LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

Article

Words Behind Walls: A Creative Writing Project with Prison Staff

Josephine Metcalf, PhD
Senior Lecturer in American Studies & Criminology, University of Hull
Christopher Westoby, PhD
Lecturer in Creative Writing, University of Hull

Abstract

Research from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge recognises that prison officers are productive role models for prisoners and that the pop-cultural stereotype of the officer beating the inmate into submission has diminished. Yet a report published by the Prison Officers Association in 2020 noted that staff members were at a greater risk of work-related stress and mental health problems than most other occupations, with little support in place. Staff wellbeing is in turn tantamount to the safety of those who serve custodial sentences.

In 2022, researchers at the University of Hull designed a bespoke eight-week creative writing course for prison staff at two HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) facilities supporting the mental health of their staff. This was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom.

This article explains the design and delivery of the course, the choice of texts as writing prompts, and the writing exercises used. The data reveal numerous benefits for individual participants, including an 'escape' from daily work, improved relationships, and a cathartic outlet for managing a stressful job. The article draws focus to the writing course stimulating confidence and prompting self-growth. The authors contend that the delivery and outcomes of the course positions prison as a unique site for writing to support employee wellbeing.

Keywords: prison staff, creative writing, wellbeing

APA citation: Metcalf, J., & Westoby, C. (2024). Words behind walls: A creative writing project with prison staff. *LIRIC Journal, 4*(1), 30–51.

Introduction

Research recognises that prison officers are productive role models for prisoners and that the pop-cultural stereotype of the officer beating the inmate into submission has diminished (Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011). Yet a report published by the Prison Officers Association (POA) in 2020 noted that members were at a greater risk of work-related stress and mental health problems than most other occupations, with little support in place to treat these issues (Kinman & Clements, 2020). Scholars have explored the 'organisational hazards' of working in a prison (for instance, high workloads, risk of suicide and self-harm) rather than addressing prison staff wellbeing in holistic ways (Kinman, Clements, & Hart, 2016). We do know that creative writing has been used to combat employee stress in other professions—an excellent example of this is an American project conducted with medics which concluded that creative writing could be a therapeutic tool to combat burnout (Cronin et al., 2020). For decades, creative writing has been offered to the incarcerated, and researchers have documented its tangible benefits including improved self-confidence and reduced emotional stress. Much of this research comes from the US (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Beasley, 2015; Littman & Sliva, 2020); to date there has been nothing bringing these overlapping fields into discussion and practice.

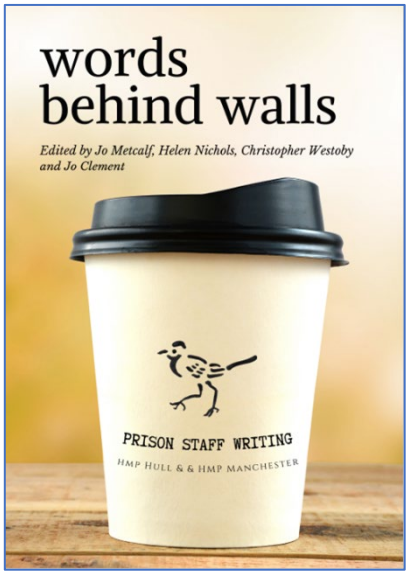
This project makes an original contribution to academic enquiry in terms of writing for wellbeing with prison staff. In late 2022, three researchers (or investigators) at the University of Hull (UoH) sourced funds to run a creative writing course for prison staff; this was the first of its kind in the UK. As we started to advertise the course and recruit participants, one individual emailed the lead investigator to comment on the opportunity: 'Thank you, it sounds a rich and lovely thing in this environment.'

This pitches the prison as a specific site of interest in creative writing. A number of factors make the prison an unusual place to work, not least the lack of mobile phones, the 'pressure cooker' atmosphere on the wings, and the need for confidentiality, thus not necessarily being able to share one's day with a partner. The nature of the working environment creates

risks to prison staff's personal wellbeing through exposure to violence, causing a high turnover (Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011).

The public are broadly fascinated with what happens behind prison walls and are arguably becoming ever more aware of those who operate the carceral machine. The popularity of recent television shows such as *Time* (2021) and *Screw* (2022) suggest that people are intrigued more than ever before by the lives of prison staff. Alex South's memoir *Behind These Doors: Stories of Strength, Survival and Suffering in Prison* (2023) that documents her ten years as a prison officer was named a BBC Radio 4 book of the week in 2023, drawing attention to the strains that prison staff are under. This was further highlighted by the coverage of an escaped Wandsworth prisoner in early September 2023—interviews with former governors and prison staff in the news discussed not just the logistics of the escape itself, but the issues facing our prisons, including staff shortages, a transient workforce, and enormous administrative challenges (Mason, 2023). The wellbeing of those who work in prison is in turn tantamount to the safety and security of those who are serving custodial sentences.

We offered a bespoke course in creative writing at HMP Hull and HMP Manchester; both sites were willing to support their staff in seeking an alternative approach to wellbeing provision within HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service). Both prisons have past histories of staff dissatisfaction; for example, prison officers went on strike at HMP Manchester over staff safety in 2018 while at HMP Hull the walkout was called off at the last minute (Grierson & Weaver, 2018). Two writing tutors—Stephen Wade and Jenny Berry at Hull and Manchester, respectively—led the groups, which ultimately produced an anthology of writings, *Words Behind Walls* (Metcalf et al., 2023). This article explains the design and delivery of the course, including our choice of texts as writing prompts, and the specific writing exercises that we used. For the purposes of this article, we are particularly interested in the ways in which the writing course stimulated confidence, prompting self-growth. And in all of this, we contend that the delivery and



outcomes of the course speak specifically to the uniqueness of the prison as a site for writing to support employee wellbeing.

A Pilot Initiative: Methodology and Ethics

Our key research question asked, 'What are the benefits for attendees associated with their participation in a (custom-made) creative writing course?' The epistemological rationale for this question, and the project more broadly, are reflected in the decision to bring together seemingly disparate researchers: a cultural studies scholar, a criminologist, and a creative writing lecturer. All three brought their own rationalist, empirical, and existential epistemologies into the heart of the project design, as reflected in their previous publications exploring themed-reading and writing groups in prison, prison governor wellbeing, and autobiographical writings (Metcalf & Skinner, 2023; Nichols et al., 2024; Westoby, 2020).

While the wellbeing of prison officers remained a primary line of enquiry for our collaborative project, we were also interested in helping HMPPS staff members realise why prisoners themselves may benefit from creative writing or other such study groups. In enabling staff to appreciate the value of such a course, we hoped they might then encourage prisoners to engage with such opportunities.

Given its test status, we were unsure how the opportunity would be received by staff, even though both course tutors and investigators had previously had informal conversations with various prison personnel about creative writing. An explanatory email about the course was sent out via staff listservs at the two prisons some weeks before its planned commencement. One of the investigators also stood on the gate at HMP Manchester for several hours with some flyers about the course, though this was not necessarily productive given that staff coming through are either in a hurry to get to or to leave work. While many did accept the flyer, few stopped to talk. At HMP Hull, one of the researchers was invited to walk around with a member of staff who knew many on-site staff by name. Stopping to chat, especially with wing officers, provided an opportunity to counteract any 'macho' retorts about creative writing, which were frequent.

It soon became apparent that though the project was originally pitched specifically at prisoner-facing staff (namely wing officers), we were not going to recruit as many as planned. This speaks to the resistance to participation as well as to the practical difficulties of scheduling in prisons

when officers are already stretched to capacity. One officer who did attend the course inadvertently spoke to these recruitment challenges, noting 'every Thursday I've had crap off the lads' [about coming to a writing class] and 'I feel a bit guilty though I have to say […] because I know there's no cover on the wing for me.' As a result, our recruitment pitch shifted and we reissued a listserv email that offered all staff (including administrative and OSG [operational support grade]) the opportunity to enrol.

Thirty participants signed up at HMP Hull and 25 at HMP Manchester. In both instances, there were marginally more females than males, which is noteworthy given both sites have more male employees overall. The number enrolled dropped by the start of the course and dwindled further during the course, with email and verbal responses indicating that this was not unwillingness on the part of participants, but rather a result of work commitments and schedules. The final number to finish the course amounted to nine in Hull and 15 in Manchester. Those who completed were employed in variety of roles, including prison officers, OSGs, finance administrators, nurses, and other medical support staff, librarians, and chaplains. While non-operational staff 'may not be exposed to the same risks and challenges as their colleagues working on the wings, they nonetheless operate in a high-pressure environment where meeting targets is paramount and political turbulence has direct implications for their working lives' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.[1]).

We ran eight creative writing sessions, each lasting one hour, one session per week consecutively, facilitated by either Wade or Berry at each site. Initial recruitment numbers led us to arrange two cohorts at each site in any given week, though at Hull these were merged into one group part way through. The course content was designed by the investigators, and then the two tutors were approached for input on the draft curricula. Participants were provided three key texts (a short story, poetry, and a memoir) all connected to prison life to stimulate discussion and used to underpin writing exercises in class as well as homework. We sought to work with tutors who had prior experience of prison. The investigators were aware that both tutors had extensive experience of running writing workshops with people in prison (as well as publishing along these lines), though not with prison staff. Indeed, Berry took it in her stride that at the time of the course, HMP Manchester was a paperless prison and hence she could not take in her notes or take writings home. Wade faced ongoing issues with scheduling, and both tutors faced queries at various points with front gate security. However, their previous experiences told them this was

not personal but rather a regular occurrence due to the prioritisation of safety and security.

The investigators could have facilitated the course themselves due to their combined experience of working in prisons and conducting creative writing. However, we anticipated that participants might respond better to the tutors than to us as academics, not just because of the evidence of success of Berry and Wade as published authors (one of the investigators is themself a successful memoirist), but because of the suspicion that sometimes accompanies academic projects (Wade, 2021; Berry, 2020; Westoby, 2020). Scholars have acknowledged the 'public mistrust of scholarly work' that negatively affects research activity (Howe & Moses, 1999, p. 27). This is perhaps heightened in the creative writing classroom whereby participants with little prior experience of creative writing may be concerned about exposing vulnerabilities. Author Patrice Vecchione tells us that, 'to become a strong writer, you have to try things out and to dare' (2020, p. 13). We felt that tutors who breathe creative writing—as both practitioners and authors—would be better placed to generate meaningful responses. Employing independent tutors also enabled the project team to be separate from the delivery of the sessions, facilitating a more objective course evaluation process. This is not to say that we covered up the academic intentions of the project—all participants received a UoH certificate of completion (unaccredited) and had to sign consent forms at the outset with the University's logo clearly embossed. The perspective of the tutors themselves was a crucial component of our data collection, and we thus conducted a formal 'closing' interview with them at the end of the course.

We had to undergo a rigorous ethics application at the UoH before the project could commence. This ethics application received input and advice from those who sat on our working groups. As part of our methodology, we set up monthly working group meetings during the planning stages of the project, which lasted through the workshop delivery and beyond the end of classes. The working group consisted of two former wing officers with decades of experience and a fellow academic colleague with prison research interests, as well as the investigators and two psychologists from the Centre for Human Factors (CHF) at the UoH. We deliberately kept the two tutors removed from the working group to keep their work with participants and their interviews with us as unbiased data. Both the former prison officers and our colleague within the working group were instrumental in advising on ethical responsibilities in both our UoH ethics

application and that to the National Research Committee (NRC) which is required to conduct research in prisons in England and Wales.

The NRC exists to ensure that the research is robust and relevant. In initial feedback from the NRC on our application, they praised the project for being 'highly pertinent' though they asked us to clarify some of the administrative logistics of the course as well as the data collection. One of HMPPS's current priorities is improving efficiency and reducing costs, and in our NRC application we illustrated how this project could support that by reminding staff that they are valued and that their work during the difficult years of the pandemic was appreciated.

In a project of this kind, the ethics are an ongoing process. For example, once the workshops had been completed and we were collating writings for an anthology, we invited participants to inform us of their preference for pieces to be published (though we did also stress this might not always be possible because of editorial decisions to encourage a range of content). Such invitations were important in making participants feel in control of their own writings, especially in the prison setting where events are often uncontrollable.

The Centre for Human Factors and a Summary of Results

The evaluation and analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data was led by the Centre for Human Factors (CHF) at the UoH. The two CHF psychologists who sat on the working group were approached for their expertise in measuring staff wellbeing in a range of workplaces. The CHF conceived pre- and post-course validation questionnaires that evaluated participants' job satisfaction, mental wellbeing, mental health conditions, and occupational self-efficacy. These two surveys were distributed to prison staff who joined the course at the launch of the sessions (T1) and at the end (T2). From the original 55 sign-ins, 24 responses were collected at T1 (participation rate = 43.7%) and 12 at T2 (constituting half of the sample at T1) (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 8). At T1, the questionnaires also asked participants about their previous experiences in creative writing, their motivations for joining, and their current mental health; at T2, they were asked about the perceived benefits of their participation.

The tutors recorded the workshops which were then transcribed and helped the investigators gain a better understanding of the organisational context and the challenges faced by prison staff as well as the advantages of these writing sessions. Participants were also invited via email at the

end of the course to be interviewed by one of the investigators or the CHF team. In total five interviews were conducted either face to face or via MS Teams with prison staff, and one further respondent emailed their answers to the questions. The contribution of the CHF was invaluable. Their questionnaires helped us understand the motivations of participants to engage with the course, citing curiosity, wellbeing, being advised by a therapist to enrol, thinking it would benefit relationships inside and outside of work, and wanting to learn a new skill. Table 1 shows the key themes that the CHF saw emerging from data that they analysed from transcripts, questionnaires, and interviews.

Table 1: List of Themes and Subthemes Extracted from the Data

Themes	Subthemes
1. Individual benefits related to wellbeing	• Escape from work • Processing of difficult experiences
2. Other individual benefits	• Development of creative skill • Development of confidence (self-confidence, interpersonal confidence) • Development of the self
3. Personal benefits regarding relationships with family and friends	• Closer relationships with family
4. Professional benefits regarding relationships with colleagues	• Development of empathy within the work setting • Connection building
5. Professional benefits regarding relationships with prisoners	• Support resources for prisoners

These themes point to the sensitivities that were at stake when conducting this research (relationships, confidence, the self, etc.) and provide a useful context as we now move to explore in detail what we did in the weekly workshops.

Reading Prompts, Class Exercises, and Homework

The rationale behind this project is that reading and reflecting on topics presented in selected books, and subsequently writing about them, can help improve participants' wellbeing. The choice to engage with three specific books to fuel class discussion and lead into writing exercises was sparked by one of the investigator's previous projects, which revealed the

positive impact of using specific US (prison) culture texts as creative writing prompts in a series of workshops with (ex) prisoners (Litten & Metcalf, 2019, pp. v–vii). After all, as a person in prison recently told them, 'Everyone has something to say about America' (Metcalf & Skinner, 2023, p. 701). The choice of these texts was deliberate because of their themes of hope and hopelessness, humanity and citizenship, and desistance (stopping reoffending). The study of other authors' writing is highly beneficial not only in developing the skill to pinpoint what similarly works or does not work in one's own writing, thereby increasing its quality and clarity, but also in inspiring and catalysing ideas.

Three readings were distributed in the first class of term: *Rita Hayworth and The Shawshank Redemption*, the 1982 novella from bestselling author Stephen King which would be renamed *The Shawshank Redemption* when released as Hollywood movie in 1994; Shaun Attwood's *Prison Time*, a 2014 memoir about serving a sentence as an Englishman in a US jail; and *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*, a 2007 collection of poetry edited by human rights lawyer and professor Mark Falkoff. Hard copies of the first two books were supplied in the first class, and participants were clearly enamoured to receive something to keep; this arguably served to make the course more official, encouraging participants to take it seriously and attend all sessions. There were logistical queries with Manchester as a paperless prison: books could only be received if ordered directly from the supplier and sent to the Deputy Governor. Because the Guantanamo poetry collection was out of print, we could only copy excerpts, which had to be done in-house at HMP Manchester in their own print room.

While handing out hard copies of books and readings gave the course credence, it also provided a level playing field for everyone to start class discussions and writings. One interviewee explained that they did not think they would be comfortable joining in but did so when they realised that everyone was reading from scratch. While this was made possible by the American-themed content, it was also intentional that all these texts focused on prison. All of our participants had first-hand experience of prison and hence something worthwhile to say about the representation of prisons in these texts. Again, this served to boost confidence from the outset. Moreover, we intended for these readings to help participants think further about the people in prison whom they support on the wings, in the classroom, and in other spaces. This encourages staff to perhaps think differently about the people who have committed crimes. A simple

example of this is that *Shawshank* helps us understand not just the prison experience but also the challenges facing prisoners upon release.

Alongside the safe, shared creative space of the weekly sessions, homework afforded participants a supplementary private space to work on the themes or techniques explored together. The homework set each week was a form of journaling. Participants were made aware of the value of consistent journaling for both one's writing practice and mental health wellbeing. Although we were keen to have the staff explore their lives within the prison walls, these exercises were designed to have them think more holistically about how their working and private lives mutually influence one another. Prisons are a dangerous and taxing environment to work in; we wanted participants to consider the real-life impact this has, and to do that, their writing had to step outside of the walls.

Many staff members work twelve-hour shifts—a life almost perfectly divided between work and home. Spotlighting these contrasting facets of their lives gave writers autonomy to steer clear of revealing too much of their work/home experiences if they were not comfortable to explore (and subsequently share) one or the other, or to use their writing to bridge these two very different spheres. Life writing often explores the effects our experiences have on others. Several participants frequently reflected upon family and romantic partners, how the nature of their work affected this, and how difficult it can be to operate in this field when intense difficulties are happening in one's personal life: 'Throughout the day, I was full of anxiety and miserable. I felt bad for the officer who took my place supervising methadone, but no one seemed to understand that my world was falling apart... All I wanted to do was call home' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Creative writing is particularly concerned with such connections, effects, and influences, and in the sphere of nonfiction, it can help a writer to see, acknowledge, and engage in this, as noted by Bronwyn Williams among other scholars (2013).

Journaling was also a logical choice for homework, given that it can sustain productivity in writing, helping to avoid writer's block (Cameron, 2016, p. 24). Particularly in the early weeks, we were very mindful that 71% of the participants had joined with little-to-no experience of creative writing since school (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 9). Our tutors struck a balance between applying encouragement to keep up writing practise whilst avoiding the application of pressure, which would dissuade participants from returning. Too much freedom in writing can paradoxically be inhibiting: we can sometimes find ourselves overwhelmed

by choice. We therefore felt that participation would be improved if we provided gentle prompts for each journal entry. For example, 'I get out of bed in the morning because…'; 'The voice in my head tells me…'; 'Being a human at home means…'; and, 'I took it home…'. These prompts carefully corresponded with the week's discussion and reading, while leaving an element of freedom in their open-endedness for participants to engage in whatever was on their mind either in or outside of work.

Working within a prison can be profoundly detrimental to one's wellbeing, even compared to other emergency and security professionals; 37.5% of our respondents reported moderate to severe mental health difficulties at the launch of the course (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 3). Having participants complete weekly journaling homework was a notable asset to their wellbeing. As one person told us following the programme: 'I left the first week, moaning I had "homework", but by the end I am sad it's finished. The time has been really cathartic for me, I really feel I have benefitted emotionally from this. It almost feels like I have been given permission to write things down… I feel good for doing it.' Survey data showed that participants enjoyed the process of journaling in their own time, with another interviewee explaining, 'I enjoyed the homework, and it actually helped me with my mental health... this took my mind off thinking about going back to work the next day.'

Prison staff wrote about their own experiences in early journaling exercises, but in-class exercises that focused on the self were reserved until a few weeks into the course. This included brainstorming the opening of a memoir and a personal moment of epiphany. By the end of the course, participants were asked to write a fictional award nomination for a colleague before then writing about themselves, but from the point of view of a colleague. Similarly, we were careful with prompts that writers may have felt revealed too much about the workplace until a sense of trust was established. Participants expressed anxiety about honest writing potentially having professional repercussions: 'Remember what we say in here stays in here,' one remarked. The tutors had to persevere in establishing trust within the groups, with one of them explaining to the researchers that, 'The staff were very nervous of what they said and I assured them each week that no-one was listening to their personal opinions.' This speaks to the notion of psychological safety, which 'describes perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context such as a workplace' and how such risk may be reduced (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 27). Clearly, as the course progressed

staff placed more trust in the confidentiality of the sessions. They developed a sense of ownership over their writing in terms of what to share with peers, therefore giving themselves permission to write more candidly.

The Writings as Anthology and as Data

Though the writings produced—whether in the class or at home—were certainly guided by our choice of writing prompts and texts for discussion, we deliberately encouraged a degree of independence to enable participants to take the production in their own direction. Thus, for example, though one exercise invited participants to consider hope and or hopelessness in the workplace, one author decided to do so through the eyes of the prisoner themselves attending their ACCT review and then subsequently feeling suicidal (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). When contributors were invited to submit a range of pieces from which the editors would pick a selection for publication, there were clearly a number of prominent topics: family, the (negative) prison, and prisoners. But each of these can be broken down into smaller themes. For example, those who wrote about families covered intimate relationships, divorce, bereavement, and childhood. As already noted, some of the participants worked shifts with literally half their lives at home and half a work. In interview, one officer spoke about 'masking up at home to hide what you saw at work,' implying the two are interlinked. And the work that was submitted for consideration in the anthology, while at first glance suggests that it is split both in and out of the prison itself, shows evidence of these worlds being entwined. As the prose piece 'Ramble' informs us, 'Sometimes I go home and worry about work […] it got me thinking. I tried writing some stuff down when I got home, with the hope of getting it out of my head. Hoping to switch off' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.).

In a discussion of the anthology's content, it is important to highlight our decision to include writings by both tutors, Jenny Berry and Stephen Wade. Each of them published an original poem about their experiences running this course as well as a previously published poem about prison. While Berry wrote 'I've seen something I can't unsee / It's a tip-top, top-notch, top-secret/living inside of me … an oasis in my brain,' Wade produced a piece titled 'The Ballad of the Words Behind Bars' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). The reasons for these inclusions were multifaceted. Unsurprisingly, the anthology's publishing editor felt these additions gave credence to a collection of writings by previously unpublished authors.

Doing so provided a sense of professionalism to the prison staff contributors who were 'honoured' to appear alongside Berry and Wade and reassured the practitioners on some level that they were not merely subjects for study. Moreover, embedding the tutors' own works in the anthology serves to remind us of the importance of practitioners in research projects such as this; the project commenced with the University investigators and ended with the participants' writings and book launch, but it all hinged on the two practitioners at the heart of proceedings.

Using the tutors to close this gap between the investigators on one hand and the publishers and outputs on the other is arguably important in light of ongoing discord between creativity and criminology. Creative research methods have long been used in the social sciences; for example, scholar Helen Kara notes that creative research methods can 'help contemporary researchers who may be facing research questions that cannot be answered—or at least, not fully—using traditional research methods' (2015, p. 1). And yet this does not translate to a clear understanding of how creative outputs can then be used as a data source. As a team of scholars from three different disciplines (though all situated within the same university faculty), we had some fascinating discussions along these lines. Of particular note to us was the justified hesitancy of the CHF psychologists to engage with the writings as a data set. As they explained to the project team:

> Although these writings could be considered as data, a couple of factors prevent us from treating them as such in our analysis. First, texts sent by participants may suffer from self-selection bias. Second, due to the fictional aspect involved in writing, it is difficult to distinguish between a genuine reflection of participants' true experiences and elements that do not originate from their personal experiences. One might argue that fiction still carries something about one's own experience, however attempting to embellish a story sets a limit to this connection. (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 6).

Again, Kara with Richard Philips has explored the use of creative writings as a data set and dissemination (2021). But this is not to say that all social scientists are comfortable in such practice, and there is still work to be done to make the two data sets complement one another.

Put simply, the CHF team identified themes of 'escape from work' and 'processing of difficult experiences [at work]' from their bespoke questionnaires and interviews. But surely it is of immediate relevance to point towards the poem titled 'Burnout' ('I need help and support/I make no difference at all') or 'Masking' ('on a crappy Monday/ Putting on fake

smiles/masking our thoughts') or the piece of prose 'Hope and Hopelessness' about a prisoner withdrawing from drugs ('I was shocked when I walked into his room, into his despair') to give context to the environment that they were escaping from or processing (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Perhaps we need to reach more of an agreement in which each set of data can inform the other, reflecting the epistemological assumptions that informed the interdisciplinary project design in the first instance. Indeed, though exploring education (including writing) programmes for prisoners rather than prison staff, US scholar Anna Plemons makes a strong case for moving away from 'data-driven classrooms' and 'evidence-based program models' and thinking about alternative ways of to evidence the efficacy of creativity in prison (2018, p. 89).

The act of writing is beneficial for participants (as explicitly demonstrated by the CHF report), but the writings produced are also essential for the investigators and—even more importantly—the wider public to help them make sense of the prison as a complicated working environment and the ways in which these pressures may (in)advertently be carried home into the family sphere. Certainly, we know from group transcriptions and the tutors that many of the anthology's pieces were self-reflective, whether about peers and prisoners at work or life beyond work. In this context, the writings themselves are a different sort of data to our questionnaire and interviews, not least because they are more 'measured' in that people have taken their time to refine the 'data.' The writings arguably stand as a vital form of data in their own right given that they come from the same minds that speak in interview or complete the questionnaire.

Cultivating Confidence

Our prison staff project suggested that writing about one's experiences from within an under-represented profession, condition, or context can provide a twofold asset: improvements to the wellbeing of the writer through the process of artistically engaging with their experiences whilst the dissemination of this writing can improve wider awareness and understanding of the context in question. These two facets of writing fed into the same positive outcome for the participant: confidence. Prison by its nature represents a place where control is taken away, and this is true of the staff who work there too. Although writing cannot change one's situation or past experiences, the act of writing (and certainly editing) gave participants a strong sense of ownership not only over the words but of the

experience they portrayed. Thus, from the outset of our course, it was important for participants to feel they were in control of their writing, from what it is they chose to write to whether, or how, they shared it.

Attending a creative writing group can be daunting, and the thought of sharing work may cause participants to leave, not attend in future, or significantly filter what they write as a form of defence. Our participants were reminded that with each exercise they were in control whether to a) participate in the exercise but then destroy their writing, finding value solely in the process of writing rather than retaining it or sharing it; b) partake in the exercise and keep their writing private; or c) share their work with the rest of the group and potentially in an anthology. This approach was planned to build a sense of confidence in the participants; cultivating trust not only with one another but with the motives of the course itself was key to get prison participants to engage in their stories. Amongst the numerous personal growth and wellbeing benefits we found this course delivered, a key finding was staff members' increase in confidence. As one of them told us, 'Before I'd think, "Oh I can't do that because you know I'm a wreck and I can't do that".'

At both prisons, we advertised no expectation for 'good' writing as a prerequisite nor as a learning outcome. Rather we prioritised the objective of participants becoming more proficient at navigating and expressing their memories via writing—accessing and engaging in their experiences and then translating it to clear prose. The prison staff arrived at this course with a range of different barriers, and tutors helped them navigate these as individuals. We did not want participants to think about their writing in terms of whether it is 'good' in terms of content or technique; this stance was important to maintain throughout the course. As one of the tutors explained to the researchers: 'Everyone's human and they're all worried about their writing and "oh gosh mine's not as good as so and so's down the table" and "my reading voice isn't nice" and "my handwriting's not nice," all kind of imposter syndrome type things.' The same tutor reflected on creative writing being intimidating both in terms of comparison between peers and whether one's work achieves on an academic level. Interestingly, they drew comparisons in the ways that the prison staff reacted similarly to prisoners along these lines. As Berry explains, 'What was funny, because I've obviously done this kind of thing with prisoners for so long also, the same things and the same fears and the same barriers came out from both: "oh I'm not good at writing" and "I'm not sure".' In interview, participants themselves flagged that tutors had repeatedly tried

to quell their fears as such, for instance stating '[the tutor] says to us you know like "just chill out, it doesn't have to be perfect first time, it doesn't even have to be good".'

The prison staff writing course allowed participants across varied roles within the prisons to connect and learn more about one another's responsibilities and points of view. Feedback comments at the end of the course flagged how productive it had been to meet people who they had never come across before (despite working at the same site for years) and to find out about other's job roles and what they entailed. As one participant explained in a post-programme interview:

> The understanding of each other's role I'd say was the biggest thing… that will really help… We had a librarian in and a prison officer and something always went wrong admin wise and then after one of the groups she took him in for a chat with their member about something that had happened, I don't get, it was nothing to do with me but… they'd opened up communication about a problem… So, [were it not for the programme] they wouldn't have come on that class together and that wouldn't have happened.

Participants were tasked with engaging in their own experiences, expressing them artistically, and then sharing them to a group they did not yet know very well. Even with the structure of our course allowing for a gradual process, it is still asking a lot of any attendee. Our tutors were integral to easing participants into this process, encouraging staff members but respecting different paces and not applying pressure to those who were not yet ready. As one participant noted in hindsight, 'What worked for me was there was no pressure from [the tutor] to speak up in front of everyone.' Staff appreciated the tutors' experience in addressing these barriers. As people progressed through the course, a significant reward for their investment was evident; one participant said, 'It's growth and development by stepping out of my comfort zone.' For many, confidence manifested in two separate journeys: confidence in engaging with the group and the writing, and confidence that transcended the writing into their professional development.

Our course demonstrated an improvement in interpersonal confidence, the ability to speak up amongst others and see enough value in their ideas to share them. As one participant noted, 'I was quieter to begin with but as I gained a bit more confidence about it, and I'm not normally one to speak up, it did encourage me to speak up a bit more and give my opinion and read bits and pieces out, not something I would normally ever consider doing.' The confidence gained through writing would transcend

the classroom, positively affecting their personal and professional lives; participants noted improvements in their relationships with colleagues, prisoners, and family members. The course showed instances of improving one's ability to express and articulate oneself, processing difficult experiences, and being able to subsequently share these with family members. As an interviewee explained, 'Actually discussing things with one sister who had similar experiences to me, I think it's made us even closer because of that shared understanding. Neither one of us had actually really talked about it.'

The course led several participants to report continuing to write in their own time and even consider whether their work might be the springboard into a larger project such as a novel. And importantly, our participants seemed to feel a positive sense of responsibility in their contribution to the upcoming anthology, in giving the wider public insight into their work and helping to improve awareness of this place of work and its importance. As one contributor noted, 'The staff I come across join the service with the sole purpose of helping people, to prevent victims. This type of work isn't celebrated by the public... If the public really wanted to hear about the great work my colleagues do day in, day out I would tell them... I alone can't give us that; it's not my gift. But I can go back tomorrow and do my bit.' Such thinking arguably instilled a sense of confidence—and pride—in their writing.

In Closing

The involvement of CHF was crucial in documenting our findings in robust ways. The data collection flagged numerous benefits for individual participants, varying from an 'escape' from daily work ('it's like an oasis') to improved relationships (with family, colleagues and people in prison) and a cathartic outlet for managing a stressful job. One of CHF's notable highlights at the end of the project was the importance of this course as distinct from other HMPPS wellbeing provision. Existing support is considered to be for individuals who might be in distress and need immediate assistance, whereas this writing programme was praised by one interviewee for its more 'holistic… general approach.' As another participant informed a tutor, our writing course was 'a genius idea because certainly from my perspective to have an hour in the week at work where you're not having to deal with what you've got to deal with, it's just wonderful.' Of all the participants involved, only one reported perceiving no value for their wellbeing. Exploring their responses as a whole, the CHF

team identified that this interviewee expressed high satisfaction with their work and hence had less need to escape or to process difficult work-related matters. Furthermore, in interview this participant also stated a preference to not bring personal issues into their writing: '[the tutor] would say a lot of people write about the past and stuff like that, that doesn't interest me, I don't want to delve into that.' Nonetheless, the respondent confirmed they would engage with further creative writing opportunities if offered.

When we invited participants to offer input on refining the courses were we to run them again, several suggested that one hour each week did not suffice. Several also noted on feedback questionnaires and in interview that they would 'absolutely' do a course in creative writing again. One of the factors that arguably makes this project so distinctive (or 'successful') in light of the prison context, is its focus on 'it followed me home.' Here were staff members who worked in the same place, writing about how the intense nature of their work impacts upon their life at home and how home respectively impacts their work. This influence manifested in their writing and discussions. More importantly, as a group whose bonds grew with each session (despite often not knowing one another until undertaking our course), they could observe these patterns in their colleagues. As researchers we must always be wary of taking participants' stories away from them to write a paper they may never see, even if their data—and that of colleagues—remains anonymous. Nevertheless, we must also celebrate this project's ability to give voice to a previously 'hidden' workforce, allowing them to see and learn from one another while also educating the wider public.

In 2006, bestselling US author and former LA poet laureate, Luis J. Rodriguez was involved with a similar project working at juvenile halls in California. Despite his extensive experience of running writing workshops with people in prison, this was the first time that he had been invited to work with staff rather than the imprisoned. As part of this 'breaking the cycle with dignity' programme, he was asked to lead 'healing' writing workshops in light of staff 'hurting' because 'working with troubled kids often leads to trauma and troubles for the staff too' (Rodriguez, n. d.). One of our prison officer participants stated something analogous: 'Working with severely damaged people, severely traumatised people, it affects us.' In interview, Rodriguez contended that healing the staff can in turn assist the youth involved. We subsequently invited Rodriguez to read *Words Behind Walls* and to contribute a quote for the anthology's back cover (the

other quote was from Falkoff). Rodriguez wrote: '…those who oversee the incarcerated are also human; they also feel, and exhibit propensities and passions' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Rodriguez is well placed to understand the staff writing course that we undertook. Nonetheless, our project is the first time that such creative work with prison staff has been documented and analysed in formal ways for its benefits, whether in the US or the UK.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Helen Nichols, Fiona Earle, Lea Freour, Jenny Berry, and Stephen Wade.

Notes

1. The anthology, *Words Behind Walls* (Metcalf et al., 2023) does not have any page numbers. This editorial decision was taken by the publishers in line with the house style of their other anthologies.

Josephine Metcalf *is Senior Lecturer in American Studies and Criminology at the University of Hull, UK, where she is the co-founder and co-director of the Cultures of Incarceration Centre.*

Jo's research centres on representations of gangs and prisons in a range of cultural forms and the ways in which these have been received by audiences. She has run numerous book groups and writing workshops for people in prison in both the UK and the US.

https://www.hull.ac.uk/staff-directory/jo-metcalf

Christopher Westoby *directs the online MA Creative Writing at the University of Hull. His debut nonfiction book,* The Fear Talking*, was published in 2020. Chris lectures in creative writing, guest lectures in subjects of mental health, and teaches reflective writing in community groups.*

Chris applies creative writing techniques in research projects on gendered barriers, under-represented community groups, and social media use in the aftermath of a death by suspected suicide.

https://online.hull.ac.uk/ma-creative-writing/academic-team/christopher-westoby

References

Anonymous. (2023). Ramble. In J. Metcalf, H. Nichols, C. Westoby, & J. Clement (Eds.), *Words behind walls: Prison staff writing*. Butcher's Dog.

Attwood, S., (2014). *Prison time*. Mainstream Publishing.

Beasley, C. (2015). Teaching behind bars: Challenges and solutions for creative writing classes in prison. *TEXT, 19*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25384

Berry, J. (2020). *The great escape*. Soulful Group.

Cameron, J. (2016). *The artist's way*. Penguin.

Cronin, M., Hubbard, V., Cronan T. A. Jr., & Frost, P. (2020). Combatting professional burnout through creative writing. *Clinics in Dermatology, 28*(5), 512–515. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clindermatol.2020.05.004

Earle, F., & Freour, L. (2023). *Prison officers & creative writing – Final report*. Centre for Human Factors. Report available upon request from j.metcalf@hull.ac.uk.

Edmondson A., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour, 1*, 23–43.

Falkoff, M. (2007). *Poems from Guantanamo: The detainees speak*. University of Iowa Press.

Grierson, J., & Weaver, M. (2018, September14). Prison officers end mass walkout over inmate violence. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/14/thousands-of-prison-officers-to-protest-over-unprecedented-violence

Gussak, D. E., & Ploumis-Devick, E. (2004). Creating wellness in correctional populations through the arts: An interdisciplinary model. *Visual Arts Research, 30*(1), 35–43.

Howe, K., & Moses, M. (1999). Chapter 2: Ethics in educational research. *Review of Research in Education*, *24*, 21–59. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X024001021

Kara, H. (2015). *Creative research methods in the social sciences*. Policy Press.

King, S. (1982). *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*. Viking Press.

Kinman, G., & Clements, A. (2020). *Survey of work-related wellbeing*. Prison Officers Association. https://www.poauk.org.uk/media/1888/poa-survey-of-work-related-wellbeing-1.pdf

Kinman, G., Clements, A., & Hart, J. (2016). Work-related wellbeing in UK prison officers: A benchmarking approach. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management, 9*(3), 290–307.

Liebling, A., Price, D., & Shefer, G. (2011). *The prison officer* (2nd ed.). Willan Publishing.

Litten, R. , & Metcalf, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Hope walks by me: Justice & liberty in the lands of the free*. Barbican Press.

Littman, D. M., & Sliva, S. M. (2020). Prison arts program outcomes: A scoping review. *Journal of Correctional Education, 71*(3), 54–82.

Mason, R. (2023, September 16). Eighty prison officers absent from Wandsworth on day of Daniel Khalife's escape. *The Guardian*.

https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/15/daniel-khalife-prison-escape-keith-bristow-nca-to-investigate

Metcalf, J., Nichols, H., Westoby, C., & Clement, J. (2023). *Words behind walls: Prison staff writing*. Butcher's Dog.

Metcalf, J., & Skinner, L. (2023). Reading America, reading Rodriguez: Exploring American literature at an English prison book group. *Journal of American Studies, 57*(5), 700–724. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875823000579

Nichols, H., Saunders, G., Harrison, K., Mason, R., Smith, L., & Hall, L. (2024). It's not ok to not be ok . . . when you're a prison governor: The impact of workplace culture on prison governors' wellbeing in England, Scotland and Wales. *Journal of Incarceration, 5*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663241253698

Philips, R., & Kara, H. (2021). *Creative writing for social research*. Policy Press.

Plemons, A. (2018). Something other than progress: Indigenous methodologies and higher education in prison. In J. Lockard & S. Rankins-Robertson (Eds.), *Prison pedagogies: Learning and teaching with imprisoned writers* (pp. 88–108). Syracuse University Press.

Rodriguez, L. (n.d.). Luis Rodriguez papers, CEMA 204. Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

South, A. (2023). *Behind these doors: Stories of strength, survival and suffering in prison*. Hodder & Stoughton.

Vecchione, P. (2020). *My shouting, shattered, whispering; A guide to writing poetry and speaking your truth*. Seven Stories Press.

Wade, S., (2021). *Stretch*. Smokestack Books.

Westoby, C. (2020). *The fear talking: The true story of a young man and anxiety*. Barbican Press.

Williams, Bronwyn T. (2013). Writing creative nonfiction. In G. Harper (Ed.), *A companion to creative writing* (pp. 24–39). John Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325759