidence among participants, fostered a sense of achievement and improved aspirations (Blake Stevenson, 2001). It was also understood as successful in actively engaging and retaining disaffected and/or vulnerable young people (Bitel & Campbell, 2005). This paper draws on a recent qualitative study of the DofE in the secure estate in England and Wales, to examine participant (young offenders and those

delivering the Award) perceptions of the scheme and their anticipations of ways in which it may assist young people upon release.

Methods

The study, which was funded by the DofE, examined young offenders’ involvement with the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, and implications for their future.

The study employed a longitudinal design, whereby establishments were visited at two research phases, pre- and post-intervention (the intervention comprised the delivery of DofE components). The study used mixed methods including focus groups with a sample of young people in the secure estate engaged in the DofE and semi-structured interviews with a sample of secure estate staff delivering the Award.

The sample was seven secure estate establishments in England and Wales delivering the DofE representing a range of different types of secure estate establishment including: Secure Children’s Homes, Secure Training Centres and Young Offender Institutions. Establishments were also sampled to represent geographical areas and length of experience in running the programme. Of the original eight establishments approached, three declined to participate and a further three were recruited to replace them. Of these three, access to two was successfully negotiated but access negotiations with the third (although agreement in principle was achieved) were not successful. Of the seven recruited, at one establishment access to young people - originally agreed - was not permitted, although the researchers were granted permission to interview staff who delivered the programme. Finally, while the research team approached three young women’s establishments, all declined to participate in the study.

The research team carried out focus groups with young people (n=60), aged between 14 and 21 years, in six establishments, on two occasions, with approximately a six months interval between visits. Focus groups typically involved the participation of 8-12 young people, a member of prison staff, one member of the research team and a DofE worker. Focus group discussion at phase one aimed to elicit young people's perceptions of the DofE prior to (or in the early stages of) delivery of DofE activities. At phase two, discussion focused on young people's experiences of the DofE activities in which they had participated during the preceding six months. Given the exigencies of prison life, it was not possible to maintain consistency in participants across the two phases in some instances. Sixty four young people (at a total of six secure estate establishments) took part in focus groups at phase one of the study and 46 at follow up.

At phase one, semi-structured interviews (n=15) were carried out with a sample of staff administering DofE at all seven participating institutions. These interviews focussed on staff perceptions of the programme, programme participants (including selection to the programme), programme structure, content and delivery, facilitators and barriers to successful implementation, perceived support and transition to the community. All staff interviews were digitally audio-recorded with respondent permission.

Audio-recordings were fully transcribed. Qualitative data (from focus groups, in-depth interviews and questionnaire responses) were analysed using a constant comparative approach. Transcripts were read by research team members and an analysis framework developed, based on emergent themes. Validity of themes was cross checked with the entire qualitative data set, and coder validity checks were made across the research team. In the report, themes are evidenced using data extracts (codes for which are provided below). All

names of people/places in the data extracts have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Glyndŵr University Research Ethics Committee (GREC). The study adhered to good ethical research practice (as set out by the British Sociological Association) and observed the principles of informed voluntary consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Where young people were aged under 16 years, consent was sought from institution carers as well as from (all) the young people themselves.

Focus Group Coding: For individual quotations, the first digit indicates institution, YP indicates Young Person, the final digit indicates research phase (baseline or follow-up). For strings of group talk the first digit indicates institution, FG indicates focus group and the final digit indicates research phase.

Staff Interview Codes: First digit indicates institution, S indicates staff and final digit indicates individual staff identifier.

Findings

Institution staff delivering the DofE in the secure estate described young offenders in their care as having multiple problems associated variously with disadvantaged backgrounds, abusive relationships, drugs and illiteracy:

Whatever you think kids can do they've probably done ... a lot of the children are very damaged emotionally, physically, there's been no structure in their life, there's been no rules, no guidelines. By the time you get them here they've usually served a sentence and, if they're under a care order, they're very damaged. You know they've gone through the mill, that's why they're in here, this is usually a last resort. (4S1)

The majority of these young people had been poor performers at school and had few or no educational qualifications. Programmes such as the DofE were far removed from the prior (to imprisonment) experiences and expectations of these young people, who said they had either “never heard of it” (2YP1) or (if they had heard of it) perceived the DofE as being for other more “bookish” or “geekish” young people (4YP1).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that it was the DofE’s focus on practical activities and skills with which young people in the secure estate could most readily engage. Hence, they talked about liking “the practical side” (4YP2) of the programme, describing it as “the best bit of education in this gaol” (2YP). Likewise, staff emphasised the practical focus of the programme, highlighting the importance of “hands on”, and “goal orientated” learning:

We have to focus on hands on because ... they’ve been excluded from school and they don’t work well in the school environment. So I think the awards we’re doing have to focus on the more practical sides: you know your cooking, your wall building, your plastering, your drawings, your computer work. (3S1)

As well as describing a range of skills (including carpentry, plastering and cookery) offered through the DofE programme, young people talked about how the DofE involved them in a range of activities and responsibilities relating to prison life. This might be “cleaning on the wing” (2YP2), “keeping the gym clean” (2YP2), being “a wing rep” (5YP2) and “doing stuff in the garden” (2YP2). It also, in some cases, involved peer support such as:

... helping people to read, peer support and helping people who haven’t been in to prison before. They are more vulnerable, they get upset when it is their

first time. I used to chat with them, explain everything and give them the opportunity to familiarise yourself with someone. If they have a problem they can come and speak to us, if they feel they can’t speak to a member of staff. (CPY2)

The DofE also involved young people with groups from outside the prison, often with whom they had had little prior experience:

... the disabled people come in every Thursday morning and we play games with them, play football, just have fun with them. It is alright, it was a good laugh. They are alright. (1YP2)

However, for most young people, the expedition was the most important component of the DofE, and was an event anticipated with great excitement. In the secure estate a major issue for the implementation of the DofE is risk management so, for example, only those eligible for ‘Release on Temporary Licence’ (ROTL) are considered as eligible for the expedition. Because of this, most institutions visited provided the expedition experience, albeit inside the prison grounds.

The internal expedition which simulates the ‘real’ expedition as far as possible, involves a series of outdoor tasks and activities, including: setting up camp, cooking on the camp fire and sleeping overnight in tents. Young people were very enthusiastic about ‘internal expedition’, irrespective of whether or not they were deemed eligible for ROTL. Focus group participants described rigorous preparation for the internal expedition, setting themselves “targets” including “map reading” (5YP2) “orienteeing” (2YP2) and camp skills, such as erecting tents and “using the Trangia (camp stove)” (CPY2).

We had practised before we went out and practised everything in the pre-training. It all went alright; it was good on the day. (2YP2)

An important aspect was “a lot more team building”: particularly helping the other less able “lads to read maps” (CPY2), for example. Those who had already experienced an internal expedition talked about giving:

... advice to the others because I knew it a bit better because I'd done the other one like. I knew what was happening, what would happen through the day. (2YP2)

On internal expeditions, experienced participants (some of whom had previously been on external expedition) “try and improve things, make more things to make it more realistic” (1YP2). The types of simulated activities on internal ‘expeditions’ comprised “crossing a river, using planks of wood”, traversing “a mine-field blindfolded, where we could have got blown up” and simulated “rowing 1500 meters in set times” (1YP2). At one institution, on the internal expedition young people were given:

Co-ordinates and we had to find things around the field ... search techniques, what was it called again? ... you know the police when they are searching for clues and things, we had to find 10 pence piece. It was good. (1FG2)

Despite the internal expedition being a practice or simulation event, taking place within the prison walls, it was highly-valued as an ‘extraordinary experience’ by participants, some of whom had received lengthy sentences:

Compared to everyday it is something different. It takes you away from this prison environment. Even though we are in prison, you are staying outside. I remember the first time I got to go out, it was a cold night but I stayed awake all night just looking up at the stars. (CPY2)

The internal exercise is perceived as good preparation for the expedition ‘proper’.

Following the internal expedition, participants could “imagine doing it proper” and setting up camp “with no help from (staff member)” (1YP2). Despite rigorous preparation, young people reported being nervous and excited about the event, “it is something to look forward to. I was looking forward to the expedition; I couldn’t sleep before the night of the expedition” (1YP2).

Those who had been on an expedition outside the institution valued the experience highly, and many recalled having new experiences such as “I’d never seen a waterfall before, I’d never seen a sheep” (2FG2). Some young people appeared greatly affected by the expedition and claimed to feel altered as a result:

When you do the expedition you learn to respect the nature around you. If you are in the city you eat a pack of crisps and throw it on the floor, but we carried it around with us. I know it sounds mad, but it is like a lesson in itself. (2YP2)

The importance attached to the experience of camping out (whether inside the grounds or outside) was not underestimated by the staff:

It’s something that the lads look forward to, you can appreciate some of these lads have never ever slept outside for the last however many years they’ve been inside, they have come from secure homes to go through the system, so for them to have to, experience camping out for even for one night is a big thing for them. (1S1)

Staff talked about “building up our relationship with the kids” (PS2) through the DofE. Development of trust between those delivering and receiving the programme, which was highlighted by many staff and young people across establishments, was perceived by staff as indicative of the development of young people’s maturity and responsibility:

You see a change in people. I, we always say we’ve seen them grow up, might sound, might sound like trivial to yourself, but, they grow from being a child into an adult ... and they accept what they’ve done, what they’ve achieved and where it can take them. And it might not be that it’s a qualification as in a certificate, but the underlying skills that they’ve learned, communication, being learned how to work as a team, all those kinds of things, the underlying things, they may have got more out of that than the actual award itself ... what we see, is they’ve gone from being Mr Angry, to someone that will listen to other people’s points of view. (1S1)

Staff described how, through the programme, young people were learning and “practising new social skills” (PS2). In this respect, they highlighted the importance of learning to think about other people and “working together as a team” (2S1):

They’ve never actually thought of anybody else before apart from themselves. Once they start thinking as a team, and working together as a team, some of them are finding it strange, or different, but they’re all putting a lot of effort into it. (5S1)

It was not simply the here and now which made the DofE appealing to young people in the secure estate. Many were focused on the future, and much discussion in the first phase of focus groups centred on how the young people might be perceived by others:

Once they find out you’ve been in prison you get pigeon holed. [They’ll think] ‘what’s going to stop him doing again what he did before’? They might think, ‘he might do it to me’. (3YP1)

At phase two of the study, it was clear that the DofE was perceived by some young people as a way of repairing or mending a discredited identity. Here, it was described

as an opportunity: “a chance to prove yourself” (2YP), and young people talked about feeling “good to achieve something positive” (WP2). For these young people, a sense of achievement was very poignant:

I think it is different, some of us come from backgrounds where it is not available to us and we have a chance to do something we don’t normally do and we can prove that we can do it, ’cause we have done it. (2YP2)

Young people described their experiences of DofE as giving them “more confidence” (1YP2), making them feel “more of a leader” (1YP2) and giving “a sense of achievement in here” (1YP2). In the focus group extract below, a young person talks about pride in his achievements:

When I got my [DofE section] signed off, I was really proud of myself. When I started it over nine months ago, I didn’t think I’d get here. I got it and it made me more proud that I got it. (2FG2)

Hence, one reason for sticking with the programme was that it was for “the benefits we see later on in life” (3YP) and “it might give me a chance when I’m released” (1YP2). Most importantly, it was valued as something to have:

... under your belt, especially when you have been in prison when it is difficult to get a job anyway. (2YP2)

Discussion

This paper is based on a qualitative study in selected secure estate establishments in England and Wales. Moreover, the DofE programme ran alongside regular education and training provision in these establishments. The authors make no claim, therefore, that the young people’s experiences described in this paper are either generalisable to all young offenders in the secure estate or a function solely of

their participation in the programme. Neither can the study provide any evidence of what actually works regarding rehabilitation. Notwithstanding this, there was a high level of agreement between the accounts of the DofE programme provided by young people and staff delivering the scheme. In addition, the findings support strands of the literature which identify key issues for the successful rehabilitation of young offenders.

The backgrounds and experiences of young offenders in this study were far removed from those of young people most typically associated with DofE participation. They were acknowledged by staff as being among the most disadvantaged and damaged of young people in society. The young people perceived themselves as worlds apart from 'typical' DofE participants, and prior to incarceration, if indeed they were in any way familiar with the DofE, had attached neither benefit nor relevance to the programme. This point is important because it signals how other young people who, for example, succeeded in education and avoided offending, occupied a social context so far removed from the experiences and social world of respondents in this study that access to, and acceptance by, that world had hitherto been perceived as unattainable.

Research suggests that repeat offenders typically face a variety of social problems (addiction, mental health problems, lack of skills, poor employment records, etc.). Therefore, interventions that are able to address these multiple needs will arguably be the most likely to overcome the multiple disadvantages in their lives and assist with desistance from criminality and addiction (see McGuire, 2002). Graham and Bowling (1995) argue that a range of factors, including: anti-social attitudes; poor self control, self management and problem solving skills; poor victim awareness; poor forward planning skills; pro-criminal role models and associates; involvement in substance abuse and addictions; poor school

attendance and non-employment; problematic inter-personal relationships; personal distress and mental health issues; and homelessness are associated with the onset of offending. Moreover, they claim that desistance to offending is associated with factors which are largely the obverse of those that relate to the onset of offending. These include: ceasing substance use; getting a stable education, employment and personal relationships; developing victim awareness and thinking skills; and adopting pro-social role models and associates.

The DofE provided young people in the secure estate with a range of skills and new experiences. The majority of young people participating in the study had no formal educational qualifications, and many had problems with literacy. While most were wary of formal education and traditional teaching and learning approaches, they responded positively to the hands on learning style as well as the physical activities, both of which characterise the DofE programme. Secure estate staff delivering the DofE likewise stressed the importance of using practical and applied methods of delivery, describing the programme as a 'back door' route for the acquisition of basic educational skills. This finding supports earlier research which suggested that offenders respond best to active and participatory programmes and highlighted the importance of extra-curricular activities such as sport and outdoor activities (McGuire & Priestley, 1995). In our study, the extra-curricular activities of sport and outdoor pursuits (the climax of which was the internal/external expedition) were an important source of motivation for young people to engage in and stay with the programme. The balance of more mainstream and extra-curricular activities is important as previous research indicates an association between the provision of long-term, extra-curricular, structured, physical activities and reduced rates of early dropout and criminal arrest

among high-risk young people (Mahoney, 2000; Margo *et al.*, 2006).

The findings from the study suggest that the involvement of young disadvantaged people in the DofE provides them with new experiences; a taste of social worlds quite alien to the ones that they currently or had previously occupied. In so doing, it rendered for these young people, the previously perceived inaccessible, accessible to them. Because of this, inside the secure estate, the DofE assumed a different purpose and meaning for participants. Not only was it perceived by these young people as offering an alternative future, it was also perceived by them as instrumental to achievement of that goal. This was because of what the certificate conveyed about or conferred upon the recipient. Inclusion of the Award on their CV was perceived by young people as conveying a range of positive attributes, including achievement, trustworthiness, effort and leadership. Tackling prejudice and stigma, creating opportunities and providing the motivation to change (and sustain that change) are key issues for the re-integration of young people who have offended (see Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004). Most of the young people in the study were acutely aware of having a ‘spoiled’ or ‘discredited’ identity, as a function of their criminal records. Related to this, they expressed fears about how stigma associated with their criminal past would affect their chances upon release, particularly in regard to employment opportunities. Young people were cognisant of the barriers they faced in ‘making good’ or reinventing themselves as responsible citizens. The DofE was therefore invested by young people with value in so much as it might mend or repair damaged identities and facilitate re-entry into and acceptance by mainstream society.

It was not only the certificate, and what it might portray about the recipient, that was important for young people in the study. Achieving the Award meant that

participants acquired the skills and competencies that most other young people, and indeed most of us, take for granted. Indeed, as has been noted in the research literature, as offenders desist so they need new skills and capacities appropriate to new life-styles; they need the human and social skills that many of us take for granted (Farrall, 2002, 2004). The DofE provided a way in which these skills might be acquired through participation in different activities, having new experiences, developing trust, negotiating and sustaining relationships with peers and significant others in the secure estate. Hence, the findings of our study suggest that participation in DofE activities can promote both the acquisition of new applied skills, new and enhanced social competences, trust - both earned and given - and increased self-reliance.

The literature suggests that young offenders who intend to desist from crime often devise plans and are optimistic they can make it work (Maruna, 2000). Moreover, those who are successful in desisting from crime are usually effectively motivated by staff towards appropriate goals, behaviours and attitudes (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Certainly, the findings from our study suggest that the DofE actively promotes and reinforces positive thinking by young offenders in their pursuit of achievements. The DofE reinforces positive attitudes through the provision of a programme which they can access in preparation for and following release, when they can be reintegrated back into school or work. Those leaving custody need accommodation, education and jobs (Lewis *et al.*, 2003), and DofE surveys (DofE, 2008b; 2008c, p.5) suggest that they are likely to be helped in getting and sustaining these through the sorts of skills and attitudes that they acquire from involvement in DofE activities.

Finally, the successful engagement of young people in the secure estate with the DofE, in this study, suggests that participation in

the programme may be a useful experience for disadvantaged young people outwith the secure estate, and particularly those disillusioned by mainstream education and/or on the cusp of offending. The new experiences it can offer these young people along with the appropriate and appealing style of practical, and hands on, delivery suggest that the DofE may have an important role in the prevention of offending behaviour.

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