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## Why does a rehabilitation programme for young offenders work better when it is founded on a caring environment?

By Joe Cullen

Introduction: how 'caring' is viewed in current policy and practice

### ***Neo-liberalism and the 'new penology'***

Since the 1990s, the concept of 'caring' in youth justice has changed from a focus on 'welfare', which emphasised minimum intervention and viewed juvenile imprisonment as a last resort, to a more punitive, retributive approach (Cavadino and Dignan, 2008; Muncie and Goldson, 2006). This shift has been most pronounced in the USA and in north-west Europe (Junger-Tas and Decker, 2008), and reflects the influence of neo-liberalist economics and politics in western countries in recent years (Armstrong, 2004). The 'new penology' is marked by the use of correctional measures, like neighbourhood policing programmes and preventive detention, but combines these with a developmental perspective in a 'holistic' package that seeks to improve the well-being of offenders, thereby transforming their wasted talents into personal and social goods (Ecclestone, 2012). Hence the new penology presents itself almost as a kind of 'tough love' approach to youth offending, projecting a steely exterior that opens to reveal a soft, caring heart.

At the core of this strategy is the use of 'evidence-based risk assessment' (Bottoms, 2006) which applies 'scientific' methods based on statistical analysis and probability theory to identify the young people who are deemed most likely to offend as well as those most likely to repeat offend (Hawkins et al., 1992). Risk assessment is used to design and implement prevention initiatives that focus on 'early interventions' and rehabilitation strategies which typically target 'failed individuals, failed families and failed communities', often using methods like behavioural parent training (BPT) and family functional therapy (FFT), combined with mentoring and targeted policing of high risk youths and high risk areas. These place a strong emphasis on 'character-building' and on improving the resilience of 'vulnerable young people' (Lexmond and Grist, 2011). For example, the UK's 'Youth

Inclusion Programmes' involve multi-agency partnerships and deliver individually-tailored behavioural development plans for young offenders and those 'at risk'. The Finnish programme 'Boys in the Forest' develops the young offender's self-confidence, responsibility and team-working through participation in activities like hiking, camping, climbing and canoeing. The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programmes (ISSP's) found in the UK and the Netherlands target persistent young offenders, and aim to reduce repeat offending by combining restorative justice (victim-offender mediation) with family group conferences and mentoring.

### ***Critique of current approaches: 'governmentality'***

A number of reviews have suggested that these kinds of interventions have proved successful in reducing youth offending and repeat offending (Ross et al, 2011). However, critics argue that this new penology is shaped by 'techniques of governmentality' that have emerged as a result of the rise to prominence of neo-liberal economics (Garland, 2001). Developed by the French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault, governmentality focuses on the techniques through which power and knowledge are used to 'observe, qualify, classify and punish'. At its broadest, governmentality refers to the strategies, techniques and practices by which a society is made governable.

In the context of youth offending, governmentality shows how government makes it possible for other agencies to regulate young people, and for young people themselves to 'auto-regulate'. Three 'disciplinary techniques' are important in this process: self-esteem, normalisation and responsabilisation. Self-esteem may, on the surface, be viewed as a desirable outcome of a 'caring' offending rehabilitation programme like the 'Youth Inclusion' Programme. But joining a Youth Inclusion Programme also coerces young people into collaborating in a process of 'examination' whereby the self has to be continuously measured, evaluated and disciplined so that discourses around the value of personal empowerment can be aligned with economic, societal and political benchmarks.

'Caring' youth offending programmes use the technique of normalisation to construct an idealised form of conduct, adherence to which is rewarded and deviation punished. Young people are constantly required to measure their behaviour and performance against accepted yardsticks, and to control their conduct, under the guidance of others, to ensure that these norms are inculcated into others with whom the individual interacts.

The technique of responsabilisation allows government to formulate and apply indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without being responsible for them. Through the application of these techniques, individuals become responsabilised into understanding social pathologies such as unemployment, poor health and crime, not as problems that require the state to intervene but as individual issues that can be solved through self-care.

In the youth-justice domain, auto-regulation is exerted through these 'disciplinary techniques of the self' allied to what Foucault called 'techniques of the market' which, together, have moulded youth crime prevention and rehabilitation policies and practices so that they inculcate norms, values and behaviours that prize things like self-control and

responsibility. Yet critics suggest that the new ‘caring regimes’ that emphasise personal development, responsibility and character-building don’t actually work very well in terms of reducing youth offending and re-offending rates (McCara and McVie, 2010). One of the main reasons they are not successful, it is argued, is that the ideology of normalisation and responsabilisation that underpins these interventions is fundamentally at odds with the everyday life-worlds in which young people live their lives (Armstrong, 2004; Cox, 2011; Vaughn, 2009).

## A radical caring alternative

What would happen if these ‘caring techniques’ were turned on their head so that ‘responsibilisation’ became a thing that was not ‘done’ to young people but instead became a technique through which young people became co-architects of their future?

Through a series of multi-partner projects – HERO <sup>1</sup> BREAKOUT <sup>2</sup> and LINKS-UP <sup>3</sup> – funded under various EU programmes between 2001 and 2012, we developed, applied and evaluated a radical approach to youth offending based on collaborative action research. This approach was successively refined through each project, building on the learning derived from its predecessor, but essentially retained a core set of common features.

### **Overall approach and methodology**

The overarching methodological framework was based on participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). This aimed to support young people as ‘co-producers of knowledge’, actively working in collaboration with the research team in developing ‘caring interventions’, in contrast to traditional ‘transmissive’ behaviour change models. This overarching methodological approach combined three distinctive, though interconnected elements, each applying a particular set of research methods, actions and tools: an ICT-supported <sup>4</sup> collaborative learning environment; a learning and behaviour change model and an implementation space.

### **The ICT-supported collaborative learning environment**

The ICT-supported collaborative learning environment was based on ‘value embedded action systems’ (Cullen and Cohn, 2006). This involves users not only in the design of the technologies, pedagogic methods and tools but in the establishment of their ‘sense of purpose’ through users’ progressive exploration and use of them. The HERO project, for example, developed an interactive game to provide a space for young offenders to explore notions of self-awareness, responsibility and self-development (Figure 1). This game aimed to challenge ‘official’ definitions of these notions. For example, ‘tidiness’ is used as a construct in young offender institutions to internalise structures, rules and notions of individual responsibility. Inmates who make up their bed in the prescribed manner, and who keep their space tidy, are rewarded with privileges, like being allowed to wear their own

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<sup>1</sup> HERO – Health and Educational Support for the Rehabilitation of Offenders- IST Programme, 2001-04.

<sup>2</sup> BREAKOUT – An Interactive Learning Programme for Offending Prevention and Rehabilitation – Grundtvig Programme, 2005-07.

<sup>3</sup> LINKS-UP – Learning 2.0 for an Inclusive Knowledge Society – Lifelong Learning Programme, 2010-12.

<sup>4</sup> Information and Communication Technologies.

trainers. Tidiness leads to further rewards. Untidiness means withdrawal of privileges, and the imposition of more punitive sanctions. Access to kitchen work is an example of a higher level reward for compliance. Inmates showing continuing good behaviour are allowed to work in the kitchen, which brings with it an array of advantages, including respite from the tedium of correctional routine; opportunities for learning new skills and opportunities to acquire additional food.



Figure 1: The HERO Interactive Game.

With the HERO interactive game, young offenders could explore the implications of both 'endorsed' constructions of tidiness and also alternative constructions. By controlling the avatars in the game, they were able to visualise the implications of different behaviour choices. Tidying the cell room opened doors to further levels in the game, including access to the kitchen, where an inmate could then acquire additional information and knowledge on possible future actions. For example, if a game player was assigned the task of 'making a sandwich' in the kitchen this triggered access to the HERO Interactive Content Repository which contained information on the nutritional value of various ingredients in a sandwich, as well as other knowledge assets on the competences required to become a chef. Data collected from utilisation of the game was then input to an Interactive User Monitoring Tool, which mapped an inmate's competences, identified skills gaps and fed these into a personalised learning plan for the inmate. Other avatars simulated the implications of choosing an alternative path to compliance – for example by becoming the wing 'Daddy' who controlled the supply of tobacco and drugs.

### ***The learning and behaviour change model***

This was shaped by three conceptual frameworks. First, Paulo Freire's concept of 'radical pedagogy', which argues that learning requires a shift from 'transmissive' to 'transformative' actions that give the oppressed a role in shaping their learning and development in order

to transform their lives (Freire, 1972). In the BREAKOUT project this was implemented through a development programme that combined an on-line information Repository of content on drugs and crime with a set of interactive ‘action learning events’ involving drama and film-making. This aimed to surface the hidden talents of young offenders and those deemed ‘at risk’; linking these skills to behaviour change scenarios and, crucially, exploring ways in which newly acquired skills could be capitalised on outside the programme environment.

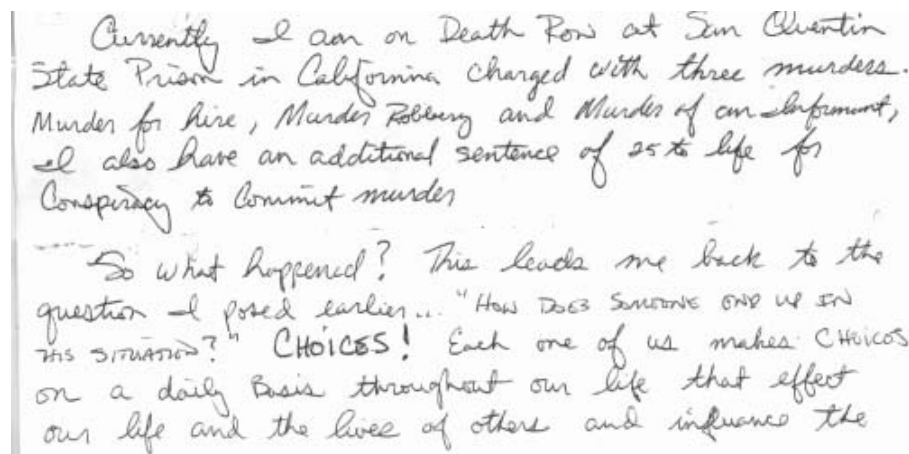
Second, Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) was used to develop learning tools and content aimed at scaffolding the learning of participants so they could build competences at their own pace. In HERO, for example, we developed a simple ‘flash’ tool called ‘How to Survive the First Few Weeks’, to help new arrivals at a Young Offenders’ Institution understand the rules and their implications (Figure 2).

Question	Answer
Have you received the induction talk?	YES
Has your family been contacted?	YES
Have you seen the probation officer?	YES
Have you any outstanding fines?	YES
Has your police custody time been taken care of?	YES
Have the prison rules been explained to you?	NO
Have you seen the chaplain?	YES
Have you seen a drugs worker?	PUT OFF
Do you know when you are due to be released?	PUT OFF
Do you know how much you will be paid?	YES
Do you have anything urgent that needs to be attended to?	YES
Have you had your Health and Safety talk?	

Figure 2: The ‘How to Survive’ Induction Tool.

Third, an ‘empathetic learning’ approach was incorporated into the learning and behaviour change methodology. It aimed to get young people to ‘lifewrap’ with other people’s experiences, enabling them to ‘step into the shoes’ of key actors affected by crime. In the HERO project this involved the ‘One Spirit’ initiative – a collaboration between ‘at risk’ young people and a group of inmates on ‘Death Row’ in San Quentin Prison, California. Through letters sent by ‘Death Row’ inmates, as illustrated in Figure 3, the group explored the factors that led to, in this case, a sentence of death for three murders, with an additional twenty-five year sentence for conspiracy to murder. The young people then applied this exploration to their own situations, the choices they had and the implications of those choices.





Currently I am on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison in California charged with three murders. Murder for hire, Murder Robbery and Murder of an informant, I also have an additional sentence of 25 to life for Conspiracy to Commit murder

So what happened? This leads me back to the question I posed earlier... "HOW DOES SOMEONE END UP IN THIS SITUATION?" CHOICES! Each one of us makes CHOICES on a daily basis throughout our life that effect our life and the lives of others and influence the

Figure 3: Extract of letter on 'Choices' from 'Death Row' inmate, San Quentin Prison, California, USA. <sup>5</sup>

### The Intervention Space

The third and final element in our overall approach created an intervention space to support collaborative learning and behaviour change. This drew on two main influences: Winnicott's (1965) idea of a 'holding environment' and Bandura's work on 'cognitive social learning'. The need for a 'holding environment' as a safe space to explore self-development without fear of punishment is particularly acute in correctional institutions, where fear of retaliation and punishment is clearly a key issue for inmates. In HERO, BREAKOUT and LINKS-UP, the holding environment was created firstly by setting up an on-line space where participants could express themselves anonymously and, secondly, through using 'action learning sets' in group interactions in which rules of engagement were clearly defined. These environments supported collaborative 'cognitive social learning' (Bandura, 1977) which emphasised peer interaction and the importance of young people learning from one another, via observation, imitation, and modelling. For example, the HERO project involved young people from rival 'gangs' in London, so part of the programme took place in a 'neutral' venue that was accepted by all participants. The young people involved negotiated the rules of engagement with the police and youth workers they were working with to ensure that the boundaries set for the initiative created a safe space for exploring new ideas.

### Implementation of the approach

HERO involved 168 prisoners serving sentences, ex-prisoners in rehabilitation and re-integration programmes and young people on the 'at risk' register, and 57 professional staff, including prison officers, probation officers, social workers, counsellors, police and youth workers across a range of scenarios, from preventive work with 'at risk' youth on the

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<sup>5</sup> Text of letter: "Currently I am on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison in California charged with three murders. Murder for hire, Murder Robbery and Murder of an informant, I also have an additional sentence of 25 to life for Conspiracy to Commit murder.

So what happened? This leads me back to the question I posed earlier "HOW DOES SOMEONE END UP IN THIS SITUATION?" CHOICES! Each one of us makes CHOICES on a daily basis throughout our life that effect our life and the lives of others and influence the ..."

Youth Offending Register, through a Young Offenders Institute, a maximum security prison and post-release re-settlement programmes. BREAKOUT focused on youth offending prevention, particularly knife and gun crime and drug-related offending, and involved prevention work with 40 school students, 25 young people in a youth organisation, 25 Drugs Services Commissioners and 50 Outreach workers. LINKS-UP also focused on youth offending prevention and supported 20 young people with 'special educational needs' and 'challenging behaviours' participating in a Youth Programme in developing new methods and tools to improve that programme. In all three cases, the focus was on supporting young people to themselves define and develop their own 'care regime' in collaboration with 'experts' and professionals.

## Results

The evaluation of the projects used a 'realist evaluation' methodology (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) based on 'theory of change' analysis, which focuses on testing theories about what 'might cause change' and on identifying 'what works, for whom under which circumstances'.

The evaluations highlighted a number of encouraging results. In terms of outputs, the key objective of creating new forms of 'co-produced' caring models, methods and tools led to some concrete innovations. In HERO, these included:

- i) the creation and successful implementation of ICT and multimedia-based courses in a young offenders' institute, a women's open prison, a 'special measures' prison and a re-settlement centre;
- ii) the production of a range of interactive learning and behaviour change tools (game; induction tool; competence development and monitoring tool);
- iii) the production of a Guidebook on positive health behaviours in a maximum security prison;
- iv) the creation and successful implementation of 'One Spirit' – a learning and behaviour change programme co-produced by 'at risk' young people; production of a film and audio CD by participating young people; a performance of the CD in a local venue; subsequent take-up of the programme by local authorities in London.

In BREAKOUT, the key outputs included:

- i) Production of an on-line Content Repository providing resources on knife, gun and drug-related offending prevention;
- ii) Production of a 'Teachers Pack' for knife, gun and drug-related offending prevention work in schools;
- iii) Production of a Commissioners and Outreach workers Toolkit. In LINKS-UP the main output was a multi-media learning and behaviour change programme that was used to deliver an online podcast/radio station; an online TV station and an online magazine.

The outcomes identified in the three projects were variable. In all three cases, participating young people reported positive benefits in terms of their personal self-development. The strongest reported outcomes were improvements in technical skills (for example in film,

photography and musical skills); in transferable ('soft') skills – for example in team working and communication skills; in improved awareness of the issues around offending and the consequences of offending. The majority of participants reported that the experience had made them want to find out about further educational opportunities, and about new careers.

However, there is much less evidence that our collaborative action research approach achieved its more ambitious objective of supporting truly transformative changes in young people's lives – in the sense of reducing actual knife and gun crime or getting at risk and repeat offenders into education or employment. In the HERO 'One Spirit' initiative, for example, only one participant reported, in the follow up evaluation, getting work in the creative and media sector. Similarly, only one participant in the 'LINKS-UP' programme went on to take up an internship with a national broadcasting agency. In this case, the opportunity was largely achieved through chance, since the programme happened to be running when the 'London Riots' of 2011 occurred – and programme participants were able to provide 'first hand' coverage of the riots to local and national media agencies, using the tools and skills they had acquired in the programme.

Moreover, the evaluation results suggest that, perversely, the 'unintended effects' of our approach in some instances conspired to reinforce the very processes and systems of 'normalisation' we were trying to subvert. For example, the 'How to Survive' induction tool developed in the young offenders' institute in the HERO project undoubtedly reduced the likelihood of new arrivals feeling the pain from sanctions imposed for not knowing the rules. But it also had the effect of improving the efficiency of the classification and normalisation processes applied by the regime, since more inmates got to know the rules more quickly. Similarly, although the HERO interactive game was designed specifically as a tool for exploring and modelling choices, decisions and implications, rather than a tool to support the inculcation of prescribed behaviours, there was an implicit 'responsibilisation' agenda built into the tool, where the internal logic of the game reward architecture had the effect of steering users down pathways that flagged up education, careers and healthy lifestyles.

This reflects a more pervasive overall dynamic identified through the evaluation. We found that the young people taking part in HERO, BREAKOUT and LINKS-UP were working to some extent from a script that was compromised or, more precisely, a script based on 'negotiation'. There was a sense that their behaviours and actions within the programmes reflected their own interpretation of the moral and ethical cues they detected were subscribed to by the research staff or the experts and professionals they worked with. Indeed, it is fair to say that all three projects were systemically compromised. In all three cases, it was necessary to work in situ with institutional and organisational structures and practices. With HERO, for example, the strongly correctional ethos of many of the sites in which the research team operated made it impossible to fully achieve the desired goals and outcomes of the project. Similarly, with BREAKOUT, the organisational culture of the school and youth organisation systems was one of suspicion of change, and fear of and resistance to any perceived encroachment on its control. In all three projects, we constantly came up against a culture of resistance. This was reflected in: the unwillingness of government agencies to sanction involvement and champion the projects; a long and protracted



process of enlisting participating institutions; the dominance of the prevailing ‘control and correctional’ paradigm of rehabilitation, and fears and ‘moral panics’ about the use of interactive and online technologies that centred around security, confidentiality and inappropriate use by offenders (in one prison the hardware was literally locked up in a cell for six months while the authorities debated the risks of inmates using the internet for ‘prostitution and drug dealing’). In turn, these systemic issues and problems provoked obstacles at the organisational level. These led to restricted resources provided for services, particularly education; a limited degree of ‘buy in’ by key staff in the institutions; the imposition of restrictions on interactivity, access and unsupervised self-learning; prevailing bureaucracy and hierarchies, and concentrated power in key roles (for example governors). In this context – with the notable exception of the ‘One Spirit’ initiative in HERO – we pretty much failed to get anywhere near achieving one of our key objectives of supporting inter-professional and professional-offender collaboration. This was mainly for reasons around poor staff motivation; lack of resources and fears around de-professionalisation of skills.

## Conclusion

With HERO, BREAKOUT and LINKS-UP we tried to create a new approach to ‘caring’ in the youth offending field, one that subverted current notions of caring as the inculcation of prescribed norms, values and behaviours based on ‘normalisation’ and ‘responsibilisation’, and replaced these with caring regimes that were founded on ‘co-produced knowledge’. We produced some significant innovations but fell short on some key objectives. We believe this new paradigm is a sound one – but its implementation will inevitably founder on the rocks of governmentality, entrenched practices and resistance to change. Ultimately, we found that what works is what the system allows to work.

## Author

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